
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 15 September 2009

*The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker
[Mr Molloy] in the Chair).*

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Swine Flu

Mr Deputy Speaker: I inform Members that the Speaker has received notice from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that he wishes to make a statement regarding swine flu.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I take this opportunity to provide an update for Members on the Northern Ireland response to the swine flu virus. There have been a number of developments during the summer recess. During the summer months, I have continued to participate in regular Cabinet Office meetings with ministerial colleagues from across the UK. My Department remains in regular contact with officials in the Republic of Ireland.

Worldwide, there have been more than 275,000 cases and more than 3,000 deaths. In the UK, there have been more than 70 deaths. In the main, the illness continues to be mild and self-limiting, although, for some people, it can be severe. To date in Northern Ireland, we have had 217 laboratory-confirmed cases. However, the actual number of cases is much higher, with almost 9,000 courses of antivirals having been prescribed to people who have been clinically diagnosed as having swine flu. In addition, the number of people who are consulting their GPs with flu-like symptoms is significantly higher than in previous years at this time.

Until now, 94 people have been hospitalised with swine flu in Northern Ireland. I have also been informed of a second death that was possibly associated with swine flu. Obviously, every death is tragic, and my thoughts and sympathies are with the family. Members will understand and respect that it is not appropriate for me to make any further comment at this time.

Although the levels of flu have been decreasing since their peak at the end of July, we should not be complacent. The scientific experts have advised that it is unlikely

that that downward trend will continue. We are preparing for a surge in cases later this year and potentially for a more severe pandemic strain.

We now know more about the virus and its effects, and we have been able to revise our planning assumptions. We have gathered more information from experiences of the pandemic in the UK and internationally, which has allowed us to refine our reasonable worst-case scenario. The timing of a possible pandemic wave has also been reassessed. In the worst-case scenario, we can still expect around 30% of the Northern Ireland population to be affected by the virus in a future wave. That means that approximately 500,000 people or one third of the population may become ill with swine flu over the course of the next wave. In addition, 5,000 people could be hospitalised owing to the virus, and up to 525 could die. During the peak week, as many as 113,000 people could be affected. Those are not predictions; rather, they are assumptions that enable us to plan for the very worst that could happen. Scientists have advised that a substantial peak in the virus may occur in mid- or late October.

I announced during the summer that advice had been received from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) on which groups should be prioritised for vaccine. When the vaccine is licensed, it will initially be offered to individuals aged between six months and 65 years in the current seasonal flu clinical at-risk groups; all pregnant women, subject to licensing considerations; household contacts of immunocompromised individuals; and people aged 65 and over who are in the current seasonal flu clinical at-risk groups.

Those priority groups have been selected because they are at higher risk of severe illness from swine flu. Prioritising them ensures that we make best use of our initial quantities of vaccine. Front line health and social care workers will also be among the first to be vaccinated. The close contact that they have with patients means that they are at additional risk of contracting and transmitting the virus.

I expect to have sufficient vaccine for all those in the initial priority groups by the end of November. I anticipate that a licence will be granted in October; however, that is the responsibility of the European Medicines Agency (EMA), and I await its decision. I will continue to monitor the emerging evidence and the expert scientific and medical advice before taking any decisions on extending the programme beyond those initial priority groups. Planning assumptions will also need to be revised to take into account the impact of the vaccination programme.

I am pleased to announce that a UK-wide deal has been agreed with the General Practitioners Committee (GPC) on administration of the vaccine this autumn. The Department has agreed that GPs will receive £5.25

per dose of vaccine given and that district nurses will assist by vaccinating housebound people, in line with existing seasonal flu arrangements.

I am grateful to GPs for their willingness to take on that major vaccination programme. I am satisfied that their co-operation represents value for money in delivering the programme. Preparations for GPs to immunise the priority groups once the vaccine is licensed will now begin. Vaccination is our best defence in the battle against swine flu, but we must also be prepared for a significant increase in hospitalised cases. Experience elsewhere has shown that up to a quarter of hospitalised cases may require intensive care. Plans are in place locally and nationally to increase critical care capacity to cope with the potential demands of swine flu. I intend to more than double capacity in adult critical care. To provide that capacity in Northern Ireland, 47 adult ventilators are being procured.

The Department also plans to increase substantially the number of paediatric critical care beds and recognises that some older children may need to be cared for in adult critical care facilities, while receiving the necessary support from paediatric staff. The number of appropriately trained staff must be increased to support that additional capacity, plans for which have been developed.

Doubling critical care capacity will allow many more people to benefit from critical care than would otherwise be the case. To achieve such a significant increase, hospitals must deploy their trained workforce differently, and they may also have to postpone non-urgent, planned operations to concentrate staff and resources on the most seriously ill patients.

Keeping the public informed is a key element of our preparations. To that end, I have a major communications programme planned for the autumn and winter to maintain public confidence and awareness. That programme will build on the work that has been done to date, including the very effective bus panel advertisements that use the "sneezing man" image, which stresses the need for good hand hygiene. To reinforce the message that people should stay at home if they are experiencing swine flu symptoms, I ran a local advertising campaign. My Department is developing leaflets and other public information to accompany the swine flu vaccination programme.

In the summer, England launched the National Pandemic Flu Service in response to significant pressures experienced by GPs there. However, the number of cases to date in Northern Ireland and the fact that our primary care services have been coping well has not merited its introduction here. The situation is constantly under review and, should the need arise, that facility can be introduced quickly.

To date, most of the focus in the pandemic response has centred on the Health Service. However, if a more

severe pandemic wave is experienced later this year, we can expect to see significant pressure on schools and local services. Recently, I met my ministerial colleagues from the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning to stress the need for business as usual as far as possible during the pandemic, and I am pleased to note that children have returned to school as normal following the summer break. The Public Health Agency continues to work closely with schools to ensure that local risk assessments are provided if significant absentee rates are reported. Now that schools have reopened and with the onset of the autumn/winter flu season, I do not expect the recent decline in the number of cases to be sustained.

Yesterday, I met the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. A future pandemic wave could have a very disruptive effect on businesses due to absences and difficulties with delivering normal services.

I also met the Finance Minister to discuss funding for the swine flu pandemic; later this week, I will meet him to continue those discussions. The bill for dealing with the pandemic could be £80 million or higher. To date, we have spent almost £30 million, most of which relates to national initiatives, such as antivirals, vaccines, personal protection equipment and antibiotics. That figure does not include costs such as the delivery of vaccinations, antiviral distribution, staff backfill for sickness absences and extra capacity in intensive care. There can be absolutely no doubt that costs will rise.

My officials have developed and costed three possible scenarios: a relatively benign estimate, assuming a moderate peak in demand; a reasonably prudent estimate, factoring in our best assessment of the extent and place of the pandemic; and a reasonable worst-case scenario. I have placed a bid of £77 million for scenario 2 on the basis that it represents the most realistic estimate of the costs that are likely to be incurred. Against that, I can find a total of £27 million, which is more than one third of the cost. I must remind the House that without funding there will be serious consequences for the health and social care service, patients and the public.

Regular hand washing and respiratory hygiene remains the single most important thing that people can do to protect themselves and prevent the spread of the disease. If people have flu-like symptoms, they should stay at home and call their GP, who will provide advice. People should not go to their GP surgery or to a hospital, as they may spread the disease to others.

We cannot predict with certainty when the pandemic will peak in Northern Ireland or the number of people who will need hospital treatment. However, our robust preparations enable us to ensure that we can respond to any scenario, even the worst case that I outlined at the beginning of my statement.

We must not be complacent. Although this is not a killer virus, it can kill; therefore we must continue to put plans in place that are proportionate to the threat. I am confident that our Health Service will cope with any increase in the number of cases in the coming months. I will continue to keep Members updated on a regular basis, and I commend the statement to the House.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr Wells): I thank the Minister for his statement, and I also thank his staff for the regular updates that Members of the House and members of the Committee have been receiving.

As the Minister knows, the Chief Medical Officer and his assistant briefed the Committee on this issue. Indeed, during quite a long meeting, they also briefed the Deputy Chairperson and me. Openness and transparency throughout the process will reassure the community, so I hope that that trend will continue.

I extend my sympathy to the family of the baby who apparently — we are not yet certain — died as a result of swine flu, the second victim in Northern Ireland. I am sure that the House will join me in extending our sympathies to that family.

I am, however, concerned about the decision that was taken on a UK-wide basis to pay GPs £5.25 for administering each swine flu vaccine. If everyone in Northern Ireland is vaccinated, the bill will be almost £9 million. Given that GPs secured an extremely generous pay review three years ago, which has led to a 50% increase in their pay to an average of £108,000 per annum, it is a bit rich of the BMA to ask for further payments for the administration of vaccines. Frankly, GPs should have agreed to do that as part as their contract.

10.45 am

My questions about that decision are as follows: first, is it binding on Northern Ireland, or do we have any choice in the matter; and, secondly, has that figure of £9 million been built into the Minister's assumptions for the future cost of the swine flu pandemic, which has gone up from £55 million to approximately £70 million? Will the £9 million be included in that figure, or are we expecting that some form of grant aid will become available from the mainland? Finally, on a minor point, will the Minister reassure us that student nurses will be included on the front-line services priority list for vaccination?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I assure Mr Wells that all front-line Health Service staff will be vaccinated as a matter of priority. Without the staff, we obviously cannot continue to operate our hospitals and Health Service.

On the substantial point that Mr Wells made about GPs, Members will be aware that the GP contract is negotiated nationally and applies to England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Although I was kept informed throughout, this negotiation was carried out in London with the GPs' contractors. GPs are independent contractors who operate in the Health Service through the GPs' contract that is agreed nationally. They provide two essential work streams: essential services and additional services. Part of the additional services is referred to as directed enhanced services, and that is where this negotiation and deal comes from, because it is work outwith their normal workload.

Whether the contract negotiated three years ago was prudent is not a matter for me at this stage; I was not involved in that. In general, GPs in Northern Ireland provide an extremely good service for our patients. The front line is moving forward towards primary care, and our focus — the shift left of the Health Service in Northern Ireland — is about prevention being better than cure. Our GPs are very much in the front line of that, and their services are increasing all the time. People are aware that, when they go to the GP now, it is not simply a doctor; a whole range of services is being provided. I anticipate that GP services will increase. It is clear that this is an additional service that GPs provide.

We want GPs to administer the vaccinations because they have their patients' records and know who is in the priority risk groups. GPs can easily identify priority risks and deal with them accordingly.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for his statement and for the updates that we get on a regular basis. I also thank all those who have been working either directly or indirectly on the issue of swine flu. We should recognise that hard work has been done on swine flu by the health sector.

Like the Minister, I extend my sympathy to the family of the child whose death, it seems, is the second associated with swine flu. It is unwise for the Minister to make any additional statement at this point, but it would be useful to have further details through time.

The Minister indicated that 94 people had been hospitalised. It will be useful to have an idea of how many of those 94 people were in intensive care. I am hearing reports that people have been ill enough to go into intensive care.

The Minister went on to say that people who have symptoms that they think are associated with swine flu should not go to their GP or their local hospital. I am still hearing reports of people ringing GPs' surgeries and being asked to come to the surgery, even though they say that they have the symptoms that are associated with swine flu. There is an issue with that. Has the Minister heard any of those reports? If so, what can we

do to ensure that GPs' surgeries do not allow that to happen? If those people have swine flu and they end up in surgeries or in hospitals, the purpose of the measures that the Minister is advising in his public statements is being defeated.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am surprised at the Member's second point about people phoning their GPs and being told to come to the surgery; that should not be happening. Perhaps there is confusion over the symptoms being reported or what the proper response should be, but the proper response is for people to stay at home and not come out and spread the swine flu.

A number of people are in intensive care. I do not have to hand the number of people who went to hospital and ended up in intensive care, but it is a substantial portion of those whom the Member mentioned. I will determine what that number is and respond to the Member in writing.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Minister for his statement, which he made immediately upon coming back for the new term. I associate myself and my party with the Minister's remarks about the death of the small child. It is very sad that a family is in mourning. It would be useful to receive any further details if they become available. Our thoughts and prayers are very much with the family at this time.

The Minister spoke about a future surge in cases. That will, of course, create extra costs for and pressure points on the Health Service. When does the Minister think those pressure points will arise, if the financial arrangements as to who is paying for the associated costs are not sorted out quickly? Where will that hit? As we go into the autumn and winter, knock-on effects will be felt. In his statement, the Minister mentioned the effects on services. If the finance is not sorted out quickly, when will those effects start to bite?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have given a robust and realistic estimate of the costs, and that is the middle scenario. To date, we have expended around £30 million, with more to come. That is what is required to protect the population. In my budget settlement letter, along with the other parts of the settlement, I stated that I will bid for resources to deal with pandemic flu. That is what I am doing at the minute, and I am discussing that bid with the Finance Minister. It is clear that if we do not live up to our budget settlement, there will be issues not only for the Health Service, but for every Department and for all of us. Discussion on that is still going on.

With regard to a white knight coming from the Treasury, I listened to Mrs Robinson's optimistic response to me that the Treasury was going to pay the swine flu costs. I still have no knowledge of that, so I am waiting to hear of any developments.

Jim Wells made a point about the costs. All the estimates for the costs, as far as the GPs are concerned, are contained in the amount. I am trying to hold the money and the costs as best and low as I can alongside achieving value for money and so on. Ultimately, however, we have a responsibility to protect our population, many of whom will come to harm if we do not take the steps that we are taking.

Mrs Hanna: I thank the Minister for his statement. I extend my sympathy to the baby's family. It is a sad time for them.

I share the Health Committee Chairperson's concern about remunerating the GPs individually for each vaccination. They do a good job, but they are well paid already, and this situation is a health crisis.

Does the Minister have a particular communications strategy in place for ethnic minorities, who may not be so aware of or understand our public health system and issues around health and safety?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I understand what Mrs Hanna has said about GP remuneration. However, as I have said, those payments are being made as part of a national deal and contract of which we are very much part and, frankly, one from which we benefit more than we lose.

As far as ethnic minorities are concerned, the Department will be making every effort to ensure that everyone receives the proper and correct information. I am re-examining that for the autumn, and the Department will continue to upgrade and refresh that information as we go along. The Department has already made considerable efforts in the production of a guide to the Health Service for ethnic minorities who come from a different linguistic tradition and who are not completely fluent in English. I will continue to re-examine that, because it is very important that people receive the necessary information and that the Department provide that information to them.

Dr Deeny: I thank the Minister for his statement. I also thank him and his Department for their work since this major health issue became a global one. The Minister's statement has answered some of the questions that I intended to ask him, and I am delighted to see that the priority groups will be vaccinated by the end of November.

Is the Minister happy that the vaccine safety checks have been completed and that the safety profile of the vaccine will be good enough? I am aware that that is a European issue, but what is the view locally? Furthermore, will any surplus vaccine be made available to the general public after the priority groups have been vaccinated? Moreover, will regulations be made that will mean, for example, that we cannot vaccinate the general public until priority groups have been covered?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As far as priority groups are concerned, decisions are very much determined by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. That committee advises COBRA — the civil contingencies committee — on those issues, and the groups that I have detailed are the groups that COBRA considers to be most at risk. However, that will be only the initial phase of the vaccination programme, and, as I said, we should be in a position to have all the initial priority groups vaccinated by the end of November. We also have a delivery schedule for vaccines, and we will move through the general population after the priority groups have been vaccinated. Again, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, after taking expert advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), will determine the steps to be taken.

By the end of December, we anticipate having almost 1.5 million individual doses of vaccine to hand. The current plan is that everyone will receive two doses of the vaccine, although I understand that in China the entire population is being vaccinated on a one-dose strategy. That is something that the Department will monitor carefully, and it will take the advice that is offered.

Vaccine safety is governed by the European Medicines Agency, which is examining the safety of the new vaccine, just as it does for other medicines and vaccines. As I understand it, the vaccine will not involve injecting a live virus into anyone. The H1N1 vaccine will be very similar to the H5N1 vaccine that is used to treat seasonal flu, with some modifications made to take account of the new virus. Therefore, tried and proven medical and scientific technology, knowledge and expertise will be applied as it is every year with seasonal flu. That should provide comfort for everyone.

Mr Easton: I praise the Minister's Department for the good work that it continues to carry out.

Will the Minister commit to being the first man in Northern Ireland to receive the vaccine? That would show goodwill to the people here and would demonstrate that the vaccine is safe. Furthermore, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety was told last week that around 9,000 people here have received Tamiflu, and I also understand that quite a number of people diagnosed with swine flu has not been given antiviral drugs. Will the Minister give the accurate figure for the number of people in Northern Ireland who have had swine flu? Does having had swine flu mean that those people do not need to get the vaccine?

11.00 am

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I do not fall into the priority risk groups for those who will receive the vaccine and, therefore, I am not entitled to it. However, if I believe that public confidence requires it, I will be happy to be the first

person to step forward and take the vaccine, because I will be absolutely certain that it is safe. Based on my knowledge, I will also advise members of my family to take the vaccine.

Prescriptions for over 9,000 antivirals have been issued so far, and that is a good indication of the number of people who have taken the swine flu medication. We do not know whether those who have had swine flu will be free from the risk of getting it again. We do not know how the virus will perform, so I think that the advice would be that those people should be vaccinated. The advice is also that those people may have immunity for a year or two, but we cannot be certain: therefore, we will always put safety first.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and commend his Department for the work that has been done.

One of the difficulties is that so much is based on speculation and assumption about what might happen. The Minister said that there has been a decrease in the number of cases since July. We expect that there will be a peak week in mid-October, but the vaccine will not be licensed until late October and will not be available until November. How can we reconcile that chronology to ensure that what is happening will be an effective means of dealing with the swine flu pandemic?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: We can have confidence because, as the knowledge of the virus increases with experience, so the planning assumptions can be modified, and that is the case. We are working on assumptions and not on predictions, but those assumptions inform us as to how we model what will happen. The assumptions now tell us that there has been a reduction in the estimate of the number of fatalities involved and the number of hospitalisations. Nevertheless, the numbers are substantial. Those numbers will be revised again, and they may move upwards or downwards. The situation is based on international, national and regional experience.

The vaccine will be available for use in a vaccination programme once the licensing process is complete. We will always put patient safety first. The licensing process will take place in October. We will then be able to go forward and give the population the protection that it requires.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for keeping us informed during the summer months about this serious epidemic that has hit Northern Ireland. It is regrettable that we have had two deaths as a result of swine flu. On behalf of my party, I extend my sympathy to the family of the infant who died.

Approximately £8 million will be required to deal with swine flu. Does the Minister agree that, if the Finance Minister does not meet that bid, it will have serious consequences for the Health Service? The situation is

urgent, and I hope that when the Minister makes his bid the Finance Minister will heed the call. Northern Ireland is crying out for it, and the people of Northern Ireland deserve the best treatment that is humanly possible.

I also record my thanks and appreciation to the officials from the Minister's Department who will attend the Health Committee and brief us in the days and months ahead.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As far as the necessary resource is concerned, as I outlined in my statement, a robust estimate of the amount needed has been made, and I am having discussions with the Finance Minister. As everyone is aware, the budget settlement included provision for pandemic flu.

The response is a national response: the approach being taken in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is the same, and I will be having another discussion with the Finance Minister in due course. The swine flu pandemic is a serious challenge to the health of the population of Northern Ireland, and the Health Service has a duty to meet that challenge. Obviously, there will be a resource implication for whatever steps are taken. I have outlined that from the beginning, and I anticipate that the House will not be found wanting as far as protecting our people is concerned.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement. At all times he has tried to bring us as much information as possible, but sometimes we are concerned about some of the detail that we do not know.

In his statement, the Minister said that he hopes to increase the number of critical care beds and train up staff. I welcome that because even in normal times there are not enough beds to meet the needs. In my constituency, two children had to be transferred to England and Scotland during the Christmas and New Year period last year. In relation to children and young people, in particular, how many new beds will be provided and where will they be located? Is the budget for the provision of critical care capacity included in the Minister's bid, or is it additional? The Minister stated that £27 million could be found: are any other services being impacted adversely because of the need to move money around?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As far as the challenge ahead is concerned, hospitalisation in many cases will require critical care capacity, a point made by Sue Ramsey. I anticipate that critical care capacity, as far as beds are concerned, will more than double and that paediatric critical care beds will follow suit. Clearly, there is an issue regarding associated staffing, and we are planning for that at the moment. Robust plans are in place, and the trusts have worked very hard to get those plans in place. It will have an effect on other activities in hospitals, and I have outlined those possible effects in my statement.

The amount of money needed is included in my estimate of costs, as it properly should be. That is part of the response as we work our way through vaccinations, medical countermeasures, workforce planning, the steps being taken nationally as well as regionally, and the steps that we are taking on critical care capacity. All of those steps must be taken to ensure that the Health Service is able to cope with the anticipated demand. We expect, and the modelling shows, that the period will last for around 15 weeks and will peak roughly halfway through that 15 weeks. There could be more than 100,000 cases during that critical period. That will present a huge challenge to primary and secondary care in our hospitals and will affect the capacity to treat people through critical care, particularly priority risk groups such as young people and the elderly.

The £27 million that I have contributed is money that I have been able to identify in the health budget. Obviously, I would rather spend it on something else, but we all have to prioritise. When money is short, the thing to do is prioritise what is most needed.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for his statement. I want to ask about communication and the impact of swine flu on the management of the Health Service. The Minister has rightly pointed out the advice to people not to go to hospitals or GPs if they have flu-like symptoms. How does that sit with one of the other stated objectives of the Health Service, which is that of trying to manage the level of people keeping appointments, particularly at hospitals? I have come across cases of people who have cancelled appointments being lectured and warned that if they cancel further appointments they may miss their opportunity to see a specialist. How can we reconcile the different messages that are being given out?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This is an emergency; we are not dealing with our normal situation. Cancelled appointments represent a considerable expense for the Health Service, and we are trying to reduce them as much as possible. The percentage of people who do not up for appointments is running at around 10%. That represents a large number of people, and it costs the Health Service a lot of money.

Against that, however, we are asking people to be responsible and to exercise some personal judgement, and that involves not turning up at the doctor's surgery or the hospital if they believe that they have symptoms of swine flu. Those symptoms are available for all to see through the various strands of the communication strategy that we have been involved in. That communication strategy is about keeping the general public as informed as possible. We have done that to date, and we will continue to do that because, as far as our population is concerned, keeping them informed is crucial.

North/South Ministerial Council Language Body Sectoral Format

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in language body sectoral format.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McCausland): In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following report on the eighth North/South Ministerial Council meeting in language sectoral format. It is the fourth such meeting since the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly, and this report has been endorsed by Caitríona Ruane MLA.

The meeting was held in Gweedore on 9 July 2009. In it, my first meeting, I represented the Northern Ireland Executive as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, along with Caitríona Ruane, the Minister of Education. The Government of the Irish Republic were represented by Éamon Ó Cuív TD, Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. The meeting dealt with issues relating to the language body and its two constituent agencies: Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch, the Ulster-Scots Agency, and Foras na Gaeilge, the Irish language agency.

I will now present a summary of the issues discussed by the Council on 9 July 2009. The Council received progress reports from the chairperson and chief executive of the Ulster-Scots Agency, Mr Mark Thompson and Mr George Patton respectively, and the chairperson and chief executive of Foras na Gaeilge, Mr Liam Ó Maoilmhichil and Mr Ferdie Mac an Fhailigh respectively.

The Council noted the ongoing collaboration between the agencies on a range of projects. Those include working with Irish language officers in district councils with a view to offering the lecture series 'aspects of our shared heritage'; a film in Irish about the Ulster-Scots language and culture, which has been completed and will be broadcast on TG4; continuing co-operation on human resources and corporate governance issues; the preparation of a joint disability action plan; and the preparation of a joint policy on child protection. There have also been joint stands at a number of events; for example, the national ploughing championships and the Tall Ships event in Belfast.

The Council noted the progress made in regard to the annual reports and accounts for the North/South Language Body, including the presentation of the 2004 accounts to the Northern Ireland Assembly and both Houses of the Oireachtas in February 2009. Both agencies, in conjunction with the sponsor Departments,

are continuing to address outstanding issues in relation to the 2005 and subsequent annual reports and accounts as a priority. The Council requested a further report on progress for the next NSMC meeting in language sectoral format.

11.15 am

The Council discussed staffing issues in Foras na Gaeilge and the decentralisation of Foras na Gaeilge staff to Gweedore. The Council asked the sponsor Departments to continue to examine the Foras na Gaeilge staffing submission in light of the 2009 financial allocation. The two posts for Belfast, which were approved by the NSMC in 2008, were filled in February 2009.

The Council discussed and approved the introduction of a revised financial assistance scheme for use by the Ulster-Scots Agency. The amended scheme extends to consideration of applications relating to travel claims, community workers and project start-date payments for events. Those and other changes are designed to improve the practical operation of the scheme.

The Council noted the resignation of Mark Thompson as chairperson of Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch and acknowledged his contribution to the work of that body. The Council approved the appointment of Peter Gallagher to the board of the North/South Language Body from 9 July 2009 to 12 December 2011. Mr Gallagher will have responsibility for exercising the functions of the body through Foras na Gaeilge.

The Council agreed to hold its next meeting in language sectoral format in November/December 2009.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as a ráiteas inniu.

I thank the Minister for his statement. He said that the 2004 annual accounts of the North/South Language Body were presented to the Assembly and to both Houses of the Oireachtas in February 2009. However, the accounts for 2005 to 2008 are still outstanding. That is of particular concern to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, which has been examining how the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure manages its arm's-length bodies, in particular their financial accountability. When does the Minister expect the outstanding accounts to be signed off?

The Minister also said that the chair of Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch, Mr Mark Thompson, had resigned. When does the Minister expect a new chair to be appointed? Finally, was the development of an indigenous languages strategy discussed at the meeting

in relation to the Irish language and to Ulster-Scots? If not, when does the Minister intend to consult Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency on the draft strategy?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his questions. He asked about the delay in publishing the annual reports and accounts of the North/South Language Body. The accounts for 2000 and 2001 were qualified by the Northern Ireland Audit Office. There was, therefore, a delay in signing off the body's consolidated accounts. That eventually happened in 2004, but, as a result of the delay, the 2000 reports and accounts were not published until 2005. Subsequent annual reports and accounts were also delayed, as the Northern Ireland Audit Office must audit the accounts chronologically.

The 2001 report from the body was published in June 2006, and the 2002 and 2003 reports were published in May 2007. The 2004 report was published in February 2009, and, at the NSMC meeting in July, the Council requested a further report on progress for the next NSMC meeting in language sectoral format. The matter is, therefore, being progressed as quickly as possible. There is a general concern to get this matter back on track and totally up-to-date, but the problem originated in 2000 and 2001, and there has been a chronological knock-on effect.

A new chair will be appointed to *Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch* as soon as possible.

Finally, the indigenous languages strategy is an internal Northern Ireland and United Kingdom matter. Therefore, it was not discussed at the North/South Ministerial Council and is, consequently, not a matter for discussion this morning but for another occasion.

Lord Browne: I thank the Minister for his statement. I would be pleased if he could confirm that the 2009 budget for the language body has been approved. If not, when is it likely to receive endorsement from all sides?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: For a number of reasons, work on the budget for 2009 is still in progress. The draft 2009 business plan for the North/South Language Body is still under consideration by both sponsor Departments and both Finance Departments, in line with budgetary processes in Northern Ireland and the Republic. The sponsor Departments will work together to finalise the business plan and budget and bring it together for approval at a future NSMC meeting.

At their meeting on Thursday 10 September 2009, the Executive noted the efficiency saving guidance for North/South bodies that was agreed by both Finance Ministers. It was agreed that the Department of Finance and Personnel will circulate the guidance to sponsor Departments. North/South bodies, like all

other public bodies, need to maximise efficiency in light of the current economic climate.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for his somewhat sparse statement. I feel for him somewhat because I am sure that his expedition into deepest Donegal was a very lonely experience and that the die had been cast before he got there.

