
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 16 March 2009

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Enhancement of Debt Advisory Services

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

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

Mr McLaughlin: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the increasing amount of personal debt and the crisis facing many mortgage holders; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister for Social Development to bring forward a package of measures to enhance existing debt-advisory services, and to provide additional resources and training for community based organisations providing debt counselling.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The motion is timely. The Assembly has indicated its willingness to provide support, and I welcome the initiatives that Ministers have announced. The matter before us is to consider how to continue to support what the two Ministers are doing. Furthermore, we must explore how we might enhance and develop that support, particularly in circumstances in which the economic decline is having more and more impact.

Unfortunately, motions can sometimes be perceived as being mischievous, or designed to embarrass or criticise Ministers. Therefore, I make it clear from the outset that there is no intention other than to recognise what is being done and to call for additional measures to be introduced as the situation worsens.

I am sure that all Members are indebted to the Research and Library Service, which provides an excellent backup facility to MLAs. The documentation

that it produced for this debate sets out in stark detail the statistics of spiralling debt and information on how many families are being confronted with the consequences of enforcement proceedings. The statistics support our concern that that is an ever-escalating problem.

I welcome the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's presence in the Chamber. Ministers are operating in circumstances in which they do not have unlimited resources, and in which problems can emerge that could not be foreseen when budgets were being allocated and bids developed. That, in turn, puts pressure on the commitments that were given in the Programme for Government. However, the enhancement of debt advisory services is a cross-cutting issue. The lead Minister, who is in the Chamber, and other Ministers — particularly the Minister for Social Development, who has provided invaluable support to the voluntary and community sector — must become involved and help to address the matter.

Ministers will come to the House to inform Members how they intend to release resources. Their announcements will often have an impact on the commitments in the Programme for Government. In such instances, those Ministers — whoever they are — should be entitled to the House's understanding.

I am sure that every MLA can provide evidence that, owing to debt problems, more and more people are coming to their constituency clinics in desperation. Some people are threatened by the significant amounts of personal debt that they have accrued. It is not so long since finance was practically being offered to individuals on their doorsteps. Furthermore, when they crossed the threshold of some of the financial institutions, people were being encouraged to take on more debt. There may have been a time when people felt that they could continue to exploit and develop such situations.

The reality was otherwise, however, as has been cruelly exposed. Many ordinary people with no background in financial management, other than managing domestic budgets and income, find themselves in over their heads and in circumstances in which they might forfeit, or be concerned about the prospect of having to forfeit, the family home. One can only imagine the trauma, pressure and stress that that brings. I am not arguing that debt can simply be wished away, but we must recognise that many individuals who find themselves in such circumstances have no sense of how to cope.

Practical steps can be taken to alleviate some of those pressures and reassure individuals. There are some initiatives out there that the financial institutions could and should introduce. I welcome the moves that the Ulster Bank has announced recently. It has made

available a significant sum of money to enhance advisory support to clients who wish to avail themselves of the bank's services. All financial institutions should be considering ways in which they can work with the political institutions.

I became aware of the SDLP amendment only this morning. I have looked carefully at that amendment but I cannot support it because I do not think that it improves the motion; in fact, it disimproves the motion in a particular way. In my view, no individual Minister should carry the load with respect to the issue of debt.

Reference to the Minister for Social Development has been omitted in the SDLP amendment. I can understand the desire of SDLP Members to show solidarity with their Minister, however, the motion is not criticising their Minister. It is simply referring to the fact that the portfolio of the Minister for Social Development involves a significant interface with the community and voluntary sector and that, therefore, there is a very substantial onus on her to support the work of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

That is of considerable importance, not simply in relation to the practical day-to-day working relationships between Ministers, but in sending out a signal to the wider community that we have joined-up Government and that Ministers voluntarily recognise and accept that they can each make a contribution to supporting the Assembly's overall response to an issue. That is the spirit in which the motion has been tabled. I hope that, even at this stage, the SDLP will consider their amendment in that context.

I recognise that the amendment has been accepted by the Speaker as a legitimate amendment, but I do not think that, as a statement from this Assembly, it exhorts and encourages Ministers to work to support one another, nor does it recognise the benefits of their doing that. It is not a matter of narrowing the issue and pointing the finger at another Minister; it is a matter of getting behind the efforts of individual Ministers to work together to bring forward a holistic package. Although we must recognise that we are dealing with broad economic circumstances about which this regional Assembly can do very little, we nonetheless have control of, and authority over, public policy, and we have the ability to be creative, imaginative and co-operative in bringing forward a response.

The interface that the community and voluntary sector in particular is providing — that is, by working alongside departmental officials and financial professionals — is the way that we can maximise our ability to impact on the huge emerging issue of personal debt, which threatens people's livelihoods, well-being and, from time to time, their family home. I ask the Assembly to support the motion, and I ask those who are proposing the amendment to consider

the issue in the context of a co-operative approach being taken, with Ministers supporting one other. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr A Maginness: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "holders;" and insert

"supports the announcements of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to double the funding, over the next two years, for free debt-advice provision; and calls on the Minister to expedite the tendering process and award contracts, as a matter of urgency, to relevant organisations delivering these crucial services."

I take on board what Mr McLaughlin has just said, and we will monitor the course of the debate to see whether it lives up to the generous spirit that he has just expressed in relation to the way in which the matter should proceed. However, we maintain that the motion, as amended, will be much more focused, and that, rather than damaging the essence of the motion, the amendment is a perfection of it.

Everyone in the House recognises that debt is an increasing problem that is being experienced by ordinary people, particularly during this time of economic crisis. The question is how we, as an Executive, use our resources in the best possible way to remedy the situation. In relation to this particular problem, we believe that we have to make the best use of the organisations that exist — in particular, the advice services given by Advice Northern Ireland and Citizens Advice, as well as other organisations that are operating on a voluntary basis. The SDLP supports that position, and I believe that other parties are equally supportive.

12.15 pm

The Minister improved the situation significantly by announcing in April 2008 that there would be increased funding of £400,000 to the organisations that I referred to, and in July 2008, she enhanced that funding to £800,000. That again was a significant increase, which the SDLP welcomed. However, the problem is that that additional funding has not yet been implemented because the tendering process has not been completed. We urge the Minister to expedite the tendering process and award contracts as a matter of urgency. Every Member agrees that the situation is urgent and that this is not a time for delay. We hope that the Minister and her Department will expedite the process and allow the contracts to be awarded as soon as possible. When I said that the amendment perfects Sinn Féin's motion, I did so on those grounds — this is a practical way to address an urgent problem.

Mr McLaughlin referred to other ministerial responsibilities, particularly those of the Minister for Social Development. Of course, the Minister for Social Development does not have direct responsibility for debt advice counselling. However, through her other responsibilities, she has tried to ameliorate the

situation affecting people in the community by, for example, issuing fuel poverty payments. It is hoped that 150,000 households will receive £150 towards household fuel payments, which will amount to £22.5 million. The Department is confident that payments can be made in April this year.

More significantly, the Department for Social Development is committed to continuing the Social Security Agency's (SSA) benefit uptake strategy. That is done not just by the Department and the agency, but in association with voluntary organisations in the community. The 2008-09 programme focuses on older people, on those with disabilities, and on families — including lone parents — and approximately 115,000 clients will be contacted, which is a significant segment of the population. The Social Security Agency reviews awards to benefit continually in order to ensure that the correct amount is being paid. Since April 2008, over 5,000 reviews have resulted in £12.8 million of extra benefit being paid to customers.

Significant strides are being made outside of the face-to-face debt counselling, which is the responsibility of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). The Department for Social Development (DSD) is doing its fair share with regard to trying to ameliorate the situation for people who find themselves in difficulty and keep them out of a debt situation.

I accept Mr McLaughlin's proposition that this issue is a responsibility for all Departments and for the Executive collectively. I appreciate the manner in which he made that point. However, there are organisations in Advice NI membership that are being forced to consider reducing their service provision. That is alarming and it ought to be addressed. Some organisations have had to issue staff protective redundancy notices as funding contracts are coming to an end without any indication that they will be renewed. In my own constituency of North Belfast, six specialist posts — including one money advice post — in the North Belfast Advice Partnership could be lost at the end of March 2009. That is a particular problem that faces people working at the coalface who are trying to deal with difficult situations on the ground.

Advice NI believes that further funding and support for money advice services is needed to address the problem of consumer debt. That is supported by findings from a 2003 report from the University of Bristol's Personal Finance Research Centre, which indicated that, at the time of research, there were around 12,500 people in Northern Ireland who had multiple debt problems and could benefit from money advice. That situation, of course, has worsened given the present critical economic circumstances.

Although one considers the DETI funding announcements to be valuable, Advice NI believes that that level

of investment is still not sufficient to address fully the current level of unmet need for money advice services. Advice NI has called for a commitment to tackling debt similar to that provided in Britain and the Republic, which is a money advice budgeting service. That could include a more holistic plan that considers preventative and action-based approaches to deal with debt advice in Northern Ireland.

I will conclude there, but I urge the proposer of the motion, in his usual generosity of spirit, to consider further the amendment to determine whether we can reach some consensus on this issue.

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

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the conciliatory way in which he approached the matter.

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

Mr Newton: It is correct to say that the Assembly has a good track record in addressing this problem, which stretches right across all sectors of the community and all levels of society. There is concern among all Ministers in seeking to address this issue.

I agree that the matter is not the responsibility of one Minister; it crosses the boundaries of all Departments. The Minister of Education even has a responsibility in this matter with regard to the area of early-days education about money management and financial management in primary schools. I imagine that all MLAs, MPs and even councillors are faced with this issue and are being contacted by constituents.

I want to mention two constituency problems that concerned me recently. First, I was contacted by a family from a large housing estate in East Belfast. I happened to go to see them on a Friday evening, and when I knocked the door, it was answered by two children who were about eight or nine years old. When I asked whether mummy was in, I was told that no, mummy was not in. When I asked whether daddy was in, I was told that no, daddy was not in. I was halfway back down the path when I heard "hello, hello, hello" from behind me. It turned out that I had been told that mummy and daddy were not in because the family thought that I was the tick man, the debt collector, calling on a Friday evening. That is the truth of the matter.

I went inside the house to talk the family about the broken window about which they had contacted me. They could not afford to replace the window and wanted the Housing Executive to repair it. However, the house contained all the very latest in home entertainment equipment. That illustrates why there is a need for education in how to manage finances.

The other problem was brought to me by a young man who called into my office. He was self-employed, having established his own landscape gardening business. He had bought his family home and was

paying his mortgage. However, he suffered an injury at work, and, unfortunately, he had reached a stage where he could not work and on doctor's advice, could not go back to his work. He had received a letter from the building society, indicating that it intended to start repossession proceedings. Those are two examples of problems that constituents face, and I am sure that all MLAs have similar stories.

In my experience, when debt becomes a problem, it does not affect only one person. Usually, a wife, husband, partner or, indeed, children are caught up in it. There is not necessarily, and not often, only one source of debt supply — it involves credit cards, store cards, housing arrears and mortgage arrears. The problem goes right across the board, and once someone gets into that spiral of debt, it is extremely difficult to get out of it. That is why I say that it is not the responsibility of one Minister to address the issue — it permeates all Departments.

People need to be made aware of unscrupulous moneylenders who drive debt up and up. Indeed, I include in that the companies that use highly sophisticated television advertising that promises to consolidate your debt and take away all your worries. One is the doorstep lender, the other is the highly sophisticated approach — neither should be encouraged. We must support the professional advice services, citizens advice bureaux and the independent advice centres. I was pleased to note that even the Ulster Bank has indicated that it is willing, through Minister Foster, of whose statement I am aware, to provide free advice to people. That is to be welcomed.

Mr Cree: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak in today's debate. Although the current economic recession is being experienced on a global scale, we must remember that it affects us all at a local level, too. It is easy to lay all the blame at the feet of the large banks and American corporations, but that does not help Northern Ireland out of its current situation. We should not sit back and hope that people in Northern Ireland will not be severely affected, because they will. We are part of a global community that is going through the most difficult economic crisis for decades; therefore Northern Ireland should be doing all that it can to provide financial assistance to its citizens.

I agree with the sentiments of the motion, which proposes that the Executive bring forward a package of measures to enhance existing debt-advisory services. However, we must remember that the Executive will not be able to end the economic crisis, but merely alleviate some of its effects.

Therefore, I commend initiatives such as Citizens Advice and Advice NI. Those organisations provide a valuable service, but in a climate such as this, they are

under tremendous pressure as people look to them for financial and, often, emotional assistance.

Advice NI made a number of recommendations in its annual report. Those included a number of calls for extra funding in order to enable advisers to deal with the extra pressures that they are being put under. Indeed, the demand for debt and financial advice is greater than ever before.

12.30 pm

The number of home repossessions is increasing at an alarming rate, but we must remember that behind every statistic, there is a human being and, very likely, a family that needs to be provided for. Although it is clear that we are in a huge economic predicament, Northern Ireland also faces many human tragedies. Therefore, the services that debt advice agencies provide are now even more imperative. Those services provide a vital lifeline for people who find themselves in difficulty, whether they are in debt, unemployed or facing the threat of losing their homes.

The economic crisis is crossing all geographical areas, industries and social groups. Advice NI deals with 200,000 enquiries a year, and that figure is likely to rise substantially this year. Therefore, we should be making extra resources available to deal with that increased workload. Unemployment is rocketing, and the total number of benefit claimants will rise sharply as a consequence. However, debt advice agencies are being asked to provide the same level of services with the same restricted resources as they had previously. In fact, staffing levels in some of the agencies have decreased by 4% over the past year.

I agree with the sentiment of the motion. The Ulster Unionist Party will support the amendment, because it is clearly more focused. I am sure that the Minister for Social Development and the other Ministers will liaise to find solutions in this very difficult period.

Mr Neeson: I must say at the outset that I hope that there will be no division in the House on this issue. I can support both the motion and the SDLP amendment.

This is too serious an issue for division, and I speak from personal experience. I was on unemployment benefit for a considerable time following the fall of the Assembly in 1982. I know the problems of trying to pay a mortgage. I know about dreading the postman coming to the door every day with bills and final demands. It is a serious issue, and I sympathise with people who have been caught up in the difficult economic downturn.

I remind Members about the role of the banks in this issue. We, the public, have bailed out those banks. It is important that the banks act responsibly towards their customers, who are facing genuine difficulties. This is an issue on which the Assembly should be focusing. I

agree with other Members that it is not an issue for only one Minister; we must act collectively to deal with it. It is easy to talk about a broad package of measures, but it is much harder to come up with specific actions that the House can advocate.

I will bring forward some such measures. Realistically, we cannot change benefits directly. However, we can do more work to ensure benefit uptake and, therefore, relieve the debt burden in some households. We can link debt service to social security queries more readily. We can build face-to-face advice into existing schemes, such as the mortgage rescue and the warm homes schemes.

I will digress for a moment to speak about the warm homes scheme. Believe it or not, the revision of this scheme is causing unemployment for some of the local enterprise agencies in Northern Ireland. That is not the responsibility of the Enterprise Minister — and I have spoken to her about this. Many people working for local enterprise agencies will lose their jobs unless there is an urgent intervention by the Department for Social Development.

It is noticeable that most of the recommendations made in the debate and in public discourse relate to benefits. However, the fundamental challenge in this is for working families — most likely not entitled to any benefits — who face genuine challenges in paying bills for commodities and, often, in covering their mortgages. There is no point in linking debt advice to benefits when so many people who need it, and any other assistance, are not on benefits. Nor should we be attempting to persuade people onto benefits when they are working. Rather, we should build provision for rising household debt into almost every aspect of policy. With respect to energy, increasing competition among suppliers and ensuring easier access to renewable energy sources would help hugely with household budgets.

This is a major issue. Even in their constituency offices, Members face a growing problem of debt. It is not so long ago that banks were trying to persuade us, on a daily basis, to take out new credit cards. I can offer an example of the effect of that. Recently, I had someone in my constituency office who owed over £20,000 of credit-card debt, yet he was on benefits. We call on the various agencies to provide extra advice, but banks should behave responsibly.

Mr Shannon: I have every sympathy with this proposal. I hope that an accommodation between the motion and the amendment can be reached.

These are the facts. In Northern Ireland, the number of mortgages in arrears between July and September 2008 was almost double that at the same period of the previous year. A total of 1,006 writs and summonses were issued, compared to 521 in 2007. A total of 3,628 mortgage arrears notices were issued to people in

Northern Ireland in 2008, which is a rise of 64% on the previous year. There has been an increase of 300% in requests for debt advice. If those figures do not tell the story, nothing will.

