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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 11 May 2009

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

**Mr Adams:** On a point of order, a Cheann Comhairle, perhaps you are aware that there was an attack on the home of a Member last night. Although I am sensitive about not abusing points of order, I consider this to be a very serious situation.

You may be aware that one group has threatened to kill Sinn Féin representatives. The attack on the home of Mitchel McLaughlin and his wife Mary Lou is the third such attack. I just want to bring that to the attention of the Ceann Comhairle and send a message of solidarity to the McLaughlin family and place on record our revulsion at and opposition to the attack. Go raibh maith agat.

**Rev Dr Ian Paisley:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, we are moving into a very difficult time. Therefore, it behoves us all to do our very best to encourage and strengthen those who are standing out against the sort of incident that was witnessed last night. I think that it is only right that the House declare plainly and clearly where it stands on this issue and how those Members who were put here by the electorate to represent them feel about that part of the electorate that is trying to kill them and their friends. Irrespective of politics, the basis of democracy is that we believe that people should be elected, that they should serve, and that they should be given the freedom to serve the people whom they have been elected to represent in this House.

**Mr Durkan:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, I know that there are probably procedural difficulties in this area, but I think that it is appropriate that an opportunity be found in the Assembly to show a united response to that attack and to the threat that was attached to it, and, indeed, to the threats that were made previously against the deputy First Minister.

In recent weeks, the Assembly has shown a real unity of purpose and determination to defend these institutions and the wider democratic process against murderous attacks on soldiers and police officers. It is also important that we unite to make it clear to the tendencies that are behind the attack that, when they attack one member of the democratic process or one party in that process they are attacking us all, and we all unite to defy them.

**Mr Kennedy:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I join others in condemning any attack on individuals or on property. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I condemn all such attacks unreservedly and without equivocation, and I encourage the wider community to co-operate with the PSNI in its investigations into any such incidents. I wish to place that clearly on record.

It is important that we investigate means by which these matters can be raised under urgent matters of the day, rather than under points of order, which is not appropriate.

**Mr Ford:** Further to those points of order, Mr Speaker. On behalf of my group I wish to be associated with the sentiments that have been expressed. There is no doubt that attacks on soldiers, police officers, elected politicians or ordinary civilians are entirely unacceptable in this society. Each and every one of us must resist them, wherever they come from and whoever they are aimed at. I am pleased to add my voice to the sentiments expressed by others.

**Mr Speaker:** The procedure concerning matters of the day can seem very restrictive. Perhaps the Committee on Procedures might consider the matter to allow Members to raise such issues. I know that I speak for everyone in the House and for the public in condemning these attacks.

## MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

### North/South Ministerial Council:

#### Transport Sectoral Format

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister for Regional Development that he wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council transport sectoral format meeting.

**The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following report on the sixth North/South Ministerial Council transport sectoral format meeting at the Curran Court Hotel in Larne on Friday 3 April 2009.

The Executive were represented by the Minister of the Environment, Sammy Wilson MP MLA, and me. The Irish Government were represented by the Minister for Transport, Noel Dempsey TD. The Council noted progress made since the last meeting, in May 2008, and welcomed the opportunity to meet to discuss opportunities for cross-border co-operation on strategic transport planning.

The Council discussed the latest position on the A5 north-west gateway to Aughnacloy and the A8 Belfast to Larne road projects and noted progress made to date. I advised the Council that development work was progressing well on both projects. In respect of the A5 project, I was pleased to report that I had announced the completion of the first significant milestone — the preliminary route corridor assessment — ahead of target on 7 November 2008. Public exhibitions that illustrated several potential routes within the preferred corridor were held during February 2009, with more than 3,000 people attending, including elected representatives and council officials.

Roads Service anticipates that the selection of the preferred route will be completed on target in mid-2009. I welcome the ongoing co-operation at the cross-border interfaces, particularly the Aughnacloy to Clontibret route. The Council also noted that the procurement process has commenced on the project, with a view to the appointment of contractors and designers in the autumn.

The next significant milestone will be the publication of the draft statutory orders, which are due to be published by late 2010. In the current economic climate, the Council noted the recent reassurance in relation to the £400 million contribution from the Irish Government and looked forward to seeing further advancement of this unprecedented scheme in the coming months.

I reported to the Council a similar position in relation to the A8 project. The scheme will provide 14

kilometres of dual carriageway between Belfast and Larne. I advised that delivery is anticipated on a similar time frame to that of the A5 and confirmed that the project has also achieved its first significant milestone — the preliminary route corridor assessment — ahead of target. The second key milestone — the preferred route — is also anticipated to be on target for mid-summer 2009. In addition, the procurement process is due to commence shortly.

The Council noted the report commissioned by Fermanagh District Council and Sligo County Council which analysed the need for upgrading the N16/A4 Belfast to Sligo route. I was pleased to report that extensive works are in progress to upgrade the A4 between Dungannon and Augher.

More than 20 kilometres of dual carriageway are being constructed between Dungannon and Ballygawley. A further four kilometres of widened two-plus-one single carriageway are being built between Ballygawley and Augher. My Department's investment delivery plan for roads also includes proposals for bypasses of Enniskillen and Fivemiletown, which will further relieve congestion and bottlenecks on that route and enhance regional journey times. Consultants have been appointed to start development work on the Enniskillen bypass.

The North/South Ministerial Council also noted the publication of the Irish Department of Transport's smarter travel policy. My Department is already progressing initiatives on sustainable transport and travel. I advised the Council that officials are proactively engaged on a sustainable transport and travel agenda and are progressing initiatives that underline the all-Ireland dimension. The Council also agreed to the ongoing work on a jointly-supported car-sharing website for the north-west region, with a tentative commencement date in autumn 2009.

Ministers reviewed progress on proposals for improving the Dublin-Belfast rail service and noted the findings from the work carried out by Iarnród Éireann and Northern Ireland Railways since the Council's previous meeting. Ministers agreed that identifying the capital and revenue funding required to improve on the frequency of the Enterprise service remains an objective but in the knowledge that the financial position is likely to be difficult in the years ahead. They also agreed that in the meantime operating companies should examine the case for reconfiguring Enterprise trains to increase their reliability.

Ministers discussed the intention of the Irish Department of Transport to deal with freight issues in a more integrated way through, inter alia, preparing a specific strategy for the freight sector. The Council also noted that the Department for Regional Development will consider issues relating to freight in

the review of the regional transportation strategy. It was agreed that the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Transport should work together to organise a freight forum in the latter part of 2009 involving North and South interests.

The Council noted and welcomed the continuing progress on the Irish Government's proposals for restoring the cross-border bridges at Annaghroe and Knockaginney. It also acknowledged the excellent cross-border co-operation to date that has led to formal planning approval in both jurisdictions. Construction work will commence soon. Replacement of the bridges will enhance cross-border links and the social and economic well-being of the immediate areas. In relation to Narrow Water bridge, the Council noted that Louth County Council has completed significant work and is to undertake further appraisal of the proposed project prior to progression through the statutory processes.

I reminded the Council that my Department's Roads Service has employed consultants who have undertaken a feasibility study for a Newry southern relief road to link the A2 Warrenpoint Road to the A1 just south of Newry. I was recently made aware of the findings of that study, and I welcome the continuing co-operation on the project between officials from Roads Service and Louth County Council.

The Council noted the studies carried out to date on the Ballynacarry bridge by Monaghan County Council. The ongoing appraisal for that bridge is expected to be completed in mid-2009, after which the authorities in the South will further consider the level of priority to attach to the project. Go raibh maith agat.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain):** I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he share with Members the findings of the feasibility study on the Newry southern relief road?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I received that report recently, but more work will be done on developing the findings. I hope to be able to share the information with the Regional Development Committee, elected representatives and the public in that part of the world in the near future.

The project is important. Roads Service and the consultants it has engaged have undertaken significant assessment work. The project is particularly important to Warrenpoint port's ability to continue to grow and to serve as an economic driver in the east coast region. As I said, I have received some preliminary findings, which will be developed, and I will have further discussion with officials on the matter tomorrow. We hope to be in a position to present the report's findings soon.

**Mr Wells:** I note the Minister's comments about the A5. He knows that the £400 million that has been made available by the Irish authorities is guaranteed.

Will he absolutely and categorically assure Members that as a result of his meeting there is no question or any doubt about the future of that funding?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I am happy to do so. Any time that we have raised that issue with the Minister for Transport, we have been very forcefully assured by the Minister, his officials and the National Roads Authority in the South that that funding will be forthcoming. As the Member has said, it is a very important component of not just the A5 but the A8 Belfast to Larne route.

I refer the Member to the comments of the Taoiseach during a dinner he attended a number of weeks ago with the CBI, in which he again reaffirmed the Dublin Government's financial commitment to that project. We have been given very firm assurances at every stage at which we have enquired about funding, and I am happy to repeat those assurances to the Member.

12.15 pm

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement and draw his attention to the Ballynacarry bridge. He is well aware of the lobbying that local councillors have done through the East Border Region Committee (EBRC) on that matter. Arising from the NSMC meeting, can the Minister tell us whether he feels that dealing with the issue is a major priority? Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I met the East Border Region Committee, and I know that the group of councils that is represented on it is very supportive of the INTERREG money available for the area going to the Ballynacarry bridge project. It is on a very dangerous stretch of the route between Cullaville and Castleblayney and has been the scene of quite a lot of accidents, so there is strong local feeling that it is a very important project. Monaghan County Council is conducting an assessment for the project. The council has not yet assessed its priority status, but it intends to do that in the near future. We will have more information at that stage.

**Mr Dallat:** I also welcome the Minister's statement. I note that the Minister of the Environment, Sammy Wilson, who has overall responsibility for road safety, also attended the NSMC meeting, at which, it is my understanding, road safety was discussed. Given the number of people who have lost their lives North and South of the border, I understand why he was in attendance. Will the Minister therefore explain why that issue was not included in his statement? Will he tell me what exactly was discussed about road safety?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** A broad range of issues that fall under the DOE headline was discussed at the meeting. Road safety is always discussed at those meetings, and I think that all

Members have an interest in the matter. The Minister of the Environment had some issues with parts of my statement. If he wishes to make a statement about the issues that were discussed at the meeting that are specific to his Department, that is a matter for him. I am sure that he will sort that out with you, Mr Speaker.

A range of other matters was discussed, including the sharing of information on car registrations and other issues that have been developed. As a member of the Committee for Regional Development, the Member will know that ongoing work has been a regular feature of North/South Ministerial Council transport sectoral meetings.

**Mrs Long:** I thank the Minister for his statement and particularly for mentioning public transport issues. The statement referred to progressing initiatives that underline the all-Ireland dimension of public transport. However, after that, the focus on public transport seemed to come down to the Dublin to Belfast rail link. Will the Minister outline some of the other public transport initiatives that were discussed?

On the Dublin to Belfast rail link, the statement also revealed that it was agreed that operating companies should examine the case for reconfiguring the Enterprise trains to improve their reliability. Can we have some clarification about what that reconfiguration may mean?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** One of the items under discussion was a policy paper on sustainable transport initiatives that the Department of Transport in the South developed. Although my Department is doing quite a lot of work on developing its own sustainable transport initiatives, that policy paper is a fairly comprehensive document from which there is much to be learned. Minister Dempsey shared with us some of the sustainable transport initiatives that are being developed in the South.

The Belfast to Dublin railway line is obviously one very important issue, not only from a public transport perspective but economically. It is a very important route on the island. Although the objective remains to improve the service and its frequency, in these difficult financial times that we face, both North and South, there is recognition that some of the initial ideas that we had will have to sit for some time, until the finances — capital investment and ongoing revenue investment — are available to develop them.

The ongoing work is of a technical nature. I presume that the Member, being an engineer, may understand it a bit better than I do. However, I know that one of the causes of engine failure is the fact that engines are also responsible for air conditioning and heating on trains. A separate system will make the trains more reliable, because engines are less likely to break down if they do not have to perform dual functions.

I will endeavour to get more information on that and share it with the Member. However, that is my understanding, as a person who is not well versed in those matters, of what they intend to do.

**Mr Bresland:** I also welcome the statement. Will there be more public consultation after the final route for the new A5 has been selected?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Yes. The preferred route option will be launched in mid-2009 — I think that it may be in July — and that will be accompanied by public exhibitions, at least in a number of areas along the way. As I said in my statement, there was a very high level of public interest in the announcement of the potential routes within the corridor, and 3,000 people attended at locations such as Strabane, Omagh and Ballygawley along the way. I anticipate that the same exercise will take place when we select the preferred route shortly. The route will go on display in public settings where the general public, elected representatives from the area and others who have an interest can come along and view it. The decision will be of particular interest to landowners whose lands and properties will be affected by the route selected. They will have an opportunity to discuss the issue with Roads Service and with the consultants. Therefore, there will be ongoing public consultations on the final route for the new A5.

**Mr Molloy:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for the statement. During the talks on transport and travel, was there any discussion about free travel in the transport system North and South for the over-60s and for those who accompany or who help people with a disability. Furthermore, as regards the Belfast-Dublin rail link, is there any guarantee at this stage that people who buy a ticket — in particular, people with a disability — will get a seat?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** There was specific discussion on companion travelling and concessionary fares for those with disabilities. The Member will know that there is a differential between what we provide in the North, which is free travel for people aged 60 and over, and what is provided in the South, where the age is certainly 65 and may be 66.

I know that an argument has been made for companion travelling, but there are still disabilities for which we have not been able to provide concessionary fares. Although we bid for some money at the start of the budgetary period for concessionary fares, we did get resources for the over-60s. However, there is another range of disabilities that might attract half fares but not full concessionary fares, and should more money become available to us we will want to ensure that all who have disabilities are covered by concessionary fares. People will continue to make the argument for companion travel as well.



In relation to the people's ability to get seats, if there is a particular problem arising about that, I will be very happy to raise that service matter with Translink.

**Mr G Robinson:** Will the Minister assure me that none of the projects, welcome as they all are, will impinge financially on the Dungiven bypass scheme in my constituency?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Who said that all politics are local? That is certainly not the intention. Last week I was in Dungiven, and we launched the preferred route for the Dungiven bypass, which is long awaited and long overdue, as I am sure that most people in the north-west will agree. People have been working for some time to identify that route. More work is being done as a result of the public consultation; there will be a more detailed design, and then we will move into the statutory processes. As far as I am concerned, that will not be impinged upon by any other road project.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Minister for bringing this matter forward. As regards the N16 and A4 Belfast to Sligo route and the report commissioned by the two councils there, a corridor identification process was to commence. Will the Minister update us on when that will take place and when we can get the report? Secondly, as regards the Annaghroe and Knockaginney bridges on the Monaghan/Tyrone border, did the Minister recognise the wave of public opposition to that work in the immediate area?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** With respect to the Member's second question, I know that concerns on the issue were raised when Mrs Foster was Minister of the Environment; indeed, those matters were discussed at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting. Nevertheless, I am aware that there was fairly substantial consultation in that area and a recognition that re-opening the bridges would be a good thing. Perhaps not everyone shared that view, but that was the general feeling. Every effort was made to ensure that the public were consulted fully. Indeed, there was further consultation with people who had not felt comfortable about engaging in some of the official exercises.

I do not have any further information about the route corridor assessment. We discussed briefly the fact that Fermanagh District Council and Sligo County Council had submitted a report on it. Obviously, we were able to update people about our ongoing work programme, including the Dungannon to Ballygawley and the Ballygawley to Augher road improvement schemes and the identification of the Fivemiletown and Enniskillen bypasses. With respect to the particular report to which the Member referred, I will endeavour to find out what work has been carried out and get back to him.

**Mr Durkan:** Mr Speaker, before I ask the Minister a question about his statement, for which I thank him, I believe that a procedural point has arisen for you and the House authorities to consider. The Minister indicated that a matter on which he wanted to report was discussed at the meeting; however, he did not make that report. Accountability and transparency are supposed to mean that, when matters are discussed at such meetings, they should be duly reported on. It seems bizarre that a party that very much insists on that has prevented the Minister, through no fault of his own, reporting on the matter in question. Therefore, the matter must be addressed, because an awkward precedent will be created if it is allowed to stand.

I thank the Minister for what he said about the A5 north-west gateway, and I welcome his further comments about money coming from the Irish Government. We received those commitments from the Taoiseach privately, and I believe that they will be repeated publicly this week. However, is the Minister concerned to ensure that every effort will be made to expedite the delivery of that project? Although the project may not be under financial pressure, does the Minister accept that, in the coming years, there will be significant pressure on the transport investment strategies in the North and the South? Is there perhaps a need for a more integrated strategy, and will the sectors North and South begin working to that end?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** One of the objectives of the North/South Ministerial Council meetings is to ensure a high degree of integration between the transport sectors, and that is what we are striving towards. The A5 road improvement scheme is a good example of that sort of approach, as is the Newry to Dundalk link.

Over the years — not just since 2007 — excellent working relationships have been developed between the Roads Service and the National Roads Authority, and, out of the public spotlight, formalised working groups have done quite a bit of careful work to ensure that there is a degree of co-ordination and integration on cross-border transport matters. Work involving not just roads but public transport will go on.

If the downturn continues, I have no doubt that pressure will build on the Budget; however, we are operating and planning on the basis that moneys that have been identified will be available to us. In the interim, that is all that we can do.

I am sure that the Member will be pleased to hear that the first target of the A5 improvement scheme — the announcement of the route corridor options — was achieved ahead of schedule. I think that in July we will be in a position to announce the preferred route for the corridor, and we will then be able to get down to more

detailed work. A significant amount of work has been ongoing and is ahead of schedule.

As I said about the A6 project, people assume that roadworks have started only when they see plant and people in high-visibility jackets at the side of the road. However, a significant amount of work has been carried out on design and on undertaking the statutory processes for both the A5 and A6 routes, as is the case for projects on many other major road networks. The work is ongoing and is ahead of schedule, and I anticipate that that good work will bear fruit in that the project will be completed within its agreed timescale.

**Mr Speaker:** On two occasions, points have been raised about the requirements of ministerial statements and whether another Minister should be present. The role of the Speaker is to ensure that ministerial statements conform to the requirements of Standing Order 18A.

It is not the job of the Speaker to examine and agree the terminology of ministerial statements. That is an issue for the Executive and individual Ministers. It is important that I say that. The Speaker has a role to play, and I am content that Mr Murphy's statement meets the requirements.

12.30 pm

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement. He is initiating a freight forum. Will the terms of reference for that forum be shared with the Assembly and the Committee for Regional Development?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The terms of reference will be shared with the Committee for Regional Development, as will all such matters. It is intended that the forum will explore areas such as economic competitiveness and environmental sustainability issues that relate to freight transport, including the realistic potential for rail freight; the rationale for priority freight routes catering for vehicles with greater loads; the scope for the promotion and development of key logistic centres in the interests of sustainable urban mobility; the opportunities for optimising existing network capacity with desirable competitiveness and sustainability outcomes through the rescheduling of deliveries in urban areas; the incentives needed for greater uptake of fuel-efficient vehicles; and the potential of intelligent transport systems and services to improve efficiency and, ultimately, competitiveness. It is intended that representation on the forum will be drawn from industrial development agencies, industry representative bodies and the Departments. All that is at an exploratory stage, but I will be happy to update the Committee and the Assembly as the work progresses.

**Lord Morrow:** The Minister assures the House that £400 million from the Irish Government is still in place for the A5 project. What about the contribution from the other Government — our Government? Is it in place? When does the Minister expect the A5 project to commence?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The A5 project has started. As I said already, most people assume that road building has not commenced until workers are visible on site. A huge amount of work has been undertaken on the development of the A5 project. The first milestone was completed ahead of schedule, and we will be able to announce the preferred route in July, which is also ahead of schedule.

We have a strong commitment to this important project. The Irish Government's financial commitment adds to the importance of the project, and it places an imperative on the Executive to ensure that they uphold their side of the bargain, as well as the imperative that is on them to ensure that the work continues.

I am satisfied with developments to date. Work is ongoing, and the preferred route corridor will be announced. After that, we will get into the statutory processes, which will take some time, and further design work will be done on the route.

Given that the Member represents a rural constituency, he will know that the A5 scheme will run through some 80 km of countryside. That means that there will be many instances in which landowners and properties will be affected. In such cases, people are entitled to proper compensation, and issues such as access to and from farms must be sorted out. There is much work to be undertaken, but I am satisfied with the progress to date and that we will continue to make good progress on the scheme.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Minister for his statement. He will know that I am not an enthusiastic supporter of the Narrow Water bridge project. His statement referred to the role and attitude of Louth County Council. Will the Minister inform the House of the role and attitude of the Irish Government and the National Roads Authority and their level of commitment to the proposed scheme? Given the current economic climate, particularly in the Irish Republic, is the proposed scheme viable? Will the Minister also clarify his Department's involvement, if any, in the Narrow Water bridge project?

I welcome the study that is being undertaken into the more sensible proposal of providing a relief road linking the A2 Warrenpoint Road and the A1 at Newry. Does the Minister agree that that is more likely to make a substantial contribution to easing the problems of Newry, particularly the freight problems that drivers experience leaving Warrenpoint harbour and also by Warrenpoint Harbour Authority?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** For someone who considers the Narrow Water bridge project to be pie in the sky and not viable, the Member spends an awful lot of time talking about it. The position on both schemes remains the same. The Irish Government funded Louth County Council to appoint consultants to carry out a study on the bridge project, and that study is ongoing. Some public presentations have been made, and further work is under way. I am not aware of what the Irish Government will do beyond that point. They will take a decision when the work that Louth County Council has been tasked to carry out is completed, and I will await that decision.

The Narrow Water bridge project is not designed to address the issue of freight, transport or connectivity between Warrenpoint port and the Belfast to Dublin road. The southern relief road scheme, however, is designed to address those issues and will have a greater impact on improving traffic congestion and freight transport from the port. Therefore, it is unfair to compare the two schemes in that respect. Nonetheless, I have received a preliminary report on the southern relief road scheme. More work on it is being considered, and I hope to be able to launch that work at some stage in the future.

**Mr O'Loan:** The Minister gave a positive report on the various schemes under his control. What are the budgetary pressures for this financial year and the next? What impact are those pressures having on those schemes, and are they leading to delay in the published timetable for the schemes?

Following Lord Morrow's line of questioning, can the Minister comment on the implications of the Chancellor's UK Budget statement, which makes clear that significant budgetary cuts will take place from 2011 onwards? Can he confirm that those cuts will inevitably lead to those schemes being significantly delayed?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Member tends to favour the school of thought that the glass is half empty rather than half full. The Budget that has been agreed for the three-year period is the Budget under which we must operate — we have not been told any different. If financial pressures are being experienced, the Executive will do what they continually do: reassess constantly the Budget and try to prioritise the schemes as best as we can. To hear the Member's party, one would think that that was not the case.

In the investment strategy, we set out the schemes that we would like to take forward and the time frame for them. As far as design and the statutory process are concerned, we have started to make significant progress on practically all the schemes, and many schemes are ahead of schedule. Therefore, a significant investment has already been made in all those schemes — perhaps not on the ground but in undertaking preparatory work

— and we intend to press ahead with them. If the Budget scenario in 2011 is different, we will do what any good Executive would do and reassess our position at that stage.

**Mr Ford:** I also welcome the Minister's statement, although I must make a procedural point. Some of us understand that Ministers come to the House to make statements on behalf of the Executive, and it is less than satisfactory when matters discussed at an NSMC meeting are not subject to proper discussion.

However, on matters for which Mr Murphy does accept responsibility, I note that he talked about a sustainable transport strategy. Given the Minister's recent success in announcing investment in new rolling stock for local services for Northern Ireland Railways, does he not accept that if we are to maintain the gains made over the past decade through the increased usage of the Belfast to Dublin Enterprise rail service, there is now a significant need for further investment in track and rolling stock as an urgent priority?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** There is an acceptance that there is a significant need for investment in the Enterprise service, but that comes up against the hard reality of the resources available to us. Therefore, the intention is to improve the service, and the objective remains the same. We asked the two companies, Iarnród Éireann and NIR, to carry out a piece of work to show how they would improve the service, including its frequency, comfort, reliability and speed. That involved not just work on the stock but on the track. It is intended to press ahead with that when the resources become available. In the interim, we will have to try to do what work we can to improve the reliability of the train sets.