I am struck by the fact that the report indicates that there has been a lack of progress in the Ulster-Scots field. Historically, the Ulster-Scots language has lagged behind the island's other minority language. Was there any discussion at all about the way in which that quite obvious leeway should be made up?

The report appears to contain several points that show where the mechanics of getting moneys, help and aid to the Ulster-Scots community have been allowed to drift. Can the Minister assure the House that, under his tutelage, those matters will be addressed much more forcefully than they have been in the past?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I note Mr Robinson's point that the report is sparse; however, it is an accurate reflection of what was discussed at the meeting.

I share the Member's concerns about progress on Ulster-Scots language and culture. I am keen to see those matters taken forward. A number of areas needed attention, and my predecessor highlighted those at an earlier stage by saying that community development and community empowerment for the Ulster-Scots community must be emphasised. There is a renewed focus on those matters; such a focus had not been in place in previous years, going back to 2000-01. That is reflected in the financial assistance scheme, which has now been brought forward. Prior to that, there was difficulty with funding workers in the community, and that area will now be accommodated by the financial assistance scheme.

To paraphrase Ken Robinson, he talked about moving towards parity and equality. If we are to have a shared and better future in Northern Ireland to which we are all committed, our society must be based on equality. I am committed to the Executive's desire to work towards that shared and better future, but good relations will be sustainable only if they are aligned to the equality agenda; they cannot be built on unequal foundations. Therefore, I will seek to address the current imbalances between Ulster Scots and Irish and strive to achieve parity of esteem and parity of funding for both. I think that we have made significant progress to date. For example, between 2005 and 2008, funding allocations from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to Ulster Scots almost doubled, and funding for Irish increased by just over 6%.

Progress is being made. However, I agree with the Member that there is still some distance to go.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an ráiteas ón Aire, cé go bhfuil sé tanaí go leor ar a lán bealaí. Tá béim mhór ar an mhaorlathas agus níl go leor béime ar thionscnaimh teangan. Ba mhaith liom níos mó béim a fheiceáil ar thionscnaimh teangan.

Cúis bhuartha domh go raibh dhá nuachtán Gaeilge againn sa tír seo go dtí le déanaí: nuachtán laethúil sa Tuaisceart, ‘Lá’; agus nuachtán seachtainiúil sa Deisceart, ‘Foinse’. Tá an dá nuachtán sin ar shiúl anois. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire ar pléadh ceist na nuachtán sin ag an chruinniú i nGaoth Dobhair.

Chomh maith leis sin, ba mhaith liom —

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it not protocol in the House that, when a Minister makes a statement, questions are asked? It is not an opportunity for a Member to make a statement in a language that 80% of the House probably does not understand.

Mr McElduff: On a point of order. Perhaps Mr Morrow is more of an expert on procedures than I am. Is it in order to raise a point of order during a debate on a Minister’s statement? It may be.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am quite certain that the Member will come to a question as soon as possible.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Le frinne, sílim gur chuir mé ceist nó dhó le linn na cainte a rinne mé, agus tá brón orm nár thuig an tiarna uasal thall an méid sin.

Ar aon nós, míneoidh mé an scéal sin go mion nuair a dhéanfas mé aistriú ar —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to come to his question.

Mr D Bradley: Creidim go bhfuil sé de cheart agam labhairt i nGaeilge anseo, agus go bhfuil sé de dhualgas orm an méid a deirim i nGaeilge a aistriú go Béarla ina dhiaidh sin.

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

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will take any points of order at the end of the debate. Again, I ask the Member to come to his question. It is not the time to make a speech.

Mr D Bradley: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I believe that, under the rules of the House, I am permitted to speak in Irish and that I am obliged to translate whatever I say in Irish into English. I intend to do so. During my contribution in Irish, I asked a number of questions. I understand that Lord Morrow may not have realised that. I assure him that I asked several questions.

I thank the Minister for his statement, although it is, as Mr Ken Robinson pointed out, rather thin. There is an overemphasis on bureaucracy and an underemphasis on actual language projects. I ask the Minister whether, during the Council meeting, the question of Irish language newspapers was raised. There were two in Ireland: ‘Lá’, which was published in Belfast and unfortunately, due to lack of funding, had to wind up; and the weekly newspaper ‘Foinse’. Was that issue discussed at the meeting? If so, can the Minister report on it to the House?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am fascinated that such a long speech in Irish contracted to such a short question. Interestingly enough, Irish language newspapers were discussed. I was interested to be informed by the Republic’s Minister that, in fact, there are larger sales for English tabloid newspapers than for Irish language newspapers in the Gaeltacht.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I congratulate Dominic on his contribution. In fact, his contribution was much longer and contained a lot more detail than that which the Minister provided today. Well done, Dominic.

11.30 am

I wish to let the Minister and Members know that, during the recess, some members of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure were not always on holiday. We spent some time on the north Antrim coast visiting language groups, which we are discussing today, including Carntogher Community Association, the Ullans Speakers’ Association in Ballymoney and Gaelscoil an Chaistil in Ballycastle. Those three visits proved very interesting; however, the most interesting of them was —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that he must ask a question on the statement.

Mr McCarthy: The question is coming now, Mr Deputy Speaker. The most interesting visit was to the Ullans Speakers’ Association, which is made up of the Ulster Speakers’ Society, the Ulster-Scots Agency, the Ulster-Scots Community Network and the Ulster-Scots Academy. All the groups said that their funding is inadequate, which is an issue that Ken Robinson spoke about earlier. The association said that the council discussed and approved —

Lord Morrow: Mr Bradley spoke about that, too.

Mr McCarthy: I am speaking in English, yet Lord Morrow is not even giving me a chance. Where do we go from here?

The council discussed and approved — that is the important point, Mr Deputy Speaker — the introduction of a revised financial assistance scheme. I am sure that the Ullans Speakers’ Association will be delighted to hear about that. The group had the highest

commendation for Éamon Ó Cuív TD from the South of Ireland and for his contribution —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will ask the Minister to answer that question, if it is one.

Mr McCarthy: I hope that the Minister can answer that question. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his comments and his question. I think that the report accurately reflected the meeting, which was brief and businesslike. I can only report what actually took place. I acknowledge the Member's comments about the Ulster-Scots Agency financial assistance scheme, which the Ulster-Scots community very much welcomes. The financial assistance scheme is in keeping with the previous Minister's commitment on community development and empowerment. In fact, it represents the outworking of that commitment.

The revised financial assistance scheme was approved at the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in language body sectoral format on 9 July. Applications are being evaluated and determined by the Ulster-Scots Agency's board to ensure compliance not only with the scheme but with the agency's strategic, corporate and business plans. My understanding is that the agency is also holding a number of roadshows so that people will be properly informed about the opportunities that are now available through the scheme. The general point about equality of funding is one that I have already dealt with and that I fully endorse.

Mr Shannon: Members will be glad to hear that I am not going to give an account of my holidays and of where I was during the summer. I will simply ask questions on the Minister's statement.

I welcome Mr McCausland to his new position as Minister. It is great to see him here. I also pay tribute to Mark Thompson, the Ulster-Scots Agency's outgoing chairperson, for his hard work and for the significant contribution that he has made.

First, the Minister spoke about progress reports in his statement. He said that the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge had a joint stand at last month's Tall Ships event. I presume that the stand was there. I am sure that everyone who attended the event enjoyed a very nice day, but I certainly did not see the joint stand there. Will the Minister confirm where it was located? Was it hidden somewhere near a burger stand or placed out of the road?

Mr D Bradley: Ask a question.

Mr Shannon: That is a question. That from the man who asked five questions.

Secondly, we are all aware of the significant numbers of people who are involved in Ulster Scots in Donegal.

Will the Minister indicate what the cross-border bodies have done to encourage members of the Ulster-Scots family in Donegal? What have they done to ensure that every contribution and effort is being made to make them feel fully part of the process? Sometimes they feel as if they are not involved.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Tall Ships event was a success. So many people were there that I must confess that I did not see the stand, even though I was there on a couple of occasions. However, I am reliably informed that the joint stand was at Custom House Square.

The Ulster-Scots community in Donegal is concentrated mainly in the Lagan area of east Donegal and along Donegal Bay in south Donegal. There are Ulster-Scots groups in both of those areas, and work is being done through the agency and the Ulster-Scots Community Network with those groups in a number of ways, such as through projects and cross-border activities. It is good to maintain the relationship between Ulster-Scots communities in the Republic and Northern Ireland. There were some very good projects such as festivals in Donegal and publications about the contribution of Ulster Scots to the Donegal area.

Mr Brolly: An cheist atá agam: an bhfuil a fhios ag an Aire cad é an cineál taispeántais a bhí ann ag an Tall Ships agus a bheas ann i gCill Dara an tseachtain seo chugainn?

What kind of stall or joint exhibition was at the Tall Ships event, and what kind of stall will there be at the National Ploughing Championships in County Kildare?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I did not see the stall at Custom House Square. *[Interruption.]*

However, having seen displays by both bodies on other occasions, I assume that the stall consisted of publications by Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency as well as displays of various aspects of both languages and cultures.

In answer to the comment that was made from a sedentary position, the point was already made that the Tall Ships event was such a success and attracted so many people that it was difficult for anybody to see everything that was on display.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his statement. I will be much briefer than other Members. Will the Minister clarify whether the Ulster-Scots Agency can fund travel by community groups outside Northern Ireland or the Irish Republic?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The issue of travel is long-standing and has been a difficulty for Ulster-Scots groups, particularly those in east Antrim that look across the sea to Scotland. Although Scotland is their nearest neighbour and is only a short distance

away, they have been unable to access support for joint projects with, and visits to, their counterparts there.

The agency has reviewed its financial assistance scheme, which was approved by the North/South Ministerial Council on 9 July. That allows the agency to consider the provision for travel arrangements for community groups to travel outside the island of Ireland. Obviously, the particular focus will be on Scotland.

In determining whether a particular application will be approved, the agency will take a number of factors into account. Groups may wish to travel to undertake research that will lead to a report or publication; attend a conference or seminar to promote greater understanding of the Ulster-Scots language and culture; or to facilitate community representatives who need to travel to undertake joint projects with groups that are based in Scotland and that will ultimately benefit the Ulster-Scots language, culture or history.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his statement. I was very impressed with his comments about a shared future based on equality and human rights; he did not actually say “human rights”, but I assume that he concurs with the sentiment. He talked about the notion of building good relations based on equality, which is something that he along with others could give leadership on and is something that we would concur with.

The Minister talked about the decentralisation of some Foras na Gaeilge staff to Gweedore. Is there a time frame for that likely decentralisation?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I note the Member’s comments on a shared and better future. It is not within my ministerial remit to comment on that, but I did comment on it on a radio programme this morning and explained the reasons for the delay in bringing forward the strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration. That delay is not due to Members on this side of the House.

The delay in filling Foras na Gaeilge’s posts is due to a number of issues. Obviously, the Irish Government’s decentralisation policy applies to Foras na Gaeilge, but there have been protracted negotiations between the unions and management regarding the posts that will be moved to Gweedore.

Due to market forces, Foras na Gaeilge has had problems with staff retention. Finally, the recruitment of specialist staff who speak Irish and who wish to live in the Gaeltacht has been problematic. It is an ongoing piece of work, but it is not something for which a particular date was given. Therefore, I will have to look into it and make further enquiries. In due course, I will provide a written answer. I am not sure how informative that answer will be, but I will endeavour to do that.

Mr T Clarke: I declare an interest as a member of the Randalstown Ulster-Scots Society, which sits in the Randalstown Memorial Orange Hall.

The Minister referred to financial assistance and travel costs. What criteria will the agency apply when supporting travel claims?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I think that I covered travel costs a moment ago: they have to be for something that is going to produce real benefit. For example, travel might involve attending a conference in Scotland on an appropriate theme or a joint research project that involves co-operation with a Scottish group.

Quite a number of Ulster-Scots organisations in Northern Ireland are members of parent bodies in Scotland. There are already strong links, particularly between east Antrim coastal groups, in places such as Ballycarry and Cairncastle, and groups in Scotland. To ensure that we get value for money, there would have to be clearly demonstrable results from any travel, and it must bring the maximum benefit to the wider community.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister on that statement. The Speaker has received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council.

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

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will take that point of order before we conclude this item of business.

Lord Morrow: There is a facility in the House for Members to speak in English and Irish. There is a clear onus upon those who decide to speak in Irish that they must give a full interpretation, in English, of what they have said. Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like you to look at what has been said in Irish today, because when I heard the interpretation in English, it took around a quarter of the time than when spoken in Irish. I would like the Speaker’s Office to take a look at the translation situation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will ask the Speaker’s Office to come back to you on that, Lord Morrow.

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On a practical level, it would be very helpful if all Members could avail themselves of the simultaneous translation system that officials benefit from. The infrastructure is already in place — córas aistriúcháin — and Members’ understanding of what is being said in Irish would be aided and speeded up by access to that system.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will ask the Speaker to deal with that and come back to it.

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In relation to the enquiry that Lord Morrow asked you to make to the Speaker's Office, nuair a bhí mé ag caint i nGaeilge ní ba luaithe agus nuair a rinne mé iarraidh an méid a dúirt mé i nGaeilge a aistriú go Béarla gur chuir tusa faoi bhrú mé deireadh a chur le mo chuid cainte.

When I made a contribution earlier in Irish, I proceeded to attempt to translate it into English. However, Mr Deputy Speaker, you hurried and harried me and asked me to bring my remarks to a conclusion. If a full and frank translation was not provided by me, it was not out of any lack of intent to do so, but because of the time constraints that you placed upon me.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That will be part of the review. I will also review your challenge to the ruling that I gave you to ask a question.

11.45 am

North/South Ministerial Council

Inland Waterways Sectoral Format

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement about the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in inland waterways sectoral format.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McCausland): With your permission, I will make a statement, in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, about a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in inland waterways sectoral format.

The meeting was held in Gweedore, County Donegal on 9 July 2009. The Executive were represented by the Minister of Education, Caitríona Ruane, and me. The Government of the Irish Republic were represented by Éamon Ó Cuív TD, Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. The statement has been agreed with Caitríona Ruane, and I make it on behalf of us both.

Mr John Martin, chief executive officer of Waterways Ireland, provided a report on progress that included several significant achievements. The Council noted that Waterways Ireland received a sustainability award for its headquarters from the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. Moreover, Boyle marina in County Roscommon received the award for best marina development at the local authority management awards.

The Council noted that 79m of additional moorings had been provided, with 23m at the Round O in Enniskillen, 20m at Camus on the Lower Bann and 36m at Portglenone on the Lower Bann. The Council noted the further development of the Lakelands Initiative campaign for the Erne/Shannon system from Belleek to Limerick, which will continue with the distribution of brochures under the overarching title 'Lakeland and Inland Waterways'. The 2009 sponsorship programme has been well received, and over 50 events have been approved.

The Council received a presentation on the restoration of the Royal canal and noted its successful enhancement to further develop access to the waterways and waterside activities and to complete its connection to the Shannon. The Council received a progress report on the restoration work for the Clones/Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster canal, including a survey of that section of the canal, which was to be completed by mid July. The Council also noted the recent consultations with local stakeholders and the programme for completion of the project. The Council noted Waterways Ireland's annual report and accounts for 2008, which were presented prior to being laid before the Assembly and the Oireachtas.

The Council agreed proposals for a number of property disposals in the context of a range of development projects on the waterways and noted progress on property-management issues, including the pilot registration project. It also noted future plans for property registration on the Royal canal and the Grand canal. The Council agreed that its next meeting in inland waterways sectoral format will take place in November or December 2009.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá an tAire gnóthach sa Teach inniu; níl aon amhras faoi sin.

I note with pleasure the Minister's reference to Waterways Ireland's achievement in obtaining a sustainability award for its headquarters in Enniskillen. In May 2009, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure held its weekly meeting at the Waterways Ireland headquarters and toured the building. It is a very impressive setting.

The Minister referred to a programme for the completion of the project to restore the Ulster canal from Upper Lough Erne to Clones. The Committee has a keen interest in that matter. Will the Minister indicate when the Ulster canal will reopen? He will be aware of ongoing interest in the matter, led by the Blackwater Regional Partnership, which is based in Caledon. A recent public information event there was attended by his ministerial colleagues, including Mr Poots and Michelle Gildernew. Will the Minister provide some hope to the campaigners who are involved in the restoration of the Ulster canal?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Waterways Ireland is working on the section of the Ulster canal between Clones and Upper Lough Erne. That project will cost €35 million. The construction cost of that section is being funded by the Irish Republic. Waterways Ireland intends to seek planning permission for that project by mid-2010, which will be followed by tendering for a detailed design and build contract.

Lord Browne: I thank the Minister for his statement. I would be pleased to ascertain whether he is considering the appointment of a board to Waterways Ireland, and, if so, what the likely composition of such a board would be.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since taking office, I have been of the opinion that there is much to commend the appointment of an oversight board. Arising from the St Andrews Agreement, a review of the effectiveness and efficiency of North/South implementation bodies is under way. If that review recommends a board for Waterways Ireland, Ministers in the NSMC will have to consider that issue along with our counterparts in the Irish Republic. It

would be premature to comment on the composition of such a board at this stage. However, I am interested in that matter, and I know that it is being considered.

Mr K Robinson: I welcome the Minister's statement, which is much meatier than his previous one. He mentioned the pilot registration project. It would be helpful to Members if he could explain what that project entails.

I note also that the Minister's statement mentions the obvious progress that has been made on inland waterways in the Republic of Ireland. That is to be welcomed: it will give a great boost to the tourism and leisure industry down there. However, the emphasis in the statement is on the link between the Shannon and Erne systems, and the Ulster canal link to those waterways. I remind the Minister that the Ulster canal runs into Lough Neagh near Maghera, on the River Blackwater. That area could do with some development. Given, in particular, the current favourable exchange rates, will he consider ways in which that section of canal could be brought forward for scrutiny, approval and, eventually, perhaps, a rebuild?

I also welcome the work that has been done at Camus and Portglenone on the Lower Bann system. I am sure that my colleague from East Londonderry will comment on the potential of the Lower Bann and the Lough Neagh basin, which generally remains untapped. We have an opportunity to build the good practice that we have seen south of the border into our own infrastructures for the benefit of leisure and tourism in Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The pilot registration scheme is nothing to do with registering pilots: it is about registering property. There were issues about the ownership of land and how that land, previously owned by various people, came together under the aegis of Waterways Ireland. The pilot scheme is operating in the Republic; registration of ownership of land in Northern Ireland is being dealt with separately.

There are currently no plans to develop the next section of the Ulster canal. The outline business case that was submitted to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in December 2006 concluded that the preferred option was to restore the south-west end of the canal. However, when the decision was taken to proceed with the south-west section between Clones and Upper Lough Erne, Ministers in the NSMC agreed to keep the remainder — from Clones to Lough Neagh — under review. The matter is now under review, but there are no plans at present.

I will pick up on Ken Robinson's point about the economic and other benefits of improvements to the Lower Bann system. In 2008, Waterways Ireland completed 36m of additional moorings on the Lower

Bann at the Vow, near Coleraine. Works on the Lower Bann include jetties and moorings at Christie Park in Coleraine, which were completed in 2003-04; jetties and moorings at Kilrea, which were completed in 2005-06; and refurbishment of the lock house at the Cutts in Coleraine. Several works were carried out at Mount Sandel in 2006-07, which cost approximately £386,000. Work is ongoing to an extent, bit by bit, on the Lower Bann. I agree with the Member about the benefits of such improvements. I am sure that, as lots more money becomes available in future, those projects will be taken forward. There are financial constraints on that; nevertheless, it is very much in mind.

Mr Dallat: Ken Robinson has stolen my thunder to some degree.

I welcome the 20m of additional mooring that has been provided near Coleraine, and acknowledge that Waterways Ireland, with responsibility for the development of the Lower Bann, has been outstanding in its performance. Sadly, the other Government agencies have not been.

When will an overall plan be announced for the development of the River Bann, which would have the potential to create hundreds, if not thousands, of new jobs in leisure and tourism? Could that be a topic for discussion at the next meeting of the intergovernmental body? I do not care whether that is held in Gweedore or Cullybackey; the important issue is that the potential of the Lower Bann is not missed.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Unless Gweedore moves into Northern Ireland, the next meeting will not be held there. The next meeting will be held in Northern Ireland.

I share the Member's interest in the Lower Bann. I will write to the Member with some thoughts on that. That would be the most appropriate and effective way of dealing with that question.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am disappointed by the response that the Minister gave to an earlier question on the Ulster canal. The Minister said that there were no plans to complete the restoration of the Ulster canal up to Lough Neagh. I understood that the restoration was starting from Lough Neagh. The report includes the words:

“the programme for completion of the project.”

It is not a completion. If it were a completion, it would go up to Lough Neagh. The Minister has said that there are no plans to do so; will he elaborate on that?

The report also states:

“The Council agreed proposals for a number of property disposals in the context of a range of development projects”.

Will the Minister tell us whether there have been any discussions with property owners in those consultations? Do they agree with the plans for the Ulster canal?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The project that is under way is to restore the canal from Clones to Upper Lough Erne. At present, there are no specific plans beyond that. People will recognise a desire to have the network completed in due course. However, that is the situation at present.

Waterways Ireland disposed of six properties that required NSMC approval. They were all in the Irish Republic; there were none in Northern Ireland. None of the disposals was financially significant.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his comments on the proposals. The Minister's report refers to receiving a presentation on the restoration of the Royal canal. It is good to see the Royal canal being highlighted. Will the Minister confirm what contribution the Irish Government are making to the improvement work on the Royal canal through the North/South bodies?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I share the Member's delight in the affection for all things royal in the Irish Republic.

The funding of capital works in the Republic is entirely a matter for the Government of the Irish Republic. They fund 100% of capital works in the Republic; we do not contribute. We pay 15% of the revenue costs for Waterways Ireland, and the Republic pays 85%, which is proportionate to the amount of miles of navigable waterway in Northern Ireland and in the Republic.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement, and thank him and his ministerial colleagues for the work that was done at the meeting. The Minister kindly indicated the budget for a section of work that is being carried out on the Ulster canal. Will he tell us whether that programme and its budget have already been subject to the kind of efficiency tests that the two Departments of Finance are subjecting the North/South bodies to?

Will the budget be subject to such a test in the future? Have the proposals been passed by “An Bord Snip” in the South, or will they be under review?

12.00 noon

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: At the meeting, there was no mention of any derogation from the Irish Republic's commitment to fund the project. That section of work, from Clones to Lough Erne, is entirely funded by the Republic. There was no mention that the Republic would step back or withdraw from that, and there the matter rests.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. An t-am seo ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire an bhfuil aon phleananna ann chun scéimeanna nua a thabhairt isteach faoi obair na Comhairle. Are there plans to bring any new schemes into the council's work?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I will make a further comment on the previous question before I come to that one. At the meeting, it was mentioned that there will be efficiency savings, North and South. However, there was no specific mention of funding of the Ulster canal.

I have now forgotten Mr Bradley's question.

Mr D Bradley: Are there plans for any new schemes?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I assume that the question refers to whether it is intended to bring any other waterways into Waterways Ireland; there is no intention to do that. I have a list of the other waterways in Northern Ireland, but those are not in the domain of Waterways Ireland. There is no further consideration as the situation stands.

Mr Savage: I also congratulate the Minister on his statement. There has been much talk about two particular canals this morning. However, has the Minister any plans for the Lagan canal, which I consider to be the most important canal in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: With regards to the Lagan canal and linking Belfast to Lough Neagh, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure owns residual property rights that remain in Government ownership as a successor in title to the former Lagan Navigation Company. Those are primarily the locks and towpath on the 12-mile lower Lagan navigation, which links Stranmillis in Belfast with Sprucefield and Lisburn. Capital projects of that nature, even if viable and feasible, are unlikely to be wholly financed by central government.

The Department met local authorities and other bodies that have an interest in the Lagan navigation with a view to developing a strategy for possible reopening in the future. To that end, the Lagan Canal Restoration Trust was established in 2008-09. It is funded by the four local authorities, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and my Department, and it aims to explore the scope for funding and delivering the 27-mile project. By way of support, my Department agreed to fund the trust in commissioning an economic appraisal for the potential reopening of the lower Lagan canal. That report is due for completion in September 2009.

I am also delighted to confirm that works to restore the Department's lock three at Newforge, with financial assistance from the Heritage Lottery Fund, will be completed by the end of October 2009. That will complement the restoration of the adjoining lock house, which was recently completed by Castlereagh Borough Council.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Forestry Bill

Second Stage

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Forestry Bill [NIA 11/08] be agreed.

Our current forestry legislation dates back to 1953 and reflects the priorities of an era when commercial timber production was the main focus. The legislation has served its purpose for much of the period since 1953. However, it has been evident for some time that forestry is of significant importance for reasons other than timber production, although timber production continues to be important, particularly for the North's economy and in supporting local industry and rural jobs.

The impact of continued deforestation on climate change and biodiversity has raised concerns globally. It is widely recognised that increasing forest cover can enhance the many benefits that forests already provide, be they environmental, economic or social. The North is significantly under-forested, with only 6% of the land area covered, compared with 10% in the South, 12% in Britain and 33% on average throughout the EU.

The forestry strategy that my Department published in 2006 acknowledges the need for the sustainable management of existing forests and a steady expansion of tree cover. It seeks to deliver a more competitive forestry industry in the North, and it provides for a balanced approach between producing commercial timber, protecting the forest environment and providing increased opportunities for forest-based recreation. Legislation must be in place to provide a statutory framework to deal with those issues.

The new Bill will address my Department's contemporary and evolving commercial, environmental and social objectives for forestry. It will allow us to obtain better value from the forest estate through creating new revenue-generating opportunities, and it will enable us to secure better use of recreational facilities and buildings. It will help to protect all forest trees from damage, reintroduce a restriction on the felling of trees in private woodland and provide a public right of access to state forests. Those are the key principles of the Bill.

Before I comment on the generalities of the Bill, I want to thank all those who responded to the consultation exercise that was carried out by my Department last year on the proposals for new legislation. I also thank the Chairperson and members of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development for facilitating

presentations from my officials on two occasions, and for their comments.

The Bill contains 39 clauses and two schedules. It provides a statutory framework within which the Department can deliver its forest expansion and sustainable forestry objectives. Members will be glad to hear that I do not intend to comment on every clause, because many deal with related aspects of the same key provisions. However, I would like to explain the thinking behind the main provisions.

Clause 1 creates the foundation of the Bill and describes the Department's duty to promote forestry. That has been expanded beyond the duty to promote traditional forestry, as outlined in the Forestry Act 1953, to include the wider economic, environmental and social context of modern forestry. The Bill thus seeks to reflect the modern understanding of what is meant by sustainable forestry.

Clauses 2 and 3 provide the Department with the main powers to engage in and support the afforestation of land and forest activity, including the acquisition and disposal of land. It also enables the Department to provide facilities on forestry land to improve its amenity.

That provision will enable the Department to deliver social and recreational forestry. Through arrangements with partners, for example, it will be able to facilitate the provision of nature trails, viewpoints, car parks, toilets, and so forth. Recently, the Department published a strategy to develop the recreational and social use of its forests. Those provisions will provide the Department with the powers to support the implementation of that strategy.

Clause 4 includes provisions to allow the Department to use or develop its forestry land for a purpose other than forestry. The aim is to allow the Department to develop or facilitate what might be regarded as non-forestry opportunities. Those include tourism opportunities, such as the provision of forest chalets or cabins in forests and the development of renewable energy possibilities, such as wind farms. The provisions will enable the Department better to realise the full potential of its forests and, at the same time, obtain better value from the public forest estate. However, in exercising those powers, the Department will be required to have due regard to its general duty to promote forestry, as outlined in clause 1.