An online search reveals homes offered in auctions at a fraction of their former cost. Big businesses and those with money are sweeping in and buying out homeowners. One homeowner in my constituency suffered a heart problem and was unable to continue working at her cleaning business. Income from her husband's job was insufficient to pay the mortgage and when someone knocked on the door offering to buy their home, there was no option but to sell. The problem was that the businessman who offered to buy her house offered £75,000 for her semi-detached home in Newtownards, which was under half of its value, even at today's reduced prices. The couple did not want to declare bankruptcy, and my constituent was forced to accept his offer, which covered the rest of the mortgage and little more. That tied them up for three months, unable to sell; however, the buyer declared that he did not want the property after all.

My constituent and her husband then found another young couple who were prepared to pay £110,000, which would have given her something with which to start her new home. However, the original buyer came back waving the initial contract, which gave him a three-month option to purchase, despite the fact that he had orally repudiated it. The couple had signed a document that they did not understand, and had not known that they could go anywhere for advice. The moral is clear: where there is no help, or where they are unaware that help is available, people will be taken advantage of.

That is just one example; there are many others. This is a story that has been repeated too many times. I am shocked to find that many homes in high rate-paying areas of Newtownards are up for auction at a fraction of their value. No matter how well-off people once were, they need help and advice to stop them from getting into a situation where there is no other option but to sell their homes at a fraction of their value.

Having learned of various situations like that in my constituency, I asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment several questions about debt advice in the Province and, in particular, my constituency. I got the following answer:

“The noo, mae Depairtment peys Citizen’s Advice fer 12 debt advisors acroass Norlin Airlan fer the tim 2008-2011. A contract wus gien tae Citizen’s Advice efter a public tender exercise where propones wur leuked fer es tae hoo bes’ tae meet demand an’ gie a free face tae face service airted aa the maist disadvantaged pairs. Nane o’ thae propones leuked tae pit a debt adviser i Airds an’ Strangford.”

“My Department currently provides funding to Citizen’s Advice for 12 debt advisers located across Northern Ireland for the period 2008-2011. A contract was awarded to Citizen’s Advice following a public tender exercise where proposals were sought as to how best

to meet demand and provide a free face to face service aimed at the most disadvantaged areas. None of the proposals received sought to locate a debt adviser in the Ards and Strangford areas. My Department continues to provide ongoing advice and assistance to all advice centres in Northern Ireland through training, workshops and seminars on many aspects of dealing with debt."

The Minister also said:

"On 3 July 2008, I announced an extra £400,000 for the provision of free face to face debt advice across Northern Ireland for two years starting in April 2009. My Department will be carrying out a post project evaluation of the debt advice during 2006/07, in order to identify any gaps in provision. It is too early to say whether the extra funding will result in a debt adviser being located in the Ards and Strangford area at April 2009."

My hope is that there will be an adviser and that Leonard Bartlett, who presently deals with debt advice along with everything else, will be able to have some assistance in that matter.

As you can see from the answers that my colleague has given, her Department is active in trying to provide a much-needed service, and she should be commended for that. Last week, I spoke on the motion that asked the Department for Social Development to put in place, as a matter of urgency, a plan of action. I reiterate that call now. People need help now. They do not need another mission statement; they need action on the mission. Let us get down to business and do all that is in our power to help people through the dark times. By working together and by acting together we can and will pull through into a brighter Northern Ireland. At this time, however, there are a great many people in trouble. Let us do our best to help them.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I declare an interest as someone who worked in the advice sector from 1981 to 2007, a period of approximately 26 years. Therefore, I am very aware of the importance and impact that advice provision has, and will continue to have, for the wider public. The provision of advice has always been fraught with difficulty, in particular, debt advice, which is a very complex area. I remember attending a housing rights seminar a number of years ago at which debt advice was talked about. I was told that one case could take approximately six months from start to conclusion. It is a very complex, time-consuming and expensive area to deal with.

Over the years, the advice sector has gone from strength to strength in spite of a continual lack of resources and funding. Advice services, particularly in the voluntary sector, have become very professional in their approach to, and delivery of, the information and advice provided. Currently, advice and information services are provided by Government Departments and agencies on issues relevant to their role. Regional and voluntary organisations provide advice on specific issues such as welfare rights and, usually, that is focused on a particular group of clients. There are independent

advice services, many of which are primary advice providers, but some of which are involved in community development and provide advice as part of their work.

Over the years, one of the main problems has been the inconsistent approach to the funding of advice services, in particular, by local councils. For instance, I worked in the Newry Welfare Rights Centre, which did not receive any council funding for the first 16 years of its existence. It was only when the voluntary community unit provided matching funding that the council changed its approach and provided some funding. For many years, the main source of funding was the Southern Health and Social Services Trust, which, in fairness, recognised the importance of advice giving.

If adequate funding is provided, there is no doubt that advice services can go a long way to help people who get into debt to the extent that has happened more recently. Many advice services respond to need and to the availability of resources. Unfortunately, a lot of advice work is supported through short-term funding.

As has been said, the provision of advice in relation to social security benefits is very important. Often, many people who find themselves in debt and on benefits are not maximising their entitlement to benefits because of a lack of knowledge in that area, which can be complex and difficult to access.

12.45 pm

Pressure is undoubtedly growing on the resources that are available to fund advice services. Organisations are having to reduce services, and staff are losing their jobs as a result. The knowledge and experience that staff have gained over the years, particularly on debt advice, is often lost, and it is then difficult to replace.

A strategic approach to the funding of professional advice services is urgently needed, and the needs of the most disadvantaged people in society must be addressed. The provision of sustainable advice services will go a long way to helping to achieve that. Independent analysis of debt advice, which DETI funded, concluded that Citizens Advice was helping vulnerable people, and that is as it should be. Fifty per cent of people who accessed the debt advice service were on means-tested benefits, and services should reach those who are in greatest need.

The point has already been made that more than one Minister is responsible for debt advisory services, and DSD's role is inextricably linked to the provision of advice services. Under DSD's proposed mortgage-rescue scheme to assist people who have difficulty in meeting mortgage payments and who find themselves in arrears, people will have to contact an advice agency such as the Housing Rights Service, Citizens Advice and local independent centres in order for their eligibility for the scheme to be established.

However, DSD proposes only to seek funding to provide at least one additional post in a mortgage- and debt-advice organisation. I cannot see how the provision of one additional post will go any way to helping to solve the problem. DETI and DSD must recognise their responsibilities, and ensure that proper and sustainable advice provision is made before the problem spirals completely out of control. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Attwood: The House is unanimous on the matter, and in response to Mr Neeson's comments, I do not anticipate there being a Division. However, I wish to make two substantive comments, one on the banks and the other on the acquisition of additional services.

Members have rightly made the point that in the current circumstances, banks have a responsibility to contribute to making credit available to clients again. However, the other part of that equation concerns how banks are managing their customer base, especially those customers who are faced with heightened debt and are at heightened risk. I say to the Minister that a further conversation is needed with the banks on that issue. The anecdotal evidence that I have heard may reflect a wider evidence base, which suggests that banks are doing a number of things to clients who may be in financial difficulties.

First, single employers — individual businessmen — are coming under pressure from banks to convert their business loans into personal loans. As the Minister will be aware, that means that the banks may be further able to put the squeeze on individual businessmen's debt burden. When people encounter such debt problems, it is inappropriate for banks to begin to do that, because their doing so makes individuals' financial circumstances even more difficult.

A second piece of anecdotal information that is beginning to emerge, for which there may also be a wider evidence base, is that some banks are closing people's accounts because they no longer want the business. There may also be a wider evidence base for that. People who lose their bank accounts in circumstances that are beyond their control are being placed in more difficult circumstances, over and above the debt burden, when their personal accounts are closed.

A conversation with the banks is needed, not only about their releasing more money to people in the North who are affected by the credit squeeze but about showing more flexibility in managing their client base. Accounts should not be closed unilaterally, and banks should not pressurise account holders to convert business debt into personal debt.

My second point, which relates to the SDLP's amendment, is that there is evidence in a sister Department of the Minister's that the tender process gets in the way of a Department being able to provide

a rapid response to the credit squeeze. I have been in correspondence — and the Minister may want to investigate the matter further — with the Minister for Employment and Learning about how Treasury guidelines on funding of third-sector organisations enable those organisations to be grant-aided rather than having to go through a tendering process necessarily.

In the current situation, there may be a way to grant-aid organisations in certain circumstances, in order to provide specialist support such as debt services in situations of need or stress, rather than their having to go through an elaborate tender process. The Minister for Employment and Learning has said that he does not believe that Treasury guidelines on funding of third-sector organisations for specialist advice-giving enables him to, for example, fund an organisation such as the Educational Guidance Service for Adults to help people who face redundancy and seek re-employment. My view differs from his.

However, if there is an issue in the Minister's Department or in any other Department about how to fund organisations that provide assistance during times of stress and need, such as those that exist at present, Departments and the Government have a responsibility to determine whether the Treasury's guidelines enable them to respond more quickly than they have thus far.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): I speak on behalf of the Committee for Social Development. The motion refers to, among other matters, enhancement in mortgage-advice services for householders who are in difficulties. As the House is aware, the Committee has considered advice provision generally and mortgage issues in particular at a number of its recent meetings.

As other Members have indicated, society faces an economic crisis that is unique in recent times with regard to the speed at which it has overtaken ordinary householders. Good decisions that were made by normal hardworking people when times were better are, in many cases, turning bad. The Committee does not believe that the Executive can come riding to the rescue, blank cheque in hand, of everyone who needs financial help in Northern Ireland. However, it believes that even a modest investment in good advice provision can be a tangible way to help people in Northern Ireland who just need some guidance in these difficult times.

As I said in the House last week, the Committee takes the view that prevention is better, and is almost always cheaper, than the cure. That sentiment has been echoed by Members in the debate. In the case of mortgages, prevention is about good mortgage advice in the first place and crisis guidance when things look like they are going wrong. The Committee welcomes elements of the Department for Social Development's mortgage-rescue scheme, which include expert advice provision.

The Committee understands that the Department is about to pilot mortgage-rescue advice provision. The Committee has also learnt of link-ups between housing associations and citizens advice bureaux in the provision of crisis-mortgage advice. Those moves are also to be welcomed. Notwithstanding those positive actions, the Committee believes that advice providers will face a further unprecedented surge in demand for their services as the recession worsens and unemployment and the fear of repossessions grow.

Therefore, the Committee believes that the time is right for careful review of advice provision throughout Northern Ireland. In its deliberations, it has heard from a large number of advice organisations, which I will not name as the list is too substantial and long. The Committee has been generally impressed, not only by the encyclopedic knowledge of the representatives of those organisations, but by their dedication to the sections of the public that they serve.

For the services provided by those organisations, some of which are regularly or solely involved in housing and mortgage issues, the Committee is keen to ensure good coverage throughout all parts of Northern Ireland, coupled with stable and commensurate financing arrangements.

I understand that, in April, the Committee will receive a briefing from the Department for Social Development on the future of advice provision in Northern Ireland. The Committee will — as it always does — approach that briefing and the subsequent consultation with an open mind and a good grasp of how important the issue is to people throughout the Province.

In conclusion, I want to re-emphasise the Committee's view that in the present economic straits, in which many investments seem to be losing their value, an investment by the Executive in sound advice on complex issues such as mortgages is bound to yield a good return for those households in Northern Ireland that need help.

Mr Armstrong: I am pleased to participate in the debate, which relates to an issue of real concern for the people of Northern Ireland. It is important that local politicians are seen to take the lead on this matter.

The worldwide recession has hit Northern Ireland at a difficult time, and job losses are announced every week. The sharp increase in house prices in Northern Ireland in recent years, coupled with irresponsible lending by banks, meant that many people were in deep trouble once the recession hit and once they lost their jobs. In 2008, there were 2,777 confirmed redundancies — an increase of 45% from 2007. However, even that figure masks the serious situation in the self-employed sector.

That is in addition to the steep increase in domestic household bills, such as electricity, heating oil, gas and

grocery bills. It is inevitable that people are feeling the pinch, and data on household repossessions support that assertion. Official figures show that applications for home repossessions increased by almost two-thirds in 2008 to 3,628 and most worryingly, the rate appeared to be accelerating in the last quarter of 2008.

According to the Court Service, during the fourth quarter of 2008, 939 writs and summonses were issued for mortgages, compared with 542 during the same period in 2007. That represents an increase of 73%. To put that figure in perspective, that is the equivalent of 70 people a week being threatened with eviction from the homes that they have bought. Real tales of human tragedy and hardship lie behind those numbers, with families uprooted and hopes and dreams lost. It is in no one's interests for anyone to lose a home. It is imperative that people seek help at the earliest possible stage, and that appropriate help is available and easily accessible.

In 2008, an incredible 13,900 enquiries were made to the Housing Rights Service. Last month, the service launched an initiative whereby it has a specialist adviser at the Royal Courts of Justice and Laganside Courts in Belfast. As with most things, however, such services and resources are scarce. It is clear that lenders and Government need to make a concentrated and co-ordinated effort to safeguard homes. It is in no one's interests to see people evicted from their homes.

This is another situation that requires a co-ordinated approach, with the cliché “joined-up Government” clear for all to see. Many agencies, such as Citizens Advice and Advice Northern Ireland, provide service and assistance to those in financial difficulties, including those who have lost their homes, are in debt or are unable to meet their mortgage repayments.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has funded pilot programmes that have indicated just how great a demand exists for such services. I am well aware of the pressures on budgets in the current climate, but I am in no doubt that the Executive need to look closely at providing funding for accredited financial services, including preventative measures, so that people are encouraged to seek advice before matters get out of hand. I commend the SDLP amendment.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I welcome the opportunity to debate this important issue. The way in which the debate has been conducted reflects that importance. The motion relates to debt advice, and given the current economic climate, Members have, rightly, identified that that topic has become increasingly important.

1.00 pm

Last December, the Executive met to discuss details of measures to help people suffering from the credit crunch or economic downturn — call it what you will. As Ministers, we recognise the pressures on household

budgets, and we are committed to easing the financial hardship that is being experienced by so many people at this time. Dealing with debt was one of the five core themes that the Executive identified then, and that echoes many of the sentiments that have been expressed in the Chamber today. Indeed, it was identified by the proposer of the motion that the issue is one for the entire Executive. That was recognised last December.

My Department has had a long involvement in the delivery of debt advice. It has taken the lead in funding provision of face-to-face debt advice as part of Lifetime Opportunities, the Executive's anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy. One of the aims of the Executive-endorsed consumer strategy for Northern Ireland, first published in March 2002, was to establish a suitable framework for the delivery of an effective debt-advice service in Northern Ireland. Subsequently, the Department commissioned research that identified an existing publicly-funded infrastructure for debt advice in the voluntary and community sector. However, the Department recognised that there was a shortfall in the number of debt advisers providing front line, face-to-face advice. Let us face it, when most people are in difficulties they prefer to speak to someone face to face about those difficulties.

In January 2005, following the research findings, DETI launched a pilot scheme for face-to-face debt advice provided by the voluntary sector. The scheme attracted debtor clients from throughout Northern Ireland who made themselves available without any marketing or promotion. The overall assessment of the pilot scheme indicated that there was a need for continuing free, confidential, front line, face-to-face debt-advice service, and, in light of that experience, funding was secured, and put on a more permanent footing, by public tender in 2006.

Citizens Advice regional office secured the first contract for delivery of a debt advice service for the two-year period from 2006-08 through a competitive tendering process, and was awarded £800,000 to deliver that face-to-face debt-advice service at a number of outlets in Northern Ireland. The contract was so fully subscribed that the Department put a new contract in place to fund the continuing provision of free face-to-face debt advice.

Following a further public tender exercise, the Department awarded a new contract to Citizens Advice for three years, beginning on 1 April 2008, and the current level of funding for the face-to-face advice service is £400,000 per annum. From 1 April to 31 December 2008 the current face-to-face debt-advice service dealt with £17.6 million of consumer debt, representing 4,592 individual debts, presented by 1,611 consumers. That return covers three quarters of the year and already exceeds the total in 2007-08 by £2.6 million.

The figures for the final quarter of the financial year will, no doubt, follow a similar trend, if not increasing.

In anticipation of the rising demand, the Department sought and obtained further funding for free face-to-face debt advice in the comprehensive spending review (CSR) in 2007, and, last July, as was pointed out, I was pleased to announce that the provision for face-to-face debt advice would double to £800,000 per annum for the two years beginning 1 April 2009. A tender for the further face-to-face debt-advice service will be published this year.