It is still the intention, the desire and the objective to improve the service, as it is the key service on the island for connectivity between the two cities, and we want to ensure that it stays that way. The Member is right: the growth in the number of rail passengers is probably due to improvements in the comfort and reliability of the service, and investing in the service is the way in which we will continue to grow passenger numbers. There has been significant investment in new trains, and we would like to make the same investment in the Enterprise service. However, we may have to wait a little longer to get the resources for that. It is not simply a matter of capital investment; revenue investment is also required if the frequency of the service is to be increased.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Fáiltím roimh an ráiteas seo ón Aire. Ba mhaith liom tagairt a dhéanamh do a dó nó a trí de na tionscnaimh a luaitear i gcomhthéacs an droichid ag an Chaoluisce agus an droichid ag Baile na Caradh agus an bóthar faoisimh taobh ó dheas de Iúr Cinn Trá. I



welcome the Minister's statement. I will refer to some of the projects mentioned by the Minister, particularly the Narrow Water bridge and the Ballynacarry bridge. A further appraisal is to be undertaken of the Narrow Water bridge, and there is still an ongoing appraisal of the Ballynacarry bridge. Does the Minister agree that, at the end of the appraisals, we would like to see some action taking place and some work beginning on the ground on both those schemes? What is the Minister's initial assessment of the findings of the feasibility study for a Newry southern relief road? Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The responsibility for assessing, designing and taking forward the Ballynacarry scheme lies with Monaghan County Council, and the responsibility for the Narrow Water scheme lies with Louth County Council. I omitted that fact in my reply to Danny Kennedy. The lead agency is on the southern side of the border and, if Members are asking for updates on those works, they should be referred to the people who are dealing with them. That was misinterpreted for genuine or mischievous reasons — I am not quite sure which. However, it was misinterpreted anyway. The two county councils are the lead agencies for both projects, and they are carrying out those assessments.

Monaghan County Council, in conjunction with the National Roads Authority, will decide what priority the Ballynacarry bridge project will have. We have been very supportive of that project. The Member will know from his constituency interests that the people in that part of south Armagh and Monaghan would like to see that project addressed quickly. The east border region has supported the project, and we have ensured that the authorities in the South are aware of that and that they support the INTERREG money available for that area being spent on that project. We are giving it every encouragement.

The position on the Narrow Water bridge is as it was. Roads Service and Louth County Council have been conducting their studies and sharing information. When Roads Service has been asked for any information or support, it has provided it and will continue to do so gladly. I am encouraged by my preliminary assessment of the southern relief road study.

**Mr Gallagher:** Just over a year ago, the North/South group Co-operation and Working Together (CAWT) produced a detailed report on road safety that involved a wide range of interests. When the report was published, it was expected that it would be taken up at North/South level. As my colleagues said, it is a matter of regret that, although road safety was discussed at the meeting, we do not have a report about it.

I expressed my disappointment at the omission of a discussion on the Belfast to Sligo road at earlier meetings, and I welcome the Minister's commitment

that the matter will be raised. I welcome the Minister's detailing of what is happening on the northern side. Did he gain any information from authorities on the southern side of the border about steps that they have taken or are soon to take to take the joint venture forward?

12.45 pm

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Member will know that work is ongoing in the Manorhamilton area on the southern side of the border; that was discussed at the time that the report was launched by both councils. The Southern Government did not give me any more update on or commitment to further roadworks to be undertaken between the border and Sligo. However, I assume that both councils and those who support the Sligo to Belfast project will continue to press the case for that work.

In the early stages, we outlined some of the work that we have planned, such as the Dungannon to Ballygawley project and the bypasses of Fivemiletown and Enniskillen. I know that roadworks are planned for the Manorhamilton area on the Southern side, but I was not given further information on any other planned works.



## MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

### Planning

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment that he wishes to make a statement regarding the weight to be given to the economic benefits of development proposals.

**The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson):** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement to underline the importance that I attach to ensuring that the planning system contributes to the growth of our economy, especially at this difficult time.

The Executive's Programme for Government makes economic growth and wealth creation our top priority, to be taken forward in a fair and sustainable manner. That strategic priority is echoed as a key theme that underlies our planning system, which seeks to deliver economic development while protecting and enhancing the environment. As Members will know, over the last few years there has been widespread pressure for the planning system to be reformed. We all recognise that the system needs to adapt more flexibly and more quickly to the many challenges that we face, particularly in the current economic climate.

My Department has already achieved a range of process improvements. We have created two strategic project teams at planning headquarters who will handle all large-scale investment proposals. To enhance their effectiveness, those teams include specialists from Roads Service and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), two of our key consultees. That is contributing to faster and better decisions. Many economically significant planning applications will be dealt with by the strategic project teams; it is high-profile and important work.

It is vital that proposals that may bring investment be processed as quickly as possible. The achievement of that will require the commitment of everyone who is involved in the planning process. We need better planning applications that contain all the necessary information to allow a decision to be made. The strategic project teams also work alongside the Strategic Investment Board to ensure that capital-spend projects flow smoothly through the planning process. That partnership has been particularly effective in delivering new schools in the Belfast area, for example.

Furthermore, I am pleased to say that the strategic project teams processed 25 article 31 applications in 2008-09. Those included a number of high-priority cases such as the £29 million investment in the Public Record Office; the new acute hospital at Enniskillen, which will cost £250 million; and signature tourism projects at the Giant's Causeway and the Titanic Quarter, which have a value of £110 million. Those

projects were all processed in line with the six-month target that is set in the Programme for Government, and they will give a boost to our economy's construction sector over the next few years.

More locally, my officials give priority to applications on which grant aid may depend and to those with an employment, community or public-interest dimension.

Furthermore, working with the city council in Londonderry, we piloted a streamlined consultation scheme for non-contentious planning applications. I am pleased to say that we had rolled out this scheme to all councils before the end of March, and approval decisions now take, on average, 24 days to issue. That means that extensions and alterations are approved more quickly, as well as other planning issues such as agricultural buildings, advertisements and shop fronts. That will make life much easier for those who wish to get on with development and grow their businesses, particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises. That more proportionate approach benefits councils and the Planning Service. Decisions are made faster, the economic and social benefits are realised more quickly, and council and departmental officials are able to focus on more important applications, particularly those with significant economic and social implications.

I also want to encourage developers to engage with local communities before an application is submitted. That applies to people who should discuss proposed house extensions with neighbours and to developers who should engage with the local community and interest groups. Too often, it is only after an application has been submitted that people hear what is being proposed, and they often object to issues that could have been resolved, had the proposal been discussed beforehand. As with the other process improvements that I have highlighted, I expect that such front-loading will ensure that applications have a smooth passage.

In addition to the process improvements, there are some planning policy statements in the pipeline that will facilitate economic development both in settlements and in the open countryside. I look forward to publishing the revised and updated PPS 4, which concerns economic development and has been awaiting Executive clearance since January 2009. PPS 21, which I published in November 2008, also contains policies for economic development in the open countryside, including farm diversification. The Executive are committed to the development of our tourist industry, and it is vital that we have the right planning policies in place to underpin appropriate tourism-related development projects. That is why I will soon bring forward draft PPS 16, which will set out the policy for tourist facilities and accommodation. Subject to Executive clearance, PPS 18, on renewable energy, will be published before the recess.

The planning system cannot be expected to satisfy all interests all the time. Economic growth, including major infrastructure provision, requires development. However, that development must be sustainable and take into account all the relevant material considerations in the wider public interest. My Department's guiding principle to development management is set out in paragraph 59 of Planning Policy Statement 1: General Principles:

"in determining planning applications ... development should be permitted, having regard to the development plan and all other material considerations, unless the proposed development will cause demonstrable harm to interests of acknowledged importance."

Competing interests often emerge in the assessment of development proposals. That requires the planning system to balance important social, economic and environmental considerations. The weight given to those is a judgement that lies with the decision-maker and will vary with each planning application.

That brings me to the main point of the statement. I want to give decision-makers the confidence and support to make judgements that will give greater weight to economic considerations where it is appropriate to do so. I want to give clarity and to leave no one in any doubt about how to deal with economic considerations. That is not a change of policy. The purpose of this statement is to provide certainty and to give guidance so that the planning system can play a positive role in encouraging investment and kick-starting regeneration. To that end, the following paragraph clarifies the weight that should be accorded to economic aspects in the making of planning decisions.

Full account shall be taken of economic aspects of a planning proposal, including the wider benefits to the regional or local economy, alongside social and environmental aspects, in so far as they are material considerations in the determination of the planning application to which they relate. In cases where the economic benefits of a proposal are significant, substantial weight shall be afforded to them in the determination of that planning application. However, in order that my officials can do that and determine planning applications without delay, it is essential that they have all the relevant information about development proposals at their disposal. It is, therefore, up to everyone involved in the planning process, including developers, agents and public representatives, to ensure that all information about economic benefits is provided at the outset.

In these difficult economic times, I want to ensure that our planning system plays a full and positive role in assisting economic recovery so that we can benefit from better times when they come.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his

statement. He said that the proposals were not a change of policy. I understand the general thrust of what the Minister appears to be saying. However, for those Members who sit through Committee meetings on the interpretation of policy — many of whom are present today — will the Minister provide a bit of clarity on his statement's anticipated impact on the interpretation of policy if, in fact, it is not a change of that policy?

Will the Minister comment on the concerns that members expressed at a Committee meeting on 30 April 2009 about the 20% increase in planning fees that he proposed and that his permanent secretary relayed to us? Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister of the Environment:** First, the current planning policies are peppered with references to the importance of economic considerations. All Members will know that, because they have probably been in planning offices with developers or objectors when dealing with planning applications and making arguments.

From day to day, planners find themselves torn between the various strands of policy, some of which are complementary and some of which are, by their very nature, in competition with one another. Given the passion that many planning applications can generate among objectors, developers and, indeed, public representatives, every planning officer has to weigh up the importance of different parts of policy.

This is not a change of policy. If it was a change of policy, it would have required widespread consultation etc. This is simply an attempt by me, as Minister of the Environment, to translate a priority of the Executive that I want to see in the planning system down to those officers who have to take difficult decisions on the ground.

It means that, if planning officers, in weighing up all of those considerations in the circumstances that I outlined, have to give greater weight to an economic consideration, they can be confident that they are reflecting the wishes of the democratically elected Assembly, the Executive and the Minister. That will be important for planning officers from day to day. However, it does not mean that they can ignore certain policies. As no planning decision is based on one particular policy, where that balance is to be made, I hope that this clarification will give greater confidence and information to those people who are making the decisions at the coalface.

Secondly, I note that the Environment Committee made some comments on planning fees. The decision to increase planning fees was not taken lightly. However, it is the first increase for four years, and most of it is based on the level of inflation that applied over that period. I took the decision only after considering all the efficiencies that I could make in the planning

system and in the Department to make up the impending shortfall in available staff and resources. I put a bar on recruitment, cut overtime in the Department, stopped the upgrading of posts, and so forth. I have taken action to save money in all those areas. I took money from other parts of the Department's budget and transferred it into the Planning Service. My colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel also provided some money. However, given the economic downturn, a shortfall remained. To keep the planning system running effectively and to avoid losing expertise, an increase in planning fees was considered as a last resort.

1.00 pm

I remind the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment that most planning fees in Northern Ireland remain substantially lower than those in the rest of the UK. In Northern Ireland, a cap of £12,500 on planning fees applies to large developments of more than 50 houses whereas the cap in England is £125,000, which is a huge difference. The increase in the price for an application to build an individual house will be approximately £110, which is also lower than in other parts of the United Kingdom and represents a small proportion of the total cost of building a house. The increase in planning fees does not, therefore, disadvantage applicants. The planning system would have been considerably more damaged by the loss of expertise through sufficient planning officers not being available to deal with applications. Developers tell me constantly that speed is the single most important element of a planning application, and speed can be achieved only by having enough resources available to process applications.

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Minister for his statement. He touched on the answer to my question in his response to the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment. Will he outline the practical economic benefits of the direction that his Department has taken? Will he also update the House on the position of PPS 4, to which he referred in his statement?

**The Minister of the Environment:** As I said in my earlier answer, the practical benefits are that the planners will have greater clarity and will, therefore, be able to make decisions with greater assurance. That will be particularly true of cases that are finely balanced. In future, when planning officers are wondering how to balance the environmental, social and economic considerations, they will have the full weight of the Executive and ministerial priority behind them, which will be helpful.

PPS 4 is another issue that is being held up at the Executive as it awaits the approval of the parties. In the past, I have made no bones about the fact that the process of receiving Executive clearance can be extremely difficult, even for some hugely important

issues. Whether the issue is planning reform or PPS 14, those who delay the process must consider whether they are serving the economy of Northern Ireland.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas.

I am grateful to the Minister for making his statement. However, Assembly policies must be based on equality, and opportunities must be provided for people in rural and urban areas.

I welcome the new policies that the Minister mentioned. However, will he assure the Assembly that those who implement the policies will be properly trained? Different divisions, for example, clearly interpret draft PPS 21 in different ways.

No matter what policy is devised and implemented, those people should be properly trained in the interim period. There should be one interpretation across the board, because confusion is being caused in the public domain. That must be looked at. I reiterate that any policy should be based on equality, and people should be given the opportunity to apply and develop. Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister of the Environment:** I do not wish to get into a debate on the differences that I have with Sinn Féin on the planning reform proposals, which are as important as today's statement in making the planning system effective for delivering for the economy. All the assessment that has been done on the equality implications of the planning reform proposals is exactly in line with the requirements of the equality legislation. It mirrors exactly what has been done by Sinn Féin Ministers on the proposals that they have brought forward to the Assembly. The equality screening has been done to the same standard as that which has been carried out by Sinn Féin Ministers. The conclusions were based on the same information as was used by Sinn Féin Ministers when they looked at equality.

The commitment that I have given to ensure that no equality issues are involved once the proposals go into the public domain is far greater than what some other Ministers have done. The planning reform proposals, which are important in this context, have been equality screened to the same degree as would have been done by any other Minister. This is not an excuse for not progressing with the planning reform proposals.

I take the Member's point about consistency of application, and I will be surprised if that point is not raised by a number of other Members. With any new policy, there will be an issue of ensuring that the people who have to apply it are fully aware of all the details of how it should be applied. The good thing is that, even where there have been some differences, no decision notices have been issued, because the final version of PPS 21 will not be available until the autumn. Any refusals are still being held until that final



version is available. Once it becomes available, the applications can be looked at again.

It is important to ensure that the same kinds of standards and interpretations are applied across offices. A large number of Members have written to me to point out where they believe that there have been differences of interpretation. I have asked officials to look at that, because I take the matter seriously and there is no point in having a policy that is more draconian in one part of the country than in another. The Planning Service must address that issue. We have to accept that it takes a bit of time for a new policy to bed in and that it takes time for people to ensure that they are applying the policy equally.

**Mr Beggs:** The Minister wants planners to give greater weight to economic considerations when it is appropriate to do so. He says that developers, agents and representatives need to lobby to make their case. The Minister remains active on Belfast City Council's planning committee, and he lobbies on individual cases. Does the Minister recognise that he is putting planners in an impossible situation in that they may not be giving what he considers to be appropriate weight to the views of their Minister?

**The Minister of the Environment:** I have been the Environment Minister for a year, and the one thing that I would have expected of the Member is that, by now, he would have found a different question to ask me.

I understand that the Assembly is interested in environmentally friendly policies, and so on. However, to recycle the same question practically biweekly is going a bit far. The Member has heard my answer to that question already, and he knows my attitude to that issue already. Rather than my simply recycling my answer, I implore the Member to try to get a different script. If he does not have a researcher who can provide him with a more incisive question, he ought to employ someone else.

**Mr Ford:** As Mr Beggs just pointed out, the Minister highlighted some of the ongoing difficulties in the current process. Specifically, given the fact that the Minister says that he looks forward to publishing PPS 4, which is being held up in the Executive, can he inform the Assembly whether the economy is still the Executive's number one priority? Is draft PPS 16 held up in his Department or in the Executive? Can he tell the House what has happened to PPS 18, which is also being held up somewhere between his Department and the Executive?

The Minister stated that he proposes to give greater weight to economic considerations. What does that mean? Does it mean that greater weight than previously will be given to economic considerations? Does it mean that greater weight will be given to economic considerations than to the social and

environmental considerations that planners are also obliged to take into account?

**The Minister of the Environment:** Subject to the Executive's approval, I hope that PPS 18 will be published before the summer recess. We are working to publish draft PPS 16 as quickly as possible.

I am reluctant to suggest a timetable because those issues are not always in my hands. As the Member well knows, under the checks and balances of our system of Government — which, incidentally, the Alliance Party was partly instrumental in setting up — those policies are subject to, and must have, the approval of a number of parties. I cannot comment on how quickly or slowly other parties will operate on the matter. All that I can say is that my desire is to put in place a suite of appropriate policies that offer guidance and certainty to planning applicants and to those who must make decisions on those applications.

I said that greater weight will be attached to economic considerations. I believe that, in the past, I have made my view clear that when it comes to material considerations, sometimes economic considerations have not been given as much weight as I would have liked. I must say that when I look at the correspondence and the number of meetings about planning applications that other Members seek with me, I get the impression that a large number of them, through the course of their work, believe that much greater weight should be given to either the preservation or creation of jobs in their constituencies.

Therefore, it is partly in response to my gut feeling, partly in response to representations that other Members have made on the issue, and partly in response to people in the development industry that I want to clarify the weight that I believe must be given to economic considerations. Greater weight means simply that: in circumstances where there is a balance of arguments and where it is appropriate, greater weight must be given to economic considerations.

I must make it clear to the Member that that does not mean that a bad planning application will be accepted simply because someone attaches a paragraph to it that states that it is of economic significance. Moreover, it does not mean that we can override policies to which we are already committed.

*1.15 pm*

**Mr T Clarke:** I welcome the Minister's statement. In response to an earlier question, the Minister said that he did not want to debate the reasons why Sinn Féin is delaying planning reform. He seemed to avoid that issue. How will further delays affect planning reform?

**The Minister of the Environment:** The irony is that most of those planning reform proposals have been well circulated in the public domain. They first

came to the Assembly and to the Committee for the Environment in the form of emerging proposals. Thereafter, given the lack of opposition to those proposals, I increased their status to planning reform proposals and circulated them among Ministers. At that stage, Ministers made no adverse comments. I had hoped to publish the proposals in January and that the consultation would have been completed by now.

Good sound proposals will be attractive to those who wish to develop and to those who are affected by development. A range of people, from environmental groups to developers, welcomed the emerging proposals. One implication of delay is that people will be disappointed that the Assembly is not doing the work that it should be doing. However, more importantly, the reform proposals refer to the devolution of the planning function to councils. Given that we will establish the new councils in 2011, we are working to a strict timetable. As I said in the Assembly a couple of weeks ago, I question whether we will be able to devolve planning powers to those councils within the agreed timetable. Those councils might begin their work without significant devolved functions.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement.

Sinn Féin believes that the special guidance notes that are attached to PPS 18 are contrary to the spirit of the policy. Indeed, the industry estimates that the special guidance notes will result in at least a 75% reduction in investment in onshore and offshore wind farms. How will the limitations cited in the special guidance impact on investment in the renewables sector? Has an economic impact assessment been carried out on that guidance? Furthermore, the Minister should rest assured that Sinn Féin will ensure that any planning policies that come to the Executive will be effectively equality-proofed.

**The Minister of the Environment:** I sometimes feel like a broken record when I discuss that matter. As it stands, the policy is generous to the wind-farm industry. Under the current policy, we have issued enough approvals to meet the Executive's target for generating electricity from wind by 2012. There are 50 applications in the system, which, if approved, will enable us to meet the targets that have been set for 2025.

There has been considerable debate about the guidance notes that are attached to PPS 18. The industry, the Planning Service and I are battling on that issue at the moment. I want to put my views on the guidance notes on record.

The wind-farm industry has circulated the story that the guidance notes will restrict the height of wind turbines and reduce their effectiveness and efficiency. They want no restriction on those wind turbines. The guidance notes indicate a height limit. If developers

then propose to build a turbine higher than that limit, they will have to make a case for that.

We are speaking about turbines that, very often, will be in sensitive areas of Northern Ireland. A balance must be struck when approving a planning application. There are beautiful tourist areas, and people go to those areas because they enjoy the landscape and the natural heritage, but someone may want to build a wind turbine of a size equivalent to the BT Riverside Tower beside the Waterfront Hall in the middle of that area. All that the guidelines say is that — and we are speaking mostly about land-based turbines — if an applicant wishes to make a case for a wind turbine that is higher than 80 m, they must be able to justify it. That will then become a material consideration, and what I am announcing today will be part of that.

When judging the acceptable height of a wind turbine for which someone is seeking planning permission, the environmental considerations should be taken into account, as should the social considerations because they will, of course, generate more noise, flicker etc for people who live nearby. The economic considerations should also be taken into account. Someone may well argue that a bigger turbine is needed to make the proposal economically effective. That will be a consideration of which the planners will have to take account.

Rather than opposing the point of view that Mr McKay expressed, my announcement should actually be helpful. I do not think that people would be happy if I were to introduce a policy stating that developers could build turbines of whatever height they wanted, regardless of the context in which they were to be placed. If developers want to build bigger turbines, they should make the cases for them. Those cases will be examined by the planning officers, and decisions will be made.

**Mr Hamilton:** I welcome the Minister's statement. There are quite a few planning applications in my area, and greater consideration of the economic aspects of those would be very welcome.

The planning system that the Minister and his predecessor inherited was criticised from all quarters, but he has set out a programme of many wide-ranging reforms, some of which he has mentioned, including the streamlined consultation process and the creation of the strategic projects unit. Another piece of work that has been carried out is the review by the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU). Will the Minister provide the House with an update on the outworkings of that review, and how it is impacting on reforming the planning system even further?

**The Minister of the Environment:** My Department instigated some work on the planning system by PEDU, which considered a number of issues, including the internal processing of planning applications, case

management, etc. It also considered how we could be more proactive in managing cases in the planning system. Nigel Dodds, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and I have held joint meetings with the Planning Service and PEDU. We are happy that many of the suggestions have been taken on board.

A number of issues arose, including internal case management and how we could be more proactive about that. There was also the issue of the service-level agreements with consultees, which, I must say, were sometimes service-level agreements in name only, because although they included timescales, those timescales were missed time and time again. We have looked at how those could be tightened up.

The planning reform proposals now include more definite proposals, such as statutory limits on the length of time that consultees have, and ways to ensure that developers make better planning applications.

PEDU has made a range of recommendations, and we have taken those on board. Those recommendations are already improving the way in which planning decisions are made.

**Mr Kennedy:** I thank the Minister for his statement. How will he ensure consistency of approach to the new policy on the part of planning officials? He will be aware of Planning Service's significant staffing problems in recent years because of retirements of senior staff and headhunting by the private sector. It is important that any new policy, or suggested policy, should be applied consistently throughout Northern Ireland.

I am concerned about the application of the new policy. How does the Minister intend to curtail the rather aggressive approach of Planning Service's enforcement section, which seems to be intent on making it almost impossible for owners of small businesses to operate, particularly in rural areas? The Minister will be aware of a couple of cases that I have raised with him directly. The enforcement section has a potential key role to play in making it possible for owners of small businesses to operate by not being overly restrictive or insistent on some regulations, which, quite frankly, are extreme.

**The Minister of the Environment:** I will correct the Member, as I do not want it put on the record that this is a new policy. It is not a new policy; it is guidance on, and clarification of, existing policy. We must ensure that there is consistency of application of policies such as PPS 21. Otherwise, people will ask questions about the way in which the planning system is working. Training of staff within the system by way of exchange and movement is important in achieving consistency, because it will allow staff to see what happens in different areas and offices.

There is a degree of subjectivity and discretion to the matter in hand; none of us, when asked to weigh up

the same set of arguments, will come to the same decisions, because we will give weight to different aspects. Given those elements of discretion or subjectivity, it is impossible to have 100% consistency. All we can do, through building up cases and examples, is to seek to ensure that that consistency happens.

On the issue of enforcement, this guidance does not give people who have been in breach of the policy the opportunity to set aside that policy. In many enforcement situations, it will be the case that individuals, either because they could not be bothered or because they thought that they could get away with it, have not even considered the policy, or they may not even have applied for planning permission, and then they get caught. There is no point in my giving the impression that this policy will deal with such cases; it will not. I know of many examples in which more consideration could have been given to the jobs that were lost because businesses were closed down in a particular area. I hope that the guidance will help to preserve such businesses.

**Mr Spratt:** I thank the Minister for his statement, in which he made a brief mention of PPS 21. What progress is being made on draft PPS 21?

1.30 pm

**The Minister of the Environment:** The consultation has finished, and those results will go before the Environment Committee next week. I think that that will happen next Thursday. The Executive subgroup will also consider the consultation results.

On 26 June, I will receive the report from the review group that has been considering what can be done for non-farm rural dwellers. We will consider changes to draft PPS 21 over the summer, and that should be finalised in the autumn, when the policy will go to the Executive for final ratification.

We are emphasising the retention of vernacular buildings in respect of replacement dwellings or dealing with disused buildings. I hope that the design guide will be available towards the end of the year. That will offer guidance to people who must restore old buildings on the type of additional features that can be added.

I spoke at a conference in Cushendall a couple of weeks ago. We looked at some old vernacular buildings and modern additions that had been made to them. I would be quite excited if the design guide could incorporate some of those ideas so that we can make good use of some of the old buildings in the countryside. Consequently, those buildings would not have to be knocked down, but could be turned into useful, liveable properties.

**Dr Farry:** I refer the Minister to PPS 18 and the draft supplementary guidance. How does he respond to the criticisms that have been made about what some



people view as subjective criteria in that draft? How can those subjective criteria give assurance to people who are seeking to invest in renewables?