Clause 5 creates a new power to enable the compulsory acquisition of land for any of the functions under the Bill. The Department seeks that power primarily to help it to deal with situations in which its forests and associated timber assets are landlocked, and access, even after reasonable negotiation, cannot be secured. In those situations, the public value of mature timber, which is the result of many years of public investment, could be lost. Other circumstances

in which land may be required include the facilitating of access to planned recreation, tourism initiatives and for biodiversity purposes.

The power is widely drafted because the Department cannot foresee the full range of contingencies that may require such a power. Nevertheless, I appreciate that such a power could give cause for concern. Indeed, the Agriculture Committee has already commented on that provision. I assure the Committee and other Members that the power will be used sparingly and only with ministerial supervision. The vesting process is described in schedule 1 to the Bill and is based around the procedures that are used under the Local Government Act (NI) 1972, which is considered to be the cornerstone of modern vesting law, with all the established rights, including representation, recourse to an inquiry by the Planning Appeals Commission, and compensation, etc.

Clause 6 provides for the Department to carry on inquiries and to collect and disseminate the results, including the preparation and publication of statistics for the purposes of any of its functions under the Act. That is largely a carry-over from the 1953 Forestry Act.

Clause 7 is a new power that allows the Department to:

“do anything which appears to it to be conducive or incidental to the discharge of its general duty under section 1(1).”

That clause also allows engagement in partnerships or participation in a body corporate in support of the Department's general functions, which could, for example, include future recreational or renewable-energy initiatives. The Forestry Commission in England and Wales has such powers under the Forestry Act 1967. That power is not intended to be additional to the general duty, but to supplement it.

Clauses 8 and 9 are intended to protect forest trees from damage by wild animals. Clause 8 will allow the owner or occupier, in the event of damage by wild animals to growing trees on his land, to cull such animals at any time, either in his woodland or in any adjoining land that he owns. That clause will apply to owners of any woodland, private or public.

Clause 9 provides the Department with a power to deal with damage or likely damage to any woodland, public or private, by wild animals that live in adjacent lands in other ownership. The Department may serve a notice on the occupier of the adjacent land that will require him or her to deal with the problem. Failing that, the Department may enter the land and control the wild animals on that land.

That provision has been the subject of concerns from stakeholders with a game-shooting interest. However, our long-term aim is to double the area of forest in the North, and that is likely to increase the habitat that is suitable for forest-dwelling animals, including deer, which have the capacity to damage

woodland and to hinder woodland regeneration. Those powers are designed to enable the Department to limit possible damage and would be exercised only where landowners are unable or unwilling to address the problem.

Similar provisions are contained in the 1953 Forestry Act and in legislation in Britain and in the South, but the proposed provisions in clauses 8 and 9 of the Bill go further in certain respects. For example, deer are now included under the definition of “wild animal”. On that point, we need to appreciate the protections that have been put in place for the Irish hare. I would like the Irish hare to be outside the definition of “wild animal”, given that it is a distinct subspecies and given the work that is going on in my Department and with the Department of the Environment.

Clause 10 is a carry-over from the 1953 Forestry Act and is a standard provision in forestry legislation that is aimed at protecting woodlands, both public and private, from the threat of fire damage. It permits the Department to serve a notice on the occupier of adjacent uncultivated land where vegetation poses a fire risk to an area of forest. If the owner does not respond to the notice, the Department may enter the land and remove or destroy any vegetation that poses a risk. Some stakeholders have expressed concern about that provision, but I refer again to our long-term aim of doubling the area of forest in the North and the need for the Department to have powers to protect woodland, whether in private or public ownership.

Clause 11 offers protection to woodland owners or the Department’s authorised officials who take action under clauses 8, 9 or 10 of the Bill against prosecution under the Wildlife Order 1985 or the Game Preservation Act of 1928. Clause 12 includes provisions to restrict the burning of vegetation that is close to forests and is another carryover from the 1953 Forestry Act. Clause 13 amends the Plant Health Act 1967 to provide powers to make subordinate legislation to control the tree disease that is posed by wood packaging.

12.15 pm

Clauses 14 to 29 deal with the felling of trees, and the key provision is the requirement for anyone who wishes to fell trees on land of 0.2 hectares or more to have a felling licence granted by my Department. That will help to underpin the strategic objective of sustainable forest management. The aim is to ensure that private landowners manage their land with due regard to sustainability, including restocking, where appropriate, sites that have been felled.

To obtain a felling licence, the landowner will have to prepare a felling management plan for my officials to consider. The aim will be to keep the management plan as simple and straightforward as possible. Felling licences are already required in England, Scotland,

Wales and the South; introducing them in the North is consistent with the principles of good forest management.

A number of exemptions to the requirement to have a felling licence have been included in the Bill; for example, the felling of fruit trees, the topping or lopping of trees and the felling of trees in gardens. Again, that is a pragmatic approach that does not place undue restrictions on people and that will, hopefully, enable us to move forward without undue bureaucracy.

To safeguard the interest of private landowners, the Bill contains provision for compensation in the event that an application for a felling licence is refused. There is also a right of appeal against a decision not to grant a felling licence. A further important provision, which includes an appeal mechanism, is the power to require restocking after unauthorised felling. Procedures related to an application for a felling licence and the requirements of a felling management plan will be prescribed in subordinate legislation, which will be subject to separate consultation.

Clause 30 introduces a statutory right of pedestrian access to the Department’s forests for recreation purposes, subject to by-laws, and that has been welcomed by a range of stakeholders. The remaining clauses 31 to 39 include powers of entry; regulation-making powers; provision for amendments and repeals; and provisions that relate to commencement.

I commend the Bill to the Assembly. It provides the necessary legislative framework to enable the Department to meet Government objectives in relation to forest expansion and the sustainable management of existing woods and forests, through which the many diverse social, economic and environment benefits can be realised. Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Paisley Jnr):

At the outset, I must say that if I have to leave the House early, it will not be out of discourtesy to the House, the debate or the Minister; it will be because there is an Agriculture Committee meeting later on. I hope that it does not clash with the debate, but it may.

The Second Stage offers the House the opportunity to debate the Bill’s principles. The Minister has taken us through those principles and outlined the Bill’s exact intention. The Bill is wide in scope and will repeal the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 1953, replacing it with a largely new set of provisions to regulate forest and commercial tree felling.

When it was created, the 1953 Act was relevant for the times in which people lived. In 1953, Britain still bore the scars of the Second World War, and evidence of a war-torn Europe was everywhere. Open bomb

sites with their crumbling buildings were set amid a new kind of architecture of half-built blocks of flats.

Those were the first signs of a redevelopment and regeneration that demanded source materials, of which wood took primacy. The production of timber was the thrust of the 1953 Act. No account was taken of developing leisure activities, which remained very much the preserve of the upper classes. The Act was unashamedly about timber production, because that was, rightly, the priority of the day.

More than 25 years ago, the great social historian Sir John Colville wrote in his book 'The new Elizabethans, 1952 – 1977':

"Whatever their station in life, the way people now conduct their affairs differs, voluntarily or involuntarily, in both opportunity and amenity from what was customary twenty five years ago. They feed and dress differently, they talk, live and spend their leisure differently, and they do so partly by choice and partly by force of circumstance."

Now that we have a further 25 years on the calendar, how much truer and more accurate Sir John's statement is today; how much greater the emphasis that is placed on leisure; how much more conversant we have become about our environment and the amenities that are, and should be, available to us and to the people; how much greater the opportunity, then, through this Bill, to produce a forestry Act that will be central to the strategic development not only of the Forest Service, but of the strategies across which the Northern Ireland Executive act; how great is the opportunity to link our forestry strategy with health, tourism, environmental, cultural, education and energy strategies; how great is the opportunity to engineer the circumstances that would see the use of our forests heralded as an example of best practice across the world — what a great opportunity is available to us.

Unfortunately, due to the circumstances and missed opportunities that have been outlined, the Bill falls some distance short. The Bill's primary thrust remains timber production, with lip service being paid to other potential opportunities, such as economic, social, environmental and recreational ones. Those are the opportunities that the Bill should seize and exploit to their fullest extent.

Of course, the Forest Service must be reorganised, but I believe that its potential is not being realised fully. For example, substantial sporting tourism revenue is being lost as a result of the service's potential not being utilised properly and exploited. Independent research from consultants that has been made available to us identifies the fact that

"sporting shooting contributes more than £45 million annually to the NI economy, sustaining 2,100 full-time equivalent jobs."

In Northern Ireland, we spend a further £10 million a year on conservation and on managing something like 990,000 hectares of forest around the Province.

Given that significant resource, it seems to me that the consultation should read into and consider the needs of those people who could play a greater role in developing even more opportunities on forestry land.

I hasten to add that those views are not necessarily mine or, indeed, those of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development; they are the views of stakeholders and those who wish to see the strategic development of and investment in our forests. Indeed, they are the views expressed in the European Community, which recognises that through regulation, forests can contribute both to the Lisbon objectives concerning economic growth and competitiveness and to the Göteborg objectives concerning the conservation of natural resources.

In order to maintain that contribution, the Bill must be adapted to be more open to the global market and to the current strategic frameworks that are being developed through the Executive Departments. It needs to be open to increasing our communities' diverse recreational demands, to those visiting our country, to the enhancement of our unique biodiversity, to the development of the Northern Ireland economy, and to the competitiveness that is necessary. The Bill must open up opportunities, and I believe that it could, and should, do that. Indeed, we should see to it that it is amended to that effect.

It is important that the Bill strikes a balance between the commercial, social, economic, recreational, environmental and strategic interests in our community, and I know that the Committee is keen to play its role in that difficult task. The Committee wishes to see how those strands can be woven together and how the Bill can connect the various sectoral strands and interests that have been recounted to us today. We will listen to the representatives of the key stakeholders. When necessary, we will challenge the Department and the Forest Service to open the Bill to the diverse interests that people have in our forests, and we will test the Department and the service to see whether they can come up with a Bill that addresses our priorities today and those that will arise in the future.

We do not need a Bill that deals only with some limited aspects of the timber industry; we need something that addresses the wide role that can be exploited through our Forest Service.

As it stands, this Bill is about timber production. It is about giving regulatory powers to the Department and to the Forest Service. It is about strengthening the hand of the Forest Service, where it needs to be strengthened, and the Department, and about protecting departmental interests. The Committee recognises that those are important aspects that cannot be overlooked. However, the Bill should and could do so much more. The House should be determined to make it do so in order that the entire community can benefit where it

can and should from the forests and forestation in our country.

The Department also needs to ensure that it protects our communities through exercising the proposed powers bestowed upon it by the Bill in a considered and balanced manner. The Committee will, therefore, scrutinise the Bill to ensure that the principles are appropriate and that they do what they are intended to do in an appropriate manner and do not go beyond that.

The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development looks forward to receiving the Bill in Committee Stage.

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

The sitting was suspended at 12.26 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. This Bill is the first piece of forestry legislation to be introduced in the North of Ireland in over 50 years. We have to take a bit of time and get it right. It is long overdue.

During recess, I had discussions with a number of stakeholders, including the Woodland Trust, members of the private sector, the Countryside Access and Activities Network (CAAN), local community groups in my constituency and council officers who have responsibility for access and tourism. I will base my contribution around those discussions.

Forest policy reviews in 1970 and from 2000-06 indicated the desire to double the amount of land under woodland in the North of Ireland by 2050 from its current 6% to 12%. In the past five planting seasons, new woodland creation in the North of Ireland has fallen by almost 50% to its lowest level, and it is below the target of 550 hectares per annum. The new Bill needs to address that major shortfall, and I think that it will.

Everyone with whom I discussed the Bill thought that the clause that deals with the felling licence was a useful tool in forest management. The private sector was concerned about the cost of felling licences and stated that there was no requirement for fees linked to felling licences in England, Scotland, Wales or the South of Ireland. Perhaps the Minister will clarify that issue.

There were also reservations about the need for farmers and woodland developers to draw up a management plan for all woodland/forestry plantations. It was felt that that was an unnecessary obligation, given that all plantings are undertaken only when grant approval has been agreed. That grant approval process takes care of the development of long-term objectives, so people were asking why there was a need for duplication.

Premier Woodlands is concerned that the Bill does not make clear who the Forest Service is answerable to in the context of carrying out its activities. Premier Woodlands believes that, as currently constituted, the Bill gives the Forest Service free rein to carry out its activities on an unscrutinised basis. I am sure that the Agriculture Committee and the Minister will deal with that.

Recreation and tourism access, including community well-being, needs to be on a level footing with timber production. Local communities need to be able to feel ownership of forests, and there is potential for community groups and new councils to investigate working with the Forest Service in building high-quality play parks for tourists and locals. I welcome the opportunity for Forest Service land to be used for other reason, including renewable energy, through

wind farms, as well as the development of tourist facilities. I would like to acknowledge the Minister's clarification that log-cabin holiday accommodation will be included in the proposals.

During recess, along with other interested parties, I visited Yorkshire to investigate the potential for the Forest Service to diversify into sporting provision and eco-holiday provision. The Forest Service has taken great steps in relation to the recreational provisions in our forests, but it is time to complete the journey. The Bill has the potential to do that. Proposals are being developed in relation to activity tourism on such measures as a high ropes project in Tollymore and a high-profile development of mountain biking — a recreational industry that has the potential to become a multi-million-pound success story. It is being planned for the south Down forests. Those projects will complement the tourism projects that are in place in south Down, the rest of the North and the island in general.

I find it difficult to envisage how a long-term strategy for forestry and woodlands in the North of Ireland can advance without consideration of the impact of climate change and sustainable development. We need to take a strategic approach to our forests and maximise their use to combat climate change, be that through the planting of floodplains, for instance. That would provide a good opportunity to alleviate problems of flooding. I am interested in the Minister's thoughts on that.

I have spoken to the RSPB and the Woodland Trust, and they are calling for the new legislation to ensure the protection of ancient woodland, a resource that is particularly scarce in the North of Ireland. Both organisations are also keen to see the promotion of biodiversity through a sustainability duty that will encompass all state, public and private woodland. In addition, they feel that such a duty should encourage the expansion of the native woodland cover in the North of Ireland.

Perhaps the Minister will tell the House how the general duty on the Department will enable the creation of new native woodland for community and recreational access. Evidence has shown that increasing native woodland cover can help to deliver on a range of policy issues, including climate change and public health. Not only is native woodland rightly considered to be a beautiful and relaxing backdrop, but those woods and trees support an array of wildlife and biodiversity. Therefore, native woods will assume a great importance in delivering on Executive priorities such as the Programme for Government targets of creating 1,650 hectares of new woodland by 2011 and halting the loss of indigenous species and habitats by 2016.

Clause 10 of the Bill deals with the removal of vegetation close to forests. I see the need for that given the risks from gorse fires, the bills for which regularly

run into hundreds of thousands of pounds, especially in my constituency of South Down.

In conclusion, forests must become multi-functional; they must be relevant to all of our lives; and many more people must be able to use them for recreation and to earn a living. Forests must be developed to provide renewable energy opportunities, and although timber production is essential, the Forest Service must have flexibility, particularly in relation to social use and recreation.

The Bill is the first piece of forestry legislation for 50 years, and it could give the Executive, its Departments and agencies the legislative authority to deliver fit-for-purpose forestry management in an ever-changing world. Together with the Agriculture Committee, I look forward to working with the Department, the Forest Service and the Minister in progressing the Bill. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Elliott: I declare an interest as a farmer and the owner of a modest area of forest.

In broad terms, the Ulster Unionist Party welcomes progress on a new Forestry Bill. The last Forestry Act dates back to 1953 and is much outdated. Therefore, we are pleased that there will be some progress on that at least. However, that does not mean that we are absolutely delighted with the new Bill: we are pleased with some aspects of it, but, to be blunt, we will seek changes and amendments in others.

Like Mr Willie Clarke and other Members, my party colleagues and I met various stakeholders in the industry and forestry officials during the summer recess. We thank those stakeholders for those meetings and for making their time available.

There are a number of issues that I want to deal with specifically, the first of which is ancient woodland. I am concerned that the Bill does not afford enough protection to ancient woodland. I do not know where it even defines ancient woodland. Perhaps the Minister and the Forest Service could clarify that aspect as the Bill progresses through its various Stages.

In her opening remarks, the Minister alluded to meeting the objectives of the forestry strategy, but I am concerned that the Forest Service is not even meeting the Programme for Government targets of planting an additional 550 hectares of forest and woodland per year, and I hope that the Bill can help to redress that issue. Another area of concern is the Forest Service's overall target of doubling forest cover in Northern Ireland by 2050, which is a huge task and, given the amount of new planting taking place, it is a target that will never be met.

Furthermore, I have noticed that the Department's replies to questions in recent months have included short-term coppice in the figures for newly planted

woodland and forest, and I am not sure that it should be included in that category.

I am hugely concerned about the overall control that the Bill will give to the Forest Service and the Department, because the Forest Service is involved in the commercial production of timber, and it should not have an advantage over private industry. I believe that the Bill will give the Forest Service a huge advantage.

If you will permit me, Mr Speaker, I will look at a couple of issues, many of which the Committee will deal with; however, I want to highlight one or two for the Minister's pursuance.

The first issue is the disposal of forestry land, and I assume that there will need to be some sort of acceptance of the public interest in such disposal. I also assume that the Forest Service cannot dispose of forestry land if and when it so desires; if that is to be allowed, there would need to be good reason that is in the public interest. I would like clarification on that point.

My second point relates to clause 4, which deals with the use or development of forestry land. Clause 4(1) states:

"The Department may use or develop forestry land for a purpose other than forestry."

Does that mean that the Department will take that land out of forestry use and develop it for use as something else? Clause 4(1) is not clear about that, and I would like it to be clarified.

The compulsory acquisition of land puts the Forest Service at a huge advantage over private industry. It allows it to take land off any farmer or landowner that it so desires for its own purposes. That is dealt with under clause 5, and if the provisions of that clause are combined with those of clause 4, the Forest Service could develop forestry land for a purpose other than forestry. That would give the Forest Service wide-ranging powers, and, unless there is a good reason for it to acquire land, such powers are not acceptable. Clause 5 should be narrowed to mean the compulsory acquisition only for reasons of access to land, and if that were the situation, that power should also be available to private landowners.

I have huge concerns about clause 7, which deals with incidental powers, and I must say, I wish that I had those powers at home. Clause 7(1) states:

"The Department may do anything which appears to it to be conducive or incidental to the discharge of its general duty under section 1(1)."

That gives the Department the power to do almost anything. I would love to go home and tell my wife that sometimes, but the problem is that she would just not listen. I would like some clarification on that issue from the Forest Service.

There is huge concern that the Bill will allow for the Forest Service to control not only forest land, but adjoining land. That also means lands that adjoin any forest, not just those that are under the management of the Forest Service for the control of animals. That will create huge problems for sporting and shooting organisations in the Province.

Clause 14 deals with the felling licence. Although there are reasons for having a felling licence, it must be subject to some flexibility, particularly where the management plans are concerned. I have not heard anything from the Department and the Forest Service that specifies clearly what those management plans will entail. I am concerned about the fact that the Forest Service will be immune from the need for such a management plan and licence. Again, that puts the Forest Service at a huge advantage over the private sector. The private sector will need a management plan to get a felling licence but the Forest Service will not. There is great unfairness in that, and it needs to be resolved quickly. I suggest that the Forest Service should also need a management plan and felling licence and that there should be an external audit group that could be overseen by people from the Forest Service and private industry. I do not want to create additional bureaucracy, but that must be looked at.

There has been no consultation with sporting organisations or with those who have the sporting rights over forestry about pedestrian access to all forestry and woodland. There must be genuine and proper consultation on that matter because there could be huge conflict in that area. We heard earlier about how much that industry brings into the Province, and we must take cognisance of that.

I look forward to going through the Committee Stage of the Bill in conjunction with the Department. Obviously, I do not believe that we will agree on everything at this stage, but I look forward to progressing the matter.

2.15 pm

Dr Farry: I must first apologise to the House for the absence today of David Ford, who was hoping to speak on the Bill, but whose mother-in-law sadly passed away last night. I am sure that all our thoughts are with David at this time.

On behalf of the Alliance Party, I warmly welcome the legislation, as well as the fact that, on the second day of the new Assembly session, we are getting around to discussing legislation, which is, after all, our primary purpose as MLAs. I certainly hope that we can do the subject justice and have a debate as long as, if not longer than, the debates on private Member's motions.

The Bill presents an important opportunity for Northern Ireland, one that does not come along very often. The Bill is the first piece of legislation in this

area for some 56 years, since the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 1953, and already there has been considerable consultation — in some cases going back quite some time — leading up to the introduction of the Bill. That shows how rare an opportunity it is to progress that type of work.

The Alliance Party will certainly support the Second Stage of the Bill, because we need to take the matter forward. Although we welcome large aspects of the legislation, it is only right to say that there are a number of deficiencies in the Bill as presented. We look forward to those issues being addressed, either during Committee Stage or, if necessary, in the Chamber through the amendment process.

I am particularly grateful for the comments and input from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the Woodland Trust. Both organisations have been extremely active on behalf of the community in Northern Ireland in protecting our natural environment, and we all owe them a great debt of gratitude for their ongoing work.

The management of our woodland is clearly a critical issue. Ian Paisley Jnr has already spoken of the balance between the economic, social and environmental aspects. It is also worth stressing the importance of the contribution of forestry to tackling climate change. The Minister has already alluded to the fact that Northern Ireland is poorly wooded; some 6% of our land mass is covered by trees. It is useful to compare that figure with the figures internationally: in the rest of the UK, the figure is around 12%; in the Republic of Ireland, it is 10%; and in the rest of Europe, it is, on average, around 44%. When one considers ancient woodland in particular, those figures appear even worse. Northern Ireland is in an even more difficult position, as only around 0.6% of our land mass is covered by ancient woodland, compared to around 2% in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The casual visitor can see the different levels of tree cover when flying over the countryside of different parts of the world. Having travelled through the north-east of the United States, for example, I was struck by the fact that virtually every small town and village is obscured by a canopy of trees. That adds to both the built and natural environment there, and is something that we should aspire to here. The historical evolution of these islands has been very different to that, and there tends to be a lot more open countryside, but perhaps we can address that over time. In the past, as Members have mentioned, the emphasis has been on the regulation of timber supply. It is clear that the emphasis now needs to change to sustainability, which should be front and centre in the Bill.

I will now make some specific comments on the Bill. Clause 1 outlines the general duties on the

Department. It is important that a clear duty is included in the legislation to ensure sustainability in relation to forestry policy and practice and the regulation of all woodland types. That should apply not only to forests that are in public ownership but to private land. It should also be cross-referenced with biodiversity. The issue is not simply the trees that are being managed, but the wildlife that exists in our forests, both flora and fauna. The Bill should make very clear references to things like the UK biodiversity plan.

I agree with Tom Elliott's comments that some of the terminology used in the legislation is somewhat vague. Perhaps that terminology can be spelt out more clearly.

Careful consideration needs to be given to the compulsory acquisition powers that are set out in clause 5. No doubt something is required in that area, but great sensitivity is necessary, and we also must respect people's property rights.

I support the intention regarding inquiries and information in clause 6. However, the tenor of that clause should be one of "shall" rather than "may". There should be a requirement for information gathering, rather than simply a hope that it will happen. Indeed, any information that is gathered should be made publicly available.

Arising from that point, I must stress the need for a proper inventory to be taken of the woodland in Northern Ireland. We would like the Bill to include a statutory duty on the Forest Service to survey and monitor the extent and condition of all Northern Ireland's woodland — that is an essential requirement.

We appreciate that a certain degree of information on the extent and location of forests, woodland and trees in Northern Ireland is already available, but, in some respects, data can be rather disparate and out of date, and there are gaps in the coverage. The Forest Service probably knows what is in its estate, but it is with what lies outside its estate where much of the difficulty arises.

It is worth pointing out that holding proper inventories is the case in the rest of the UK, the Republic of Ireland and most of Europe, so Northern Ireland's current approach is out of step in that wider context. It is worth highlighting that the Forestry Commission of Great Britain has recommended such an inventory for Northern Ireland and regards it as being essential.

The fundamental point is that we cannot measure our progress, particularly on the protection of ancient woodlands, if we do not have baselines and do not know from where we are starting. Therefore, taking an inventory to establish where we are starting from is critical if this legislation is to have credibility. The Minister has acknowledged that those limitations exist,

but the challenge for her is to follow up on her words and commit fully to taking a proper inventory.

Clause 7, to which Mr Elliott also referred, covers incidental powers. In any exercising of those powers, the Bill should contain a very clear sustainability duty.

I welcome the clauses on the felling of trees, but, at this stage, I want to stress three points. First, there should be a presumption against granting a felling licence for ancient woodlands; the bar for granting one should be set extremely high. Secondly, the Forest Service should not be exempt from the need to request a felling licence. As things stand, who is there to police the Forest Service? That is an important and necessary safeguard. Thirdly, I am somewhat sceptical of the need for compensation should a felling licence be refused. We need to shift our priorities from the traditional notion of our economy more towards the protection of the environment. I must again stress that the concept of sustainability means that, as far as I am concerned, the protection of the environment and the economic development of Northern Ireland go hand in hand.

We on these Benches would welcome some stakeholder advisory input on the way forward for the regulation of practice and policy. Although we consider the Bill to be a good start, the opportunity with which we are presented should be seen as a platform on which we can build. I look forward to the Bill's being improved as it goes through its various Stages, and we are happy to support the Bill's Second Stage.

Dr W McCrea: I realise that the Bill is at Second Stage, so we are undertaking a general review rather than going into all the detail.

Although it is true that the Minister has outlined the Department's emphasis in respect of most of the clauses, we need to ensure that those matters that we identify as deficiencies will be gone into in depth during the Bill's Committee Stage. That is, of course, what Committees are engaged to do. The Committee will engage with the Department in seeking to tease out some of those deficiencies, as well as those things that we believe need to be put right.

The explanatory and financial memorandum to the proposed Forestry Bill states that the general duty of the Department is:

“to promote forestry on a wider footing than the traditional primary role of developing afforestation, the supply of timber, and the maintenance of reserves of growing trees.”

In addition, the explanatory memorandum states that the Bill:

“places equal importance on protection of the environment and social and recreational use.”

I appreciate that that is laid out as a general principle. However, many are concerned that lip service is being paid more than dealing with the issues, because the

Bill seems to have more to do with the regulatory powers that are being given to the Department, rather than tackling many of the issues that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development will, clearly, identify.

It has been emphasised to me that the monetary, health, educational and environmental benefits need to be clearly identified and taken account of. We need not only identify the issues but how we move them forward in a specific way. Many consultees welcome the broad basis of the Bill but are concerned that the commercial production of timber is still, in the Department's eyes, the primary benefit of forestry. I understand that the Woodland Trust made a statement to the Committee emphasising that the primary function should be the promotion of sustainable forest management, and that the social and environmental value of forestry must be accorded equal importance to commercial production. Therefore, the Bill must strike a balance between commercial concerns and all the other issues that we have identified.

I will not go into all the issues today, clause by clause, and I am sure that everyone will be delighted about that. I, as a member of the Committee, will have the opportunity to go through the Bill, clause by clause, during its Committee Stage. However, we have to lay down certain parameters and state clearly that the amount of woodland in Northern Ireland compared with the rest of the United Kingdom or the rest of Europe is unacceptable. It is vital that we ensure real protection for our ancient woodlands, but we must also ensure that we have a process and a specific programme to realise the desire for more tree-planting and more woodland in Northern Ireland.

