
Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 2 March 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment —

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During yesterday's debate on the 50:50 recruitment policy, a Member said:

"Catholic officers who joined the police in recent years have the stigma of not necessarily getting their place completely on merit." — [Official Report, Vol 49, No 1, p68, col 2].

The Oxford English Dictionary's definition of stigma is:

"a mark or sign of disgrace or discredit".

I ask you to review Hansard, Mr Speaker, and make a ruling on the matter. To suggest that any member of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, given what it has experienced recently and over a long period could, in any way, be deemed to carry a sign of disgrace or discredit is a poor reflection on those who would make such a comment and a poor reflection on the House. A ruling is required to ensure that, in future, comments of such gravity and severity are not made in the House or, if they are made, that they be corrected immediately.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. I have continually warned all sides of the House about the language that they may use in the House and to be moderate and temperate in their language. I will study Hansard and come back to the House directly or to the Member directly.

Mr Attwood: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, I stress the point that, in addition to Members making unparliamentary or inappropriate comments about other Members, I am of the view that a line may have been crossed when inappropriate and improper references were made to people outside the Building. Whenever

a Member uses a word that has a very explicit and unfortunate meaning, such as the word "stigma", I believe that a ruling must be made, rather than a mere exhortation being given to Members to be moderate in their comments.

Mr Speaker: On occasions in the House, debates can raise emotions from all Members, and some of the comments that are made are part of the cut and thrust of debate. Once again, I remind Members to be of good temper when they speak in the House. It is important for Members on all sides of the House to remember that.

Mr McDevitt: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At the end of questions for oral answer to the Department of the Environment yesterday, I raised a point of order with you about a DUP Member making unacceptable comments from a sedentary position. You gave a commitment to check the Hansard report, and I thank you for that. However, I checked Hansard this morning, and it does not record that sedentary comment. Will you give a commitment to check the tape on that matter?

Mr Bell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me deal with Mr McDevitt's point of order first.

Hansard does not record everything. There is a procedure for how it does its work. I advise the Member to speak to Hansard or to the Business Office about that issue.

As I said yesterday — I thought that I dealt with the issue fairly strongly — Members should not try to speak from a sedentary position in the House, because, on occasions, remarks can be picked up. As the Member found when he read the Hansard report for yesterday, not every remark is picked up. However, that does not necessarily mean that neither I nor the Clerks at Table hear those remarks. Members

may have the notion that because remarks are not picked up by Hansard they are not picked up at the Table. However, that is not the case, and I remind Members of what I said yesterday: it is vital that they do not try to speak from a sedentary position. It is wrong, and I remind all sides of the House of that again.

Mr Bell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday we had the shameful behaviour of the Deputy Speaker John Dallat of the SDLP shouting from a sedentary position for the Minister of the Environment to resign. Will you make a ruling on that disgraceful behaviour as urgently as possible?

Furthermore, Mr Attwood raised a point of order this morning about public officials being slurred, yet in recent Committee meetings, Members have slurred planning officials. Can the House have your ruling on that? Perhaps the SDLP will take the log out of its own eye before it looks for the speck in others'. Moreover, is Conall McDevitt's sectional behaviour in raising of a point of order about people speaking from a sedentary position, when he wilfully watched and heard the Deputy Speaker screaming "resign" from a sedentary position yesterday, not sectarian in itself?

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us try to close this debate down. All parties in the House have Members who, from time to time, will try to speak from a sedentary position. Let us remind ourselves that that should not happen.

Mr McDevitt: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: If the Member's point of order is on the same issue, I am very reluctant to take it. If it is a different point of order on a different issue, I will take it.

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is it on a totally different subject?

Mr Attwood: I can give the Speaker a 100% guarantee that it is, although my point of order arises from one that was raised on a previous day.

You will be aware, Mr Speaker, that you stated that you did not have the power to make a ruling that the First Minister should lodge legal advice in the Library. Subsequently, I met you last Tuesday in relation to the matter. The First Minister stepped down from office for 21 days and has now been in office again for 24 days. He was out of office awaiting legal advice for

a shorter period than other people have been waiting to hear about that legal advice since he returned to office.

Given that it is a matter of public interest, that the Department of Finance and Personnel has said that it would be inappropriate to publish the instructions to counsel in respect of that legal advice and that there is now a long delay and some doubt about the matter, I urge you, Mr Speaker, to bring the matter to a close as quickly as possible. I urge you to consider whether a ruling from the Chair is appropriate or whether in some other manner it can be indicated to Ministers, including the First Minister, that it is a matter that needs to be shared with the House and the wider public.

Mr Speaker: I have given the Member quite a bit of latitude on this issue, as he will appreciate. I have spoken to him and have once again written to him, and, as far as I am concerned as Speaker, that is where it ends. There are other avenues that the Member should explore in trying to resolve the issue. I do not feel that, as Speaker, it is my job to come in here and make a statement on a particular issue that a particular Member has brought to me, because I would be doing that quite often. I believe that there are other avenues that the Member could pursue in relation to the issue.

Mr Attwood: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I have not yet received a letter from you in relation to the matters that I raised with you in our conversation last Tuesday. If that is your final ruling on the matter there is nothing further that I can do, except to express the concern that the requirements of accountability and disclosure to the House in this matter — subject to the issues of privilege and ongoing legal investigations — will not have been satisfied if the House is not in a position to require anything further from the First Minister.

Mr Speaker: I have taken some time to look at the issue. In fact, I have taken my own counsel on the issue, and my mind has not changed from the first day that the Member raised the point of order. Once again, I say to the Member, as I did when I spoke to him face to face, that I believe there are other avenues that he should follow, which can hopefully resolve the issue for him.

Ministerial Statement

Planning Reform

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment that he wishes to make a statement.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I can assure you that, being in a debating chamber, you will not need to wrap me up in bandages or mollycoddle me; I am quite up for the challenge of facing the Chamber and do not need to be pampered, unlike some Members who have intervened this morning.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement to formally update Members on our current position in relation to the reform of the planning system. As Members know, over the past few years there has been widespread pressure for reform from many quarters. That is continuing, and was drawn into sharp focus with the publication last month of the Public Accounts Committee's report on the performance of the Planning Service. We all recognise that the planning system needs to be able to adapt more flexibly and quickly to the many challenges facing our society today.

The Executive are committed to doing what they can to grow the economy, and we all know that we need a planning system that helps us to do that. Members will be aware that the consultation paper 'Reform of the Planning System in Northern Ireland: Your Chance to Influence Change' was issued for public consultation on 6 July 2009. The proposals were widely publicised through the consultation period, and people were informed of the 11 independently facilitated stakeholder events arranged as part of the consultation process. Almost 500 people attended the stakeholder events, which were held across Northern Ireland, and an independent report was prepared by the consultants who managed and facilitated the events. In addition, more than 260 written responses to the consultation paper were received from a wide range of interests, from agents, architects and business and development interests to environmental groups, residents' groups and community and voluntary groups. The independent facilitator's report and the responses to the consultation were all considered carefully as part of the policy finalisation process.

10.45 am

In January 2010, I circulated my final proposals to ministerial colleagues for consideration. I can now inform the Assembly that the Executive have agreed the final proposals, and, in doing so, they have also agreed that we should begin to draft the necessary legislation to give effect to the reforms and to the transfer of the majority of planning functions to local government.

Members will be aware that the consultation responses ran to more than 200 pages, so they will be relieved to hear that I do not intend to share that level of detail with them today. However, I shall provide a brief summary of the final proposals. The Government's response to the consultation will be made available on the Planning Service website later this month, along with the final equality impact assessment at a strategic level.

Generally, the consultation responses indicated broad support for the majority of the proposals outlined in the consultation paper. As a result, the final positions in many areas reflect the proposals that were set out in the original paper. On some issues, respondents' comments were more mixed. By "respondents" I mean those who replied in writing and those who offered feedback through the facilitated sessions. On other issues, there was strong opposition to specific proposals. I shall highlight the nature of the response as I deal with the various issues.

The consultation paper asked whether, in future, planning policy statements (PPSs) should provide strategic direction and regional policy advice only, which would then be interpreted locally in development plans. That question received a fairly mixed response. However, a majority across almost all groups favoured the retention of some elements of operational policy in PPSs.

In the Programme for Government, we committed to having an up-to-date suite of PPSs in place by 2011. That will include a new PPS 1 which sets out the general principles underlying the planning system. Bearing that in mind and taking into consideration the mixed consultation result and the time and resources that are required to review, consult on and publish new PPSs, I have decided that we will not review our existing approach at this stage. After the transfer of functions, my officials will work with councils and others to determine how best to

manage the nature, timing and presentation of future planning policies.

Members will be aware that the consultation paper proposed a wide range of key changes in order to create a more flexible and faster local development plan system underpinned by earlier and more effective participation from the public and other stakeholders. Councils will be able to use the new local development plans to provide a clear and realistic vision of how places should change and what they will be like in the future. The plan will support that vision by indicating clearly where development, including regeneration, should take place and what form it should take. In addition, the opportunity to develop appropriate linkages with the new community planning responsibilities should not be missed.

The responses to the consultation paper indicated broad support for the majority of the development plan proposals, and, in most areas, we will proceed as indicated in the paper. I will not restate the detailed proposals today, but, broadly, I confirm that, under the new system, the plan will consist of two separate but related documents that will be prepared and adopted separately to ensure that early strategic direction is in place. Indeed, my officials have recently been in contact with colleagues on transition committees and transition management teams to agree arrangements to work co-operatively on pilot studies for several plans so that those can be progressed quickly when functions are transferred.

Furthermore, a more meaningful and effective approach will be taken to enabling interested parties and the local community to engage early in the plan process. A preferred options paper will be introduced as a basis for public consultation, and there will be a requirement that the plan process include a clear statement of community involvement.

There was opposition to the proposal that the Department should give examiners the power to determine the most appropriate procedures to be used when dealing with representations to the local development plan. The aim of the proposal was not to stifle debate at the independent examination or to stop certain stakeholders from contributing; rather, it was simply to enable the independent examiners to better manage the examination process.

A recurring theme among the responses was that the proposal would undermine the legitimacy of the public participation process and that the removal of the right to be heard orally would impact detrimentally on those with the lowest levels of literacy. After taking into consideration the comments made, the level of opposition and the perception that there may be a potential detrimental impact on some sections of the community, I have decided not to proceed with that proposal. My Department will consider other administrative ways by which the management of independent examinations may be improved.

The consultation paper set out proposals for modernising the planning application system. Those proposals were aimed at creating a more responsive, fair, predictable and efficient system by changing the culture of the planning application process to a development management approach; moving away from operating the planning system as a mainly regulatory process towards a more dynamic way of enabling and facilitating sustainable economic and social development; establishing a hierarchy of development based on a three-tier classification of developments, so that resources can be focused on those applications with greater economic and social significance through more proportionate decision-making mechanisms; and introducing new streamlined processes for applications within the hierarchy to front-load the process by promoting earlier pre-application discussion, improving the predictability of timescales and ensuring effective engagement of the local community and elected representatives at the pre-application stage.

As with the development plan, there was a lot of detail in the consultation paper, which I will not rehearse today. In general, there was strong support for the development management proposals from the consultation responses and the stakeholder events. For example, there was support for and we will proceed with the proposals relating to the following: the introduction of a new planning hierarchy; the three proposed categories of development — regionally significant, major and local — and their respective definitions; the statutory requirement for developers to hold pre-application consultation with the community on regionally significant and major developments; the introduction of the power to decline to determine applications where pre-application

community consultation has not been carried out or where the applicant has not complied with the requirements of pre-application community consultation; the granting of a power to enable district councils to hold pre-determination hearings for major developments and a wider power to extend that for other types of applications; the requirement for councils to introduce schemes of officer delegation for local applications post-transfer, thereby building on the hugely successful streamlined arrangements that are in place at present; the expansion of the list of statutory consultees; and the introduction of a statutory obligation on those authorities to respond within a specified time frame.

There was a mixed response to the proposal that the Department should be given the option to appoint independent examiners to hold a hearing of or inquiry into applications for regionally significant development. However, it is essential that the Department should retain that option in situations where the Planning Appeals Commission is unable to hold a hearing or inquiry or commit to providing an advisory report within an acceptable timetable. We will, therefore, proceed with that proposal.

In the consultation paper, we propose to reduce the normal default duration for planning permission and other consents from five years to three years but to retain the power to vary that. There was a slender majority in support of the proposal. However, after taking into consideration the consultation responses, the current economic climate and the slowdown in development, I have decided not to proceed with that proposal at this time but to revisit it post-RPA implementation.

A key element of our aim to ensure that there is a more proportionate approach to planning has included a focus on extending permitted development rights. The potential for extending those rights for householder development, non-householder development and small-scale renewable-energy generation was the focus of a comprehensive consultation exercise that finished in late January this year. More than 130 responses were received, and officials are analysing those with a view to finalising the policy and bringing forward the necessary legislation during the next business year.

The consultation paper proposed some fundamental changes to how the appeals

system should operate as well as changes to existing procedures. We will take forward the majority of changes that received clear support in the public consultation. However, I have listened to concerns that were raised about some of the appeals issues and will now outline the changes that I have made.

Most of those who responded supported the proposal to reduce the six-month time limit within which appeals must be made, although there were varying opinions on what it should be reduced to. Taking account of all the responses, I have decided that the appeal period will be reduced to four months rather than the two months suggested in the consultation paper. However, powers will be provided to change that through subordinate legislation at a later date, if appropriate.

Appeals are currently processed either by written representation, with or without an accompanied site visit, or by a formal or informal hearing, and the appellant can request his or her preferred method. In the consultation paper, we proposed that the Planning Appeals Commission should be given statutory powers to enable it to decide the most appropriate method based on published criteria. That proposal provoked one of the highest responses across the range of questions, and less than a third of those who responded supported it. A number of respondents expressed concern that the written representation method could disadvantage the one quarter of adults in Northern Ireland with the lowest levels of literacy. Opposition was also expressed during the stakeholder events. Having carefully considered all the responses and, in light of the widespread opposition and concerns that were raised, I do not intend to proceed with that proposal.

There was overall majority support for the proposal not to allow appellants to introduce new material beyond what was before the planning authority when it made its original decision, unless it could be demonstrated that the additional material could not have been submitted earlier. However, business, developers, the Planning Appeals Commission and agents and architects were opposed to that. Those who rejected the proposal viewed new material as a means of negotiation and addressing issues that would add flexibility to the system and allow it to respond to changing circumstances. I have taken into account the strong representations that were made in

opposition to that proposal and have decided not to bring forward any legislative change. However, my officials will look at lessons that were learned from the Scottish experience, monitor the Planning Appeals Commission's handling of new information, and, in the interim, draw the conclusions of the consultation and the issues raised in it to the attention of the commission.

Following the transfer of planning powers to the new district councils and in keeping with the theme of strengthening local accountability, the Department sought views on establishing local member review bodies in each district council to determine certain minor appeals. That proposal attracted minimal support across all respondent groups, with less than a third of respondents in favour of it. Those who opposed the proposal expressed concern that local councillors may not have the skills, knowledge, experience or impartiality required for such bodies to operate fairly and effectively. I have therefore decided that local member review bodies should not be introduced at this time, but the situation should be reviewed post-RPA.

On the basis of our assessment of the likely effects of third-party appeals on the planning system and of our objectives for planning reform, the consultation paper made it clear that there were no proposals to make provision for third-party appeals in the current package of reforms. However, I undertook to seek views on the issue before reaching a final decision. The question attracted a high response, and opinion was split, with almost 60% of respondents supporting the introduction of a third-party right of appeal and 40% opposing it. Most of those in favour felt that any third-party appeal rights should be restricted in some way. Many of the responses raised issues that need to be more fully explored. Taking account of the proposed changes to the planning system on the issue of front-loading the process through the promotion of earlier engagement with the local community and on the analysis of responses, I remain of the view that there does not appear to be an immediate and compelling reason to proceed towards making provision for third-party appeals in the current round of planning reform proposals.

Further consideration of the issue will be deferred until the extensive changes to the planning system under planning reform and the transfer of functions to local government are

given sufficient time to bed in. That will allow us to assess their impact and effectiveness before considering whether further changes may be required.

11.00 am

As I said, enforcement is integral to managing development. One of the fundamental elements of the planning process is the power to take action, where it is considered expedient, against unauthorised development and breaches of planning control. Otherwise, the credibility and integrity of the planning system will be undermined. Therefore, I intend to introduce legislation so that retrospective planning applications will attract a multiple of the normal planning fee. The final amount will be determined at a later stage and included in subordinate legislation. I also intend to proceed with the introduction of fixed penalty notice powers for breaches of an enforcement notice or a condition notice.

Although more than two thirds of those who commented supported the introduction of provisions on notification of initiation and completion of development, those opposed to it said that it could add to the workload of the planning authority without any significant gain. At the stakeholder events, although many people welcomed the proposals, some developers said that such a scheme would be unworkable. We will not proceed with that proposal at this stage, but officials will continue to monitor the impact of regulations that were introduced in Scotland in that area in 2008 and other recent enforcement measures in Scotland.

The consultation paper asked whether the Department should give further consideration to making it an immediate criminal offence to commence any development without planning permission. Just over half of respondents felt that the Department should not give that idea further consideration. There was a general recognition that such a power could unfairly penalise individuals who had unknowingly or unwittingly commenced development in breach of planning legislation. I have fully analysed the responses, considered all the key points and taken account of all other available and proposed enforcement tools, and I am satisfied that no further consideration should be given to that proposal. My Department will continue to use and to consolidate its existing suite of enforcement powers and give consideration to

measures that could help to ensure that levels of fines are commensurate with a breach of planning control.

The consultation document was also used as a vehicle to initiate debate on whether there is a case for seeking increased levels of contributions from developers to support the provision of infrastructure that is identified as important to Northern Ireland's social and economic development. The issue of developer contributions is not intrinsic either to planning reform or to the transfer of planning functions to councils. However, it was included in the consultation paper after agreement with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). The responses to the consultation indicated an appetite for seeking increased contributions, and more than two thirds of respondents supported that idea.

Given that infrastructure is funded and delivered by a range of Departments, including DFP, the Department for Regional Development (DRD), the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), funding and infrastructure responsibilities should be considered at Executive level. A separate paper will be produced and forwarded to the Executive in the near future to provide further details on the consultation responses. Regardless of which Department takes that work forward, I am keen to contribute to the role that the planning process might play in any future system of contributions.

The consultation paper also sought views on whether, following the transfer of functions, central government should continue to set planning fees, with consideration to be given to transferring fee-setting powers to councils after a review that will take place approximately three years post-transfer. More than two thirds of respondents were in favour of that proposal, and 87% supported the proposal that central government should have a statutory planning audit/inspection function in future. In light of that strong support, I am content to proceed with both proposals.

Views were also sought on culture change, capacity and related performance management issues. There was widespread recognition among respondents that the revised structures for the devolved delivery of the planning system will require a change in attitude among all stakeholders and the development of a new

culture. There was also recognition of the critical need to ensure that all key players and stakeholders have sufficient capacity to realise the full benefits of the reforms. We are already making progress through, for example, the introduction of the streamlined council consultation and, as I already mentioned, early work on pilot development plans.

My officials will continue to work with other sectors, particularly through the RPA implementation structures, to explore performance management issues and how best to enhance capacity in the system to ensure readiness for the changes that will arise through the implementation of the RPA and planning reform. I am also encouraged to note that other professional organisations, such as the Royal Town Planning Institute, are already considering their role in that respect, as it is clearly an area that involves many more players than my Department or the Planning Service.

As Members will be aware, views were also sought on the draft equality impact assessment (EQIA) at a strategic level, which was published with the consultation paper. Most of the responses received related to the specific reform proposals. I have indicated where I have taken those issues into account, with others, to influence the final position. We will publish the final EQIA at a strategic level later this month, alongside the Government's response to the wider planning reform consultation.

We also recognise the fact that there is a need to gather more relevant information on equality and planning. We have given a commitment to develop a monitoring strategy that will be implemented from 2011 onwards. We will take all the responses to the consultation process into account as part of the development of that strategy.

I appreciate the fact that my statement has been somewhat of a charge through a massive reform programme. All players in the planning system will experience significant change in adapting to new and different procedures and processes and, critically, in changing culture and mindsets.

In a statement to the Assembly on 14 September 2009, I said:

"The reforms that are proposed ... represent the most far-reaching changes to our planning system"
— [Official Report, Bound Volume 43, p22, col 1].

since the 1970s. I stand by that statement. We will make the necessary progress only if we have the right level of support from all stakeholders, including elected representatives, at every level.

Members will be aware that if we are to bring the proposed changes forward to 2011 to coincide with the transfer of the majority of planning functions to local government, we will have to work to an extremely tight legislative timescale. The final policy positions that I outlined will require primary legislation and a huge raft of subordinate legislative changes, all of which must be concluded before the dissolution of the Assembly in spring 2011.

Members will also be aware that, for a variety of reasons, we are well outside best practice in the delivery of the timetable for the legislative programme. However, we remain committed to doing all that we can to deliver the ambitious programme that has been set out and to transferring a fit-for-purpose planning system to local government in 2011.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mrs D Kelly): I thank the Minister of the Environment for his statement. He is right to conclude that he has brought an extensive set of planning reform proposals before the House. The Committee for the Environment faces a challenge to deliver on time its scrutiny of the proposed reforms and accompanying legislative requirements. It goes to show that early consultation can lead to a much improved and better-informed set of proposals.

I will address the planning policies that the Minister outlined in his statement. He stated that he had hoped, by 2011, to have in place an up-to-date suite of PPSs, including a new PPS 1. However, that will not now happen in that time frame. Will he give the House some detail about the new time frame that he envisages? Accelerated passage is not recommended practice for any Committee, and the Minister said that he wanted all the relevant legislation to be enacted by spring 2011. I would be grateful for some clarity on the time frame for that. I welcome the statement generally, but I want the Minister to give us some information on PPS 21, because many people in rural communities are awaiting the outcome of the deliberations on that PPS.

The Minister of the Environment: Mrs Kelly raises a number of issues. We still intend to

have a fit-for-purpose suite of planning policy statements in place by March 2011, which will include a revised PPS 1 that sets out the general principles for formulating planning policy, making development plans and exercising development management. The suite of planning policy statements, together with the revised regional development strategy (RDS), will provide a robust and consistent planning policy framework that will allow all new councils to carry out their planning functions.

I have completed my work on PPS 21; the matter is now with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), and it will then go to the Executive. I hope that that will happen soon so that we can bring it to a conclusion. Further work has to be done on PPS 4 before it can be brought to the Executive. As regards the timescale, I want to work with the Committee as far as possible. We have had a good working relationship on all legislative proposals thus far, and I want that to continue to be the case.

The closer we get to March 2011 and the dissolution of the Assembly, the more pressure we will be under. The Committee will have to consider how it wishes to do things. If the Committee believes that something is not worth taking forward before March 2011, it may decide not to proceed with it. I am in the hands of the Committee in that respect.

Mr Speaker: As there is quite a bit of interest in the Minister's statement from all sides of the House, I ask all Members to be brief in their questions.

Mr Ross: The Minister will be aware of the huge backlog of planning applications in the Planning Appeals Commission. Will he outline how what he has laid out will impact on that?