Will the Minister assure the House that PPS 18 will be pitched in such a manner that will not just meet the minimum targets that have been set, but will give Northern Ireland the opportunity to emerge as a world leader in both onshore and offshore wind-energy production?

**The Minister of the Environment:** I am not sure what subjective guidance the Member is referring to. It may have been better if his question had been a bit more specific.

The criticism that I have heard from the wind industry is not that we are being subjective, but that we are being too prescriptive on turbine heights, and so on. I hope that I have explained in my earlier answer why we have set those limits, and what developers have to do if they wish to make a case for taller turbines.

As for renewable energy and its implementation in Northern Ireland, we must be careful not to regard wind power as some type of panacea. There are downsides. We have introduced and will introduce planning policies that seek to assist those who wish to introduce renewable-energy projects to their own homes at a micro level. One of the proposals of the planning reforms is to allow some of those projects as permitted developments, so that there would be no need to apply for planning permission. That cuts down time and cost.

Permissions that have been granted for large-scale developments and onshore applications demonstrate that we have been fairly generous. Members will also have an opportunity to debate the impact of legislation on offshore wind farms when they consider the Marine and Coastal Access Bill [HL].

I wish to be very clear: even if we have a large number of renewable-energy projects across Northern Ireland, the baseload must still be provided by energy providers that can assure consistency of supply. That adds cost, because parallel systems will tend to be run.

That is why we must be very careful that we do not simply see the construction of wind farms as some kind of panacea. We should not think that if we stick up wind farms, we will get all our energy for nothing because the wind will provide it and we will not have to buy oil or coal. It does not quite work like that.

That is one of the reasons why planning policy must reflect the balance between getting renewable energy where it is feasible and protecting our natural environment. It should not be forgotten that many wind farms are built on environmentally sensitive sites, because that is where the wind blows strongest and it is where they are easiest to locate.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### RUC Museum

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

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

**Mr Shannon:** I beg to move

That this Assembly supports the suggestions for an RUC Museum at Brooklyn Headquarters near to the Garden of Remembrance; and calls on the Northern Ireland Office to allocate the necessary funding to enable building to begin during 2009.

I appreciate the opportunity to bring this matter to the Chamber and to speak to the motion.

In 2001, the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, John Reid, announced funding of more than £1 million for the construction of a Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) garden of remembrance and museum. With the RUC now replaced by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), Chris Patten, author of the Patten Report, recommended that a garden honouring and remembering the officers who had served in the RUC and the PSNI was a fitting and just memorial. I agree with that.

Announcing the financial package on 14 November 2001, Dr Reid said:

"I am delighted to be able to announce the creation of a Garden of Remembrance for the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Patten identified a need for continued recognition of the dedication and sacrifice of the officers of the RUC. I fully support this prestigious and permanent memorial and I look forward to being able to visit it."

**Dr Reid wag awa:**

"Tha gerdin o' remembrins alang wi' tha RUC muzeim wull bring taegither baith proajects intae a' kimpleet 'RUC experience' whor fowk cumin tae it caun luk bakk oan tha sacrifices o' tha RUC as they wauk throo tha memoriel gerdin as weel as takkin in tha muckle items en displays about tha RUC an' it's histry."

**Dr Reid continued:**

"The Garden of Remembrance along with the RUC Museum will draw together both projects into a complete 'RUC experience' where visitors can reflect on the sacrifices of the RUC as they walk through the Memorial Garden and visit the many exhibits and displays about the RUC and its history in the Museum."

Tha fundatshin wus drawn up tae provide pratical recognishin o' tha acheevmunts an sacrifices o' tha Royal Ulster Constabulary, whiel tha woark o' tha fun' wus tae bring about mare help tae luk efter tha injured an disabled polis oafichers, en oafichers that hae noo

retired, as well as their families, and their widows who have been affected by terrorism in Northern Ireland.

The Royal Ulster Constabulary George Cross Foundation was created to provide practical recognition of the Royal Ulster Constabulary's achievements and sacrifices. The work of the Northern Ireland Police Fund was to bring additional assistance to injured, disabled and retired police officers and their families, as well as police widows, who have been affected by terrorism in Northern Ireland.

It was all a beautiful plan, and we have a beautiful memorial garden, yet we are still waiting for the promised museum to be built on site, alongside the garden. That has been going on for far too long without intervention. I was contacted by a constituent who was, understandably, very anxious for the Northern Ireland Office to fulfil its promise and build the museum beside the garden, where there is ample space and where it would set off the memorial garden.

Currently, there is an RUC museum on the Knock Road in Belfast, but the best place for such a museum is beside the garden of remembrance, which I believe was always the intention. Surely it is best for the museum and the garden to go hand in hand, to allow people to see the history of the RUC and, indeed, the PSNI, as it is now, and to see the history of policing in Ireland as a whole, so that they can learn about the men and women who gave their lives to protect the people of the Province. This is an opportunity for the two to be built together.

However, as with most recommendations in the Patten Report, only those that suited were implemented straight away, with everything else left hanging in the balance, waiting for people to get around to it. It is past time that the Assembly stood up and added its voice to the voices of the thousands of widows and orphans and of those who have served with pride in the RUC and the PSNI. The Assembly should ask that the Northern Ireland Office finally fulfil its word and allow for a museum to be built beside the garden, so that both can be enhanced.

The existing RUC museum is not well known. For example, a search on the Internet revealed only the location of the museum; there were no reviews or links, apart from one on the PSNI website, which brought up only an error page. It is little wonder that there are no reviews of the museum when no one can find out anything about it. When five people, one of whom was an ex-RUC officer, were asked whether they knew of the RUC museum's existence, none of them was. The reason for that is that the museum has not been promoted as it should have been.

The museum is not well known throughout the international community. It could be used as a tourist attraction similar to the Newseum in the United States,

but it must be well publicised, and people must know about it. Situating the museum beside the memorial garden has the added attraction of ensuring that it will honour not only the sacrifice of serving members of the RUC and their families but the promise that was made in 2001.

In 2005, the then Security Minister, Shaun Woodward MP, visited the memorial garden and again stated how happy he would be to talk to the trustees about a new museum. However, the Northern Ireland Office has done nothing about releasing the funding to further the project, which is why we tabled the motion. How long must we wait for action? How many Northern Ireland Office officials will make assurances and promises and not be held accountable for their words?

We have a noble and proud history of having one of the best police forces in the world. Police experts from Northern Ireland are invited to numerous places across the globe for their advice and guidance not only because of their experience in fighting terrorism but because of forensics expertise that they have acquired over the years. It is recognised that our police force is at its peak. However, it is sad that we can barely acknowledge that, when one considers the recommendations of the Patten Report.

Although Members remember the RUC and the exemplary work and sacrifice of its members, our children and grandchildren will not. We must ensure that there is a relevant and interesting facility to which we can take our children to tell them about the history of our colourful country. In the same way as there are Jewish memorials to the Holocaust, so, too, should there be reminders for our children of the price paid by good men and good women for the peace and safety of our beautiful nation and our beautiful land.

Museums are a part of a cultural heritage that should be enhanced and encouraged. Children are taken to the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum to get a feel for the way that things used to be and to understand their traditions and heritage better. A police museum will inform future generations, allow them to understand the truth behind much propaganda and allow them to see pictures and images that are vastly different from those that have often appeared in the media. That is essential as the Province moves on; in moving forward, we cannot and will not forget our past and allow others to distort and malign real facts and real history. An RUC museum could show facts in a way that will be interesting and informative for those who hail from the Province and those who come from abroad. We have been fortunate that many people have come from abroad to join the police force in Northern Ireland. Those people have added their cultural identities to our police force, and their contribution is acknowledged.

For those who lived through the Troubles, and those who receive their information through the media — and there are people who do — the museum is necessary. It is long past time that such a museum be built in the best place and promoted in the best way. The Northern Ireland Office made a promise, and we will hold it to that promise: a garden of remembrance and a museum to honour the RUC, the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) and other policing organisations. We do not yet have that in its entirety, and we will not stop until we do so.

My party colleagues and I ask the Northern Ireland Office to stop its stalling and honour its word. By co-locating the museum and the memorial garden, let us honour and be ever conscious of the sacrifice of the men and women who gave their time and their lives in service to our Queen and country over many years.

1.45 pm

**Mr Attwood:** I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert

“notes the proposal for an RUC museum; believes that methods to acknowledge the past, including the role of the RUC and the different experiences of policing over the years, should be developed; and recommends that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Policing Board, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Commission for Victims and Survivors and the future victims and survivors forum should consider the matter.”

The SDLP is not inclined to support the motion. However, that should not in any way diminish the fact that the broad sentiments that Mr Shannon outlined are very much arguments and views from which we do not dissent. His final comment was that the contribution of RUC and police officers over recent decades and at present should be recognised. As he was saying that, I was thinking, as, I am sure, were many others, of Constable Stephen Carroll, who made his contribution to the PSNI, but also to the RUC. Whatever differences that the SDLP and the nationalist community have had with policing and the RUC, and whatever concerns we have had about what individuals and elements in the police were responsible for in the past, there is something to honour, respect and elevate in what Stephen Carroll and many other officers did over the years before and since Patten.

In that regard, the SDLP does not dissent from the spirit and substance of some of what Mr Shannon said. I want to make that very clear. However, we are still inclined not to support the motion, and we have two broad streams of thought about the matter. The first is technical and financial and the second is personal and emotional.

The motion is very specific. It calls on the NIO to release funding for an RUC and police museum in this financial year. The SDLP does not think that that is the best use of public and police funds in this financial year, because although some of this information has not yet been placed in the public domain, there are

already very substantial and unavoidable pressures on the police budgets over the next couple of years. If the devolution of policing and justice were, for example, to happen sooner rather than later, there would be further and additional pressures on the policing and justice budget over and above those already identified.

In the context of tight financial pressures and where there will be unavoidable claims due to the dissident threat, hearing loss and extra staff for the Public Prosecution Service, where there have been new and additional concerns in recent days, we do not think that an RUC and police museum is a priority that justifies money being released in this financial year. That is different from understanding the sentiment and spirit of what Mr Shannon said. However, it recognises that, in the current financial environment, there are grounds for saying that the policing budget and additional policing moneys should go in directions other than to such a museum.

Given that there are unavoidable and difficult policing and justice budgetary pressures, I ask Mr Shannon to reflect where this proposal comes in the order of things. Without diminishing what the Member said, the SDLP thinks that this is not where the priority budget line should be.

This is, of course, much more than a technical and financial issue. It is also personal and emotional, because the experience of people in the North over the past 30 or 40 years is not about money and technical matters. Rather, it is very much about personal experience and emotional impact. That is why we think that acknowledging the past and how that is expressed, including through museums, needs broader and deeper consideration.

That is why we suggested, as the Eames/Bradley group suggested, that the issue of how a museum might be framed, and there are very many different models about how a museum to acknowledge the past could be framed, should be referred to the Commission for Victims and Survivors. Hopefully, in the near future, it should also be referred to the proposed forum for victims and survivors.

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** I understand the points that the Member raises in relation to the technical objections, and I am sure that those will be fleshed out during the debate. However, I fail to understand his emotional objection. I thought that his party had overcome that objection, especially considering that its representative on the Policing Board put her name to a letter of 11 March 2008 in which board members unanimously supported the business case — not the emotional case, technical case or outline view — that allowed for the appointment of a consultant to take the matter forward with a fully fleshed-out proposal to the Northern Ireland Office. Is the Member now saying that his party's



board members did not give proper consideration to the issue and that perhaps they did not look at the broader issue? Have they made a slip-up in this case? Is he withdrawing consent for the business case during this debate? Is he aware that that letter was sent?

**Mr Attwood:** I anticipated that someone — most likely Mr Paisley — would raise this matter. As I pointed out, we are in a very different place today when it comes to financial priorities than we have been at any time in the recent past. The SDLP has been trying to convince the DUP and Sinn Féin that we need to look at budgets, because our situation is graphically different from what it was 18 months, or even six months, ago. Commitments entered into previously must be reconsidered in the context of the new budgetary position. That includes that particular commitment. I thank Mr Paisley for the intervention, but I did anticipate it, and I think that I have given a fair answer.

However, the emotional point is a broader one. In some ways, the Eames/Bradley report was appalling. In chapter five, which deals with memorials and remembering, it states:

“Through storytelling, people realise that, although they feel their cause was just, not all that they did in pursuit of it was either the right thing to do, or altogether necessary.”

In my view, that is an appalling statement for anyone to make. Things that were wrong were not, as they put it, “the right thing to do”; and they describe things that were completely unnecessary as being not “altogether necessary”. We must consider proposals about the past and the museum in the context of the Eames/Bradley report and its weaknesses.

In the same chapter, the group makes some valid points about how we should acknowledge our past. It states that we must not glamorise what was wrong, elevate terror or misrepresent the experience of the past. The report also states that there may be a need for:

“a dedicated ‘Troubles’ exhibition in an existing museum.”

That is why we included the reference to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) in our amendment. I note that the Minister is present, and that he might reply to the matter in his personal capacity.

The report states:

“A memorial should direct people to the future and in particular a shared and reconciled future.”

It also states that we must develop shared space in order to mitigate any alienation from a shared memorial.

Those are some principles that need to be acknowledged when taking forward the matter of whether there should be a museum to take into account the particular experience of the RUC, or one that will take into account the vastly shared experiences, not just of policing, but of society over the past 30 or 40 years. That debate needs to happen.

One thing that we can learn from the Patten experience, regardless of whatever misgivings there might be about some of its details, is that, at a point in time in our history, a number of people outlined not just a reflection on the policing of the past but a vision and values for policing in the future. We are in a far better place today than we would have been had that not happened. We think that the same thing should happen in respect of our experience of the past. We need to look at a model that outlines the shared experience of the past in order to move forward on an ethical basis.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat. There can be no doubt that many issues remain to be resolved by our society as it moves out of and away from conflict and towards stability. The resolution of those issues will present many challenges for us all to deal with. We must face them in an open, transparent and equitable way. There should be no tolerance of playing politics with people’s genuine feelings and grievances.

One of those challenges will be how we deal with the legacy of history and how we preserve history, particularly the history of participants in the conflict. I am a trustee of the Museum of Free Derry. A main principle of that museum — its narrative — is that people who lived through and witnessed a particular period in our history are entitled to tell their story. The museum promotes the principle that people have the right to describe their story and experience in their own words. However, it is accepted that that cannot be done in isolation from others who do likewise.

The issue of an RUC museum poses many challenges to us. However, the Assembly recently dealt with the victims’ issue, which was not without difficulties and differing views and perspectives. The Executive found a way forward: a platform in which all those perspectives could be addressed and resolutions sought. That is not to ignore concerns that were raised in the establishment of the Victims’ Commissioners, but people must accept that, no matter what is proposed, there will always be concerns and issues. That is the reality of our situation.

Sinn Féin supports and is committed to the concept of the need to preserve the history of the conflict in an appropriate and necessary way. The party has a view on how that can best be achieved, and it is mindful of the need for sensitivity about what is a very complex, and, for many, a very emotional issue. We attempted to introduce an amendment to deal with that, and we called for time and space to allow all ideas and views to be heard and addressed.

In our view, the legacy of preserving history, an issue similar to that of victims, should be delegated to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). I have no desire to question the timing of the motion, but I believe that this is not the

time for the Assembly to take a position as fixed and determinate as that outlined in the motion. Similarly, the amendment is overly prescriptive. We believe that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is best placed to take forward the task. We have seen how it dealt with the issue of the Victims' Commissioners.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Let the debate begin the discussion on how we best preserve the history of the conflict in an open, transparent and equitable manner. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr McFarland:** I support the motion. The issue of an RUC museum has festered for more than seven years; a time that is littered with broken promises and delays. It goes back to November 2001, when John Reid, the then Secretary of State, promised the RUC George Cross Foundation a garden and a museum. Since then, the NIO has prevaricated and nothing has happened.

Members should pay tribute to Jim McDonald and the foundation for being tenacious in keeping at this issue. Alex Attwood talked earlier in the debate about money. Jim McDonald said on the radio this morning that the foundation was more than happy to raise a substantial part of the funds for the museum, but not until the Government fulfil their commitment to produce some of the money. The foundation's supporters are happy enough to do their fair share, but progress must start now.

What is the importance of such a museum? It is worth reminding ourselves that it would not be just an RUC museum; it would be about policing on the island of Ireland. The museum would reflect the Royal Irish Constabulary and policing in the 100 years from 1822 to 1922; the Dublin Metropolitan Police from 1836 to 1925; the RUC from 1922 to 2001; the Garda from 1922 to the present; and the PSNI. Therefore, the museum covers a fairly substantial area of policing on the island of Ireland.

2.00 pm

The museum would be a good vehicle for cross-community and cross-border relations. I have the privilege of being a trustee of the Somme Heritage Centre, which looks at Ireland's contribution to the First World War, when the island was one and both sides of the community were involved. Looking at policing since 1822 is another opportunity — right across our community and in relation to North/South matters — to consider the whole issue of policing and to provide some degree of common cause.

I am concerned about the SDLP amendment. It would bog the issue down in faction fighting that would involve DCAL, the Policing Board, which, although initially happy, may now be unhappy, and victims' groups. It is probably a recipe for disaster.

The issue should be dealt with by the Northern Ireland Office before the devolution of policing and justice takes place, as was promised. Otherwise, it will get mixed up with ongoing political conflict. Surely the men and women who gallantly served the community on the island of Ireland for over 200 years deserve better. I call on the NIO to fund the museum, and I urge colleagues to support the motion.

**Dr Farry:** I too support the motion. I recognise that it is far from perfect, but it gives a strong signal of the way forward for this Assembly. I encourage the Northern Ireland Office to move ahead with the proposal. I am sympathetic to much of the thrust of the amendment, but I have two difficulties with it. First, there is a lack of a specific commitment to an RUC museum. Secondly, it does not place any pressure upon the Northern Ireland Office to address this issue ahead of the devolution of policing and justice. Alan McFarland made that important point, and I will perhaps elaborate on that in a moment.

My party certainly wants to see a much more collective approach to commemoration, remembrance and reflection across our society. Although the Eames/Bradley group's report is far from perfect, it should certainly inform discussion in that regard. Whether it is under the Eames/Bradley group, the Commission for Victims and Survivors for Northern Ireland or a forum, a move should be made towards addressing those important points. That does not need to exclude studying discrete aspects of the history of Northern Ireland in relation to the Troubles and beyond. I see scope for things to move ahead on an individual basis, even though we have an overall framework. We are currently dealing with a number of inquiries into things that happened in the past. That is notwithstanding efforts to move to a much more collective way of examining the past in Northern Ireland on a more cost-effective basis. There does not have to be a one-size-fits-all approach to all of those matters.

The point has been made that any museum is not simply based around what happened in relation to the RUC and the Troubles and it reflects a much wider history of policing, not just in Northern Ireland but on the island as a whole, before the Troubles broke out. It is also worth recognising that a particularly important contribution was made by the RUC. I appreciate that what I am going to say is not a view held by everyone in this House, but it is important to recognise that the RUC was the final line against anarchy breaking out in Northern Ireland during the years of the Troubles. The semblance of the rule of law and democracy that we had during that time would not have been possible without the contribution of the RUC.

Of course, policing in this part of the world is an extremely contentious and difficult issue. In many respects, policing and the matter of who controls the police has been at the heart of the Troubles and the conflict that has occurred here over the past number of

years. I am certainly not saying that the history of the RUC is unblemished. There were acts, both institutional and individual, that were wrong. When a more detailed scrutiny is carried out into the past, regardless of whether that happens under a legacy commission, Eames/Bradley or some other body, no doubt the state will have to face up to some difficult truths. Equally, other organisations and individuals will have to face up to difficult truths, and it is important that they are prepared to co-operate by coming forward in the same way as the state will be under pressure to do. However, such considerations need not detract from the contributions that were made by many individual officers, who did nothing but serve on behalf of their community and who provided that service honourably. Indeed, during the Troubles, a category of people in our society were targets for no other reason than the nature of their job. Indeed, the men and women of the RUC were very much in that category.

In order that we can have a clean start after the devolution of policing and justice, it is important that we address legacy matters now. I add this subject to that list. The Northern Ireland Office should follow through on its commitments. It is unreasonable to burden the incoming devolution settlement with them. I am enough of a neo-Keynesian to say that spending the money in the forthcoming financial year makes economic sense. We are talking about getting people to work and bringing forward capital spend, which implementing this proposal would achieve.

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** If stones could speak, they would tell thousands of stories as we walk around the memorial garden that honours the standing of, as Alan McFarland said, policing on this island and, particularly, the Royal Ulster Constabulary. That memorial garden is at Knock, in Belfast, and it contains tablets of stone on which is carved a roll of honour that speaks of Northern Ireland's incredible history. Indeed, that history is echoed around this Chamber. Looking around, I am reminded of a Constable Morrow and two constables named Donaldson, as well as the incredible memory of a District Inspector Durkan.

The fact should not be lost on the House that the memorial garden is not for one side or the other. It is not a memorial to or a history of one side or the other; it is about recounting facts about and the history of Northern Ireland. To turn our minds from that fact or to take our hands away from delivering on that history by not putting a memorial in place tells, in itself, a story about our society's ineptitude and failure to come to terms with its past.

The technical arguments that have been advanced in order to dilly and delay are unacceptable. Those arguments are about spending £5 million. However, if we delay implementing the proposal and the matter comes before the Assembly after policing and justice has been devolved, believe you me, the financial

resources will not be available. Now is the time to extract from the Northern Ireland Office a portion of the £5 million that is required to complete the project, so that it might deliver what it was supposed to deliver almost 10 years ago.

One Member argued that time and space must be created, but that would defeat us. By delaying we falter, and, if we falter in delivering this project, we would fail not just ourselves and the House but the people who are entitled to have an important, proper and telling history of the events that, for such a long time, affected every man, woman and child in this Province.

The SDLP has been attempting to spook nationalist horses. Every aspect of this matter has been settled. Sinn Féin, the SDLP, the Ulster Unionist Party and the DUP — all the political parties that are represented on the Policing Board — endorsed a properly fleshed-out business case. It was wrong for Alex Attwood to attempt to pull the rug from under the feet of his colleague Dolores Kelly, for that is what happened in the Chamber today. It is wrong, because, as I said in an intervention, the Policing Board gave its consent on 11 March last year to the building of an RUC museum. Its support was not partial or given after some consideration but was unanimous. As a consequence, the Policing Board commissioned work to be carried out. That resulted in the Chief Constable backing that work and in the ball being put firmly in the court of the Northern Ireland Office to deliver on it.

What happened earlier was completely objectionable and indicates that the SDLP is trying to spook nationalist horses. Today, they are indulging in a huge amount of theatre, and they are doing so for one reason: the European election that will be held in a few weeks' time. That is incredibly sad, and it reflects the minds of pygmies rather than the minds of people who are prepared to be political giants on an issue on which strident and positive steps forward should be made.

The RUC museum project should go ahead. We are entitled to it, and by "we" I mean all the people of Northern Ireland. They are entitled to see their history recorded appropriately and in a way that honours some of Ulster's most gallant and fallen people.

**Mr A Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Dúirt mo chara Raymond McCartney go bhfuil Sinn Féin ag iarraidh ár stair a choinneáil, ach ní bheimid ag tabhairt tacaíochta don rún seo ná don leasú. My colleague Raymond McCartney has set out Sinn Féin's position on the RUC museum. We believe that it is important that our history be preserved and told in its entirety. We know that there are many aspects of our history on which many of us disagree. As my colleague Jim Shannon said, there are facts and there is history. However, there are some disputed versions of our history and of what we have been told are historical and, I might add, contemporary facts.



Sinn Féin is conscious that the proposed RUC museum presents its own challenges; every Member will acknowledge and accept that. There is a challenge as to how we define our society's history of policing going back many decades. We are in a much better place now, and that must be acknowledged. Political giants in our society and community have enabled all of us to be in the better place in which we are today.

Sinn Féin believes that the matter would be better placed within the remit of OFMDFM, because the appointment of the Victims' Commission is an example of how OFMDFM can rise to the challenge if the will exists and political accommodation is sought among the various parties and other participants. The matter should be in the hands of OFMDFM. It delivered in the case of the Victims' Commission, where, at least, it laid the groundwork for its establishment. In the time ahead, we want to see a similar approach taken to ensure that the matter is dealt with maturely and professionally. The approach must be sensitive to all the views that are held, not least those of the police family. I wish to acknowledge that. However, wider views must be taken on board. Policing here has been a long-standing issue of some import, and, as I said, we have moved to a better place in that regard. We still have some distance to travel, but we have laid important and positive foundations, and we are making substantial progress.

My party and I look forward to a time when we can properly reflect the history of policing in a way that allows everyone to identify with and recognise the history as it is spelt out according to their views and their version of history. Let me be frank: many of the views across our community are deeply held, and justifiably held.