That aspiration is one thing, but how do we take that forward? The Department desires to double the woodland in Northern Ireland. Yet, until now, all the Department's efforts in that respect have totally failed. Therefore, we must ensure that something is done and a programme is outlined that will take us to that vision. It is important that we protect endangered ancient woodland, and that we not only aspire to have more woodland but establish a programme by which we can achieve that, and measure our progress along the way, because it will take time. If we are going somewhere, we have to see how well we are progressing.

Clause 4 of the Bill is entitled “Use or development of forestry land”. Paragraph 4 of the explanatory and financial memorandum states that that clause will provide a power for the Department:

“to develop its land to obtain better value from the public estate — for example to allow for the creation of wind farms or the development of tourist facilities on forestry land.”

The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development received excellent information from the RSPB, the Woodland Trust, Farm Woodlands Ltd and

the district councils. We are thankful that those bodies are actively engaged in considering the Bill, and we must keep them engaged. The Committee was told that the Department's powers, as outlined in clause 4, should be subject to planning laws. I want the Minister to consider that to see how the Department will be subject to planning laws.

2.30 pm

Clause 5, which deals with the compulsory acquisition of land, is widely drafted. I am always concerned about giving Departments wide, sweeping powers, because, in the past, I have found that they use such powers and push them to the limit. The Minister will know that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development always seeks to ensure that the power of the Executive and of Departments is restricted. It seems that any powers that are granted are used very quickly.

Ballymena Borough Council said that landowners should have the right of appeal in regard to that power. When a Department is granted the power of compulsory acquisition of land, people wonder whether they own anything. With such powers, Departments can tell people what to do with their own land, and people find that they do not really own anything and that the Department has more interest in the land than the landowner.

The control of animals in forests is an important aspect of the Bill, and it was drawn to the Committee's attention that the Forest Service has to control the vermin in state forests. Will the Forest Service and the Department be included in legislation to control wild animals and vermin that might attack and undermine forest on their land so that it is not only farmers who have to do so? The Department should lead by example in what it is enforcing on ordinary farmers.

Dr Farry mentioned the felling of trees. I agree that it is important that the Bill should include a presumption against felling in ancient woodlands. We must ensure that we protect the ancient woodlands. If we acknowledge the fact that we have little enough woodland in Northern Ireland and that ancient woodland is part of our heritage, we should do everything in our power to protect it. Clause 14 concerns the requirement for a licence for felling trees, and the Department should also come under that legislation. Protection must be in place not only from unscrupulous persons who would fell trees but to prevent the Department from felling trees for monetary gain.

Farm Woodlands Ltd raised concerns about the possible length of time to process applications for a licence. It also disagreed with the requirement for a management plan for private forestry. If it is right to have a management plan for private forestry, should the Forest Service also be required to have a

management plan to fell trees? That is another issue that was raised in response to the Committee's request for the community to make its voice heard.

I am concerned about the proposed unlimited power of entry. I have major concerns about granting that power to the Department. I also have concerns about infringement of adjoining land rights. It must be ensured that the rights of farmers on adjoining land are acknowledged as much as those of the Department.

It ought to be said that much of the Bill is welcome. It takes forward the provisions of the previous Act, which is long out of date. That is important. However, I make a simple appeal to the Department to ensure that, during the passage of the Bill, it continues to engage with people who have a keen interest and who have taken the time to return information to the Committee, including those who represent bodies that I mentioned earlier, such as the Woodland Trust, the RSPB, district councils and Farm Woodlands Ltd. The Committee will do likewise. In the end, we must ensure that the final Bill will take forestry to an advanced stage and, in years to come, will leave a heritage for the next generation of which we can be proud.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Second Stage of the Forestry Bill. During the debate, it has been mentioned a few times that it is 56 years since the Forestry Act 1953 was passed. It is slightly younger than me. At that time, forestry was simply a matter of growing trees, cutting and selling them. The Bill is much more expansive than that. Of course, it includes that basic facet of forestry; however, it also covers its potential for tourism, recreation, wind farms and so on. The Bill has a strong environmental and social aspect, which is welcome. However, there will be areas of concern, one of which I will mention. During the past year or so, the Committee, the Minister and the Department have developed a good, solid working relationship whereby we can raise deep concerns with the Department, it will respond, and we end up dealing with those issues. I am sure that we will be able to do that as we progress through Committee and the Bill's various stages.

I want to flag up a particular area of concern so that the Department and the Minister can consider it. Often, forestry is carried out in remote areas where the roads infrastructure is just about sufficient to service local communities and their farming needs. Suddenly — not even every year, as it occurs only now and again — trees are felled and massive, heavy lorries converge on those small country roads. I want the Department to respond to that and potentially to develop a protocol with Roads Service as to how those roads are maintained during such phases and repaired when that work is finished. In those areas, that can cause huge difficulties for local farming communities and rural dwellers in general.

I would like the Minister to deal with that issue in her response to the debate and throughout the Bill's various developments. I am sure that all matters will be dealt with in the thorough manner to which the Committee has recently become accustomed.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the opportunity to comment on the important Bill that is before the House. The previous Member to speak mentioned that the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 1953 was passed 56 years ago. That was a long time ago, before my time.

Northern Ireland's forests are a cherished part of the landscape. They provide great amenity space for thousands of people each year. The Province's tourism industry also relies heavily on its various accessible and well-known forest parks. In presenting the Bill, I believe that the Department wants to improve the overall conditions of those forests, which will be to everyone's betterment.

As the Bill shows, the forestry industry is more than just a reserve of timber. As the importance of leisure and amenity space grows, so does the public's use of forest parks. Likewise, as environmental issues gain prominence, the need to maintain forests and increase tree cover becomes more important. Amenity space and facilities are dealt with in clause 3, and the Department could do much more to make greater use of forest parks to the benefit of tourism.

In my district council area, a number of forest park areas have been utilised, such as Gosford forest park in Markethill and Clare Glen, to great effect for caravan owners. However, I ask that there is greater focus, on a Province-wide basis, on improving amenity spaces by making them bigger and by improving the facilities on offer.

I am concerned about the compulsory acquisition of land that is mentioned in clause 5. In my role as a public representative, I have come across vesting issues in which constituents have come to me for advice. One thing is always clear: the vesting of land is a very traumatic experience for landowners who cherish the land that they have worked for many years. Although I acknowledge that the full right of appeal will be available to the landowner in any vesting procedure, I ask that caution be exercised in any attempt to use such powers.

The Bill refers to the traditional function of the development of afforestation. Forest cover in Northern Ireland stands at around 6%. How the Department moves forward to increase forest cover will be complex as the area of suitable land available and the population density are factors in how targets for increasing woodland cover are worked out.

The spread of rural dwellings and the small-in-size-but-large-in-number nature of farm holdings reduce the opportunity for large-scale forestation in Northern

Ireland in comparison with our European neighbours. As I have stated in a previous debate, Northern Ireland is a compact land mass in comparison with Great Britain and other EU countries.

The Forest Service is on record as stating that it will be trying to improve opportunities for grant-aided woodland expansion. It is through grant-aided schemes that, I feel, the Forest Service will have the best chance of encouraging landowners to consider tree-planting. However, I do not believe for one moment that doubling the area of woodland is achievable. With an ever-growing population across the world, food is becoming increasingly important, and that may dictate the use of land in future. The situation is changing, and a certain amount of flexibility must be built into the Bill to account for changes in how land is utilised.

I welcome the Bill. However, the Committee will have much to discuss about how the Bill will affect and shape the future of forests in Northern Ireland.

Mr Savage: I broadly support the Bill, which represents the long overdue reform of the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 1953. That Act reflects a past priority to establish a strategic reserve of timber and maintain a timber supply in Northern Ireland. For a long time, my party has been calling for elements that are contained in the Bill.

With that in mind, I strongly support those aspects of the Bill that seek to protect the environment and encourage the enjoyment of land by the public. However, I am concerned that, in the Bill, the duty on the Forest Service to sustainably protect native woodland and the biodiversity that it supports is not strong enough. There is a greater need for sustainability criteria in the Bill, and that must be examined in Committee.

In bringing forward the legislation, the Department rightly recognises that forestry is now a complex and multifaceted enterprise, with increasing economic, social and environmental purposes and benefits. The Department endorses the view that the Forest Service needs to move with the times in order to maximise the benefits of the public estate.

I wish to further qualify my support for the Bill by making some observations about items that caused my colleagues and me some concern. From a commercial forestry standpoint, the overarching concern is that the Bill gives too much power to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Forest Service with no meaningful checks and balances.

Regulatory and compulsory purchasing powers are being acquired, held and exercised by an agency that also owns and operates a monopoly over publicly owned forests. In light of the percentage of forested land that the Forest Service owns and the percentage of timber production that it is involved in, there is a real

danger of market implications for the private forestry industry in Northern Ireland.

2.45 pm

From an environmental point of view, the overarching concern is that the Bill does not place a strict enough duty on the Forest Service to protect native ancient woodland and biodiversity or to manage forests in a sustainable manner. Concerns have also been raised about powers that the Department may give to the Forest Service that will allow it to cull any animal on forestry land or adjoining land that poses a threat to forestry. That will exempt the Forest Service from wildlife protection, hunting guidelines and other legislation.

There are many issues that we could talk about, but there is nothing in the Bill to indicate how the Forest Service will double forest cover by 2050. Forest Service policy suggests a development with the private market. However, there are convincing arguments that suggest that current grant schemes will not deliver the required development. That raises a certain level of concern in the long term about the Forest Service's compulsory purchase power. Those matters need considerable examination and resolution during the Bill's various stages. The implementation of appropriate safeguards would have a big impact on the future of the Forest Service.

I support the Bill. I also ask the Forest Service to think seriously about the large amount of open space in high areas of our community, which could play a big part in the production of forestry in Northern Ireland.

Mrs D Kelly: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate on the Bill. I had the privilege of being born and reared in Derrymore in the townland of the Montiaghs. The Minister may know that Doire Mór translates as the "big oak tree" and that seven Doires make a Montiagh. Woodland was very much a feature of the landscape and provided many of the names for our local areas and roads, many of which are still used.

Unfortunately, the Plantation of Ulster led to the ravage of Ulster, and much of our woodland was felled and shipped across to England to fuel smelting in the iron furnaces that adorned Stratford-upon-Avon. Therefore, it falls to the Minister to set out a vision and a strategy for the next 50 years to replace some of what we have lost and to go beyond that. The Forestry Bill is welcome, although there are some amendments that should be looked at. In their contributions this afternoon, many Members referred to those amendments.

Mr Dallat: Does the Member agree that people have shown great affection for our trees, even to the point of hugging them? Does she agree that the Forest Service should not have sole responsibility for the targets and that other Departments, particularly the Department of Education, have a major role to play in

encouraging our young people to show the same affection for our trees as some of our leaders?

Mrs D Kelly: I agree with the bid that the Member made for the involvement of the Department of Education. I am sure that the Minister will not take the approach of her party president and run about hugging trees and telling people that all will be well. I hope that she will demonstrate her intentions in the Bill.

The Bill must also look at sustainable development and the promotion of biodiversity in state, public and private woodland. It should also encourage the expansion of Northern Ireland's woodland cover in line with the Forest Service's existing commitments. The Minister said that there is a commitment to move from 6% cover to 12% cover. Perhaps she can define what that means in acreage so that we can get an idea of what our base is.

In bringing forward the final legislation, it would also be helpful if the Minister would consider setting up a stakeholder advisory committee, similar to those that exist elsewhere. In that way, the organisations and individuals with expert advice to give and a vision for the future can help to develop sustainable forest management policy, regulation and practice. I would be grateful if the Minister could give us her thoughts on that.

I concur with the Members who talked about the woodland survey and monitoring requirement. That is something that we need to take cognisance of. I come from the Craigavon area, where, to this day, vesting is a very sore point among many whose lands were vested and taken from them, so any vesting powers in the legislation will have to be very sensitively dealt with through very clear guidelines. Land vesting cannot be done on a whim; it has to demonstrate how we are going to improve, whether economically or socially. The other side of the coin is the impact that any such vesting would have on biodiversity and sustainable development.

I support the principle laid out in clause 6, under which research will be carried out in respect of the wider social and economic benefits of forestry. Information gathered should be freely available to all stakeholders. Perhaps the Minister might give some thought to publishing that research on the Department's website, particularly if we want to engage the wider public in the debate on the protection of our woodlands.

It is not good enough that other state agencies, authorities and Departments might be exempt from the requirement to hold a fell licence. That is another amendment that the Minister might wish to consider.

I welcome the fact that the Bill is before us. It is good to see that at least some legislation is coming to the House at the start of the session. I hope that the

Minister sets challenging targets for sustainable development because, as many know, we are here for only a very short time, and we have to protect the environment.

Mr Kennedy: We are here for four years.

Mrs D Kelly: Perhaps less in some case, which might be a godsend for some members of the public.

When it comes to sustainable development, we are very much the custodians of the land. We have to take a carrot-and-stick approach. It is all very well to have regulations and prohibition notices, but we must recognise the hard work of farmers and the fact that, over the years, many farmers have been the custodians of our land services. We have to help farmers and other landholders to protect and enhance our environment.

Mr Speaker: I must interrupt proceedings. I ask the House to take its ease until we move into Question Time at 3.00 pm.

The debate stood suspended.

3.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Mr Speaker: I remind Members, if they need reminding, that they must continually rise in their place — the word “continually” is important — if they wish to ask a supplementary question.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Housing Executive Grants

1. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister for Social Development if she has intervened in any cases where people have been turned down for housing renovation and disability grants, and if so, how many were overturned due to her intervention in the South Down constituency in 2008-09. (AQO 31/10)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The short answer is that I did not intervene in any cases in which people were turned down for private grants in South Down in 2008-09. I am disappointed by the implied suggestion in the question that I might have used ministerial authority to ensure that my South Down constituency was given preferential treatment over others.

Members are aware of the shortfall in the housing budget, which has affected the delivery of certain housing programmes. In particular, the level of funding for home improvements in the private sector is insufficient, and applications for discretionary renovation, replacement and home repairs assistance grants are now unlikely to be approved, save in exceptional circumstances.

The disabled facilities grant scheme is, of course, unaffected. I have received many representations about that scheme, several of which were made by colleagues here, on behalf of constituents. I have also received numerous representations from members of the public about individual applications. I have looked into and responded to each and every one of those representations. I have not, however, intervened in any cases that resulted in the overturning of decisions taken by the Housing Executive. Since it was not necessary for the Housing Executive to refuse or cancel applications that were made in 2008-09, it is a fact that no such enquiries were made to my office during that period, although that was the case subsequently, because of budgetary problems.

I have done my utmost to protect the most vulnerable households by ring-fencing budgets for new social housing to help those who are in housing stress. In fact, the Member may be interested to know that in the past two years, 236 new social housing units have been started in her constituency, costing almost £38 million.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for her honest answer, but I do not know why she is disappointed. I am entitled to ask questions in the House when people raise issues with me. The reason I asked the question was to get to the bottom of some of those issues. I am glad that the Minister gave that answer; maybe it will put a lot of rumours to bed. Can the Minister tell me how many decisions were overturned last year and this year?

The Minister for Social Development: I do not have those figures to hand; I will write to the Member with that information. However, bearing in mind the £100 million shortfall in the housing budget this year, it is important that all Members join the campaign, along with the Ministers who represent their parties, to ensure that, once and for all, housing is put on a sound financial footing and that capital receipts are decoupled from the overall housing budget. The Executive inherited that situation from the direct rule Administration, and it must be rectified urgently.

Mr Shannon: The Minister will be aware that people in the neighbouring constituency of Strangford are having difficulties with the disabled facilities grant scheme. Does she know that there is a three-year waiting list for those grants in my constituency? I am sure that she is endeavouring to address that situation. Will she confirm that the concerns of people who are on that list will be addressed, and that there will be a greater emphasis, as she has said before, on making those grants available, and specifically in the Strangford area?

The Minister for Social Development: Disabled facilities grants can be divided into two types: mandatory, which are not affected by the scheme, and concern internal alterations to houses; and discretionary, which are affected because of the £100 million shortfall in the housing budget.

In deciding the housing budget for this year, I was given a certain pot, with which I decided to protect the vulnerable. I am sure that no one in the House would disagree with that. The vulnerable are those who are homeless or in housing stress, hence the protection of money for newbuild; those who are vulnerable because of fuel poverty, hence the protection of funding for the warm homes scheme, and those who are in institutions or in the community and who may not be well. It is important to protect people through the Supporting People programme in order to ensure that they can

remain in the community, with the support of family and friends, instead of being admitted to an institution.

The Member raised another fundamental issue, and I urge him to have further discussions with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I was very grateful for the £20 million capital allocation that was made in June, but that simply deals with what is already in the pipeline. We still need financial assistance to cover the shortfall in order to deal with the people in the pipeline.

I instructed the Housing Executive to ensure that nobody lost his or her place in the queue because of the lack of finance for improvement grants. As soon as money becomes available, those grants will be dealt with: money will flow to them. It is important that housing is put on a sound financial footing so that those problems can be rectified.

Remember, there is not one person in the House or in the community who is responsible for the economic downturn: it has beset us globally. However, the one budget that has been deeply affected by the downturn is the housing budget. That must be rectified as a matter of urgency. The Member's good offices with his Minister for Finance and his ministerial colleagues in the DUP would be greatly appreciated.

Mr P J Bradley: I was also curious about the question about South Down. Now that I have heard Ms Ramsey's contribution, I am doubly confused as to why people with queries about South Down are going to a representative in Belfast.

Will the Minister advise the Assembly on how the Executive can make good the overall shortfall in the housing budget without having to cut expenditure on other services?

The Minister for Social Development: I advise the Member to read the SDLP document 'New Priorities in Difficult Times'. In that document, the party has set out where more money should be spent in areas such as housing, renewable energy and upskilling, as well as stating where the money should come from. It is a unique document and an important contribution to the economic debate. I understand that the Ulster Unionist Party has also published a document highlighting where money should come from.

For my part, I have suggested measures such as the reprofiling of the Housing Executive's debt, the sale and leasing back of assets, and other measures to free up additional funding without necessitating cuts to services. However, such initiatives require the approval of the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Social Housing

2. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the anticipated need for

newbuild social housing for (i) the remainder of the 2009-2010 financial year; and (ii) the 2010-11 financial year. (AQO 32/10)

The Minister for Social Development: Housing need is a continuum. It would not be very insightful if I were to reply in the context of a single year; the figures must be taken across several years.

The most recent social housing needs assessment by the Housing Executive shows that there is a regional requirement for 3,000 new social housing units each year; that is year-on-year for the foreseeable future. The Executive have been unable to provide that quantum of resources for housing investment. With the budgets available to me, I plan to provide 1,750 new homes this financial year, and 2,000 in the financial year 2010-11.

There have, nonetheless, been significant increases compared to recent years, when an average of only 1,250 houses were started. I have made the increased supply of housing my priority. I will continue to lobby Executive colleagues for additional funding in order to put housing on a firm financial footing once and for all.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her answer. Indeed, she has anticipated my supplementary question well. Can she advise whether the Housing Executive has funds to purchase lands at Ballymacoss in Lisburn and complete a social housing project for 160 new homes?

Mr Kennedy: Is that in South Down? *[Laughter.]*

The Minister for Social Development: I am glad that Ballymacoss is not in South Down, but I am aware of the case. Discussions are ongoing, and, when I return to the Department, I will check on the situation between the Department, the Housing Executive and Lisburn Borough Council. I have received representations on the matter from Members of the House and from members of Lisburn Borough Council.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for her answer. The Minister will recall that, on several occasions, I have asked about social housing projects in Monkstown in my constituency. Can the Minister assure me that those projects are on target despite the budgetary constraints?

The Minister for Social Development: I hope that a fair proportion of houses will be built in various locations throughout Northern Ireland. I say again that I would be very grateful for the support of all Members to ensure that housing is put on a sound financial footing, as that would ensure that we can deliver the best-quality housing to those who deserve it.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What discussion has the Minister had with the credit union movement regarding the proposal that it brought to the Executive and the Department for

Social Development to work alongside her and help to finance the social housing project?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Ms McCann for her question. I met the credit union movement several months ago and was given detail on its thinking on the matter. The credit union movement subsequently met officials and was advised that it should submit a proposal if it wished to continue with the plan. I understand that no proposal has been forthcoming, although the credit union movement is due to meet Department of Finance and Personnel officials shortly. I want to encourage as much financial innovation in housing as possible. I was surprised by the comments of certain Sinn Féin representatives, which were reported in local newspapers, to the effect that I may have rejected a proposal from the credit union movement. Suffice to say, I welcome all proposals. All proposals will be duly assessed, but we need to receive them first.

Housing Executive Grants

3. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister for Social Development when she proposes to allocate funding to the Housing Executive's grants department to allow applications awaiting approval to be released.

(AQO 33/10)

The Minister for Social Development: I welcomed the Executive's release of £20 million in June, which was made available for social housing in the last monitoring round. Fifteen million pounds has been allocated to private-sector grants and £5 million to disabled adaptations. That additional funding will cover only existing commitments on private-sector grants and limited approvals for grants in cases where exceptional circumstances have arisen in-year. Additional funding is required to cover those grants, and a bid was submitted in the September monitoring round to cover the shortfall. I personally ensured that the Housing Executive held the details on file of people whose grants were cancelled or refused and wrote to them to explain what will happen if additional funding becomes available.

I would like to clear the pipeline of grant applications, because I have great sympathy for all those who find themselves in such difficulties; indeed, I would like to reopen the grant scheme to new applications. However, a significant injection of additional funds is required to do that. We will be debating the issue, presumably in less than an hour, and I look forward to the Member's contribution.

3.15 pm

Mr Buchanan: First, I must tell the Minister that, unfortunately, I will not be present for the debate on

home improvement grants, because I have another meeting to attend.

I welcome the fact that disabled facilities grants have been ring-fenced. I have heard the Minister say much about social housing. The Housing Executive has identified houses that are eligible for grants for replacement dwellings, but they are sitting in the system now and cannot be progressed. Does she not agree that such houses form part of social housing? As far as I am concerned, they do. She, however, is not investing the money to allow the grants to be released and the replacement dwellings progressed.

The Minister for Social Development: Mr Buchanan and I discussed that subject yesterday in the corridor. He makes a fair point, and I have great sympathy for people who find themselves in that predicament having applied for grants for improvement, home-repairs assistance or renovation. However, my point is that the shortfall of £100 million in the housing budget means that my Department can deal only with its existing commitments. I need the support of all Members, and I suggest that Mr Buchanan have a word with his colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel and other DUP Ministers about putting housing on a sound financial footing.

Given that we are talking about that subject, I must mention that I have seen documentation that was republished yesterday. It suggested that I diverted funding from grants to the social housing development programme. I put on record that that is totally untrue. All I did was protect the vulnerable in Northern Ireland. Would the House not expect me to do so?

Ms Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat. I thank the Minister for her answer. Perhaps she will clarify something for me. I thought that, when answering question 1, the Minister said that she had instructed her Department to ensure that no one waiting for home improvements or adaptation should lose his or her place in the queue. However, when responding to Tom Buchanan, she outlined a criterion of exceptional circumstances. I raise the point specifically because I speak as an elected representative who has been inundated with queries from constituents. By vulnerable people, I mean elderly, and particularly disabled, residents whose applications for vital home improvements and adaptations have been refused or suspended.

Certain people, whose applications were originally approved, subsequently spent a considerable amount of money on planning applications and surveys, only to be told that the process had been suspended. I am not sure whether those people now satisfy that criterion of exceptional circumstances. Alternatively, are they still on the waiting list? If so, will they keep their place on that list?

The Minister for Social Development: Ms Anderson's question contains two separate issues. First, exceptional circumstances relate to the level of a property's structural disrepair. If the Member, as a public representative, tells the Housing Executive that she believes that a level of structural disrepair in a particular property has been previously disregarded by a Housing Executive inspector, that house can be reassessed and a recommendation made to the committee that deals with the criterion of exceptional circumstances.

The second part of the Member's question relates to all those who have been sent letters stating that their applications cannot be dealt with at present because of the lack of financial assistance. To be honest, having realised that those letters were slightly harsh, I instructed the Housing Executive to ensure that no one lost his or her place in the queue. Why did I do that? I did it to ensure that, when the money becomes available, those people will not lose their place in the queue and that the money will flow to them as it should have done originally.

However, we come back to the very kernel of the debate: everybody in this House, particularly those who have Ministers who sit round the Executive table with me, should ensure that they support me in my quest to have housing put on a sound financial footing. I have no doubt that that would enable all our constituents and all the people of Northern Ireland to be dealt with in a fair and equitable manner, and for them to have access to a good standard of housing.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for her response. There have been a number of cases in which people have been left out of pocket — I think that that is what Ms Anderson referred to earlier — because they have had to commission a structural engineer, in cases where there is a replacement dwelling, or an architect. What measures are in place to compensate those people for that out-of-pocket expenditure that they necessarily incurred as part of their application process?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mr McGlone for his question. I am very clear about this. I understand that quite a number of people have been left out of pocket because of their grant applications. That means people who have had to use architects, consulting engineers and various other types of consultants in order get their application for grant aid processed. Coupled with that is the application for planning permission for the replacement house.

I want to help those people. As a result, I have asked my officials to look again at that particular issue because the current statutory provision that enables the Housing Executive to recompense expenses that are incurred by applicants is quite specific, in that such fees are only recoverable if the grant is approved and

the works are satisfactorily completed. I realised that there was a little problem that we needed to address, so I asked my officials to have a look at the issue. It may be possible to provide help for some applicants who have reached the latter stages of the grant-approval process and whose grant would have been approved had money been available in relation to the costs that they have incurred directly as a result of advancing their application, such as fees for architects, planning consultants or civil engineers.

However, the proposition requires more work before the scheme can be launched. I am working on it, because there are certain details that I have yet to finalise with officials, but I will be happy to come back to the Member when that is fully completed.

Warm Homes Scheme

4. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the effectiveness of the warm homes scheme in the current financial year.

(AQO 34/10)

The Minister for Social Development: The warm homes scheme is my Department's main programme in tackling fuel poverty, and I remain committed to alleviating fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. As the Member knows, the scheme has been extremely successful and hugely popular. Since 2001, we have spent over £118 million on the warm homes scheme, making over 71,000 homes warmer. The scheme was subject to a Northern Ireland Audit Office review and a subsequent Public Accounts Committee hearing. Following a series of recommendations, which I welcomed, changes were made to ensure that money was targeted at those people who were most in need of help to improve the energy efficiency of their homes.

Following a competitive tendering process, the new warm homes scheme contract was awarded on 1 July; H & A Mechanical Services Limited and Bryson Charitable Group are the new scheme managers. I am pleased to say that, for the first time, young families who are in receipt of working tax credit can now benefit from improvements to the heating systems in their homes. I encourage Members to advise them to contact the new scheme managers. People who are over 60 can also benefit from the scheme. I encourage Members to advise their older constituents to apply to the scheme.

Despite enormous budgetary pressures, I have increased this year's warm homes scheme budget to £20.5 million, and I have set a public service agreement target in this financial year of 10,000 homes to be assisted by the scheme. I expect that target to be met.

Mr Armstrong: Is the Minister content with the progress that her Department has made in meeting the

fuel poverty commitment that is in the Programme for Government?

The Minister for Social Development: My Department, with the Housing Executive and the other stakeholders that are involved, has done a sterling job. What would have been the case if we had not implemented a warm homes scheme? What would have been the case if we had not issued 167,000 households with a fuel poverty payment earlier this year? What would have been the case if I had been unable to enable last year's increase in the winter fuel payment from £25 to £100? Hopefully, I will be able to do that this year. Therefore, we are addressing fuel poverty, and I hope that I will be able to address energy efficiency in all the homes in question as a result of the revised warm homes scheme.

Mr Molloy: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. Do applicants who applied and were knocked back under the Eaga scheme have to reapply now? Will the new applications cover new central heating systems in new projects?