He also referred to the massive challenge that local government will face in taking on additional planning responsibilities. What does he plan to do to help to build the capacity of local councillors and local government to deal with those responsibilities?

The Minister of the Environment: The Planning Appeals Commission has suffered the same difficulties as the Planning Service has, in that planning applications have more than doubled in a short space of time. The workload increased significantly, and, as a consequence, planning applications were not dealt with as quickly

as we would have liked. We cannot afford to leave ourselves in a position whereby the backlog keeps building as the Planning Appeals Commission works its way through it.

Independent examiners can be brought in to bring forward planning proposals, where appropriate. Some planning proposals can be quite controversial, and people will, therefore, call for public inquiries. However, if those public inquiries cannot be held for six months, a year or a year and a half, that will not be good for the economic or social development of Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is imperative that we are supported by an independent examination process that will ensure that the Planning Appeals Commission can be helped in that regard.

As regards capacity building in councils, I have already had an offer of assistance from the Royal Town Planning Institute, which is prepared to work with us on developing a training programme for councillors. Many councillors have considerable experience of planning issues, but we need to further enhance and embellish that experience. We intend to do that to properly prepare elected representatives in local government for their new and increased responsibilities.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement, which I broadly welcome. Much progress has been made on the issue to date, and the Committee hopes that further progress can be made in a reasonable period.

I note the high level of interest in the third party appeal mechanism. In the absence of the introduction of such a system, what independent mechanism or mechanisms does the Minister feel should be in place to challenge a planning decision if a party feels that an application has not been properly assessed?

The Minister of the Environment: I am not fundamentally opposed to the notion of third party appeals. In fact, if people examine the records of previous Assembly debates, they will find that I have supported it. We are following a particular process of change to the planning system, and it involves a fairly fundamental change. We have decided to go with a mechanism to allow the community and voluntary sector to have its say at the start of the planning process. Instead of trying to stop the train when it is three quarters of the way down the line, they can get in at the start of the

process, exert their influence and have their opinions and voices heard.

11.15 am

In the statement, I made it clear that where satisfactory consultation had not taken place in the first place, councils could decide to reject the planning application outright without dealing with it. It is not a mechanism for lip service; it is a mechanism that allows the community to get fully involved in planning applications at the earliest point and to influence and change those planning applications for the well-being of the wider community.

I recognise that we cannot have both that and a third-party appeal mechanism at the end. It has to be one or the other. I want to give this system an opportunity to work. It will be for a future Minister of the Environment, if he or she is not satisfied with how it is working, to introduce a system that allows third party appeals. I am not necessarily opposed to third party appeals, but I want to give this system an opportunity to work first. It would not work if the process for community involvement applied at both ends.

Mr Beggs: I, too, give the statement a general welcome. Given the low level of public confidence in the planning system, it is clear that there is a need for change. The Minister advised that the changes to the new area plans are aimed at creating local development plans that are more flexible and can be realised quicker. It has taken an inordinate amount of time to put into operation the systems for the Belfast metropolitan area plan (BMAP) process and for the Larne, Ballymena and Antrim area plans.

Will the Minister confirm that the new area plans, which are to be developed by local councils under the new system, will still have to conform to the regional development strategy? That would prevent local councils racing to expand their green belt areas for further development and, thereby, also prevent the unplanned effect that that would have on development throughout Northern Ireland.

The Minister of the Environment: Planning policy is that area plans will be in general conformity with the regional development strategy. There can be change, but it should not be of such a substantial and significant nature that it wholly undermines the RDS. That will continue to be the case.

Mr Ford: I also thank the Minister for his statement and broadly welcome it. The Minister talked at some length about local development plans and, specifically, about establishing pilot studies. I declare an interest as a member of Antrim Borough Council. At what point will the Antrim and Newtownabbey transition committee be able to engage in those pilot studies and deal with the hopelessly out-of-date plans, particularly those at the Antrim end? Will the Minister also confirm that the overall and final say on local development plans will rest with his Department and explain how that sits with court judgements on the need for independent environmental advice?

The Minister of the Environment:

Newtownabbey is under the BMAP, which should report to me next year. I sat on the Committee for the Environment with Mr Ford, and we were both critical of the BMAP proposals at that time. We did not believe that those would be delivered in the specified time frame of three years, and that was eight or nine years ago. The BMAP has not worked, because it has not delivered on time.

That is not good for developers, economic development, social development, environmentalists or community groups. It is not good for anyone not to have development plans delivered within a reasonable time frame. I have indicated to both Newtownabbey Borough Council and Antrim Borough Council that we will work with them on a joint project. I will correspond with the Member in writing as regards the timescales of that project.

The introduction of councils as the lead bodies on development plans will provide substantial independence and allow us to deal with the overriding issue of the lack of independence at central government level, which was raised in relation to a number of plans. I should mention that the people who were engaged in a court process against us in Craigavon have withdrawn it, and I hope that that will also be the case with the northern area plan. That will allow both area plans to proceed, which will be good news for everyone.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the Minister's statement. If all these proposals come to fruition, there will be fundamental changes to planning. In his statement, the Minister referred to permitted development, and I have raised that issue in the past. He said that officials are looking at the consultation responses. Will he give us an idea

of the type of development that will be permitted in the domestic situation? Will he also comment on the changes to enforcement? As many of us have heard in the past, Planning Service enforcement has been weak.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member please come to his question?

Mr I McCrea: Does the Minister feel that the changes that he proposes to enforcement will tackle that problem?

The Minister of the Environment: About 20% of planning applications could go towards permitted development, such as small-scale renewable energy projects, solar panels, small-scale turbines and small-scale single-storey extensions that do not impact on neighbours. There may be opportunities to leave many small planning applications exclusively in the hands of building control. That is right and proper. We need to reduce the amount of red tape and bureaucracy that exists in Northern Ireland and adopt a much more flexible system for our community.

As far as enforcement is concerned, the introduction of a premium fee to deter commencement of development prior to the submission of a planning application will discourage individuals who do things first and seek planning permission later. The size of the fee will be decided later. We will continue to use our current wide-ranging enforcement powers and seek to consolidate and enhance them where required.

It has been perhaps 30 years or more since there has been change as significant as this. We should not wait for a further 30 years before we do something significant in planning. We have the Assembly, and we no longer have to go to Westminster to plead for legislation. This House can deal with such matters as and when they arise. Where fundamental problems are identified, the House should be responsive to them.

If there is something in my proposals that does not work as envisaged in three or four years' time, Members can change it. We do not have to wait 30 years. We can change things as they need to be changed and introduce legislation as we need to do so. This House will work more credibly in the future if that is the case.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome the Minister's

statement. The recent Public Accounts Committee report on the Planning Service showed that there is a low level of confidence in it. Customer satisfaction stands at only 32%. I hope that that will be addressed.

Planning helps with building our economy. What conversations has the Minister had with local councils about the handover of planning functions to them in 2011? Will the new system be fit for purpose? It is important that planning facilitates the economy and that the new system works. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of the Environment: The councils and Planning Service have put in considerable effort through the strategic leadership board and the transition committees. We have identified a number of council areas where we can commence development plans under the new system, and preparatory work is under way in order that those plans will be ready to roll when the powers are transferred to local authorities.

Consistency, openness and transparency are all critical to any local authority's planning system. Political accountability at every level is also critical to ensuring widespread confidence in the planning system. As part of the transfer of planning functions to councils, ensuring that appropriate codes of conduct and best practice arrangements are in place will be important, because they will provide assurance to the public that the system is open, fair and transparent. They will also provide protection to our councillors and planning officers from unfounded allegations. I have often had to rebut unfounded allegations made against planning officers, even when I was a local councillor. I have never seen any evidence of planning officers being on the take.

Work on governance and related issues is being taken forward through the review of public administration implementation structures, in which planning officials are involved fully. Central to that work is the statutory code of conduct for councillors, which my officials are developing in consultation with the local government sector. Planning Service will provide a planning section of that code of conduct, the detail of which will be contained in the statutory code of conduct, which has yet to be agreed. To support the code, Planning Service will also draft supplementary guidance to assist councillors when dealing with planning matters.

The guidance will include information on such issues as lobbying of planning officers by councillors.

Mr Bell: I congratulate the Minister for the success of this statement. I welcome the cross-community consensus for the progress that the statement details.

Given the critical nature of planning and efforts to secure economic growth and regeneration, does the Minister accept that the proposals will be widely welcomed? Furthermore, will he inform the House how we would make progress if we were to find ourselves, through no fault of the Minister's, in a 26-council model?

The Minister of the Environment: I thank the Member for his question. We are looking at the 11-council model and at the 26-council model. It is absolutely critical that greater powers be transferred to local government and that greater efficiencies be delivered. The amalgamation process can form part of that, but it is absolutely critical that we deliver on powers and efficiencies as we work through the system. Many of the functions could be transferred to 26 councils, but it is still our aim to transfer them to 11 councils.

Mr Kinahan: I welcome much that is contained in the Minister's proposals and the hard work that the Department put into them. I look forward to seeing the changes that will make Northern Ireland a better and more efficient place for business.

I welcome the Minister's comment about pre-application consultation with the community and the fact that he wants to see a culture of change. One of the great concerns on the ground is that every developer is trying to pack in as much as he can, while local communities are chipping away at the consultation. How will the Minister give them strength, and what does he mean by "major developments", for which councils will be given the power to hold predetermination hearings? It is essential that we ensure that consultations work with the community, so how will the Minister achieve that?

The Minister of the Environment: If the current planning applications in the streamlined process, which it is proposed will be extended, were taken out of the system, they would generally be regarded as minor applications. To some extent, the process could be extended to minor applications. Strategic applications are very

often applications for shopping centres and large leisure facilities and those that step out of the development plan proposals and become article 31 planning applications. Major applications involve large-scale developments of housing, such as substantial numbers of apartments, and so forth. Those are the types of applications that are deemed as major and, therefore, require community consultation.

What may be a major development in a village such as Dunadry, in which I know the Member has an interest, may not be major in Antrim, Lisburn or Craigavon. Therefore, account has to be taken of the consequences that a development will have on a particular community.

Therefore, I suspect that a proposal to build 60 units of housing in a village with 200 units of housing would be major, whereas in another area it may not be major. That must be considered further, but, at this point, we probably have to be more sympathetic to people who wish to be consulted than to developers.

11.30 am

Mr Dallat: I also welcome the Minister's statement, particularly if it delivers on its promise of a more responsive, fair, predictable and efficient system. I am particularly interested in the Minister's desire to retain the right to appoint independent examiners to hold a hearing or an inquiry into regionally significant planning applications. In a truly non-sectarian way, is the Minister minded to appoint independent examiners to look at the Knock Golf Club planning application?

The Minister of the Environment: I will treat that question with the contempt that it deserves. We are discussing how to move the planning system forward and how we can tackle the lack of confidence in that system. Only around 30% of people are content with the current planning process. We have gone through a huge amount of work and community consultation in developing these proposals, and I believe that there will be widespread community support for the changes. It is simply pathetic that an individual Member cannot look at the proposals and come forward with a question that is relevant to the debate. Instead, he engages in his own prejudice on a particular planning application about which he appears to know very little.

Mr Shannon: I was looking forward to a debate on planning, Mr Speaker, but you reminded me that only questions on the Minister's statement are allowed. For that reason, I will focus on relevant issues.

As the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee has said, the recommendations relating to planning appeals indicate that there has been a lot of disquiet about the Planning Service, which the Minister acknowledged in his earlier reply. By and large, I welcome the Minister's response on the issues that he has brought to Members' attention. Will he assure me that his Department will accept pre-inquiry applications on smaller planning applications? In relation to the culture change and capacity-building to which the Minister referred, it is clear to everyone —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to his question.

Mr Shannon: Does the Minister agree that it is clear to everybody that we need an attitude of can do, rather than cannot do? Those are my questions. Thank you for your graciousness, Mr Speaker.

The Minister of the Environment: In giving 99% of responsibility for planning applications to local government and divesting the Minister of the Environment of that responsibility, I believe that the drive, motivation and delivery of planning will come from local authorities. They will give their planning officers clear and specific instructions about the targets that must be met. If those targets are not met, local authorities will be asking why. Local authorities will also be identifying the resources required to deal with planning applications in their areas. In the same way that they have been extremely successful in delivering building control — in less than two weeks in most cases — I believe that local authorities can and will deliver on the planning system extremely successfully.

Mr McDevitt: I welcome the thrust of the Minister's statement. We all agree that public confidence in the planning system is at an all-time low. I know that the Minister agrees that many communities feel utterly disenfranchised by the planning process, not least the 700 people who objected to the Knock planning application and now feel left out of the system. I want to ask specifically about third-party appeals. We note that 60% of respondents favoured the idea of third-party appeals, and

I welcome the Minister's commitment to the principle. Surely it is time for him to consider including a trigger mechanism for third-party appeals in the draft proposals as a backstop. Despite the Minister's best laid plans, on occasion, a third party will require redress to him or to an appeals mechanism, as was the case in recent weeks at Knock golf course.

The Minister of the Environment: It is funny that the Member should have raised that question because, only recently, I was in the Malone/Eglantine area of his South Belfast constituency, where people felt disenfranchised by a process that did not work for them. Those people were extremely critical of the Planning Service and of the senior planning officer who was involved in developments there, several of which, I might add, were supported by the local MP.

I sometimes ask people whether they want one of the various third-party appeal processes to be adopted. Such a process involves several elements: the first party to deal with a planning application makes a strong presumption in favour of development; third-party appellants must pay costs should they lose; there is a short timescale in which to lodge a third-party appeal; initial decisions on planning applications are delivered in about eight weeks; and anyone who has not engaged in the planning process cannot lodge a third-party appeal. If we were to decide to take an alternative route, that is the kind of third-party appeal process that I would consider. However, I am not sure whether Northern Ireland is ready for that, and I will not go down the route of providing a third-party appeal process that would stretch out planning applications for two, three, four or five years. When such a system existed, it was not good for the economy, social infrastructure, environment or communities.

A third-party appeal process must deliver quickly and efficiently, and, if we choose to go down that alternative route, we would have to drop the present front-loading exercise. Therefore, the proposed route must be given an opportunity to succeed. If it does not work satisfactorily, the next mandate of the Assembly will have an opportunity to assess and modify it. At present, the proposed process is the best model, and I look forward to working with the Committee on developing the relevant legislation.

Ms Lo: The Minister mentioned the residents of South Belfast. When they read his statement,

many of those residents will be disappointed by what he has to say about enforcement, the third-party appeal process and the criminalisation of those who commence a development without planning permission. On several occasions, the Minister referred to community engagement. With respect, I do not think that he listened to everything that the community said. The Minister said that front-loading meant that there was insufficient evidence to support the introduction of third-party appeals. Will the Minister confirm that a front-loaded planning application is required only for major projects? Would a planning application for an apartment block of eight or 10 flats require front-loading?

The Minister of the Environment: I reiterate that the planning system cannot be loaded at the front and at the back. We are attempting to deliver a planning process that is fit for purpose. The Planning Service has experienced major difficulties in dealing with the number of planning applications that it receives. Applications must be dealt with in a way that is fair, impartial, efficient and consistent.

That is what we are setting out to achieve with these proposals. People should have the opportunity to make their case, and planning officials should have the opportunity to assess those applications according to the planning policies that are in place. Public representatives will have the opportunity, and rightly so, to represent the public on those issues. That is the best way forward at the moment, but, as I said, I am not ruling out something different in the future. However, at the moment, we are going through a fundamental change process which will give the community a far greater stake than is currently the case.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee referred to its highly critical report on the Planning Service, and the Minister will be aware of the report, which highlighted major issues and concerns around inefficiency and mismanagement. That clearly reaffirms and creates issues and concerns right across the whole spectrum of local government, including ratepayers, public representatives and the wider public. Therefore, will the Minister assure us that proper management and delivery structures, as well as the required efficiency, will be in place to ensure that the Planning Service is, and will be, fit for purpose come 2011?

The Minister of the Environment: There are a whole range of activities taking place, including these proposals, and they will greatly assist us in achieving many of the efficiencies that we have referred to, such as the streamlined processes. Specific teams have been put in place to deal with the backlogs in Craigavon, and the Chairman of the Committee will know about the backlog that existed there some time ago. However, the planning process that is being conducted by the Craigavon office is as different as night and day from what it was a number of years ago. Therefore, a number of steps are being taken.

However, I wish to make it clear that when the issue goes to local authorities, the buck will stop with them. If they do not deliver for the local community, it will be for the local community to indicate to their councillors and to their public representatives that the responsibility has been vested with them and to ask why they are not delivering. I am of the opinion that they will deliver. The expertise exists in the Planning Service and in local government to ensure that what we are asking them to take on, and what they want to take on, is something that they will do well.

Mr Gallagher: I understand from what the Minister said that he has moved draft PPS 21 along the system and off his desk. In relation to the very vexed issue of new dwellings for the farming community, under draft PPS 21, those dwellings have been located facing silo pits and with slurry lagoons close to back doors. In signing off, will the Minister tell us if he has given any further options for people who are caught in those difficult circumstances?

The Minister of the Environment: I very much look forward to making a statement on draft PPS 21 in the not-too-distant future when Executive clearance has been received, and I very much look forward to filling the Member in on the exact proposals for draft PPS 21 at that point. A number of changes have been made to the draft policy, which will be considerably better when it is produced.

Ministerial Statement

British-Irish Council: Meeting in Misuse of Drugs Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister that junior Minister Newton wishes to make a statement.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Newton):

In compliance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, as amended by the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, I wish to make the following report on the seventh British-Irish Council (BIC) meeting in misuse of drugs sectoral format, which was held on Wednesday 24 February in the Tynwald in the Isle of Man.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was unable to attend. The Executive were, therefore, represented by myself and the Minister for Regional Development, Minister Murphy MP MLA. The report has been endorsed by Minister Murphy, and he has agreed that I should make the statement on behalf of both of us.

11.45 am

Mr Adrian Earnshaw, a Member of the House of Keys and the Isle of Man's Minister for Home Affairs, hosted the seventh BIC ministerial meeting in misuse of drugs sectoral format in the Tynwald buildings, the Isle of Man's government buildings in Douglas, Isle of Man. The meeting was chaired by Mr John Curran TD, Minister of State with responsibility for the national drugs strategy in Ireland. It focused, in particular, on how to effectively manage the challenges associated with substance misuse in the prison setting. The state of Guernsey was represented by Deputy Hunter Adam, the Health and Social Services Minister, and the state of Jersey by Deputy Anne Pryke, Health and Social Services Minister. The British Government were represented by Mr Matthew Bullard, head of drug supply reduction and the mandatory drug testing strategy of the national offender management service, and Mr Dominic Flint, senior policy adviser in the drug strategy unit of the Home Office. The Scottish Government were represented by Mr Alan Johnson, deputy director of drugs and community safety.

The British-Irish Council was established under the strand-three provisions of the Good Friday Agreement as a forum for its members to exchange information and to discuss, consult and use best endeavours to reach agreement on co-operation on matters of mutual interest within the competence of relevant member Administrations. Ireland is the lead Administration in the Council on the misuse of drugs.

The meeting provided a good opportunity for Ministers from each member Administration to focus in detail on two key challenges related to the issue. The first of those challenges was the need to counteract the availability and use of drugs in prisons, and the second was the need to provide a range of treatment services in prisons that are comparable to those available in communities, which will thus enable prisoners to address their problem drug use.

During detailed discussions, Ministers exchanged information on their experiences and on best practices utilised across their jurisdictions. Many of the exchanges focused on improvements to security procedures aimed at preventing drugs getting into prisons. At the same time, it was emphasised that such action could be effective only when combined with the provision of drug treatment to prisoners. The importance of continuity of treatment for people following their release from prison was also emphasised. Ministers envisaged that if those key issues could be successfully addressed, it would facilitate their respective Governments impacting positively on the lives of prisoners, which would result in a reduction in the levels of reoffending and would continue to reduce problem drug use in society.

We, as Ministers from each of the BIC member Administrations, took the opportunity to utilise the BIC forum to exchange information on the sale and use of psychoactive substances, which are known as legal highs. The Ministers discussed the various measures planned and implemented across the jurisdictions and the outcomes of those interventions. Given the ongoing concerns around psychoactive substances, not only among the Administrations of the British-Irish Council, but across the EU and beyond, the Ministers directed that the BIC sector on the misuse of drugs should retain the use of psychoactive substances as a standing item on the agenda for the foreseeable future.

The Ministers reviewed the successful work carried out by the Council in that sector during 2009 and focused on important areas. The meeting in Guernsey focused on youth justice initiatives. In addition, Guernsey's response to psychoactive substance use was presented and discussed. The meeting in Ireland concentrated on drug-related death indices, and a major part of the meeting focused on developing effective policy responses to drug deaths.

The Scottish meeting dealt with the prevention of drugs misuse. The presentation and discussion centred on innovative approaches that have been taken in Scotland on drugs information and advice initiatives and the Scottish drugs awareness campaign on cocaine.

Ministers agreed that the meetings provided a useful forum for sharing, in a focused and practical manner, the detailed expertise and knowledge of people who are involved in prevention of drugs misuse throughout the British-Irish Council region. It was also noted that in addition to exploring specific themes in depth, each meeting had facilitated exchange of information on general developments and initiatives in respect of the misuse of drugs.

Ministers noted and agreed that work in 2010 will focus on the following areas: in Ireland, the policies of Administrations in tackling alcohol misuse; in the UK, new directions for drug and alcohol policy in meeting new challenges; and in Guernsey, community action in dealing with drugs, alcohol and antisocial disorder.

The meetings also facilitate strengthening and consolidation of ongoing co-operation and exchange of information, experience and best practice between members.

Finally, Mr Speaker, I report that the next BIC meeting in misuse of drugs sectoral format will be in spring 2011.

Mr Ross: I thank the junior Minister for his statement on an issue which, unfortunately, is all too prevalent in the media.

One issue that has been given a great deal of attention lately is that of so-called legal highs. What action is being taken to deal with legal highs and the people who supply them, particularly those who are able to change the make-up of drugs ever so slightly to try to get round existing laws?

I noted that our national Government were present at the meeting. Do they plan to make any currently legal drugs, such as mephedrone, illegal?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for his question. He is quite right that, indeed, substances that are described as legal highs have been prominent in the press during the past number of weeks.

I can recall only one incident in Northern Ireland relating to those substances, which occurred in your constituency in Londonderry, Mr Speaker. At the time, the person involved was selling those substances. Whether one believes that that is legal, or responsible, is another question. However, that gentleman was shot. I cannot condone the shooting, which was disgraceful, but there is, obviously, major concern.

The Republic's Minister of State with responsibility for drugs, Mr John Curran, was able to state a number of incidents. He said that in Dublin, 100 shops sell legal highs. Until it is agreed that action must be taken, it is only a matter of time until that situation evolves in Northern Ireland. Mr Curran quoted an article in 'The Irish Times', which reported that someone can phone up and have drugs delivered up to 4.00 am in the manner that one would phone for a takeaway from a fast-food outlet. Mr Curran further reported that when a fire occurred in one such shop, its owner, when allowed to return to his premises by the police, retrieved a substantial amount of money from the safe; reputed to be around €500,000. That shop, in a Dublin facility, sells legal highs.