I know that Members, particularly the proposer of the amendment, have expressed concerns about the current position of the tendering process. The reason for the slight delay is that the Department wishes to examine, in detail, the post-project evaluation report that was conducted. Also — and this is very important — we need to integrate the private-sector money that has been made available by the Ulster Bank. An extra £300,000 has been made available — which we were only too delighted to receive — and we want to make sure that that is part of the tendering process.

Face-to-face consultation is important, but it is not the only way to deliver advice. Throughout England, Scotland and Wales, other methods are also effective. Debtors in those countries have the benefit of a number of telephone advice services, some of which already operate effectively in Northern Ireland. They allow debtors to get advice while preserving a degree of anonymity — I am sure we can understand why people may want that.

With that in mind, the Department has obtained additional funding in the CSR of £200,000 a year, for 2009-2010 and 2010-11, for an enhanced telephone-based advice service for Northern Ireland. The tendering process for that project closes today; it has generated considerable interest, and things are moving forward significantly. The assessment panel that will award the tender will meet on 27 March, and panel members will receive the bids on Wednesday 18 March.

The current service is being delivered in neutral access areas, generally in town centre locations. Advice providers use extensive outreach measures in order to bring the service to areas of high social and economic deprivation. Mr Brady is right to point out that research by Citizens Advice revealed that there was a great deal of need in those areas. Although Citizens Advice holds the current debt-advice service contracts, agreements are also in place with Omagh Independent Advice Services and the Housing Rights Service, both of which are affiliated to Advice NI, in order to enhance coverage throughout Northern Ireland.

The three-year contract is a long-term commitment, which meets a long-term demand and allows advisers to specialise. I join Mr Brady in congratulating advisers

on their professionalism; it is something that the House should endorse. I know that they are under a lot of pressure and have to deal with many different cases. All of the people who go to them for advice have multiple debts, and it is a difficult problem to deal with. I wish to put on record my appreciation for the professionalism of the debt advisers.

As I said, the three-year contract meets a long-term demand and allows advisers to specialise. It also creates a regime for better training. Citizens Advice has agreed a partnership approach to the development and delivery of "Wiser Adviser" money-advice training in Northern Ireland. As a result, Citizens Advice and Advice NI — with funding from the Money Advice Trust — have been working together to meet training needs in what is an increasingly complex aspect of the advice services.

From 1 September 2008 to 31 December 2008, debt advisers handled £5 million of consumer debt, of which almost 60% — nearly £3 million — was owed to high street lenders, whether in the form of mortgages, credit cards, overdrafts or loans. Those statistics follow the trends in previous quarters. With that in mind, in November 2008, I invited the four local banks, jointly as an industry or separately as individual companies, to play a role with my Department in addressing the problem of over-indebtedness. As has been noted, I was pleased that Ulster Bank took up the invitation and pledged £300,000 of funding over two years to support the debt advice in which my Department is engaged.

In recent months, the debt advice service has drawn in a small number of individuals who have reported debts of £1 million and above. That is significant, and the House should note it. Those debts are related to assets acquired during the peak of the credit and property boom, which are now a feature of indebtedness, and my officials will monitor the developing situation.

My Department is also looking at other measures to help those who find themselves in debt. I propose to introduce a debt relief Bill that will set up a scheme to help individuals who can neither afford to pay their debts nor the costs of petitioning for bankruptcy. Under that proposed scheme, individuals with moderate levels of unsecured debt will be able to apply to the Official Receiver for a debt relief order. That would afford relief similar to that offered by a bankruptcy order, but at less than one third of the cost.

Much mention has been made in the debate about the Department for Social Development. A great deal is going on in that Department with regard to debt advice. Its opening doors strategy, which was launched in September 2007, aims to put in place a quality integrated advice service across Northern Ireland and establish a proper framework to ensure that services are planned and delivered in a way that matches resources to need. Furthermore, through the community support

programme (CSP), which is delivered by local councils, DSD has allocated £5.15 million, of which £1.9 million has been targeted specifically towards providing front line advice services.

At a regional level, DSD continues to core fund Advice NI, Citizens Advice and the Law Centre by up to £1.5 million. A Government advice and information group has been established, which consists of representatives from a range of Departments that have an interest in voluntary advice services. Again, DETI plays an active role in that group.

I will now turn briefly to a couple of issues that Members specifically mentioned. Alban Maginness referred to the Money Advice and Budgeting Service that is available in the Republic of Ireland. A report on child poverty, which was recently published by the Committee the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, recommended that we examine that model to see whether it could be of benefit to debt advice in Northern Ireland. My officials met with representatives of the Irish League of Credit Unions to explore whether the opportunity for such a model exists in Northern Ireland. Given the recent report on role and potential of credit unions in Northern Ireland by the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, it is a very opportune time to be looking at such a scheme.

Leslie Cree said that we were delivering the same level of service with the same level of funding. I must put on the record that that is absolutely not correct. We have doubled funding for face-to-face debt advice, added an extra £200,000 in funding for the telephone service and we have received £300,000 from the Ulster Bank. Therefore, we are not delivering the same level of service for the same level of funding, although I acknowledge that we are under considerable pressure given the economic climate.

Sean Neeson mentioned a specific DSD issue, which I am happy to take a note of and pass on to Margaret Ritchie.

Alex Attwood mentioned two issues. The first issue was the banks' management of their customer bases, which we have been mentioning to the banks in our meetings with them. Mr Attwood gave anecdotal evidence, and we have been saying that we need to look at specific cases to bring to the banks so that we can ask them what is happening. If we bring anecdotal cases to the banks, they will say that they cannot understand the reasons for what has happened. Therefore, we need to look closer at issues with the banks. I am concerned to hear that business loans are being converted into personal loans, because that puts personal properties and assets at a great deal of risk.

The second issue that Mr Attwood mentioned was on flexibility and procurement, and I hear what he said. We are very much aware of the 2002 report from

HM Treasury, which stated that if Government want smaller organisations to apply for tenders, they need to work with the voluntary and community organisations to take account of their distinctiveness. That process has been used for every tender exercise for debt advice that we have been involved in, and the fact that all our contracts to date have been successfully won by voluntary organisations from the third sector demonstrates that the approach is working in their favour.

We first entered debt advice in early 2005. Before that, debt advice funding was short term and piecemeal; it is not any more, because we have put it on a permanent footing. Hopefully, we will be able to look at the issues that have been raised in the debate, which has been worthwhile and taken place in a measured way.

I thank those Members who tabled the motion. I hope that I have outlined a wide range of current and future measures, which will, as the motion suggests, enhance existing debt-advisory services and provide additional resources to those organisations that help people with debt.

Mr O'Loan: I also thank all the Members who spoke in what has been a very constructive debate. There has been a very high level of understanding of the issue and of the very difficult situation in which many members of our community find themselves. There has been a great deal of sympathy for the position of those people. Given that, the united response by the Assembly is absolutely right. I give particular credit to the proposer of the motion, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, who was most constructive in what he said and spoke in a generous spirit. It is only right that I respond to that generosity, and, in light of it, I beg leave to withdraw the amendment.

1.15 pm

As far as debt is concerned, we seem to have been hit by a perfect storm. For many years, banks and other financial institutions threw money at people and encouraged them to incur high levels of debt. A situation was therefore created that can only be described as irresponsible. Given the current economic downturn, many people are losing their jobs, and in many cases, they find themselves over-indebted, with financial responsibilities that they cannot meet. Many Members referred to specific examples of people who are in perilous financial circumstances as a result of that situation. It requires a response, and I recognise the response that has been made and that continues to be worked through.

Looking to the future, once we have worked through this particularly difficult time, we need to work towards a situation whereby we are not merely creating rescue packages for people who get into dire circumstances, but we are able to give financial advice at a very early stage as people make their financial decisions. For

example, the Health Service is moving significantly from acute hospital provision to placing a much greater emphasis on public health and prevention. That same model should be applied to a person's finances. That should be the response when financial advice is being given — such advice needs to be given at an early stage, and it should be readily available.

Referring to the specific issue of loan sharks, Robin Newton mentioned people who collect debt. Some people do so perfectly legally, but we know very well that others do not do so legally. Their methods of enforcing contracts are well outside the law. That is something to which attention must be paid.

I recognise what is being done on the matter. The Minister detailed the £400,000 of funding that has been doubled to £800,000 and the £200,000 that has been made available for the telephone debt-advice service. That is all good. I welcome what the Ulster Bank is now doing. When the banks appeared before the Committee for Finance and Personnel on this very issue, I challenged them, but they had nothing to offer at that point. I welcome the fact that the Ulster Bank has now come on board significantly. Other banks and financial institutions ought to do the same. We should be putting pressure on them to do so.

I give credit to all the points that Members made. It is sometimes the individual cases that show the meaning of what we are doing. Some Members made it clear that we are not talking just about statistics. Mr McLaughlin, Mr Neeson and Mr Cree all referred to that point, and Mr Shannon and Mr Newton described particular cases that speak very eloquently about the issue.

In her response, the Minister outlined the reason for what she called a "slight delay". She knows that she will have the support of everyone in this House if she can bring in the final implementation of the funding that is at her disposal and make it available directly through front line advice services.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé an-sásta cead cainte a bheith agama ar an ábhar thábhachtach seo inniu. Aontaím leis an cuid is mó a dúradh.

I welcome my colleague Mitchel McLaughlin's having moved the motion on this fairly serious topic. As most Members outlined, this affects us all in our work as MLAs and elected representatives. I acknowledge that the amendment has now been withdrawn, and we acknowledge that we want to come out of here today with a united voice on this issue.

Debt affects many people, particularly in the present economic climate. In the past year, the number of people seeking debt counselling services from organisations such as Citizens Advice has doubled. I acknowledge the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's response to the debate.

Debt primarily affects people on low income, those suffering from illness, disabled people, people who have over-committed themselves, and those who have lost their jobs. On the other side of the argument, there has been irresponsible lending — some Members referred to the banks. Some people do not have the relevant skills or know-how to manage their resources. Nevertheless, debt is concentrated among people on low incomes and, in this economic climate, those who have lost their jobs. Some areas of concern are credit cards, personal loans, bank loans, hire purchase and mortgages — many people are concerned about their homes being repossessed.

Sinn Féin thanks the SDLP for withdrawing its amendment, and it accepts that the issue does not just concern one Minister. Arlene Foster referred to the Executive's response to the matter and to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's doubling of funding for face-to-face debt-advice services.

Many of us who are councillors will know that the Department for Social Development has provided funds to help citizens' advice bureaux throughout council areas. For example, in my constituency, the funding received by the Lisburn citizens advice bureau has enabled it to open outreach centres in places such as Poleglass, Twinbrook and Knockmore.

So there is an issue around the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister for Social Development. In addition, the Minister for Employment and Learning is responsible for funding the Law Centre. On the one hand, there is a response to this issue from individual Ministers, and then there is the Executive and all the other Ministers. I am glad that we have a united front on this issue.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment referred to changes to the tendering process, which means that many voluntary-sector organisations are now able to bid for contracts. In addition, she mentioned a new telephone service, which is useful for people who are unable to attend debt advice centres. Also, in April, debt relief orders, aimed at people on low incomes, will be introduced to provide an alternative to declarations of bankruptcy. Positive measures are being taken, and the Minister reminded us that funding for such measures will have doubled over the period of the comprehensive spending review.

The motion is an attempt to focus on the fact that people are undergoing unprecedented economic difficulties. More and more people are losing their jobs, and, in turn, many people have multiple debts, including credit-card debt and personal loans. If people lose their jobs, they are then in danger of losing their homes.

Robin Newton made that point, and he made a fair point that the Minister of Education should try to get people involved at an early age in managing their

finances. People are concerned about over-committing themselves with credit cards and personal loans.

Mr Newton talked about home repossessions, and spoke about incidents of which he has personal experience in which people had their homes repossessed and were put out of their jobs.

Lesley Cree referred to the role of Citizens Advice. All Members will recognise the important role that citizens advice bureaux — and the many voluntary organisations — have played in this area over the years. Sean Neeson spoke of his experience of being on the dole — or on benefits — when the Assembly was closed down a number of years ago. He made interesting suggestions about linking benefit uptake with debt and the benefit system.

Jim Shannon also referred to mortgage arrears. The British Government has to be made to recognise, as we do, that house repossessions should be the last resort rather than the first. He also spoke about what Arlene Foster has done on the issue in recent years.

My colleague Mickey Brady, who has worked in the area of debt advice for many years, spoke of his experiences. He said, rightly, that the issue is complex and that there needs to be a more strategic way of dealing with its funding. I know, for example, that funding for a lot of citizens advice bureaux and at local government level has been patchy, and there has not been a strategic approach to funding, because it comes from DSD to councils. As Mickey Brady, I believe, said, a more consistent approach is required, and I see some evidence for that from the Minister's announcement today on funding, particularly for face-to-face debt-advisory services.

Alex Attwood talked about banks and their lending practices, and how they are turning business accounts into, maybe, personal accounts and closing some people's bank accounts. There is an issue there. I agree with what he said that rather than people — particularly those from the voluntary and community sector — having to go through a tendering process every time, they should be grant aided.

David Hilditch spoke on behalf of the Committee for Social Development, which, like all of us, recognises the issue with which people are faced with regard to debt and the importance of trying to help them. That is key to this debate. It is imperative that the existing provision is increased to ensure that advice on how to get out of financial difficulties is available to all people, regardless of whether they are on low incomes, have lost their jobs or are disabled.

I ask the House to support the motion. I acknowledge the Minister's comments about the motion and what she is trying to do to address the problem. I thank the Members who spoke, and I acknowledge that the amendment has been withdrawn. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr O'Loan has sought leave to withdraw the amendment to the motion. Is it the will of the House that the amendment be withdrawn?

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the increasing amount of personal debt and the crisis facing many mortgage holders; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister for Social Development to bring forward a package of measures to enhance existing debt-advisory services, and to provide additional resources and training for community based organisations providing debt counselling.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

World Wildlife Fund Earth Hour 2009

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

Mr Gallagher: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Assembly Commission and the Executive to support the World Wildlife Fund's earth hour 2009 by switching off the lights in Parliament Buildings and all Government departmental buildings at an appropriate time on Saturday 28 March 2009.

1.30 pm

Given the very high number of empty places around the Chamber this afternoon, some members of the public might well conclude that the lights have already gone out at Stormont. Furthermore, considering the remarks that have been made by the Environment Minister at various times, and his refusal to acknowledge that climate change is happening, many people might also believe that the lights have gone out as far as our environment is concerned.

Earth hour is a global initiative that is aimed at sending a strong message to world leaders in particular that we must all continue the fight against climate change. This is not simply a motion proposed on behalf of a few people in Northern Ireland who care about the environment and who are somehow acting alone. Globally, 1,430 cities and towns in 80 countries have signed up to earth hour, so they have already committed to switch off the lights in homes, offices and Government buildings.

Locally, as some Members will know, a few of our district councils have committed themselves to the initiative. Belfast City Council, Armagh City and District Council, Limavady Borough Council, and Ballymoney Borough Council are among the number that we know of at this point that have taken a decision to switch off their lights during earth hour.

When we become more energy efficient, we save money on our energy bills and contribute to a greener and more sustainable environment. As everyone knows, in the present circumstances, the public are tightening their belts and are thinking of ways to save money on heating their homes or by driving less and making more use of public transport. If such savings can be made — not only financially, but in relation to saving our planet — there is a strong case for supporting the earth hour initiative and encouraging further behavioural changes, in order to deliver a sustainable environment as well as a sustainable economy.

Therefore, it is important that the Assembly sends a clear message that we take the environment seriously. I believe that Northern Ireland needs to play a role in the global initiative against climate change.

Recently, the management school at Queen's University carried out a study on greenhouse gas performance and the UK economy. That report stated:

"As the UK economy moves towards a low carbon economy, Greenhouse Gas performance and efficiencies will become increasingly important to regional competitiveness."

The study found that the greenhouse gas efficiency levels in England outperform the efficiency levels in each of the other countries, which, after England, were rated in the following order: Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. The study further shows that if the Northern Ireland economy operated at the greenhouse-gas efficiency level that the English economy presently does, gross value added in Northern Ireland could be increased by 50%.

Economic competitiveness is one reason for seeking to control our carbon emissions, but there are others. Regulation, for example, is a key issue. As Members will know, we have legal obligations in relation to climate change. The Climate Change Act 2008 aims at reducing carbon emissions by 80% by 2050. We are also controlled through the directives issued as a result of EU legislation, some of which we are failing to meet. That legislation aims to achieve a 20% reduction in Europe's energy consumption by 2020. The energy performance of all our buildings is also covered by EU legislation.