The Minister for Social Development: I assure Mr Molloy that those who have applied already to Eaga will not have to reapply, because the two scheme managers have been told that they must address what is in the pipeline. They are contacting everybody who is on the waiting list, and I have been told to expect that that will be completed by the end of November. Naturally, I hope that it will be done much earlier, and I will urge the managers to do so.

The second part of Mr Molloy's question goes back to the fundamental issue, which is why the Department revised the scheme. Heating replacements will not be dealt with under this scheme. We want to ensure that all houses, particularly those without central heating, can access such heating. If the Member has a specific issue to address, he may like to pass it to me for investigation.

Mr Gallagher: I commend the Minister and her Department for locating one of the warm homes scheme provider's offices in Enniskillen, a town in the constituency and the county that has by far the greatest level of unfitness. However, as we all know, when all these schemes are done, we will still have people who face fuel poverty. Does the Minister foresee anything more that can be done about that poverty?

The Minister for Social Development: More can be done. Mr Gallagher's question follows on from that of Mr Armstrong. The Department also funds a substantial investment in heating replacement schemes in the public housing stock.

The Housing Executive has invested heavily in the energy efficiency of its stock, including a substantial programme of conversion to natural gas. I would like to see all public housing stock converted to cleaner,

more efficient natural gas where it is available, and I support the extension of the gas network to more parts of Northern Ireland. I am conscious that there will be an Adjournment debate on that issue this afternoon.

Fuel poverty is not about energy costs alone; it is also about low incomes. Alongside the warm homes scheme and heating replacement programmes, one of the Department for Social Development's key priorities is to maximise household incomes through the benefit uptake campaign, which aims to help people to claim their benefit entitlement. The current annual campaign, about which Members were notified, started on 17 August 2009.

As I informed Mr Armstrong in my answer to his question, my Department also administers the winter fuel payment that everybody aged 60 or over is entitled to receive. That will help elderly people to meet energy costs during the winter months.

3.30 pm

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Forestry Bill

Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Second Stage of the Forestry Bill [NIA 11/08] be agreed. — [*The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew).*]

Mr Shannon: I support the motion, but I also wish to raise some issues. In particular, although I welcome many provisions in the Forestry Bill, I want the Minister to take on board the fact that other aspects of it give me serious cause for concern.

The Forest Service recognises that the demand for forest use is changing, but it is silent on all matters relating to shooting and, particularly, deer stalking, despite significant reference having been made to the service's desire to acquire additional powers for itself in that regard in its strategy for sustainability and growth.

Aa the minnit the Forest Service dales wi' the shuitin community es yin o' hits uiser curns bae gien oot permits fer gaime shuitin an' control o' vermin, sae the fact at thair isnae onie mention o' shuitin ir deer stalkin' i this consultation bes raire. The Service hasnae yet seen the fu' extent, importance an' validity o' recreational sportin' shuitin' an' the parallel roul fer recreational deer stalkers i' the management o' plaintins an' the bag sportin' tourism earnins at ir bein' loast.

Independent research bae consultants, PACEC, has shewn at sportin' shuitin pits mair nor £45 million intae the Norlin Airlan economy ivry yeir an hefts 2,100 fu' tim' equivalent joabs. Forebye thon the shuitin community i Norlin Airlan spens £10 million oan conservation waark ivry yeir an' hes owresicht influence oan 990,000 hectares aroun' the Province. Oan account o' thon A wud ax the Meenster fer wie she hasnae yet tuk thon intae account.

The Forest Service currently engages with the shooting community, as one of its user groups, through the issuance of permits for game shooting and vermin control, so the absence of any mention of shooting or deer stalking in the consultation that took place on the Bill is surprising. The service has clearly not recognised the full extent, importance and validity of recreational sporting shooting, the parallel role for recreational deer stalkers in forest management and the substantial sporting tourism revenue that is being lost.

Independent research by consultants at PACEC identified that sporting shooting contributes more than £45 million annually to the Northern Ireland economy, sustaining some 2,100 full-time equivalent jobs. The shooting community in Northern Ireland also spends £10 million a year on conservation work and has management influence on 990,000 hectares around the Province. Therefore, I ask the Minister why she has not yet taken that into account.

Among the main concerns that exist is a proposal for Forest Service staff, possibly including those non-staff to whom they delegate powers, which is a worrying point, to be authorised to go on to all land that is adjacent to forestry — not just the Forest Service's land alone but all privately owned woodland — to shoot deer. The Forest Service has confirmed its intention to double woodland and forestry in the Province from the current level of 6% to 12%, as well as confirming that the increase will largely be delivered by private owners. I welcome that fact, because it is good news, and, in a small way, I am playing my part, because we have planted 2,500 trees, so we are doing our wee bit to try to make that target achievable. However, the problem is that the Forest Service wants powers to allow its rangers to go on to private land that is adjacent to private forestry to shoot deer. Staff are to be able to shoot deer day or night, 365 days a year, and they are to be exempt from the provisions of the proposed new wildlife Order and the game Acts.

I want to look at things through the end of a scope — not through the end of a barrel — at a Forest Service that is trying to control shooting rights on its land. I suggest that, if one can be both, it is probably poacher and gamekeeper at the same time, and that concerns me.

When speaking to my colleague Lord Morrow beforehand, I was reminded of a saying in a magazine that he and I both read, 'Shooting Times', which states that the wildlife of today is not ours to dispose of as we please; rather, we hold it in care for those who come after. Therefore, Mr Speaker, it is important that the Forestry Bill ensure that wildlife be protected, as should be landowners with land close to Forestry Service land.

The Forestry Commission wants to be able to cull deer that might cause damage, not just those that are actively causing damage, and to recover the cost of such deer culling on private land — supposedly for the benefit of other private woodland owners — from the owners of the adjacent land. That is outrageous. Indeed, the commission wants the adjacent landowners to pay for it as well.

Access to sporting shooting and deer stalking should be given equal status with other sports and forest uses, and there should be formalised engagement with the

representative bodies for deer stalking and shooting sports. The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, Mr Ian Paisley Jnr, commented earlier on recreational shooting and tourism. There is potential to be realised.

In recommending the partnership solution, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) proposed that the Forest Service join with the voluntary sector and other relevant bodies in a deer forum. I suggest to the Minister that that is, perhaps, a way of addressing the issue so that that opportunity can be extended, the voluntary sector can play a role in further deer management, and the Forest Service can reduce its overheads and direct commitments. That seems sensible, and I ask the Minister to take it into account in her response.

Roger Pollen of the BASC informed me that the association welcomes the principle of equality and access. If the process is to be equality-proofed, which according to the legislation it is, we must have equality for everyone. At present, we do not have equality for deer shooters and country sports enthusiasts. It has to be genuine and inclusive.

The omission of shooting and deer stalking from the terms of reference of the consultation causes widespread concern about the commitment to genuine access and equality. To date, access for deer stalking has been restricted to members of the Forest Service to the exclusion of the public, even though the equivalent services in the rest of the UK allow extensive public access for deer stalking. Thus, the current approach in Northern Ireland is suppressing public value on at least three levels.

It is limiting tourism potential. There are places in the Province to which people come from across the water — from Germany, Denmark, France and Belgium — to shoot deer. Why do we not use that potential to create tourism and put the money back into the borough? The current approach is denying equality of access to the shooting community; it is failing to reduce public-sector costs; and it is failing to gain income from the public purse. The potential exists; let us realise it. The consultation recognises increasing afforestation, with associated challenges and opportunities, yet makes no reference to necessary deer management or to sharing the forest with the shooting community.

To answer the question, I do not believe that charging is a significant barrier to participation; in fact, charging for deer stalking could produce significant revenues. Money could be put back into the economy, the Forestry Commission and the system. Access to the forest for shooting is already closely regulated. Therefore, extending access to deer stalking should

present no significant challenges but should be undertaken to ensure fair opportunity.

There are recreational and social benefits to be derived from engaging with the shooting community. Those benefits, when applied to deer stalking, must not be underestimated. Thus, in asking whether the main opportunities have been identified — a question that the Minister and the Forestry Commission asked through the Forestry Bill — it is clear that a huge opportunity has not been identified: deer stalking. It has been entirely overlooked as a local demand and a tourism resource. It is a sure money earner. I am sure that the Minister will not pass on exploiting that potential.

Scotland, for example, and other parts of the UK have embraced those opportunities with the establishment of publicly funded posts to promote country sports tourism. The data revealed in the PACEC report show the current value of shooting to the Northern Ireland economy, but there is further potential to be realised, and the Forest Service has a role to play in its development. When considering that sporting shooting provides an excellent off-season tourism opportunity, it is clear that there is scope for promoting it as a separate marketing strand. Partnership with the main representative bodies, noted in my introduction, could ensure effective marketing of that opportunity. Do it right and take full value of what is there.

I have, as have, perhaps, the Minister and other Members, been contacted by landowners of adjacent properties who are concerned that clause 30(4) gives a blanket public right to access on foot to all forestry land for the purpose of recreation. As the definition of forestry land is land that is owned by the Department, that does not mean land that is privately owned. However, there is concern that there will be cases of “right to roam”, as has happened in Scotland and other parts of the UK. If any forestry or Department land has shooting rights attached to it that belong to someone else, there is a possibility that those rights will be interfered with. It is important that we have protection for the landowners of adjacent land and that we have a system that does not encroach upon that.

There is also concern that clause 31, which allows a power of entry to any land and which seems to be in reference to the felling of trees, will give rise to the need for private landowners to have a felling licence for felling their trees. Such a licence will only be issued with a management plan, and that puts the landowners under more unwarranted strain. The decision to fell trees that are not protected is a decision for the owner, not the forestry division. Moreover, clause 14 issues a blanket ban, which, I believe, cannot and should not be enforced on private landowners and which could be construed as the Department having control of private woodlands and, subsequently, as a nationalisation

proposal. Therefore there is a question mark over where this is going. It is feared that this is the compulsory acquisition of land, and that leaves the Department in complete control at a time when it is underfunded and, in some cases, ill-equipped to be so, regardless of whether it is fair to landowners. Where is the fairness for the landowners in that process? They are the people for whom I am fighting the bit today.

Those are the concerns that the Minister must address directly in order to assure us that that is not the purpose of those clauses of the Bill, as it would be grossly unfair if those concerns were found to be justified. The Minister will respond to us on that. I ask the Minister to put those concerns to rest and to qualify and quantify the issues.

I welcome the concept of better access to the public forest, as will many in the Chamber, but the Bill must also represent genuine equality of opportunity. The shooting community should not and must not be ignored and omitted from this process any longer, and neither can the private landowners have their management rights to their own land taken from them. That has to be addressed as well.

The Bill will come back to the Committee, and the Committee members will have a chance to look at those issues, but I ask the Minister to take my comments on board. They are serious, genuine and honest comments. I represent a large number of people in the Province, as do many Members, who will be affected disproportionately by the legislation if it goes the wrong way.

Mr Kinahan: I congratulate the Minister and her Department for the work that has been done on the Bill, and I thank the Department for meeting us in the summer. I also thank the consultees who responded. A great deal of useful information was provided, much of which Members will have heard before.

Since I am not a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, Members might be wondering why I am speaking in this debate, but many people rang me this summer and asked me to get involved. As my colleague Tom Elliott has done, I must declare an interest; I am the owner of some five acres of woodland that are as old as I am — about 50 years young.

There is an imbalance in the objectives of the Bill. There is too much power placed in the Department’s hands with not enough checks and balances, and there are many areas that need clarification. We need the stakeholder advisory committee, which many Members have mentioned. I am not going to go into every matter, despite the ream of paper that I have in front of me. There is an imbalance in the Bill’s objectives. It promotes forestry and develops forestation, primarily in line with its wish to supply trees and timber.

However, we need to improve the balance; it needs to protect the environment and encourage the enjoyment of the forests. It should balance the supplying of trees and timbers with economic, social, environmental and recreational uses.

Forestry is a long-term business. I agree with the need to double the amount of land that we have in forestry from 6% to 12%, but we need to be careful about how we do it. The Bill is definitely a step in the right direction.

3.45 pm

In the long term, we do not know what is in store for us. Global warming, whether our fault or not, a population explosion, and the loss of good farmland worldwide mean that we may have to grow more, but we must also educate more, and the use of woodland is essential in that. At the same time, we must respect private landowners and their pastimes. We need an independent forestry body that has teeth and that will be listened to rather than just be consulted.

On the matter of too much power: reading the text shows that the Department wants to acquire land by agreement; erect such buildings and execute such other works on forestry land as it considers necessary; provide facilities on the land that it considers desirable, and compulsorily acquire any land it requires in order to perform any function under the Bill. The Department also wants to act in its role as the occupier of the land and be able to kill, cull or destroy any wild animals on that land, or on adjoining land; impose reasonable fees or other charges as it may prescribe; make by-laws for the preservation of trees or timber on forestry land and prohibit or regulate any act that may injure or deform forestry land. If one adds powers of entry to the land; the need for permission to fell trees, and the power to set fees, one will realise that the Department is seeking extremely strong powers, which I do not think it requires.

I know that the Bill is a wish list, or probably more of an intend-to-have list. I also know that the Department would not use all of those powers unless it had to do so. However, we must take great care. If one takes all of the powers contained in the Bill together, the Department could flatten a forest or woodland and build a housing estate; it could buy anyone out, and it could control the market and the value of the land. The Department could also kill any animals and pests when it feels it needs to do so; and, as I have said before, it could set fees and charges, whether farmers or others could afford them.

I know that the Department will only use the powers in the Bill in exceptional cases. However, the Assembly must ensure that the proper checks and balances are in the Bill.

Many points require more clarification and a bit more thought, such as the Department being subject to

planning law at all times. Charges and fees must be discussed in detail and, like planning fees, must be passed by the Assembly, if they are required at all. Moreover, the Department, or Forest Service, owns 80% or more of the trees, so why make the small, possible powerless, private sector pay? There will be little in return, and it is not fair to ask that sector to pay if the Forest Service does not.

Who will decide whether animals are doing enough damage to merit a cull, and who will ensure that breeding cycles, animal welfare and every other factor is considered? Who will decide when the Department can go onto someone else's land to cull or clear threatening crops?

Rights of appeal are set out in the Bill, but the time frame for appeals also concerns me. We must have a really dynamic and fast appeals system. The present system in the Department is incredibly slow, as are other matters, and improvement will require much more resources. We are meant to be considering cut backs.

As regards some specific items in the Bill: the Department wants felling licences to be applied for, which will give total control for trees in woodlands over 0.2 hectares, trees over 10cm thick, and in areas where there is 5cu m of timber. That is good thinking, but it is also very dangerous. Why does the provision not include all trees in all areas? That would stop developers felling trees at weekends. Indeed, perhaps we should examine a retrospective law on that point so that they do not start doing it tomorrow.

I want all trees between 100 and 150 years old to be protected. On two or three occasions today, the term "ancient woodland" has been mentioned, but I wonder how many Members know that that means trees that are pre-1600, which accounts for very few of the trees in Northern Ireland. We should increase that to 100 or 150 years old.

The proposed licensing is in line with mainland legislation and seems sensible. However, it should be in the form of a licence that is linked to a plan of over five years, in which the private forestry farmer is free to fell within his licence whenever timber is needed by the market. The Forest Service must also be required to get a licence. If trees are being planted and managed according to the UK Woodlands Assurance Standard, which is sustainable, they should be exempt; perhaps other areas should also be exempt.

With regard to access, clause 30 states:

"the public shall have right of access on foot to all forestry land for the purposes of recreation."

It has already been clarified that that means forestry land only, and I am grateful for that.

Members of country sports clubs and other users also have major concerns about the Bill. In Tardree

forest, which is in my locality, we have game shooting, horse riding, quad bikes, cross-country bicycling, rambblers and one or two more unsavoury uses. We need the balance of a central body, probably a voluntary body, to manage that. We need to respect the rights of all and consult and work with all users. We need an independent advisory body.

There is conflict among the people who use the Belfast hills, where opening up the land means that farmers have problems with insurance. There has been damage to fences, cattle have been let out — or let in — and many other things.

The Bill seeks the power to cull pests, and that seems reasonable. However, who knows best? We need an advisory panel for checks and balances.

When trees are being felled, it is a dangerous situation. When the trees are young, there is the risk of fire; when the trees are being felled, there is even more danger. Advice will be needed when the by-laws are being drawn up.

Mr Shannon: Does the Member agree that a forum could be used as one method for reaching agreement? I suggested a deer forum, but there could be a forum that would include all the other bodies.

Mr Kinahan: I agree entirely; whether it is one forum or a group of different bodies, advice is always needed.

With regard to sporting bodies, shooting rights exist on private and departmental land. The BASC states that the value of sports to our economy is worth £45 million, and some 2,100 full-time jobs rely on it; Members have already heard those figures. That is evident at game fairs and country shows throughout Northern Ireland. Those rights should not be compulsory on the Department, but they will need to be discussed with the groups.

The power to cull all animals includes the wish to enter forestry land and adjoining land to cull animals. That is against the present gun and wildlife laws. That should be done only through an independent body, by agreement and within the law.

To conclude — Members will be pleased as I have been going on for too long — there is the possibility of too much power without enough checks and balances. We need an advisory body that will include wildlife groups, biodiversity groups, timber groups, countryside groups, sports groups and many others. There are many points that I have not addressed, but I welcome the need for an inventory. We do not want compulsory purchase, other than for access. The Committee has much to do, and UUP Members look forward to being able to help it.

Mr B Wilson: Like other Members, I support the proposed legislation. However, it must be strengthened in a number of ways.

The importance of woods and trees to our environment has never been more apparent than it is today. They are essential for climate regulation; for the flow and quality of water; for mitigation of air pollution; for soil conservation; for storing carbon; and for our society to adapt to climate change. They also encourage exercise, improve physical health and reduce mental stress.

As other Members have pointed out, Northern Ireland has fewer trees and less woodland than almost any other country in Europe. Woodland accounts for a mere 6% of our land, compared with the European average of 44%. Even the UK and the Republic are better, with 12% and 10% woodland cover respectively.

It is even worse if we consider ancient woodland. Of the 6% woodland cover, only 0.08% is ancient woodland. Indeed, since felling licences were abolished in the 1960s, 273 of Northern Ireland's ancient woods have been lost to felling. We have failed to protect our woodlands and are now paying the price.

Those statistics give cause for alarm, because ancient woods are our equivalent of the rainforest. They are rich in wildlife, and one of the foundations upon which we can restore our natural environment. The Bill, although belated, is welcome. However, as it stands, it does not give adequate protection to ancient woods. The general duty of the Department should be amended to ensure that both DARD and its agencies are able to deliver on all the benefits accruing from native woodland and the biodiversity that it supports. Protecting native and ancient woods should be part of the Department's general duty.

The clause must include a clear definition of sustainability, a term generally understood as referring to development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. By enshrining sustainable forestry at the heart of the Bill, the Minister can ensure that forestry practice encompasses environmental and social issues as well as continuing to recognise the need for commercial harvesting.

In the Bill's current form, the definition of forestry land is limited to:

“any land held by the Department for the purposes of any of its functions under this Act”.

That is incompatible with the challenges on the ground, because some of the most beautiful ancient and native woods are not owned by the Forest Service. DARD and the Forest Service should therefore have a responsibility to advise and assist landowners in the public, private and charitable sectors on how best to

manage their woods, should that help be required. The Bill should be strengthened to take that into account.

In light of the loss of ancient and native woods, I welcome the fact that the Bill proposes to reintroduce the requirement for felling licences. In fact, I have raised the need for tree-felling licences in the Assembly on a number of occasions. They are required in the UK, and throughout most of Europe, but were abolished in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s. I have no doubt that the abolition of felling licences played a major part in the destruction of our woodlands over the past 50 years.

It is also disappointing that the new felling regime outlined in part 3 of the Bill fails to explicitly mention ancient woods. A number of other Members have referred to that. In practice, that means that ancient woods will not be afforded any additional protection, and they are still under threat from clear felling. I support Dr Farry and Dr McCrea in asking the Minister to insert a new clause in the Bill that offers a presumption against granting a felling licence in respect of all woods identified on the ancient woodland inventory. That inventory was completed by the Woodland Trust in 2006, and is based on sound research and field survey. It identifies all recognised areas of ancient woodland in Northern Ireland, and is used by the Planning Service as a material consideration in all planning applications.

As I previously mentioned, ancient woodland covers only 0.08% of our landscape, and its protection would not place an onerous duty on either Departments or landowners. Indeed, by including such a new clause in the Bill, the Minister would be able to reassure the Assembly that ancient woods will be appropriately protected, both now and for future generations.

I am also concerned about clause 16 of the Bill, which authorises DARD to pay compensation to an applicant should they be refused a felling licence. In my view, there is absolutely no justification for that compensation, as public money should not be paid for simply obeying the law. If public money is used in that way, it would have a detrimental effect on other Executive commitments, such as the doubling of woodland cover and adapting to climate change. In fact, if the clause were introduced, it might actually deter DARD or the Forest Service from refusing a felling licence, even if there are valid environmental grounds for doing so. I ask the Minister to remove that clause from the Bill.

4.00 pm

I am also concerned that the land owned by Government Departments is exempt from felling licences. As that land accounts for 70% of the total forest area, it is necessary to reconsider that provision.

In the coming weeks, the Assembly will have an invaluable opportunity to shape forestry legislation to

ensure that it provides a framework for meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century. With that in mind, the Bill needs to be strengthened to offer greater protection to ancient woods. That is achievable by amending both the general duty on the Department and the proposed felling licence regime and by removing the clause providing compensation to developers refused felling licences. I support the Bill.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Second Stage Forestry Bill: part three. I appreciate the indulgence of the Speaker and Members; I know that this debate has been a wee bit disjointed. I also appreciate the nature of the debate, in which all involved have been very good humoured. There is cognisance of the fact that the Assembly's primary purpose is to legislate, and it is a good sign that this legislation has had its Second Stage on the second day of the new session. I hope for similar indulgence from the Assembly on other legislation that I plan to bring forward over the coming months.

As many Members have pointed out, the current forestry legislation is 56 years old. From that point of view, although Members have challenged my Department on the vagueness of parts of the Bill or have said that there are not enough specifics in it, our hope is that this Bill is written in such a way that it is fit for purpose and lasts into the future. I hope that it will not be another half century before new forestry legislation is passed, but certainly the legislation needs to be vague enough to cover issues that we do not foresee today but that may be important in five, 10, or 15 years. Therefore, the detail on a lot of the issues involved will come in subordinate legislation, and the Committee and stakeholders will have ample opportunity to contribute to that subordinate legislation and to help us to get it right.

I will now go through Members' contributions. I apologise in advance if I do not cover everything, but I will refer to the Hansard report and follow up on any questions that have been put to me and that I have been unable to answer.

The first contribution was from the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, Ian Paisley Jnr. He challenged us on the recreation aspects of the Bill and argued that what we do needs to become more widely encompassing. I agree with him fully; I have made recreation and getting people into forests a ministerial priority, and my Department has recently published a strategy to bring that about. Through this Bill, I am determined to have a more balanced arrangement between timber production and the use of our forests for recreation and leisure. In establishing that, I have responded to the views of stakeholders and reflected my own view that we must increase our recreational provision. However, I am

very happy to work with the Committee to ensure that we get it right and that there is a proper regional balance in leisure provision.

Some of the recreation and leisure facilities that we already provide include woodland walks, cycling and recreational shooting. Earlier this year, I announced that the Forest Service had appointed an operator to deliver high-trees adventure facilities in Tollymore Forest Park, and hopefully that will open next Easter. A lot is being done, but I agree: we need to do an awful lot more, and we will want to do that in the time ahead.

Willie Clarke alluded strongly to the tourism aspect and to getting the balance right. He talked about log cabins and the recreational use of forests and made a local plug for south Down. We see a lot of potential in south Down, but in areas such as the Sperrins there is also potential to develop recreational pursuits in Forest Service areas. Willie also talked about native woodland, which was certainly a theme throughout this afternoon's debate. A lot of people were concerned about the need to protect our native and ancient woodlands.

Tom Elliott described a modest area of forestry; I would love to know what he means by "modest". He asked for a clarification of what constitutes ancient woodland. "Ancient", as I believe Brian pointed out, means that a woodland dates from the 1600s onwards, and "long-established" means that it dates from the 1830s onwards. Members are right: we absolutely do not have enough of our ancient and long-established woodlands protected. They are a valuable resource, and I do not mean from the point of view of cutting them down. The uniqueness of the flora and fauna in those long-established and native woodlands is something that we are all very proud of.

Tom also asked whether short-rotation coppice could be categorised as trees. Short-rotation coppice refers primarily to willow, but there are other woodland short-rotation systems. A native tree that might be used in short rotation is ash, and eucalyptus can also be used. Therefore, short rotation applies to not just willow. Willow is from the same family as sally and, obviously, is a tree. There is now a use for willow, as Mr Elliott will know, because companies such as Balcas are turning it into woodchip and pellets and providing alternative and renewable energy sources.

We have to be pragmatic and ensure that we are increasing our forestry cover, and we will not do that with just broadleaf or native species. There must be a mix to ensure that we get the coverage that we are aspiring to. Members said that that is not achievable, and it might not be. However, I will give it my best shot and do everything that I can to double the rate of our forestry cover because, as many Members pointed out, 6% coverage is not good enough. It will be a

difficult target to achieve, but I will do everything that is in my power to do that.

Tom Elliott also spoke about the disposal of forestry land. I can see why that question came up, but, under the 1953 Act, the Department has the power to sell any land that has been acquired for forestry, and it does so from time to time when the land is not required. However, any disposal of land will be considered carefully and in the context of our strategic aim to double forest cover. Therefore, there might be times when we want to dispose of some land in order to buy more to give us, for example, more scope, but there are reasons for that.

Again, like many other Members, Mr Elliott, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, talked about the wide range of powers that the Department is seeking to introduce through the Bill. Compulsory purchase powers will be used sparingly under existing, well-established government compulsory purchase arrangements. They are intended, principally, to enable access to land-locked timber resources that have been created at public expense. There might be other circumstances in which land might be required; for example, to enable access for recreation or tourism initiatives. That is why that provision has been widely drafted.

In the current economic climate, which I do not foresee changing radically over the next period, we do not have the money to buy land to put into forestry. I would love it if we had, but we do not. Therefore, I see compulsory purchase powers being used very little. In fact, the Bill will be going before the Committee for scrutiny. It is more a case of, perhaps, buying a corner of a field or something in order to get access to timber that is mature and that has a value to the public purse. Believe me, however, this is not about buying up swathes of land and putting it into forestry production; the resources for that are simply not there.

Mr Elliott also spoke about clause 7, which deals with incidental powers. That issue came up in the debate time and time again, and Dr McCrea also made significant mention of it.

That clause allows engagement in partnerships or participation in a body corporate for the general functions that are carried out by the Forest Service, which could relate to future recreational or renewable energy initiatives. The Forestry Commission in England and Wales has such powers under the Forestry Act 1967. The power is intended not to be additional to the general duty but to supplement it. I am loath to give swingeing powers to anyone without checks and balances. We want those powers to be used responsibly, and that will be dealt with in Committee. We want the Committee to have its role in scrutinising the Bill.

Mr Elliott also raised the need for the Department to have felling licences. I assure Members that the Department is bound by fairly stringent standards such as the UK Woodland Assurance Standard and the Forest Stewardship Council. The Forest Service is audited annually on the standards that we have to comply with. We are more than happy to be part of that and for robust standards to be in place. We have a duty to enhance tree cover; it is not in the Department's interest to chop down trees. Where there is a commercial aspect, we will reinvigorate it, and where trees are harvested, they will be replanted.