Legal highs are substances that are not controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. They are self-administered to achieve an altered state of mind. It is the duty of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) to advise Ministers on appropriate measures to be taken in respect of drugs that are, or appear likely to be, misused and cause, or may cause, social problems.

Following the publication of recent reports on the availability of mephedrone and given that evidence of the drug's harmful effects is emerging, the ACMD is looking at the issue as a priority and is due to report in early 2010. The ACMD's assessment of the harmful effects of drugs will be a key consideration in any decision to bring forward proposals to control any drug.

The Government's approach is to act to protect the public from the dangers or otherwise of harmful drugs. The availability of so-called legal highs changes the environment in which some young people now find themselves. It is completely legal for them to go to a shop and buy the so-called legal highs across the counter. Therefore, it is imperative that appropriate legislation is introduced that deals not only with current trends but with foreseeable ones. No one really knows how those drugs can reappear in greater strengths or in different substances that may have the same or, indeed, a worse effect, if I can use that term.

Legislation was introduced on 23 December 2009 to make it illegal to possess or distribute a range of substances, including GBL, 14BD, BZP, a group of substituted piperazines, a range of synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists, 24 anabolic steroids, and, wait for it, two growth promoters. That is the situation at the minute.

The States of Guernsey acted extremely quickly and identified that those substances lead to antisocial problems in the community. They were able to take the effective action of banning them as imports. That action was taken in Guernsey because of the concerns that they had for their young people. However, we cannot do that in Northern Ireland at the moment.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the junior Minister for his statement. After listening to the statement, I am sure that every Member will agree that it is encouraging that the misuse of drugs will be on the agenda of future BIC meetings.

Given that Ireland, through John Curran TD, is taking the lead role in the BIC on this issue, how can we make progress through the North/South Ministerial Council or even introduce parallel legislation to eradicate what is a worrying problem? I clarify that I did not ask that question because of any fixation that Sinn Féin has with "North/Southery".

How can we, as a legislature, and, indeed, through local government and communities, learn from the experience of our partners in the BIC and bring that knowledge to the people in our constituencies?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for her question. I understand exactly where she is coming from about sharing information and the importance of the issue

being on the agenda of future BIC meetings. It is important that, whenever the meetings take place, we ensure that we have the highest possible level of representation. I got out of the meeting that Northern Ireland does not have all the answers, Dublin does not have all the answers and Guernsey had one answer. It was requested that Northern Ireland share the information that we have with other Council members. We also requested that the other Administrations share information with us, because it is through the sharing of such information that we learn. That is the case whether the matter in question is drugs misuse in prisons or the drugs misuse that creates a situation in which people end up in prison. The sharing of that information is vital, as is keeping the matter on the agenda.

I attended the meeting because the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was not available. That was the second time that I have done that. We need to have the highest possible representation at BIC meetings.

12.00 noon

Mr Kennedy: I thank junior Minister Newton for his statement. Is he able to give an assessment of the current level of drugs available in Northern Ireland's prisons or young offenders centres, and has he any information on whether hard drugs are available? The matter is of grave concern to Ministers and Members. How can this be taken forward in action to deal with this considerable problem?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I will try to answer the Member's question in two formats — the scale of the misuse of drugs in prison and the treatment available in prison.

Substance misuse in Northern Ireland's prisons reflects the general level of misuse in the community. Although generally drugs misuse in Northern Ireland is lower than in the UK as a whole or Ireland, there is a small but significant drugs misuse population in Northern Ireland's prisons and justice settings. The drug report for 1 September 2009 to 30 November 2009 showed that there were 141 prisoners on drug misuse charges; 242 prisoners had a drug dependency on committal, 166 of whom had an addiction to cannabis; and 278 prisoners had a dependency on alcohol. During 2008, there were approximately 400 individual drugs finds in the prisons and, as a result, there have been 265 instances of prisoners being charged with

possession under prison rules. In the same year, 82 domestic visits were terminated due to the passing or suspected passing of drugs, and 47 prisoners have been placed on closed visits.

Treatment and prevention services in prisons are overseen by the Health Service, led by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which provides a range of statutory treatments, intervention and prevention services in a prison setting. Where necessary, the trust brings in community and voluntary sector providers to help deliver the services. Members will recognise that, although people with a drugs habit are in prison, it is important that they receive the same support as they would receive outside a prison.

There is also a key issue in the continuity of services between those receiving treatment in the prison setting and the service that they receive post-release. The fact that the South Eastern Trust has taken over responsibility for addiction in prison settings has helped to improve care pathways and increase interaction and liaison between the services. Work is ongoing between the Northern Ireland Prison Service's addiction services and the health and social care trust to improve the existing care pathways. In addition, there is significant collaborative work with the Probation Board, the PSNI and the trusts.

Mr McDevitt: I am sure that the Minister will agree that this region is in the midst of a drugs crisis that is exacerbated by the arrival of legal highs. The junior Minister does not need to travel to Derry to buy a legal high; he can buy one 500 yards from the gates of the Stormont estate and across the city.

I have two questions for the junior Minister. First, the second non-attendance in a row of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is something that many Members will note with concern. Perhaps the junior Minister will tell us why the Health Minister was unavailable to attend. Secondly, many aspects of the matter fall between the stools of health and justice. We all look forward to the early devolution of justice powers, so that we can completely control the drugs issue. Specifically, when can the House expect the Executive to take action on legal highs, including a ban on imports and distribution, the monitoring of shops and retail outlets distributing them and

the education of young people on the potential associated health risks?

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to the end of his question.

Mr McDevitt: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I am sorry, but I got a bit lost as to what Mr McDevitt's questions were during his statement to the House. Therefore, the House will understand if I do not answer fully.

I have already said that the highest possible representation is required at BIC meetings and that this is the second time that I have had to undertake the role. I can only inform the House that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was unavailable to travel to the meeting.

I was unaware that one can buy legal highs 500 yards from this Building. I wonder how the Member is aware of that, and I hope that he has shared that information with the authorities. It was implicit in his remark that he would do so.

I cannot remember what the Member's third question was.

Mr Speaker: I will allow the Member to ask it again.

Mr McDevitt: Thank you for your discretion, Mr Speaker. When will the House see some specific proposals from the Executive in the areas of education and the control of legal highs?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I covered that point in my statement to the House. I expect to see those proposals early this year.

Ms Lo: I was particularly interested in the point that the junior Minister made about the work that will be done in the UK this year that will focus on a new direction for drugs and alcohol policy. Will he explain that a little more? For example, will it include legislation on underage drinking or on the setting of minimum prices for alcohol?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): We are concentrating our work very much on education. The Member will be aware of the 2008 report, which examined ways of reducing the supply of drugs in the Northern Ireland Prison Service, and that was the information that we shared with the other Administrations at the BIC meeting. That report recommended that we

increase staff training, improve visitor and prisoner search strategies in and around prisons and improve staff monitoring. That report produced 28 recommendations, one of the most successful of which was the introduction of passive drug dogs.

The remit of the Member's question is much wider. I was impressed by work that was undertaken on the Isle of Man, and, although the community there is not huge, the scale of what had been done there with schoolchildren, schoolteachers and parents of pupils is significant. Each of those groups received information that was tailored to their understanding, and that helped to educate them about various aspects of drug taking and the use of legal highs in particular. We can learn something from that approach, and, although we were dealing specifically with the use of drugs in our prison population, education to prevent young people from getting into trouble and going to prison should begin at a very early age.

Mr Bell: I welcome the positive work that Minister Newton has done in relation to psychoactive substances. Having been a social worker working with young people for 21 years, I agree with all of what my colleague the Member for South Belfast has said about the damage that those substances do to young people. In future meetings will the Minister look towards the model used in the USA, which allows for some substances to be more immediately classified? The problem in the past has been that, when a substance is classified, the compound and the name are changed, and then we need to go through the whole legal system to get it banned again. Will the Minister look towards proactive models in the USA, which would allow us to get substances that damage children and families banned more quickly?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for his question. From his background as a social worker, he will have seen many of the problems emerging. The point that he makes is a valid one, and I tried to cover it in my statement and subsequent answers. Some of the compounds that are used are actually for growing plants. They are not suitable for human consumption, yet we are feeding them to young people and not-so-young people. How can we address the fast-changing drug types and methods of drug construction and manufacture? If we can learn from other parts of the world, I am keen to encourage that.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement from the junior Minister. I also believe that it is a shame that the Health Minister was not in attendance, because it is a very important issue that we are dealing with. Many people in our communities die every year because of drug misuse. Therefore, I urge his party colleagues to strongly lobby him to make sure that he is present the next time that the matter is discussed.

What will the Executive's focus be with regard to tackling drug misuse in 2010 when it comes to organisations from the community? In my constituency, the Falls Community Council has done tremendous work over many years tackling drug and alcohol misuse. One initiative that they worked on dealt with taxi companies that offered a dial-a-drink service — a type of service that was mentioned earlier — and they were very proactive in making sure that that was stopped. What initiatives will the Executive work on to ensure that organisations such as that across the North will be supported in the coming year?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for his question. It is apparent from what the Member has said that what may have started from the ability to dial up alcohol at 3.00 am and get it delivered, according to Mr John Curran's experience in Dublin, has now moved into the supply of types of psychoactive drugs. No matter where we go on the matter, it will be necessary for us to bring the community along with us and, where there are community concerns, to listen to those.

That is related to the question that Ms Lo asked. Although we were dealing with the use of drugs in the Prison Service, underpinning all that is the work that is being done and needs to be done at all levels in the community to ensure that community leaders and those working directly with young people — youth leaders or school teachers — are totally aware of the long-term effects. Sometimes those effects are not so long-term: those substances can have a fairly immediate effect on personality and can cause brain damage. It is a wide approach, and we need to encourage that.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his statement. The frustration that we all have is with the fact that there are a great many people who abuse the system in relation to drugs and substances. Last week, I had a meeting with

the PSNI and some residents in Newtownards about mephedrone, in particular. As the Minister said in response to my colleague Jonathan Bell, mephedrone is a plant food. It is clear that people are breaking the law inadvertently — if that is the way to put it — because the law allows them to do so. If it is said that the plant food is not for human consumption, that keeps people right. It is clear that people are affected by taking plant food and mephedrone. What are the Executive and the North/South bodies doing about that issue? It is not just an issue for Newtownards in the middle of my constituency —

12.15 pm

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to finish.

Mr Shannon: It is an issue for everyone.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for his question. I refer to the answer that I gave to Mr Alastair Ross. The Member is quite right that it is a growing problem. I outlined the number of drugs that, in December 2009, were made illegal to possess or distribute. People have the ability to manufacture those drugs, to change the compound slightly and the names of the drugs and to market them legally.

When I was in the Isle of Man, I was reminded of a case that was taken recently by human rights campaigners. In China, a guy who was deemed to have been engaged in the illegal importation of drugs into the country was put to death for that activity. A human rights campaign ensued on the basis that he had not been sentenced correctly and that he was not competent to answer questions. Nevertheless, the Chinese Government put him to death. Many of the drugs in Northern Ireland are manufactured in and exported from China. That is the extent of the problem that we are addressing.

Mr Dallat: I will leave aside the argument about the absence of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Junior Minister Newton is a splendid substitute who speaks with a great deal of compassion. Given that no further meetings in the misuse of drugs sectoral format are scheduled for another year, does he agree that the drug barons will not be too worried? The message needs to go out that we intend to put their lights out rather than those of the thousands of people whom they have destroyed.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I share the Member's concern, and I thank him for that

compliment. He is right to say that the drug barons will not be worried, but the officers who are associated with the work will continue with it. We will make progress on the issues. If the Member wishes to be updated, I am happy to do so individually.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank junior Minister Newton for his statement. Reference was made to the work of the South Eastern Trust. Has the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety brought any proposals to the Executive on how the misuse of drugs is dealt with in prisons and on the treatment of prisoners?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I will have to come back to the Member on that. I am not aware of any such proposals being made since I took office, but I am happy to clarify the position for the Member.

Mr A Maginness: I congratulate the junior Minister on his comprehensive and important statement that arose out of the BIC meeting. It emphasises the importance of collaboration among all the jurisdictions in these islands.

Two matters disturb me. First, a mechanism must be available under secondary legislation to deal immediately and effectively with legal highs as they come on the market. Does the junior Minister know whether there has been any discussion about legislative mechanisms to deal with that issue instantly? Secondly, is he satisfied with the range of medical and psychiatric services that are available in prisons and detention centres to treat prisoners with drug problems?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): Earlier, I referred to the response in Guernsey, where it was decided to ban the import of psychoactive substances because Departments were concerned that the problem would be much worse by the time the legal system had allowed them to take the appropriate action. However, given that it is not a devolved matter, we cannot do that. However, I understand the Member's concern, and I will ask officials to check whether we can address that through secondary legislation.

The Member was quite right to raise a question about whether the treatments that are available to drug-addicted prisoners ensure that they are not addicted to or reliant on any drugs whatsoever when they return to society.

However, those treatments work only if the support that is provided to prisoners in the Prison Service is comparable to that which they receive on their return to society. Indeed, it is not sufficient for drug users to leave prison clean; they must be supported after they return to society so that they can, hopefully, play a much more constructive role than they did before. Although that area is not my responsibility but that of the Minister of Health, I believe that a holistic approach should be taken to individuals and their problems.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I also thank the junior Minister for his statement. I believe that we will reap the benefits of the collaborative approach that has been taken, because we will be able to tap into the wealth of experience from other jurisdictions. The Minister mentioned the import of substances from China, and I am aware that a number of people are using the Internet to buy drugs from China. One of the difficulties is that an information gap exists between one level of society and the people who work in local communities, and that situation also applies to the issue of resources. How will the junior Minister guarantee that the information that we gather here is filtered through to communities and that those communities are resourced in a way that allows them to start tackling the problem head-on?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for his question. He raised a point about the use of the Internet to buy and sell drugs, which may not have been mentioned yet. That is another worrying aspect, and one that is extremely difficult to control.

The Member asked how we can engage fully with the community. There is no doubt that going down the legal route of banning a substance will not fully address the problem. One SDLP member said that people are able to buy legal highs 500 yd from the gates of Stormont. People can just walk in, buy those substances like they would sweets from a sweetie shop and they can be taking them within 10 minutes. The Isle of Man's initiative involving schoolteachers, schoolchildren and parents is one that we should consider. Information must be shared at community level to make people aware of the difficulties that drug use will cause to individuals in the longer term. That strategic approach is extremely important.

The misuse of drugs is something that all the trusts will have to address, because it is not a problem that will go away easily. We need to address the problem before we destroy the lives of many of our young people. Indeed, the problem involves not only young people but more mature people. Essentially, the health and social care trusts will have to address the issue.

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

The sitting was suspended at 12.26 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Final Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel

(Mr S Wilson): I beg to move

That the Budget Bill [NIA 8/09] do now pass.

I am out of breath; I made it here just in time. Today's debate is a rerun; it must be the fourth time that we have debated this matter. I hope that everyone is worn down and worn out. I will not take up too much of the House's time with today's Final Stage. All the issues were thoroughly covered during the Supply resolutions debate and at Second Stage two weeks ago. In fact, the debate at Second Stage extended to some eight hours and was an Assembly record for a Budget Bill. Therefore, I hope that Members are well talked-out by this stage.

I thank Members for their contributions, which ranged far and wide — some further and wider than others — but which covered many important issues. I may not always agree with Members' remarks, but I appreciate that genuine economic and fiscal concern for Northern Ireland and its people lie behind them. I thank Members and Committee Chairpersons for their input.

Today's Final Stage signals the end of this financial year, and, as we turn our minds to 2010-11, I am acutely aware of the challenges that lie ahead. The Executive and Assembly are addressing some of those challenges, such as the Northern Ireland Civil Service equal pay claim and the funding of water and sewerage services, in the review of 2010-11 spending plans that is under consideration. At the same time, the Executive have agreed to reduce the opening level of overcommitment to zero to provide additional scope to address pressures in the 2010-11 in-year monitoring process, including, no doubt, the likely shortfall in planned departmental capital receipts.

In the face of all the challenges that lie ahead, and as we plan for a more constrained financial environment in the years ahead, I call on all Ministers and their Departments to continue

fundamentally to examine service delivery with a view to identifying and delivering further efficiency savings that can be recycled into front line services. Moreover, I call on all Assembly Committees to play their part in the process. Committees should continually examine areas of departmental spend and their spending priorities in the Programme for Government. That should not be curtailed to monitoring rounds or public expenditure exercises but should be a work in progress for each Committee.

We should get to know our Departments and get down to the business of fundamentally examining what public services are delivered by each Department; every area of spend by Departments; how services are delivered; whether there is room for improvement with more efficient and effective delivery; whether a service is a low priority; whether a service is still relevant; and whether a service is even in line with the Programme for Government.

In the current fiscal environment, tough decisions lie ahead. We must cut out wasteful and imprudent spend and make decisions about priorities for the future. Unfortunately, we will not be able to fund everything that we want to fund; we must make difficult choices and, perhaps, disappoint some people. In that context, the Executive proposed the establishment of the invest-to-save fund to support Departments in producing efficiencies and to prime the pump. The Executive recognise that the delivery and realisation of savings sometimes requires upfront investment. I am sure that Members will appreciate that fact and continue to work towards that end in their respective Committees.

In conclusion, as we move into 2010-11 and face all its challenges, I am hopeful that there will be an ever-increasing financial reality and maturity in the Chamber. Our minds are already turning to the provisional out-turn in June, followed by the preparation and laying of resource accounts and the ever-present issue of underspends. As an Executive, we have achieved much, but there is still much to achieve. Many challenges wait around the corner for the next financial year.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Weir): Like many Members, I have sometimes been cast in an unusual role in the House. Today, I find myself cast in the slightly unusual role of Jennifer McCann for the duration of the debate — it is not an

unwelcome role. I will speak on behalf of the Committee, after which I will make some brief remarks in a personal capacity. I am acutely aware of the Business Committee's indication of the need to keep our representations today succinct. All parties have respected that and have restricted the number of contributors to the debate.

Members will be aware that the Budget Bill provides the statutory authority for expenditure in 2009-2010 as specified in the spring Supplementary Estimates, which take account of what happened during the year's monitoring rounds. The Bill includes the Vote on Account, which allows public expenditure to continue in the early part of the next financial year until the Main Estimates for 2010-11 are voted on by the Assembly in early June.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel took evidence on the Budget Bill from Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) officials on 10 February 2010. That evidence session was the culmination of a process of scrutiny by the Committee of in-year monitoring rounds in 2009-2010, which, in addition to an explanation of the Department's position, included briefings on the strategic and cross-cutting issues relating to public expenditure following the outcome of each monitoring round. Following that evidence session, the Committee recommended that the Budget Bill be granted accelerated passage.

I want to take a few moments to outline the Committee's ongoing work on the 2010-11 financial position. Tomorrow, the Committee will formally consider its co-ordinated report on the review of the 2010-11 spending plans for Northern Ireland Departments, which will reflect the views of all 11 Assembly Statutory Committees. As Members heard during the Committee's recent take-note debate on that review, a number of Committees expressed varying levels of dissatisfaction with shortcomings in the information provided by Departments on their revised spending proposals for 2010-11. The Committee for Finance and Personnel will aim to identify measures that can help to improve engagement on budgetary issues and avoid a recurrence of that situation.

The Committee will soon commence the next stage of its ongoing inquiry into the role of the Northern Ireland Assembly in scrutinising the Executive's Budget and expenditure. That will

include a review of the resources available to assist Statutory Committees and Members in general to undertake Budget and financial scrutiny. The Committee will put forward a set of practical recommendations for enhancing the Assembly's capacity in that regard.

The Committee also anxiously awaits the outcome of DFP's review of the Executive Budget process for 2008-2011. That review was due for completion by the end of 2008, and should inform the establishment of an effective process for determining future Budgets, once the review of the 2010-11 spending plans has been concluded.

It is important that the Assembly does not lose sight of the medium to long-term strategic financial issues that affect the Executive in minimising and managing any further public expenditure pressure in the years ahead. In that regard, the Committee will report to the Assembly shortly on the outcome of a detailed investigation into the drive for greater public sector efficiency and effectiveness. However, that is for the future. On behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I support the motion.

I welcome the Budget Bill's Final Stage. It is, as the Minister said at Second Stage, a Budget Bill made in Ulster. Despite the pressures and the occasional gloomy forecast, we have a Budget that balances expenditure. There is no doubt that the various Departments have had to face a range of pressures, including the £370 million combination of capital and revenue that had to be found. However, that came about as the result of two factors; the Civil Service back pay settlement, and meeting the cost of water services.

It is undoubtedly right that those pressures are met, but we should be aware that there is an opportunity cost in meeting those commitments. That has been shown by the £370 million that has been sought. I suspect that we will revisit that, particularly the issue of water charges.

In looking to the future, we must ensure that, from a departmental point of view, there are no sacred cows that remain exempt from efficiencies. Consequently, I praise the work that the performance efficiency and delivery unit (PEDU) has undertaken so far and the Executive's commitment to the invest to save initiative. If spending a certain amount of money upfront will allow greater resources to

be allocated and released in future, then that is to be welcomed. The value of that thorough re-examination was evident in the announcements yesterday on the February monitoring round, which showed that there is still room for better financial management in some Departments.

As part of the self-denying ordinance, I promised to be brief. Consequently, I will practise what I preach. I urge Members to support the motion.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I will follow Peter's lead by being brief.

The Budget Bill has been thoroughly debated, and the Minister has made reference to the record amount of time that Members have devoted to the consideration of the proposals and recommendations therein. I look forward to the parties now supporting the Bill's Final Stage.

The Bill brings us into the final year of the three-year Budget period that was agreed in spring 2008. As well as authorising the Bill, we have to begin to turn our minds, hopefully in a constructive and strategic fashion, to planning the budgetary process for the next Assembly term.

I have noted other parties' concerns about the current arrangements. On reflection, I am confident that the agreed Budget has remained true to the aims and objectives of the Programme for Government, and that is reflected in the proposals in the Bill. We have to take account of the changing economic circumstances, which could well have blown us off course. We have addressed the original expectations of the Programme for Government despite the downturn and its potentially calamitous impacts.

In the next term, we have to make early decisions so that we have proper planning to decide whether there will be a one-year budgetary process or a three-year process that reflects the outcomes of the comprehensive spending review. The process should be timely and open, and we should be prepared to look at the existing arrangements, including in-year monitoring. We must continue to address value for money. One key issue that I think reflects the maturing political process here is that government is seen to be more agile, responsive and authoritative in its reactions. The key element in providing cohesiveness, coherence and a sense of

ownership and transparency is dealing with all of that in a timely and open fashion.

I commend the proposals. My party will support the motion. I commend all colleagues who contributed to the debate.

Mr McNarry: I support the Final Stage of the Budget Bill. That is not a case of capitulation, exhilaration or conversion. It is more a case of acknowledging the Minister's honest and practical approach, not just to what I have been saying for months, but to the realities that he is now accepting in the Budget. Hopefully, that will make for an improved working relationship in the days and months ahead.

Today's Budget is likely to come in for major revision during the next 12 months and beyond. That is partly down to the post-election spending cuts that we all expect. Those have the potential to affect Northern Ireland disproportionately because of the high level of public sector employment here.