The present global economic downturn presents many challenges at governmental level, not least energy efficiency and improving the environment. We can see already how the American, Irish and British Governments are paying more attention to increasing efficiency and making best use of resources, including environmental resources.

President Obama referred to the environment in his inaugural address. Since then, he has announced a "green new deal" and in doing so, he pointed out that America's economic downturn presents a huge opportunity to put people back to work in ways that will transform the economy and improve carbon efficiency.

Closer to home, Gordon Brown has committed his Government to achieving both greenhouse gas reductions and economic growth. On different occasions, he has talked about the present financial crisis as an opportunity to address climate change.

Members may know that, in recent months, the Irish Government launched a scheme to make homes across the country more energy efficient. In addition to improving energy efficiency and reducing carbon emissions, the initiative created 2,000 new jobs at a time when there was bad news on the jobs front.

Realising Northern Ireland's indigenous energy potential and removing the barriers that exist to its development must be a key focus for our Executive. We import more than 90% — close to 95% — of our energy, and that is neither reliable nor sustainable. There is no reason why we should not increase significantly our production of electricity from the sources that we all know about — the wind, the sun, the sea, and the production of crops, such as biomass. We have an abundance of indigenous renewable energy resources waiting to be harnessed. Not only will they reduce our reliance on fossil fuels, they will open up major economic opportunities and bring all-important jobs and other significant social benefits to the people here.

Our First Minister and deputy First Minister are in the United States of America in an attempt, among other things, to encourage investment here. It is important, therefore, that this Government reflect the same approach as that being adopted by other Governments, and to which I have already referred: one that shows that carbon efficiency and renewable energy have been put at the forefront of our policies.

I return again to the recent study from Queen's University — its conclusions are worthy of further consideration. The study said that those regions that will be most competitive will be those that are able to outperform other regions as regards high production of goods and services per unit of greenhouse gas impacts. In the future — and probably in the near future — the efficiency with which greenhouse gas emissions are used will be a fundamentally important determinant of our competitiveness. Countries and regions with low greenhouse gas efficiencies may, therefore, find themselves at a disadvantage. It is important for all of us that, as a first step, we take the earth hour initiative seriously.

I ask Members to support the motion, so that we can show — as a first step — that we are doing our bit to improve the environment for future generations in Northern Ireland.

Mr McKay: A LeasCheann Comhairle, I thank the Members for tabling the motion. Sinn Féin will speak in favour of it.

Earth hour 2009 is a global event. It is symbolic and it will send out a clear message to political leaders that more needs to be done to combat climate change. As Mr Gallagher said, a number of local business and councils have signed up to it across Ireland, including my council in Ballymoney.

This Assembly should also play its role in setting an example. Belfast City Council is supporting earth hour, and my party colleague Mayor Tom Hartley outlined that the council is committed to creating a greener, cleaner city in which good environmental practice is at

the core of all policy and practice. That is something that all our councils should replicate.

Climate change is already having a big impact. At the United Nations climate change conference in Poznań, all countries agreed to make operational an adaptation fund. That means that some \$60 million could be made available to help poorer vulnerable nations cope with the impact of climate change, and help to secure the survival of some of the least-developed countries and some island states. Good work was done at Poznań, but much, much more needs to be done if a final agreement is to be reached in Copenhagen in December 2009.

The World Wildlife Fund's earth hour will go some way towards publicising and highlighting the small steps that we all can take to reduce our carbon footprint and work towards practically saving energy. In the current economic climate, it will also go some way towards helping to save money.

Like the majority of elected Assemblies across Europe, this Assembly needs to send out the very clear message that it believes that human behaviour influences climate change. This society needs to be more energy efficient and less reliant on finite fuels, because their fluctuating prices throw hundreds of thousands of local people into fuel poverty. This Assembly needs to recognise the need to do something about that rather than just talking about it.

We need to be more proactive about sustainable development. We need to prevent the strangulation of the renewables industry, and we need to present a coherent position on environmental matters that is modern, constructive and forward-thinking — not fundamentalist, blinkered and economically short-sighted.

I am sure that the Minister of the Environment will try to resist the attempts that are being made to switch off this Assembly's lights in an effort to highlight climate change. However, I urge the rest of this Assembly to take this opportunity to knock his lights out. Go raibh maith agat.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Symbolism and normalisation are two things that are very important in Northern Ireland, and the power of both concepts is well understood here. The symbolism of switching off lights in this Building at the same time as others in 934 cities across 80 countries is a sign of our identification with the common cause of all humanity against the effects of global warming.

Iconic landmarks across the globe will be plunged into darkness, including Nelson's Column, the Forth Bridge, the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro, Table Mountain in Cape Town, and Sydney Opera House. The London Eye will also be dimmed for an

hour. Stormont — the internationally recognised symbol of Northern Ireland — should be no exception.

That move would also place Northern Ireland in the mainstream of world opinion and would demonstrate that this Assembly is in step with the vast bulk of scientific and reputable opinion on this matter. The Executive have signed up to delivering key targets to protect the environment and to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions of Northern Ireland and the UK. That will mean reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 25% — to below 1990 levels — by 2025, and ensuring that 12% of our electricity is generated from indigenous renewable sources by 2012.

I cannot emphasise enough the importance of Northern Ireland appearing to be normal and in the mainstream of world opinion. I was heartened to discover that Ballymoney, in my North Antrim constituency, has signed up for the one-hour symbolic act along with Belfast, Armagh and Limavady. The Belfast wheel, Belfast City Hall and the Victoria Square shopping centre will participate, and I encourage others to do the same.

In the United Kingdom, 90% of the energy that is produced is based on burning hydrocarbons and producing carbon dioxide. That is a far higher dependency than in countries such as Canada, France, Japan and in Scandinavia.

Dependence on imported natural gas is rising from its current rate of 50% to an estimated 80% in 10 years. The built environment accounts already for 50% of all end-use energy that is produced, with transport and industry each accounting for only 25%. Therefore, the built environment has to be the major target when considering any cutbacks in emissions, and there are clear implications for building design in the future.

The figures that I provided came from Sir David King, the Government's former chief scientific adviser. Unlike some figures that have been quoted in the Chamber recently, they are not plucked from sources that are open to question.

1.45 pm

By supporting the motion, the Assembly can show that, as a body, it is made up of sensible people who listen to properly validated scientific advice. By doing so, we can undo some of the damage that the Environment Minister has undoubtedly inflicted on our international standing. I support the motion.

Mr B Wilson: At first sight, the motion may seem frivolous and unimportant when compared with some of the major problems that the Assembly faces. However, that is not the case, given that it highlights two of the major threats facing Governments throughout the world: the security of energy supplies and climate change. I, therefore, welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion, and I thank Tommy Gallagher for tabling it.

I am pleased to see that the media have covered this year's earth hour already. That contrasts with their total lack of interest in the event last year. When I issued a press statement asking all public bodies — and, in particular, the Northern Ireland Assembly — to switch off unnecessary lights for an hour, there was no media interest at all. Like most of my press releases, the media ignored it totally, and the lights stayed on.

Some Members: Shame.

Mr B Wilson: I had hoped that it would have been a success, and I had even hoped that the authorities would have questioned the point of lighting public buildings after hours or at weekends when those buildings are not in use. However, while the lights were going out in cities across the world, Belfast was oblivious to the appeal. In fact, I must have been the only person in Northern Ireland to respond to last year's earth hour appeal. Not only did I turn off the lights, but I turned off the television and sat on the sofa, in front of a log fire, cuddling the wife for an hour. It was a rare and enjoyable experience. *[Laughter.]*

Outside of Northern Ireland, the switch-off was a great success, and many millions turned off their lights. For example, in Christchurch, New Zealand, energy use was cut by 13%.

This year, the local media are taking much more of an interest. In fact, I have been asked already to submit two articles to the local press. However, the aim of earth hour is not just to save energy, but to highlight how much energy we waste. It is part of an awareness campaign to make people think about how they use energy. For example, do lights in public buildings really need to be switched on in the evenings and at the weekends? Can we reduce the length of time that lighting is provided? Can we use energy-saving light bulbs or renewable energy? Are the lights really necessary? If earth hour can persuade us to examine our overall energy use, it will have been a success.

Climate change is a major threat to the future of our planet. In order to combat climate change, it is essential that we reduce our energy consumption. Indeed, a report issued just last week from the climate change summit in Copenhagen expressed concern that the earlier UN estimates of rises in sea levels were too low. It would appear that the previous Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change did not take into account the potential impact of the melting of the polar ice caps. I am sure that even a climate change sceptic such as our own Environment Minister would admit that any reduction in energy use is desirable. Energy costs make up a significant proportion of the average family's expenditure, and any reduction will help the fight against fuel poverty.

As oil prices have fallen in recent months, there has been a reduction in the previous drive to provide energy

from renewable sources. We have grown complacent, but that complacency is not justified. Although oil prices have fallen because of a reduction in demand due to the worldwide recession, that will not continue when the world economy picks up again.

As we move out of the recession, the demand for oil will grow, particularly in China and India. Demand will be considerably above the 2007 level, which created massive hardships in energy consumption throughout the world. The price of a barrel of oil is likely to exceed last year's record of \$150. Therefore, we should be taking advantage of the current low oil prices to reduce our consumption and develop alternative sources of energy. Indeed, we have already talked about some of the opportunities to develop alternative energy in Northern Ireland.

It is important that the Assembly shows leadership by responding to earth hour and sending out a message to the whole community that we must reduce energy consumption and increase investment in alternative energy from renewable sources. I support the motion and look forward to an hour-long cuddle on 28 March.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

I am not going to comment on whether Mr Wilson generated electricity while sitting on the sofa at home.

I support the motion. I am pleased to be able to speak on the subject today, and I thank Tommy Gallagher for bringing it to the Chamber.

It is vital that all politicians and governmental institutions in the North show leadership on the issue of climate change, as others have done around the globe. Commentators in the United States believe that climate change and global warming would have been at the top of the list of priorities of newly elected President Barack Obama had he not inherited the financial crisis, such is the seriousness with which world leaders are treating concerns for the future of the planet

Earth hour will see non-essential lighting being extinguished at many iconic landmarks, buildings and structures around the world, without public safety being compromised. The places taking part in the initiative include the Las Vegas strip, the Christ the Redeemer statue in Brazil, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Colosseum in Rome and the Sydney Opera House. The Scottish Parliament and buildings in Dublin, Cardiff and various other locations across these islands are also participating in the earth hour initiative.

It is only right that the Building in which we sit, and other public buildings in the North, take part in the initiative in an effort to raise awareness of the major threat of global warming and of mankind's contribution to it. It is time to show leadership, and I hope that —

as a result of the initiative — all of us will look seriously at how we can make a daily impact on climate change. This must not be a throwaway initiative, to be forgotten when it is over. We must continue to take every opportunity to play our part in the global response to this global problem. Some 50 million people across 35 countries took part in earth hour 2008. The WWF hopes to surpass that number considerably by having 1 billion people involved this year.

We have had bad publicity at local, national and international level recently thanks to our Environment Minister's position on climate change — a position which few people with any relevant scientific credentials agree with. The Assembly and the Executive must send a message to the people of the North, and beyond, that we are committed to tackling climate change. However, our efforts must not stop there; we must seize all opportunities to implement sustained initiatives to tackle climate change, such as generating more power from renewable sources.

I have no doubt that the Member for East Antrim's house will be lit up like a Christmas tree as he polishes his motorbike for summertime excursions. Nevertheless, I encourage members of the public to get involved in earth hour 2009, switch off between 8.30 pm and 9.30 pm on Saturday 28 March, and, thereby, declare that they want the issue to be addressed. If we fail to tackle global warming and climate change, the costs to this generation, and future generations, will be too great. I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Beggs: I, too, support the motion and the concept of earth hour. The earth hour initiative to turn off unnecessary electrical devices and lights for one hour does two things. First, it raises public awareness of both the amount of energy that we are consuming as a society and the need for everyone to mitigate the scenario of runaway climate change.

Secondly, it helps all of us, as individuals, to take a first small step, if we have not already done so, towards curbing carbon emissions. We can join in as individuals, public bodies or private companies. I hope that this will be a first step, and that, subsequently, there will be follow-up actions as the switch-off helps to raise the profile of the issue of energy consumption and global warming in the public domain.

Unlike our Environment Minister, I believe that, collectively, we can make a difference. If we all make energy savings, significant collective savings, which will benefit our environment and conserve our dwindling fossil-fuel supply, can result. I praise the efforts of the World Wildlife Fund and commend individuals and public authorities that have already pledged to participate in this venture at the end of this month.

We, as an Assembly, should do our bit and switch off the lights in Parliament Buildings for that hour on Saturday 28 March.

Other Members have asked whether we need so many lights on for so long and whether we need so many lights on at 3.00 am. That is something that the Assembly Commission can look into subsequently, and it should be considered with regard to Civil Service buildings.

I take this opportunity to praise the work of WWF in the southern group environmental health area. Last week, with the Environment Committee, I visited the Chrysalis Women's Centre in Brownlow. Collectively, that group has widened the knowledge of energy usage in the community. It has encouraged cycling, and it is now encouraging its members to work in partnership with the local health trust and Brownlow Integrated College to grow their own vegetables. Therefore, other benefits can follow. Turning out the lights is purely a first small step, but an important one. I hope that it serves as a catalyst to spur many on to take further steps.

There is a growing awareness, particularly among young people, of the need to become more energy efficient and of the undeniable links between human activity, increasing CO₂ deposits in the atmosphere and climate change.

In that context, it is impossible not to comment on the recent actions of our Environment Minister. We all know that once he was a global-warming alarmist. A few short years ago, he signed early-day motions at Westminster, describing climate change as the greatest threat to civilisation. However, he now gets worldwide fame and media coverage with his denial of man's contribution to climate change. My researcher watched the Minister's YouTube video on climate change, recorded at the Giant's Causeway, before the Minister took the step of removing that embarrassing bit of footage. My researcher described the video to me as a 10-minute ramble, in which our Environment Minister, Sammy Wilson, basically said that climate change —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I have given the Member some latitude, but his remarks have now strayed far from the motion.

Mr Beggs: Climate change is very important and there is a need for us all, not only to turn lights out for an hour, but to take the issue seriously. I hope that our Environment Minister will do so.

Mr McKay: Does the Member agree that from a party-political point of view, there appears to be a lack of DUP Members who are willing to speak on this issue? Does he agree that that is a sign of the disagreement and disarray in the DUP on this issue?

Mr Beggs: I find that very strange, and it is for the DUP to answer for the paucity of its Members in the Chamber and for their failure to speak in this debate.

Members should bear in mind that this issue is referred to in the Programme for Government, to which all Ministers have signed up. In the Programme for Government, it states that climate change is:

“one of the most serious problems facing the world.”

It also says:

“we are determined to play our part in addressing this challenge by reducing our impact on climate change.”

Furthermore, it says:

“our carbon footprint is relatively high and well beyond a level that is sustainable in the longer-term.”

Why is the DUP failing to speak on this subject, which is a very closely related matter? The earth hour is simply a focal point, and — I hope — a catalyst that will spur others on to greater efforts.

2.00 pm

When pressed, various quotations have been given to me as the source of information as to why the Minister takes that line. I ask Members to Google four words — “Heartland Institute” and “Exxon Mobil” — and see what comes up. Then, join the dots.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am calling the next Member to speak because you have gone well off the mark. I call Dr Alasdair McDonnell, who, I am sure, will not stray from the motion.

Dr McDonnell: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker; I assure you that your confidence is well founded.

Climate change is a very serious issue if not the most serious and challenging issue facing humanity. That is not just my opinion, or the opinion of some in the Chamber; it is the consensus opinion of world renowned scientists, even if it is not that of our own Minister of the Environment.

As I understand it, the World Wildlife Fund’s earth hour, on Saturday 28 March, is a commitment by, at this stage, more than one billion people in 1,500 cities and towns across the globe to turn off the lights in their homes and places of work for an hour. That represents an act of global solidarity and responsibility. The aim is to send a clear, strong message to political leaders about the need to take the steps needed, and the significant investment decisions around the infrastructure and energy systems that are required, to tackle the climate change that is taking place before our very eyes.

Earth hour also aims to increase local and international public awareness of the need for every individual to take responsibility in their daily lives. Individuals must take the necessary steps in their homes and workplaces to use energy more economically and frugally, and in an environmentally efficient manner.

Given those objectives, the World Wildlife Fund’s earth hour cannot and should not be belittled or sneered at. Our Minister’s views on climate change fly in the face of rigorous environmental evidence and have, without question, damaged the standing of Northern Ireland and its credibility on the global stage. No one is suggesting that that damage will be undone by passing the motion; however, it will signal that most of us know the facts and are prepared to provide leadership. If Northern Ireland were to join other places around the world and participate in earth hour, it would give a very clear signal that we are progressing, progressive, and proactive about promoting energy efficiency and encouraging a sustainable green change in people’s attitudes and behaviour.