Fairly stringent standards already apply to the Department, and if it were to be regulated through felling licences, as some Members have suggested, it would lead to duplication and unnecessary bureaucracy. The Department would have to apply to the Department, and we all require Departments to make best use of their resources and not carry out unnecessary work. That work certainly would be unnecessary, given the standards that already apply to the Forest Service in its duty of care. If necessary, Mr Elliott can come back to me on any of those issues.

Stephen Farry had much to say on the need for increased cover. I fully acknowledge that our cover is not good enough, and I am committed to forest expansion. That is one of the Forest Service's key policy objectives, but, as a policy issue, it does not require a statutory position. Mr Farry also talked about climate change contribution, and he acknowledged the importance of the role that forestry can play. I fully concur with that. Our contribution to that will be within the context of the forestry standard and associated climate guidance. I noted Mr Farry's comments on clauses 4, 6 and 7 and on other points. I am happy to reflect on those and take his views forward on the matter.

Dr McCrea talked about the use of forest land for tourism purposes and about planning permission and integration into planning strategies. That will certainly be done, and the Department would be subject to the same planning permission considerations and scrutiny as any other body or agency. We will need planning permission if we are to create tourism projects, and those would also be subject to environmental impact assessments. Checks and balances will be in place.

Dr McCrea also talked about the need for the Department to have felling licences and about its proposed powers of entry, which is always a controversial power. The Department will want to take the time to discuss those issues carefully with the Committee to give it a role in helping us to make the Bill a piece of legislation of which we can be proud. He also pointed out issues about recreation, and I emphasise that other Departments have a role in that, whether it is the DOE, which has a role with

environmental aspects, or DCAL, which has a role with recreational aspects. However, we will also look to other partners, such as local councils. We have already heard good examples of how we work together to improve the recreation product of forestry land.

4.15 pm

Dr McCrea also talked about controlling wildlife in state forests. We have established that that needs to be done. He also talked about the time that it takes to process licences. I agree that we want to do that with as little bureaucracy as possible. We want it to be a simple procedure that does not take long, because it is to no one's benefit if it does. We also want to work with landowners to ensure that those licences result in woodland sustainability. We want them to be straightforward. The detail will come through in subordinate legislation. I want to emphasise the Committee's role in that.

Pat Doherty mentioned that the Forestry Act 1953 is 56 years old and that, therefore, it is younger than him. I am not sure about that; Pat is looking youthful these days. He talked about rural roads. Certainly, in my constituency, we share those concerns about the ability to put roads back to their original condition. I agree with him wholeheartedly: it is a huge difficulty for local communities. We will want to address that during the coming weeks and months.

Tourism was a theme of William Irwin's remarks. He said that more could be done. He covered clause 5 and was one of the people who said that he did not believe that large-scale forestation is achievable.

Although I do not want to rush through my comments, I do not want to repeat what Members have already said and to go through clauses that have already been talked about. Mr Savage said that the Department is looking for too much power and that there are no meaningful checks and balances. Again, he is on the Committee, so I will be able to sit down with him and others to work through those issues.

Dolores Kelly described the Bill as a vision for the next 50 years. No pressure then, Dolores. John Dallat made an intervention about tree-hugging. I am not sure whether he was talking about him or me. The words "mighty oaks" and "little acorns" sprang to mind. Dolores went on to talk about addressing the ill effects of the Plantation. Certainly, we would all love to be in a position to do something about that.

Dolores raised a point about the stakeholder advisory committee, which was a theme throughout the debate. She also mentioned the woodland survey and inventory. We do very much take stock of what is already recorded on the inventory because we accept the importance of native woodlands and want to ensure that it takes cognisance of what we have in order for it to be protected.

I think that Dolores also mentioned the amount of tree cover. Six per cent tree cover equates to 80,000 hectares. The Department's plan is to double it, which is an extremely ambitious target.

Jim Shannon talked about shooting deer — he has never seen 'Bambi', then — and about giving the voluntary sector a role in controlling deer and the equality element of that. Obviously, the Department has looked at the issue. It would be remiss of me to bring forward a Bill that did not encompass everyone's equality. I take his point about country sports and tourism.

The "right to roam" applies only to Forest Service land. I know that that issue gave people some cause for concern. It is about giving all of us pedestrian access to Forest Service land and forests so that we can better enjoy and appreciate what we have.

I believe that it was Danny Kinahan's first involvement in a debate with me. He mentioned his five acres of land. We all get precious about the few trees that we have. Would it not be lovely if we all had more? Fair play to him. He talked about a better balance between timber production and social, environmental and recreational needs. He also talked about climate change and the powers that the Department has introduced in the Bill.

I was taken aback by Mr Kinahan's comment that the Department could flatten a forest to build a housing estate. We could not and would not do that; that is not what we are here to do. As set out in clause 1 of the Bill, our primary focus is to protect forestry and ensure that we continue to roll out forestry cover. The suggestion that the Department would do otherwise flies in the face of clause 1. That is not what we are here to do.

Mr Kinahan also said that we need a dynamic appeals system. That is certainly something that I am trying to get through all aspects of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. He spoke about the need to have trees in all areas and about developers felling trees at weekends. We all know of such issues in our constituencies. However, tree preservation orders are still the remit of the Department of the Environment. I want to be careful not to overstep the mark and tread on the work of other Departments.

Brian Wilson spoke about the benefits of trees, forests and our ancient woodlands. He, too, pointed out that the abolishment of felling licences in the 1960s had a detrimental impact. It is, therefore, important that the requirement for a felling licence be included in the Bill to ensure that we protect our native woodlands. Mr Wilson also raised environmental and social issues and said that we should look at the issue of a presumption against a felling licence, which was a point that was raised earlier.

We are at only the Second Stage of the Bill, and we have a long way to go. We will appreciate the co-operation of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee in working to create legislation of which we can all be proud and which, hopefully, will last well into the future — although not another half-century.

We must ensure that we double our forestry cover and that we protect wildlife, both flora and fauna, and the environment in forests. We must also ensure that we have more habitats for animals and flowers in forests and that there is more scope for them to flourish. We have a big job to do. It is great that so many Members contributed to the debate today and that so much goodwill has been shown towards the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Forestry Bill [NIA 11/08] be agreed.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Home Improvement Grants

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

Mr F McCann: I beg to move

That this Assembly urges the Minister for Social Development to explain why the Housing Executive has suspended the payment of home improvement grants, despite the Department for Social Development being awarded an extra £20m in the June monitoring round for housing; and further calls on the Minister to remove the suspension of these grants, which are vital to meeting the Decent Homes Standards to enable essential maintenance and home improvements work to be carried out.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am sure that there will be widespread support in the Chamber for this motion as the issue under discussion affects people in all constituencies. How many Members have had people call to their offices and homes about home improvement grants? How many times have we received phone calls from people, young and old, who are in despair after learning that the Housing Executive has turned down their application for help towards home improvements?

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

As if that were not bad enough, how many of those people were encouraged to make an application only to be told by the Housing Executive at the last hurdle — after having gone through the entire process — that, because of budgetary problems, their grants would be frozen and that they would have to continue to live in the terrible conditions that they were trying to improve by applying for grant assistance?

The Minister said that she would rather put a roof over people's heads than worry about kitchen replacements. What about the people who are sitting in homes with leaking roofs? What about the people whose electricity supply is substandard and in a dangerous condition? What about the people whose homes are riddled with damp and crumbling because of that?

What about people who live in a rural setting, have to endure intolerable living conditions and are waiting for help, only to be told that the Minister has redirected the money? She would rather put a roof on a new house than tackle the atrocious conditions that exist in many of the houses that have been refused assistance.

Perhaps the Minister can tell us how many of the houses that had a grant application refused were checked to ensure that they met health and safety standards. Are there ramifications for the health of the families who live in those houses? Two such families attended one of her infamous roadshows in Newry to ask that question, but they were shouted down and heckled by SDLP members. Where is the concern for those families?

The Minister needs to explain why she does not spread her budget more evenly to ensure that houses that are in a bad state of repair can be assisted along with the newbuilds. She needs to explain why rotten kitchens and heating systems that affect people's health will not be replaced. Does she not realise that she is storing up a financial nightmare for the future? Does she not realise that rotten and decaying kitchens and doors affect the fabric of a house and cost more to put right further down the road? Does she not also realise that a heating system that is not repaired or replaced affects the fabric of a house?

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member put on record his recognition that the housing budget has a shortfall of more than £100 million?

Mr F McCann: I have no difficulty agreeing that there is a shortfall in the housing budget. However, the problem with the budget has been that the Minister has redirected all the finances towards newbuilds, which created the mess that we are in today. Over the past number of monitoring rounds, considerable amounts of money have been given to the Minister to deal with some of the problems that I mentioned, but she has chosen not to.

What costs can be matched against the damage to a person's health? Those are questions that the Minister needs to answer. She should not blame other people, which she usually does. She should not evade the hard questions or play with words, which she has become famous for. Too much depends on this. Thousands of people are waiting for answers to those questions; hundreds of people who are employed in the sector, including Egan contractors, depend on the work to put bread on the table for their families.

I am sure that all Members have received letters from small contractors who are involved in the renovation sector saying that they are among the 900 small contractors who rely totally on the business from the home improvement grants to survive. That sector will go to the wall because of decisions taken by the Minister.

The Minister should admit that her interference led us to this crisis; she should admit that she made a mistake. How much of the money that should have been used to fund an improvement programme or

those working on the Egan contracts has been used to purchase properties from private developers?

Does the Minister know how much money people have spent on preparing documents to supply the Housing Executive with plans for the work that they intended to carry out? How can that money be recouped? It is my understanding that some 14,700 people applied for grants, and the Housing Executive had a statutory responsibility to complete the work in 4,000 of those cases. In 9,700 instances, applications for a grant were refused or suspended. How do those people recoup the money that they spent in preparation for the receipt of a grant? They include elderly people who cannot afford to lose that money and families who had to borrow money to fulfil the requirements that were laid out by the Housing Executive. Will the Minister tell the House if she will guarantee that those people will receive refunds? Many people only took part in the scheme on the back of advice that they received from the Housing Executive, only to be told at the last minute that their grant had been frozen: where is the fairness in that? There are many questions for the Minister to answer and, as elected representatives, we require those answers to ensure that our constituents are given the correct information. We await the Minister's explanation.

Even this morning, Members from across the House approached me to tell me horror stories from people in Derry, Strabane, Newry, Armagh, Fermanagh and across the board. Many people in rural areas live in atrocious conditions. The Minister said earlier that any case put forward would be investigated, but we continually put cases forward, and they are continually knocked back. That is the problem, and the Minister needs to deal with it right away.

4.30 pm

Mr Burns: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out 'remove' and insert: "review"

I am delighted to make my first speech of the new Assembly term on such an important topic. Last year, the House saw many Sinn Féin motions that were directed at the Minister for Social Development. The SDLP did not support those motions, and it will not support this one without the acceptance of the amendment that I have proposed.

We all recognise the importance of the private-sector housing grants scheme, as detailed in the motion. I am a strong supporter of that scheme, which is an important tool for tackling bad conditions in private-sector housing. Those grants help people on low incomes who own their own homes to get their houses up to the decent homes standard. There is a real need for those grants, of that there is no doubt, and we can all agree on that aspect of the motion. People who need grants come into my constituency office, and they

are desperately disappointed that those grants have been deferred or suspended. People need those grants to help to bring their houses up to a better standard.

At the same time, however, we all know that the Minister is caught in a catch-22 situation. She did indeed receive £20 million in the June monitoring round, but that money had conditions attached: DSD had the money spent before it was received. The Minister will no doubt explain in detail that that money needed to be spent on Egan contractors, kitchen replacements and bathroom replacements. Even with that extra £20 million, the budget for the Department for Social Development is still far short of what is required.

Mr F McCann: I think that most Members have been lobbied by people who work under Egan contracts. They say that the work that they are in the process of carrying out will shortly dry up and that they will be back to square one. As far as Egan contractors are concerned, £5 million of that £20 million was set aside to deal with their contracts. What happened to the rest of that money?

Mr Burns: As you very well know, the Egan contractors who lobbied everyone had been given a commitment about all the work that needed to be completed for public-sector housing. Everyone knows that.

Originally, DSD needed an extra £100 million; that figure is now a mere £80 million. The reasons for the budget shortfall are well known, so I will not repeat them; the SDLP has been repeating those reasons for a long time. However, I remind Members of the reduction in income caused by the global economic downturn. I am happy that the Finance Minister is listening; Mr Wilson clearly understands the SDLP's arguments. We will continue to press him for more money, and perhaps the social-housing budget will once again be put on a firm footing.

It is because of the lack of money that grants have been suspended. No doubt, all parties in the Assembly care about the people who need those grants. However, we cannot spend money that we do not have. That is why our proposed amendment calls for the Minister to keep the suspension under review. To open up a grants free-for-all when we do not have the money would not be wise.

Members must understand that within the funding shortfall, DSD has to consider carefully how every penny is spent, and providing new homes is the main priority. All Members will have people who are on housing waiting lists coming to their constituency offices.

Thousands of new homes are required as a matter of urgency, and current market conditions are well suited to building new houses. For that reason, the SDLP is

committed to new building targets. The money for that is protected, and we will meet those targets.

The budget for the warm homes scheme is also protected to help householders who live in fuel poverty, as is the money for the Supporting People programme. The Minister has said many times that she will protect the most vulnerable in our society, and she deserves credit for that. Beyond that, given the budget shortfall, savings will have to be made somewhere. The Minister of Finance and Personnel knows that the money cannot be raised through the sale of land or houses, and, therefore, he must come up with additional funding. If he does that, the Minister for Social Development will be able to review the suspension, as proposed in our amendment.

Let me make it perfectly clear that there is no lack of will to provide the grants; the problem is a lack of money. I am hopeful that the suspension will be temporary, and I urge the Minister of Finance and Personnel to double his efforts to find the money to balance the DSD budget once and for all.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hamilton): I will speak initially in my role as Chairman of the Committee for Social Development. The Committee considered the Department's June monitoring round submission prior to the summer recess and endorsed the Department's bids. However, members felt that, given the budgetary challenges facing the Executive at that time — indeed at all times — all bids, which amounted to £130 million, were unlikely to be met in the June monitoring round.

The Deputy Chairperson, Mr Hilditch, spoke in the House in July and warmly welcomed the outcome of the monitoring round, which included, as has been mentioned, an additional £20 million for renovation grants and for disabled adaptations. Most Members will be aware of some people's frustration about renovation grants. Those householders want to improve their homes. They have made grant applications and, perhaps, incurred costs in doing so. They lodged those applications with the Housing Executive and had hoped that the extra money announced in June would lead to payment of their grants. It is now my understanding, as has been mentioned, that the backlog of applications was such that the additional money announced in June would only cover the cost of statutorily and contractually committed renovation work that was already in the system.

The Committee recognises the budgetary pressures and the difficult choices facing the Minister. However, the Committee expects important statutory housing obligations — for example, in relation to the special purchase of evacuated dwellings scheme (SPED) or certain disabled adaptations — to be met at all times. The majority of Committee members also expect a

good and appropriate balance to be maintained in the delivery of the housing programme's other objectives.

One other objective is the achievement of the decent homes standard in social housing, which is mentioned in the original motion. As the House will be aware, the Savills report, which is on the Minister's desk, reportedly shows significant improvements in Housing Executive stock in that regard. The Committee intends to review progress on the decent homes standard when the Department makes the Savills report available to it. I encourage the Minister to share with the House and the Committee the difficulties and challenges that she faces and the successes that she has achieved with regard to housing.

I will use the remaining time to make some comments in a personal, party capacity. As I said in a Committee capacity, I fully understand, appreciate and empathise with the budgetary difficulties that the Minister faces, and I entirely understand the difficult situation that she was put in and the choice that she had to make to move money around in her budget. However, it is worth pointing out that doing that is not without consequence. There are many consequences of moving money around in that way. The pressure is biting really hard because we previously had a £40 million tap of money that flowed into renovations at a fairly steady rate each year.

That flow has not been reduced to a trickle: the tap has been turned off completely. That is where the consequences and some of the pain are coming from. That pain is being felt not only by those who are applying for funds but by those who carry out the work; not big building firms but owners of small businesses, some of whom would have been depending on two, three or four small grants jobs each year for their livelihood.

Mr A Maginness: The Member, as Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, seems to be implying that the Minister should rearrange the budget internally. The Minister has indicated that newbuild is a top priority, as are the warm homes scheme and the Supporting People programme. The Member is suggesting that some of those priorities should, in fact, be altered or their budgets reduced. Which of those does Mr Hamilton, either as Chairperson of the Social Development Committee or as an ordinary Member, suggest should be affected adversely?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: The Member knows that it is unfair to ask that question of me as Chairperson of the Social Development Committee. I have already made comments that the Member, I am sure, subscribes to personally.

The point that I am getting at is that when the constant flow of money stops dead, there are ramifications. Small businesses are downsizing or are

going out of business quietly as a result of this. They are local family firms that employ local people and use local building supplies to do their work. We cannot procure preferentially in any way, but we all know that grants work benefits local firms first and foremost.

We need not turn the tap back on to £40 million a year: it is not possible to do that. However, some small infusion of cash back into the renovations area would greatly assist those businesses and the people who benefit from those schemes. Perhaps not £40 million or even £4 million: £400,000 would be better than what is going through the system at the moment. It would let 20 small grants jobs go ahead, which is better than nothing, which is the case at present.

Problems are being stored up for the future. I take the Member's point about the other priorities. Nevertheless, there is an onus on the Minister to ensure that, if in making those difficult choices at the end of the financial year there is money left over in any of those schemes, and I have particular concerns about the warm homes scheme and the slow start being made by the new scheme —

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: I know of one energy firm that has made 82 referrals, of which only three have gone through so far. There are issues developing, and it is absolutely necessary that the Minister ensures that having made the difficult choices, all the available money is spent on those other priorities. I welcome the debate.

Mr Armstrong: It is no secret that there is a major problem with the Executive's finances. The Minister for Social Development has repeatedly highlighted difficulties in her Department's budget, and in particular, the problems that have been caused by the huge drop in revenue from house and land sales as property values have plummeted and income from sales has dropped from £100 million to £8 million in one year.

It is all very well for some Members and their parties to seek to attack the Minister as part of a political grandstanding exercise, but she cannot create money out of thin air as if by magic. The Executive Budget, never mind the DSD budget, is finite, and hard choices must be made, although we would not think so when we listen to some Members. I am not here to attack the Minister or her Department. I know that she wants to increase funding for public housing stock, public- and private-sector home improvement schemes and to combat fuel poverty. However, the problem is that we do not live in an ideal world: we live in the real world.

The motion appears to be slightly confused in that it refers to home improvement grants, which are for private homes, but goes on to mention the decent homes standards, which apply to public-sector housing.

On the first point, it is clear that there is a growing crisis with regard to home improvements. The motion identifies an additional £20 million that was allocated to Housing Executive funds in the June monitoring round. That may seem to be a large sum of money, but it would only partly cover those grants in which formal letters of approval have been issued. In other words, that money has already been spent, and the result is that no new money is available for further grant aid.

4.45 pm

Over 13,000 private homes have applied for grant aid, some of which are in the final stages and are nearing approval. Over 9,000 of those homes have received letters from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive informing them that grant aid can no longer be provided. Furthermore, over 900 small and medium-sized family-based contracting firms, which have been actively engaged in contracts involving the Housing Executive grant, face the prospect of work drying up in early January 2010. With no approvals being issued, those firms are facing closure. That will throw even more people onto the dole queue. Even if contractors were redeployed to work on social housing projects, many of them are only at the early stages of planning and will not be ready for commencement until 2011.

I appeal to the Minister to do all she can to secure funding to support grant aid in the private sector, and to alleviate the genuine fears of those firms whose main business is drawn from the private-sector grant schemes. As I said, I will not attack the Minister or her Department, as I understand the financial situation in which she has to operate and the difficult choices that have to be made. I urge her to look within her budget to see what can be done to support home improvement grants in the private sector and to meet the decent homes standards in the public sector.

The answer, as always, is more funding. If the Minister cannot find that in her budget, Members from other parties must pressurise their party colleagues in the Executive to allocate funds to the Social Development Minister. There is no other way.

Ms Lo: One of my constituents recently contacted my office seeking help. He had made a statutory application for a Housing Executive improvement and repair grant. The gentleman had already incurred associated costs of £987 when he was informed by the NIHE that his application would not be honoured, due to budget constraints. This 60-year-old gentleman has endured living in a property in the Village area without central heating or an indoor toilet for over 15 years. He was recently made redundant from his long-term employment without any redundancy package, and is suffering serious health problems, having had several heart attacks in the past year.

The Housing Executive reconsidered only after pressure from other elected representatives and me, and was forced to introduce a set of guidelines to deal with exceptional circumstances such as those of that gentleman. People should not be left in limbo waiting for grants to improve their unfit homes. That can have a very negative impact on their health and well-being. Delays in repairing some properties can also make those homes uninhabitable in the long run, thereby reducing the housing stock.

I call on the parties in the Executive to work together to give DSD the housing budget necessary to carry out the many aspects of its work. The Housing Executive is facing serious funding shortages of £100 million each year following the collapse of the housing market. The home improvement grant has been curtailed, like so many other programmes, due to a shortage of funds.

I recently attended a DSD public meeting when the Minister was present. It was embarrassing to watch her appeal to members of the audience, on several occasions, to lobby their elected representatives and respective parties to put the Department on a sound financial footing. That is indicative of what little support the Minister is getting from the Executive.

It took 'The Stephen Nolan Show' to resolve the difficulties of the SPED scheme. The situation is a disgrace, and when I spoke to the police officer in question, I realised the stress that it has put on him and his family. Last year, the Housing Executive spent more than £9 million on the SPED programme. This year's budget was only £1.5 million, to be increased by scraps in monitoring rounds. That is no way to run any Department.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that the problem was experienced not only by one ex-police officer but by a number of police officers? Indeed, other members of the public found themselves in exactly the same position. Extra resources are needed to meet those people's demands.

Ms Lo: I absolutely agree.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member agree that the two main parties' failure to give leadership in tackling sectarianism is partly at the core of the problem?

Ms Lo: I absolutely agree.

People do not really care what Department is responsible for what. I think that the layperson on the street does not know what Department does what. All people want is for the Government to deliver public services to meet the needs of their citizens. Marginalising one or two Ministers from the smaller parties merely shows up the lack of cohesion in the Executive, who are so often playing party politics rather than working together for the common good.

The housing downturn was not the Minister's fault. We must ensure that, in future, funding for important and much-needed schemes, such as the SPED scheme and the home improvement grants, are secure and not subject to fluctuating incomes from the receipt of house and land sales.

Mr Hilditch: I support the motion, and I welcomed the Minister's announcement back in July. More than 20,000 people are deemed to be in housing stress, and 9,000 are registered as homeless. On top of that, 17% of our housing stock is below the decent homes standard. Investment is required to replace properties' obsolete and inefficient systems and functions. I understood that the £20 million that was awarded in the June monitoring round was to allow for the necessary maintenance work to proceed while providing important support for the construction sector in these difficult times.

Mr McCann took us on a geographical tour of the west of the Province, but we could all give examples from our own constituencies, including those in the east. On my doorstep, an area of social deprivation in Castlemara has been hit particularly hard and has had a number of maintenance schemes and cycle maintenance cancelled. The suspension of home improvement grants comes on top of that. Indeed, constituents have been told not only that there is no funding but that they will have to reapply when money becomes available again.

Many of those people are in vulnerable positions: they are unable to move away from Housing Executive property or to purchase properties elsewhere. Now they are being told that they cannot have the grants that are necessary to complete priority maintenance work. Like many constituents —

Mr McQuillan: Does the Member agree that people who were approved for a home improvement grant are worse off now than they were previously? Those people have gone to the expense of getting plans drawn up and had planning applications ready to submit. Some of those people will be out of pocket and will be up to £1,000 worse off than they were before they started.

Mr Hilditch: That is accurate, and I intended to refer to that matter later.

Mr A Maginness: The Member said that applicants would have to reapply for grants. I understand from the Department that applicants will not have to reapply. Rather, their applications are effectively frozen.

Mr Hilditch: In researching today's speech, I obtained some information from the grants office in Ballyclare. If it is not correct, I am sorry.

All Members know about individual cases. Last night, I had an opportunity to visit an elderly woman

who has spent two winters with rain coming in through the front windows of her house. Now that her application has been turned down again, she is not looking forward to a third such winter.

In my East Antrim constituency alone, 244 grants have been cancelled and 67 applications for home repair refused. I was horrified to learn that 94 renovation grants for properties that have been deemed unfit have also been refused. That means that 94 homes throughout the constituency are occupied despite their being unsafe. People's lives are at risk because those dwellings are dangerous and in need of urgent repairs, such as rewiring, roof work, extensions, plastering, and so forth. To make matters worse, some of those households, as my colleague said, have been further penalised through having already paid for plans for extensions to be drawn up. The Housing Executive has offered no reimbursement for that expense.

I am thankful that the disabled facilities grant scheme will continue. However, more than 13,000 private homeowners have applied for grant aid, and some of their applications were at the final stages or nearing approval. Despite that, 9,000 of those applicants received letters from the Housing Executive to inform them that grant aid is no longer being provided. That is unacceptable. This year, the Housing Executive will approve only 2,000 grants approximately. Given that it approved some 7,000 last year, that is a shocking reduction.

Everyone has the right to live in a safe home, and it is unreasonable and unjust to concentrate solely on the provision of newbuilds. If the Northern Ireland Housing Executive is to remain committed to bringing all homes up to the decent homes standard by 2010, it is imperative that the Minister concentrates on both issues. The Housing Executive must be dedicated to providing quality housing services, and it must work with others to create safe and confident communities. It must take into account the importance of improvements and repairs, as well as address the needs of the homeless.

I ask the Minister to revoke the suspension of the grants and move towards supporting the construction industry. The crisis cannot be ignored, and the Department must start to approve grants again. Otherwise, the future of Housing Executive offices and their staff will be at risk, private housing is likely to deteriorate further and the companies of the contractors involved will face closure. I support the motion.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. If Members compare Sinn Féin's motion with the SDLP amendment, only one word differs. The amendment replaces "remove" with "review". What does review mean? It could apply to a review lasting three weeks, three years, or for ever. Although that one

word is the only difference between the motion and the amendment, it is unclear and jeopardises the entire motion.

Mrs D Kelly: The SDLP is not in the habit of using the same definition of the word as Sinn Féin, when it referred to the reviews of the programme of cohesion, sharing and integration, of the anti-poverty strategy or of the Civic Forum. In contrast to Sinn Féin, the SDLP has time frames.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Member for that point of information. Although Dolores may think otherwise, the matter that is being debated is important, and we should not be getting it mixed up with any other issues. It never fails to amaze me how Dolores manages to introduce sectarian issues, as happened earlier when she raised a point of order.

Mrs D Kelly: When?

Mr P Maskey: The subject matter was slightly different, but she talked about how the two main parties on the Executive and in the Chamber are not dealing with sectarianism effectively.

The Sinn Féin motion refers to "essential maintenance and home improvements". The key word is "essential".

Some of that was mentioned. I think that Simon Hamilton touched on the figure, but the fact is that it was cut down, seemingly as a matter of urgency. It did not seem that any real thought went into closing the door. Perhaps the Minister has not given the right direction to her staff in the grants offices because people have received letters that state that the grant scheme is closed and that they will have to reapply.

5.00 pm

During a telephone conversation, I was told by a member of staff that the scheme will probably never even be opened up again. Perhaps the Minister could give better direction to her Department's staff.

Mr Molloy: In connection with what the Member said, and in response to Mr Maginness's point, I have a letter from the Housing Executive that very clearly states that people will have to make a further application if grant aid becomes available in the future.