2.15 pm

It may be a bit premature to suggest locating the museum at Brooklyn headquarters because, as some Members will know — Policing Board members will certainly know — a very important discussion on the police estate has yet to take place, and the headquarters site may not be left unscathed. We do not know how much of the current estate will remain in the hands of the PSNI. Policing Board members have acknowledged that that matter must be dealt with to ensure that the PSNI can more inclusively take forward full service delivery in a professional and financially efficient manner. In delivering that service, we must not only focus on today but look ahead to tomorrow.

Sinn Féin is not arguing that this matter should not be progressed for financial reasons; we are simply saying that the issue is far too important to be dealt with in the manner outlined in the motion and the amendment. As my colleague Raymond McCartney said, we will support neither the motion nor the amendment, because we believe that it would be much better to place the matter within the remit of

OFMDFM so that it can be dealt with in a more inclusive way. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr G Robinson:** I am firmly of the opinion that the motion seeks to ensure that due respect is paid to the Royal Ulster Constabulary George Cross and the role that its members played in the darkest days of the Troubles. None of us should underestimate that role, and we should all be grateful to the men and women of the RUC for the job that they did in the most difficult of circumstances. Few other police forces in Europe and, perhaps, worldwide did — or do — a comparable job. Moreover, few other forces lost so many of their officers — from both sides of the community, men and women, full-time and part-time — as they carried out their duties or when off duty. The fact that those officers continued to patrol every community, despite the difficulties, is the reason why there should be a permanent museum to the RUC and its valiant officers.

From the 1960s to the needless name change of Northern Ireland's police force, the police's job changed beyond all recognition. The history of how policing in Northern Ireland adapted, developed and responded to changing circumstances must be given a proper place in Northern Ireland's history. The best way to do that is to ensure that a museum is established that charts the course of the RUC and the changes that were forced upon it by events.

The ideal location for such a museum is near the garden of remembrance because the officers who are commemorated there paid the ultimate price for performing their duty in extreme circumstances. The memory of those officers and the history of the RUC are so deeply entwined as to be virtually inseparable. The Northern Ireland Office must ensure that funding for the project is made available as a matter of urgency so that the museum can be opened at the earliest possible opportunity.

The amendment seeks to muddy the waters of the debate and to complicate and extend the process of establishing a museum. It is a great pity that the Members who tabled the amendment cannot give the motion their full and wholehearted support. I urge them and every Member to support the motion as proposed by my colleagues.

**Mr Kennedy:** I support the motion, but our party will not support the SDLP amendment. The creation of a policing or RUC museum would be an important manifestation of the cultural identity of the majority of people in Northern Ireland, quite apart from its historical significance. The RUC was important not only to the majority community but to all law-abiding citizens in all communities, and it is well worth reminding people of that. It is also, therefore, an important part of our history.

On a wall in my office in this Building is a copy of a memorial picture entitled 'Our Murdered Colleagues', which honours all the RUC officers who lost their lives

during the recent conflict. In my work in the Assembly, it serves as a daily reminder of the huge sacrifices made by the men and women of the RUC. It is unfortunate that the PSNI has made a huge sacrifice recently. We must never return to the days of widespread and wholesale loss for those who work to create better conditions for all of us in Northern Ireland.

Academic researchers could use the existing museum's archive of police records from the 1840s onwards. The reference library and archive allows visitors to find information on ancestors who served in the RIC and the early RUC. The existing museum also provides a base for the RUC George Cross Historical Society, which promotes and encourages research into police history in general.

There is a broader significance to the museum, as there is also a cross-community context and a North/South context, which all sides in the Assembly would do well to remember. RUC veterans have asked the Irish Government to help establish a museum to promote and celebrate the history of policing on the island of Ireland. The memorabilia collection to be housed in Belfast will display uniforms, helmets and weapons that date back to the Royal Irish Constabulary, the all-Ireland force that kept order between 1822 and 1922. Exhibitions will also feature the Dublin Metropolitan Police of 1836 to 1925; the Irish Republican Police of 1920 to 1922, which sounds ironic; the RUC of 1922 to 2001; the Garda Síochána of 1922 to the present time; and the present PSNI. The whole project was the brainchild of the RUC George Cross Foundation, which was established in 2001 to commemorate the force that was replaced by the PSNI. The foundation has gone out of its way and met President Mary McAleese at Áras an Uachtaráin, along with members of the Garda Síochána Historical Society and the Garda Síochána Retired Members' Association. In any of those contexts, it would be reasonable to expect that, eight years after the PSNI replaced the RUC, a museum to commemorate the RUC should be properly funded and that building on the project should begin.

The Government should honour the commitments given previously. It would be a bad signal for the whole community if we were to engage in penny-pinching on the matter. The absolute sums involved are not so large, and the cross-community context is widely acceptable. I endorse the motion.

**Mr Hamilton:** At this stage of the debate and after having followed so many Members who support the motion, I do not need to continue with too much detail to make a case for a museum, as the strong case for it has been related by colleagues. Not least is the service and sacrifice of the members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary throughout the Troubles. I consider myself fortunate not to have a family member on the list that the Member who spoke previously referred to, but I know many families who have and who still

grieve the loss of a loved one. A permanent exhibitions and fitting tribute to them in the form of a museum would be only right and proper.

As has been said, the memorial garden is already on site at Brooklyn. I hesitate to use the word "success", but the attraction of international visitors of some renown to that site shows how well loved that force was, and its sacrifice has been honoured by many from far and wide.

The previous Member who spoke made an important point that should not be missed. He said that the museum would be one of policing in Ireland in its widest context, from the Royal Irish Constabulary to the Royal Ulster Constabulary through to the modern day. I have learned that some exhibits of policing in Ireland date right back to 1814, but that they cannot get a proper display in the current —

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** The Member made a very positive point about visitor numbers. More than 4,000 people visit the current garden of remembrance each year. That means that, since the garden opened, more than 20,000 people could have visited an accompanying museum. Washington has the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and other places have memorials. As the Member rightly said, we are missing a huge opportunity that has significant tourism potential.

**Mr Hamilton:** I thank the Member for his intervention, and he is correct. There is a wonderful memorial garden at Brooklyn, but there is nothing to tell the stories behind the names of the people that are inscribed on the tablets that he spoke about earlier.

The case is so strong that it convinced the former Secretary of State John Reid to commit not only to a memorial garden but to a complementary museum. In 2001 he said:

"The garden of remembrance, along with the RUC Museum will draw together both projects into a complete RUC experience where visitors can reflect on the sacrifices of the RUC".

Therefore, he saw the matter in the same way that I, the Member and others in the Chamber see it. A holistic approach needs to be taken to the story of the RUC and policing in Ireland. There cannot be a memorial without a museum or an interpretative centre that tells the story of the people who are being remembered and of the history of policing in Ireland.

Anyone who has seen the existing police museum at Brooklyn would agree that it is insufficient to exhibit properly artefacts that date back to the early 1800s and that it is not an appropriate way of telling the story of the RUC and policing in Ireland.

**Mr Shannon:** I understand that 8,000 artefacts could be made available to such a museum; I am sure that the Member is aware of those. I am also sure that he would agree that that fact complements Ian Paisley Jnr's point that a museum would attract more tourists.

There would be more than an hour's or even two hours' viewing in a museum of that stature.

**Mr Hamilton:** The Member is right to say that there is great potential for those artefacts to be exhibited properly. In the past, my colleague the Member for North Down and his council tried to have some of the artefacts moved out and displayed in the North Down Borough Council area. However, they were told that that could not happen because of the sensitivity of the items. It would be entirely appropriate for those artefacts to be displayed permanently in an RUC museum.

The other great case for building an RUC museum is that it would contribute to greater understanding. I know that there are some Members in the Chamber who would not visit a museum of that kind regularly. However, deep down, I think that even they would appreciate the point of having an RUC museum and would know that it would contribute to an understanding of policing in Ireland and, indeed, our recent history.

In the early part of the decade, the former Secretary of State promised monetary assistance for the project. A lot of time has elapsed without any product having come out of that promise. Words come cheap, and it is high time that that promise was met. Through our work on the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, other Members and I are aware that the RUC George Cross Foundation continues to make the case for the project to be granted capital funding. It has clearly drawn an expectation from the promise that the former Secretary of State made.

An RUC museum would exhibit policing in a positive way, contribute greatly to an understanding of policing and bring obvious tourism benefits for the people of Northern Ireland. Everything that can be done, including feasibility studies and business cases, has been done. The case is compelling, and, therefore, I support the motion. I call on the Secretary of State, the NIO, and the Government to fulfil the promise that was made and to meet the expectation for an RUC museum to be built at the Brooklyn site.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The debate will continue after Question Time, when we will hear from the Minister, Mr Gregory Campbell.

*The debate stood suspended.*

2.30 pm

## Oral Answers to Questions

### HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

#### North/South Ministerial Council: Efficiency Savings

1. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what efficiency savings his Department is making on health issues through the North/South Ministerial Council. (AQO 2651/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey):** The North/South Ministerial Council is part of the Belfast Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement. It was created to take forward work that would be of mutual benefit to Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. My Department and the health and social care bodies have undertaken a range of initiatives with our counterparts in the Republic. The primary aim of that work is to promote health gain and social well-being for people living in both countries, and across that work the overriding principle has been to secure value for money.

**Mr Easton:** Does the Minister agree that the North/South implementation body should make efficiency savings, just as his Department must?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I agree. We operate on the principle of value for money. Mr Easton is probably aware that the Department of Finance in the Irish Republic and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) in Belfast are discussing that. I am required to act according to the guidance that is issued to me. I am not in control of these bodies; they are jointly controlled under the North/South Ministerial Council.

Guidance from the Dublin Government is available; we still await that from DFP. Once that comes, I will be permitted to proceed. It would be helpful if I were to receive that. I imagine that the Member knows as much about it as I do.

**Mr Gallagher:** I speak as a representative of a rural border area. Healthcare is badly stretched on both sides of the border. People want to see an increase, rather than a decrease, in North/South activity.

In relation to efficiency savings, I want to ask the Minister about the loss of over 700 nursing jobs. Will



he tell the House whether he has taken that matter to the Finance Minister and asked him whether he will look at some measures to offset that?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** It is not 700 nursing jobs that are under discussion; it is 700 nursing posts. There is a distinction. The proposal is that, over the next three years, recruitment for nursing will be reduced from 2,250 nurses to 1,400. That is the proposal, and it is only a proposal. It is not hard and fast yet: I am considering it. I stress the vital importance of nurses, but one cannot run a hospital without a whole range of other people: porters and cleaners, doctors and consultants, occupational therapists, speech therapists, administrators, secretaries and so on. They are all needed in a hospital.

I listened carefully to the debate on 20 April, and an amendment was made to excuse the Department of Health from having to make efficiency cuts. That would have saved nursing posts and others. However, the Member's party and others were keen to vote it down. Despite assurances and promises given to trade unions that they would support the amendment, they did not support it. I am where I am. I have this task that I have to complete. I assure Members that I will consider those proposals most carefully before reaching a conclusion.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas don Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer.

With respect to all-Ireland co-operation and efficiency savings, will the Minister comment on whether the pilot scheme on GP out-of-hours services has saved money, and whether he and his Southern counterpart have plans for further developments or pilot projects?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** As far as cross-border co-operation is concerned, the overriding principle is mutual benefit. If I can see benefit to the people of Northern Ireland, I am prepared to proceed with practical proposals.

The Minister for Health and Children in the Irish Republic also takes that view. That is how we assess such matters.

As regards the efficacy of the cross-border GP out-of-hours pilot service, there have been mixed results. As anticipated, some parts of the pilot scheme have proven more beneficial than others. However, any decision on whether we proceed with it will be determined by our experience.

The Health Service must make efficiency savings of 3%, which we find absolutely horrendous. The Health Service should not be asked to do that; however, it is being asked to do so here. In the Irish Republic, there has been a straight reduction of 10% in the Budget. A

different approach has been taken in the Irish Republic, but I am not quite clear whether the Irish Government will take 10% off the Department of Health and Children's budget. The total budget for Safefood, the trading name of the Food Safety Promotion Board, is £6.3 million. I am not entirely clear as to how much of that will be affected by Irish budget cuts as a result of the credit crunch and the international economic crisis.

## Caesarean Sections

2. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Caesarean sections have been performed in the past five years. (AQO 2652/09)

**Mrs McGill:** Ceist uimhir a dó, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I take it that that means "Question 2". I need Jim Shannon here to translate.

The number of Caesarean sections performed in Northern Ireland hospitals in each of the past five years is as follows: in 2003-04, 5,487; in 2004-05, 5,564; in 2005-06, 6,412; in 2006-07, 7,196; and in 2007-08, 7,149.

The decision to deliver a baby by Caesarean section, either electively or as an emergency, is based on the clinical judgement of an obstetrician, who takes account of the medical condition and circumstances of both mother and infant.

**Mrs McGill:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response. Given the concerns about the increasing number of Caesarean sections, particularly in the North of Ireland, does the Minister agree that the new Public Health Agency should inform people, particularly young mothers, about the implications of having a Caesarean?

Should the Public Health Agency, for example, inform young mothers that there is an 80% likelihood that their babies could develop childhood asthma as a result of their having a Caesarean section? Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** There is a concern that the rate of Caesarean sections in Northern Ireland is on the high side. Having said that, the number of Caesareans performed in Northern Ireland is approximately the same as the UK average, and is less than, for example, that in the Irish Republic and other countries. There is a huge range in the number of incidences across Europe, from around 15% in eastern Europe to 33% in Portugal and 38% in Italy. Our section rate is sitting at 28%, and, certainly, I want to get that number down. However, the decision to carry out a Caesarean section

is based on a clinical judgement made in discussion with the prospective mother.

We have established a patient safety forum, which will promote a safety culture, share best practice, support organisations in implementing evidence-based interventions and measure patients' safety. We are also considering other ways in which to get out messages about Caesarean sections, some of which the Member mentioned.

I do not envisage the Public Health Agency playing a key part in that, as it has an altogether different role in health promotion. However, there is a strong push across the Health Service to provide the type of information that allows clinicians and mothers to make informed value judgements.

**Mr Gardiner:** The Minister will be aware that, in recent months, some people have criticised Craigavon Hospital, particularly its maternity unit. I hope that the Minister will join me in taking the opportunity to express my gratitude for the professionalism of the hard-working, dedicated staff of Craigavon Area Hospital, particularly given the growing pressures in that area.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Please ask your question.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I readily agree with Mr Gardiner about the maternity unit at Craigavon Area Hospital. It has faced rising pressures due to the increase in the number of births from just under 3,000 in 2004 to a provisional figure of 3,800 in 2008. Those figures illustrate the steep rise in the number of deliveries at the hospital. Much of that rise is due to the mothers' preference for Craigavon Area Hospital because of its excellent reputation. It has highly professional staff, and its obstetricians and midwifery unit work together.

I visited the hospital on several occasions, and I have announced substantial investment in the hospital to ensure that it has the facilities that it requires and that demand never outstrips capacity. The hospital continues to operate within its capacity.

**Mr Attwood:** The proposal to establish a midwifery-led unit at Lagan Valley Hospital means that less-routine cases, including Caesarean sections, will, in all likelihood, be transferred to the Royal Victoria Hospital. What negotiations are ongoing to enhance the budget and resources of the maternity unit there to enable it to deal with women who have to undergo surgery, including Caesarean sections, or other acute interventions?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Lagan Valley Hospital was a specific part of my Department's review of services in the Belfast area. I have asked for a business case to be provided for the establishment of a midwifery-led unit at Lagan Valley Hospital.

In Belfast, the Jubilee Maternity Hospital continues to work within its capacity, and it will receive investment to ensure that that remains the case. Investment will be made in Craigavon Area Hospital, whose maternity unit is also a unit of choice for mothers in the Lisburn area. In the south-east, the maternity unit at the Ulster Hospital is a unit of choice, and that will be the case for the new unit in Downpatrick when it comes into operation shortly.

I examined those issues to ensure that the system has sufficient capacity for dealing with the expected transfer of some births from Lagan Valley Hospital. I anticipate, although I cannot pre-empt the result, that I will receive a positive business case indicating the substantial use of a new midwife-led maternity unit at Lagan Valley Hospital.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question 3 has been withdrawn.

### Alcohol-related Deaths

4. **Mr McCausland** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to address the increased level of alcohol-related deaths. (AQO 2654/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The increase in alcohol-related deaths greatly concerns me and my Department. Under the new strategic direction for alcohol and drugs, a high priority is being placed on measures to address alcohol misuse in Northern Ireland. Regional and local action on education, prevention, treatment and support is ongoing and includes public information campaigns, targeted education programmes, and continuing service development. Liquor licensing, alcohol pricing, advertising and accessibility are also key issues that must be addressed. As part of the young people's drinking action plan, the entire Executive must give those issues further consideration.

2.45 pm

**Mr McCausland:** I thank the Minister for his answer. The number of alcohol-related deaths in the United Kingdom has risen substantially since the early 1990s, from 6.9 per 100,000 of the population to 13.3 per 100,000 in 2007. Can the Minister give corresponding figures specific to Northern Ireland? Does he agree that the widespread dissemination of such information would help to highlight the dangers that are associated with alcohol abuse?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** In 2008, 286 people died as a direct result of alcohol. That number is rising, and that is a matter of great concern to me. We are aware that alcohol plays a part in one third of adolescent suicide attempts. Alcohol has an important impact on health,

crime, antisocial behaviour, personal safety, risk taking, and so on. Society must take alcohol seriously. If we do not, we will pay a price.

One of my current focuses is on the impact of alcohol on young people, hence the young people's drinking action plan, which will consider minimum unit pricing, and restricting alcohol promotions and happy hours. Those measures are also being considered in England and Scotland.

All Departments have responded positively to that action plan, and some Departments have responded very positively, but the young people's drinking action plan is, sadly, currently stalled at the Executive. Mr McCausland would be of assistance to me if he could determine why that is being held up. The plan would not only have public support, but would have a very positive impact in pressing down on young people's drinking, which is increasing all the time.

Alcohol is now 62% more affordable than it was in 1980, and minimum unit pricing must be considered. Pricing is causing a problem. In England, a policy of a minimum price of 50p a unit is being considered. Under that proposal, a half pint of beer could not be sold for less than 50p. That is not unreasonable, and it is the type of direction in which I want to go.

**Ms S Ramsey:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Notwithstanding the Minister's answers, have he or his officials had any recent discussions with the Minister for Social Development on combating easy access to alcohol, considering the recent debates that have taken place in the Assembly and the proposals that the Minister for Social Development has claimed that she will bring forward?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** One of the proposals of the young people's drinking action plan is to establish a cross-departmental subcommittee to work on that issue. Licensing is the responsibility of the Department for Social Development, which is actively considering that matter.

The figures on access to alcohol are stark: 81% of 16-year-olds have consumed alcohol, and 27% of young people have purchased it for themselves at some time. Almost one fifth of those young people buy alcohol from a pub, 14% from an off-licence and around 5% from shops and supermarkets. Despite the fact that they are underage, they are accessing licensed establishments.

In addition to discussions with the Department for Social Development, I have talked to the police about how to move forward on this issue. It is a society-wide problem, and one need only look at areas such as the Odyssey and parts of south Belfast such as the university area and the Golden Mile late at night to get an indication of how bad things can get. The events in

the Holylands area on St Patrick's day are an example of the type of behaviour that we must face up to and deal with, rather than run away from.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Minister for his earlier replies. Does he agree that it is a matter of concern that there appears to be opposition to his proposals at a senior level in the Executive? Will he assure the House and me that he will continue to press for that important change at Executive level, no matter who is against it?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I am happy to give that assurance. Indeed, I do so with confidence because virtually everyone in the House agrees with the direction in which my Department and I want to travel. It is unfortunate that I have encountered those delays.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I welcome the Minister's intentions and proposals on untimely alcohol-related deaths. My constituency is no different from others where there has been a high increase in alcohol-related deaths, particularly among young males. Is the Minister aware of a proposal that has been made to the Western Health and Social Care Trust for a detoxification unit for the Derry area, which is supported by councillors, GPs and a wide spectrum of people who are involved in alcohol-education programmes?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I am not aware of the specific proposal to which Mr Ramsey referred. However, I will make myself aware of it and will discuss it with him.

## Children with Speech Difficulties

5. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children who have speech difficulties. (AQO 2655/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The number of children who have speech, language and communication needs varies according to the criteria that are used to assess them. However, it is reasonable to believe that approximately 3% of all children in Northern Ireland meet the criteria for specialist help. In a population the size of Northern Ireland's, that equates to fewer than 13,000 children who are aged between nought and 18 years.

During the past two years, services for those children have improved significantly. For example, my Department secured additional investment of more than £4 million for allied health professional services; an increase in the number of speech and language therapists from 228 in 2007 to 412 in 2009; and a reduction in waiting times from 26 weeks in 2008 to 13 weeks in 2009.



In addition, my Department will produce a new speech and language therapy action plan for consultation and implementation by the end of September 2009 to drive further improvements in services for those children.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Minister for his reply and, in particular, for his and the Department's intention to launch a speech and language consultation. The sooner that helpful consultation happens, the better.

Will the Minister explain what communication there is between his Department and the Department of Education on the matter? When MLAs talk to certain parents, they find that they often have difficulty because there seems to be little co-ordination between the Department of Health and the Department of Education, not only in identifying children's needs, but in service delivery.

I appreciate that there has been a reduction in waiting times —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member must ask a supplementary question.

**Mr Storey:** However, those waiting times must be driven down further.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The speech and language therapy action plan has resulted from the task force's work. Sadly, that work has been delayed because the task force's chairperson died in office. The action plan will be ready for a brief consultation period in June 2009 and ready for implementation. We are working in conjunction with the Department of Education to produce the action plan, which is due to be published in September 2009 after consultation.

A number of the actions to which I referred are already in place. Two years ago, during my response to a debate in the House, I gave assurances that I would take certain actions. For example, I have increased the number of speech and language therapists; the number of support staff to 66; and the amount of money that is allocated to those services. I have reduced targets and ensured that they are met so that no child waits longer than 13 weeks for initial treatment.

There is much to be done to the plan as it is brought forward. One of its key thrusts will be to make better use of existing speech and language therapists. It is not always a matter of simply recruiting more therapists. Instead, we must think strategically and carefully about the best way to use them.

**Mr McCarthy:** In light of what the Minister said, why do public representatives continue to receive complaints from people who are having difficulty obtaining a statement for their children during their early education periods? I ask that question in the context of his earlier comments —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member must ask a question.

**Mr McCarthy:** — to the effect that his Department works in conjunction with the Department of Education.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I suggest that Mr McCarthy makes those comments during the consultation on the action plan that will begin at the end of September. Although I have ensured improvements, I do not suggest that the position is perfect. I regret that parents must wait for long periods, because children with speech and language needs should receive support as soon as possible. I take that issue seriously. The consultation will provide an excellent opportunity for Mr McCarthy to make those points.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an méid a bhí le rá ag an Aire, agus cuirim fáilte roimh an phlean gníomhaíochta atá beartaithe aige. I welcome the Minister's intention to formulate an action plan. Advocacy groups, such as Afasic, provide valuable support programmes for young people with speech difficulties. Does his Department support such groups? Does he intend to enhance that support? Go raibh míle maith agat.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The role of such groups will, to a large extent, be determined by the action plan. The consultation is an excellent way for the Member to make those points.

## Swine Flu

6. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment he has made of the spread of swine influenza. (AQO 2656/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I have been advised by the Chief Medical Officer that on 29 April 2009, as a result of the spread of swine influenza, the World Health Organization raised its pandemic alert level to phase 5, which is characterised by human-to-human spread of the virus into at least two countries in a single World Health Organization region. Therefore, everyone must ramp up preparations because a global pandemic may be imminent.

Northern Ireland has already done so and has been planning for a similar situation for many years. GPs across the country have been notified, made aware of the symptoms and told what to do if they suspect that a patient has the virus. Hospitals are well prepared and have specific plans to deal with a pandemic. We have stocks of antivirals that can be used to treat those who become ill. Northern Ireland has robust contingency plans in place, including plans for acute hospitals, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service and social care.

Moreover, advice has been issued to GPs and hospital clinicians.

Cases of swine flu have been confirmed in Europe, including some in the United Kingdom. The UK Health Protection Agency continues to monitor events and work closely with the UK Government to review the ongoing events and assess their threat to public health in the UK. The appearance of confirmed cases in the UK and Europe is not unexpected. Although no cases have been confirmed in Northern Ireland, there is no reason to believe that we will escape the virus.

**Mr Cree:** I commend the Minister for his proactive approach to updating everyone on the swine flu crisis. Has he had regular contact with his British counterparts? Has he briefed his ministerial colleagues? Given the cost of this unforeseen emergency, will he bid for additional funding from the Executive?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I confirm that I have taken all of the action to which Mr Cree refers. I am in constant contact with colleagues in the home countries through COBRA. Indeed, we had a COBRA meeting this morning from 11.00 am to 1.00 pm. I will have a further conversation with my colleagues Alan Johnson, Nicola Sturgeon and Edwina Hart tonight as a wash-up.