If Members are serious — and my colleagues and I in the SDLP are serious — about meeting the 20% reduction in energy consumption by 2020, we have to support the motion. We must commit ourselves clearly and give a public lead. Not only will that bring considerable environmental benefits, but encouraging greater energy efficiency in homes and in the workplace will bring about a very significant economic saving and benefit.

Our over-reliance on imported fossil fuels is what got us into such a crazy situation in the first place in which, last summer, oil prices rocketed out of control and left hundreds of thousands of people in fuel poverty. We cannot afford to let that situation develop again. If we do so, we would be criminally responsible. If we are serious about tackling climate change, we need to develop a local, customised energy model that meets the needs of the customer and not the producer.

When I was a child growing up in a rural area —

Mr Neeson: The glens of Antrim.

Dr McDonnell: — in the glens of Antrim, as I been reminded by Sean Neeson, who has seized control of a large part of the glens of Antrim and annexed it to the East Antrim constituency.

When I was growing up, people burned turf — we are told perhaps that that was not environmentally friendly and that we had to keep the bogs — firewood, and all sorts of things. Over a period of time, pressures were created to turn people toward more coal and more oil. The net result of that has been that when coal goes off the market and oil prices go through the roof, people drop very quickly into fuel poverty.

If all our energy potential is to be harnessed, our efforts require investment in local energy efficiency and in a renewables industry that works. Not only would that help to create a sustainable environment but it would help to create a sustainable economy. As President Obama’s “green new deal” recognises, building a renewables industry will not only boost industry but significantly boost employment. That sector will be a

key component of the new sustainable economy that we will need as we emerge from the recession.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please draw your remarks to a close.

Dr McDonnell: I could go on, Mr Deputy Speaker —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please do not. *[Laughter.]*

Dr McDonnell: The motion is a good one. I support it, and I ask that the House support it.

Mr Neeson: I am speaking on behalf of the Assembly Commission. On Saturday 28 March 2009 at 8.30 pm, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) aims to get one billion people around the world to turn off their lights for one hour to mark earth hour. Homes, businesses and iconic landmarks in more than 1,000 cities across the world will go into darkness, sending out a dramatic expression of concern about the effects of climate change and demonstrating that it is possible to take positive action. At the end of 2009, leaders from 192 countries will meet in Copenhagen to decide how to tackle climate change. That will provide the greatest chance to put in place the means to combat what many believe to be the biggest threat to people and wildlife.

Last year, 50 million people across 35 countries switched off their lights for one hour. San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, the Coliseum in Rome and the Sydney Opera House were all plunged into darkness. This year, WWF aims to reach one billion people, which would make it the largest mass-participation event the world has ever seen. Belfast City Hall, the Belfast wheel and Victoria Square's dome will join major landmarks worldwide, including Nelson's Column, the Forth bridges and the Eiffel Tower in plunging into darkness for one hour.

I am delighted to say that the Assembly Commission plans to switch off the external floodlighting around Parliament Buildings and the street lighting along Prince of Wales Avenue from 8.30 pm until 9.30 pm on 28 March to support earth hour. Although a pre-planned function is taking place in Parliament Buildings, it is hoped that the majority of the internal lights can also be switched off. Security and events staff on duty will ensure that health and safety issues and security issues are properly managed. Consultation will take place with the Department of Finance and Personnel's estate-maintenance division to ensure that security and safety on the wider estate are not in any way compromised.

The aim of earth hour is for people to unite and make a bold statement to show that they are concerned about climate change, in order to convince the world's leaders that it is possible to take positive action. The Assembly Commission is pleased to be able to join with others across the globe by switching off the lights at Parliament Buildings for one hour on the evening of Saturday 28 March.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call the Minister to respond, I ask any Member who has important business to discuss to take it outside in order to allow other Members to be heard.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): As Minister of Finance and Personnel, I am always keen to support any motion that highlights the potential opportunities for efficient use of public money and for saving money for the public purse in Northern Ireland. As the Department with responsibility for managing the Government estate, the Department of Finance and Personnel has invested £180,000 in upgrading the interior lighting in office buildings to more efficient occupancy-sensor lighting, which will automatically switch off when offices or buildings are unoccupied for a period.

It should also be stated that a number of buildings also have exterior lighting, which some may perceive as purely aesthetic. However, it is important to recognise the important role that lighting plays in providing well-lit access for health and safety purposes and in improving security.

The central energy efficiency fund invests up to £2 million annually in grants to the public sector for the delivery of energy efficiency or renewable technology projects. In 2008-09, 41 projects received funding, with the aim of delivering savings of £1 million in the first year. Therefore, where practicable, I am happy for the terms of the motion to be applied to buildings of Departments, taking into account cost, health and safety, and security issues. Lighting on the Stormont estate will be switched off for earth hour 2009.

Officials in my Department are working with colleagues in those Departments that occupy Dundonald House, Castle Buildings and Stormont Castle in order to seek their participation. Obviously, this is a matter for other Departments to decide for themselves. However, I encourage them to participate in their buildings where practicable.

To conclude, I believe that Mr Brian Wilson said that it is important to switch off unnecessary lights for that hour. I am sure that Members will agree that all unnecessary lights and, indeed, energy-using appliances should be switched off at all times, not just for an hour on Saturday 28 March 2009.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is extremely important that the reasons that action on climate change is so urgent and crucial are written into the record. I have a briefing document on earth hour that refers to successive reports from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change — the last of which involved over 3,800 scientists from over 150 countries — that put the reality of human-induced climate change beyond any doubt.

The evidence, to which my colleague Dr Coulter referred, indicates that 80% cuts in global greenhouse gas emissions are needed in order to keep global average temperature rises below 2 degrees above pre-industrial levels and to avoid irreversible and devastating changes in the earth's natural systems and climate.

It is important to note the worthy comments that were made in the debate about the scepticism that has been shown by the Minister who has responsibility for the environment — it would be too much of a misnomer to call him an Environment Minister, because that he is not — about the consequences that have been predicted if that temperature threshold were to be exceeded.

For example, in Africa, between 350 million and 600 million people will suffer water shortages or increased competition for water. Agricultural yields could halve by 2020, while arid areas will expand by 8%. In Asia, up to 1 billion people will suffer water shortages as supplies dwindle as a result of the melting of the Himalayan glaciers. Maze and wheat yields will fall by up to 5% in India. Rice crops in China will drop by up to 12%, and there will be increased risk of coastal flooding.

In Australia and New Zealand, there will be between 3,000 and 5,000 more heat-related deaths each year. By 2030, water supplies will no longer be guaranteed in parts of southern and eastern Australia, and there will be annual bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef.

In Europe, warmer temperatures will increase wheat yields by up to 25% in the north. However, water availability in the south will drop by up to one quarter. Heatwaves, forest fires and extreme weather events, such as flash flooding, will become more frequent, as will the incidence of the consequent new diseases.

In Latin America, up to 77 million people will face water shortages. Tropical glaciers will disappear. Tropical forests will become savannah, and there will be increased risk of coastal flooding in low-lying areas such as El Salvador and Guyana.

Indeed, that is the background to the motion. My colleague Mr Gallagher referred to the participation in earth hour of people in 1,430 cities and towns in 80 countries. It is important that the Assembly gives a lead on the issue. As regards reliance on fossil fuels and the need to achieve energy efficiency, to which the Minister referred, it is extremely important that the drive to achieve energy efficiency is put into action in the Building and in those for which Government Departments have responsibility.

2.15 pm

Mr McKay spoke in favour of the motion and mentioned the Minister's unusual remarks. Rev Coulter said that 12% of electricity must be derived from indigenous renewable sources by 2012. We need to

show that we support the mainstream global thinking on such important issues as the production of CO₂.

Mr Wilson referred to his —

Mr B Wilson: Brian Wilson.

Mr McGlone: Yes, Brian Wilson; he is the only Mr Wilson present. He made important points about the use of lights and renewable energy, and expressed the concerns that arose from the report of the climate change summit in Copenhagen. I completely buy into his practice of having a cuddle for the environment. I am up for that. However, there has been complacency around the use of energy for renewables, and the reinstating of grants for solar and thermal heating is necessary. Those measures save energy and overall costs, reduce consumption, and create jobs and employment.

Mr Boylan referred to electricity usage. It is important that we show leadership, and the President of the United States is doing that. It remains to be seen how that will pan out, but we look forward to it. In regard to earth hour, we could have a non-weekend day whereby buildings that normally use a large amount of power could produce a meaningful and tangible reduction. That does not apply to Government or public buildings only — we should all do likewise in our own private buildings and homes.

I thank Mr Beggs for his comments on individuals, private bodies, public bodies, Government buildings and Departments. Collectively, we need to make that difference. He praised the work of WWF. Some of its representatives are here, and accompanied us on a visit to Craigavon last Thursday, during which we witnessed the work of the Chrysalis project, which demonstrated the determination and dedication of a community group that works with statutory agencies and the local education authorities to provide joined-up thinking and working in the interests in the environment — something that is lacking in many areas. Mr Beggs is right to pay tribute to that programme. As elected representatives, it is our responsibility to show leadership to the many young people who are concerned about the environment.

My colleague Dr McDonnell referred to the need for global solidarity and the need for all political leaders to send a clear message. He said that the Minister's views on that are slightly askew. However, the rest of us have to pick up the pieces and behave and act responsibly in that regard. He made a valid point that last year's rise in fuel costs, as we all know from our constituencies, contributed to fuel poverty and created difficulties for many people who were previously on the breadline. It makes sense to address environmental issues and fuel poverty issues together.

Mr Neeson referred to the WWF's aim to reach out to one billion people. I thank him for outlining a series of measures that are being taken in Parliament

Buildings on behalf of the Assembly Commission. We are taking action for that one hour, and it is, perhaps, a sign of things to come. Given that Members are in and out of offices every day, we should, perhaps, switch off our lights. I have noticed that some bulbs in the building are of high wattage and consume huge amounts of electricity.

I thank the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his comments on the efficient use of renewables and for providing investment and £2 million to the central energy efficiency fund and other projects. However, I urge him to encourage all his colleagues to show leadership and collective wisdom on the issue of climate change. I support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Assembly Commission and the Executive to support World Wildlife Fund's earth hour 2009 by switching off the lights in Parliament Buildings and all Government departmental buildings at an appropriate time on Saturday 28 March 2009.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time.

2.30 pm

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

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members may be aware that a delegation from the Canadian Parliament is visiting Parliament Buildings. Some members of the delegation have taken their seats in the Public Gallery, and they are very welcome. On behalf of the Assembly, I extend the warmest of welcomes to the honourable Michael Duffy, the honourable David Smith, Mr Dean Del Mastro MP, the honourable Geoff Regan MP, Monsieur Raynald Blais MP and Mr Pat Martin MP.

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

School Viability Assessment

1. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Education to outline the process for assessing the viability of a school. (AQO 2286/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Tá sé iontach tábhachtach go bhfuil an córas oideachais bunaithe ar chóras scoileanna láidre inmharthana a sholáthraíonn ardchaighdeán oideachais do pháistí.

It is very important that our education system is founded on a base of strong and viable schools that deliver high-quality education to our children. In the first instance, it is a matter for the relevant education authority to assess the viability of a school within the parameters set out in the Department's sustainable schools policy.

The sustainable schools policy sets out six key criteria to be considered in assessing a school's viability. The provision of quality education is the overriding policy consideration. The six criteria are quality educational experience; stable enrolment trends; a sound financial position; strong leadership and management; accessibility; and strong links with the community. Any review of a school's future viability must be handled carefully and sensitively, and it must consider the local circumstances on a case-by-case basis.

Should the education authority assess that a school is not viable, there is a statutory requirement for a development proposal to be published when a school is

being closed or amalgamated. The development proposal process provides the opportunity for extensive local consultation, and before a proposal is published there is a statutory requirement for boards to consult with any schools that may be affected by that proposal. There is also a statutory duty on the proposer to consult with the governors, parents and teachers of the school or schools affected by the proposal.

The publication of the development proposal initiates a statutory two-month consultation period. At the end of that period, I take into account all the relevant information, including the representations received and the educational needs of the children, in making a decision.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that a school that scores highly in all six of the criteria that she outlined — including the quality of education that is provided, which she referred to as the most important criterion — is viable and should remain open? If so, does she agree that Anamar Primary School, which is situated between Cullyhanna and Crossmaglen and lives up to all the standards in the criteria, should remain open?

The Minister of Education: Tá líon na rollaithe 91 dalta ceadaithe i Scoil Náisiúnta Anamar agus an líon iontrála 13; ach ní raibh ach rollú 34 dalta sa bhliain 2008-09.

Anamar Primary School has an improved enrolment of 91 pupils, with an intake figure of 13 pupils. However, it achieved an enrolment of only 34 pupils in 2008-09, of whom only five were year 1 pupils.

As the Member knows, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) is the appropriate governing body for Anamar Primary School. CCMS advised that it has carried out a survey of the primary provision in the parish, and one of the options is to close Anamar Primary School or to amalgamate it with St Patrick's Primary School, Crossmaglen. CCMS is proposing to go out to pre-consultation on that in the near future, but it has stressed that the process is at a very early stage and that no decisions have been — or will be — made about any option until after the pre-consultation period has closed.

CCMS has pointed out that it is important to ensure that access to high-quality education for each child is set at the heart of any proposals for the future. At this stage, the issues involved are a matter for the CCMS and the school trustees to consider, and it would be inappropriate for the Department to prejudge the outcome of that process.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle agus go raibh maith agat, a Aire.

Will the Minister outline some of the criteria that are considered when assessing a school's viability? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. Tá sé chritéir ann atá le breithniú agus inmharthanacht scoile i gceist; tá siad leagtha amach sa bheartas um scoileanna inbhuanaithe.

The sustainable schools policy, as I said, sets out six criteria to be considered in assessing a school's viability: quality educational experience; stable enrolment trends; a sound financial position; strong leadership and management; accessibility; and strong links with the community. Those criteria are not meant to be used in a mechanistic fashion; each case must continue to be considered on its individual circumstances, but the overriding consideration must be the quality of education for the children.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for those answers. However, will the Minister admit that under her current sustainable schools policy, rural schools are, potentially, under threat of unnecessary closure? What guarantees can the Minister give to the House that rural-proofing will be a central part of the criteria and procedures for assessing the viability of any school?

The Minister of Education: As regards rural schools, my Department consulted with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in developing the sustainable schools policy. It was also assessed against the Rural Development Council's rural-proofing checklist set out in its report, 'Striking the Balance'.

The policy, clearly, incorporates school-viability criteria that are appropriate for schools serving rural communities. First, a lower enrolment threshold is applied to rural primary schools than to those in urban areas. Secondly, the accessibility criterion, and its guidance on home-to-school travel times, is particularly important in a rural setting. Crucial practical questions, such as whether the distance to school and the travel times for pupils are reasonable, or what transport arrangements are put in place, will always be addressed.

Thirdly, the policy includes a strong links-with-the-community criterion. That ensures that local community involvement with the school, and the contribution that the school makes to the community, are included in any consideration of a school's viability. I think that it is fair to say that schools that have been closed during my time in office have been from rural and urban communities.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 2 and 3 have been withdrawn.

Departmental Reviews

4. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of completed reviews carried out in her Department that have not yet emerged as policy. (AQO 2289/09)

The Minister of Education: Faoi láthair, tá sé athbhreithniú ann a bhfuil polasaithe fúthú ag céimeanna éagsúla forbartha sa Roinn Oideachais.

There are six reviews for which policies are at various stages of development in the Department of Education.

Mr Dallat: Would the Minister agree that there are, perhaps, too many ongoing reviews that have not been brought to a conclusion? I mention the special needs review, the early years review, the review of Irish-medium education and the review of the common funding formula? Does the Minister agree that while those reviews are not brought to a conclusion, and are not turned into ploughshares, the education system is sadly lacking in the resources and the knowledge that it requires to deliver equality across the system?

The Minister of Education: As the Member will know, we have wide-ranging reforms right across the system, and the reviews are very important to make sure that we have good policy in place. I do not agree that there are too many reviews happening; I welcome the fact that they are happening. I welcome the work that is being done across a range of issues.

The Member mentioned special needs and Irish-medium education: tremendous amounts of work are being done in both those areas, and I welcome that. We need to ensure that our education system is fit for purpose for the twenty-first century. Members will know that I believe that we need a lot of change in the system, and that I am leading fundamental reforms right across the educational system.