Mr P Maskey: It seems that all of the points from the rest of the Members and parties in this Chamber back that view. That is the message that quite clearly is coming from the Minister's Department. The Minister refuses to recognise that point, but a number of her party colleagues have questioned whether that is the case. Perhaps better direction needs to come from the Minister on that issue.

Mr McElduff: I have one question about exceptional circumstances that I want the Minister to address. The Housing Executive's website states that it

expects that applications for discretionary grants may be approved only in exceptional circumstances. We are talking about the current state of play.

There is a lady who lives in Carrickmore, County Tyrone, who has twice been a victim of the conflict. She recently had an intruder in her home, and her repair grant application is to secure her back door. There is an 80-year-old lady from Mountfield, County Tyrone, whose guttering is rotting away. She is fearful of infestation of mice and rats, and she is cold in the winter months. I want the Minister to give an assurance that she will review cases such as those here and now so that they will qualify as exceptional circumstances because, all too often, MLAs are being told that exceptional circumstances do not apply.

Mr P Maskey: I thank the Member for that intervention. On no fewer than six occasions during Question Time today, the Minister stated that the housing budget needs to be placed on a sound financial footing. That is exactly right, and every single Department in the Executive has to ensure that all of its moneys are on a sound financial footing. If they fail to do that and fail to work the system in a proper way, they are accountable to the elected Members of this Chamber and to the entire community outside.

I have heard more money being asked for in this Chamber before. Does it come out of the health budget, or does it come out of the education or roads budgets? What budget should it come out of? That is the question that the Minister has to answer because it must be remembered that all of us have to answer to all of our constituents. In recent times, I have had a number of people in my office because of the door being slammed in their faces when it comes to the grants that they had applied for.

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

Mr P Maskey: Those constituents had been brought to the wire and they had been promised those grants, yet they were refused.

Mrs M Bradley: I support my party's amendment to the motion. We have before us an impossible situation that has been caused by a £100 million shortfall in the housing budget. That shortfall was brought about by the economic downturn, and everybody should remember that.

I am well aware that there are huge pressures on the Finance Minister's bank balance. However, the simple fact is staring us all in the face. Although Sinn Féin would have us believe otherwise, the housing budget is inefficient, ineffective and is unfairly portrayed. I applaud the Finance Minister for giving £20 million in the June monitoring round to the Department for Social Development. However, that merely fed the historical black hole that already existed due to the

Department for Social Development starting the financial year from behind because of deficits that were caused by the collapse in land and house sales, as assets could not be sold at a good price. The case today is the same as it was last year, and the Minister will make that case again today. Hopefully, her plight will be listened to this time.

However, for those who need it spelled out, the bottom line is that the housing budget is totally unfit for purpose, even though the Minister has suggested ways forward that might help.

A motion such as this serves as a pathetic point-scoring exercise. Yesterday, we heard the Education Minister ask the Assembly to work with her to move forward. The SDLP is asking for the same sentiment to be afforded to the Social Development Minister. The Executive exist to create a better quality —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mrs M Bradley: No, I will not give way. The Executive exist to create a better quality of life for the people of Northern Ireland. Surely, one of the most basic rights is to have a decent roof over your head. I ask Sinn Féin and the DUP, as the majority —
[*Interruption.*]

I did not say anything when Mr McCann was speaking. Please have manners.

I am asking Sinn Féin and the DUP, as the majority vote holders in the Executive to put their money, literally, where their mouths are and give the Minister what she needs to make that provision a reality for those people who need the help of home improvement grants.

Mr McGlone: Does the Member agree, and I am sure that her ministerial colleague does, that we have heard Assembly debates ad nauseam about housing grants and affordable housing — so many that you could paper the Chamber with Hansard reports of them — with commitments left, right and centre? Maybe, left and right, depending on how the political axis is viewed at the minute.

However, to re-emphasise the point, if Sinn Féin and the DUP are interested in putting their money where their mouths are, could they put it into the most practical form of affordable housing to help people by way of a home repairs grant, a renovation grant or a replacement grant at minimal cost to the public purse? Will the Member accept that point and reflect it in the debate?

Mrs M Bradley: I certainly will, I agree with that point. My office is inundated, as are many others, with constituents who have suffered due to the grant process being restricted. I can see only one way out. If we are to help those who voted for us, they and the parties

must know that the DSD cupboard is bare because of external factors.

The Minister is not a magician. She can work only with what she has. It is obvious to me that we should all support her efforts to seek further funding, rather than score points at the behest of our constituents. We should deal with constituents' problems by supporting the housing budget. To use Paul Maskey's word, it is "essential" that everybody in the Chamber supports the Minister and her housing budget.

Mrs D Kelly: Last year, we heard Mr Fra McCann tell the Minister to stop whingeing and take the money, but the Minister fought on and got additional money for her budget. Thankfully, she did not listen to Sinn Féin that time round, and I am quite sure that she will not listen to Sinn Féin this time round.

It is clear from the debate that Sinn Féin intends to carry on this term the same way that it left off in June: attack the sole SDLP Minister without once directing any of its anger or concerns at the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who has refused the Minister for Social Development any additional funding to relieve the housing budget. As far back as December, Sinn Féin would not allow the Minister to reallocate her own £38 million within her Department to meet housing need.

Mr McElduff: I have a question that I would love to have answered, if possible. Did any of the £20 million given to the Minister for Social Development in the June monitoring round go to Housing Executive grants offices in Omagh and Derry, for example, where I have constituents who are anxiously trying to get redress?

Mrs D Kelly: I am sure that the Minister herself will answer that question. However, on that point, I have a copy of a letter dated 30 June 2009 from Sinn Féin Minister Michelle Gildernew to the Finance Minister. In it, the Sinn Féin Minister wrote:

"I am perplexed by the proposal to increase the capital overcommitment by £20m in respect of housing improvements for DSD."

No support came from Sinn Féin in the Executive on that occasion. The letter continues:

"Whilst I am sure that this bid has substantial merits, the paper does not spell out why this particular bid should be met at the expense of any other capital bid, and there is no compelling rationale as to why we should make an exception".

Shame, shame, shame on Sinn Féin and Michelle Gildernew for not supporting the SDLP in the Executive when Margaret Ritchie was looking for money. Everyone in the House ought to know, because the Minister has told them often enough —

Mr P Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: In a moment. There are substantial restraints on where that £20 million can be spent. Of course I will give way to Mr Maskey.

Mr P Maskey: I have not heard or seen that information, so I am wondering where it came from. Maybe she is just making it up, or is it confidential stuff from the Executive that should not be given out?

Mrs D Kelly: I assure the House that I am not a tout. I do not inform on sources. As far as I am aware, there are no touts in our party, unlike some parties, which have major concerns about informers in their midst. Indeed, the document is not marked confidential, but it is a matter of record, and I hope that it will be read into the record. Perhaps Mr Maskey would do better to ask Michelle Gildernew why she would not support the SDLP Minister for Social Development in meeting the real and pressing needs of people in housing stress.

Mr F McCann: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Member keeps quoting information that nobody else is aware of. To put the record straight, at every Executive meeting when monitoring rounds have come up, Sinn Féin has fully supported additional money going to the housing budget to deal with the DSD's problems.

Mr D Kelly: Mr Deputy Speaker, I do not think that that was a point of order. That is the same Member who, only a matter of months ago —

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am aware that, on previous occasions, Speakers have ruled with respect to documents that Members have referred to during debates and that the reference document must be verified. All that we are asking is whether the document is an Executive paper and whether the Member is prepared to lodge it in the Assembly Library.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Perhaps we can allow the Member to answer your question.

Mr O'Dowd: With respect, Mr Deputy Speaker, I raised the point of order with you. On previous occasions, rulings have been made on that subject.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Yes, but it is necessary for the Member to say whether she is willing to lodge the document in the Library.

Mrs D Kelly: I am more than happy to lodge the document in the Library, and to allow all and sundry to read it and see Sinn Féin's real purpose in the Executive, which is to attack the SDLP in the hope that it will fail in its Ministry. While Margaret Ritchie remains as the SDLP Minister, there is no chance of that happening, and I have every confidence in her being the shining star in the Executive that she is today, and will be tomorrow. I seem to have hit a sore

point with Sinn Féin Members, so they really should take the matter up with Michelle Gildernew.

There are ways to spend money more efficiently and effectively, and that is exactly what Margaret Ritchie has done in respect of the Housing Executive. For example, she told Housing Executive officials to use brownfield sites and existing housing land to ensure that there is less cost to the public purse. Margaret Ritchie is driving efficiencies and effectiveness through the Housing Executive to the best of her ability, and often, as Mr Deputy Speaker knows, her efforts are being held up and not supported by the so-called main nationalist republican party in the House, which tries to say that it speaks for the most vulnerable people in society. The SDLP started out speaking on housing matters and for the most vulnerable and marginalised people in society, and, next year, we will go into our fortieth anniversary on the same platform: ensuring that the most marginalised people in our society are protected.

Mr McGlone: I am sure that most of us are deeply concerned about the needs of our constituents; I hope that that is the case. I also hope that Sinn Féin will reconsider the strategy that it is employing. Many people are being held up and cannot get grant aid. Many people are looking to have houses built. If we had a bit more co-operation in this place, yesterday and today, we would have been faced with an Executive showcasing to the world what they are doing for the people of the North, rather than having silly and juvenile debates.

Let us have a bit of co-operation at Executive level. Let us see delivery for those who really count: the people, including those who have applications in the grants system.

5.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mrs Kelly, your time has run out.

Mrs D Kelly: Oh dear.

Mrs Long: I share a lot of the concerns that Sinn Féin has raised in relation to the suspension of the housing grants scheme. Most Members share those concerns. I am willing, or I was willing, to consider the notion of a review, but I am slightly worried by what I have just heard, because it sounds increasingly as though the issue is no longer about a review but about people digging in and taking entrenched positions. I am not sure that that is helpful. I am waiting for the Minister's reassurance that if we say that something should be reviewed there is a commitment to review it. As Dolores Kelly rightly pointed out, the word "review" is often a euphemism in the Assembly for doing nothing. The public do not want that: they want a proper review in the light of all the information.

The other thing that impresses me about the debate, and others like it, is Sinn Féin's almost relentless pursuit of the DSD Minister on every issue. If that energy were put into working with the other parties in the Executive to create better collectivity, we would be able to move forward a lot faster, and the public might be more impressed by the Executive that are representing them.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for giving way. All of us in the Chamber are hard-nosed politicians, including the Minister for Social Development. If any Minister is not a hard-nosed politician, he or she should not be a Minister. I know that the media have portrayed the Minister as "Saint Margaret of DSD", but, at the end of the day, Margaret Ritchie is a Minister who has to be held to account by the Executive. As regards funding for DSD, if anyone wishes to read Sinn Féin's submission on the Budget, it states clearly that Sinn Féin would support extra funding for social housing — *[Interruption.]*

Mrs Long: I thank Mr O'Dowd for what he said. I come from a particular tradition that is not really into sainthood, but we are not into relentlessly demonising people either. This is about looking at the issues on their merits. Nobody who objectively analyses the number of issues brought to the Chamber by Sinn Féin that are directly related to DSD could miss the point that it has been relentless in its pursuit and criticism.

It is also not fair to say, despite my reservations about the suspension of the grants programme, that the DSD Minister has been the worst performing Minister in the Executive. That is telling, because if people were pursuing other Ministers with the same relentless passion when they are not performing, we might get more out the other end of the Executive.

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Long: No, I will not give way, because I want to finish what I have to say.

I want to focus on the issue, which is the impact that this has had. I hope that the Minister will consider a review. The debate was slightly pre-empted by Question Time. However, I listened to the Minister, and she said that she had focused on protecting the vulnerable. That is very worthy, and I can understand that in difficult budgetary constraints it is what she must do. However, some of the people we are dealing with in this discussion about the grants are vulnerable people who also need to be protected. There has to be some balance between building new houses and maintaining the housing stock that we already have. The pendulum has, perhaps, swung too far.

For those who clamour about where the money would come from, we need to look, realistically, at freeing up what are relatively small amounts of money for the grants scheme from the newbuild scheme, if

necessary, in order to provide an opportunity to maintain the housing stock. We can expand the housing stock, and we can be more cost effective in how we do that, if we can maintain, adapt and renovate existing properties or those properties that are falling out of use and bring them back online more quickly. There is also the danger that if it is not done, the cost of doing it down the line, when the scheme reopens, will be a lot greater because the properties will be in a worse state of repair. There are also knock-on effects for neighbouring properties in many cases, particularly mid-terrace properties. For example, when roofs start to leak when a terraced house becomes abandoned, and there are all sorts of other issues, that has an implication for the rest of the houses in that terrace. There are also issues about how quickly uninhabited houses can be restored to full use.

The suspension of the payment of home improvement grants can impact on the waiting list, because if people cannot adapt their homes to their needs, they will join the waiting list and seek a home that suits their needs. Those two issues are not separate. They are linked in that the people who will join the waiting list will be people whose homes could be adapted if the money and support were available. Therefore, there needs to be a balance on this issue.

The impact that living conditions have on the health and well-being of individuals is crucial, which Anna Lo and other Members mentioned. I am concerned about that. There are also financial implications, and a number of Members have spoken about the professional fees that people have incurred when making their applications. There are also people who bought properties, which required modernisation to make them habitable, on the understanding that they would be able to rent out those properties and return them to the market. Those people are also incurring costs from properties that cannot be let. They still have to pay their fees, and they will suffer from not being able to get insurance if they cannot return them to a habitable state. There are all sorts of other wider financial implications. Such issues need to be addressed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should bring her remarks to a close.

Mrs Long: The impact on industry has been touched on, but, as a result of this debate, I would like the Minister to indicate that she is willing to review the suspension of the grants and other Members to indicate that they are willing to co-operate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call on the saintly Minister for Social Development, Ms Margaret Ritchie.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I thank the Members who contributed to the debate, and I welcome the opportunity to respond to those contributions, not least because it gives me the

opportunity to clarify and correct some of the issues that were raised. I will try to address all the questions and points that Members raised, and I assure the House that I will study the Hansard report and write to any Member who has raised an issue that is not covered in my response.

The motion asks me to explain why the Housing Executive has suspended the payment of home improvement grants, despite being awarded an extra £20 million in the June monitoring round. I am happy to provide that explanation. The SDLP amendment has asked me to review the position on that suspension of grants, and I am happy to do that as well.

I welcome the opportunity to talk to Members again about the difficulties that I face, because they are all aware that, due to the downturn in house and land sales, the housing budget started this year with a £100 million shortfall, which has impacted on all spending programmes. I remind the House that I started last year with a shortfall of £80 million. Difficult decisions have had to be made, and the Housing Executive has had no choice but to prioritise its expenditure in all budget areas. The outcome of that is that it has ultimately affected the delivery of certain housing programmes. In those circumstances — and I emphasise this — I have listened to the political grandstanding this afternoon, and I question whether certain Members are really interested in the vulnerable and in wee Maggie down the lane who is waiting for an improvement grant. I sympathise with that sort of person, because I live in the countryside, and I know what it is like to have to wait for an improvement grant.

Mr T Clarke: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister for Social Development: No. I will not, because Members have given way already. I want to continue and explain the problem. That is what is wrong; people do not want to listen to the problem. They want to politically grandstand and attack rather than help.

I have done my utmost to protect the most vulnerable households by ring-fencing budgets for newbuild social housing to help those in housing stress; for the warm homes scheme to help those in fuel poverty; and in support of people living independently in the community rather than in institutions. I have heard Members from around the House say that that is what they want as well.

I have also decided on the provision of newbuild social housing within the social housing development programme. It is a priority, because the current market conditions are more suited than ever before to increase investment in social housing, to stimulate the economy, to protect jobs in the overall construction industry and to help the most vulnerable and needy in society by providing them with a home.

There is a falsehood out there that I have somehow diverted money from the provision of grants, and I heard Fra McCann saying that today. It is a pity that he does not listen better at the meetings of the Social Development Committee; perhaps then he might have some answers. There is a falsehood out there that I have somehow diverted money away from grants, and from other parts of my Department's budget, to concentrate solely on the provision of newbuild social housing. I can categorically state that that is not true.

Let me say it again: I have protected only three areas from the full impact of the £100 million shortfall, and the Housing Executive has had to absorb pressures right across the housing budget. However, there has been no diversion to social newbuilds. What was given to Members yesterday in documents sent by a certain gentleman, representing a certain organisation, was a misrepresentation of the facts.

However, as I have said, difficult decisions have had to be made. As the level of funding available for home improvements in the private sector is insufficient, applications for discretionary grants, including renovation grants, replacement grants and home repairs assistance, may now be approved only in exceptional circumstances. However, I have ensured that other grants such as disabled facilities grants, which provide adaptations to enable disabled people to remain in their own homes, and repair grants approved on foot of statutory notices given by district councils will continue to operate normally.

In such difficult circumstances, I welcomed the Executive's decision to make £20 million available for social housing in the June monitoring round. I have ensured — to answer some queries made, I believe, by Barry McElduff — that £15 million has been allocated to private-sector grants and £5 million has been allocated to disabled adaptations. However, as Members will know, that £20 million addresses only part of what is a £100 million shortfall in the housing budget, and I must continue to bid in future monitoring rounds to protect the housing agenda.

Members may not be aware that the additional funding is conditional on the release of £20 million from the existing resources to Egan contractors, who carry out maintenance works such as kitchen replacements on Housing Executive properties. The Executive are perfectly within their rights to attach conditions to the release of £20 million to housing, but in this instance, and for someone trying to manage the budget proactively, those conditions were not helpful. In order for the Housing Executive to release the £20 million for Egan contracts, it had to cut back other planned maintenance and related works. Effectively, I was given £20 million and asked to fund £40 million — £20 million for Egan contracts, and £20 million for

grants and disability adaptations — from the June monitoring round allocation.

Historically, there has been a time lag between grants being approved and the eventual application for payment, which has resulted in a significant commitment being built up in the grants system. As a result of the economic downturn, the availability of builders has meant that previously approved grants are now resulting in payment requests being received sooner. Therefore, the additional funding allocated in the June monitoring round will only allow the Housing Executive to meet commitments for private-sector grant applications which have already received formal approval, and to fund the statutory grant approvals this year. However, I have ensured that any cancelled or refused grant applications will be held on file in the place they were in the queue against the event that additional funding becomes available at some future date. I have also ensured that the Housing Executive writes to all applicants who have had their applications cancelled or refused, to explain the approach to be taken.

David Hilditch raised an issue that he had taken on board from the Ballyclare grants office, and Francie Molloy raised a similar issue.

If Members know of cases where people have not received those letters, please let me know. My instructions were that nobody was to lose their place in the queue and nobody had to reapply. I want to make that absolutely clear.

5.30 pm

I know that many people have been disappointed by the non-approval of their grant, but they will not have wasted their efforts in bringing their applications to an advanced stage. Many people are out of pocket on various consultancy, architect and civil engineering fees advancing their grant applications, and many of those people are on low incomes. As I advised my colleague Patsy McGlone earlier during Question Time, I am looking at what can be done to help those people ahead of their grants receiving final approval. I hope that I get the support for that scheme when it comes forward.

I sincerely hope that the Housing Executive's restriction on grants will be temporary. I hope that I will be able to help everybody whose applications are in the pipeline. I bid for additional funds in the September monitoring round, which will allow the Housing Executive to approve the grants received this year, and which it has not been able to process due to a lack of funding.

Many issues were raised during the debate. At one stage, I thought that Mr McCann was in a state of confusion, because he mixed up improvement grants with Egan contractors and planned maintenance.

Mr F McCann: Not in the least.

The Minister for Social Development: He sounded confused to me, because they are distinct issues. However, it might be better if Mr McCann were to encourage his colleagues to support me round the Executive table to put housing on a sound financial footing. His words would be put to more profitable use if he were to deploy them to that end.

I thank Mr Burns for his helpful comments. Simon Hamilton recognised the frustration that many people have about improvement grants, which I also recognise. I note, sadly, that as Chairperson of the Committee, he is not in his usual place. I agree with him that many of those issues are not without their consequences. He raised the issue of the warm homes scheme, and I addressed that during Question Time when I said that everybody in the pipeline will be dealt with by scheme managers and everybody should be contacted by November. I would like to think that that will happen earlier, and I will be urging them to do so.

I hope that the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee will provide strong support and urge their ministerial colleagues in the DUP to put housing on that illusive sound financial footing. Why do we want that? For too long the funding of housing has been predicated on capital receipts. However, capital receipts have now dissipated, as has the level of house sales. In this new financial situation, which was pointed out by my colleagues in our document 'New Priorities in Difficult Times', we need to look at housing to ensure that it is put on a sound financial footing.

I welcome the support of Billy Armstrong and Anna Lo, and I sympathise with her constituent. Many of us have constituents who have found themselves in such difficulties, and I echo her clarion call to put housing on a sound financial footing.

I have already answered David Hilditch's question about the Ballyclare grants office. Anna Lo also raised the issue of people who have spent money on architects' fees. We are dealing with that issue and I hope that I will be able to come forward with a clearly worked-up scheme.

I hope that Mr McCann will urge his Sinn Féin ministerial colleagues in the Executive to support me in putting housing on a sound financial footing rather than carping and trying to make a political football out of people's misery and suffering. Dolores Kelly is absolutely right: I remember in October 2007 Mr McCann saying me that I should accept my lot and stop whinging. He then changes his tune to suit the political moment, save for the fact that he does not always have his facts correct.

Paul Maskey raised an issue and, again, there seems to have been some misinformation, which I have already corrected.

Barry McElduff raised the issue of exceptional circumstances. The criteria used to determine exceptional circumstances are clearly laid out. An exceptional circumstance is one in which an imminent and significant health and safety risk exists; a serious risk under structural stability exists, or any other circumstance that is considered to be exceptional exists. There is a simultaneous application for disabled facilities and renovations, and where works are required, the adaption is allowed to proceed. If Mr McElduff knows of applications that fulfil those criteria and have not been properly addressed, I suggest that he refers them to me and I will ensure that they are assessed again. Such matters should be addressed in a totally professional, adult and mature manner.

Patsy McGlone and Mary Bradley raised the issue of affordable housing and the need for funding. I could not agree more that there must be an investment of resources, that housing should be put on a sound financial footing, and that the needs and suffering of people should be recognised. Dolores Kelly put in a sterling performance and referred to the fact that I am stretching my budget like an elastic band, that we are witnessing a miracle akin to that of the loaves and fishes, and that I have been doing things with the budget to prove that it can be stretched.

First, we can increase the level of resources by securing further financial commitments from the Executive. We can also be innovative through the transfer of sites, leasing and other measures. I would appreciate the support of the House in securing additional funding for housing. The problem is an overall lack of finance, not a lack of desire to provide all private-sector grants and enable essential maintenance and home-improvement works.

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

The Minister for Social Development: The answer is not to rob the vulnerable to pay another group, which some people want me to do.

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

The Minister for Social Development: We must secure more resources in total for housing. Let me be absolutely clear: there is not enough money for housing, and I look forward to the full support of the House to achieve that goal.

Mr A Maginness: I have a feeling of déjà vu in relation to the debate, because we have seen many previous attacks on the Minister for Social Development. The motion is no more than a thinly veiled attack on the Minister. Naomi Long and other Members have indicated that, in fact —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: I will, very quickly.

Mr F McCann: You and Naomi Long have made that point. What you are both actually saying is that if I, as the housing spokesperson for Sinn Féin, have any major complaints about the way the Minister runs her Department, I should not bring them up because they might annoy you, her, or your party.

Mr A Maginness: I will repeat the point: if Margaret Ritchie of the SDLP were not the Minister for Social Development, the motion is unlikely to have reached the Floor of the House. That is the situation.

Mrs Long: Does the Member agree that if Mr McCann, as housing spokesperson for Sinn Féin, were genuinely concerned about housing issues, we would all accept his right to raise them with the Minister, and, indeed, with his party colleagues who are Ministers in the same Executive, and with other Ministers, who would be able to give the Minister support so that she could get the money?

Mr A Maginness: Naomi Long has made it very plain. Not the SDLP, but the Alliance Party, and indeed Billy Armstrong, have made it very plain that the motion and debate are part of the relentless pursuit of the Minister for Social Development. That is the situation. The Minister has made it very clear that she is under severe budgetary pressures. She has effectively lost £100 million of funding. I ask Sinn Féin: in similar circumstances, could a Minister from its party perform as well as the current Minister has performed, and would its Minister — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. It has got to the stage where I am having difficulty hearing. Members should make their remarks through the Chair.

Mr A Maginness: I will speak more loudly.

Any other Minister, faced with a loss of £100 million in funding, would be presented with the same difficulties. The Minister has said that there are three priorities: the warm homes scheme, the Supporting People programme, and newbuild housing. From which of those priorities is the Minister to take in order to provide grants? In this situation, additional funding for the Department for Social Development is required so that the legitimate concerns of all our constituents can be met. We should all support the Minister in demanding that.

Have we heard one word of criticism from Sinn Féin of the Department of Finance or the Finance Minister? No; not one. That is because the motion is part of a political vendetta against the SDLP Minister. Innumerable motions have been brought by Mr McCann and his colleagues against the Minister, for which the only reason is political. It is not to defend the vulnerable —

Mr A Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: It is not to improve things for people —

Mr A Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: It is to attack the Minister and the SDLP because the Minister is performing well —

Mr A Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: And because the Minister has had an outstanding record.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. When it is obvious that a Member is not willing to give way, another Member should not persist in asking.

Mr A Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: I have given way; we do not get time added when making a winding-up speech.

I thank Anno Lo, Naomi Long, Billy Armstrong and my colleagues for supporting the Minister on this issue. What is now required is for the House to support the SDLP amendment, which asks for a thorough review so that we can get to grips with and resolve this problem in the same way as the special purchase of evicted dwellings problem was solved last week. That was done by two Ministers — the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Sammy Wilson, and the Minister for Social Development — coming together and working out that issue. However, that needs the support of all Members and all parties in the Assembly. I hope that people would not be perverse in pursuing a party-political attack on, or vendetta against, a Minister, to the detriment of the interests of their constituents. We want to resolve the issue for vulnerable people, not make the situation worse.

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

Mr A Maginness: All I ask is that colleagues are supportive and not critical of the Minister for Social Development in these circumstances and that they support the Minister so that she can get the extra funding that everyone wants her to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Mickey Brady to make a winding-up speech. I ask all Members please to give him the Floor.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. From the content of the debate so far, it is clear that the issue of grants being stopped is a serious one. Private-sector grants deal directly with unfitness and include replacement grants and potential unfitness with home-assistance repair grants. All those grants are means-tested and applicants have to prove their financial hardship. The grants are targeted at those homeowners who have no disposable income and they are primarily designed to ensure that owners and

residents of substandard private accommodation can acquire a decent standard of fit accommodation and remain in their homes. That will reduce the increasing burden on public-sector housing. Surely that is reason alone to ensure that the grants are prioritised.

The number of fit newbuild properties is decreasing dramatically, and as a consequence of the decision to stop grants, unfitness in the private sector will increase. The withdrawal of grant funding will cause unemployment, as such funding generated approximately 700-plus jobs in the construction industry, across all the trades and among component suppliers to that industry.

People who live in poor housing experience poor health and poor standards of living generally, and that affects their daily lives. Housing fitness needs to be made a priority and needs to be actively pursued.

The Minister, in responding to the debate, talked about vulnerable people and how sympathetic she is. However, at a recent public meeting in Newry that was hosted by the Minister for Social Development, I was appalled by the cavalier attitude of the Minister and her party colleagues. Some people who had come to the meeting to explain the dreadful condition of their homes — the dampness and disrepair — were heckled and ridiculed by an SDLP MLA and a number of SDLP councillors.

5.45 pm

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: No, I will not give way; I was at the meeting and the Member was not.