The alert is now at level five, and we are preparing for level six; that is ongoing. I am also having routine cross-border discussions, and hope to meet Mary Harney shortly.

3.00 pm

There will, of course, be a cost implication, which was not part of my Budget deal. However, that is a conversation that will have to take place between my Department and my finance director and the Department of Finance and Personnel.

## REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### Bilingual Road Signs

1. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans to honour the Good Friday Agreement by ensuring that signage on motorways and major routes is in both English and Irish.

(AQO 2671/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My Department's Roads Service has developed a draft policy for the introduction of a limited range of bilingual traffic signs, with either Irish or Ulster Scots in addition to English. However, in order to advance the overarching policy proposal, it must be referred to the

Assembly's Executive Committee, as the issue cuts across the responsibility of a number of other Departments. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has responsibility for the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has responsibility for tourism. Recently, I canvassed the views of ministerial colleagues about my proposals, and I am considering them before I refer the matter to the Executive Committee.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra a thug sé ansin. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí de a n-aontaíonn sé gur chóir go mbeadh an polasaí céanna i bhfeidhm anseo agus atá, mar shampla, i bhfeidhm sa Bhreatain Bheag agus i dtíortha eile ar fud na hEorpa ina labhraítear níos mó ná teanga amháin. Agus ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí de fosta cad é an dearcadh atá aige den fheachtas atá ar bun faoi láthair ag grúpa darb ainm Na Ceithearna Coille, a ghreamaíonn greamaitheoirí Gaeilge ar chomharthaí bóthair.

I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree with me that the policy applied in Northern Ireland should be no different from that applied in Wales and in other European countries in which more than one language is spoken? What is his view of the campaign being mounted by a group called Na Ceithearna Coille, members of which target road signs with "Gaeilge" stickers? Go raibh míle maith agat.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My view on what legislative protections should be in place to support the rights of minority language speakers is clear: I support the approach taken in Wales and Scotland, the legislative protections that are offered there, and the bilingual policy that is adopted in those countries. I have no issue with that.

Of course one supports bilingualism and the promotion of the Irish language, as was agreed in the section of the Good Friday Agreement on the promotion of the Irish language in public life. However, defacing signs may not be the best way in which to go about that. I would like people to express vocal support for bilingual signage, and bilingualism generally, across all Departments.

I have been consistent not only in raising the issue before I was Minister, but in following through on it now that I have taken up ministerial office, and also with regard to my responsibilities under the European charter. I have been proactive in the Department in ensuring that there is a multi lingual website, and that many of the Department's publications are available bilingually. However, there is much to be done.

Other countries, some of which have been referred to, set a good standard for us. I do not see any reason why we should not aspire to adopt those standards here, but I am not sure that stickers should be placed

over road signs, which, for road safety purposes, are generally reflective. Some of the stickers impair the night-time reflectiveness of the signs. That does not necessarily serve the purpose that those behind it intend. However, I do support campaigns for bilingualism.

**Mr Cree:** Has the Minister made himself aware of any studies into the safety implications of motorway signage? Does he agree with me that including Irish and Ulster Scots, as would be required by the Belfast Agreement, could be a safety hazard on motorways?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Other countries have bilingual signage. Earlier this year I was in Cardiff, where all the motorway signs are in English and Welsh, and there are no road safety issues. It is obvious that substantial resources would have to be expended on motorway signage here. However, the policies adopted and the legislative protections afforded to speakers of minority languages in other countries are something that we should rightly aspire to here.

**Mr McCausland:** I thank the Minister for his answer. In considering the matter, I ask him to take account of two issues: first, that the relevant section of the Belfast Agreement has anticipated the Council of Europe's European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and has been superseded by that charter, which requires the promotion of the Irish and Ulster-Scots languages to be taken forward in a resolute manner; secondly, following up Mr Cree's supplementary question, that the Minister will take particular account of the research carried out by Oliver Clark and Simon Davies from the University of Hull, which was presented to the British Psychological Society's annual conference in Dublin last year, and which showed that —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Please ask a question, Mr McCausland.

**Mr McCausland:** — increasing road signage contributed significantly to road accidents.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I am sure that for every study making that conclusion there will be another showing that increased road signage has no impact. I am sure that the Welsh authorities took great care to ensure that bilingual signage did not create more danger for road users. I have been doing my bit, and I have been proactive in ensuring that my Department meets its responsibilities to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The promotion of bilingualism here has a long way to go; perhaps we should take the politics out of it. Legislative support and protection for minority languages and those who speak them should be no threat to anyone here, and we should all give it our backing.

**Mr Brolly:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Seo an cheist atá agam don Aire: an dtig leis an Aire a chinntiú go bhfuil an chumhacht ag an Roinn s'aige comharthaí dhátheangacha a chur i bhfeidhm?

I will translate that. Will the Minister assure us that his Department has the power to introduce dual signage? What representations has he had on that issue from elected Members, including, of course, Dominic Bradley?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department has the power to introduce bilingual signage, but as I said in my original answer, it is a cross-cutting issue, and, as such, must be brought to the Executive. Since the Good Friday Agreement was signed, which is at the root of the original question, until March 2006, only two MLAs, Alex Maskey and I, contacted the Department about bilingual signage. Since March 2006, a number of people have contacted the Department on the matter. I support the use of bilingual signage and I want to secure the support of Executive colleagues for it. The promotion of Irish or any other minority language in public life threatens no one, and it should enhance all our lives.

### Infill Development

3. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the cumulative impact on local infrastructure of successive infill development; how this is assessed by his Department as part of the development control process; and what agreement there has been with the Department of the Environment on this issue. (AQO 2673/09)

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I should have said that question 2 has been withdrawn.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The divisional development control sections of the Department's Roads Service work closely with DOE Planning Service in the development of area plans. It is at that stage that the cumulative impact on traffic of infill developments is considered. In addition to that assessment, developers are required to submit a transport assessment form for a proposed development or redevelopment. Roads Service considers that form during the planning consultation process. The transport assessment form demonstrates how the development functions in transport terms and identifies any possible adverse impacts.

Roads Service may, through Planning Service, request a full, detailed transport assessment where a development is considered to be likely to have significant transport implications, irrespective of the development's size. Infill development, which by nature tends to be relatively small scale, does not normally require a detailed transport assessment. As part of the transport assessment process, the impacts of committed developments that have extant approval have to be taken into account in the analysis. Those developments that are still under consideration are not taken into



account in such an analysis. When development plans do not provide for the cumulative impact of developments in an area, Roads Service is required to consider each individual planning application on its merits.

Each application is examined against the planning policies, guidelines and site conditions that pertain at the time of the application. Members will be aware that the regional development strategy for the period to 2025 promotes development on brownfield sites. The strategy defines brownfield land as:

“that which is, or was occupied by, a permanent structure within a defined settlement limit.”

That excludes the gardens of dwellings and apartments.

Under service level agreements, Roads Service is required to advise the Planning Service on the suitability of existing roads and transportation infrastructure necessary to service a proposed development so that the Planning Service can arrive at a decision on an application. The service level agreement does not require Roads Service to provide advice on the cumulative impact of a number of infill developments.

**Mrs Long:** I thank the Minister for his answer, which was very helpful. I note his comment about the regional development strategy and area plans. Does he accept that they are out of date in respect of what is happening on the ground, and that infill development in back gardens, for example, is not covered? Although such areas may not qualify as brownfield, they are still development sites.

Does the Minister agree that there is an issue whereby if someone applies for planning permission for 40 or 50 houses, a detailed traffic-impact assessment will be carried out, but if a number of developers apply for the same number of houses, three or four at a time, a detailed assessment would not be carried out, even though the impact on infrastructure would be exactly the same?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The interim review of the regional development strategy — and we are engaged in a much longer-term review — clearly made a point about gardens as opposed to brownfield sites. That advice was passed on to the Planning Service to use in dealing with applications. There was quite a clamour to be more definitive in citing what constitutes brownfield sites and what constitutes gardens. The interim review tightened that definition up, and passed that advice on to the planners.

I appreciate what the Member said about the cumulative effect of traffic if a single application is made, as opposed to multiple applications, but Roads Service and planners can only consider applications on their merit. They cannot anticipate what may turn out to be further planning applications. They have to consider applications that are extant when an application is received. In that respect, they can measure a cumulative

effect, but unless there is a range of applications at one time, it is impossible to do that.

One cannot measure the possible impact from applications that may be made next week or next year. That is even more difficult in the current climate, because many proposed developments have now been put on hold. It is impossible to anticipate what may be planned, but I appreciate the point that the Member made. Perhaps when there is reform of the planning process and more involvement at local government level, some of those matters can be examined.

**Mr Wells:** Does the Minister share my profound disappointment that his definition of what constitutes brownfield development, as a result of the review of the regional development strategy, has had absolutely no impact on the amount of high-density development in Northern Ireland? His Executive colleague Mr Sammy Wilson has confirmed that not a single planning application has been turned down as a result of the redefinition of brownfield development.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member come to his question?

**Mr Wells:** It is absolutely useless in preventing the cramming that we are seeing in our towns. Secondly, I share the concern of Mrs Long —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I must insist that the Member come to his question.

**Mr Wells:** Does the Minister share the concern that a development can be turned down only if it adds 10% to traffic, but one can have 20 developments, each adding 8% to traffic, and one cannot turn any of them down? Surely that is absolute nonsense.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** We have made a genuine effort to respond to an issue that was raised, and to define more clearly the difference between brownfield sites and gardens. If there was an issue with that, and the planners were not happy or found that that redefinition was not appropriate or satisfactory, we should have heard from them, because planners ultimately approve or reject applications. I do not think that I have heard that from them.

As for cumulative development, I make the same point that I made to Mrs Long: we cannot make decisions based on anticipation. We can only deal with and make an assessment on applications that are in front of us. That is how Roads Service must operate.

If the Member and others perceive a clear problem, I am more than happy to work with the Minister of the Environment to see how we could try to make improvements in the context of planning reform, but it is very hard to deal with planning applications or their impact on transport on the basis of anticipation.

3.15 pm

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask Members to please stand clearly in their places so that I can be certain that they really want to be called. I call Mr Francie Molloy, who did stand.

**Mr Molloy:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Will he state whether the current service level agreement can be amended to include a qualification whereby Roads Service would have to take account of the cumulative effect of infill developments?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Roads Service and the Planning Service are reviewing the service level agreements, and my understanding is that there are no plans to make provision for assessing the cumulative impact of infill developments. However, as I said, this is the place where Members can raise issues that are important to them, and I am happy to work with the Minister of the Environment if people think that there is a pressing need that is not being met by the current planning policy.

### Ballymoney Bus Depot

4. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions he has had with Translink about the future of Ballymoney bus depot.

(AQO 2674/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have had no direct discussions with Translink about the future of Ballymoney bus depot. However, I understand that that depot continues to be a key operational centre in the provision of a network of bus services to the north Antrim area and, as such, Translink has no plans to discontinue its use.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Minister for the reassurance. However, will he give an undertaking that he will look at this issue in light of the fact that Ballymoney has only a bus depot — that is, a place from which buses come and go, but at which members of the public cannot access them. The actual bus stops are in different locations in the town. Ballymoney must be one of the few provincial towns in Northern Ireland that does not have a dedicated bus station, as it had previously. Given the amount of money that we are told is going to be spent on the facilities at the railway station, it would seem natural to have a joined-up approach to public transport by locating a bus station at the railway station, as that would be to the benefit of all the travelling public.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** What the Member said makes sense; I was not aware of the exact situation in Ballymoney, and I am happy to raise the issue with Translink. The Member will understand

that the capital budget for Translink is extremely tight, as are the budgets across all Departments, but I am certainly happy to raise that issue with Translink.

Bus stations have been brought into operation in different towns, and they have made a huge improvement to the level of service and to the number of people using the bus service. Therefore, the desire, intention and objective of Translink should be to have a bus station facility in all regional towns. I am not aware of the exact plans for the service in Ballymoney, but I am happy to take up the matter with Translink.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister alluded to the fact that the capital budget is very tight. Will he outline the current plans for capital expenditure in the Ballymoney area?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Member will know that work on the railway track is ongoing in the Ballymoney area, as that has interfered with transport there. We have given approval for Translink to purchase 20 new trains. That contract has been signed and the project is progressing, with the first new trains expected to be in service by 2011. It is planned that 13 of the new trains will replace the old fleet service, five will be used to increase the frequency and capacity of the service in the Belfast area, and two will allow additional trains to be deployed on the Derry line.

Translink also has plans to relay the track between Coleraine and Derry, and that work, plus the additional trains on that line, will facilitate the delivery of an enhanced level of service when the scheme is complete in 2013. That will mean that the journey times to Derry will reduce by 30 minutes and for the first time, commuter services into Derry could arrive before 9.00 am. In addition, as I have already mentioned, the track-life-extension work on the railway line between Ballymena and Coleraine is being undertaken, and that is expected to be completed by the end of this financial year.

We have approved a capital grant of over £400,000 to enable Translink to replace the roof of Ballymoney railway station. The Department has also made a significant investment in public transport improvements. During the last financial year, expenditure of £36 million for rail infrastructure and £9 million for bus projects was incurred. Over the next two years, capital grants of £100 million and £35 million will be invested in rail and bus services respectively to further improve those services. Given the funding restrictions that all Departments must try to live with, it is simply a case of prioritising which projects are undertaken.

**Mr O'Loan:** Will the Minister go further in his answer and agree that the accommodation for train travellers at Ballymoney station is not up to the standard that we would expect in the twenty-first century? It will not encourage people to use public transport. Does

the Minister agree that there is a need for further investment there?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I am sure that in every sector of our railway service we could identify parts that are not up to scratch and could perhaps be more attractive to passengers. It is quite clearly the case that where investment has been made, passenger numbers have increased right across the service. Passenger numbers are up by about 11%, and that is directly due to investment in facilities and in the trains and the rolling stock. Improving the service, the comfort and the frequency certainly leads to more passengers using the service.

I am not aware of the exact detail regarding Ballymoney train station, but I do know that Translink has to try to prioritise capital works.

The railway station in my part of the world is nearing completion. However, there was not, in effect, a railway station there; it was practically a Portakabin. I presume that Translink will prioritise to try to bring what it considers to be the worst stations up to scratch, and then gradually work its way through a programme. However, as we have said, even in this morning's discussion, budgets are tight, and capital investment obviously has to be prioritised.

**Mr McClarty:** My question was on the long-term plans the Minister had for public transport in the northern region. He has answered that question fully in response to the Member for North Antrim. Thank you.

## Corporate Social Responsibility

5. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his Department's policy approach to corporate social responsibility and positive community impact in the discharge of his Department's services. (AQO 2675/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department is strongly committed to corporate social responsibility and has articulated how it aims to develop that in its corporate and business plans for 2009-2011. We are also very keen to support our staff to make a personal contribution to the community. One of the ways in which we hope to achieve that is through a partnership with Business in the Community, which would allow us to participate in schemes such as the Talent Management programme and the Time to Read initiative.

Members will also be aware of the recent Between the Bridges community-based charity event, which my Department played a role in facilitating through its corporate social responsibility agenda. We also wish to enhance areas such as research development, where we can, through internships and work placements, make

use of undergraduates and graduates to help us with work associated with promoting sustainability.

It is my intention to publicly launch my Department's corporate social responsibility policy shortly. It is being developed to take account of the wide spectrum of measures that we will take now and in the future.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. May I ask the Minister to outline in specific terms how the procurement procedures in his Department have an influence on social responsibility and community impact?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** In relation to procurement, my Department follows the guidance prepared by Central Procurement Directorate and the Equality Commission on sustainable development and equality of opportunity in public-sector procurement. In line with that guidance, action plans have recently been produced at my instruction by Roads Service, Northern Ireland Water and Translink. Those include proposals for implementing critical community impact and social objectives, such as increasing access to public-sector procurement opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises, encouraging the economically inactive back into the workplace, and encouraging training and skills development through, for instance, apprenticeships.

In addition, the Roads Service action plan ensures that social and environmental factors are taken into consideration alongside financial factors in making procurement decisions. The action plan has a package of measures to deliver the step change needed to ensure that Roads Service and its partners are focused on better design, low waste, higher recycled content, respect for biodiversity and delivery of its wider sustainable development goals.

**Dr McDonnell:** I thank the Minister for his answers. Does the Minister agree that his Department can contribute very positively to the whole economic and social future of an area when it invests in, for instance, transport structure? Is he engaged in dialogue at the moment with DETI or the Department for Social Development (DSD) on how regeneration can take place in a number of towns and cities across Northern Ireland?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I agree with the Member that we can have a very positive impact. When people have argued for where the Executive's resources should be focused, we have all made arguments about building up the infrastructure; be that roads, rail, houses, hospitals or schools. Building up the infrastructure is a very useful way to stimulate economic activity, and in the longer term also provides us with a solid base of assets going into the future.

The Department for Social Development is largely responsible for regeneration matters and works closely



with Roads Service on its various town centre schemes. I have not had any discussions with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on such matters, but I know that officials from a range of Departments work together on larger urban regeneration initiatives. For example, one will find officials from DETI, DSD, Roads Service and other bodies working together in the Ilex project in Derry and in some of the development projects in Belfast. Such co-operation is happening across the board on specific projects, which is good. Our form of Government gives Ministers the ability to interact regularly on such projects, which is helpful.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question 6 has been withdrawn.

### Rural Transport Services

7. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he is aware of plans to cut rural transport services and for his assessment of the importance of developing an integrated public transport service, making it worthwhile for senior citizens to have free bus passes. (AQO 2677/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I am aware that Translink has extremely limited plans to change rural transport services involving a reduction in frequency on three routes and the withdrawal of one very low-use sub-route in County Derry. There will be no reduction in the overall bus service coverage in the North.

I fully realise the importance of developing an integrated public transport service. The Executive's Programme for Government has set a target for improving public transport provision to deliver a modern, efficient and sustainable transportation system that facilitates economic growth and social inclusion across the region.

It continues to be worthwhile for senior citizens to have a SmartPass. Since the introduction of free travel for people aged 60 and over in October 2008, more than six million trips have been made, which clearly demonstrates the benefit of that important scheme.

**Mr Burns:** Does the Minister agree that although rural bus services are never likely to make money, Translink has a responsibility to subsidise public transport in rural communities?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Yes. Translink takes that responsibility seriously and acts on it. It continuously prunes routes in its public transport provision. That happens on an ongoing basis because, for instance, only one or two people per week might use some of the routes to which I referred.

As the Member knows, due to the pace of development over the past number of years, areas not served by public transport may suddenly gain a couple of hundred houses. Consequently, Translink continuously reassesses and alters routes. However, it also has a responsibility to provide rural transport. Such transport is often subsidised and is non-profit-making. It is part of Translink's public service agreement that it will continue to provide rural transport.

**Mr G Robinson:** Does the Minister agree that a fully integrated public transport system is an essential lifeline for rural communities?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Yes. The Member may take issue with the reduction of some services in the area that he represents. However, Translink has, so to speak, to wash its face, and if routes are not being used, it does not make economic or environmental sense to continue them and not provide a service in other areas that may attract more people on to public transport. The process is changing constantly, and we look to Translink to continue to provide its service across the rural routes in the North.

**Mr Elliott:** Free bus passes are only useful where there are available services. Does the Minister have any advice for senior citizens who have SmartPasses but cannot use them because there is no bus service nearby?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I am not sure what area the Member is talking about. However, since last October, six million trips have been made using free bus passes, which indicates that it is a beneficial scheme. As a representative of some rural areas where the public transport is not as good as it is in urban areas, I know that it is more difficult for people to access public transport. There are other rural community transport projects in a lot of those areas to try to fill the gaps that there might be in Translink's service. I encourage those who are eligible for the bus passes to get them and to make as good use of them as possible.

**Mr Brady:** Will the Minister outline the alternative to the current Translink proposals?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Translink is developing corporate proposals on how it goes forward, which have been a matter of discussion with me, the Department and the Consumer Council. Translink has to sustain itself as a company, so the choice is between some bus fares increasing marginally and the loss of jobs and services. Those are always difficult decisions. This is the third time since I came into office that we have had such discussions. However, those are the sort of choices that are facing Translink, and I hope that, through consultation, we can reach an acceptable solution.

3.30 pm

## SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

### Budget 2009-2010

1. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the implications of the UK Government's recent Budget announcement for her Department. (AQO 2691/09)

**The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):** The full implications of the Chancellor's statement are still being assessed. However, I welcome its proposals to give more help and support in getting people back to work. The statement will also give additional help to people who are most in need — children, older people and disabled people — in the form of extra benefits, tax credits, child trust funds and winter fuel payments. My Department will ensure that those who are entitled to extra benefits will receive them.

I am not surprised that additional investment is being proposed for house building and energy efficiency in Great Britain. Indeed, I have argued for some time that that is also the right thing to do in Northern Ireland. Although the Chancellor was subject to unprecedented financial pressures, he still managed to find an additional £1 billion for housing. I hope that, at the very least, the Barnett consequential for that will be contributed to our own housing budget, which is woefully short of funds. The Executive must clearly signal that they will reprioritise and invest more in housing to achieve the indisputable benefits, and they must put housing on a firm financial footing rather than allow construction workers and homeless people to continue to suffer. The Chancellor has accepted the important fact that investment in social housing is the best way to boost the economy, while delivering on vital economic and social policy objectives. Why have we not done likewise?

**Mr K Robinson:** I thought that it was my function to ask the questions and the Minister's to answer them. However, I take her point and her detailed and helpful response.

What steps has the Minister taken with the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that extra funding can be detailed for the areas that she mentioned? The Minister knows my concerns about housing estates such as Monkstown where, because of population movement and the changing population profile, appropriate housing is not always available to match demand.

**The Minister for Social Development:** Over recent months, I had several discussions with the Minister of Finance and Personnel about that issue. The housing budget must be reprioritised and reprofiled. We can no longer live a hand-to-mouth existence, surviving off the scraps of quarterly monitoring rounds and the legacy of the direct rule Administration, whereby the social housing development programme and associated issues were not put on a sound financial footing. I delivered that message to the Minister of Finance and Personnel. In January 2009, I received a helpful response from him, in which he acknowledged the need to invest in housing. I now want him and my Executive colleagues to reprioritise and to put housing, once and for all, on a sound financial footing.

**Mr T Clarke:** What is the Minister's assessment for the UK taxpayer after her Department lost a £300,000 legal case?

**The Minister for Social Development:** That is a ridiculous assertion. For the benefit of Members, let me put the record straight on that matter. First, I did not pursue any legal action. Secondly, we did not receive any bills or pay any costs. It is worth recapping on the fact that the judgement supported me on three of the four counts.

Let us look at those counts. The first was that I did not consult adequately — the judge threw that out; the second was that I had already made up my mind about cutting the funding — the judge threw that out; the third was that I had no right to terminate the contract over UDA behaviour — the judge threw that out. Therefore, I make the point again that the court supported my position on all the substantial issues. The court found an error in procedure on the ministerial code point. I was aware of that potential procedural problem and sought the cure, that is, retrospective Executive approval of the decision. In fact, that is a routine procedure that has already been used by the DUP. However, when I asked for retrospective sanction, the Executive refused it.

I have heard some politicians, including ministerial colleagues, peddle the accusation that is being made here today, but such cheap shots diminish not only those who make them but the offices that they hold. The costs incurred in this case are far more a consequence of Executive decisions than of any action on my part.

I would also like to point out that the Independent Monitoring Commission published its latest report last week, and, yet again, it referred to UDA criminality and to the fact that there had been no decommissioning. Therefore, in the broadest sense, I was right all along. My decision was right then, and it is still right now.

**Dr Farry:** To return to the Budget, will the Minister confirm that it is her view that the £116 million in Barnett consequentials that the Executive will receive

over the next two years should be invested in economic recovery through social housing, energy efficiency and renewable energy, that it should not simply be offset against the £123 million in efficiency savings that have been asked for, and that those should be funded in a different way?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I thank Dr Farry for his intervention. I will come back to the initial point. There needs to be a reprioritisation of the housing budget, and emphasis needs to be placed on putting housing on a sound financial footing once and for all. We are dealing with a legacy from the direct rule Administration, which is not helpful at all. Through the operation of the Barnett formula, an additional £116 million is available for the Northern Ireland Executive this financial year and the following financial year. I will seek to ensure that my Department shares in that increase to assist with the various pressures that are being encountered in the housing programme and throughout the social security office network as a result of rising unemployment. Therefore, I cannot agree with you more.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Minister to make her remarks through the Chair.

### Welfare Reform Bill

2. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Social Development when she expects to propose a legislative consent motion on the Welfare Reform Bill.