Mr Cree: Can the Minister tell the House how much her Department has spent on consultancy fees since the return of devolution?

The Minister of Education: I will write to the Member with the exact amount. I do not, obviously, have the figure to hand.

Every School a Good School

5. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Education to outline the main aspects of her Department's policy 'every school a good school — supporting newcomer pupils'. (AQO 2290/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá mé iontach sásta go bhfuil mo Roinn réidh anois chun beartas foirmiúil a

fhoilsiú a chuideoidh le scoileanna tacaíocht a thabhairt do dhaltai nuathagtha.

I am pleased that my Department is now ready to publish a formal policy to help schools to support newcomer pupils. The aim of that policy is to ensure that schools and education and library boards are in a position to welcome newcomer pupils into their school communities.

I want to build on the capacity and skills of school workforces to support newcomer pupils, both now and in the future, as part of the overall raising standards agenda. In order to do that, the policy will be delivered through a broad, consistent regional framework at education and library board level and a flexible, responsible response at school level. My Department has funded the setting-up of the regional inclusion and diversity service throughout the education and library boards, and that will become an integral part of the education and skills authority.

The inclusion and diversity service is responsible for a range of work areas, from school-based support for initial parent-teacher meetings to follow-up advice on pastoral needs, basic language needs, curriculum support and an extensive training programme for school staff. In addition, my Department will continue to fund schools directly, via the common funding formula (CFF), for each newcomer pupil with significant language-acquisition needs. In the 2008-09 financial year, £5.5 million of that funding was paid to schools.

The most recent school census figures have just been finalised, and we have 6,995 newcomer pupils in our schools, representing a 23% increase on the previous year's figures. I have taken action to ensure that Roma children — who, as a historically nomadic group, face the double barriers of language and discrimination — receive a fair and equal education. Additional funding has been provided to schools based on the current reported number of Roma children.

In Ireland, we know what it is like to emigrate to countries throughout the world as a result of difficult times, so it is important that we ensure that children who come to this island have the best possible chance to integrate equally into our society.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for her reply. She referred to the inclusion and diversity service. Is she aware of the concerns among educationalists that the inclusion and diversity policy is badly flawed? Will she consider undertaking an immediate review of the policy before it creates serious difficulties for children and teachers?

The Minister of Education: We will be launching the policy on newcomer children, and I will forward the Member a copy of the associated document.

Mr Gardiner: Will the Minister update the House on her review of the common funding formula and the steps that she is taking to ensure that funding earmarked for newcomer pupils is, in fact, directed towards newcomer pupils?

The Minister of Education: It is the responsibility of principals and boards of governors to determine how best to use their CFF money. As the Member will know, extra money per child is available under the CFF for newcomer children.

Tá na príomhoidí agus boird gobharnóirí freagrach as cinntiú a dhéanamh faoin bhealach is fearr le húsáid a bhaint as an chistiú ón fhoirmlé chomhaontaithe.

We have evidence from schools that shows that they use money from the CFF in various ways that benefit their newcomer pupils. The Department has established a working group to develop good-practice guidelines for principals and boards of governors. Specifically, the guidelines will outline how schools should use their CFF money to achieve the optimum support for newcomer children. It is anticipated that the guidelines will be issued to all schools by the end of 2009.

The newcomer pupil factor is currently £983 per child, and we do not have graduated funding. If a child requires support to access the curriculum, the school will receive the CFF newcomer factor for that child. When the child no longer requires support, the funding will cease, which means that it is not given in the following year.

I have, and Members will have, witnessed examples of very good practice and integration with respect to newcomer children throughout the North, and I pay tribute to principals and school workforces, who are doing tremendous work. There is much that we can learn, and share, from that good practice.

2.45 pm

Substitute Teachers: ELB Spend

6. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Education to confirm how much each education and library board has spent on using recruitment agencies for the supply of substitute teachers for temporary contracts since September 2008. (AQO 2291/09)

The Minister of Education: Sna blianta deiridh, bhí titim shubstaintiúil san airgead a d'íoc gach bord oideachais agus leabharlainne le gníomhaireachtaí earcaíochta le múinteoirí ionaid do chonarthaí sealadacha.

In recent years, there has been a substantial decline in the amount paid by each of the education and library boards to recruitment agencies for the supply of substitute teachers for temporary contracts.

Since 2005-06, costs have decreased some 80% from £817,933 to £170,145 in 2007-08. In September 2008, the Belfast Education and Library Board spent £5,000; the North Eastern Education and Library Board spent £19,589; the South Eastern Education and Library Board spent £8,532; the Southern Education and Library Board spent £500; and the Western Education and Library Board spent £1,205. Therefore, £34,826 was spent by the five education and library boards.

I have asked my officials to write again to each of the education and library boards, reinforcing the position that recruitment agencies should be used to employ temporary teachers only in exceptional circumstances.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for her reply. She will know that it is a situation that I have been watching for some time. When will everyone be made to adhere to the guidelines that she provided in a response to my question for written answer on 3 December 2008?

The Minister of Education: I have outlined details of the substantial decrease in costs with regard to the use of recruitment agencies by education and library boards. I have written to the boards and expressed my strong concerns about any use of recruitment agencies; they may be used only in exceptional circumstances. I also note that there are big discrepancies between different boards, and we need to get as much as possible of the education budget into front line services. I thank the Member for his interest and perseverance in the matter.

Mr Armstrong: Will the Minister outline her Department's performance evaluation process for substitute teachers in Northern Ireland and the training and career opportunities that are available to teachers who are on the substitute teacher register?

The Minister of Education: Ón 1 Meán Fómhair 2006 níl cead ag bord oideachais agus leabharlainne ach múinteoirí ionaid atá cláraithe ar chlár na múinteoirí ionaid a fhostú.

From 1 September 2006, the Department has allowed the education and library boards to employ only substitute teachers who are registered on the substitute teacher register. From 1 August 2008, departmental guidelines have advised that all qualified substitute teachers who are paid through the departmental payroll must be recruited through the substitute teacher register. However, in situations in which no suitable teacher is available in the required time frame, recruitment agencies can be used to employ substitute teachers who are not paid through the departmental payroll system — although I have made it clear that I will be concerned if that is overused.

The primary purpose of those guidelines is to offer protection to pupils, schools and employers by ensuring that all substitute teachers are properly checked as suitable to work with children and appropriately qualified before they can work in schools.

The application process to join the substitute teacher register also includes checks that ensure that teachers are considered eligible to teach, that they satisfy relevant health requirements and that they are registered with the General Teaching Council.

Departmental guidelines also state that all substitute teaching staff who are recruited through employment agencies must have their names on the substitute teacher register, as inclusion on the register does not prevent a person from seeking work through an employment agency as well.

I will write to Mr Armstrong with further details on the training.

Mrs M Bradley: What effect will the shortfall of £20 million for teacher redundancies have in the situation of teachers who wish to take voluntary redundancy this year? What will be the knock-on effect for young teachers being made compulsorily redundant?

The Minister of Education: The Member will know that I secured an extra £6 million in this year's Budget to deal with premature retirement. She will also know that we are bringing our arrangements for premature retirement into line with the rest of the island, England, Scotland and Wales. We need to ensure that our young teachers have opportunities.

At the moment, I am working with the Department to ensure that the £6 million is used to best effect in line with departmental policy.

Academic Selection

7. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of how long unregulated academic selection will continue. (AQO 2292/09)

The Minister of Education: I gcás na scoileanna gramadaí sin atá ag iarraidh teist aistrithe a fheidhmiú, creidim go nglacfaidh siad leis in am trátha go mbeadh a gcuid daltaí níos fearr as dá mbeadh siad páirteach sa chóras príomhshrutha oideachais seachas taobh amuigh de.

In time, I believe that the breakaway grammar schools will accept that their pupils are better served if they are part of, rather than outside, the mainstream education system. I am also convinced that when political colleagues see educationalists working within the Transfer 2010 guidance, which is aimed at delivering quality education for all children, they will realise that the old system could not continue. Perhaps, at that time, we will return to the issue of legislation.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra a thug sí.

I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she not agree with me that the situation that she has allowed to

develop is nothing more than an unmitigated disaster and is placing great stress on pupils, teachers and parents? Pupils are being withdrawn from primary schools, teachers are under great pressure, and children are wondering how many tests they will have to do. Will the Minister tell us when she will stop playing Pontius Pilate and take action to alleviate this terrible situation?

The Minister of Education: As the Member knows, we have a deeply unequal education system. We have a system that is failing thousands of our young people. I have given statistics in this House, but I will repeat them: 12,000 young people are leaving school without English and maths GCSEs, or Irish and maths GCSEs depending on what language they are studying through. That is simply not acceptable.

The Member's party claims to be opposed to academic selection — I have yet to see proof from its Members of their willingness to work with me in bringing about the changes to this deeply unequal system that are needed. Change is very difficult, but we are bringing about change for the vast majority of our young people. I am the Minister of Education for 100% of our young people. I brought proposals to the Executive, but two parties refused even to discuss them. Following that, I issued guidance, which, if adhered to by schools, will ensure that we have a smooth transfer in 2010.

I am surprised to hear the Member saying those things, because he was a teacher. No children are forced to sit tests. No children should be tested at age 10 or 11 and have their pathways decided as a result of that. I am proud to be bringing the necessary change to the education system. It is needed badly, and it is supported by the vast majority of educationalists, parents and schools. There are 1,238 schools in our system. Of that number, a small percentage is attempting to block change. However, I think that they now see that that is going to be very difficult. We must put the interests of 100% of our children first.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle agus go raibh maith agat, a Aire.

Will the Minister outline the equality measures contained in her guidance?

The Minister of Education: The guidance that I announced on 2 February 2009, if followed by all post-primary schools, will create a more equal system of post-primary transfer by levelling out the inequalities of the old system. That system has failed children from working-class communities, who are disadvantaged disproportionately as regards admission to grammar schools. One in four children admitted to a non-selective school is entitled to free school meals but only one in 17 children admitted to grammar schools falls into that category.

In the current school year, 73% of the children transferring from primary schools in Holywood — 77

out of the 106 children who sat the test — transferred to a grammar school. The figure in Hillsborough was 72%, and the figures for the Malone Road and the Stranmillis areas were 95% and 85% respectively. Contrast that with only 37% in the Sandy Row area and 34% in Poleglass and Twinbrook. Those are figures for the children who sat the test — it does not even take into account the number of children who did not sit the test. The percentage of children transferring to a grammar school was 22% in Rathcoole, and 26% in the Shankill area — that is, 10 out of the 39 children who sat the test. It was 20% in the New Lodge area — 16 out of the 79 children who sat the test.

For the first time ever, grammar schools have an opportunity to offer true equality of access to their provision — something that we should rightly expect of publicly funded institutions. In recommending that geographical criteria, such as parish and catchment area, be used in conjunction with the nearest suitable school, the guidance seeks to ensure that rural applicants are not disadvantaged. All children will be considered equally local when applying for a place nearest to them in each of the categories of suitable school. If followed by all post-primary schools, the guidance will ensure that, for the first time ever, children will transfer on the basis of equality, social justice and excellence.

Mr Elliott: Does the Minister accept that despite all her bluster, there will be pupil transfers from primary schools to the post-primary sector from next year, and does she accept the remit for that?

The Minister of Education: We will have to wait and see. I hope that all schools adhere to the guidance. That is the best way of ensuring that we have equality in our system and that all children are given a fair chance.

Thankfully, this year, for the first time ever, the primary curriculum will not be distorted. Children in P5, P6 and P7 will not be spending their time preparing for tests that they should not be doing. They will have the revised curriculum, and, like many other children across the world in Canada, Finland, the rest of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales, they will be learning different languages, mathematics and science, and have interactive learning, which will keep them stimulated, instead of having some children sitting at the front of the class, preparing for an outdated test, and others sitting at the back of the class, filling time. Thankfully, those days have gone for ever.

I urge parents not to make their children do breakaway tests, and I urge schools not to play politics with children's lives by creating unnecessary tests.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 8 has been withdrawn.

Schools Under Threat of Closure

9. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Education how many schools are under threat of closure.

(AQO 2294/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá inmharthanacht scoileanna sa toadhcháil le breithniú ag an údarás oideachais ábhartha laistigh de na teorainneacha atá leagtha amach i mbeartas scoileanna inbhuanaithe na Roinne.

The relevant education authority will consider the future viability of schools within the parameters set out in the Department's sustainable schools policy. The Department is considering six published development proposals for the closure of five primary schools and one post-primary school. I understand that the relevant education authorities are also undertaking prepublication consultation on three potential school closures.

Mr Easton: Does the Minister agree that it is sad and pathetic that the South Eastern Education and Library Board and her Department have not bothered to contact any teachers at Donaghadee High School with regard to their future — to tell them whether they are getting redundancy or what is happening — after her announcement of the closure of Donaghadee High School? Indeed, over 40 special-needs pupils will have absolutely nowhere else to go in North Down. Will she take measures to address those issues?

The Minister of Education: I will discuss that matter with my officials and reply to the Member in writing.

Mr Dallat: Given the fact that there is a fear among schools, both primary and secondary, that those arbitrary figures might be adhered to — causing a great deal of uncertainty, particularly in the secondary-school field — and given the fact that my former school is in the all-Ireland final for both Gaelic football and camogie this weekend, does she not appreciate that those schools are really special and need to be protected and not culled by arbitrary mathematical figures?

The Minister of Education: First, they are not arbitrary mathematical figures. I have explained in my answer to this question and the previous question that we do not just use the numbers: there are five other criteria.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Moutray is not in his place to ask question 10.

Free School Meals

11. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Education to detail what percentage of free school meal entitlement children attend (i) non-grammar schools, and (ii) grammar schools which have declared their intention to operate breakaway admission tests. (AQO 2296/09)

The Minister of Education: Glacann gach Roinn comhairle dlí — agus cineálacha eile comhairle riachtanaí — i mórán mór bheart.

All Departments take legal and other necessary types of advice on major actions. Like all legal advice that is obtained by Government Departments, that is privileged. Therefore, I do not intend to publish the legal advice that was received in relation to that issue. However, the legislative basis for the issuing of guidance has already been published. Paragraph 1 of the guidance states that it is issued under article 30 of the Education Order 2006, which states:

“The Department may issue, and from time to time, revise such guidance as it thinks appropriate in respect of the arrangements for the admission of pupils to grant-aided schools”.

3.00 pm

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 1 has been withdrawn.

National Development Plan: Financial Commitments

2. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether financial commitments to innovation and research in Northern Ireland, made by the Government of the Republic of Ireland in the national development plan, remain in place. (AQO 2307/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I have not been informed that there is a problem with the Republic of Ireland funding in general, or the innovation fund specifically.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his answer. The moneys from Dublin to the North under the Republic's national development plan are a powerful demonstration of how to position the island in the global economy — at the front line of innovation, research and development. I understand the Minister's answer, but is he talking to his Southern counterparts about how to protect current funding and explore future funding to help the island economy on both sides of the border?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I understand the Member's fundamental point. We all welcomed the assistance that was offered. Clearly, when budgetary pressures began to become apparent in the Republic, a number of people asked whether those would affect what we were doing. I consulted with the Department of Finance and Personnel before I answered

the Member's question, and neither that Department nor I have been advised of any forthcoming difficulties.

I was in Dublin last week and I spoke to my employment counterpart about a number of issues on which we work together. The Member will recall that we held the first all-island skills conference last October in Londonderry and Letterkenny, which was very successful. Before Christmas 2008, I announced additional help for a number of innovation projects, all of which have at least two counterparts in the Republic in relation to university consortia.

Combined with Science Foundation Ireland, that initiative constitutes a suite of opportunities for us to pursue joint research, and the Department is totally supportive of it. The announcements that were made before Christmas will produce an excellent research base going forward, which will be the future seedbed for a lot of jobs. I am very supportive of what we are doing together, and I believe that it will yield very significant results.

Mr Armstrong: How has the funding for innovation money been used for further education?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: We made a number of announcements about higher education before Christmas. In respect of further education, under the funding for innovation programme, 21 projects are being carried out by the six further education colleges in 2008-09. Those projects focus on college engagement with employers in priority skill areas, supporting entrepreneurial activity, and improving cross-border collaboration in the development of an all-island workforce.

We are considering proposals from further education colleges for year 2 support under the fund. Up to £3 million will be available in the 2009-2010 financial year, and a further £3 million will be available in the 2010-11 financial year. That is a very significant commitment, and I am absolutely convinced that the colleges will take it up with relish.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I know that the Minister has given assurances about the money from the Southern Government for innovation and research. However, if, for some reason, that money is not made available, does the Minister have a contingency plan in place to fill the funding gap?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I had a meeting with the Minister of Finance and Personnel over a month ago, at which I asked him whether he and his Department had any reason to believe that that money was not going to be available. He said that he had no reason to believe that. Likewise, when I was in Dublin last week, I was given no indication that that would happen.