2.15 pm

I appeal to the Minister of Finance and Personnel to consider the option of a Civil Service pay freeze or at least a freeze on pay increases as an alternative to job cuts, if that is what is in the pipeline. The protection of jobs is a priority for the Ulster Unionist Party, and it must also be the priority of the House. A Civil Service pay freeze may prevent job losses, which should be the last resort. The Minister must tell us whether he is on course to cut public sector jobs or whether he wishes to put an alternative to the House, either today or in due course. That is the elephant in the room as far as the Budget is concerned.

I was surprised at last week's outburst by the Minister of the Environment, who bemoaned the fact that he could not sack civil servants and was being forced to redeploy them. He must not have considered the impact that Civil Service job cuts would have on an already fragile economy. Such arrogant comments give rise to the public consistently branding the DUP as the job-cutting party.

Undoubtedly, the future of public sector employment is a big issue for Northern Ireland, and the Minister of Finance and Personnel must come clean about his thinking on the matter. I appreciate that he needs a bit of time, but drift is the enemy of good public policy, and we must

move away from that. I do not want decisions to be made in haste simply because they have been put off repeatedly. We need to develop a strategy to handle the looming situation, and we are honour bound to preserve and protect as many jobs as possible.

Should we move significant amounts of work out of the public sector and into the private sector? When that happened in the Water Service, jobs were lost. The issue must be properly debated and considered. Should we hit targets to enlarge the private sector by moving public sector work into the private sector just for the sake of a shuffle? Surely, the Minister is not thinking about doing that. Regardless of the approach that the Minister adopts, he will be left squarely responsible for public sector jobs and public sector job cuts. That is the real issue that lurks behind the Budget.

We must develop a more hard-headed, value-for-money approach. That is the type of comment that the Minister made during past debates, and I would welcome such an approach from him now. However, we need to extend that approach to how we spend the public's money. We must veer away from the wish-list politics that we have had to endure. We must return instead to making sensible assessments of the potential impacts of public spending, of investment and of the money that is available for expenditure. Given the current financial climate, it is also essential that we set achievable targets.

That spells out the need to revise the Programme for Government, something for which I have argued repeatedly. That is the other course of action that we must take to create a dynamic fork of government spending that creates and protects jobs, generates business and gives people a real return for their tax pounds. In that sense, the Minister of Finance and Personnel should become our country's fund manager, and, by creating a new agenda for revitalising our economy, he must get the most from taxpayers' money and the block grant allocation.

I fear that our finance policy is reactive and lacks vision because of inherited fault lines. If we do not address that policy properly, only interesting hardship lies ahead. I would prefer that we looked forward to interesting times, made more interesting, as they will be after the general election, when events bring new pressures, irrespective of who is in Government. In the light of what the Finance Minister has

told us, the Budget is just about competent. I suspect that he has been unable to tell us the whole story. We are reaching a stage of economic oppression, and the Minister knows that he needs to bring his challenges to the House and explain how he will deal with them.

I support the motion.

Mr McDevitt: Like Mr Weir, I stand in the place of another — Mr O’Loan. I apologise to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and to the Minister; Mr O’Loan is unavoidably elsewhere today. That said —

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: We are glad.

Mr McDevitt: It means that you get the political speech, Minister.

The SDLP remains unconvinced that this Budget is the best that the Minister can produce. My party disagrees with sticking to the three-year budgetary cycle, blind to the global recession, the evidence of which is all around us. We would rather be debating the Final Stage of an emergency Budget that could deal with the realities facing our region, prioritise the young, the sick and the elderly, and do more than pay some lip service to the economy and jobs.

In the early stages of the Bill, I noted the Minister’s comments about the way that the Executive have been able to insulate many in society from the worst impacts of the shrinkage of the public purse. I do not doubt the Executive’s commitment to do that, nor the Minister’s determination to do so. However, because of the structure within which we have debated the Budget Bill, we have done little more than put a plaster over the problem. That is a pity; we could have done so much more.

We in the SDLP remain concerned about the extent to which this budgetary process is predicated on efficiency savings and asset sales which are yet to be realised. We note the warning that the Minister gave earlier that one of the pre-emptive shortfalls will occur in that very area. We also have serious concerns about the ability of this budgetary framework to properly defend front line services.

Despite the fact that the process is wrong, inefficient and inadequate, we must try to address the serious shortcomings that we know will exist in the year ahead. They are no more evident than in health, social services and public safety. They have left 90-year-olds with around

15 minutes of care each week, and they have left many in County Down concerned about the ability of the new Downe Hospital to fulfil its potential and to have an A&E service. They leave many elderly people across our region to worry about whether and how they will get a hot meal. They also bring ward closures and endless stories of cutbacks in mental health, cardiac care and other aspects of the social and health system.

The Budget does not offer an adequate response to those people or to the working families that face the brunt of this recession. As I noted previously, it makes little reference to the working poor and says little to the hundreds of families now homeless as a consequence of the economic downturn. It is myopic about the opportunities for efficiency savings in health, education, economic development, tourism development, innovation, environmental management or any other aspect of our regional polity which could benefit from greater co-operation with the Republic of Ireland.

Health managers, businesspeople and working families will want to see a much greater commitment from across the Executive in the year ahead to tackling the significant crisis that this region faces. Irrespective of community backgrounds, people want to see a commitment that extends beyond the “made in Ulster” proposition; a commitment that considers that Ulster, in the words of John Hewitt, is on the island of Ireland and that the island of Ireland is part of a great archipelago which some call the British Isles and others prefer to call “these islands”. That archipelago, of course, is part of a continent. To deny any of those realities is to deny the essence of Ulster. This Budget seems to be incapable sometimes of fulfilling the true opportunities for co-operation on this island and further afield. We call for a radical rethink in the year ahead.

I have no doubt that every party in the House shares a determination to protect and to support the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in defending front line services. However, I am sure that we all share the frustration and annoyance that he has yet to bring forward any proposals for how efficiencies could be sought in his Department in order to deliver the commitment to protect front line services. I agree with what the Minister and Mr Weir said about the importance of small but significant organisations such as PEDU in the public

service. We have to have the courage to know that no Department is a castle. No Department is beyond investigation or opinion about where efficiencies could be found. How can we support front line services and put patients first if the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will not share the basic information that is necessary for us to be able to collectively do that very thing?

That is another reason that we need a new Budget. As the financial leader in the Executive, our Finance Minister needs to be able to reconstruct the public finances in this region so that he can differentiate properly between essential important services and those that are perhaps hidden in big budgets.

The Hillsborough agreement between the DUP and Sinn Féin affirmed that there was a:

“shared belief in the importance of working together in a spirit of partnership to deliver success for the entire community.”

Those are fine words indeed, and we will all support them. However, we ask that those words become the reality of financial and economic management in the year ahead. Whenever the Executive and the two big parties talk about putting the economy first, they should really mean it. They should challenge the assertion of the independent review of economic policy that there is no link between what was said in the Programme for Government and the reality of our Budget. We talk about the economy, but we do not really do very much about it.

The SDLP will, of course, support this Budget. We will support the paying of the salaries, the running of the services and all the practicalities. However, that does not mean that it is the best that Mr Wilson or this region is capable of.

Mr McCarthy: I apologise for the absence of my colleague Dr Farry, who has had to leave. He thrust two pieces of paper into my hand, and I can barely read them. However, I will do my best. I see that the Finance Minister is laughing; he is probably relieved that Stephen Farry has gone.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: We think that Stephen has bother reading his notes.

Mr McCarthy: You are absolutely right.

Mr McNarry: Will you give way, Kieran?
[Laughter.]

Mr McCarthy: I will give way.

I am reading directly from what Stephen gave me. The final rounds of the debate have been long and largely good natured but serious. We support the Final Stage. We have to ensure the continued funding of Departments. We have already made clear our concerns about budgets. We have stressed the failure to address the cost of division in this society. We need to rebalance our economy and to protect our public services and local jobs. The Executive do not have the right balance between revenue raising and spending cuts. The entire burden is on spending cuts. There is a need for tough decisions and more than just rhetoric.

I will add my comments. I am concerned about the lack of funding for our rural roads, which is a matter that I raised during questions to the Minister of the Environment yesterday. Here we go again: the Ards Peninsula. I am sure that Mr Wilson has been to the Ards Peninsula, which is particularly dangerous if travelling by motorcycle.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Especially if Jim Shannon is driving.

Mr McCarthy: I appeal for more funding for our rural roads simply because they are dangerous. There is no doubt about that. I mentioned it briefly to Conor Murphy in the voting Lobby yesterday, and his response was to get him more money.

The man who has that money and holds the purse strings is listening to what I say. I am sure that Mr McNarry will agree with me when I say, on behalf of all Strangford constituents, that we need more funding for our roads, as well as for health and all the other services. Therefore, that is my —

2.30 pm

Mr McNarry: Will the Member include the Moss Road in Ballygowan in his plea?

Mr McCarthy: Of course I will include all roads.

I hope that the Minister is listening to me. It is a serious problem, and we want to see as much improvement as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel to conclude the Final Stage.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. You caught me by surprise. I thought that a few more Members were yet to speak, but I thank Members who

contributed to the debate, which, thankfully, has been a bit shorter than the Bill's Second Stage. Members are clearly exhausted. Mr Farry had to retire before the fray had even started, as did the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, although she may have been exhausted after her lunchtime walk. However, she had Mr Weir stand in, and he did an excellent job.

I thank Members for their comments, and I will address some of the points that were made. I again emphasise the work that the Committee did in scrutinising and providing its views on the Budget. I accept that the Committee's work has been made a little difficult. Many of the other Committees were not able to provide information in full to the Committee for Finance and Personnel because a number of Departments have not yet produced their line-by-line plans to address financial pressures next year. It really is not acceptable that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Department for Regional Development have not produced their spending plans.

Our Assembly does not have an opposition, so Committees perform a great deal of the scrutiny and, to a certain extent, the opposition role by holding Ministers to account. It is difficult for Committees to do their job without information. Therefore, it is important that the required information be made available to Committees so that they can do their work properly. In his comments on behalf of the Committee, Mr Weir talked about its review of the Budget process and its involvement and engagement in the budgetary role. I look forward to the Committee's reports on the Government's proposals for the review of 2010-11 spending plans and on its inquiry into the Budget process and the resources that are available to support the Assembly. We will bring a report on that subject to the Committee for its consideration.

Mr McLaughlin pointed out, rightly, that we must now look at the budgetary process for the next three years. That will be difficult, because, at the minute, we are peering into a very dark glass. We do not possess clear information about what future departmental expenditure limits will be. Therefore, to plan Budgets ahead requires some guesswork. However, the first step is to review how we deal with the budgetary process. When the financial implications of

Government decisions at Westminster become clear and as the new process is implemented, perhaps we can move on.

I agree with Members who said that the budgetary process must look further ahead. It cannot be a year-on-year process. Departments need a degree of certainty. At least the three-year budgetary process enabled planning. The message that I get continually from industry, particularly from construction, is that having a three-year capital programme enables it to plan investment and to consider which projects are likely to be available to it.

Linked to that is the need to respond to changing situations with agility. I believe that the process that we have undergone and what we are discussing today demonstrate the Executive's willingness to look at situations that have changed and respond accordingly.

The only comfort that I took from anything that Mr McNarry said came at the beginning, when he said that, although he had not capitulated or been converted and was still critical, he at least acknowledges the reality of the situation, which is that we had to review the Budget, and the revised Budget recognises the changes that we had to face.

Mr McNarry then began to criticise. One thing that he said struck me, which was that we need an honest and hard-headed approach to future difficulties. I hope that no one will ever accuse me of not giving a hard-headed and honest response to the difficulties that lie ahead. However, some of Mr McNarry's suggestions for the way forward were not so much hard-headed as looking for easy answers. However, when one delves behind what initially seemed attractive, it becomes apparent that he did not provide much of an answer.

First, Mr McNarry suggested that, instead of cutting jobs, we should consider a pay freeze. I do not think that he said that from a position of ignorance, because I have explained the situation and, when we discussed the matter at the Executive, his leader asked whether we could consider a pay freeze and how much money that might save. On the face of it and given the cost of government wages in Northern Ireland — they account for around 65% of our spending — it seems an attractive proposition not to allow any wage increases in order to produce significant savings. However, one must then look at the reality of the proposition. How

much control do we have over the wage bill? The only part of government wages over which the Assembly and I, as the Finance Minister, have direct control are those of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, which accounts for about 22,000 out of more than 260,000 public sector staff. Therefore, when it comes to wage negotiations, we do not have control over most of the wages of public sector employees. The majority of public sector wages are determined through national wage negotiations. For example, we do not determine the wages of teachers and nurses.

Secondly, long before this Executive were set up, the Northern Ireland Civil Service entered into pay agreements with its 22,000 employees, so there is a contractual element to their pay, which progresses along pay scales. Increments account for about 2.4% of the wage bill, which equates to a 2.4%-a-year cost increase. We are not even able to suspend those increases because they are a contractual obligation.

Thirdly, when it comes to making tough decisions about wages, everything is fine until there are protests about it. Only last week, one of the Member's own Ministers, despite an Executive decision that we should not pay bonuses to civil servants at a senior level, applied to me for a 4% bonus payment for such people. I suspect that it was easier for the Minister of Finance and Personnel to turn it down than for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to do so.

Mr McNarry: I am indebted to the Minister for spinning this out in the manner in which he has been doing. Perhaps he would prefer to address what I actually said, which was to face up to the challenge, or is he telling us that his preference is to cut jobs? I asked him specifically to consider ways to avoid jobs being cut.

I appreciate that there are obstacles. However, are they all insurmountable, or is the Minister saying that he has no choice and that he is not prepared to choose anything other than cutting jobs? In light of what the Minister said and what he has brought to the Department — he mentioned honesty and truth — would today's debate not be an opportunity to set some examples about what can be done? I appreciate that there will be hard choices.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have not been spinning. I have been explaining because I do not want the Member to remain in the darkness with his ignorance of the matter.

He said that, instead of cutting jobs, we could freeze pay.

Mr McNarry: Are you going to cut jobs?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have an obligation to Members to show that it is not a choice simply between freezing pay and cutting jobs. If the easy option were to freeze pay and make huge savings, the Member would have made a valid point. However, I am not spinning. I am trying to explain to him that, should the Assembly decide to freeze pay, there will be no huge pot of money because our powers over pay in the public sector are limited.

What can we do? I tried to illustrate to the Member that we have made decisions. Do not forget that I froze bonuses to people at the top end of the Civil Service, despite the fact that the Senior Salaries Review Body recommended those bonuses and that they had been implemented in other parts of the United Kingdom. I did that to try to save money here, to avoid that spend, to set an example and to try to get the bandwagon rolling in other Departments.

Mr McNarry: The House agreed with you.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The House absolutely agreed with me. Therefore, if such decisions can be made, we will not run away from them. However, where there is no possibility of something being done, let us not pretend that it can be done. That gives people only a false hope that there is a solution.

If we can restrain pay increases, we will go down that road. There will probably be a national directive on the issue, and we are in negotiations with the trade unions for the 2009-2010 pay period. However, it is up to individual Ministers to decide how they will make any required savings and efficiencies in their Department. In some Departments, a huge part of the budget is spent on wage costs, and, if that Department identifies that things can be done better with fewer people or by moving things around, that will be done. If efficiency savings can be made and if we decide to use fewer people, much of that need will be addressed through the processes of natural wastage and redeployment, if possible. Compulsory redundancy will be the last resort. As I said earlier, that is why it is important for individual Ministers to come to their Committee and tell it how they intend to implement the savings that their Department has to make.

Perhaps Mr McNarry should be talking to the Minister from his party who has not brought the savings to the Committee.

2.45 pm

Mr McNarry: I am asking you.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member can intervene when I am finished. One of the Member's colleagues is the last person who would allow me to say how his Department should make efficiencies. Indeed, he would be the first to criticise me, and we would probably have a barrage from his party colleagues in here criticising me for paddling through the minutiae of his Department. The Executive make a Budget decision collectively, and that is what we did. It was collectively agreed. It was not Sammy Wilson's Budget; it was the Executive's Budget.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to refer all his remarks through the Chair.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am speaking through the Chair, but I was speaking with my back to the Chair. I like to have face-to-face contact with the Member when I am having a go.

The Executive decide the Budget. Once that decision is made, it is up to individual Ministers to decide how they will apply the savings in their Department. My Department and I were criticised because we asked too many questions about where the swine flu money was going and whether it was going to be given back. We were criticised for footering around and for asking questions about when the money was going to be given back. That is why it is important that, once the Budget has been agreed, Ministers bring forward their spending plans and indicate how they intend to make their savings.

The Member might think that the easy answer is to freeze wages and that, hey presto, there will not be any need to worry about any other savings. However, I hope that I have at least explained to him — not spun it or made excuses — why that is not the easy answer. If he wanted hard-headed explanations, he has got a hard-headed explanation, not spin. It would have been easy for me to say that we would look at freezing wages and that, hopefully, that would mean that we would not have to make redundancies. In three or four weeks' time, however, people would be telling me that I had misled the House, because I knew that it was

not going to be as easy as that. That is why I have taken some time to explain the matter to the Member.

Mr McNarry: We are moving from spinning to waffling. It is always a sign that the Minister is in trouble when his explanations float somewhere up there in that big, high ceiling. I understand his explanation, but I want to bring him back to the question of whether he will introduce job cuts in his Department to deal with parts of the efficiencies that are required there, not to mention in the other Departments. Are we on that road? Will job cuts be introduced under the Minister's direction?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It seems that, every time the Member gets an explanation that he does not like, he considers it to be waffle. If he does not like the answer that he gets, that does not mean that it is waffle. It is fact that my Department controls only a certain percentage of wages. It is fact that we have —

Mr McNarry: The Minister's Department —

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will come to my Department in a minute or two, when we will see how well the Member has read his papers.

It is fact that pay progression accounts for 2.4% of increased cost every year. It is fact that the rest of the public sector wages are negotiated nationally and are therefore outside the control of my Department or, indeed, any in Northern Ireland. That is not waffle; that is fact. If the Member does not like that and it upsets his little theory that, somehow or other, if wages are frozen, there are no more difficult decisions to make, that is up to him.

Sometimes, it happens that the Member turns his back on reality, only to find that he must then repent of his ways. For example, his arguments were so devastated that the House has not heard mention of black holes for months. The Member found out that his black holes never existed and that he had been imagining them. My Department has been able to balance the Budget. That is what the process in which the Assembly is engaged is all about. We are finalising a Budget that has taken account of money coming in, money that is available and costs. My Department has been able to present a Budget that has no big black hole in

it. That silenced the Member. His latest claim, therefore, is that that is waffle.

I wish to deal with the point that the Member made about my Department. I supplied the Committee for Finance and Personnel, of which he is a member, with a paper that outlined how DFP would make savings. The paper outlined implications and where savings would be made. It was made clear that some savings would be made through reducing the number of posts. The Member may not remember that, or perhaps he did not read the paper. If he had, I suspect that he would have given the Assembly figures for the number of posts that would be redeployed or changed in my Department. This may be what is wrong with the Member: he gets an idea into his head, yet he never tries to check the facts. He should do his homework. I used to have to say to youngsters in school that, before they come to class and ask me stupid questions, they should do the work, and then they might not ask stupid questions. If the truculent pupil — I was going to say “child” — at the back of the classroom who does all the shouting and is the teacher’s worst nightmare did his homework first, he might not have to ask the kind of questions that he asks.

The fact is that, if there are savings to be made during the next number of years — savings that the Member may know more about from his conversations with his Conservative friends — they will have to be made in a combination of ways. Let us be hard-headed and honest about that. Let us not pretend that there is an easy way out.

I want to deal with Mr McDevitt’s comments. He spoke for almost 15 minutes. I counted them. At the end of his speech, he agreed with me. He spent 15 minutes explaining why the Budget is bad, yet he agreed with it in the end. He came to the correct conclusion, even if he took a circuitous route.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, I remind you that Question Time begins at 3.00 pm.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Right. Quickly, then.

Let me just go through Mr McDevitt’s remarks. He disagrees with having a three-year budgetary cycle. I have already responded to that issue. There needs to be certainty, which the three-year budgetary cycle provides. However, changes are required, and we have made those changes.

Secondly, Mr McDevitt talked about the need for a radical rethink, which included more money being spent on hot meals; cardiac care; the accident and emergency unit at Downe Hospital; mental health; hundreds of homeless people; and environmental management. I scribbled down two other points that I cannot make out. If the Member wants to remind me what the other two issues were, I am happy to let him do so.

Mr McDevitt: The need for a radical rethink was perhaps reflected in the exchange that the Minister had with Mr McNarry, when he accepted that we have little control over such a big part of our cost base, namely our wage bill. Is it the Minister’s opinion that we are too dependent on UK-wide negotiations for salaries, particularly at senior levels and some professional levels, and that we should, in fact, be moving towards a more regional approach to pay?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The trade union friends of the SDLP would not be happy about regional pay agreements, which they have resisted for many years. I can see merit in regional pay agreements, but it should not be forgotten that they also have implications.

Rather than being a radical rethink, the issues that Mr McDevitt mentioned are part of a fantasy wish list. All those issues are worthy, but he did not make one suggestion as to how we should redirect resources to pay for them. The Member wants those issues to take priority, but from where should we redirect the resources? A more balanced and helpful approach would have been for the Member to suggest where the resources should be redirected from.

I know that the SDLP made suggestions for an alternative Budget, but, as I reminded the Member on a number of occasions, its suggestions represented a change of about 1% in current spending. That was the radical rethink that we got from the SDLP. It would not have enabled us to reprioritise and spend money on the issues that he talked about.

Mr McCarthy stood in eloquently for Mr Farry. He read his notes beautifully.

Dr Farry: That was the short version.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Yes; it was a short version. Had Mr Farry been speaking from those notes, it would have taken him one hour. Mr McCarthy got through Mr Farry’s notes

in about three minutes. I ask him to please pass his notes on to Mr McCarthy in future to save time. I always enjoy debates with Mr Farry, though.

Mr McCarthy mentioned rural roads. I know about the state of rural roads, and I talked about that the other day. Roads Service received £15 million in the December monitoring round. Spending on roads accounts for 40% of our capital budget. Spending on roads in Northern Ireland is 39% higher than in England. Therefore, spending on roads is fairly generous. However, it could always be argued that there is never enough money spent on anything. We have given some priority to spending on roads because it is an important part of our infrastructure.

I thank Members for taking part in the debate. I am glad that we have got to the Final Stage of the Budget Bill. I am sure that the House is also glad. I commend the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Budget Bill [NIA 8/09] do now pass.

3.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Industrial Heritage

1. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what his Department is doing to promote our industrial heritage.(AQO 865/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McCausland): National Museums Northern Ireland is committed to the interpretation and promotion of our industrial past. The refurbished Ulster Museum has a spectacular display tower that showcases the quality and scope of the national collections. It is prominently positioned on the ground floor of the museum and is the focal point for the display and interpretation of a number of iconic objects, including a nineteenth-century reeling machine used in the linen production process.

In addition, the gallery displays, at present, a narrative that acknowledges and conveys the significance of the key industries that formed our industrial heritage. In particular, the redesigned Belfast gallery uses photograph collections of National Museums Northern Ireland to convey a strong sense of the lives and working conditions of the many thousands of men and women who were employed in the linen, engineering, shipbuilding and other industries.