(AQO 2692/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** A legislative consent motion is required when the Westminster Parliament intends to legislate on an area that falls within the competence of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The British Government will not include provisions in a Westminster Bill dealing with devolved matters unless the Northern Ireland Executive have agreed to it. Such provisions can be retained in the Westminster Bill only if the Northern Ireland Assembly has agreed to it by passing a legislative consent motion. There is no requirement for a legislative consent motion for the British Welfare Reform Bill, as it does not seek to legislate on matters that fall within the responsibilities of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

**Mr McClarty:** I thank the Minister for her response. Will she assure the House that her Department will prepare for Members a detailed synopsis of the Bill, with particular emphasis on the aspects that affect Northern Ireland before the legislative consent motion is introduced?

**The Minister for Social Development:** Mr McClarty raises very pertinent issues in relation to the prospective Welfare Reform Bill. We are taking on board all the issues that are being debated in Westminster, and there

are ongoing discussions with Ministers in Great Britain and with Ministers in the devolved Administrations and their officials concerning its impact. I will certainly take on board the Member's submission, and I will come back to him directly.

**Mr P Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus go raibh maith agat, a Aire. How does the Minister believe the Welfare Reform Bill will affect the uptake and provision of benefits across the Six Counties?

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Bill's proposals are wide-ranging, and I understand that many of them will be piloted and evaluated before being introduced. The Member knows that, under existing parity arrangements, I must bring forward similar proposals, particularly in respect of provisions that relate to benefit conditionality. In so doing, I will ensure that the equality impact of the Bill's proposals is assessed fully and that full recognition is given to the need to protect the most vulnerable in our society. That is because I believe firmly that all of us are duty-bound to protect the most vulnerable. I will, therefore, assess the Welfare Reform Bill in that context.

**Mrs M Bradley:** Does the Minister have any concerns about proposals in the Welfare Reform Bill?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I am concerned about the fairness and practicality of some aspects of the Westminster proposals. For example, I believe that the proposition that benefit recipients with addiction problems be required to undergo treatment as a condition for benefit qualification poses all sorts of questions. I will consider all those and other matters.

### Disability Living Allowance

3. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the Disability Living Allowance report brought forward by the DSD Committee, for her assessment of the recommendations leading to an improvement in administration of the allowance.

(AQO 2693/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Members are aware of my views on welfare entitlement. I am determined that every person who is entitled to support under the welfare system receives all that to which they are entitled, not least DLA, which involves decisions on entitlement that have an impact on vulnerable people.

Independent commentators recognise widely that disability living allowance is an especially complex benefit to administer. Nonetheless, mindful of the clients that it serves, I have set challenging public service agreement targets for DLA. Therefore, I am pleased to report that last year's indicative results represent the Social Security Agency's best DLA



performance since the benefit's inception in 1992. Subject to validation by the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the agency achieved financial accuracy of 99.7% against a target of 98%. It also achieved an average claims clearance time of 41 days against a target of 47 days. I am sure that Mr Brady agrees with me that that is a highly commendable performance that is worthy of acknowledgement.

Notwithstanding that, we are not complacent. During the debate last October in the House on the Committee for Social Development's report on the administration of disability living allowance, I welcomed and commended the Committee's work and acknowledged that the resultant recommendations were helpful as we strive to drive through even more improvements. I have since sent a memorandum of reply to the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development containing my detailed response to each of the recommendations, the majority of which I have accepted. My officials will continue to update the Committee for Social Development on the remaining recommendations, on which work is progressing.

**Mr Brady:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that there are still glaring inconsistencies and problems with the interpretation of medical conditions when decisions on DLA are being made?

**The Minister for Social Development:** Mr Brady raised the issue of medical conditions. I want to make the point very clearly that disability living allowance is paid as a contribution towards the extra costs that severely disabled people face as a result of having a long-term disability. Entitlement depends on the effects that the severe physical or mental disability has on the need for personal care and the ability to walk.

The reliance on effects, rather than the disability itself, ensures that all severely disabled people have equal access to the benefit, whatever the causes of their disabilities. There is no doubt that disabilities and a person's health can affect their ability to walk and to do certain things. It differs with each person; nobody is the same in that regard.

3.45 pm

**Mr Shannon:** I thank the Minister for her response. Mr Brady was right in what he said because the paperwork is off-putting. Does the Department have any intention of reviewing the paperwork and of simplifying the questions that are asked in the paperwork? That is important.

It is not sufficient for the Department to draw the conclusion that a person can walk, can self-help and can self-care if a GP states that the person's disability is not known. Will the Minister give an assurance that a review of the paperwork and the application form will be undertaken and that full information in relation to the applicant will be considered?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I think that Mr Shannon is referring to the initial application form that a person submits to ascertain whether they are entitled to disability living allowance or to ascertain the band within the various limits to which they are entitled. Notwithstanding the length of the form, I am very conscious that many claimants incur great difficulties and challenges when they are faced with such forms. I do not disagree that that is a very daunting task.

A new, shortened DLA claim form was introduced last November. Key customer representatives such as Citizens Advice, Advice Northern Ireland, the Law Centre and Disability Action were consulted on the design. They provided very positive feedback. I am sure that the Member is aware that the Social Security Agency also provides support for customers who need help with filling in DLA forms through face-to-face services or telephony.

I am still open to any other suggestions of ways to help people to complete forms and to reduce the problems or challenges that they face. In most instances, I fully take on board that people apply for DLA because they suffer from a disability. Work is also under way to examine the DLA renewal claim form that is in use with a view to reducing its length.

**Mr B McCrea:** Following on from the Minister's statement about forms and given the disproportionately large number of people in Northern Ireland who claim DLA compared to other regions of the United Kingdom, will the Minister assure us that sufficient controls are in place to ensure, even with the new shortened forms, that only people who are fully entitled to DLA are able to make claims? If all that is taken into consideration, does she expect the long-term trend of the number of DLA claimants to rise or fall?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I think that Mr Basil McCrea expects me to look into my surveyor's glass and make a prediction. The number of applicants and claims for disability living allowance in Northern Ireland is much higher than regions of Great Britain. However, we must ask ourselves what the reasons are for that. Perhaps there are greater levels of disability. We have to be sensitive to those issues. I cannot predict whether levels will increase, but I am sure that officials in the Social Security Agency will adopt a rigorous approach, along with medical practitioners and the examining medical practitioner, to assessing application forms.

Of course, if someone is unsuccessful, an application can be made to have a case reconsidered, and, if that is unsuccessful, he or she can appeal the decision, although, for many people, that can be a fairly daunting task. If a person is still unhappy as a result of an unfavourable appeal, it is possible to go, on a point of law, to the

social security commissioner. Therefore, every possible avenue is open. I am assured, however, that staff in the Social Security Agency adopt the most rigorous process. I want to be sensitive to vulnerable people who are in need, because we meet such people every day.

### Housing Executive: Maintenance Grants

4. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister for Social Development for an assessment of the number of building firms and contractors that will be affected by the shortfall in the Housing Executive maintenance grants. (AQO 2694/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** We are all aware of the £100 million shortfall in the housing budget for this year. However, broadly speaking, there has been no significant change in the allocation for the Housing Executive's revenue maintenance programmes. In fact, the Housing Executive has already advised its Egan contractors that it will be releasing programme maintenance starts worth £16 million.

In the present economic crisis, I feel strongly that we must adapt and focus our efforts on the areas that can deliver the greatest and most rapid stimulus to the economy. I have seen strong evidence from senior economists that increased investment in social housing is one of the best ways to keep businesses afloat and skilled workers in jobs.

House building offers a higher economic multiplier than larger infrastructure projects. It creates or sustains more jobs than other options, and it spreads the benefits over a wider geographical area. I am convinced of the need to increase investment in social housing to stimulate the economy, protect jobs and help those in housing stress, and I will continue to lobby my Executive colleagues for their support for my proposals. If I am successful, I will make every effort to use that investment to boost the economy.

I cannot assess how much the shortfall in the housing budget will impact on individual construction businesses, but I am doing everything in my power to maximise the work that is available to the sector. For example, I have instructed the Housing Executive to plan the newbuild programme using a much greater proportion of land and sites — commonly known as transfer sites — that it already owns, and, consequently, more of the available money will go directly into construction work and wage packets, instead of into land purchase costs.

**Mr Molloy:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that maintaining the present housing stock must remain a high priority, because any reduction in that stock would add to waiting lists?

**The Minister for Social Development:** Mr Molloy's question highlights the most fundamental requirement of the social housing development programme. Whether that involves newbuild or planned maintenance programmes, it must be placed on a sound financial footing. No more must the housing programme be subject to a hand-to-mouth existence, based on scraps from the quarterly monitoring rounds.

I will continue to try to persuade my Executive colleagues to reprioritise the housing budget. I have commissioned the University of Ulster to carry out some useful research in that respect, which I will publish shortly. There is no doubt that investment in social housing development programmes is an investment in one of the most labour-intensive industries, and it is a significant — perhaps the best — way to stimulate the local economy, create and provide a social asset and address social housing need.

**Mr Armstrong:** I agree with the Minister's analysis that the Housing Executive requires a lot of money. What encouragement has the Minister received from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that funding will be found to enable her to move forward with her plans?

**The Minister for Social Development:** Mr Armstrong has again highlighted the need for financial investment in the social housing development programme.

Perhaps, no Department has been affected by the fall in capital receipts as much as DSD, but, that said, we must make every pound go further with regard to the transfer sites. I am encouraging the Housing Executive and the housing associations to build on their own land, thus making the pound stretch further.

I have continually told the Minister of Finance and Personnel that we need to reprioritise the housing budget and that the hand-to-mouth existence to which the social housing development programme has been subjected through its receipt of scraps from quarterly monitoring rounds must be stopped. I have also presented those sentiments in documents to the Executive and to my ministerial colleagues. Housing is fundamental to the lives of everybody. We are duty-bound to address housing need throughout Northern Ireland, wherever it comes from.

I received a helpful letter from the Finance Minister back in January, and I noted that he met the Housing Council following a meeting that I had with that organisation. He published a statement and took on board and recognised the need for investment in the social housing development programme. It is to be hoped that that recognition and acknowledgement will be translated into a reprioritisation and that an investment of funds for the social development housing programme will be given number-one priority.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I heard what the Minister said about

investment in housing and construction being not only a significant factor in regeneration and the creation of jobs, but, primarily, in putting a roof over people's heads. There has been a significant fall in capital receipts. Will the Minister outline the consequential pressure points in respect of the housing spending programmes and their delivery?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I have prioritised the social housing development programme to ensure that we meet the target of 1,750 newbuild social homes and to protect the most vulnerable in our society through fuel poverty measures, such as the warm homes scheme. It is inevitable that the shortfall will have an impact on all the other housing capital programmes, with the main pressure points being private sector grants, Housing Executive multi-element improvement schemes and extensions for those requiring disabled adaptations.

The biggest factor is the collapse in private sector house building. However, the housing associations and DSD are increasing house building through the social housing development programme. About two years ago, we were only going to build 600 houses, but, at the end of last year, we had built 1,595, and, this year, I am determined to ensure that we build 1,750, in spite of this year's £100 million shortfall and next year's £100 million shortfall. Therefore, it is important that we place housing on a sound financial footing. That is why I commissioned research from the University of Ulster. I want to ensure that we put housing on a sound financial footing and that we secure the resources from the Executive to ensure that we address the needs of those who are most vulnerable and that we help those in the labour market and the construction industry and, above all, those in housing need.

### Village Regeneration Programme

5. **Ms Purvis** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the regeneration programme for the Village area of South Belfast.  
(AQO 2695/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** Last February, I announced plans for a £100 million regeneration of the Village that will transform the housing stock there through a mixture of demolition, newbuild and refurbishment. The Village was declared an urban renewal area in April 2008, and, since then, work has been ongoing to acquire those properties where advance purchase was requested. To date, 112 applications for advance purchase have been received, and agreement has been reached on 100 of those. Subsequently, the vesting application was lodged with my Department on 27 November 2008, and 116 objections to it have been received. Those are being dealt with by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

4.00 pm

The Village regeneration project is the largest single project on our books at the moment. It is a complex process, and not all the groups or individuals living in the area are in agreement about the details. I am pleased to have taken the initiative to get the redevelopment under way in an area that has some of the worst housing left in Northern Ireland, but operational matters are principally the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

**Ms Purvis:** Since the Minister is aware of the serious effects of multiple deprivation in the Village, can she give an assurance that the regeneration programme will be prioritised by her Department and rolled out in this Assembly term?

**The Minister for Social Development:** The very fact that we declared the Village an urban renewal area — and funding starts the minute an area is declared as such — and that work is ongoing shows our commitment to the project and the impetus behind it.



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

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### RUC Museum

*Debate resumed on amendment to motion:*

That this Assembly supports the suggestions for an RUC Museum at Brooklyn Headquarters near to the Garden of Remembrance; and calls on the Northern Ireland Office to allocate the necessary funding to enable building to begin during 2009.

— [Mr Shannon.]

*Which amendment was:*

*Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert:*

"notes the proposal for an RUC museum; believes that methods to acknowledge the past, including the role of the RUC and the different experiences of policing over the years, should be developed; and recommends that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Policing Board, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Commission for Victims and Survivors and the future victims and survivors forum should consider the matter." — [Mrs D Kelly.]

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure has indicated that he wishes to respond on matters contained in the amendment.

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell):** I followed the debate, as I am sure other Members did, with great interest, given the complexity that would arise as a result of much of the discussion contained therein. I welcome the proposal to establish a policing/RUC museum. At present, policing is a reserved matter, with responsibility for it falling to the Northern Ireland Office. In whatever year the devolution of policing and justice may occur, I expect that responsibility for a proposed policing museum would transfer to the proposed new Department of justice. It would then be a matter for that Department to consider any business proposals put forward for the creation of a policing museum.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Most Members who spoke this afternoon said that they had no objection in principle to the establishment of a policing museum or to the history of policing on the island of Ireland as a whole. Indeed, some Members, particularly those from the Ulster Unionist Party, said that they believed that the proposal provided a means of creating cross-community support.

The SDLP in no way diminishes the sacrifice of many men and women over many years, and, in particular, over the past 30 to 40 years, when all too many of them paid the ultimate sacrifice. In recent months I visited the garden of remembrance, which was quite a poignant experience. I urge members of all communities to visit that garden and to note the names and stories behind the memorials. The only record that

tells the story behind some of those names is a book on the Troubles; other than that, unless one has personal experience or knowledge of the circumstances in which some officers lost their lives, there is no other means of telling their stories.

Members from Sinn Féin and other parties pointed out that there should be a way of telling our story. One of the recommendations of Bertha McDougall's report on support for victims and survivors focused on storytelling. Mr McCartney is a member of the management committee of the Museum of Free Derry, and he told us how important it was for people to be able to tell their story in their own words as they remembered it. All Members, right across the Chamber, recognised that there are differences in our experiences and in how we tell our story. There is history, story and historical facts.

No one is disputing the fact that there is general support for how we best remember the past. The SDLP amendment tried to set it in the context of the Eames/Bradley group and the wider storytelling, and the recognition of the many victims of the Troubles.

Mr Paisley Jnr, who is no longer in the Chamber, made comparisons between pygmies and giants. There can be no diminution of the SDLP's role in policing. The SDLP was the giant that led the way for the support of police reform across the nationalist community. For Mr Paisley to enter such a comparison into this afternoon's debate is an absurdity. He said that our amendment is about dillying and delay. That is not what the amendment is about. The SDLP amendment is about realities and the economic situation that Northern Ireland, and many nations across the globe, face today. Mr Paisley said that it shows that we falter and fail.

Here we are at the start of another week with no Executive business before us, there is no Executive business next week, and there was no Executive business last week. People are playing at electioneering, and Mr Paisley accused our party of doing that in moving the amendment. He should look to himself first, and if that is how he measures up dilly, delay, falter and fail, those words could, quite reasonably, apply to the Executive. In the Minister of the Environment's statement earlier today, he referred to four occasions on which, he alleges, Sinn Féin blocked progress at the Executive. The two main parties need to sort things out. I stress that it was Mr Paisley who entered such words into this afternoon's debate.

The Alliance Party spoke about the need to build a museum to recognise the worst of our past but, quite reasonably, recognised that one person's remembrance is not the same as another person's remembrance.

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

**Mrs D Kelly:** We have handled this afternoon's debate maturely, and the SDLP amendment set it in the reality of today's economic climate.

**Mr Spratt:** I declare an interest as Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, which is considering the financial implications of the devolution of policing and justice, and the museum issue was raised in recent evidence.

I will go through some of the issues regarding a new policing museum and put them into the context of how the situation has been spun out by the Northern Ireland Office. As other Members have said, a new museum was announced in 2001 by the then Secretary of State, John Reid, in conjunction with the creation of the RUC GC Foundation. PSNI estates services initially submitted a business case to the Northern Ireland Office in November 2002, with projected costings of £9 million. That figure allowed for the completion of a memorial garden by 2004. Various sites were considered, including: Seapark; the proposed new policing college at Cookstown; Belfast city centre; the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum; and the Knock Road headquarters on the basis of a joint heritage site with the garden and with shared staffing and costs.

The RUC GC Foundation runs on a small annual budget of some £160,000, and most of the work is carried out by volunteers who work in the existing museum and who could work in a new museum. It was then agreed that PSNI estates services would withdraw from the agreement, and the RUC GC Foundation, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Office, commissioned an independent feasibility study by a firm of museum consultants.

All stakeholders were consulted on the outline design case, and a business case was put together at a projected cost of £5 million, which represented a reduction of £4 million. The business case was submitted to the Northern Ireland Office in mid-2006. It included a further study of audience numbers and greater justification for the museum to be located on the Knock Road site, which the Northern Ireland Office said that it needed in order to put a robust case to HM Treasury in 2006.

The audience development plan was completed by another firm of consultants, and the RUC GC Foundation took the precaution of conducting a further independent site analysis. Again, that pointed firmly in favour of the Knock Road site. Critically, the audience development plan suggested that the museum should have a major educational and outreach role in relation to reconciliation and healing. It also recognised the importance of the museum being a living museum depicting the history of policing in Ireland, from the RIC to the RUC and through to the Police Service of Northern Ireland, because no other such museum or establishment exists.

As a number of Members have said, there are 8,000 exhibits being stored. Some of them are vehicles, a couple of which are on show at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. Other exhibits date back to the early 1800s. Some of them are very valuable and need to be on display.

The RUC memorial garden has a history trail that leads one through policing from 1814 into the garden where the names of those who died, both in the earliest troubles and in the more recent campaign, are inscribed. It is early days, but, as has been said, I hope that the name of Stephen Carroll, who tragically lost his life in the first terrorist attack since the formation of the PSNI, will be included in that garden at some point. I am sure that there will be discussions with the family in that regard, and I hope that everyone in the House will encourage that.

The business case, including the independent reports, was submitted to the Northern Ireland Office in late 2007. However, to the amazement of the RUC GC Foundation, the Northern Ireland Office stated that it required the written approval of the Policing Board and the Chief Constable in relation to the Knock Road site. As Ian Paisley Jnr indicated, the Policing Board agreed unanimously to that on 11 March 2008 and the Chief Constable gave the Police Service of Northern Ireland's approval on 30 April 2008.

After the business case had been processed further by a consultant, it was submitted to the Northern Ireland Office again in September 2008. Once again, the Northern Ireland Office has tried to stall the issue and has tried to divert the whole plan away from the Knock Road site. As my colleague Jim Shannon said, a very small museum, which was originally situated at the reception area of the old Brooklyn headquarters, has been moved to a small office close to the entry gate of PSNI headquarters. That museum is totally inadequate and, as has also been pointed out, very few people know that it is there.

*4.15 pm*

The business case was submitted for the final time on 18 November 2008, and it was believed that it would come before the Northern Ireland Office board in January 2009. Regrettably, that did not happen, and there were further meetings and administrative queries from the Department of Finance and Personnel on 23 March. So the whole scenario goes on. The final report of the Oversight Commissioner, in May 2007, also identified the construction of a museum "adjoining the garden" as a remaining issue of the Patten proposals. There have undoubtedly been a whole series of events to stymie the idea of having the museum there.

As many in the Chamber have said, this is an important part of the history of policing in Ireland. It is something that will be of immense importance,

because the plans that have been submitted provide for an amphitheatre for educational purposes within the museum. The PSNI will be able to use it; it is something that they lack in Belfast. The Assembly Education Service attracts schools on a daily basis from all sides of the community and further afield. A police museum would be a widely used facility. As has been pointed out by others, it could be used for tourism and to attract people.

I am heartened that there are no serious objections, but we oppose the SDLP amendment. It would further stymie the project. This is a legacy issue that the Northern Ireland Office should sort out.

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

**Mr Spratt:** It is a historic issue that needs to be settled, and I commend the motion to the House.

*Question, That the amendment be made, put and negatived.*

*Main Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly supports the suggestions for an RUC Museum at Brooklyn Headquarters near to the Garden of Remembrance; and calls on the Northern Ireland Office to allocate the necessary funding to enable building to begin during 2009.

## Children Missing from Care

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

**Miss McIlveen:** I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the failure of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to monitor and maintain baseline figures relating to the number of children who go missing from care and the number of such incidents per child; demands action to address the lack of access to specialist therapeutic support services for these children across all Health and Social Care Trust areas; recognises the pressure on police resources and time in retrieving these children; calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to place greater emphasis on the needs of missing children and to ensure that his Department accurately accounts for these children in its role as corporate parent; and provides a clear strategy and resources to address the reasons for these children going missing and the risks to which they are exposed during their absence.

I am disappointed that, for the second time in two weeks, the Minister is unable to attend the Chamber for this debate. However, this matter is too important to be delayed again, and I will proceed this time in his absence.

I note that the last delay afforded the Minister's colleagues time to draft an amendment. I am content to accept that amendment. However, I cannot say that I am entirely happy. The purpose of the motion is to highlight a basic and fundamental gap in current practice in the Department. The Minister and his officials know that, hence their inability to answer the questions that have been posed. It was essentially agreed that the amendment should be the topic of an all-party motion to be tabled at a later date, following the debate on the substantive motion.

The motion was generated as a result of my concern at the experiences of some of the most vulnerable children and young people in our society. In Northern Ireland, almost 2,500 young people are in care, many of whom have stable placements and quality care. However, we all know that the overall outcomes for those children are likely to be poor.

The Department assumes the role of corporate parent of children in care, and therefore has the mantle of responsibility. According to the most recent figures, it remains a shameful fact that care-leavers are still 18 times more likely than other young people to leave school without any qualifications. In addition, more than half of all care-leavers, 53%, left school without



gaining qualifications, compared with 3% of all other school-leavers in Northern Ireland.

Only 12% of young people leaving care obtained five or more GCSEs, as opposed to 65% of pupils overall. That obviously has an additional knock-on effect, given that young care-leavers are also four times more likely to be unemployed than those of a similar age in the population.

I know that strategies and approaches are in place to address the needs of children in care and that that can happen only over the longer term. In particular, I welcome the publication of the White Paper 'Care Matters: Time for Change' and the specific educational support schemes that have recently been put in place. However, I remain particularly concerned for a much smaller number of children and young people whose vulnerability and risk are drastically increased by their experiences of running away from residential homes, and, less so, foster-care placements.

Experience here and in the rest of the United Kingdom tells us that, without doubt, children who go missing from care are subject to greater risks, including drug and alcohol misuse, sleeping rough and being sexually abused and exploited by adults who prey on their vulnerability. Reports by Extern, Barnardo's and the Children's Society all identify a young person's going missing as the most immediate indicator of sexual exploitation.

Since December, I have asked the Minister on three separate occasions and in three different ways to provide figures for the number of children in Northern Ireland who go missing. I am concerned that unless we are clear about the number of incidents of children who go missing from care and their patterns of risk, we will not be able to even begin to solve this problem. Keeping an accurate record of the number of children who go missing from care and the number of incidents per child are important indicators of children's safety and vulnerability.

I am aware that there is currently no legal requirement for those statistics to be kept or analysed, and I am genuinely concerned at that serious legislative gap. It does not seem too much to ask that vulnerable children be identified so that they can be helped. My understanding is that unless a child is missing from care for 24 hours, trusts will not have a record of them having gone missing. It does not take 24 hours for children to be at risk or come to harm.

Of the 2,500 children in care, only 13%, or 319, are in residential care. Last year, there were 325 reported notifications of children absconding from care. That is the only year for which I can find any figures. Although that clearly includes multiple incidents of individual children who go missing, I must register my concern that the figure is significantly high.

The PSNI has confirmed that, in 2007-08, there were 4,956 incident records for adults and children who went missing. A total of 616 of those had an address at a children's home. The lack of information means that it is not clear how many of those cases were repeat incidents and how many children they represent.

Retrieving children who go missing from care on a repeated basis represents a substantial investment of police time. Extern research shows that, in Northern Ireland, one in 10 children will run away from home, but it also shows that children in care are nearly five times more likely to run away overnight than those living in families.

They are also more likely to have had more than one episode of running away. Some 32% of young people who had spent time in care had run away three times, compared with only 13% of children who had never been in care. The research also indicates that running away is associated with mental-health difficulties, offending, and the use of alcohol and drugs.