Of course, we all understand the huge budgetary pressures that exist at the moment. As I understand it, the Irish Government are presenting a Budget on 7 April, at which time they will have to announce a significant number of adjustments to their national development plan. In those circumstances, I am unable to commit. However, there is no question of doubt that work on a number of those projects has already commenced — jobs have been advertised, and posts have been filled. In those circumstances, we would be faced with very significant difficulties, and, at this point, my Department would not have the money to proceed without the money that was promised through the fund.

Were there to be any changes to the budgetary conditions, I would have to take advice on the matter and look at it again to see what we could do. However, I have had no indication at all from any quarter that there is any threat to those resources.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Apprenticeships

4. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what priority he is giving to promoting apprenticeships to school leavers. (AQO 2309/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Apprenticeships NI is my Department's flagship programme to increase the number of skilled employees in priority skill areas. My Department works tirelessly to promote that provision, and that work includes the efforts made by careers advisers, as well as work carried out with careers teachers, social and community workers and the sector skills councils. All those people play a pivotal role in ensuring that school leavers are aware of all the opportunities that are available to them. A very successful Apprenticeships NI publicity campaign in August 2008 resulted in over 1,600 calls and texts to the Apprenticeships NI helpline and 11,000 direct hits on the website.

Mr Lunn: I understand that in Great Britain, the employers of new workers are entitled, in some circumstances, to a Government payment of £2,500. Does the Minister have any views on that, or does he have any plans to introduce such a scheme over here?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member will be aware that our apprenticeships target has been reached, with over 10,000 people in position. In the past few months, the focus has been on those apprentices who have been hit as a result of the economic downturn and on identifying steps that can be taken to ensure that they are protected. That involves payments and training being provided at departmental cost. Therefore, a direct comparison cannot be made between many of the schemes that we

run and the schemes in GB. In some cases, we are ahead, not only as regards financial contributions but as regards policy areas. Therefore, there is no direct read across.

It is clear that the lifting of the age limit has resulted in a very significant boost to the numbers of people taking up apprenticeships. Therefore, at this stage, I am confident that we are at least reaching a willing audience that is prepared to participate. That said, we will, of course, take advice on the matter. We will be guided, in large measure, by the sector skills councils and the responses that we receive from the various work development forums around Northern Ireland, through which employers can tell us about any shortcomings that they encounter in the apprenticeship programmes. We will then adjust our programmes accordingly.

Mr Newton: Does the Minister agree that there is a need to enhance the status of apprenticeships in the minds of parents and society in general so that they are looked upon as a path to excellent career opportunities? If the Minister recognises that need, what is he doing about it?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I agree wholeheartedly with the Member. There is a need to enhance the status of apprenticeships.

The response to apprenticeships has shown that there is a pool of people who are prepared to take that need seriously. Many people in business have recognised that the absence of meaningful apprenticeship programmes over a prolonged number of years has left a huge gap, particularly in our manufacturing sector. The Member has many years of experience in this field, and I fully support what he is saying.

We have a collective effort, part of which is the careers service. We have appointed 23 new advisers and implemented a pilot programme of putting careers offices on the high street so that people have easy access and no longer have to go through jobs and benefits offices. We are also making advice available in schools. It is a question of talking up the point — both in this place and in other places — that very worthwhile careers can be obtained through the careers service route.

The Member will know that a number of Northern Ireland's key manufacturing units — including a very significant one in his constituency — would not be here today had it not been for apprenticeships. That point is absolutely on the nose, and I hope that all of us will contribute to raising the awareness and status of apprenticeships.

Mr O'Loan: There has been more than a little consternation that Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) — a company that has made a £100 million profit from the Northern Ireland public in each of the past two years — appears likely to suspend its apprenticeship

intake next September. What discussions has the Minister had with NIE in relation to that matter?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: That matter was raised with me last week during questions on my ministerial statement, and I am following up on it. I visited the company's apprenticeship school and was extremely impressed with what I saw — it is an absolutely first-class operation. As I said last week, I would be extremely concerned if such a company were to go down the road of suspending its apprenticeship intake, because it would set a very bad example. I do not know the nature of NIE's labour supply-and-demand balance or the reason for their decision. However, I am following up on the matter, and I would be happy to advise the Member of the result of my discussions.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister think that there is a role for providers of adult or community education in helping people who have been made redundant?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Sadly, right across the education sector, people who have engaged in essential skills work — such as members of the Union Learning Fund — are losing their jobs. We are looking at what steps the Department can take to ensure that people do not merely fall off the edge, just as we have been trying to do in respect of apprenticeships. When someone has been out of work for six months, their chances of getting work drop by about 50%; when someone is out of work for 12 months, those chances drop by 75%. A very significant piece of work is required to ensure that a large swathe of people do not fall back into unemployment — unable or unwilling to apply for posts.

I support the thrust of the Member's question.

Visit to Malaysia and Singapore

5. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment he has made of the benefits arising from his recent visit to Malaysia and Singapore. (AQO 2310/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The visit cemented the relationship between Queen's University, Belfast and Petronas, the Malaysian-owned oil and gas company that is funding major research into green technologies at the university's ionic-liquids laboratories. Many Malaysian students and staff have chosen to study and work here, and, indeed, Queen's already has between 1,400 and 1,500 alumni in Malaysia. My visit emphasised the importance that we place on attracting international students and promoting international links between Northern Ireland and the rest of the world.

3.15 pm

In Singapore, I met the Workforce Development Agency, the Ministry of Manpower and the Institute for Adult Learning to discuss the Skills Programme for Upgrading and Resiliency, which is a programme that we use, although it is slightly different in Singapore. I also visited the Institute of Technical Education and Singapore Polytechnic, which reinforced the benefits of the new skills support programme. That experience will inform the Department's review of the skills strategy.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he confirm that much of Singapore's phenomenal economic success is based on education? Will he further confirm that Singapore still uses a system of academic selection at age 11 and that it enjoys almost universal — 95% — adult literacy?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member is correct. Investment in education in Malaysia and Singapore is astonishing. We visited universities, polytechnics and other colleges in which vast amounts of money had been invested. We have been rebuilding the further education estate in Northern Ireland, and a programme is ongoing to complete that process; however, the investment evident in those countries was breathtaking.

Those countries see education as a way of keeping ahead of the competition. They are in the eye of the Asian storm, surrounded as they are by China, Korea, Japan and Indonesia. If they are not up to the mark, no one will be. By coincidence, Boyd McClarty, the High Commissioner for Malaysia, is in the Building this afternoon, and I hope to meet him immediately after Question Time.

There is a clear link between education and the economic success of those countries and where they see themselves going.

Mr Dallat: I congratulate the Minister on his trip to Malaysia and Singapore. However, I recall that the last 1,000 jobs lost in my constituency of East Derry went to Malaysia. What did he learn on his trip that might prevent that sort of thing from happening in future and how will we apply it?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The irony is that Malaysia is losing jobs to Vietnam and Singapore; they are leaching jobs to other Asian countries. There is a circular movement of job opportunities based on wages, and Malaysia is not immune from that because its standard of living is high, its infrastructure facilities are well invested, and it is subject to exactly the same pressures to which we are subject. There is still cheap labour in Asia, but it is moving around. In many of the countries that started their economic growth some years ago, such as South Korea, wages are catching up rapidly with ours. Their main worry is that other Asian countries, such as

Cambodia and Vietnam, are beginning to suck jobs out of Indonesia's economy.

The main lesson of my visit was that there is no substitute for education. Mr McClarty mentioned the selection process. In Singapore, there is a process held at 11, and thereafter people are streamed to university, polytechnic or what they call initial teacher education. A further process determines later whether students take a vocational or academic route. Education, education, education — dare I use the phrase? — dominates thinking in Malaysia and Singapore. I met the Ministers responsible in both jurisdictions and both gave the same message.

Redundancies: East Antrim

6. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action his Department is taking to address recent redundancies in East Antrim.

(AQO 2311/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Staff from jobs and benefits offices are working with companies that have declared redundancies in East Antrim, including Ryobi Ltd, F G Wilson Ltd, Brett Martin Ltd and McNeill-McManus Glass Ltd. They have established multi-agency partnerships with the relevant borough councils to ensure that maximum help and support is given to all who have been made redundant or who face the threat of redundancy.

Recently, staff took part in a Positive Futures event in Larne, which offered relevant support and guidance to those who attended.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his answer. However, can he tell me how his Department is working with Invest NI to strengthen and maintain the existing jobs in my constituency? In particular, how is the Department assisting in improving training and upskilling in order to increase the competitiveness of those firms, so that jobs will be protected in the long term?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member may be aware that we have protocols with Invest NI, and we have regular meetings. As soon as my Department is notified of any possible redundancies, Invest NI officials and Department for Employment and Learning officials communicate with one another and discuss what steps can be taken. I assure the Member that, at this time, we are engaged in a very significant discussion about how to handle, going forward, some of the situations that have arisen in the Member's constituency and in others.

I can give the Member some examples. There are companies that are telling the Department that they have a good, long-term future and believe that an upturn is coming. They want to know how to keep

their skilled workforce together in one lump, because, in effect, that skilled workforce represents their intellectual property for the future. Between us, we are addressing that matter to see what assistance we can give within existing budgets. As the Member will know, we are not in a position to draw in any additional funds. We have to see whether we can reprioritise our respective budgets to try to ensure that the companies that we believe have a future have skilled workforces in position to take advantage of the upturn when it comes.

Mr Ross: The Minister will be aware that East Antrim has been hit particularly badly by job losses. Many of those who have lost their jobs are in their 40s and 50s, and we know that people in that age group find it particularly difficult to find new jobs and are reluctant to go into training. Can the Minister tell the House what specific things his Department is doing to ensure that people in that age group recognise the importance of getting back into training so that they are not left behind?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member is right. As I said in an earlier answer, if people in that age group do not find work relatively quickly, they are vulnerable to long-term unemployment. He is also correct to say that a number of companies in his constituency have been deeply affected. I will point out, however, some of the things that we have been doing.

Recently, officials and I attended an event called Positive Futures Larne, which was held by Larne Borough Council, and subsequent events are planned for Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey. In Larne, around 5,000 flyers were distributed and all those on the live-load register in that area were personally notified of the special events that were taking place. Those events took place, I believe, at a leisure centre, and were aimed at giving people the skills to prepare for work — such as creating CVs and doing interviews — and at letting them know what facilities would be available to them.

I assure the Member that the Department and Invest NI are working closely together and monitoring those situations. A lot of those companies are at the core of our long-term industrial future, and, therefore, we have a special responsibility to see that anything and everything possible is done at this stage to help them to survive and prosper in the long term.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answer regarding the problems on the jobs front in East Antrim. Does the Minister agree that one specific area that needs very close attention is the research and development capability that exists in East Antrim and which must be retained at all costs? Can the Minister tell me what positive steps he is taking to do that?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member has shown great ingenuity in asking one

question when, in fact, he meant another. However, I will not try to anticipate that question. East Antrim is fortunate to have a major university campus at the University of Ulster's Jordanstown site. All joking aside, I know that the Member has been paying close attention to that.

Research and development is one of our top priorities. Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom as a whole underperforms when it comes to the percentage of research and development undertaken when compared to some of our major competitors. Therefore, my Department has been working with the University of Ulster.

In response to the Members who asked about the innovation funds, recent announcements were made that the University of Ulster was successful in getting funding for a number of those projects. In the long term, the research work in some of the new buildings that have been erected at that site will be vital for our long-term future, including for the built environment, biomedicine and sports science.

For years, Invest NI has been encouraging companies such as F G Wilson to take on a permanent research and development capacity — I am sure that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is more fluent on the current position than me, but I know that those are collective objectives. If this country does not have a major research capability, it will be very difficult to sustain jobs in the long term.

Research Assessment Exercise: University of Ulster's Performance

7. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment his Department has made of the performance of the University of Ulster in the research assessment exercise. (AQO 2312/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am very pleased with the performance of both our universities in the recent UK-wide research assessment exercise. The University of Ulster achieved top-three positions in the UK in biomedical sciences, Celtic studies and nursing. A further seven subjects are ranked in the top 20, and just over 93% of researchers who were entered for the research assessment exercise work in disciplines in which world-leading research is taking place. The league table that was produced by 'Times Higher Education' showed that the university moved up 18 places in the UK, from sixty-third in 2001 to forty-fifth in 2008. Therefore, the university can be content that its performance was exemplary.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his reply. To what extent does he believe that the improvements that occurred in research activity between 2001 and 2008

are related to the Department's investment in the research base?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I have no doubt that the success of the universities was assisted by the Department's significant investment. More than £63 million was provided through the support programme for university research and the science research investment fund. The Department is continuing to ensure that our universities have the physical research infrastructure to undertake high-quality research through a new permanent capital funding stream, which will be called the research capital investment fund.

In the past couple of weeks, the Department has been talking to the universities about how we will go forward in the next five-year period and whether any adjustments need to be made. We also have to decide what areas of research to target and where to put our resources. I believe that the results announced in December, particularly those for the University of Ulster, indicate that the Department's assistance, which was agreed with the universities, steered us towards greater achievement of excellence. The results demonstrate clearly that they have been successful.

Redundancies

9. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he has had with Executive colleagues in relation to assistance for employees recently made redundant by small manufacturing companies in the current economic downturn. (AQO 2314/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: At each meeting of the Executive I have updated colleagues on the measures that my Department has implemented in response to the economic downturn. That includes the support that my Department provides to employees who have recently been made redundant to assist them in finding alternative employment or to access retraining or upskilling regardless of the employer's size or sector.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his reply. The best assistance for those unfortunate workers is to get them back to work. Will the Minister consider discussing with his Executive colleagues the higher criteria that were introduced recently by the Northern Ireland Civil Service for contracts, which has resulted in small local firms having to lay workers off?

If that could be done, perhaps further unemployment in small firms could be avoided.

3.30 pm

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am aware of the issue to which the Member referred.

The answer to his question is that the Executive have discussed the matter briefly. The Minister of Finance and Personnel is responsible for procurement. It is clear that a significant number of employers have come to us and said that they are, basically, excluded because of their size or scale or because of other conditions.

In letting contracts, we have also had to look at the possibilities that exist for ensuring that there is room for apprentices and so on. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment may recall whether the Minister of Finance and Personnel intends to bring material on the matter to the Executive. I believe that he does; he has been lobbied by a number of people. Indeed, I have also written to him because I have received the same correspondence as, I guess, the Member. Therefore, I believe that changes can — and will — be made that will impact positively on the type of contractors to which the Member refers.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Regional Tourism Organisations

1. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment has been made by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board of the role of regional tourism organisations; and to outline how their performance and efficiency is monitored. (AQO 2326/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): Regional tourism partnerships replaced regional tourism organisations, and they have a refocused role and remit to place greater emphasis on local product development, visitor servicing and industry capability. The intention was to develop a tourism structure that dovetails more effectively with Tourism Ireland, Invest Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB), and to have one that is fully inclusive of the whole of Northern Ireland.

Regional tourism partnerships are independent organisations that are managed by their own boards. The current funding that is provided by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to the regional tourism partnerships is managed through service level agreements between NITB and each regional tourism partnership. I have concluded that there is scope to simplify and streamline current arrangements, particularly as we move to implement the new local government structures that are envisaged in the review of public administration.

I have asked my officials to work with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, local government and the tourism industry to present me with proposals that would: first,

identify any shortcomings in current structures; secondly, set out new agreements that align with and complement the new local government boundaries that are envisaged in the RPA; thirdly, promote more effective co-operation between all those bodies that are involved in local product development and visitor servicing, thereby enhancing the capability of the tourism sector; fourthly, ensure that the distinctiveness of our local tourist attractions and destinations is recognised and promoted effectively within the overall Northern Ireland tourism offering; and fifthly, to ensure that there is clarity about the roles and responsibilities of all parties in order to ensure that the best use is made of the resources that central Government and local government allocate for tourism development.

I believe that that work is necessary to help to develop better value for money and to meet the challenging tourism targets that are set out by the Programme for Government. I have asked for that review to be completed in parallel with ongoing work on the development of the new tourism strategy for Northern Ireland, which will replace the existing strategic framework for action. However, I want the review to be completed as quickly as possible — certainly, no later than the end of May 2009.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest as a local councillor. Regional tourist partnerships have created significant new tourist routes, such as the Causeway coastal route between Carrickfergus and Limavady. Does the Minister agree that care must be taken when moving forward so that investment that has been made to date is not lost, that only improvements can result, and that such significant coastal routes will still have a place in the future of tourism?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Recently, I had the opportunity to speak with the Causeway Coast and Glens regional tourism partnership. I had a good meeting with the group. Clearly, excellent work is going on in that regional tourism partnership, particularly with regard to the coastal routes of which the Member spoke.