The Ulster Folk and Transport Museum houses a wide range of industrial heritage, including the successful exhibit, the flight experience, which celebrates Northern Ireland's connections with the aviation industry. The Transport Museum also includes a maritime collection, the highlight of which is the Titanic exhibition. There is also an increasing emphasis on web presentation and engagement.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for his response. As he will know, when the Ulster Museum was being refurbished, some major industrial artefacts were removed. What plans has his Department to display the articles that were removed? Does he agree that the development of the Titanic signature project could provide an

opportunity for the promotion of our industrial heritage?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

The sheer size of the machinery to which the Member refers, and which was always very impressive when one walked into the old museum, made it impossible for it to be accommodated in the refurbished Ulster Museum. It is currently in secure storage and, as National Museums develops its collection management proposals, that issue will be addressed. Those artefacts are a vital part of our country's history, and it is true that, however good the photographs may be, they are no substitute for actual artefacts that make an impression on the visitor.

As I said in my original answer, the display tower in the refurbished museum will be the focal point for the display of a number of iconic objects. However, it is the intention that, in due course, an appropriate location will be found for the piece of machinery that was associated with the linen industry.

Mr K Robinson: I have listened carefully to the Minister's response. He knows as well as I do that what we see in the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, the Ulster Museum and other places round the country is but a pale shadow of Northern Ireland's world-class industrial heritage. Will the Minister look at the position of HMS Caroline, the third oldest warship afloat in the world, which is sitting in Belfast and could form the basis of a museum that indicates not only our industrial past, but also our maritime past?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I appreciate the Member's interest in HMS Caroline, and it is shared widely across the country. HMS Caroline has served in Northern Ireland as a training ship for the Royal Naval Reserve, and she is still a commissioned ship of the Royal Navy. At present, the navy is considering the future of the ship. My Department convened a group of stakeholders on 28 January 2010 to discuss options in relation to HMS Caroline on a without prejudice basis. The Royal Navy, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), Belfast City Council, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the Department for Social Development have agreed to collaborate on the development of a strategic outline case for the future use of HMS

Caroline. I am sure that we all join in wishing that initiative well.

Mr T Clarke: I thank the Minister for his positive answers so far. However, does he share my view that we have neglected our industrial heritage over the past decades?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I agree with my colleague on that issue, and I share his concern about the preservation of our unique and rich industrial heritage. In response to an initiative from the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, my Department is finalising the development of a museums policy. Beyond that, it will examine specific areas, including industrial heritage, in more detail.

Industry was one area that differentiated Ulster from the rest of this island, and Belfast was one of the great industrial powerhouses of the British empire. Industry also formed part of the background to unionist opposition to home rule, and all such moments in history should be commemorated, celebrated and remembered. I am also in favour of that because many of the entrepreneurs who promoted those great industries were from Scotland or of Scottish descent, including the founder of shipbuilding in Belfast, William Ritchie from Saltcoats.

Cultural Tourism

2. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his vision to increase cultural tourism by promoting the rich vein of Irish history, culture and tradition; and how he will communicate this vision to the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment to underpin the tourism strategy. (AQO 866/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

As Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, I am committed to the promotion of Northern Ireland's shared history, and I recognise the diverse range of cultural identities that makes up our local community. Those identities must be represented and promoted in a balanced and inclusive manner. It is in that context that Northern Ireland will increase its cultural tourism product.

The opening of the brand new state-of-the-art Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) in the Titanic Quarter is scheduled for May 2011 and will be a highly significant event for the promotion of Northern Ireland's cultural heritage. The greatly enhanced public and

exhibition space will allow PRONI to become a key venue for cultural heritage events that can be used to promote our shared history, culture and traditions. The Ulster Museum has also been refurbished recently at a cost of £17.2 million, and it seeks to tell the story of our people from earliest times through to the present day.

The Member will also be aware that the draft tourism strategy recognises the significant contribution that my Department makes to infrastructure, events, and recreation and leisure activity. On that basis, I have been invited by Minister Arlene Foster to participate on a steering group to monitor the progress of the implementation of that draft strategy.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response. It is generally agreed that cultural tourists spend more money here than standard tourists. Therefore, it is vital that all Departments work together in developing the cultural tourism product. In my area —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should come to his question.

Mr W Clarke: I was just trying to set my question in context. What engagement has there been between the Minister, the Minister of the Environment and other stakeholders in the development of the tourism product?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The key point is the final one that I made in my initial response: Minister Foster is establishing a steering group to monitor progress on the implementation of the tourism strategy. As the Member acknowledged, that must be examined across Departments, because, for example, the Department of the Environment has responsibility for the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and historic buildings. A range of Departments has a contribution to make, and actions are always more effective when taken on a cross-departmental basis. That approach will have a greater impact in the end.

Mr P J Bradley: The organisers of the Milwaukee Irish Fest are concentrating their efforts on promoting the culture of Northern Ireland during the event in August 2010. What assessment has the Minister made of their efforts, what level of encouragement is he prepared to offer them and does he have any plans to attend the event?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

I held a meeting with the organisers of the Milwaukee Irish Fest. In the past, that event was predominantly what I would charitably describe as a fairly “green” Irish festival. However, in recent years, an attempt has been made to broaden the sense of cultural representation. Last year, several musicians and others, largely from an Ulster-Scots tradition, attended the festival, contributed to it and were much appreciated by the folks who attended. The festival also gave them an opportunity to establish contacts with people in America and Canada and, in that respect, the trip was productive.

I know that, this year, the Ulster-Scots Agency is again supporting some musicians to go to that event. We are still considering what else might be done. I have not yet made a decision on whether to go, but I am always cautious with such things in case I am accused of travelling too much. I am sure that the Member would not want to get me into that very difficult situation.

Mr I McCrea: The main question was about promoting the rich vein of Irish history. In line with that, will the Minister outline his vision to increase cultural tourism by promoting the Ulster-Scots history, heritage and culture?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

As I said, I am committed to the promotion of Northern Ireland’s cultural diversity and shared history, recognising that we have a rich diversity and that there are different traditions and communities that need to be respected and reflected in a balanced and inclusive manner.

At present, four things come to mind with regard to the Ulster-Scots tradition. First, it is encouraging that the Prime Minister made a commitment to provide £5 million for an Ulster-Scots broadcast fund. That will help to bring the Ulster-Scots tradition to a wider audience, both on our local screens and on screens elsewhere. That is a long-standing issue on which I have long campaigned, and I am grateful for that commitment.

Secondly, there is also an Ulster-Scots strategy, which will be complementary to an Irish-language strategy. That will be ready by the end of this month. The intention is that it should be comprehensive and that it should cover areas such as education, broadcasting, tourism, and the social economy, among others.

Thirdly, in addition to the broadcast fund and the strategy, work is ongoing in relation to the Ulster-Scots Academy, which will unlock £11 million that remains there at present. That will be taken forward in a very inclusive way. I am about to sign off on a process to recruit a director, and we are also in the process of appointing an interim board to take that work forward.

Finally, we have reflected on the contribution that cultural centres can make to cultural development, and we are looking very seriously at the potential for developing two Ulster-Scots cultural centres, one in an urban setting and one in a rural setting. We have had conversations with folk in north Antrim who have a particular interest. They have shown a lot of initiative in taking their project so far, and we would be keen to work with them to take it through to completion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Cricket

4. **Mr Bresland** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what his Department is doing to promote and develop cricket. (AQO 868/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I congratulate the Cricket Ireland team on qualifying for the 2010 Twenty20 World Cup to be played in the West Indies in April and May this year. This is the second year in a row that Ireland will be playing in that prestigious competition, and I wish the team all the best in its endeavours in its group, in which it will play against teams such as England and the West Indies.

Responsibility for the promotion and development of cricket rests, in the first instance, with the governing body for the sport, Cricket Ireland. However, in the past three financial years, Sport Northern Ireland, which is responsible for the development of sport generally in Northern Ireland, including the distribution of funding, has provided over £2.5 million to assist with the development of cricket here. A further £654,000 has been provided to date in this financial year.

In addition, Sport NI holds regular meetings with the board and staff of Cricket Ireland, including the CEO and national coach, and provides guidance, advice and support on various issues, including funding opportunities, changes in legislation and the development of performance systems and structures.

Mr Bresland: I thank the Minister for his answer. For his information, some of the cricketers representing Ireland are from west Tyrone. What assistance has the Minister's Department provided to cricket clubs in the north-west?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland is responsible for the development of sport, including the distribution of funding. Over the past three financial years, Sport NI has received two applications for funding from cricket clubs in the north-west under the Building Sport programme. In May 2007, Bready Cricket Club received two awards. The first was a capital fund of £1,692,451 towards a cricket centre of excellence. It also received £155,000 revenue towards the employment of a multi-sport cricket development officer for five years. In March 2009, Limavady Cricket and Rugby Football Club received an award of £216,632 towards the installation of a new drainage system, which was beneficial to the club's rugby pitches and the cricket outfield.

3.15 pm

I acknowledge the Member's point that a number of people from the north-west have been successful in cricket, and I am aware that two of Cricket Ireland's biggest stars hail from the north-west: William Porterfield, who is from Donemana, is the current captain and plays for Gloucestershire, and Boyd Rankin, who was born in Londonderry, plays county cricket for Warwickshire.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá ceist agam don Aire faoi sheanchluiche a imrítear i mo thoghcheantar féin, an tIúir agus Ard Mhacha.

Is the Minister aware of the ancient sport of road bowls, as played in County Armagh —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That has no relevance to the question. I call Mr McCartney to ask a supplementary question.

Mr McCartney: I hate to come in as a late substitute, and I apologise to the Member.

I add my congratulations to the Irish team on its qualification for the World Twenty20 tournament. Is the Minister aware that the Irish cricket team has also qualified for the one-day international World Cup in India in 2011? That is an excellent opportunity because cricket is a popular sport in India. Should the Minister contact the tourism Minister not only to develop cricket but to

develop tourism as a result of the World Cup?
Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his question. I agree entirely that every and any opportunity should be used to promote tourism to Northern Ireland. If there is an opportunity to fly the flag for Northern Ireland somewhere else, I am only too happy to support and encourage it.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Minister for his comment on the NIACUS scheme. Will he comment further on the success of the training course that was held in 2009 by the Northern Ireland Association of Cricket Umpires and Scorers for potential umpires in the Northern Cricket Union area?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: We want to improve standards in cricket and in all sports. The two key themes in sport and in arts are participation and excellence. We are doing much work to increase participation, and we also need to improve the work on excellence. Any training that enhances the sport is to be encouraged and welcomed.

Windsor Park Football Stadium

5. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of the disadvantage to other football league clubs, such as Glenavon FC, caused by the existing contract between Linfield FC and the Irish Football Association, and whether this contract should be replaced with a more equitable alternative in the event of any stadium development at Windsor Park. (AQO 869/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am aware of and understand the concerns of clubs, and the situation must change. In that context, I refer the Member to my answer to a question for oral answer on Tuesday 20 October 2009 and to my answer to a question for written answer on 17 November 2009. Those answers set out my position on the issue. For convenience, I repeat my answer to the question for oral answer:

"It has been made absolutely clear to both the IFA and Linfield Football Club that any development at Windsor Park that involves significant public expenditure is conditional on the contractual arrangements being agreed to the satisfaction of all concerned, and, wherever possible, my Department will facilitate that process. The issue will also feature prominently in the outline business

case for regional stadia development that has been commissioned by Sport NI. It is vital that any new contractual arrangements that are put in place provide a sustainable long-term future for international football in Northern Ireland. As far as the commercial arrangement between the IFA and Linfield Football Club is concerned, the IFA is, in the first instance, responsible for addressing the concerns of the other football clubs, and I anticipate that that, too, will be a factor when re-examining the present contract arrangements." — [Official Report, Vol 44, No 6, p220, col 1-2]

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he indicate how much funding DCAL provides to Irish league clubs, such as my hometown team of Glenavon Football Club, which dates back to 1885?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am not in the least surprised that the Member managed to mention the fact that there is a long-established football club in his constituency. However, I wish to point out that Cliftonville Football Club, which is in my constituency of North Belfast, was the first football club to be established in Ulster and that its founder was a great unionist and Orangeman.

Sport NI is responsible for the development of sport, including the distribution of funding. Up to the end of the last financial year, Sport NI had made capital awards worth £2.8 million to senior Irish league clubs under its soccer strategy and stadia safety programmes. The recipients of those awards were: Ballymena United Football Club; Cliftonville Football Club; Donegal Celtic Football Club; which received two awards; and Portadown Football Club. The Department has also recently approved stadia safety business cases for another three projects that Sport NI recommended. As a result, Ballymena United Football Club, Institute Football Club and Crusaders Football Club were awarded the sums of £800,000, £800,000 and £650,000 respectively to improve stadia safety, the total cost of which was £2.25 million.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá ceist agam don Aire faoin ábhar seo. Will the Minister explain what percentage of the overall capital costs are the IFA, the GAA and the Ulster branch of the IRFU themselves obliged to commit towards their individual schemes? The Minister will know that each governing body has identified its strategic requirements for stadium development, so what

percentage are they expected to contribute themselves?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his question, but it is a little bit premature. The cost of each of the stadiums has not yet been finalised. We must await the completion of the outline business case and our consideration of that before the cost can be assessed. However, I have made it clear to all the governing bodies that they will be required to contribute to the cost but that the extent of that has not yet been determined.

Mr Cree: I, too, wished to ask a supplementary question about the development of the new stadia. However, perhaps the Minister will tell us what the timescale for the new stadia is? For example, will the issue of a football stadium be resolved quicker than the others, or will everyone have to wait until there is a combined resolution?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: We must recognise that the stadiums' design, construction, planning applications and contracts will not necessarily be synchronous with one another. However, we will endeavour to ensure that each one comes forward as quickly as possible. We want to get to the point where the matter is fully and finally resolved and where the proper stadium provision is in place. However, as I said, it is somewhat premature at this stage to talk about how those will line up with one another, but we will endeavour to do all that as quickly as possible. The responsibility for that lies with not only the consultants, but the governing bodies. They must work with the consultants to get the right results that meet the needs of each of the sports.

Sports Grounds: West Belfast

6. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has any plans to address the shortage of sports pitches in west Belfast to allow local GAA and soccer clubs to play within their local community. (AQO 870/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Belfast City Council is responsible for local recreational provision in Belfast. It is also responsible for assessing levels of recreational provision, including pitch provision, for all sports in the Belfast area, and for making plans to address any evident shortfalls in order to help

local sports clubs, such as GAA and football clubs, to play within their local community.

Sport Northern Ireland, which is the lead development agency for sport in Northern Ireland, supports all district councils, including Belfast City Council, in identifying and, where necessary, addressing deficiencies in pitch provision within their area. In addition, one of the priorities to emerge from 'Sport Matters: the Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2009-2019' is the development of a more strategic and co-ordinated approach to accessing all available sports facilities in local areas, particularly those in the education sector.

That issue will be considered as part of the implementation of the Sport Matters strategy. I recently wrote to the Minister for Social Development, the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, asking them to nominate a senior official to join a DCAL-led Sport Matters monitoring group, which I plan to set up shortly. We feel that that is an important way in which the needs of local communities can be addressed within local communities. Some more thought is needed to make sure that new provision in a school setting meets wider needs and is accessible to people in the community when the school is not using it.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Is he aware of recent surveys that show that there is a shortfall of 116 pitches in the Belfast area? More than 50 of them are required in west Belfast; so that area has a greater shortage of pitches than any other part of Belfast.

The Minister mentioned the word "thought" and said that more thought needs to go into the process. There are a lot of people who want to play sport in west Belfast — soccer, Gaelic games or other sports — and they have heard too much about thought and want to see action. Will the Minister make sure that action is taken to address the shortfall, especially in west Belfast? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As I said, Belfast City Council is responsible for local recreational provision in Belfast. I am sure that Mr Maskey knows at least one councillor on that council that he could talk to; perhaps, someone with whom he has a very close relationship.

There are councillors who will put forward the case for west Belfast very strongly, as there will be councillors who will put forward the cases for east, south and north Belfast. However, the primary responsibility lies with Belfast City Council, and the matter is one on which Mr Maskey and others want to see the council move forward.

Mr Kinahan: The Minister partly answered the question that I was going to ask. It is good to hear that he is talking to the Minister of Education. Will he ensure that all schools are included, and will he establish a time frame for receiving an answer on whether school pitches can be used by everybody?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I confirm that I have been speaking to the Minister of Education: whether she has been listening is something on which I could not possibly comment.

The first issue is urgency. I want the plan to be taken forward as quickly as possible. We are missing opportunities by not being able to use facilities that are associated with schools, and those facilities need to be opened up to the wider community. That happens in many places, but it should be happening everywhere. Instead of being the exception, it should be the norm. That would go a long way towards addressing the needs of our community. I assure the Member of my commitment to taking that matter forward with urgency.

Mrs M Bradley: I ask the Minister to undertake to work with Belfast City Council, Derry City Council, and any other council, to look at the need for soccer and GAA facilities in all areas, particularly the need for more pitches.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As I said, the primary responsibility for local recreational provision lies with local councils, and it is important that they engage fully with Sport NI, which is the funding body. Every effort should be made by councillors in Londonderry to make sure that they fully engage with Sport NI. If that happens, we are sure that there will be much better provision in Londonderry for the sports needs of the people who live there.

3.30 pm

Executive Committee Business

Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas)

Order (Northern Ireland) 2010

The Minister of Finance and Personnel

(Mr S Wilson): I beg to move

That the Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010 be affirmed.

Before I deal with the statutory rule, I will set out some background to the measure. In 2007, under direct rule, a package of reliefs aimed at businesses in rural areas was introduced. It included measures such as relief for farm diversification, environmentally friendly plant and machinery in quarries and an exemption for rural ATMs. Those decisions were taken after a wider consultation in 2005. One of the measures provided for a rates exemption for cash machines in rural areas based on a list of designated rural wards. The policy intention was to encourage and sustain the provision of ATMs in rural areas, which remains a worthy aim. At the time, direct rule Ministers decided that the exemption should be time-limited for three years, and the scheme is due to end on 31 March.

Last year, my Department undertook an evaluation to consider the merits of the scheme and to determine whether the measure should be discontinued. A range of research and analysis was undertaken, and we consulted key stakeholders such as the Rural Community Network, the Consumer Council and banking representatives. Moreover, the Committee for Finance and Personnel was briefed on the evaluation of the scheme, and its views were sought before decisions were taken on the way forward. That was done with an open mind and with a view to reaching consensus on how best to proceed.

I will now explain what the scheme does. The exemption is provided for stand-alone ATMs that are individually valued in the valuation list, such as those located outside petrol stations or on the high street. It does not apply to ATMs that are located in banks or building societies; they

tend to be valued as part of that property. At the time of the evaluation, 43 ATMs were eligible for the exemption. That represented an increase from the 37 that were eligible when the scheme was introduced in 2007. Although that increase is relatively small, it is important for those who benefit from it.

The evaluation of the scheme provided some evidence that the growth in the number of ATMs in rural areas is higher than it would have been had the measure not been in place. Furthermore, it showed that the policy has a positive effect and that more isolated rural locations benefit most. As part of the evaluation, consideration was also given to the financial and regulatory impact of the scheme. It found that the administrative cost of the exemption was negligible and that the scheme may assist small rural businesses. The financial cost of the scheme is just under £80,000 in forgone revenue. Given the benefits that it can bring, that is a modest sacrifice.

Consultation that was undertaken as part of the evaluation showed support for the measure and for its retention. Rural stakeholders made it clear that they wanted the exemption to be retained, and the British Bankers' Association was of the view that the rates exemption in itself did not make a substantive difference in the decision on where to locate new ATMs. Nevertheless, it stated that the exemption was a consideration in deciding whether to retain existing ATMs. Separately, the Bank of Ireland stated that it was a determining factor in deciding whether to retain or remove ATMs from rural locations.

On balance, I think that the scheme should stay. There is a risk that the removal of the measure at the current time could jeopardise the viability of machines that currently receive the exemption. I have taken account of the evaluation outcome and the views that were expressed during the consultation and those of the Committee, and, on balance, I believe that the rates exemption for individual ATMs in designated rural areas should continue. I acknowledge that the numbers involved and the subsequent impact are modest. However, that should not prevent us from doing all we can to ensure that banks and building societies are not discouraged from placing new ATMs or from retaining current ATMs in rural areas. Although the measure is a fairly modest one, it is worth preserving for isolated communities

that depend on ATMs. Travelling a few miles to the nearest town is not easy for everyone. Cash machines play an important part in sustaining rural economies. Evidence shows that money that is withdrawn locally is spent locally; almost two thirds of every £10 that is withdrawn from a cash machine is spent locally.

The recent spate of ATM thefts has had a significant impact on a number of rural communities and makes it all the more important that the Assembly demonstrates its continued support for the provision of cash machines in those areas. On that basis, I consider that the current exemption for ATMs in rural areas should be extended for a further three years.

My Executive colleagues and members of the Committee for Finance and Personnel have already advised on the details of the statutory rule. The Committee indicated that it was content for individual, separately valued ATMs in designated rural areas to continue to be exempt from rates, particularly given the modest cost of the scheme.

The citation, commencement and interpretation of the Order are set out in article 1. Article 2 provides for the extension of the relevant date before which the scheme must end to 1 April 2013.

I look forward to Members' comments. I commend the Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010 to the House.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Ms J McCann): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I thank the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, Peter Weir, for covering the Committee's statement on the Final Stage of the Budget Bill.

I thank the Minister for his opening remarks. The Order provides exemptions from rates for individual ATMs in designated areas. It extends the scheme, which was originally introduced in 2007, for another three years until 2013. The purpose of the scheme is to encourage and sustain the provision of ATMs in rural areas.

As the scheme was due to expire in April 2010, the Department of Finance and Personnel carried out an evaluation in the second half of 2009 to determine its impact and effectiveness. The Committee received a briefing on the outcome of that consultation at its meeting on 4 November

2009. During the briefing, members heard that the number of ATMs that were eligible for exemption from rates had risen from 37 to 47 since the introduction of the scheme. Members were also asked to note that, in the responses to the consultation, banks had advised that the rates exemption did not affect the decision on the provision of new ATMs but might be a consideration when deciding whether to retain existing ATMs.

Members expressed concern that the closure of the scheme might have unintended consequences, as the removal of an ATM would, undoubtedly, have a negative effect at a local level. Members also noted that a programme was in place to look at the provision of ATMs in deprived urban areas. The Committee therefore wrote to the Department on 26 November 2009 to confirm that it would be content for rural ATMs to continue to be exempt from non-domestic rates.

The Committee initially considered the proposal for subordinate legislation at its meeting on 20 January and formally considered the statutory rule before the Assembly today at its meeting on 17 February, together with the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules. The Committee agreed to recommend that the Order be affirmed by the Assembly. I support the motion.

Mr Weir: I welcome this move; as has been indicated by the Chairperson, it is one on which the Committee and the Minister of Finance and Personnel are walking hand in hand. I welcome the proposal to extend the scheme that is already in place.

As the Minister said, most Members have a reasonable level of mobility that affords us ease of access; most of us can drive and get about. However, the ability of a lot of people in rural communities, particularly elderly people, to get about is severely limited. Consequently, this measure can help to make it relatively convenient for people to go down to their village and make use of an ATM.