Research and experience from the rest of the United Kingdom shows that children who repeatedly go missing are vulnerable and at risk. Repeatedly going missing from care is one of the most important indicators of increased vulnerability, as was recognised in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) report 'Our Children and Young People — Our Shared Responsibility', which expressed concern about the repeated instances of children going missing, and about whether social workers and the police have sufficient resources to deal with them.

The report also identified the risk of sexual exploitation, whereby children in residential care were targeted and subjected to abuse by adults who knew that they were vulnerable. Some may accept children going missing from care as the norm, but would any of those who are parents in the Chamber accept that as the norm for their child?

A recent report by the House of Commons Committee on Children, Schools and Families argued that the state fails as a parent because it does not demand enough from services. Two essential demands must be made: to know when children are missing, how many times and why; and the recording and analysis of all that information to ensure that care becomes a better experience for children.

I know of one current example of a young girl aged 14 who regularly goes missing from care, where she has been living since the age of nine. From a young age, she witnessed significant domestic violence and alcohol abuse in her family. Over the past year, she has been going missing from the children's home and staying away for increasingly long periods, usually from 8.00 pm to between 3.00 am and 5.00 am. Each time she goes missing, the home reports the incident to

the PSNI. She often returns in a dishevelled state and is subsequently too tired to attend school. It is strongly suspected that she has been under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs. I am not implying that her story is shared by a substantial number of children in care, but it is by a few. For one child to have that experience today in Northern Ireland is one too many. Unless the experiences of such children going missing from care are rigorously recorded and analysed, it is too easy not to see the child's real story.

In response to the recommendations contained in 'Our Children and Young People — Our Shared Responsibility', the Department published guidance in April 2009 that seeks to ensure that the PSNI and staff in children's homes work together to protect children. The guidance introduces a traffic-light system that recognises the difference between children who return late and those who are missing and, therefore, at risk. I ask the Minister to confirm what, if any, multi-agency training is being put in place to ensure that the PSNI and social care staff are clear about how to implement that guidance.

To my knowledge, only one specific support service for children exists; it operates in the east of the Province and is partly funded by the Department. To date, in the first nine months of its operation, some 23 referrals have been made from that one area. Will the Minister tell the Assembly whether he plans to invest additional resources in specific services for children who go missing from care? Is he familiar with the young runaways action plan that was published in England and Wales? That plan seeks to provide support to children and prevent them from running away from home or care. Does the Minister plan to consider such a strategy for Northern Ireland?

I have seen the project to which the amendment refers in operation in Manchester. I am, therefore, aware of the need for such a project in Northern Ireland. However, for such a project to be implemented here requires the basic measures, such as accurate record keeping, to be in place. That is the primary motivation behind my motion. I am glad that the Ulster Unionist Party, by accepting the motion, albeit with an amendment, recognises the need for the Department and other agencies to do more.

I will write to the Minister to advance the issues that are raised in the debate. Given the clear legislative gap that I highlighted, I will consider the merit of introducing a Private Member's Bill. I hope that the Minister will support me in that initiative.

**Mr Beggs:** I beg to move the following amendment:  
At end insert

“; furthermore notes the danger of sexual exploitation that children missing from care can face; notes the successful approach of the Manchester Safeguarding Children Board 'Protect Team', and calls on the Northern Ireland Office to ensure that the Police

Service of Northern Ireland, in conjunction with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the relevant voluntary sector organisations, provides an enhanced Protect Team for Northern Ireland with a view to preventing the sexual exploitation of children and young people.”

I declare an interest as a member of the Carrickfergus children and young person's locality group. Barnardo's paid for my travel costs when I visited Manchester with other MLAs to observe the work of the Protect team.

I thank the Member for tabling the motion. It highlights the issue of children who go missing from care, the need for improved support, and the need to record and analyse the experience of such children.

4.30 pm

The motion calls for more resources and for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to place greater emphasis on the needs of vulnerable young people. It calls for a clear strategy and for resources to be made available to address the reasons why those children go missing. That is all very laudable.

Let us chart where we are and where we have come from. In May 2007, the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland published the report 'An Analysis of Public Expenditure on Children in Northern Ireland: Part 1: Spending on Children's Services'. It revealed that, in 2004-05, less was spent on each child in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the United Kingdom. It showed that 28.6% less was spent on each child than in England and 33% less than in Wales. The proportion of Northern Ireland's personal and social services budget that was spent on children amounted to only 14.1%, compared with 24% in England and 26.1% in Wales. During direct rule, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety underinvested significantly in children's services, which received significantly less funding than similar services in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The motion fails to recognise the significant developments that have taken place in the children's sector in recent years. The 'Families Matter' strategy document, which was published in March 2009, is particularly relevant to the debate, as is the Care Matters strategy. I understand that the early draft of 'Care Matters' was delayed for several months during the Sinn Féin/DUP spat last summer. That means that progress on the matter has been delayed because of politics.

I am pleased —

**Mr Weir:** I noticed that the Member criticised the wording of the motion because it does not mention the positive progress that has been made. However, given that the amendment does not refer to that either, does that mean that the Member is critical of his own amendment?

**Mr Beggs:** I am conscious that we have all failed in the area, and I did not wish to say that no further

improvement is needed. No one can ever say that, when it comes to children going missing, they do so at a satisfactory level.

I am pleased to learn that the 'Care Matters' document has been finalised, that it has been with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and that it has now been passed to the Executive for final approval.

What is the relevance of those documents? They are relevant because, if families who are at risk are supported, fewer children will enter care. The evidence is clear: children who are in a caring family environment have a much better chance of reaching their full potential than those who are placed in care. Children who are outside the care system are also less likely to go missing. In addition, a wide range of new investments is being made in services for children and young people who are in care.

I hope that those omissions from the motion are not a sign that children's issues are being used for party political purposes to attack the Minister. It would be helpful if the proposer of the motion would advise the House about when — or whether — she has written to the Minister or sought a meeting with him on the matter.

The all-party Assembly group on children and young people received health officials at its March meeting, and we were advised of progress on the Families Matter strategy. That strategy acknowledges that parents are best placed to support children. It advocates strengthening universal services and developing services for families that need extra help. A further £2.4 million in recurrent moneys is attached to the strategy.

Last week, Fergal Bradley from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety briefed the all-party Assembly group on children and young people on the Care Matters strategy. He and his colleagues must be complimented on the progress that has been made to date, but more must be done.

The Care Matters strategy has been developed with input from key partners, including the Department of Education, which educates the children; DEL, which helps some of them to go to further education; the Department for Social Development, which has a role in their getting housing; OFMDFM, which is responsible for children's matters; the Northern Ireland Office; the Youth Justice Agency; and the voluntary sector. Each of those bodies has a degree of responsibility for children and young people in care, and, by making changes, they can improve the lives of and outcomes for those vulnerable individuals.

Safeguarding and information sharing is a key issue that has been highlighted, and piloting arrangements for the collocation of social work staff in the PSNI public protection unit is suggested. An information-sharing protocol is being developed, and, if it is to be

meaningful, it is obvious that statistics such as those relating to children who are missing from care will be a key indicator. That should have been done in the past, and it must be ensured that it is done going forward.

Additional money is available to invest in family intervention services that are consistent with the Families Matter agenda. If we are to afford a better future for our children and young people, it is clear that a range of improvements will be required, with the co-operation of all the bodies that I mentioned.

The motion refers to the risk to which children and young people are exposed during their absence from care. It is vital that the Assembly identifies one of the main risks, which has been mentioned earlier; namely, the sexual exploitation of children and young people. It must propose measures to deal with that, which is why I tabled the amendment.

Some people might suggest that sexual exploitation of children does not happen in Northern Ireland. I will tell Members of my experience of visiting Barnardo's Beyond the Shadows project in Belfast over a year ago. The project worked with some of the most marginalised young people in Northern Ireland. During the meeting, a case worker had to leave the room to take a telephone call from a young girl who was alone in a locked room and did not know where she was. She had gone out with people whom she thought were her friends. Clearly, those people were not her friends. She was being exploited.

Vulnerable young people, particularly those who are in care, seek friendship, contact and close liaison with others. Therefore, they are particularly vulnerable to unscrupulous men. Indeed, a recent edition of the 'Sunday World' revealed that young girls in east Belfast had been given drink and drugs by older men, who then exploited them.

Before Easter 2009, Barnardo's took other MLAs and me to visit the Manchester Safeguarding Children Board's Protect team. Its model involves close partnership working between police, social services and the voluntary sector. It is recognised as being successful at proactively preventing sexual exploitation of children and is being replicated across greater Manchester and, indeed, further afield throughout the United Kingdom.

A social worker leads on case planning, undertakes direct work with young people and their families and is the key link worker with individual homes. Police gather evidence and intelligence. They also use preventative strategies, such as warnings under section 2 of the Child Abduction Act 1984 and section 49 of the Children Act 1989. I want to know more about those warnings: how often, if at all, are they used in Northern Ireland? Of course, the voluntary sector



supports young people and raises awareness of the dangers of being drawn into sexual exploitation.

The group of MLAs was told that some 54 warnings under the Child Abduction Act 1984 had been issued in the Manchester programme. Only two of them had been breached. Therefore, most people who attempted to draw vulnerable young people into a dangerous situation had heeded the warnings because of the severity of punishment. Have any such warnings been issued in Northern Ireland? If not, what changes are necessary to enable that tool to be used here? Are new protocols and regulations needed? The Assembly needs to hear from the police on the matter. I hope that all parties who have responsibility for it will get together and talk.

There is a 90% conviction rate in cases that the Protect team have taken to court. Significant statistics are available. During a six-month snapshot in 2007, 62 young people who had been referred had gone missing 769 times. Post-referral, they went missing only 276 times, which represents a 64% reduction. As regards children from care specifically, 22 looked-after children had been missing 312 times. Those are the sort of figures that one might expect to emerge in Northern Ireland. There is no reason why Northern Ireland would be significantly different from elsewhere. That figure was reduced by 21%.

Many children continue to go missing. We must recognise that young people cannot be stopped from leaving a home. They must be encouraged and supported to stay. In extreme cases, a secure detention order can be used. I understand that such an order has been used recently in Northern Ireland.

Therefore, the benefits of a multi-agency team include better access to information; better understanding of different agencies' roles; information sharing; better knowledge; and improved outcomes. How would such a team be comprised in Northern Ireland? Perhaps, it would be comprised of a dedicated PSNI sergeant and two constables; social workers from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; and a voluntary sector practitioner.

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

**Mr Beggs:** I ask Members to support the amendment, which calls for measures that have proved successful elsewhere.

**Ms S Ramsey:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the substantive motion and commend its proposers. I also take on board the reasoning behind the amendment, because it is right that the Assembly deals with kids who go missing from care.

The amendment deals with realities, such as sexual exploitation, and highlights the need for a joined-up approach to address the matter. As the mover of the motion said, the House should not divide on this serious issue. The Assembly should send a coherent message to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and his officials.

I had intended to commend the Minister — credit where credit is due — on the work that he and his officials have carried out to date. However, the Minister is not attending today's debate. Given that he was dealing with the swine flu crisis, I could have accepted a postponement last week. His failure to attend today sends a negative message about the importance of vulnerable children to him and his Department. I hope that the health sector does not go to the wall because of swine flu.

For the record, other Ministers have shown the capability and commitment to deal with crises in their Departments and have had the manners to participate in and listen to debates in the Chamber, most notably Michelle Gildernew during the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease and bluetongue. During Mr Beggs's contribution, it struck me that Michelle Gildernew is able to multitask because she is female. We must consider the Minister's failure to respond to a 90-minute debate on a serious issue that affects human beings.

During his speech, Mr Beggs made several excuses about Every Child Matters and the children's strategy; this month's excuse is swine flu. Last month and the previous month, the excuse was the lack of Executive meetings. I patiently await next month's excuse.

**Mr Beggs:** The document will be completed. I understand that it is now with the Executive.

**Ms S Ramsey:** Other documents from the health sector and the Department did not sit on desks because the Executive was not meeting. Mr Beggs is well aware that he is politicking on an issue that affects vulnerable people.

My minute of negativity is now over, and I commend — I have only a couple of minutes left — the mover of the motion and my colleagues who tabled the amendment, because the issue affects the most vulnerable in society. We are failing children and young people in care, some of whom are there through no fault of their own. The state is supposed to be their parent. It is important that the original motion does not simply demand that we monitor and deal with kids who go missing from care, rather than wait 24 hours before anything kicks in. I doubt that the provision that will kick in after 24 hours is what is required.

Moreover, the state has failed to address some serious issues that affect kids in care. We need to consider that matter and adopt a joined-up approach to ensure that, when young people become part of the

care setting through residential care, foster care or other types of care, society has a proactive package to deal with their emotional, physical, educational and health needs and protect them from exploitation. Mr Beggs mentioned the 'Sunday World'. Every week, that newspaper contains stories of how older people prey on our most vulnerable. We need to stop that behaviour. We should not wait 24 hours before we decide if a person is vulnerable. Children who go missing from care are in a vulnerable position.

I have no problem with the issues that are outlined in the motion and the amendment. As Mr Beggs said, the PSNI and the Department need to work closely. When children are returned to care homes, nobody asks why they absconded in the first place. We all know of cases in which children are brought back but go missing again the next day. We need to create a joined-up strategy to deal with kids who go missing and are vulnerable in the community and to ask why they decide to go AWOL.

I accept the Member's point that the Executive have been considering issues of housing and social justice. There is an onus on the ministerial subgroup that deals with children and young people not to create more work for the Executive that will provide an excuse for their lack of work on the matter. They need to focus on the issue with a collective responsibility and reach a collective outcome.

Kids are in care, some of them because they are vulnerable. We must ensure that we take away that vulnerability and stop others from exploiting them. I commend the motion and the amendment.

4.45 pm

**Mrs M Bradley:** I am sure that we can all agree in the House that the most important commodity that any country can have is its children. That is what we need to concentrate on today; that and what makes a child run away from care. If a child is not happy in care there is definitely something wrong. Our care system is supposed to protect and nurture in the absence of parental influence for whatever reason.

Looked-after children are nearly always the most vulnerable children. They have had experiences that some adults may never have in their lifetime. They will nearly always need support even when they leave care. How, then, does the child who has run away cope alone outside the care system? They are exposed to the increasingly familiar drug rings, the sex trade and the child-trafficking business. They are at most risk from themselves, and the fact that they often have had no previous sound family experiences to draw upon means that they do not instinctively sense whether an experience is good or bad. Any form of affection or consideration, misguided or not, is often a welcome caller to the looked-after child.

We were recently horrified by the brutal details that emerged from the case of Baby P in the UK and the lack of occupational investigation by those charged with protecting the vulnerable in society. However, we are here today not to dig around the whys and wherefores of such a case but to examine the preventative issues which should ensure that we never see another Baby P and that those in positions of trust are armed with the necessary manpower and can utilise a fully accessible database of information and complaints that, when consulted and acted upon, should make the experience of a looked-after child or young person a more helpful and friendly one. In turn, that should create a more stable and pleasant care environment, leading to a reduction in the number of runaway episodes, which are common at present.

The entire system must be examined. The provision of care and the recruitment and allocation of social workers to individual cases must be reassessed and, more importantly, the workload of social workers must be addressed. In the past I have had occasion to approach social services about children who are on the child protection register, only to be met with what I can best describe as a nonchalant attitude to what I considered a serious situation. The shift in attitude must begin at the heart of social services, not with the paperwork. My local social services workers, although very approachable, have an extraordinary workload. It is neither helpful nor wise to place the lives of vulnerable children and young people in the hands of overworked people with a serious morale issue.

I admit that there are obvious time and financial constraints involved in retrieving a child who runs away. However, the real change will come only when we can identify what makes children go missing in the first instance. Children need to be protected and looked after but not only in status. They need to be looked after by social services in a true parental manner, not in a pitiful manner. Children and young people are not an item that we can throw away or recycle. We get one chance at life, and it is a lottery for most of us.

Good records and good administration are essential, but true care is what is needed. The interdepartmental approach is what will guide this issue and form the best response to the problem. The solution is a matter not just for the Department of Health, but for the entire spectrum of the Executive. Children's lives are mapped right across each and every Department in the Executive. It is wrong to lay the responsibility at the door of one Minister; it is a shared problem, in what the Assembly likes to refer to as a shared society. A shared problem needs a shared solution. It also needs financial support, so that what is needed for children in care can be implemented. I support the motion and the amendment.

**Mrs Long:** I thank the Members who brought the motion to the House and those who tabled the

amendment. It has already been mentioned that the absence of the Health Minister is a major disappointment in the context of this debate. I agree with Sue Ramsey; I do not believe that his presence in the Chamber for an hour and a half as a courtesy to Members would have significantly set back his response to swine flu.

I am also disappointed that, being part of an overall Executive, no other Ministers were willing to respond to this important debate, given its cross-cutting nature.

**Mr Weir:** This matter was raised at a Business Committee meeting that I attended. The Minister could probably explain it, but my understanding is that it is up to Ministers, if they are going to be absent, to request that an individual stand in for them. Therefore, the Minister in question has a veto. Indications were made that Mr McGimpsey did not want any other Minister to stand in on his behalf. It is not a question of the unwillingness of the other Ministers; it is because Mr McGimpsey is not prepared to allow anyone else to speak on his behalf.

**Mrs Long:** The Member's point is welcome, because it highlights the issue of whether or not the Executive are functioning in a joined-up fashion. The two junior Ministers in OFMDFM are tasked with dealing with children's and young people's issues, and it is unfortunate that arrangements could not have been made in the Executive to ensure that there was some response to the debate. I will not get into a discussion about who blocked that. I am simply stating that, as a matter of record, it is disappointing. Mary Bradley is right to say that the issue of children missing from care is cross-cutting and extremely important.

Some of our most vulnerable young people are also among the most stigmatised in society. In many cases, the emphasis that is being put on the role of the police can lead to a perception in the community that young people who are living in children's homes are involved in illegal activity. I agree with the proposers of the motion that those issues must be handled with great sensitivity.

Many young people are in care homes to be protected from dangerous, abusive or destructive environments. It is crucial that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in its role as a corporate parent, ensures that risks to young people are significantly reduced and that they are properly managed while they are in care. Young people must be safe, not only from the threat of external harm and exploitation but from their own dangerous self-harming or risk-taking behaviour, which may happen because of significant levels of distress.

The motion calls for the extent of the problem to be monitored. We need statistics if we are to determine the scope of the problem and know whether to respond and to what degree and whether that response is working. Practitioners to whom I have spoken in the

run-up to the debate have suggested that the risks to which children are exposed when they go missing vary quite dramatically, depending, partially, on how long the absence lasts and how frequently those young people are absent.

The perception that has been built up by monitoring statistics in England and Wales is that, when young people are absent for longer periods, they are at risk of much more serious harm. However, statistics on young people who are repeatedly absent are also a high indicator that those children are at risk of sexual exploitation in particular. In Northern Ireland, it is assumed that, on the basis of people's knowledge of the children with whom they work, young people are often absent from care for shorter periods. Their carers know where they have gone, because they return to family, a relative, a friend or a hang-out, and people know their whereabouts. The difficulties arise when that behaviour is addressed. A lack of proper monitoring and intervention makes it difficult to change that behaviour.

There is also a small but vulnerable group of young people comprising children in care who have been trafficked or who have sought asylum as minors without adult supervision. Those young people are more likely to disappear from the system than any other group of young people. They are hugely vulnerable, because they have no adult supervision or support networks.

No one will deny that sexual exploitation of young people is a significant issue. However, their physical safety, their vulnerability to crime and their health are also important, particularly if they are repeatedly going missing and are living rough. Interviewing returning children is, therefore, crucial, because it identifies the reasons behind the episode, helps to inform future care and gives the right level of support to those young people and the people who work with them.

The use of police resources has been raised, and we have to concede that dealing with children missing from care is a drain on those resources. From time to time, that issue has been raised in my constituency in cases involving difficult circumstances. No one will argue that anything other than non-contact methods should be used in children's homes. A young person can be reasoned with before he or she leaves if a carer knows that it is going to happen, but there is little that one can do to prevent them from leaving care. Alternative methods, such as locking the facility or introducing contact methods, have the potential to raise issues of trust with young people and the legal liabilities of staff. There are huge sensitivities around the issue. It also raises the issue of whether we want our care homes to become, more or less, secure facilities. We do not. Not all those young people need that level of protection. Once a child goes missing from care, there is very little option but to engage with the police — not to do so may result in serious



consequences. The police are the only people with the power to return those children.

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

**Mrs Long:** We need a more coherent strategy, and I hope that the Minister will assure us that we will get one. Unfortunately, in the absence of statistics, it is hard to see how that will be achieved. In Wales, it has been shown that people living in families are less likely to abscond and be at risk.

This is Foster Care Fortnight. If more work were done on that front, we could deal with many such issues in a more sensitive way.

**Mr Storey:** I commend my colleague for moving the motion.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has an unenviable and undistinguished record of maintaining proper records on vital issues of public concern, and we should not lose sight of that. There is a great deal of blame passing and saying that it is someone else's fault. I am surprised at the number of times that Ministers come before the House — when they do come before the House; on this occasion, the Minister of Health has not — to use the excuse that an issue is cross-cutting or that they are part of a four-party mandatory coalition, almost as an excuse for not doing their job.

Let us focus for a moment on the responsibilities of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. We note particularly that the motion highlights:

“the failure of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to monitor and maintain baseline figures relating to the number of children who go missing from care”.

That is not the responsibility of any other Minister. We could probably give the Minister of Health some latitude if this were the only issue on which he does not maintain suitable records and information. I will list some of the issues that my colleagues asked the Minister about in recent months: the number of patients transferred to hospitals outside Northern Ireland due to a lack of beds or personnel; departmental records of the amount of public money spent on hospitality; the number of children with speech difficulties; the number of patients presenting at accident and emergency departments who were told to go home and come back the next day; the percentage take-up of the flu vaccine; and the incidence of hospital-acquired pneumonia.

**Mrs Long:** Will the Member add to that list that there are no records kept on staff assaults in the Health Service or of the outcome of prosecutions that are pursued or whether boards have supported the staff involved?

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Member for her intervention. I tabled a question asking what records are kept in

accident and emergency departments in relation to domestic violence.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. The motion is on children missing from care. I ask the Member to stick to the motion and not to digress.

**Mr Storey:** Not that I would ever question the ruling of the Chair, but I have to set the debate in some context. We are talking about the Minister —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order, order. I have allowed the Member a degree of latitude to set the debate in some context. I ask him to return to the subject of the debate.

**Mr Storey:** I return to the subject of the debate. The answers were: “unavailable”, “not kept” or we were told that an answer could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

The lack of proper records on children missing from care is not just a failure of good government; it is a failure of basic care. That is why the debate is timely and important. If children go missing — particularly from children's homes — that is a failure of officialdom. It is also a ministerial failure.

There is absolutely no point in blaming the system. That defence has not worked for MPs' expenses claims, and it will not work here. The system needs to be changed. It does not need to be changed to please Members; it needs to be changed to address the needs of children in the months and years ahead.

5.00 pm

Nobody would ever say that it is best for any child to grow up in care; it is absolutely far better for a child to grow up in a loving, caring family environment. We witnessed recently how the Children's Commissioner concluded that it was better to place a child in care and criminalise its parents than to have that child grow up in a home where parents use physical discipline. However, apart from that kind of ideological aberration, most people would conclude that it is far better for a child to grow up in a loving, caring environment.

Unfortunately and regrettably, that is not always possible. When that is the case, the care system should be supportive of the child, should be supportive of the establishing of good relationships and should do everything possible to make that child feel valued, loved and cared for. Often, when a child runs away from either a care home or his or her own home, it is because that has become an established practice and something that is easy for the child to do.

In many cases, tension surrounding the break-up of a family — as the result of a divorce or separation, for example — has been very high up the list of reasons that children run away. However, if the Department's set response does not involve an acknowledgement of

that fact, how does that help the child's growth and development? Clearly, it does not.

I would have made that point to the Minister today, had he been present, but, unfortunately, he is absent. We need to know whether the Minister is prepared to put in place the appropriate information to tell us exactly what the case is. It is past the time for excuses and ministerial absenteeism; it is time for action on the part of the Minister. I support the motion.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I support the motion and the amendment.

Today's debate has brought to the fore many of the worrying concerns about the safety of young people in care. The figures that have been referred to indicate that, at present, approximately 2,400 children are in care in the Six Counties, with approximately 57% of those placed with foster carers and around 13% placed in residential care. Those figures are certainly startling. We all recognise that where it has taken responsibility for vulnerable children, the state needs to do more to ensure that those children are safe and have a better life.

I take this opportunity to commend the good work that foster carers do in our communities. They provide a loving and caring environment and emotional support for the children who are placed in their care.

Members have said that no centrally held accurate statistics exist on the number of children who go missing while in care. No statistics are available that state the overall number of those children who go missing on multiple occasions. We are told that those statistics are difficult to gather, as some people may go missing for short periods. In her contribution to the debate, the proposer of the motion outlined how there is no legislative requirement to keep such statistics. If the Department is serious about keeping those children safe, we need to gather that information to ensure the best provision for those children, who are most definitely in need.