Part of the aim of the review that I have initiated is to take on board all the good work that is happening in regional tourism partnerships and to try to be more innovative and distinctive so that people have clarity on the delivery of tourism. It must be said that some confusion exists on tourism delivery in Northern Ireland. I want to ensure that that confusion ends and that there is clarity on the matter.

As I have said many times in the House, tourism is a key driver for Northern Ireland's economy. Therefore, there must be clarity about how it is delivered.

Mr Ross: The Minister will be aware of another exciting project in my constituency, namely the

restoration of the Gobbins path, which will be a great addition to the Causeway Coast and Glens route and will significantly benefit tourism in east Antrim. Will the Minister update the House on the progress of that project?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am happy to do so. As I told the Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust, I visited Holland recently, and I met a journalist from the German 'Financial Times' who sang the praises of the Gobbins cliff path and was excited when I told him that there was a prospect of it being enhanced.

The Tourist Board has received a grant application from Larne Borough Council for the restoration of the cliff path. The proposal includes the restoration of the path to its original state from 1902, with improved access, a cliff-top path and a visitors' centre. The budget is approximately £6 million, with tourism development scheme grants of £3 million. The proposal is consistent with the Causeway Coast and Glens tourism master plan and is one of several proposals that have been received. Further information is being sought as part of the appraisal process. I am hopeful that it will be dealt with as expeditiously as possible.

Mr O'Loan: How effective are the NITB and the regional tourism partnerships in generating visitor numbers? The pound's low value in 2009 should give us some assistance, whereas the international lack of confidence will work against us. What indication is the Minister receiving about expected visitor numbers in the tourism sector in 2009?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Unfortunately, it is too soon to have any official record of that number. However, anecdotally, we have heard that we are getting a strong uptake from the Republic of Ireland. Some hotels along the border are reporting increases of 25% in visitors from the Republic of Ireland. The Department has been encouraging the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland to sell Northern Ireland as a value-for-money place in which to holiday, and those bodies are doing that. I had the pleasure of visiting Germany with Tourism Ireland last week. It is marketing us not as a cheap place to visit, but as a place that offers good value for money. I endorse that view.

It was good to be in Germany last Wednesday after the weekend that we had had. I wanted to see whether there was any kickback from the bad publicity that had shot across people's screens in Germany and worldwide. I heard that people understood the situation and understood that the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland have rejected violence and that, therefore, Northern Ireland is at peace with itself. They wanted to come and explore. I tried to give them all the message

that Northern Ireland is a good place to come to that offers value for money.

Invest NI: Purchase of New Land

2. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the purchase of new land by Invest NI for industrial use, during the past two years. (AQO 2327/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest Northern Ireland has not completed the purchase of any land for industrial use in the past two years. However, the availability of service sites for development by its clients is fundamental to the future growth of the Northern Ireland economy. A key target of the Programme for Government and the investment strategy for Northern Ireland is that Invest Northern Ireland will acquire and/or develop 200 acres of service land in main hubs.

To that end, Invest Northern Ireland has launched the first phase of projects to acquire land in four priority locations — Strabane, Omagh, Armagh and Newry — where an urgent need has been identified. Past experience has shown that acquisition projects can be complex and can take several years to complete. However, to date, work is progressing well, and Invest Northern Ireland expects to achieve the target.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given that land prices are probably at their lowest in several years, is the Minister content with her Department's land bank for future businesses?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Yes. We were pleased to sell off a large amount of our land. The rationale is that Invest Northern Ireland intervenes in the property market where there is evidence of market failure. I have identified the four areas in which we need to intervene, and work is progressing well on those sites. I hope to be in a position to make announcements in relation to some of those in the very near future.

In 2007-08, which was the organisation's most successful term ever in respect of property sales, 43 companies purchased 120 acres of land throughout Northern Ireland. However, it will not surprise the Member to learn that sales activity has fallen by some 80% in comparison to 2007-08, and obviously a key reason for that is the lack of finance available from banks to businesses in order to allow them to pursue their growth plans.

As it is at the moment, I am satisfied with the plans to purchase new land, and those plans are continuing apace.

Mr P Ramsey: Will the Minister outline the policy of Invest NI in relation to specific related industries and the creation of industrial parks and zones? Medical-

supplies industries could be located beside waste-management units. What is the policy regarding that?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I know the particular case to which the Member is referring, and it is essentially a planning issue. The Member will understand that, although I have taken representation from the particular industry involved, and have also attended a meeting with the Minister of the Environment, it is essentially a planning issue. All that my Department can do is support the Member in making his objection known in relation to that particular issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 3 and 4 have been withdrawn.

Economic Downturn: Assistance for SMEs

5. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she has had with Executive colleagues in relation to assistance for small and medium-sized enterprises facing difficulties in the economic downturn. (AQO 2330/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Executive colleagues and I are engaged in ongoing discussions to consider what further action we can take to support businesses at this time. The economic downturn is now a standing item on the agenda for Executive meetings. Members will be aware of the £44.5 million package of measures announced by the Executive on 15 December 2008 in response to the economic downturn. That included the new 10-day prompt-payment policy to assist business cash flow.

Also, in my capacity as chairperson of the Economic Development Forum, I established a subgroup, led by the private sector, to consider what additional measures I, and Executive colleagues, could take. A number of recommendations have been made and are currently under consideration. Furthermore, Invest NI has established the accelerated support fund to offer clients targeted assistance, and a series of seminars are also being held for client and non-client companies, to provide advice on how businesses can respond to the downturn.

My Department and the Executive will continue to do all that we can to support businesses through this difficult period.

Mr Lunn: Has the Minister had any discussions with the banks specifically about the problems for small businesses in relation to cash flow and credit?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I have had the opportunity to attend meetings with the banks with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as well as the Finance Minister. As was rightly pointed out in this morning's debate on debt relief, there are

two issues concerning the banks. The first is in relation to the accessibility of credit to those firms that are seeking it — that is a big difficulty — but there is also an issue in relation to the management of current customers, with which there are also difficulties. There are reports that banks are unilaterally turning some business loans into personal loans — we heard of that this morning from the Member for West Belfast Mr Attwood. That gives a lot of cause for concern.

When those issues are raised with the banks they say that they are open for business and that they are lending, but I see a difficulty with raising those issues with the banks unless there are specific instances that we can take up with them. I appeal to Members, when they write to me, the Finance Minister, or the First Minister and deputy First Minister, to provide specific examples, so that we can take those up directly with the banks and challenge them on their behaviour.

I am glad to say that the banks are becoming more open to discussing issues with politicians. Their refusal to appear before the Committee for Finance and Personnel in the past was a retrograde step. However, I think they have realised that they need to engage with politicians, because only then will we be able to build the confidence needed in the economy, so that we can move forward.

Mr Wells: I am sure that the Minister is aware that there are many perfectly reputable companies in Northern Ireland that are not seeking extensions to credit lines, or extra credit, but simply want the renewal of their present credit arrangements. Therefore, I welcome her comment that if individual MLAs provide her with information, she can pursue the matter.

3.45 pm

There are two companies in my constituency that employ 150 people between them. Both companies have run into serious difficulty recently, simply because the bank wrote to them to inform them that it was closing their overdraft facility and to ask them to pay off their debts within three weeks. Does the Minister agree that that is totally unacceptable, given that there was no possibility of either company's defaulting on its loans?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Yes, I agree with the Member. The difficulty is that, although those companies will not default on their loans in the long term, they will not be able to repay their overdrafts within three weeks. That is precisely the sort of behaviour that we need to hear about directly so that we might challenge the banks. When we meet banks' representatives, they say that they are working very well with businesses, that they are offering them money and that they are doing all that they can for them. They will continue to say that until we can go to them with specific, fact-based examples.

We must be able to confront banks so that we can answer on behalf of our constituents.

Mr Savage: What help is available to people who want to start up in business, especially in manufacturing?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As the Member will know, Northern Ireland's economy is 99.9% reliant on small businesses. There are 132,000 businesses in Northern Ireland, 99% of which are deemed to be small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Of those SMEs, some 95% are micro-businesses, which employ 10 or fewer people.

Contrary to popular opinion, we spend a great deal of our time helping start-up businesses to get off the ground so that they can move to the next stage of exporting. I want to ensure that the replacement programme that I will launch later this week for the Start a Business programme will allow start-up businesses to move to the next stage. At present, a gap exists between those businesses that are on the Start a Business programme and those that are Invest NI's clients. We must close that gap and be more responsive to the economy. I hope that when I make that announcement later this week, the Member will see precisely the sort of help that is available to start-up businesses.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Broadband Access: Rural Areas

7. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether there are rural areas that are still unable to access cable broadband. (AQO 2332/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Broadband services over a wireline or cable solution are available to more than 99% of premises across Northern Ireland. However, a small number of premises — less than 1% — remains unable to access broadband by way of a wireline solution. Those premises are scattered across Northern Ireland and tend to be in remote rural areas that are too far from the nearest telephone exchange to allow a broadband service to be delivered via a wireline solution.

In such instances, alternative technologies, satellite and wireless among them, have been deployed. We have regularly monitored the quality of the satellite service, and on each occasion found that it met the terms of the contract. We recently awarded a new three-year contract to Avanti Communications Group plc in order to ensure that all of Northern Ireland continues to have access to broadband services. We will monitor regularly the quality of the satellite service provided in order to ensure that it meets the terms of the contract.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for her answer. She will appreciate that some of those, especially in the

business sector, who do not have access to cable broadband are experiencing difficulties. Although we appreciate the huge investment that has been made in broadband services, some of that investment may more usefully be directed to businesses in rural areas, especially those west of the Bann, that do not have access to cable broadband.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: That is precisely why we announced the new Avanti contract, which deals with that less than 1% of premises that does not have access to wireline or cable broadband, and that must use satellite technology instead. That contract caps the cost at £27 a month, plus a £70 installation fee. BT, at the end of the contract that it had had for the past three years, indicated that it would cease to offer satellite product, which Avanti will now offer when the changeover takes place.

I hope that Members will let my Department know of any instances of difficulties with the changeover from BT to Avanti Communications so that we can investigate.

Mr Craig: Will the Minister provide an update on what has happened to the broadband fund, which was introduced in August 2008 to help with infill in rural areas? I declare an interest, because, unfortunately, I live in one of the broadband black spots.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I never thought that the Member would refer to his home area as a black spot, but there you go.

The £1.9 million fund was launched in August 2008 to support broadband-technology trials and the delivery of infill solutions in rural areas. To date, two letters of offer have been issued, and there will be a further call for projects at the start of April 2009. It was announced in February 2008 that money would be put into North West Electronics to deliver broadband access in rural parts of west Tyrone. An additional £137,000 of funding has been made available to Avanti Communications, which has undertaken 3G mobile-technology trials in a number of areas, including Ballintoy in County Antrim and Ballinamallard in County Fermanagh.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for the information that she just shared with us. I have had communication with the Department on broadband in my area, and I heard the Minister's reference to west Tyrone. In regard to east Tyrone, specifically the Ardboe area, I was trying to communicate to the Department that people in that area cannot get access to broadband with an adequate speed.

Will the Minister provide some idea of the timescale for the Avanti Communications contract, its implications for rural areas, such as those that I represent as a councillor, and the speed of the broadband that will be available to businesses once the process is complete?

Mr Elliott mentioned the issue, and access to a satisfactory and good-speed broadband is important to businesses.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The whole idea behind the Avanti Communications contract, which was awarded at the start of January 2009, is to ensure that the Northern Ireland economy, particularly our rural-based SMEs, continue to benefit from access to affordable broadband solutions. If that contract were not in place, people living in places such as Ardboe and Tamnamore, to which Mr Elliott referred, would have to pay for wireless and satellite communication. We are bringing in a contract, which is, essentially, a subvention, to help those people get access to wireless and satellite communication. I am happy to write to the Member about the speed of the broadband as I do not have that information to hand.

Giant's Causeway: Funding for Interpretative Centre

8. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made in obtaining funding for the National Trust application to build an interpretative centre at the Giant's Causeway. (AQO 2333/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The National Trust has submitted a grant application to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board for financial assistance of £9.25 million for the new visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway. That application is currently being assessed. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment officials are proactively monitoring progress on the economic appraisal with a view to enabling a decision to be made as soon as possible.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given the importance of ensuring that the project is moved forward, will she give us an indication of when she believes we will be in a position to, at long last, have a visitors' centre that is fit for purpose and matches the Giant's Causeway's status as a world heritage site and the premier tourist attraction in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I cannot be definitive on timescales, because, as the Member knows, the economic appraisal has to go through the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister as well as my Department, before being signed off by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. I am hopeful, and the National Trust has been in constant communication with the Tourist Board, even before it received formal planning approval. The planning approval went through in very good time, and I hope that we will be able to emulate that.

Mr K Robinson: I welcome some progress on the long-running saga at the Giant's Causeway. However, is the Minister aware of any further proposed developments in the immediate area that could assist in enhancing the attractiveness of the Causeway site as the premier tourist attraction in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I understand that other applications are in the planning system, but none has come to me for grant aid or anything like that. I assume that if some of those applications are successful, that they may well do so. To date, however, we have had no such applications.

Mr Dallat: I, too, thank the Minister for her answer. On this eve of St Patrick's Day, would it be in order to celebrate the fact that the Giant's Causeway is no longer at risk from speculators and their lobbyists?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: If the Member is referring to the Seymour Sweeney application, which I may think that he is, he will know that that application was turned down. As I understand it, the matter is with the Planning Appeals Commission, and, therefore, I cannot say anything further about same.

Euro: Benefit to Business Community

9. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment she has made of the benefit to the business community, in both retail and manufacturing sectors, of the strength of the euro compared to sterling. (AQO 2334/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Members will be aware of the significant challenges that local businesses are currently facing. The global economic downturn has resulted in a fall in demand for goods and services, locally and in export markets.

Recent movements in the euro/pound exchange rate have, however, provided some relief to local companies. That is a particularly important factor in cross-border trade, especially for the retail sector. Similarly, the exchange rate improves the competitiveness of companies exporting to the rest of Europe. However, it should also be recognised that the strong euro has led to higher import prices. Invest Northern Ireland will continue to work with local firms to help them to take advantage of trade opportunities in the euro zone and elsewhere.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does the Minister agree that, given the strength of the euro, tourism is an area that could generate the economy, with people coming particularly from the South of Ireland?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Absolutely. Indeed, PricewaterhouseCoopers' recent outlook pointed out that local exports and the local tourism product are more competitive in the current

climate. When I look at such forecasters, it is always nice to take something positive out of what they are saying. There has been a positive experience in retail in many of our border towns, and, indeed, beyond. I understand that Banbridge, for example, is doing very well at the Outlet centre, and the new, improved roads infrastructure has also helped.

As regards tourism, anecdotal figures have shown an increase in visitors from the Republic of Ireland. I am particularly pleased about that, because a lot of visitors in the past came to the Republic of Ireland for their holidays, and stayed there; they did not come into Northern Ireland. We are now seeing people coming into Northern Ireland, and that, as we all know, is very good, because once people come into Northern Ireland, they will want to come back.

Mr Weir: In addition to the positive advantages of tourism, given the recent changes in the exchange rates, can the Minister outline what additional actions the Department is taking to promote trade?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member will probably be aware that I was able to take the biggest ever trade mission to Europe when I recently went to Holland. That was a very successful trade mission, a lot of contacts were made, and I hope that a lot of business will be done as a result. I also had the opportunity to be in Germany last week.

Our exports are doing well at the moment. We have to recognise that the imports are on a downer, but over the next six months, Invest Northern Ireland plans to organise seven more trade missions and stands at exhibitions in the euro zone. Hopefully, we will see something coming out of that. I am positive about where we are at the minute, and I know that Invest Northern Ireland, and, indeed, Tourism Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, are working very hard to give us stand-out in those markets.

Mr Gardiner: Will the Minister advise, as a result of her recent visit to Germany, of any direct foreign investments coming in to Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As the Member will be aware, it takes 18 to 24 months to work on such foreign direct investments. However, I do not intend to divulge the contents of my discussions in Germany or, indeed, in the Netherlands. All I wish to say is that I am extremely hopeful that we will see some very good product in the near future.

Adjourned at 4.00 pm.