As indicated, exemption from rates is not the decisive factor on which a bank will base its decision to site an ATM in an area, although it has, perhaps, a marginal effect. We are all aware that commercial decisions about whether something goes ahead or is withdrawn or retained can sometimes be relatively fine, and, even if the scheme has only a marginal impact, if it means the retention of an ATM or a bank taking

the decision to site an ATM in an area, then that community will be at an advantage. The Minister and the Chairperson of the Committee indicated that 47 local communities benefit from having an ATM due to rates exemption. It remains to be seen how many of those ATMs would be retained if the exemption were not available. However, it is an advantage for those communities.

The other advantage of people in rural communities not having to go five or 10 miles to the nearest town to withdraw money relates to the environment. That issue is close to the Minister's heart. The provision will cut down unnecessary journeys and help reduce CO2 emissions. The Minister is again undoubtedly proving his green credentials.

It was indicated that the impact of the provision on ATM siting may be relatively limited, but this is quite an imaginative issue. The cost implication for the regional rate and the wider effect on the public purse are relatively limited. As the Minister said, the overall cost of the scheme in lost revenue is around £80,000. That is a relatively small sum of money, and, if it means that a range of communities is able to benefit from ATMs, then that is useful.

Will the Minister provide information on the definition of a rural area? I appreciate that it may not be available to the Minister today because of the level of detail required. One will clearly not find an ATM in a hole in a hedge; they are situated in banks or in some form of service in villages across Northern Ireland. It would be useful if the Minister would explain, perhaps in a memo, what definition has been used to classify an area as a rural area. Mention has been made of the 47 communities in which rate exemption already applies. Clearly, that does not preclude other areas that may fall under the definition if ATMs are installed there in the future. Will the Minister give concrete examples of the specific towns and villages that fall outside the definition of rural area that could qualify for the scheme? We can all point to our constituencies. Belfast, Bangor or Antrim are clearly not rural communities and consequently would not benefit from the scheme. However, we are also aware of villages in our constituencies that may not have an ATM, and I would like some clarification of whether they will count as rural areas. We have all been involved in situations in our constituencies; perhaps we have lobbied banks to say that a certain village is being

ignored and that there is a strong groundswell of opinion that it should have an ATM. A definition from the Minister could be a useful argument for us to deploy. I urge the Minister to make that information available to Members.

The scheme is excellent and should carry on. It benefits many of our constituents across Northern Ireland at relatively little cost to the public purse.

3.45 pm

Mr Beggs: I, too, support the retention of the exemption from rates of ATMs in specified rural areas. Although the cost is relatively small, the exemption is a consideration for banks and businesses when deciding whether to retain or install an ATM.

Small rural shops have been under considerable pressure due to the trend towards supermarket shopping. Therefore we should take any measure possible to protect shops in isolated rural communities. If an ATM and, therefore, money is available locally, people will shop locally. An ATM can be important in retaining access to basic goods and facilities in rural areas.

ATMs in rural areas are of particular benefit to pensioners and people on benefits. The cost of journeys for people who have to travel into town to access money can account for a considerable proportion of their income. For example, the return journey to collect benefits or pick up money that has been paid directly into a bank account could easily cost £5. It is an important issue for disadvantaged people who live in rural communities.

Recently, ATMs have been under considerable pressure due to thefts. There is bound to be a question mark over where banks will replace ATMs and whether owners will invest in replacements before appropriate security measures have been put in place. I do not want to put any impediment in the way of the replacement of ATMs in rural communities. We hope that there will be no more thefts, and we wish to ensure that any gaps in the ATM network will be filled.

The exemption from rates for ATMs in specified rural areas is another measure that may encourage the replacement of ATMs and ensure the viability of some rural shops.

Mr O'Loan: I support the proposal. I will represent the views of my colleague Patsy McGlone, who had

wished to speak in the debate but cannot do so. We both represent large rural constituencies and are sympathetic to ensuring the financial inclusion of rural areas. Much of our economy is still cash-based, and, as Roy Beggs and others said, the most disadvantaged are particularly reliant on the availability of cash.

In considering policy, it is important that we look positively towards the availability of cash. As the Minister outlined, the proposal is a three-year exemption from rates for ATMs in specified rural areas after an initial three years' full exemption, and, as in all policy evaluation, we should look at the evidence. The number of rural ATMs eligible for exemption increased by 16% over the three-year period. Although the total number of 43 is small, that increase is considerable.

Definitive evidence has not been produced that rate relief is a key element in encouraging banks to retain and develop the ATM network. We should be reluctant to give money to banks, as they are not conspicuous in displaying a social conscience. I do not want to indulge in simple bank bashing, because some of our local banks have schemes that indicate a social conscience. However, given the recent history of banking and the fact that some banks are reporting large profits even in these difficult times, we should approach the matter with considerable scepticism. Even the evidence from the British Bankers' Association and the Bank of Ireland is not definitive. They have said that the exemption does not influence the placing of ATMs initially but that it may determine whether they are retained. We should certainly look at that, but dispassionately.

I note the views of key stakeholders. There is strong support for the Order from the Rural Development Council, the Rural Community Network and the Consumer Council. The Minister has quoted the evidence from research carried out by Queen's University for the Rural Development Council, which shows that £6.30 out of every £10 withdrawn is spent locally. Like others, I note the fact that the cost is not great; it is about £80,000, which works out at about £2,000 per ATM. In the absence of strong contrary evidence, it is prudent and sensible to extend this provision.

I stress what has been said already about thefts from ATMs. That is a big issue for the banks. There is a clear responsibility on the banks to secure their ATMs and recognise that, to date,

that security has not been adequate. Although the banks are looking at that issue, this is not the time to change policy. That point must be taken on board.

In future, we should distinguish between free-to-use ATMs and those for which people have to pay a fee. I am more reluctant to confer a benefit on banks or other financial agencies that charge people to use their ATMs than on those who provide a free service to the public.

Mr McCarthy: I support the Order. Anything that helps the rural community has my party's support. I was taken aback, however, by the attitude of some Members that this will cost only £80,000. Yesterday, in the Long Gallery, I sponsored a visit by Carers Northern Ireland, which provides an excellent service across Northern Ireland, despite having its funding cut. That group would be very glad of £80,000 or even half of it. Similarly, in my rural village, the Lifestart group has had to cut its cloth. Although £80,000 is a small amount in the big scheme of things, it could do a lot of good in those two instances.

That said, decisions must be taken, and the Finance Minister and the Committee have made that decision. On behalf of the United Community group, I support that decision.

Mr McQuillan: The Minister of Finance and Personnel is right to exempt ATMs from rates for another year, given the rise in the number of ATM robberies, especially in rural areas. ATMs are vital to local communities, especially in rural areas like those in my constituency, East Londonderry. The increase in robberies — in particular, the use of diggers and manually operated machinery to rob ATMs — offers a disincentive to banks to maintain those facilities, especially when they fall victim to more than one robbery. The banks have said that they will keep less money in ATMs in order to restrict the amount of money that can be stolen and to act as a deterrent to thieves. That is not enough. Why can banks not use other methods to prevent and deter robberies? I encourage them to do so. However, the actions of individuals and groups that rob ATMs must be condemned, and I call on communities where the thieves live to bring information to the police. The only people who are hurt by such actions are the communities of Northern Ireland.

Cash is on the way out as the main means of currency exchange, as more people opt

to use debit cards. Cash can be obtained from supermarkets and convenience stores through the use of cashback facilities. That is another disincentive to banks to maintain cash machines because other means of accessing money are becoming more popular, probably cheaper and have less risk associated with them. Nevertheless, the use of cash is better for local shopkeepers because they incur charges from banks when customers use debit cards to pay for their goods. That adds further pressure on small businesses and local shopkeepers, whose profit margins may be hit severely if people have to use debit cards rather than cash. I therefore worry that robberies on ATMs could have an effect on people's ability to access their money in rural areas. This rates exemption will offer an incentive to banks to keep ATMs where they are without incurring additional costs. The scheme will cost the public purse £80,000, which is good value for money. I commend the motion to the House, and I thank the Minister for maintaining the incentive in light of recent robberies.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As we are aware, this scheme was introduced in 2007 for three years as part of a package of rural relief measures that was aimed at businesses in rural areas. During the intervening years, we have witnessed a huge downturn in the economy, which has had a particularly detrimental impact on small businesses in rural areas. The call for this rates exemption to be extended has been supported by key stakeholders, such as the Consumer Council.

I note that, in October 2009, a policy evaluation for the scheme found that the number of ATMs in rural areas had increased by some 16% since the previous evaluation. That statistic demonstrates the importance of access to ATMs for people who live in rural areas. The economic downturn has also resulted in an increasing number of people being on benefits, many of which are paid electronically. ATMs are essential for those people to access their benefits and entitlements.

It is fair to say that ATMs in many ways represent a lifeline for people who live in rural, dispersed communities. In most cases, the main banks are centralised in provincial towns, and that can make it extremely difficult for people who have mobility issues to engage in even the smallest of financial transactions.

Recently, small businesses have been hit hard by the changing economic climate and attacks on their premises, which have devastating impacts on their livelihoods. The pattern of ATM thefts has also had a huge impact on rural communities. It would be an additional burden on small businesses if the Department of Finance and Personnel were to remove the current rates exemption.

In a recent 'Spotlight' programme, a construction expert said that, if the banks spent a little bit more money and installed reinforcing mechanisms with the machines, they would utterly wipe out the ability to steal the machines. I encourage the banks to take that advice, which would be of massive aid to rural areas.

Mr G Robinson: This debate addresses an issue that provides a great benefit to those who live in rural areas of Northern Ireland. Rural dwellers appreciate and need easy access to their money just as much as those who live in towns. By ensuring that it is cheaper for businesses to provide that vital service, we can help those businesses to continue to provide it.

In recent weeks and months, we have all seen the appalling damage that has been done to rural businesses by criminal gangs who decide to make unexpected illegal cash withdrawals. The repair bill and the loss of business after those raids can be considerable. This motion is aimed at helping and encouraging those businesses to keep providing ATMs in their local communities in the long term. The loss of service to the community is beyond price. The fact that someone lives in the country should not mean that they cannot have access to their cash on a 24-hour basis. If someone has access to a local ATM in a rural area, it could perhaps save them a 20-mile return journey to the nearest town's ATM. Is that not an excellent way of helping to stabilise and protect the rural population and aid small businesses, which are more common in rural areas, so that they thrive and remain viable?

This motion has a very practical and serious intent. I urge everyone to support it, as it is a small way of encouraging local community stability and business support at minimal cost to the public purse. I thank the Minister for his input, and I support the motion.

4.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel to conclude the debate by making a winding-up speech on the motion.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr McLaughlin: Those are the wrong notes.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I hope that I have the right ones here.

I thank the Members who have taken part in this short debate. I welcome the universal support for the motion from around the Chamber, and especially from the Committee and its Chairperson. I just wish that everything could go through the Committee with the same widespread support that this measure has had. I look forward to the Committee Chairperson taking a number of other issues through in the same way for me in the future.

Mr Weir asked a question about the designated areas, and I am more than happy to circulate to Members the list of wards that have been designated. A number of villages already have rates-exempt ATMs. Based on the deprivation index, 200 such wards were prescribed when the Order was introduced in 2007.

The exemption costs £80,000. I reply to Mr McCarthy when I say that it is not a case of it costing "only" £80,000. I hope that it is not seen as a case of "only" that amount so it really does not matter. The consideration was whether the scheme provided value. If we had come to the conclusion that it did not provide value in rural areas, we would not have continued the scheme, regardless of whether the cost was £80,000, £8,000 or £800,000. However, the evaluation showed that it delivered value in all the forms that Members have described, including ensuring services in local areas and ensuring that people, particularly those who are not as mobile as others, have the opportunity to access cash that they can spend in local shops.

I assure Mr Weir that one of my top priorities in considering whether the measure should go forward was not the potential carbon footprint that may have resulted from the removal of the rates exemption. I am sure that Members will be shocked to hear me say that.

Mr Beggs talked about the importance of access to ATMs in rural areas. He mentioned the cost to many people of a round trip. Designated wards in his constituency include Blackhead, Whitehead and Ballygalley, where he knows that the loss of the shop has caused problems. The important issue is that the cost of accessing a small amount of cash might be quite considerable in

rural areas from which people may have to travel some distance to an ATM.

Mr Beggs and other Members mentioned the potential long-term impact of the thefts not from, but of, the cash machines at present. Without trying to provoke controversy in a debate that has so far been free of it and in which we have had total agreement, I say to Mr Beggs and others that after next Tuesday, if they vote in the right way, they will have ample opportunity and justification to raise such issues with a Justice Minister in the House who will hold the Chief Constable and police to account. I am sure that, just as he finds it a good experience to have me here as Finance Minister to talk about how to make the provision of those machines viable, he would welcome the opportunity of having a Justice Minister to talk about how to make ATMs safe.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thought that might provoke him. So, I look forward to Mr Beggs voting — I think that it is next Tuesday — in a way that allows him to legitimately raise the security of ATMs with an accountable Minister on the Floor of the House, because it is not an issue that is devolved at present. I will give way.

Mr Beggs: My point, which was valid in the context of the debate, was that having to pay rates might be the final straw that prevents banks from replacing ATMs. Furthermore, if the Minister and his colleagues are convinced about the rightness of what they agreed at Hillsborough, they are within their rights, and have enough votes, to take that decision themselves.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As the Member knows, not only am I convinced, but I have sought and will continue to seek to convince others that the right decision was made at Hillsborough. I am glad that he raised the point, and I would have been disappointed had he not done so. I am simply saying that the question of whether ATMs are retained in rural areas is a security issue. Security could have an impact on whether the machines stay in rural areas. Therefore, it would be much better to have a local Minister of Justice to debate with, question and call to account. If the Member agrees with that, I am sure that he will not act hypocritically by voting against the opportunity to do so. I shall leave that point with him and other Members who would like to be able to discuss such security issues in the future.

Mr O'Loan raised a couple of issues. He pointed out that the rates exemption resulted in a modest 16% increase in the number of ATMs. One might be disappointed that the increase in the number of machines that have been installed in those areas is not higher. However, at a time when many other services are being removed from rural areas, at least the trend has not been downward. In contrast to what has happened in rural areas to village shops, post offices, garages, and so forth, all of which have experienced a downward trend, it is one area in which there has been an upward trend.

The evidence from the British Bankers' Association and the Bank of Ireland is that the rates exemption at least helped to retain ATMs, and in the case of the Bank of Ireland, it influenced where it located the machines in rural areas. I accept Mr O'Loan's reluctance that money be given to the banks, particularly given the way in which they have behaved, but the modest rate relief is not primarily a way to benefit banks; it is a means of ensuring that services are provided locally.

Mr O'Loan also raised the issue of free-to-use machines, as opposed to those for which people must pay a fee. In fact, that issue was discussed during the original consultation period for the Order in 2005, when it was suggested that it should only apply to free-to-use ATMs. However, all the consultation responses, particularly that from the Rural Development Council, expressed the view that an ATM that charges a fee is better than no ATM. Therefore, ATMs for which fees are payable were included in the Order. Free-to-use ATMs are preferable, but if exempting rates is the only way to attain a machine, albeit one that people must pay to use, it is felt that that is worth doing.

I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate. I thank Mr McQuillan, Mr Doherty and Mr G Robinson for their support, and I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2010 be affirmed.

Draft Rates (Deferment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): I beg to move

That the Draft Rates (Deferment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 be approved.

Members will be glad to hear that this item of business will finish me today. Indeed, by the looks of things, it may finish off the rest of the Members, too.

Before I deal with the regulations, I want to set out the rationale behind the rates deferment scheme for homeowners pensioners. It is important to understand the purpose of the scheme and the consequences for those who participate in it. If Members remember only one fact from this debate, it should be that this is not a new relief or allowance. It provides a payment choice as opposed to free money. There is a cost attached to it, for my Department and for the participants. It is quite different from the wide range of measures that is available to help pensioners with their rates.

Deferment represents a new payment choice for owner-occupier pensioners who may not have the means to pay high rates bills or who are ineligible for rates relief or a rates rebate. The scheme could make a significant difference for them. The scheme will be attractive to pensioners who do not have access to other means of support and are struggling to meet mounting household bills while living in the family home during their retirement years. We want to provide them with a payment option that will enable them to remain in the homes in which they raised their families.

Evidence shows that people in Northern Ireland tend to stay put much more than people in other parts of the United Kingdom, which is a good thing for community life. Pensioners and their partners may be able to roll up their rates bills at a concessionary rate of interest until such time as they die, their property is sold or the conditions of the scheme are broken. It will be a long-term commitment that should not be entered into easily or lightly. It will involve a contractual commitment that could last for more than 30 years.

Given the long-term commitment involved, it is important that pensioners are made fully aware of all the facts to allow them to make informed

choices. There will be a range of issues for them to consider, including the level of mounting debt, the impact on the property on which the debt will be secured and, looking further into the future, the value of the estate that they may wish to pass on. For that reason, applicants will be provided with a projection of what the deferred debt could be. After that, they will need to make an informed choice about whether the scheme is appropriate to their needs.

I am sure that there will be varying views about the scheme. Some will view it as an opportunity to be availed of, should it suit the pensioner's circumstances, some will have concerns about the cost and revenue implications, and others may view it simply as a form of death duty. Deferment will be a welcome option for pensioners who have significant equity in their property.

As much as 85% of all pensioner households own their properties outright. For others, deferment will not be for them, particularly if they wish to leave their property fully to their children. However, deferment presents a further payment option. In that context, it is important to remember the position of the Finance and Personnel Committee, which is that even if only a small number of pensioners were to benefit, the choice of deferment should be made available to them.

We can achieve this aim through regulations. Although the scheme is unique in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, it is not uncommon internationally. Experience shows that take-up varies considerably. There are between 10,000 and 11,000 deferred rates in British Columbia and Oregon, while the figure for Minnesota and New Zealand is only a few hundred. Our best estimate locally is that, over the medium to long term, we may have 2,000 participants at any one time, but those numbers could be higher or lower. This shows, once again, that decisions made by this local Assembly can provide options that are perhaps not available in the wider UK context.

Before I turn to the statutory rule, I shall briefly run through the key aspects of the scheme on which there was detailed consultation, including liaison with key stakeholders and representatives of elderly people. By and large, there was broad support for the scheme, with many viewing it as a further option for pensioners. The regulations represent the

final outworkings of the Executive mandate of change. They allow my Department to enter into a deferment agreement with an owner-occupier of pensionable age, which is currently aged 60 or over, as well as their partner or surviving partner. In addition to a range of conditions that have to be met before and during deferment, everyone who owns the property must also enter into the deferment. If that is not possible, deferment cannot be granted, owing to the increased debt-recovery risks. Generally, all will have to occupy the property as their sole or main residence. Deferment will not be permitted on rented properties, second homes or empty homes. However, some limited exceptions on occupation will be made for nursing and residential care homes so that participants are not disadvantaged.

4.15 pm

Central to the deferment will be property ownership, occupation and equity, which is the property value free from a mortgage or charge. At the outset, there must be a minimum of 40% equity in the property. Consideration will also be given as to whether, at any time during the term of the deferment agreement and reflecting assumptions on life expectancy, there is likely to be less than 30% equity in the property. Where that double-check approach cannot be met, deferment will not be granted, owing to the risks posed. Where ongoing equity conditions are not met at any time during the deferment term, which we consider a low risk, owing to the assessment that will be undertaken at the outset, further deferment of rates will not be permitted, as a result of debt-recovery risks. The debt accrued to that point, however, would stand.

The deferred debt will be secured on the property, with daily compound interest accruing. It will be calculated using the Bank of England base rate minus 1%, subject to a minimum 1% threshold. Using trend data over the past 10 to 15 years, the base rate minus 1% has broadly equated to the rate of inflation.

In other schemes internationally, the rate of interest is similarly linked to the bank prime lending rate or average borrowing rates. In British Columbia, a 0.25% rate is applied, and the interest rates in some American states are around 5%.

Deferment will not be an easy choice for pensioners, and costs will be incurred to obtain

relevant information on the property title. Similar to experience elsewhere, the applicant will have to pay those costs. However, if deferment is allowed, the applicant will have the opportunity to roll the up-front costs into the deferred debt, with interest accruing.

Before I deal with the statutory rule, I will speak about administration costs and the revenue forgone. The non-recoverable administration costs are anticipated to be in the region of £125,000 a year, but that will depend on the actual take-up. Likewise, revenue forgone will depend on that, as well as on the rates liability. Assuming average property values, the revenue forgone could be around £200,000 in the first year through to around £1.5 million a year once the scheme and the numbers have settled. Beyond that, we expect the scheme to be broadly revenue neutral.

The revenue forgone and costs will impact on local councils. Councils will be paid in the normal way the district rates that are due and will not bear the direct costs that will result from the loss of revenue through ratepayer deferment. Councils will feel an impact only on a relatively small additional amount of their share of the cost of collection, and if any of the secured debt ends up having to be written off. As Members will be aware, both of those measures are in accordance with current procedures.

I have covered the key aspects of and issues related to the scheme. Regulation 1 deals with citation and commencement, while regulation 2 deals with interpretation. Regulation 3 sets out key issues relating to eligible persons, the deferment agreement and equity. Regulations 3 and 4 deal with the conditions to be met before entering into and during a deferment agreement, the detail of which is set out in schedules 1 and 2 to the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977. Regulation 5 provides for the deferred debt to be secured on the property as a statutory charge. It will be enforceable as if it were a mortgage by deed created in favour of the Department. That necessarily provides stronger recovery powers than those that exist under current rating legislation, primarily owing to the level of debt that is likely to be involved. Regulation 6 provides for some minor modifications to the 1977 Order, including the disapplication of the normal rates demand and the early payment discount, where payments are made based on the amount outstanding under a

deferment scheme. Participants will be provided with an annual statement of the deferred debt.

I look forward to what I am sure will be an interesting debate. I have tried to deal with some issues that I am sure will be raised. I remind Members of my commitment during Final Stage of the Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 to have a scheme that is effective and attracts sufficient and manageable numbers. As previously indicated, in a couple of years' time, I want to conduct a thorough evaluation of the scheme to examine how many people it helps and how effectively it provides value for money. That may serve to allay some concerns that Members may have about the operation of the scheme.

In conclusion, I commend the draft regulations to the House.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Ms J McCann): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I thank the Minister for his opening remarks. In its 'Report on the Committee's response to the 2007 Executive Review of the Domestic Rating System', which was published in November 2007, the Committee for Finance and Personnel recommended that a deferred rates payment scheme for pensioners be introduced. The Committee considered that even if only a small number of pensioners would benefit, the choice of deferment should be made available.

The draft Rates (Deferment) Regulations 2010 introduce a rates deferment scheme for owner-occupiers of pensionable age and their partner or surviving partner, with effect from 1 April 2010. It sets out the conditions that must be satisfied before the Department can enter into an agreement with an eligible person. It also sets out the terms that will apply to the deferment agreement, such as an advantageous rate of interest, which, together with an annual review facility, was included in the recommendation in the Committee's 2007 report.