Barnardo's, jointly funded by the Department of Health, offers a limited service that is aimed specifically at children missing from care. That service, to which Members referred earlier, is located in the Eastern Health and Social Care Board area. Children who are not in that area do not have the same access to the specific therapeutic support to address the risks and difficulties associated with repeated instances of missing children.

Of the core issues that have been outlined in today's debate and in the Members' briefing from Barnardos, one is that those children who are repeatedly missing from care are some of the most vulnerable in our society. Another is that the lack of centrally held information on the issue makes it very difficult to analyse and address. Another is that there is no comprehensive monitoring system or strategy in place

to address those issues, and that has implications for effective service planning.

As Members have said also, there are clear indications that for a small but significant number of children and young people, there is a link between being missing from care repeatedly and instances of sexual exploitation. Those are serious issues of concern. Today's debate has highlighted many issues, and we need to see action.

The amendment refers to examples of good practice in Manchester; specifically, the Manchester Safeguarding Children Board's Protect team.

We must look to those examples to inform us in developing a clear strategy to prevent harm to vulnerable young people in care. As has been clear from the debate, we need a cross-cutting strategy to identify and tackle the issues, and we look forward to that being taken forward on a cross-departmental and cross-statutory basis.

I support the motion and the amendment.

**Mr Weir:** Like other Members, I commend the proposer of the motion and my colleagues who tabled it. It would be remiss of me not to express disappointment that the Minister is not in the Chamber to be with us on such an important subject. All Members appreciate the significance of the swine flu problem, but it beggars belief that he could not spare an hour and a half to be with us on such an important subject.

**Mr McCallister:** Does the Member not accept that a Minister would need a great deal more than an hour and a half to prepare for such an important debate? It is not just a question of a Minister turning up in the Chamber and taking part in a debate.

**Mr Weir:** Given that the Minister does not appear to have done a great deal on the issue and having listened to some of his replies, one wonders how long he would have prepared for it.

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

**Mr Weir:** I have already given way once.

**Ms S Ramsey:** I will take only 20 seconds.

**Mr Weir:** OK.

**Ms S Ramsey:** The Member may agree with me that the Minister thought that it was important to come to Question Time but not to this debate because the former was live on TV. That highlights the problem.

**Mr Weir:** In the words of a fictitious politician of a while ago:

"You may very well think that; I couldn't possibly comment."

It beggars belief that the Minister is busy 24/7 dealing with swine flu; one wonders how the country copes when he is asleep at night. How are we not overwhelmed by swine flu? I am also disappointed that there do not appear to be any departmental officials in

the Chamber, although that may be a symptom of the Minister's absence. I am also disappointed that the motion is needed. As my colleague Michelle McIlveen said, she pressed the Minister with questions on the issue on three occasions, and the information was not forthcoming.

Leaving that aside, I welcome the motion and the amendment. I agree with other Members that the amendment slightly puts the cart before the horse, and there are vital things that need to be put in place before we can move forward on it. However, the amendment offers a welcome way forward, which is something to embrace.

As Mr Beggs and Mr Storey said, we all share a belief that a family environment is best for children. Providing whatever support that we can to families is of benefit to society in human and economic terms. Mr Storey also acknowledged that that is unfortunately not always possible with every family, and that in many cases, children end up in care because their family circumstances are simply inappropriate. For example, mention was made of sexual exploitation; unfortunately, the vast majority of sexual exploitation happens in the home. Consequently, we are left with a large number of children in care.

As the proposer of the motion said, statistics on the issue are scant. However, police statistics show that a disproportionate number of missing children are in care, which is why they should be the focus of our attention. As Naomi Long said, before we can provide concrete solutions to the problem, we need to know its scope. Consequently, it is vital to have robust statistics and records to highlight patterns in the disappearance of children.

That is not simply an academic exercise: missing children are vulnerable to being led into activities that are harmful to themselves and to society. It has not been mentioned, and I do not want to dwell on it, but there are two sides to the problem; society as a whole suffers when children are led into criminal activity.

In my constituency, a care home and a juvenile justice centre are in close proximity, and for many years, residents who lived close by suffered from antisocial behaviour. Although the juvenile justice centre often got the blame for that, in practice a wide range of children was involved, and very rarely were any of them directly connected to the Rathgael site.

Society suffers as a result of such criminal activity. Perhaps more so, however, children suffer. Vulnerable children are led astray into a range of activities, be it crime, drinking, drug-taking or sexual exploitation. The protection of those vulnerable children must be foremost in our mind.

Mention was made of the fact that we have, at least as a first step, some level of model that can be rolled

out across Northern Ireland. That does not preclude further steps being taken. Again, we have the example of what operates in the former Eastern Health and Social Services Board area. However, we are witnessing one bit of good practice in one former board area that is not being repeated elsewhere. As was the case in the debate that the Assembly had some time ago on autism, in which a range of board responses to adult autism was revealed, with some boards being more proactive than others, here is an example of good practice that has effectively been ring-fenced by one health board.

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

**Mr Weir:** We need to adopt a much more joined-up approach. 'Our Children and Young People — Our Shared Responsibility' outlines a positive way forward. That needs to be implemented, and we need to have the statistics available so that the problem can be tackled for the sake of the most vulnerable children. I support the motion and the amendment.

**Mr Gardiner:** I support the motion and my colleagues' proposed amendment. I preface my remarks by making some important observations. Today's motion is the fifty-fifth private Members' motion that the DUP has tabled on health. It comes after the Minister has made 14 statements to the House, answered 3,500 health questions and steered no fewer than five Bills through the Assembly. That represents a workload four times greater than that of the closest DUP Minister. When will the DUP give the Minister time to manage his Department? The Minister of Health is in the midst of managing a swine flu crisis —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. As I did with Mr Storey, I ask the Member to return to the motion's subject matter, which is "Children Missing from Care". Thank you, Mr Gardiner.

**Mr Gardiner:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for drawing my attention to that point, but some statements, which I feel need clarification, were made earlier in the debate about the Minister's actions. The Minister is active, and it is worth noting that among those who are criticising him for not being here today is not one single DUP member of the Health Committee. Where are they? They should be here supporting their colleagues, but none of them is here.

Why was the subject of the debate not brought before the Health Committee? Why, indeed, did the Health Committee fail to meet last week? The answer is that it could not get a quorum. I received a telephone call to say that, apart from me, only three Committee members were available to attend the meeting: my colleague Mr McCallister and a Sinn Féin Committee member. Therefore, we could not hold a Committee meeting. It would have been much more constructive



to have brought the matter of children missing from care before the Health Committee for mature discussion rather than try to grandstand with yet another health debate. The subject chosen for debate was deliberately emotive, and its timing deeply inappropriate. We are now not simply having debates on health but debates on children.

All those DUP health debates cast aspersions on the professionalism and dedication of the many excellent health professionals in the Health Service.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order, order. Mr Gardiner, it is time to return to the subject matter of the motion, please, which is "Children Missing from Care".

**Mr Gardiner:** I again thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for reminding me about that, but certain matters must be highlighted, such as the DUP's hypocrisy in its attacks on the Health Service.

Our main concern is for children who go missing from care. I support the motion and the amendment.

5.15 pm

**Mrs Hanna:** I support the motion and the amendment.

The fact that children go missing in Northern Ireland is a huge concern for everyone who is involved in the protection of children. Although it is the responsibility of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, it is a much wider societal issue, and it requires far more family support, early support and early intervention. However, the fact that the Health Department does not have adequate records for children who go missing from care is very worrying. There is no baseline data, so it is impossible to measure the extent of the problem and, consequently, to address it. Without those adequate records, we are not sure who is running away, why they are running away, or, indeed, whether a child is repeatedly running away.

There are a number of reasons why young people run away from care. It may be because of an unsuitable family placement, for example. There is also the issue of young asylum seekers, who are vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking.

Improving the lives of children is a priority for the Health Department. It states that effort needs to be focused on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, and no group is more vulnerable or disadvantaged than children. It is essential that all partners work together: the statutory agencies, the Police Service, health and social services, and the NIO, because it still has that responsibility. Indeed, the Manchester Safeguarding Children Board emphasised that point.

Runaways are on the increase in the UK, and I am led to believe that that may also be the case in Northern Ireland. 'Care Matters in Northern Ireland' outlines the vision to improve services for children in,

or on the edge of, care and to provide support. The Care Matters strategy, which was launched in 2007, planned to improve the outcomes for children who were looked after by the state. I am pleased to hear that the strategy is with the Executive and is soon to be implemented, because charities that work with young people, such as Barnardo's and Save the Children, are advising us of what we know anyway: children who run away from care homes may turn to sleeping rough, begging, theft, drugs and alcohol, because they are living on the street and do not have a lot of choice. That puts them at considerable risk, and we are always picking up the pieces.

In Northern Ireland, there are so many children in care who do not attend school and who have mental-health problems, as well as alcohol and drug-related problems. There are also many teenage parents and young offenders. There are many reasons for the barriers to improvement, but I fear that insufficient joined-up working across all the relevant authorities is a major one. We now have an opportunity to make a fresh start to tackle the issue head-on collectively. For too long, children have suffered in a care system that has failed.

To begin with, there must be clear statistics and guidelines to deal with the protection of children. In recognising the seriousness of the issue, the Government must commit to fulfilling their international obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and to providing better protection to the most vulnerable children. Without stability and future prospects, children whom we fail to protect now may fall prey to homelessness and to a life on the street. It is a huge challenge for all of us. It is a much wider societal issue, but the Health Department has the main responsibility, not only because of the ripple effect of any negative impact on society, but because all children are our future, and we have a huge responsibility in that area.

**Mrs McGill:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and the amendment. I thank the proposer and her colleagues for tabling the motion and I commend the proposer and Members who brought the amendment to the House.

The motion is comprehensive. It mentions the monitoring of figures: quite a bit has been said about the difficulty in obtaining those figures, what figures are obtainable, and how are they used. The motion then mentions lack of access to therapeutic support for young people who have gone missing, perhaps repeatedly. It acknowledges the pressure that is on the PSNI, asks the Department to behave as a corporate parent and calls for a strategy to be drawn up to address the reasons why children abscond. The amendment refers to the sexual exploitation of young people who go missing.

The absence of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for the debate, which was raised by my colleague Sue Ramsey right away, is an issue. However, Mr Gardiner made the point that the matter could be dealt with by the Health Committee. The way to address the important issue of vulnerable children may be found somewhere between those options. However, this must not be turned into a conflict between Members and parties. Ultimately, I do not believe that that will happen.

The PSNI's reply to a freedom of information inquiry states that in January 2009, 16 young people were missing from homes here. That response gave me a sense of the difficulties involved, a feeling that I also got from somebody in the Western Health and Social Care Trust. The situation can be fluid. As my colleague Michelle O'Neill said, somebody who is 15 minutes late in returning to a children's home can be reported as missing because they did not return on time. The person from the Western Trust told me that a judgement call is involved in such cases.

Individual absences differ. Someone may present a very serious problem by being absent from the place in which they should be for two or three minutes. As a Member said earlier in the debate, anything can happen in a very short time. However, a young person who goes to school every day and who is due back at 9.00 pm may have arranged to do something else that leads to them being 10 or 15 minutes late. The person from the Western Trust said that it can be difficult to record all those details.

I accept that point, and I note that the proposer of the motion asked for figures to be recorded and kept centrally. Responses to the Member for Strangford Miss McIlveen suggest that trusts should have those figures and that, perhaps, given time, they will be able to produce them.

I share Mrs Hanna's delight that the Care Matters strategy will be considered by the Executive fairly soon. I hope that that strategy addresses a number of the issues that have been raised in the debate. Go raibh maith agat.

**Ms Purvis:** I am glad that the Assembly is taking the time to examine the situation of vulnerable children and young people in our community. I thank the authors of the motion and the amendment.

I have been working quite a bit on this issue in my constituency of East Belfast. I have very serious concerns about what is happening to those children. What we know of them and the risks to which they are exposed are extremely worrying. However, what is even more troubling is what we do not know.

In response to a freedom of information request in January 2009, which has already been mentioned, the PSNI stated that 38 children were classified as missing

in Northern Ireland, 16 of whom were missing from care. Clearly, the numbers fluctuate regularly. However, if those figures are typical, they suggest real cause for concern but probably do not herald an emergency.

When it comes to trying to understand the situation of vulnerable children, the problem is what we do not know. The number 38 tells us very little. We do not know how many children are truly missing from care or how often they go missing, because there is no regulatory requirement for that information to be maintained, tracked or reported. The 16 children missing from care are likely to be the tip of the proverbial iceberg. I welcome the fact that Barnardo's is carrying out research into that issue, and I urge the Department to fund more such research.

We know that children in care are not thriving in our society. Before they enter care, many children will have endured an abusive or violent situation at home and few will have had any form of stability or healthy, caring relationships in their young lives. As Miss McIlveen stated earlier, a mere one in 10 care leavers achieves five or more GCSEs. The statistics of young people in care are very similar to those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Those circumstances leave children and young people in a very vulnerable position. Many of them carry a host of unmet economic, social and physical needs that can leave them open to manipulation. We know that care homes are targeted by criminals who seek to take advantage of children who are at risk of being coerced into some form of physical, emotional or even sexual exploitation.

The motion rightly calls for specialist support services and a strategy to address and remove the risks to which those children are exposed. However, it does not address a lingering and important question about the other children who are missing. If we return to the PSNI's figure of 38 missing children, half of whom are in care, where is the other half? Who are they?

Children who go missing from residential and foster care are one element in a broader concern of missing and vulnerable children. The issue is very serious and scary and it is happening in our own communities. Children and young people are being coerced and manipulated into various forms of exploitation. What do we think of a 13-year-old girl who has a 28-year-old boyfriend? Is that acceptable or is it child sexual abuse? That is what is going on currently.

Not all those children are missing. Some of them go home to a parent who is aware of, and is quite possibly involved in, the exploitation of their own children. I know of a case of a mother who allowed and encouraged a relationship between her 14-year-old daughter and a 40-year-old man. Is that acceptable in our community? I know of examples in which pub and

club owners have prevented community workers from entering their premises to try to identify vulnerable young women for fear of losing business. That happens on a weekly basis.

We turn a blind eye to those situations that are clearly there for us to see almost any weekend in a pub: a 12-, 13- or 14-year-old girl, dolled up to the nines, goes to the pub, drinks alcopops and gets a boyfriend of 27 or 28 years of age. He goes with her that weekend, falls out with her the next weekend and passes her on to one of his friends. That is what is meant by being passed around the pub. Is that acceptable? Of course not: it is paedophilia.

**Mr Beggs:** Does the Member accept that one of the beneficial outcomes of the Protect Team model used in Manchester is that it investigates children who are missing from care and addresses other vulnerable children in the community? Its scope is much wider than children in care, so it may help to address the issue that the Member has mentioned.

**Ms Purvis:** I thank the Member for his intervention, and I accept that the model's scope is much wider than children in care. That is what we need to see.

The alternative is the continual sexual abuse of children. Those children and young people rarely make an informed choice to be involved in such activities; they are groomed, manipulated or forced into them.

5.30 pm

The answer is to prioritise child protection at all levels. That means changing our perspective and approach to the issue to reflect the understanding that the children are victims who have been coerced, or worse, into those activities and that they are not willing participants. That will require a joined-up proactive response from all the agencies and organisations that come into contact with those children. As well as the Departments, the police, the judiciary, our local councils, and even the licensing authorities, have an important role to play.

I support the motion and the amendment.

**Mr McCallister:** Some Members remarked on the Health Minister's absence from the debate. As my colleague Sam Gardiner said, the Minister's record on answering questions and on participating in debates ranks well above any other Minister, as does his record in introducing legislation. Furthermore, he is more active in running his Department than the majority of DUP Ministers. Mr Weir was so exercised about the debate, yet he has not managed to remain in the Chamber for its entirety.

Miss McIlveen opened the debate by laying out some worrying statistics and trends, and other Members backed her in those arguments. A common theme running through Members' contributions was the

dangers faced by children and the need for the Department to be the corporate parent and to work with other Departments and Government agencies to address the issues of drugs, alcohol and sexual abuse.

Another common theme was the need for improved record keeping. However Mrs McGill said that representatives from the Western Trust had told her of some of the difficulties faced when trying to keep records.

In moving the amendment, my colleague Mr Beggs provided frightening statistics on children's services and spoke of the worries in that regard. I attended a useful briefing from the Department on the Care Matters strategy at the all-party group on children and young people. Such strategies are a welcome development, and it is hoped that the Care Matters strategy will have Executive approval soon.

Mr Beggs and Mrs Hanna mentioned the need for a cross-governmental approach to children missing from care. It is not the responsibility only of the Department of Health, but of the NIO, the Youth Justice Agency, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education. A great deal of work needs to be done in addressing the serious issues that we face.

Ms Ramsey accepted the Ulster Unionist Party's amendment and said that we need to make serious progress on the issue. Bar some debate about the Minister's non-attendance at the debate, there was agreement that we need to do more on this issue, and that is to be welcomed. However, I remind Ms Ramsey that the difference between attending a debate and attending Question Time is that one supplies a Minister with the opportunity to provide ministerial accountability. It has nothing to do with appearing on television, as Ms Ramsey might have suggested in an intervention.

Mrs Bradley spoke about the importance of children in society, and every Member accepts that. She also spoke about the effort that we must all make in addressing how our care system looks after those children.

Mrs Hanna also mentioned early intervention and early detection, which must be made a priority in so many areas if we are to prevent families from reaching the crisis point whereby their children are put into care. Many Members pointed out that the best home for children is with their families, so it is critical that we have such support and early-intervention procedures in place.

One of the best contributions that I heard today was from Ms Purvis, who talked about the broader issues and told some horror stories about the exploitation of young people in our society. It was certainly shocking to hear them, but it is right that we do, so that we can start to address the issues. It is just horrendous that that is going on so very close to this Building.

I thank Members for their support for our amendment.



**Mr Poots:** The debate is timely, and I thank my colleague Miss McIlveen for bringing it to the House. I regret that some Members have criticised her motives for doing so, but I can assure them that her only motive was to raise in the House concerns that people had brought to her. It is right that the matter should come before this House, because it is important.

A number of weeks ago, we debated a motion that had been tabled by Sinn Féin Members, and at the time, I pointed out that although the issue was important, it was unlikely to make many headlines. I dare say that when we pick up tomorrow's newspapers, the headlines will once again be about MPs' expenses. That is fair enough, but, unfortunately, this debate will not get much mention in any newspaper because newspapers do not tend to be interested in these stories. However, they should be, because we are talking about vulnerable children.

If one asked those vulnerable children whether they wish to be in care or in family homes, their overwhelming response would be that they wish to be in caring, loving homes with their own parents. Unfortunately, for many young children across Northern Ireland, that is not the case. Unfortunately, intervention is often required. Many children end up either in foster care or in care homes not because of any wrongdoing on their part, but because they have never had an opportunity in life and because their parents have not provided for them. In some cases, their parents might not have had opportunities in life either, and the problems affecting those children could have been passed down through a number of generations.

**Mr McCarthy:** The Member mentioned foster care, and this is foster care fortnight. Does he agree that tremendous work has been, and continues to be, carried out by people who take it upon themselves to bring those vulnerable children into their own homes? Indeed, I heard a report this morning about a man and a woman who had reared their own family and had taken foster children into their home. We should acknowledge that tremendous work.

**Mr Poots:** I thank Mr McCarthy for that intervention. Mrs O'Neill also commended foster carers on their work, and I can endorse both Members' comments. Many foster carers are the salt of the earth; they are people who want to give some love and care to children who have had none.

It is good to see Mr Weir with us in the Chamber. Indeed, he has been present for most of the debate, and I welcome the fact that he continues to be with us — in spite of Mr McCallister's previous remark about his absence.

It amazes me that the issues raised today do not appear to be being taken up by our Children's Commissioner. In the previous Assembly, I was Chairperson of the

Committee of the Centre, on which Mr Beggs and other Members also sat. Some of the stories that we heard would have raised the hairs on the back of one's head. We heard about how children were being treated and how young children were getting caught up in cycles whereby they repeatedly ended up in juvenile justice centres and care facilities. Those cycles need to be broken.

I want to see people in the office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People getting their teeth into those issues. However, I am afraid to say that I have yet to see any evidence of that. I challenge the Children's Commissioner to support those vulnerable young people; her office has not inconsiderable resources with which to carry out those duties.

Miss McIlveen pointed out some important statistics, including the fact that 53% of young people leave school without any qualifications and only 12% leave with five GCSEs or more.

Glenmore Children's Home, which does excellent work, reopened in January 2004. It is a small four-bedded unit with a large enclosed garden and a ground floor that is suitable for disabled young people and disabled visitors. Two young people left that home recently. One is 19 years old and is studying at Queen's University, and the other is her sister, who is studying at the Lisburn Institute of Further and Higher Education and lives with her grandparents. Three other young people in that home are studying for qualifications and are doing very well at school. A 15-year-old came to live in the home recently and is settling in there very well. Unfortunately, a decision has been made to close that home. One must ask why it is closing. I suspect that the decision has more to do with cuts than with anything else. That home is an example of one that is performing; however, it will not be allowed to do so because it is to be closed.

Neither Roy Beggs nor any Member who supported the amendment made a case for it. Fortunately, it made its own case, as none of the Members who spoke in support of it was able to do so. Mr Beggs's attitude was that the Minister should not be blamed. However, the motion is not about blaming anybody; it is about highlighting an issue, and I think that Mr Beggs got off on the wrong foot.

Sue Ramsey criticised the Minister for his inability to multitask and for letting men down. She said that women could multitask and that they could handle a crisis and respond to debates. In this instance, I must say that men have been let down. However, I suspect that other males could do the Minister's job and multitask a bit better than Mr McGimpsey has done in this case. Ms Ramsey also said that young people missing from care equated to their being vulnerable.

Naomi Long talked about self-harm, mental distress, and the use of police resources in a non-contact environment. She said that a more coherent strategy should exist.

Mervyn Storey tackled the issue of poor record keeping and said that he believed that there has been a ministerial failure on the issue in a number of areas in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and that it was time for action.

Michelle O'Neill commended foster carers, and she called for a more cross-departmental, cross-statutory strategy to tackle the issue.

Peter Weir said that we needed robust statistics and record keeping, which are vital in dealing with the matter. He wanted to prevent children suffering, because when children become involved in these issues they suffer, and, as a consequence, society suffers with them.

Samuel Gardiner spoke for three minutes and 27 seconds and addressed neither the motion nor the amendment; he simply had a little rant about the Minister and the DUP and indicated that one should not ask any questions of the Minister and that he should be allowed to get on with his job without having to deal with anything. I assure Mr Gardiner that there will be more motions on this issue; this is a matter that concerns the people of Northern Ireland. The DUP will not ignore health issues just because it does not hold the portfolio of the Department of Health.

Carmel Hanna talked about family support and early intervention and about establishing the reasons why young people run away. She said that there were wider societal issues for that, and I tend to agree with that point.

Dawn Purvis said that 38 children are missing, and of those, 16 are in care. She said that there is little stability in many young people's lives. She also provided some startling examples, including that of a 13-year-old girl who has a 28-year-old boyfriend, and a 14-year-old girl who is with a 40-year-old man. Wider society can only regard that as purely exploitative and wholly unacceptable, but it is taking place. The challenge to wider society is the question of what it is going to do stop it. A number of people must take up that challenge.

5.45 pm

John McCallister once again defended the Minister's record. The Minister may have responded to questions, but that is not the same as answering questions. An awful lot of questions, including those on the issue that we are discussing, are responded to with a statement that the answer is unavailable in the format requested, and other such nonsense. If we were given more answers, there would be less need for some of the debates that take place. Mr McCallister indicated that

there is broad agreement that something needs to be done, and he is absolutely right.

It is deeply disappointing that neither the Minister nor any colleagues or officials that he could have sent were present for the debate.

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

**Mr Poots:** Nevertheless, the matter has been aired, and the public is now aware of it. In future, we will be looking for more action and fewer evasive answers.

*Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.*

*Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly notes with concern the failure of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to monitor and maintain baseline figures relating to the number of children who go missing from care and the number of such incidents per child; demands action to address the lack of access to specialist therapeutic support services for these children across all Health and Social Care Trust areas; recognises the pressure on police resources and time in retrieving these children; calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to place greater emphasis on the needs of missing children and to ensure that his Department accurately accounts for these children in its role as corporate parent; and provides a clear strategy and resources to address the reasons for these children going missing and the risks to which they are exposed during their absence; furthermore notes the danger of sexual exploitation that children missing from care can face; notes the successful approach of the Manchester Safeguarding Children Board 'Protect Team', and calls on the Northern Ireland Office to ensure that the Police Service of Northern Ireland, in conjunction with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the relevant voluntary sector organisations, provides an enhanced Protect Team for Northern Ireland with a view to preventing the sexual exploitation of children and young people.

*Adjourned at 5.46 pm.*