The SDLP representatives were not prepared to listen to, or sympathise with, people whose living conditions are dire and unacceptable. Given the tenor of Mrs Kelly's contribution today, it still seems to be a source of amusement to her that those people continue to live in those dire conditions.

Sinn Féin has always supported bids for more money for social housing, and it has supported the Minister, a fact of which she is well aware.

Ms J McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: Of course I will.

Ms J McCann: Does the Member agree that there is an onus on all Ministers to be proactive in looking for moneys that are not there? In the Minister's answer to my earlier question about her discussions with the credit union organisation, which has indicated that it could provide a substantial sum of money for the social housing programme, she stated that she met that organisation several months ago, which is not acceptable. Does the Member agree that the Minister needs to be more proactive in chasing that funding?

Mr Brady: During the debate, several Members mentioned the substandard conditions in which people are living, and the types of repairs that are required, such as fixing leaking roofs and windows. Mr McCann referred to that issue.

Thomas Burns talked about the global economic downturn, which we all know about. He also said that Sammy Wilson, apparently, clearly understands the SDLP arguments. I am glad that someone does.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: No, I will not. Simon Hamilton, speaking as Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development —

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During Mr Brady's contribution, he referred to me. I was the only SDLP MLA present at the DSD meeting in Newry. He made an unfounded and spurious attack on me. I think that I deserve the right to answer.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, but it can be referred to the Speaker.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Simon Hamilton, as Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, talked about the problems that the Committee and, indeed, the Department are facing because of the lack of funding. He made an appropriate point that there has to be a balance in the delivery of housing standards, and that budgeting difficulties — in the sense of moving money around — are not without consequences.

Billy Armstrong was something of a cheerleader for the Minister, so I will simply pass on his points. Anna Lo mentioned specific cases in her constituency, to which we can all relate. David Hilditch spoke about there being 20,000 people in housing stress and 17% of housing stock being below decent homes standards; that is an appalling statistic. Where is the £20 million that was allocated from the monitoring round for construction and the alleviation of social deprivation?

The Minister was asked about the issue of reapplying. People come into my constituency office with letters from the Housing Executive that state that they have to reapply. Perhaps the Minister should, and could, clarify that issue with her officials.

Paul Maskey talked about the difference between the words "remove" and "review". There is a vast difference. In her intervention, Dolores Kelly went into the semantics of defining the word "review". To be perfectly honest, I am not quite sure what she was on about, but if she did not know herself, that probably explains it.

Mary Bradley said that the housing budget was not fit for purpose. We all sympathise with the fact that not

enough money is there, but it has to be recognised that money is not available.

Dolores Kelly talked about Mr McCann whingeing and about his attack on the SDLP Minister. That is par for the course at the moment. I ask the same question that Fra McCann put to Naomi Long: if the Minister is not performing well, should we accept it?

Mrs Long: I am happy to answer that and to clarify my position. It is right that the Assembly should hold all Ministers to account. The problem is that one Minister is being singled out by one party for party-political reasons. If the Member wishes to look closer to home, there are a few underperforming Ministers to deal with. The Alliance Party has said that we support the Minister's request for additional funding, and we support a review of her decision; we do not support the current position.

Mr Brady: That is magnanimous, coming from a Member from a party that does not have a Minister. Mrs Long said that she does not come from a tradition that goes in for sainthood. Perhaps she recognises martyrdom, because it seems that, according to her party colleagues, the Minister is being sacrificed on the altar of the Department for Social Development.

The Minister talked a lot about the difficulties that she faces — the downturn in housing sales. We have heard her mantra of “give me the money and I will build the houses”, but many vulnerable people are not getting the service that they need and deserve. The Minister seems to be somewhat fixated with Mr McCann. I was trying to think whether they had a D H Lawrence kind of relationship. Is it “love-hate” or “hate-hate”? The SDLP appears to be paranoid about Mr McCann, and I am sure that he lies awake worrying about that. Alban Maginness also appears to be paranoid about the issue, but I shall rest our case there.

I support the motion, and I do not support the amendment. I ask the House to support the motion. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 26; Noes 36.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Cree, Mr Durkan, Sir Reg Empey, Dr Farry, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr Neeson, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr P J Bradley and Mr Burns.

NOES

Mr Brady, Lord Browne, Mr Butler, Mr T Clarke, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McElduff, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McQuillan, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Murphy, Mr O'Dowd, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms J McCann and Ms S Ramsey.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly urges the Minister for Social Development to explain why the Housing Executive has suspended the payment of home improvement grants, despite the Department for Social Development being awarded an extra £20m in the June monitoring round for housing; and further calls on the Minister to remove the suspension of these grants, which are vital to meeting the Decent Homes Standards to enable essential maintenance and home improvements work to be carried out.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Natural Gas: Strangford

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic for the Adjournment debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately seven minutes.

Mr Hamilton: It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. Indeed, it is a pleasure to participate in what should be a positive debate on energy. All too often, we have been used to energy debates that were framed by unfortunate price rises in oil, gas or electricity. This evening, we have an opportunity to debate something positive about energy, bringing energy choice and real economic and environmental benefits to more people in Northern Ireland.

As Members will be aware, the Strangford constituency already has natural gas. Towns in the old Strangford constituency, such as Carryduff and Dundonald, which will move out of the constituency, already enjoy the benefits of natural gas. Newtownards already has natural gas, and Phoenix Natural Gas recently had its licence extended to include Comber, which is now also enjoying the benefits of natural gas.

I and, I am sure, my colleagues in the constituency want to see further expansion. We consider ourselves fortunate that there is a natural gas supplier that wants to invest in the infrastructure in our area, namely Phoenix Natural Gas, which recently applied for a further extension of its licence area to include Saintfield in mid-Down. Many Members will know where Saintfield is and how it is growing. I consider Saintfield to be a strategic staging post and a very important area in the further development of natural gas, not just in Strangford but further afield.

In many ways, the application to extend natural gas to Saintfield is a no-brainer for three broad reasons: the energy choice that it will provide; the economic benefits that it will bring; and the resultant environmental benefits. With regard to energy choice, Saintfield is typical of many of the small rural towns in Northern Ireland in that there is little or no real energy choice. Householders and businesses have to choose between coal and oil for their heating, which some might say is a difficult and unacceptable choice in this day and age. We all know about the volatility of the price of oil and coal, and many of us will struggle to remember a time when the price of oil went down significantly; it

always seems to be on the rise. Likewise, the price of coal has been going up. Moreover, all Members will be mindful of the carbon-heavy nature of oil and coal and the damage that they do to the environment. Therefore, bringing natural gas to Saintfield and elsewhere in the Strangford constituency and beyond has created an energy choice.

There are obvious economic benefits to expansion, which I want to touch on. First and foremost, householders and businesses will benefit. In recent days, we have seen the 19% price cut by Phoenix Natural Gas, and Firmus Energy today announced a price cut of nearly 18%. In the case of Phoenix Natural Gas, the decrease is on the back of a similar price decrease earlier this year. Natural gas prices are as low as they have been for many a year, which provides an economic benefit for householders who use it.

It is not just the people who live in the Saintfield area and elsewhere in Strangford who would benefit; clearly, businesses would benefit. I am very mindful of the economic disadvantage that a lack of energy choice brings to our competitiveness and of the negative impact that it has on that competitiveness. For example, for businesses in the Saintfield area that could perhaps avail themselves of natural gas, particularly those that use a heavy load of gas, the benefits resulting from extending the network could be massive. Natural gas could reduce their overheads and bills significantly, and in the current climate for some businesses that might make the difference between keeping people in jobs and letting others go. Indeed, the savings that could be made might allow some small businesses to expand, such would be the impact on their bottom line if they had a wider energy choice.

The expansion of the natural gas network presents an opportunity for the public sector. Indeed, the public sector could lead by example in this matter. In some respects, the public sector has been leading by example already in the area of energy. For the past number of years, natural gas has been the fuel of choice for housing associations for newbuilds and conversions. In areas where natural gas is accessible and money has been available for conversions, homes have been switched to natural gas. In the Saintfield area and further afield, if we are lucky enough at a future date, Housing Executive stock and housing association newbuilds could be converted or built to use natural gas. Natural gas creates obvious savings for the householders who use it, and it is a much more efficient fuel, given that the efficiency standard in boilers is around 95% compared with that for very inefficient oil, Economy 7 or coal.

Natural gas is not just for housing. In the public sector, schools could convert to natural gas, and in some areas many have done so already. Leisure centres, community centres and clinics could convert

to natural gas and make some savings. The previous debate centred on a lack of resources in a particular area, and that resource challenge will only increase as the years go on. Anything that can save the public sector money is worth examining, and extending the natural gas network would provide that opportunity in the Strangford constituency.

Economically, there is great benefit to be had from the infrastructural investment that would come purely from putting the pipes into the ground. Roads have to be dug up and pipes have to be laid, and men and women have to be employed to prepare for the digging and laying of the pipes. It is my understanding that, if natural gas were brought to the Saintfield area, some £2.6 million of infrastructural investment in the natural gas network would be made. That is a huge amount of money, and it is certainly not to be sniffed at in these very difficult times. I wonder how many people that will keep in employment and how many others it will give jobs to. Money going to local contractors to lay those pipes and to put that infrastructure in place will obviously create a spin-off for the wider economy as workers spend their money in shops and services in the local area.

It is important to remember that that is £2.6 million of private investment; it does not represent a begging-bowl approach, and we are not looking for a handout from the public sector. The initial investment will come largely from the private sector, and that is an opportunity that is not to be sniffed at. When the pipes are laid and the infrastructure is in place, people will want to convert to natural gas. That, in turn, will bring economic benefit for small, local installers who make a living from converting homes, businesses and the public sector estate to natural gas. There are a lot of people out there who, through small jobs in converting, will do well out of any network extension.

From the beginning to the end of any such project, consumers, businesses, the public sector, investors and installers will feel a massive economic benefit as a result of that £2.6 million investment in the infrastructure. Economically, an extension has great potential for this part of the Strangford constituency.

There are also well-recognised environmental benefits to natural gas, as opposed to other carbon-heavy fossil fuels. It is a lower-carbon fuel, and gas can certainly help Northern Ireland to make a contribution to lowering harmful greenhouse gas emissions. It is widely recognised that a gas-condensing boiler emits up to 50% less carbon than, for example, an oil boiler. That is a huge difference, and, given that we are all increasingly conscious of the damage that carbon-heavy fuels do to the environment, we must not miss this opportunity to encourage more people, more businesses, and more of our public sector

estate to contribute to lowering carbon emissions in Northern Ireland.

6.15 pm

As we look to the future of energy in Northern Ireland, we should not accept natural gas being confined to a small area around greater Belfast and to 10 towns along the North/South pipeline from Newry to Londonderry. We should not take a narrow view that gas can only be viable in those places and that everybody else should make do with the old, inefficient, carbon-heavy fuels or some hotchpotch of micro-generation renewables. We need to consider expanding our natural gas network as far and wide as possible.

That has already happened in microcosm, in Comber, where the licence area was extended. It can happen again in Saintfield, which, as I said before, is a critical staging post for the expansion of the natural gas network. From there, we can, in the future, move further north to expanding towns, such as Ballygowan, or further south through Crossgar into big towns, such as Downpatrick, where benefits could be immense for business, consumers and the public sector estate. We should expand the network; this is an important first step towards expansion into the south-east.

I am heartened by the inclusion in the draft strategic energy framework of a reference to expanding the natural gas network, not only in the south-east of Northern Ireland but into the west. I commend the Minister for her efforts towards achieving that aim. She obviously has a constituency interest in the expansion of the natural gas network in that direction, and she is right to fight for that. There are particular benefits in moving west, especially for business. Many big businesses in the west of Northern Ireland would benefit immensely from the availability of natural gas.

I appreciate that technical issues need to be considered and that the Utility Regulator needs to complete an economic appraisal of the proposal. Every “i” must be dotted and every “t” crossed, and I expect nothing less. Although we are debating the matter today, and the Minister is present to reply, I appreciate that she cannot deal with the issue herself; it is a matter for the Utility Regulator. I am happy to leave him to do his job, but I urge and plead with him to listen to the people of Strangford when making his assessment. He should listen to the businesses there and, most importantly, to the views of the elected representatives of that constituency, which have been expressed here today. He should ensure that the natural gas network extends to Saintfield and, hopefully, with further investment in the future, beyond, so that the energy choice and economic and environmental benefits of natural gas reach as many people as possible in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCarthy: I support this evening's proposal. During the first period of devolution, my colleague Sean Neeson led the campaign to extend natural gas to the north-west and elsewhere in Northern Ireland. Sean and the Alliance Party continue to support that notion.

In its strategic energy framework, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment committed to encouraging a shift away from domestic dependence on oil for home heating to natural gas. We certainly agree with that sentiment, and I am glad that the Minister is present in the Chamber.

The natural gas industry arrived in the 1990s, and there are now 125,000 gas customers in the greater Belfast, Larne and Lisburn licensed areas. In greater Belfast, the vast majority of Housing Executive homes have been connected to natural gas. Almost all newbuild properties, nearly every large business and, I am informed, over 60% of smaller businesses have gas as their means of energy. In the 10 years up to and including 2008, approximately 200 new customers were connected to the natural gas network every week right across Northern Ireland.

As Mr Hamilton said, natural gas will deliver real enterprise and economic value to the proposed new areas. In addition to their private shareholder natural gas investment, the wider natural gas industry is investing in the local economy. Over £500 million has been invested by all involved in the gas industry over the past 10 years, most of which has employed local labour to convert homes and businesses to natural gas.

Phoenix Gas estimates that rolling out the natural gas network to new areas could add approximately 1,000 new jobs to the local construction and service industries, which is surely good news for everyone in Northern Ireland, particularly in these trying times. Natural gas makes Northern Ireland more marketable to inward investors who wish to locate their businesses here. Diversification of energy supply reduces prices for consumers: Minister Ritchie mentioned that earlier, and we all welcome those efforts.

Along with Simon Hamilton, the Alliance Party welcomes the Phoenix Gas planning application to extend its network throughout the Strangford constituency and into the Saintfield area. Natural gas should be made more available to increase energy competition, leading to a further reduction in prices for consumers. Reducing fuel prices is a key weapon in the fight against fuel poverty, and extending the natural gas network will have a range of other benefits, including a reduction in greenhouse gases and the creation of jobs in installing the required infrastructures.

We welcome the recent 19% reduction in gas prices. It is not so long ago that we were on the opposite side of the fence, when there were huge increases in gas prices that would have been a deterrent to conversion.

Hopefully, we are entering a new dispensation; many will say that the 19% reduction is not before time. Let us hope that that trend continues.

The Alliance Party looks forward to natural gas being made more widely available to consumers in rural areas. I must mention my constituency now: I have a particular interest in the Ards Peninsula and mentioned it a number of times to the gas providers. They said at the time that, if there was sufficient demand in that area, they would consider it, but why should the residents of the Ards Peninsula or, indeed, any other area in the Strangford constituency be denied the choice of cheaper energy for their homes and businesses? In the meantime, we welcome the proposals that are afoot and support the Adjournment topic.

Mr Shannon: I support the Adjournment topic and congratulate Simon Hamilton on giving us the opportunity to comment on it. As a representative of the Strangford constituency, I am keen for natural gas to be installed and available for all the people there.

I do not wish to sound like an advertiser for Phoenix Gas or any other natural gas provider, nor do I want to repeat what everyone else has said. However, having read the Phoenix Gas information booklet, I want to take a slightly different angle and look at the benefits of natural gas for householders.

I read an information booklet from Phoenix Gas today, and I could not help but see the real benefits that come from using natural gas, whether at home or in business. The sales pitch states that natural gas offers choice and flexibility. It can be used to power central heating or single appliances. It is not unlike electricity in that appliances can be used for cooking, and, although I have never used a tumble dryer, those can still be used too.

Natural gas offers choice in how to run the home. It offers control, and that is an option that a lot of people in Strangford do not have. Natural gas central heating is ideal for all lifestyles: for someone like me, who comes home in the early hours of the morning, or my wife, who is at home all day with the boys. At the touch of a button, enjoy cosy warmth and plenty of hot water — I sound like an advert on the television — without the need for an expensive immersion heater. There are cost savings, which we should be encouraging.

I like an open fire, but living-flame fires look and feel like genuine coal fires without the soot, ash, dirt and cleaning. There are advantages for an almost single man: I am married, of course, but I am almost like a single man in relation to my home.

A natural gas cooker can transform the way in which one cooks, giving total control and an instant precise response from a gas hob. For someone who used to live on Chinese takeaways before becoming diabetic, that is of great advantage. I sound as if I am

making a sales pitch, but the choice of cookers, hobs and ranges has never been more exciting. As Members can hear, I am enthralled by natural gas appliances.

I will come to a serious point: natural gas costs less than electricity. That is why we want to have it in Strangford. A newspaper headline today pointed out that NIE has dropped its prices by 5%. “Bully for NIE” is all I can say. The prices were dropped by 10% a while ago. Every one of us receives an electricity bill. People regularly come to my office to tell me of their concerns about debt and the fact that their electricity bill is two or three times higher than it used to be. For NIE to drop prices by 5% or 10% is not sufficient. That can be balanced against the natural gas tariffs. Phoenix Gas has dropped its tariff by 19%. That matters. It was dropped by a significant figure a short time ago.

Gas-powered tumble dryers do not just cut back on charges compared with NIE, they also reduce electricity usage. That is the type of effect that we want to see. Here is an interesting fact for those who aspire to look after their own home — I am not sure whether I am one of those people: running costs of a natural gas tumble dryer are half that of an electric one. The typical annual running cost of a gas-powered tumble dryer is £25·20, compared with that of an electric tumble dryer, which costs £65·91. There is a clear difference.

It is all about choice. My colleagues Simon Hamilton and Kieran McCarthy have said that the people of Strangford deserve and should have a choice. I cannot sign up for this miracle of modern life, this gas, at my home address, because it is not available there. Nor can I do so at my work address. I cannot get natural gas at work or at the office. That is not just Jim Shannon talking; it is all the people in the Strangford area who live in Newtownards and who cannot get natural gas. I cannot get the wonderful money-saving aid in a time of economic depression to help my constituents in the Strangford area or anywhere down the Ards Peninsula. Some areas of Newtownards have access to natural gas, but there are a great many other areas that do not. On the whole, it is not readily available. We hope that gas will be available in Comber and Saintfield soon.

6.30 pm

It is long past time that our rural constituents have access to the gas network, especially given the well-publicised downturn in gas prices. For that reason, I join my colleague Simon Hamilton in asking the gas company to take note of the needs of the Strangford people and take action. It is very important that natural gas be made available to the new houses that have been built in Strangford over the last while and that people there can take advantage of the price reductions.

Northern Ireland has the best broadband coverage in the UK. If that can be achieved in rural areas, then surely natural gas can be made available to everyone who wishes to purchase it. It is long past time that our rural constituents are afforded the same opportunities as those in the rest of the Province. It is long past time that natural gas output was extended throughout Strangford: to the Ards Peninsula; all of Newtownards; Comber; Saintfield; and to Crossgar and Ballynahinch, which will soon become part of the Strangford territory. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have no doubt that Phoenix Gas will be rushing to the Ards Peninsula in the morning to get Mr Shannon to sign a marketing contract. *[Laughter.]*

Mr P J Bradley: I thank Mr Hamilton for introducing the Adjournment debate on the extension of the natural gas network in the part of County Down that he represents. I fully support the views outlined by him and his constituency colleagues; I will call them the Strangford three from now on.

My support is twofold. First, I always support proposals that I consider to be of benefit to the people of County Down. Secondly, if the desired pipeline eventually makes its way further into the Strangford constituency, it will be just one step removed from South Down, which is the part of the county that I represent.

If the gas pipeline is extended within the Strangford constituency, and I sincerely hope that that it is, it would be relatively easy to make a similar case for the residents and businesspeople of Saintfield, Ballynahinch, Crossgar, Downpatrick, Castlewella and Newcastle. The western part of South Down will be serviced by a different pipeline, thus my comments relate to the area bordering the Strangford constituency. However, I have fears regarding Kilkeel, which, geographically, is so far removed from both pipelines that it may have to wait for another day.

Extending the natural gas pipeline within the Strangford constituency will enable many new customers to be served. Towns, communities and individuals stand to benefit economically. Mr Hamilton referred to the potential benefits that an extension of the natural gas pipeline will bring, and I agree with him. New investment will provide valuable jobs in the gas installation industry. Heating engineers will have a role to play, and the private house-building sector will experience additional benefits in its field of expertise. From a social perspective, the introduction of a mains gas supply to family homes should improve the standard of living and leave occupants with more disposable income.

In its document ‘New Priorities in Difficult Times’, the SDLP proposes the establishment of a £12 million

investment fund in 2009-2010 to kick-start the facilitation of the maximum penetration of natural gas in Northern Ireland. It is not enough to run spurs from the main transmissions into adjacent towns. Distribution networks need to be rolled out to as many towns as possible, thereby offering choice to all customers. Phoenix Gas and Firmus Energy will require an element of public subsidy and/or sympathetic regulations to accelerate the development of the two networks into new areas.

I support the request that Mr Hamilton made on behalf of his Strangford constituents who are still without a gas supply. I have no doubt that the Members for Strangford will support me when the time comes for the pipeline to be extended to South Down.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I am sure that we were all enthralled by Jim's description of domestic chores.

Mr Hamilton: He is a domestic goddess.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: He is a domestic god rather than a domestic goddess. He spoke about how he will do the cooking and the tumble-drying. I cannot wait, and Mrs Shannon must be very excited by the whole prospect. *[Laughter.]*

On a serious note, I congratulate Mr Hamilton for securing the Adjournment debate. I very much welcome the opportunity to discuss this important issue in the House today. The debate is timely because, as was mentioned, the new strategic energy framework for Northern Ireland is out for consultation. One of our chief goals is to improve the security and diversity of supply. The extension of Northern Ireland's gas network is a key element of our planning in that respect.

I want to set out a bit of the background to the gas industry in Northern Ireland. Natural gas is a relatively new phenomenon here. It arrived in 1996 via the Scotland to Northern Ireland pipeline, known as SNIP, which is the undersea gas pipeline. Initially, it was principally intended to help to fuel electricity generation by way of a new combined cycle gas turbine at Ballylumford.

Since then, the industry has expanded steadily. In addition to being Northern Ireland's primary source of power generation, gas now brings the cleanest burning fossil fuel to many homes and businesses throughout greater Belfast, including, as Mr Hamilton mentioned, areas in the Strangford constituency, as well as to other parts of the Province.

In the past decade, Phoenix Natural Gas has constructed significant networks, and it has grown its customer base in the licence areas of greater Belfast and Larne to approximately 125,000. That has helped to establish natural gas as a major competitive source

of fuel for the commercial and domestic energy sectors. I do, however, accept that the company operates in a specific area of Northern Ireland, and I will touch on that subject later.

Further development of the gas infrastructure has taken place over the past five years, with the construction of a major gas transmission pipeline to the north-west of Northern Ireland in 2004. That not only supplies fuel to the electricity power station at Coolkeeragh but brings gas to businesses and householders in the urban areas of Londonderry, Limavady, Coleraine, Ballymoney and Ballymena.

The construction of a gas transmission link with the Republic of Ireland through the South/North pipeline was completed in 2006 and provides security of supply in the event of the pipeline from Scotland becoming unavailable. It is important for Northern Ireland not to be reliant on only one source. That link has also led to natural gas being provided to the towns and cities of Newry, Banbridge, Craigavon and Antrim.

Firmus Energy has approximately 5,000 customers in the areas adjacent to the north-west and South/North pipelines. It continues to roll out the gas infrastructure in the area for which it is licensed. That sets the current network of gas in Northern Ireland in context.

To turn now to Strangford, natural gas has been available in the northern part of the constituency for some time. Phoenix Natural Gas, as part of its original development plans for greater Belfast, has been supplying customers in Newtownards, Dundonald and Carryduff for several years. In 2007, Phoenix applied for, and was granted from the regulator, permission to expand its gas network in the Strangford constituency to include Comber and a quarry on the edge of the constituency at Temple.

As Members know, and as was mentioned in the debate, other parts of the Ards Peninsula are less densely populated and, therefore, an economically viable gas network may not be possible. That is the position from an economic perspective, but bear with me and I speak more about that later.

We are undertaking work to consider the potential for the roll-out of natural gas elsewhere. That may have some direct relevance to rural areas in the rest of the Strangford constituency and in the South Down constituency.

I am aware that the gas industry has been considering how the roll-out of gas can be further increased. Within the past six weeks, Phoenix has applied to extend its licence area to bring natural gas to Saintfield. The application is with the Utility Regulator who has the main responsibility for issuing gas conveyance and supply licences. I spoke to him only yesterday, when he told me that he was working through the application. Work is, therefore, ongoing.

Indeed, Phoenix has been giving thought to how the gas network might be extended to east Down and further, to Downpatrick.

The Department is conscious of the need to encourage the continued development of the gas network to those rural areas that may not be covered. We are undertaking a number of initiatives to realise that. Along with the Utility Regulator, we recently commissioned consultants to undertake a study to consider the technical issues and the costs and benefits that are associated with extending the gas network. That will involve a feasibility study to look at the potential pipeline routes and gas loads in the towns to the west and north-west of Northern Ireland. That study's conclusions will provide me with some information that will not only be useful to the areas that are directly assessed but is likely to have direct relevance to other areas of Northern Ireland for which proposals are being considered by the wider gas industry.

We have heard from the Members present that there are clear benefits to be obtained from extending the natural gas network in Northern Ireland, such as the diversity of fuel supply and a reduction in carbon emissions. To that extent, we must consider the future development of the natural gas network to help us to encourage a shift in domestic use away from oil to more efficient use of gas. Therefore, in conjunction with the Utility Regulator and major gas stakeholders, it is proposed to establish a gas strategic development group, which will consider how the Northern Ireland gas market can be further developed.

However, it must be stressed that, at present, the expansion of the gas network to towns in the west, the north-west, the Strangford constituency or anywhere else in Northern Ireland can take place only where it is economically viable to do so. An important part of our gas extension study, and any consideration for extending the gas network, must be an assessment of the realisable gas loads in the respective areas. Indeed, there are locations in the existing gas licence areas in which the take-up of natural gas has been disappointing in some sectors. We are very keen for businesses and domestic users to consider gas and, perhaps, dual fuel as an option.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for giving way. On the last point that she made, does she agree that the enormous hike in the price of gas in the past year or so — I think that there were two huge increases — is enough to put off anyone converting to gas? Will she also ensure that the price of gas will be regulated when the number of customers is substantial? There should be some mechanism in place so that companies — whatever company it may be — do not have a monopoly and are unable to charge whatever price they like to the customers who use their supply.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: Indeed. That is why we have the Utility Regulator to deal with those very issues. Although Members may think that I should not have to, it is important to state that the Utility Regulator is completely independent of the Government. He does not fall under my remit or the remit of anybody else: he is completely independent.

Last week, I had the opportunity to meet the head of all the European regulators. We made the point that all the regulators in Europe should be completely independent from Governments and should also be on a level playing field. We have concerns about some countries in that regard, but the Utility Regulator is completely independent in Northern Ireland. He will take into account the issues that the Member raised.

With natural gas now established as a major fuel source for industrial and domestic consumers in many parts of Northern Ireland, I very much welcome Phoenix Supply's recent announcement that it is to reduce its gas tariffs by 19%. Firmus Energy has brought down its price for domestic customers by nearly 18% in its licensed area. Those announcements are extremely welcome for their customers in what are, as many Members have said, very difficult economic times.

In conclusion, the debate is timely, given that we are developing a new strategic energy framework. It has given me another opportunity to underline the importance of people making known their views on that strategic framework, and to say that I regard our energy infrastructure, including extending our gas network, as a key element in that framework moving forward.

Adjourned at 6.45 pm.