The Committee considered the proposal for subordinate legislation at its meeting on 20 January 2010. It formally considered the statutory rule that is before the Assembly at its meeting on 24 February 2010. Although the Examiner of Statutory Rules had not formally reported at the time of the Committee's consideration of the rule, he had written to the Committee to indicate that he had no issues to raise by way

of technical scrutiny. That was confirmed in the Examiner's eleventh report, which was issued on 26 February 2010.

At the meeting on 24 February, members questioned Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) officials on the impact that the deferment of rates payments would have on councils and the anticipated level of take-up of the scheme. The officials advised that it is estimated that take-up will be in the region of 2,000 ratepayers. That will have an indirect impact on the cost of collection for what is, essentially, a complicated scheme.

The departmental officials confirmed that any additional costs in that respect will be shared among all councils. Officials also confirmed that there will be no direct impact on local councils as regards revenue forgone because the scheme is funded by regional rates. Councils will, therefore, continue to receive rates as if they had been collected by Land and Property Services (LPS).

Members raised concerns that there appears to be some confusion surrounding the issue and a general belief that the scheme will have a detrimental impact on local councils' income. DFP officials agreed to revise the forthcoming press notices about the scheme to include information that will clarify the position for councils.

Following its discussion on 24 February, the Committee agreed to recommend that the draft Rates (Deferment) Regulations 2010 be approved by the Assembly. I, therefore, support the motion.

Mr Weir: I, too, rise to support the draft Rates (Deferment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010. Given the Chairperson's comments on the impact on local councils, I must declare an interest at the outset as a member of North Down Borough Council and as vice-president of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association.

The draft regulations are a welcome and sensible move. I welcome assurances that have been given that, at least with regard to direct income, there will be no detrimental effect on local councils. There may be a marginal impact on indirect income due to the additional charges that affect LPS. However, that will be relatively small.

The Minister prides himself on being someone who tells it like it is, tries to stick to the facts

and avoids spin where possible. If we are looking for a measure that, to use the adage from the advert, “does exactly what it says on the tin”, we will find that the rates deferment proposals are fairly clear cut. The title shows clearly what is intended. As the Minister said, the regulations are not about additional relief but about deferment. Indeed, the level of detail that the Minister went into in explaining the regulations shows that a lot of detailed work has been carried out to ensure that the measures are properly applied.

The reservations expressed are principally on the basis that a lot of pensioners will view the measures as not being in their interests or not attractive to them. That is because they come from a generation that does not like the idea of building up debt. They prefer to pay bills as soon as they receive them. Others will not want to build up a charge on their property that may come out of their will or be deducted from the value of their property at the time of their death. Perhaps I should express a personal interest in that I hope that my folks do not see the scheme as an opportunity to rob me of my inheritance when it is on the statute book. A brief shaft of selfish honesty has emerged in the debate.

Mr McLaughlin: Are you declaring an interest?

Mr Weir: Yes.

The regulations will not necessarily appeal to a lot of pensioners. We can benefit from the experiences of elsewhere. It was indicated that where such measures have been used, whether in British Columbia or New Zealand, take-up has been limited. Nevertheless, it is a valuable measure because it will provide pensioners with an additional payment option.

We are all well aware that a lot of pensioners benefit from the various rates relief schemes that are available. However, we are also aware of some who are ineligible for pension credit, rates relief and a range of other measures because of their economic circumstances. They may find themselves in a situation in which they have financial assets in the form of property but are cash poor. The regulations will provide another option for such people in that they will be able to avoid the situation in which they feel under mounting financial pressure and are struggling to pay a bill. The regulations will provide some relief and another option. Indeed, in extreme circumstances, and when faced with large rates

bills, pensioners will not be forced to sell their houses to help to pay their debts.

In addition to the financial advantages that the regulations will provide for individuals, they will have a social advantage in helping pensioners to stay in their homes for longer. That is to be welcomed.

Given the experiences elsewhere, I suspect that take-up will be limited. Nevertheless, the regulations will be of major benefit to a small number of pensioners throughout Northern Ireland. They will have a direct and positive impact on the financial choices that they face. I commend the motion.

Mr Beggs: The Minister said that the regulations will have some rates implications for local authorities. Therefore, I declare an interest as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council.

I note that the regulations will provide an additional measure that pensioners and others who are eligible will be able to consider using. Therefore, it is not a measure that they must use but an additional option that they can voluntarily buy into should they choose to, and they will be able to consider whether it is beneficial to them.

Many pensioners are asset rich but income poor. They may have worked all their lives, saved, paid off their homes, reared their families and their children may then have moved on. At that point, being reliant on pensions, for example, how do they continue to pay rates that may be disproportionate to their income? I welcome the regulations as they will provide an option that pensioners can consider and which may enable them to continue to live in their family homes and to defer the payments.

Should they decide to move, there would be considerable cost involved. As well as the upset of moving home at the later part of their life and moving away from much of what is dear to them, they may, perhaps, be moving away from friends in the neighbourhood who could support them in their later years. If the legislation will benefit such people, then it must be supported.

I note from what the Minister said that considerable protection will be built into the public purse so that it will be applicable to those with at least 40% equity on their homes. Therefore, there should be minimal risk to the public purse, yet it will bring an advantage to

some pensioners. Therefore, I support the rates exemption.

4.30 pm

Mr O'Loan: I support the proposal: I supported it from the outset when it was being considered by the Committee. Even if the demand for it is not huge, the proposal is soundly based. It will be of benefit to a certain group of people and, as the Minister said, it is entirely an option. However, there are some who may be disposed to take up that option, particularly those who are described as being asset rich and cash poor. It is something that a small number of people in that category may welcome, and that is why I welcomed it.

The proposal may be availed of by others who want to have the choice of enjoying the money available to them at that time of their life and who may ordain that their rates are eventually paid for out of their estate. If people want to make that choice, then it is good to offer it.

I welcome the fact that there is no impact on council income, with the exception of the relatively small issue of the cost of collection.

As with any new scheme, it is right to evaluate it, and I know that rating policy division will do so. Rating policy division does a good job of bringing clear evaluations before the Committee, and it takes the views of the Committee seriously. As this is a new scheme, it is right that it has a close evaluation. We are told that the scheme will be a complex one to administer and, from what the Minister has said, one can see why. Therefore, it will be a relatively costly scheme for the Department to administer. If take-up turns out to be extremely low and the costs are significant, it may be necessary to determine whether it should be continued. Therefore, we need to be sensitive to that issue. Nevertheless, we should give it our full support.

Dr Farry: Like other Members, I will try to be mercifully brief. We are doing very well with today's business. I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council, just in case it comes up.

I will be supporting the measure. I gave my 100% support to a rates proposal from the Minister, which will be welcome news after the battles that we have had over other aspects in recent months.

Like Mr O'Loan, I do not think that we should be entering into the situation lightly. Compared to some of the other reliefs that we have talked about, this is more complex and will create a much deeper and more costly administrative burden. We should not dismiss the financial implications of the cost of the administration on those who provide it. We should note that Land and Property Services (LPS) has been overstretched during the past few years. What the Assembly has asked of LPS has contributed to that situation considerably, and its baseline in the budget has proven to be inadequate to the task in hand. Special measures have had to be introduced to address that situation and reflect the changed circumstances with regard to rating policy.

Furthermore, I would not overly dismiss the impact on councils. I have seen quite significant hikes in the percentage costs that councils have been asked to contribute in recent years, some as much as 15%. Nevertheless, there is an overwhelming public interest in moving ahead with this policy intervention.

One could take a very cold, callous and mean free-market approach to housing and suggest that if someone finds themselves in a situation in which they are unable to meet the running costs of the household — including paying their rates — they should consider moving to a less expensive form of accommodation. However, that approach neglects the very clear social purpose that a house brings. A house is not simply an economic transaction; it is something that goes to a person's senses of security, tradition and community, and we should not dismiss that lightly. Our senior citizens are more reluctant than anyone else to move homes when they face financial difficulties, because they have a much longer history in those houses and communities. Therefore, it is important that we seek to give that group of people as much support as possible.

The rates deferment scheme is very much an option and it is something that people will have to consider in line with their individual circumstances. However, no pressure should be placed on individuals, and it may be the case that those who have fewer dependents, or no dependents, perceive the scheme to be very much in their interest, while those who have dependents like Mr Weir would perhaps think twice about whether they would want to rob him of his inheritance.

I do not think that the scheme should be labelled as a death tax. It is the very opposite of that, and will ensure that people are able to enjoy the fruits of their hard labour while they are alive. It will also enable them to enjoy their retirement in the place where they have lived, rather than facing difficult financial circumstances and being forced to move into a different type of accommodation. If the scheme works for a certain number of people, the Assembly has a duty to move in that direction.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank Members for their views on the rates deferment scheme. Given the novel and complex nature of the measure, we will watch its development with interest. I appreciate that there are some concerns about the scheme, including the debt potential, but deferment provides an important choice for those who are outside the thresholds for rates assistance, be that through housing benefit or the rate relief scheme.

Through the measure, the Assembly can ensure that pensioners do not feel pressurised to leave their family homes for financial reasons. As Mr Farry put it, houses should not simply be regarded as market transactions whereby, if people cannot afford their house, they go to a weer house or a different area. Very often a great deal of emotional baggage is attached to a house and it provides a social context and family support; all of which make it much more than that. It is important that, if people are caught in those circumstances, we try to find ways of facilitating them.

Several issues have been raised during the debate. First, all Members seem to appreciate that the scheme is not a way of giving further relief to individuals. There are costs involved and it does, and will, require people to think long and hard before they go down the route of applying for it. Several Members have also pointed out that it will only be in very specific circumstances that people will apply for rates deferment. Normally applicants will have a source of income that stops them from obtaining rates relief, as well as a house with considerable equity, but are facing rates bills which are eating into their limited pension or income, and are not too concerned about scallywags like Peter Weir, who are more interested in their inheritances than their parents' well-being and ability to enjoy their retirements. It is a way of freeing up that income — that is the important thing. However,

it is not without cost, and it is important that we spell that out.

I did not like Mr Weir's description of me as someone who "avoids spin where possible". I am glad that he is not here, because I would have something more to say about that. "Avoids spin full stop" would have done. He raised two points. The scheme will involve costs to councils and to LPS. The identified costs for the scheme amount to around £125,000 per annum.

When I took over in the Department, I did not warm to the scheme. In fact, the first time that I appeared before the Committee and Mr O'Loan asked me a question about it, I was not all that enthusiastic about it because of the administrative costs that I was given at that stage. The process is complex; a lot of checks, etc, need to be done. Some of those costs will be borne by the people who are applying for the scheme, but there are ongoing administrative costs for the Department, and they were considerably higher than £125,000. It is important that we try to keep those costs to a minimum. I trust that the reduced cost of £125,000 per annum will be deliverable. Councils will be responsible for 45% of those costs, so some administrative costs will be spread across the councils.

We will seek to ensure that there is guidance for the individuals who apply and that they are given an indication of where the debt is likely to go during the period of deferment. With all the information that we can get from actuaries about life expectancy, the value of the house, what will happen to rates, etc, we will seek to give individuals who apply some indication of the costs involved. For example, if someone applies for deferral of rates on a property that is currently worth £150,000 — assuming that there is a rates bill of about £800 on that, which is about the standard — after 20 years, they would have a deferred debt of £60,000. Of course, the value of the house would have gone up during that period, but a considerable amount of debt could be accumulated, and that is why we have to build in all the safeguards to ensure that people will be capable of paying.

As Mr Beggs pointed out, that is the reason why we want to ensure that all applicants have at least 40% equity at the very start, because the last thing that we want to do is leave someone saddled with a debt when they do not even have an asset that can be used to pay it. Mr

Beggs indicated that it is important that we minimise the risk to the public purse and to the individuals. That is why an applicant will only be accepted for the scheme after he or she has been given considerable explanation of the full implications by the Department.

I welcome the fact that, twice in one day, Mr Beggs and Mr O'Loan have agreed with me. I hope that the local papers hear about that, because normally only our disagreements get into the 'Larne Times' and the 'Carrickfergus Advertiser', etc. I hope that the Member will indicate that he was pleased on the two accounts of rural dwellers' access to cash and pensioners' access to their cash through the deferral of rates and that he welcomes the actions that I have taken.

As far as Mr Farry is concerned, I am pleased that I have made one proposal on rates that he has agreed with — it must be the first in the last two weeks. It is good that he has done that. He has pointed out that it is complex. I hope that I have reassured him about the costs to the councils and of the fact that it is not a "death tax". It will free up people's incomes and enable them, if they desire, to benefit from some of the equity from their house now rather than spending their income on paying rates.

4.45 pm

The option for deferment will impact on a limited number of people, but the more people who take it on, the lower the administrative cost will be per individual. The proposals address the financial difficulties that a specific group of people might face as a result of the current way in which rates are levied in Northern Ireland. I commend the measure to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Draft Rates (Deferment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 be approved.

Private Members' Business

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee agreed previously that, where two or more amendments have been selected, additional time may be allocated at the Speaker's discretion. As two amendments have been selected, up to one hour and 45 minutes will be allowed for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to publish the long overdue cohesion, sharing and integration strategy by March 2010; believes that publication would be an illustration of commitment to fruitful working relationships; and calls for the establishment of a dedicated Executive mechanism and a Standing Committee, in accordance with Standing Order 50(2), to encourage, monitor and scrutinise implementation of the strategy across all government Departments.

Given current events, the motion is timely, and the subject has been debated in the House on at least two occasions. According to the research papers, Members from across the House have asked many questions about why a strategy on an issue that goes to the heart of the divided society in which we all live has been delayed so long.

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

The research that has been conducted over the years is quite clear. Over 80% of respondents to the recent Northern Ireland life and times survey stated that they wanted to live in a shared society. That means that people want shared housing, shared workplaces, shared spaces and shared public amenities. We all know about the economic cost of not dealing with the divisions in our community, but the issue is about more than that. Unfortunately, too many people lost their lives in the past 30 to 40 years because of the divided society in which we have all lived and grown up.

The motion calls for the publication of the strategy. I note that, last week, the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced that they had agreed the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. Unfortunately, it was not produced to the Executive, and, to the best of my knowledge, it has not been shared with other parties, or with Ministers from those parties at the Executive. Indeed, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has had no opportunity to scrutinise such a document.

Last autumn, the DUP published what it believed was the basis for an agreement on cohesion, sharing and integration between it and Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin retaliated by issuing its own document on how a shared future should go. It is interesting to read the draft strategy, which Mr Donaldson issued when he was a junior Minister.

The draft strategy identifies political leadership and community engagement as key priorities. It also states:

"We believe that strong local political leadership is essential to the success of this strategy. For this reason we will establish a new Ministerially-led Good Relations Panel. With the support of the Head of the Civil Service, other departments, local government (from both NILGA and SOLACE) key stakeholders with a role and responsibilities in tackling sectarianism, racism and racial inequalities and statutory bodies such as the Equality Commission, the Community Relations Council and PSNI, the Ministerial Panel's priorities will be reviewing and monitoring".

We will wait to see whether that paragraph remains in the agreed strategy and judge it accordingly. Some people, however, are sceptical about whether agreement has been reached and view the statement to that effect as a means to give cover to the Alliance Party as its grabs for the justice Ministry post. Given the kind of political leadership that is shown in this place, it is interesting that political leadership is to form a key part of the strategy. I will come back to that point later.

In some of the responses, local councils expressed concern that the onus for promoting good relations is being pushed down to local council level. I accept that there is a genuine need for leadership at local council and local community level. However, that does not mean that Members and party leaders in this place should be allowed to move away from their

responsibility to provide strong leadership. We will wait to see how that situation develops over the next few weeks.

One of the critical issues is the need for cross-community relations and cross-community work. During the outworking of the peace programme over the past 10 to 15 years, capacity was increased on a single-identity basis. That was necessary during that time, but what is required now is more cross-community work. In fact, research by the University of Ulster and the University of Oxford shows that the real benefit from such work is a greater opportunity for cross-community contact, which has an effect not only on the individuals who engage in the work but on the perceptions and attitudes of the communities that they represent. I trust that cross-community work will be a central plank of the published strategy.

Two amendments have been proposed to the substantive motion: one from the Alliance Party and one from the Ulster Unionist Party. Members should note that the SDLP substantive motion calls for:

"the establishment of a dedicated Executive mechanism and a Standing Committee, in accordance with Standing Order 50(2), to encourage, monitor and scrutinise implementation of the strategy across all government Departments."

We strongly believe that our motion outlines the minimum requirement, because we are so far behind in the development of cross-community work and a cohesive, sharing and integration strategy that we must not lose any time in implementing the final published strategy.

The SDLP cannot support the Alliance Party amendment, because it weakens the substantive motion. The Alliance Party seems happy to note the recent progress made by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and it has its reasons for doing so. However, the rest of us have much more to say on the matter. It is interesting that the Alliance Party agreed to put forward a name for the justice Ministry without seeing the colour of First Minister and deputy First Minister's money in respect of the strategy. The Alliance Party amendment does not go far enough.

Similarly, the Ulster Unionist Party amendment does not go far enough in respect of monitoring, and I hope that it will reflect on that. However, the UUP entered into the spirit of the

substantive motion to a much greater extent than the Alliance Party. We wish this place to demonstrate much stronger and more meaningful political leadership to the community and wider society. I welcome the fact that the junior Minister is present this afternoon, and I look forward to his reply.

The SDLP, from its very foundation, has sought to build better community relations and tackle sectarianism and racism.

Indeed, our new party leader, Minister Margaret Ritchie, made that a key platform in her bid for the SDLP leadership. She outlined how she envisaged a society that was reconciled, not only in relation to the two main communities in the North, but on a North/South basis.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: Sorry, I cannot, because I have very little time left.

There is concern within ethnic minority groups and other organisations that sectarianism and racism are being dealt with by one strategy, when, in the past, there were two different strategies. It will be interesting to hear from the junior Minister about that, because some concerns have been expressed about how sectarianism and racism will be recognised and dealt with.

In the draft strategy that Mr Donaldson issued, there is also mention of a flag protocol and of how we deal with our past. How we deal with our past impacts so much on today. If we do not tell the truth about the past, we see former terrorists glorified, memorials erected without any planning approval and flags going up all over our towns and villages, which clearly demarcate them and identify them with one community or the other. Many people feel that those flags make members of the community that they do not represent feel unwelcome. There needs to be a strong emphasis on the issue and a real political will to tackle flags, emblems and symbols of the past. As Members know, in my constituency last weekend, young people were engaged in violence. Unless we get to the truth of the past, we will prolong the effects of it and will not learn lessons from it, which means that young people's lives will continue to be corrupted.

The "separate but equal" policy from Sinn Féin is not acceptable to the SDLP. The SDLP

is interested only in a shared future and a shared society based on equality. I restate our disappointment with Sinn Féin for not allowing nationalist votes to be equal to unionist votes. That has allowed the gerrymandering of the justice ministry post.

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

Mrs D Kelly: I am sure that junior Minister Newton will not tolerate members of his party joining Facebook sites that say "No Pope here."

Mr Ford: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"notes the recent progress made by the First Minister and deputy First Minister in agreeing their draft cohesion, sharing and integration strategy; believes that publication of the draft for consultation will be an illustration of commitment to fruitful working relationships and to the building of a shared and better future; recognises the importance of a commitment at all levels of government and within civic society in creating a shared and equal society; and looks forward to early public consultation on the draft strategy which will give all parties and the wider community the opportunity to make a contribution to the shape and direction of final policy."

I will try to address the motion and our amendment and not just respond to the usual rant that we hear on all occasions such as this. Undoubtedly, today's debate on the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy is timely, although I am not sure that the precise wording of the motion is timely given the changes that we have seen in recent days.

Building a shared future for the people of Northern Ireland is the biggest issue facing the Assembly, the Executive, all the institutions of government and every public agency. Sadly, it has been neglected over the years. On two occasions during the Assembly's first mandate, my colleagues and I voted against the Programme for Government that was introduced under the leadership of the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP, because on neither occasion did it properly address the issue of building a shared future. Therefore, although it is very welcome to hear Dolores Kelly mention the SDLP's commitment to the building of a shared future, if she had been in the Assembly in its first guise in 1998, she would have seen that what came forth from the Administration that was jointly led by her then deputy party leader was a little

lacking. Therefore, if people are going to issue brickbats in all directions, they should look first at the realities of life.

Dr Farry: I appreciate that this matter affects Mr Ford personally. Does he agree that it is rather strange for a party to profess its support for a shared future and its opposition to sectarianism but then make sectarian comments by labelling him as a unionist? Surely, in a shared society —

Mrs D Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. If the Member checks the Hansard report, he will see that I did not name Mr Ford.

Dr Farry: Statements made by the Member's party leader and some of her colleagues have labelled Mr Ford as a unionist. Surely, in a shared society, people have a right to have a political opinion that is not based on a point of view about the border or on a point of view that represents a section of society but that is based on a point of view that represents all of society.

5.00 pm

Mr Ford: I entirely agree with my colleague. I must confess that his intervention is a much higher tribute to the quality of my handwriting than I had thought was justified. I did not realise that he was able to read several lines below the point that I had reached in my notes from such a distance over my shoulder. I am grateful to know that my handwriting is so good.

Dr Farry is absolutely right: the current leader of the SDLP feels obliged to label as a unionist anybody who does not fit her definition of a nationalist. Moreover, she has made cheap sectarian jibes about the effect that an Alliance Party member filling a role on the Executive would have, and she did so on the presumption that those of us who have taken an entirely different stance to that of unionism on many points over the years are now somehow unionists. That shows the kind of sectarianism that is coming from the SDLP, and it gives the lie to the fine words of the motion.

No progress was made on building a shared future during the first Assembly mandate; progress occurred only during the period of direct rule. That is an indictment of the leadership of the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP, and there is no doubt that very little progress was made after the restoration of devolution in May 2007 until recent weeks. Instead, there has been delay and deadlock, and, in that sense, the

wording of the SDLP's motion might have been relevant a couple of weeks ago. However, there has been some movement in the process. That movement is clearly limited, and it is obvious that the full issue is not being dealt with. However, we did not see similar progress on any previous occasion. We did not see progress on building a shared future under the leadership of David Trimble and Séamus Mallon. We did not see progress on building a shared future under the leadership of David Trimble and Mark Durkan. We did not see progress on developing the strategy under the leadership of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness.

Mr McDevitt: Will Mr Ford confirm that he has seen the First Minister and deputy First Minister's new paper that he is expounding the virtues of?

Mr Ford: It seems that Mr McDevitt can not only read my poor handwriting over my shoulder but can read at an angle. That was the next line in my notes.

Let me make it clear that I welcome the process. The document that has been agreed by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister remains an OFMDFM document, and I understand that it is now out for consultation in Departments. It is not an Alliance Party document. We did not shape or write it, and we have not even seen it. The issue is whether the process is moving forward; it is not about a suggestion that our document has been adopted.

I have absolutely no doubt that, given the conflicting documents that the DUP and Sinn Féin put forward last summer, the document will contain significant gaps. I have no doubt that we will seek to strengthen it, and the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists may even want to strengthen it. However, that is the point of a consultation process, and that is the stage that we have now reached. A process is now under way that was not under way a few weeks ago. That represents movement, renders the motion out of date and makes our amendment significantly more appropriate.

I welcome the process and the fact that it has started to move in the past couple of weeks. It is possible that the Alliance Party's constructive attitude has had an effect on the way that the leaders of the DUP and Sinn Féin —

Mr B McCrea: I would have thought so.

Mr Kennedy: Credit where credit is due.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. All remarks should be made through the Chair. I understand, Mr Kennedy, that you will have 10 minutes to speak after Mr Ford has finished.

Mr Ford: I am not sure, Mr Deputy Speaker, whether you will deduct the time that some Members have used to speak from a sedentary position from their overall speaking time.

There is no doubt that a full commitment to building a shared future is required in the Assembly, in the Executive, in every institution of government and in civic society. There is no doubt that there are huge arrears in what needs to be done, and that affects every part of Government policy. That is why it is important that a document is now being circulated to Departments in a way that ensures that all Departments accept their responsibilities and are brought on board. This is not an OFMDFM paper exercise; it is a process that must ensure effective delivery and the engagement of every part of government. It must ensure that every agency from Roads Service to the health and social care trusts accepts that there is an obligation to change things.

At last year's US investment conference, we heard the cogent comments of Mayor Bloomberg of New York, who made it absolutely clear that the concept of building a shared future and allowing a completely open society is not airy-fairy liberal waffle — much as some may wish to suggest that it is — but is of fundamental and practical importance in building a modern economy in which people maximise their opportunities for economic activity, whether in employment or in opening a business, and which ensures that the best possible economic development happens. Why would anyone suggest that this region, with an economic development record that is almost as bad as any other region of the UK, could possibly afford any obstacles to moving its economy forward? It is vital that we develop that economy and that we build on the opportunities that exist.

It is vital, against the background of the increase in violence of the past few weeks and, to some extent, of the past few years, as witnessed, for example, in the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) reports, that we take serious action to tackle good relations issues and build a shared future. We cannot move society forward unless we start to address those issues.

That is why it is vital that we have a home-grown structure for the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy — not something dropped down from direct rule that is ignored by the devolved Administration but something drawn up under devolution which builds and makes opportunities for all our people.

There is a huge range of things that need to be done, but there are also examples of things that have been seen to move forward. Thirty years ago, fair employment was an impossible dream, but it is now the accepted position in virtually every workplace in Northern Ireland. There was a commitment to seeing that there was fairness in employment, and it happened. We have seen the demand for shared schooling, with the massive oversubscription of nearly all integrated schools an indication of how people wish their children to be educated. We have seen the demand for shared housing, which cannot be met, particularly in the greater Belfast conurbation but also in other towns. Public housing is segregated, yet it is clear that people wish to live in mixed and inclusive areas.

The shared future process must be seen to apply to every part of government. There must be a robust, serious and meaningful policy, and it must be put into operation by every Department and every public agency. Last week's developments were a start on that process.

Mr Kennedy: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after the second "calls" and insert

"on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure the strategy has robust monitoring and evaluation criteria to facilitate its successful implementation."

I am grateful for the opportunity to move amendment No 2. I speak not as Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister but as an Ulster Unionist Party representative.

We should thank the SDLP for tabling the motion. The Ulster Unionist Party broadly supports the main thrust of the motion, although we have reservations about the establishment of another Standing Committee in this place, and I will come to that issue in a moment. That is our concern, and it is the reason why we tabled our amendment.

Despite the recent statement issued by the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on the cohesion, sharing and

integration strategy, the strategy has yet to be published for wider circulation. Despite, again, the rather long-winded and self-congratulatory tone of the Alliance Party amendment, we have, in reality, not moved very far.

The original statement by the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister said:

“Over the coming weeks, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will ask government departments for their input into the programme. The document will then be presented to the OFMDFM committee before being submitted to the Executive. The draft programme will then go out for public consultation.”

Although I welcome the progress, I have concerns that it is yet another formula for more process, like most things that have arisen out of Hillsborough. It appears that the Alliance Party has sold its soul for the promise of process politics. Taking into consideration the fact that no document has yet been published, we will not support the Alliance Party amendment.

Mr A Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: No; I have considerable progress to make.

The publication of a CSI strategy was a commitment of the Programme for Government. It provided us with an opportunity to build a more pluralist and cohesive society in this part of the United Kingdom. Intrinsic to that concept is the recognition of our diversity and the determination to make mutual respect and recognition the basis of a Northern Ireland that is at ease with itself. We do not advocate being “equal but separate”, as that would maintain the divisions that have blighted our society for too long. However, “equal but separate” is the only example that Sinn Féin and the DUP have shown on the issue. There has been a complete lack of leadership as the situation has veered from a tragically missed opportunity almost to farce, as both parties published their own version of the programme. More than two years into the Assembly’s remit, it is safe to say that the DUP and Sinn Féin-led Executive have failed on this and many other issues. That view is shared by others, including Mr Duncan Morrow of the Community Relations Council, who described the failure to agree policy and ensure a shared and better future as “embarrassing and potentially dangerous”. Even Sir Hugh Orde,

before leaving office, lamented that CSI was hardly on the public agenda at all.

Recent events have illustrated the fundamental need for a CSI policy. Unfortunately, people in Northern Ireland are growing ever more cynical about our politics. This process will not have reduced that cynicism. We have had an impasse for over two years. Then, when it has been politically expedient for the DUP and Sinn Féin in order to get the Alliance Party over the line on policing and justice, the rabbit is finally pulled out of the hat. If it was that easy, many people will ask, why was it not done before? That is no way for a functioning Executive to work, and I fear that that progress does not mean that genuine change has taken place. It has been expedient for the DUP and Sinn Féin to make that decision in that way.

I will move on to our amendment. As I stated, we support the thrust of the SDLP motion, and we await the publication of the programme with interest. Although I recognise and share the SDLP’s desire to see the CSI programme implemented, I am not convinced and neither is my party that the establishment of a new Standing Committee is the best way to ensure its implementation, nor would it be the best use of scarce resources. Setting up a new Standing Committee is not perhaps the best use of resources at a time of financial constraint, when we have all been calling for more efficient government. The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has responsibility for scrutinising the strategy, which is cross-cutting, as are many OFMDFM strategies. Therefore, a new Standing Committee would be uncertain, as it would not be linked to any specific Department and would be less likely to hold Ministers to account. The Ulster Unionist Party believes that robust monitoring and evaluation criteria incorporated into the strategy would help its implementation as well as Committee scrutiny.

5.15 pm

We must remember that a significant amount of the policy will be delivered at a local level. The strategy will, hopefully, be implemented by the new councils, if we ever get them, in communities and in the voluntary sector. We must provide those groups, as well as the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, with the tools and expertise that they need get the required results.

Questions arise about who will set the targets, if there are any, and who will be statutorily responsible. The Ulster Unionist Party is always cautious about setting arbitrary targets that become the focus of a strategy over and above the changes that are needed on the ground. The cohesion, sharing and integration strategy will essentially be about getting people to work together at local level, which is always hard to measure.

We wait to see what the final programme will look like and whose version will be used. Clarification is needed on whether the good relations baseline indicators will still be used; whether they are still relevant nearly three years after their publication; and whether the aims of the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy are the same as they were for A Shared Future. Remember that? What is the difference between a strategy and a programme? Perhaps the junior Minister, whose presence I welcome, will tell us what the difference is. It is clear that people will need robust monitoring and evaluation criteria if the programme is to make the positive impact on the ground that we all hope it will.

I commend the Ulster Unionist Party's amendment and seek the House's support for it.

Mr Bell: I support the Alliance Party's amendment. *[Interruption.]* It is in the spirit of cross-community understanding.

There is an old saying that those who do not learn from their mistakes are destined to repeat them. The Ulster Unionists, on their watch, made the mistake of trying to implement this document for a number of years. The SDLP, on its watch, also made the mistake of trying to introduce something. The Ulster Unionists and Conservatives and the SDLP had their watch, and both failed. It is important for the House that we do not fail on our watch.

It is important that we look at our aim and at what we are here to do. We are here to build a better future for all the people of Northern Ireland. It is not the time to make sectarian jibes or follow false leads. We are here to build a new future for Northern Ireland, and we all bear a serious responsibility to achieve that. As our Members for Upper Bann will know, it is a time for us to reflect on the short political life since 1997, a year in which we lost two policemen, Constable Graham and Reserve Constable Johnston. A year before those murders, a young man called Mr Michael

McGoldrick was also murdered. When I was growing up, I lost two brothers: Frederick Starrett and Robert Cummings. All those people paid a heavy price to give us the peace that we have today. After a weekend in which we recalled the horrific events that occurred in Newry — I have some very good friends who were left without their husbands there — it is important that we take our opportunity today. Many people gave their today for our tomorrow. It is important that we get it right, as opposed to getting it rushed.

My brief research indicates that some £29 million has already been invested in good relations work in the current CSR period. The Executive worked immediately to seek agreement on a new programme and a new policy direction. It has been a difficult process, and it is important that we get it right, as opposed to getting it rushed.

The DUP is pleased that, at long last, we have an agreement for a shared and better future for everyone in Northern Ireland. When all Executive Departments have put forward their views and have had their chance to contribute, the strategy will go to public consultation. The people of Northern Ireland understand that it is important that we get this right, as opposed to getting it rushed.

Although the strategy is not yet published, a lot of important work has been done in other areas, including sterling work on parading. Others may seek to use that issue for political advantage, but a lot of good and hard work has been done on the parading issue, and I seriously commend everyone who was involved.

The motion calls on the Executive to publish the strategy by March 2010. People do not seem to understand that the DUP will not serve artificial deadlines. It is more important that we have a strategy that is fit for purpose and that all parties have had a chance to make a contribution. Now that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have agreed their programme for cohesion, sharing and integration, Executive Ministers will have their chance to comment, including the Minister for Social Development, who has made a good contribution. The SDLP could learn a lot by looking to her example of sharing ideas with colleagues and integrating them with the work that DSD has already done. A little more homework is required on that issue.

We need cohesion. Mr Kennedy introduced himself as an Ulster Unionist. I do not know

whether that meets electoral law. Should he not have said that he was a member of the Ulster Conservatives and Unionists — New Force? On his right-hand side, there are the Ulster Conservatives and Unionists. Mr Cameron tells us that he supports the Hillsborough agreement.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please. Your time is up.

Mr Bell: On his left, there is Mr McNarry, who tells us that it is a betrayal.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate on the CSI strategy. Like the Member who spoke previously, I warmly welcome the recent announcement that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have agreed a programme for cohesion, sharing and integration and that they are at the stage of seeking input from Departments. It is my understanding that the document is then to be presented for scrutiny to the Statutory Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, chaired by Danny Kennedy. As a member of that Committee, I look forward to that development and the opportunity to discuss the strategy.

Mr A Maskey: The Member has just referred to the Chairperson of the OFMDFM Committee. Danny Kennedy said, in a rather incoherent way, that he maybe nearly supported the motion. Will the Member consider how Mr Kennedy's proclamation that he supports the motion squares with the fact that the Ulster Unionist Party held secret meetings with the DUP and the Orange Order to try to ensure that nationalist representatives are denied election to seats? I wonder what part of the strategy they are interested in. All they are interested in is —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I gracefully remind Members that interjections are supposed to be short and to the point.

Mr McElduff: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank Mr Maskey for his intervention. Danny Kennedy made the point that a Statutory Committee exists to monitor and seek the implementation of the sharing and cohesion programme. A Statutory Committee is much more powerful than a Standing Committee. I do not support diluting the implementation or scrutiny of this strategy through referring it to a Standing Committee. The Statutory

OFMDFM Committee is the proper Committee to scrutinise the strategy.

Mr Kennedy: So you are with us?

Mr McElduff: Certainly, Danny, and I will see you next Wednesday at 2.00 pm.

The programme sets out a vision for a new era to build a shared and better future in which fairness, equality, rights, responsibilities and respect are acknowledged and accepted by all. I welcome the fact that the Alliance Party amendment is up to date and notes the recent progress made by the First Minister and deputy First Minister in agreeing the CSI strategy. That is helpful.

In my constituency of West Tyrone, the iconic Lisanelly education campus project exemplifies cohesion, sharing and integration. I pay tribute to the leadership of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and of the previous First Minister, Ian Paisley, who was also supportive of that project. Leadership at local level has been provided by people like Monsignor Donnelly; Reverend Robert Herron; Danny McSorley, the chief executive of Omagh District Council; Barry Mulholland, the chief executive of the Western Education and Library Board; and Pat Doherty MP. That group of five has been at the heart of lobbying for the establishment of the Lisanelly education campus. It is an iconic project. A number of post-primary schools will be located on one broad site and will share facilities.

The SDLP is very good at speaking about a shared and better future. I would like the SDLP leader, Margaret Ritchie, to travel to Omagh and have a word with her three councillors on Omagh District Council, who have been begrudging and obstructive towards that project at every turn. The challenge of leadership has fallen on other shoulders at every turn. Regrettably, the SDLP contribution in Omagh has been obstructive and begrudging. That featured in a recent letter to a newspaper, which was written by a local man from Glencordial called Joseph Ferris. It was a very accurate and on-the-mark letter that reflected the words that were spoken by SDLP Omagh district councillors.

I also make reference to the Greencastle flag initiative. The CSI programme will include references to respect for flags and not having a proliferation of flags or emblems in our communities. The Irish national flag is the chosen flag of the people of Greencastle,

mid-Tyrone. The rules of the flag are displayed at the crossroads in Greencastle, and one national flag flies in that area. That initiative has led to other flags being taken down. There is not a proliferation of flags in that area. Other communities should introduce that initiative.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: I have limited time, Basil. I have about 19 seconds left, but I will give way for five or six seconds. Go ahead.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member agree that Ulster is at the crossroads?

Mr McElduff: Thanks very much. I hope that that is a nine-county Ulster, Basil, not a six-county Ulster.

I will leave it at that. Martin McGuinness is doing a great job.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to stick to the motion.

Mr B McCrea: OK, George?

Mr G Robinson: Thanks, Basil. I have no doubt that this debate will bring everything except cohesion to this Assembly. It is a pity that some people see fit to create difficulties instead of trying to resolve them. However, I will concentrate on two areas: the creation of an equal society and the consultation on the strategy.

It is up to this Assembly to lead Northern Ireland towards the goal of an equal society. It is up to all of us to set an example on the political level that will be seen and hopefully followed by civic society. The publication of the draft consultation will be a start in the right direction. It will show the world that Northern Ireland's politicians want to keep moving forward in their genuine attempts to build a society in which everyone is equal. That would also be a very public sign of this Assembly's determination to work together for the good of all our citizens.

I appreciate that not everyone wants progress. Some people outside this Assembly actively oppose it politically and others violently. Those people have no respect for the people of Northern Ireland. They are the very reason why a united way forward politically via the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy must be found.

5.30 pm

To ensure that the Assembly has an acceptable draft strategy for all peace-loving people in Northern Ireland, there will be a public consultation process. I urge everyone to contribute to it, so that the final policy maximises the strategy's impact for community cohesion, sharing and integration.

However, I sound a note of caution to the Members on the Benches opposite. The policy must ensure that local historical figures, including WF Massey from Limavady, in the East Londonderry constituency, which I am proud to represent, are treated with respect. Links with the RAF and army regiments should be celebrated, and the presentations that the armed services made to Limavady Borough Council should be treated with the respect that they deserve, which, unfortunately, has not always been the case.

I hope that Members on the Benches opposite will ensure that equality, shared spaces and community cohesion are not perceived as one-way traffic in future. Only when everyone in Northern Ireland feels that they receive genuine respect for their culture, heritage and beliefs can the strategy be of full use. Nevertheless, it is important that progress is made quickly, and I understand that the publication of the consultation document is not too far off. I look forward to seeing it. I support amendment No 1.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome the advances made on the CSI strategy, which must deal with many issues. There are many isms in our society. We all have our examples. I can relate to the ism in sectarianism, which underpinned the murder of Kevin McDaid and the injuring of Damien Fleming in my constituency last year. All such incidents are dreadful, and we must work to eradicate them.

We must deal not only with the ism of the two communities: many intolerances and prejudices must be dealt with. We have to work to rid our society of all the dreadful isms that will be addressed in the CSI strategy. We have to work in the context of fairness, equality, rights, respect and responsibility. There will be many layers of responsibility, and it is essential to involve local communities in the process. They will have an integral role in shaping how the CSI policy is put into practice. It is OK to talk about strategies and high-level documents, but this

strategy cannot make it from the top down; it must meet the work that goes, proverbially, from the ground up.

I make my main comments in my role as party spokesperson on ethnic minorities. Sometimes our debates concentrate too much on two communities when there are many communities in this region. Tackling racial harassment and racial discrimination must be equally integral to our overall task. Members have referred to two strategies. We must ensure that the CSI strategy refines and better what is in place and that it will bring together a whole family of policies and approaches.

I will refer briefly to the six shared aims in the racial strategy, because they are most important to our ethnic minority groups. The elimination of racial inequality must surely be a central plank. We must strive to eliminate all types of racial inequality in our society. There has to be equal protection for our ethnic minorities. If I had time to go into the detail of that, there are many areas in which protection of ethnic minority groups is still lacking. There must be protection of their rights and protection against racism and racist crime.

There are many issues on equality of service provision that NICEM (the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities) and its like are worried about, such as people losing rights when their spouse is directly affected or loses a job. The CSI strategy must include work to improve service provision in that and many other areas. It must increase the participation of our ethnic minority groups and the process of dialogue with and between those groups. Some good work is being carried out, but many more hurdles remain to be overcome and many areas must be improved on.

We must also build ethnic groups' capacity to know their rights and to know how to take on the system. Many people from Ireland have gone to live in other countries, and the biggest barrier that they faced was getting to know the local system and how it worked. Therefore, we must ensure that that shared aim is protected and, indeed, improved. All six shared aims, which are so important to ethnic minorities, must be enhanced, not just rubber stamped.

It is OK to debate strategies and documents using fine words, but it is not OK for Members to be trying to score cheap political points. Cohesion, sharing and integration will require

more than a document that is written in black and white; all aspects of the strategy will require a change in attitude from everyone in society. That means that people from many areas in our society, including politicians, will have to work from the ground up to help ethnic minorities and all community groups. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Shannon: As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I am aware, as are others, of how much hard work has gone into producing the strategy. Sometimes, there has been frustration about the speed of the project, and there is no question that we have been waiting for it for a while and that people are impatient for its delivery. I understand that frustration; however, as has often been said in the Chamber, particularly during the previous debate on the strategy, we can have either a rushed strategy or the right strategy. Rather than forcing the publication of a document that is not fit for purpose, we should get it right. In my office, as, I am sure, in many others, the girls have a saying: do it right now, or do it right. Those options are different, and given the choice of doing things right now or of doing them right, I would always rather have them done right.

Thair cannae bae onieboadie i the Chammer wha dusnae know fer wie this strategy was maide fer an' what bes in hit. Hits a strategy at maun bae far reachin' tae ansuer aa o' the differ needs i the Province adae wi' fairness an' equalitie an' tae achieve thon a clatter o' thocht maun bae pit intae hit. This hes bein the case ap tae noo an' the yairn about the hare an' the tortoise bes yin at cums tae min'.

There can be no one in the Chamber who is unaware of what the strategy has been designed for and what it incorporates. To provide all the fairness and equality needs in the Province, the strategy must be far-reaching. If that is to be achieved, a lot of thought must be put into it. That has certainly been the case, and the story of the hare and the tortoise springs to mind.

Although I agree that some things, such as Planning Service reforms, can and should be done quickly, other things should be changed only at the right time and in the right way. The best and most relevant example is post-primary transfer. The Minister of Education decided what she did not want, she threw it out the window, but she made no provision to replace it. She left an entire year of children frightened and

insecure about what the future held for them, and if it were not for the work of a body that was not even funded by her Department, we would have had even more chaos in schools than we do now. That is a typical example of what happens when, in the hope of getting a good response to what one believes in, one rushes into doing something else.

Nevertheless, I agree that it is vital to have a strategy in place and that we adhere to its recommendations. I would prefer us to be implementing the strategy already, but, to change things in Northern Ireland, it is more important that it is the right one. As I said in the previous debate on the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy, I am well known for my drive to eradicate poverty. Indeed, that is one of the Committee's aims and commitments, and it is still of the utmost importance. Therefore, in the light of the economic downturn and the financial pressure that many families are under, it is vital that we adopt the right approach and ensure that that extra financial burden does not cause those who are struggling to keep their heads above water to sink to the bottom. I know that a shared future and the eradication of poverty are linked, and when everyone in Northern Ireland works together, across all boundaries and from all ethnic groups, religious persuasions and political backgrounds, we can achieve a lot for the Province. As a people, we will be stronger for that.

However, cohesion and sharing are not waiting on the strategy's being published; they are happening already. I have seen great examples of cohesion and sharing at work in community groups in my constituency and in other constituencies. There is no doubt that there are still some old division lines in the Province, and some new ones have appeared with the increase of migrant workers and new prejudices coming to the fore. However, it is clear that much work is already being done in the community to combat that. I extend my congratulations to the community leaders who work so hard in my constituency and in other constituencies to ensure that everyone is included in their schemes; they do not ask anyone their religious persuasion or where they go on Sunday.

Let us get the document into play as soon as it is prudent to do so, but let us not pretend that without it there is no sharing, cohesion and integration; they take place every day, and will continue due to the goodwill of the people.

They are not solely based on this document, important though it is; the fact that it has not been published yet does not stop the principles to which we adhere being worked out in communities. I support the amendment.

Mr Elliott: I rise with mixed emotions: I am pleased to hear that there is progress, but I am annoyed that OFMDFM has failed to deliver on the issue. There are some suggestions of a broad strategy, but there is nothing final, and there is no clear indication of what we will get. It was interesting to hear Mr Bell say that we should not make political jibes, but his speech contained almost nothing but political jibes. However, that is for him to assess. Nevertheless, we did hear the political facts that we have to contend with. It was interesting to hear him say that there has been huge progress on the parading issue, and I welcome that.

Mr McElduff: If something positive ever happened here, would the Member be prepared to acknowledge it? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Elliott: I thought that we were making huge progress with Mr McElduff: I often praise him. Therefore, I am surprised to hear him say that, but I suppose that is where he is coming from. I will deal with him later.

I am pleased to hear that there has been significant progress on parading, and I look for further acceptance from the nationalist/republican community of the right of the Loyal Orders to parade in areas throughout the Province where they have been stopped in years gone by. I welcome that progress and look forward to it in the Garvaghy Road, Ormeau Road and Dunloy.

The Lisanelly project in Omagh, which Mr McElduff mentioned, has potential if handled properly; however, I will go no further than that until we see if it is more positive than we believe it to be. However, it is a pity that his party colleague was not as positive in cohesion, sharing and integration on other educational issues where she has proved to be a total disaster. All she has done is divide communities. Therefore, he should give some advice to his colleague in that respect.

It is unfortunate that there was ethnic cleansing throughout the Province for years, and those are the type of hurts that we must try to heal. Mr Leonard said that it is not just about the document; it is about the outworkings of the

document. We can have all the documents in the world, but if the outworkings are not right and people do not interpret them properly and do not carry out what is expected, we will be no further forward. That is why there is work to be done, document or no, and even after a document comes out. The Ulster Unionist Party has been trying for years to bring people together, but others have not co-operated, and they are still not co-operating. One only has to look at the west bank of Londonderry, where the Protestant community has been almost totally alienated. That is very unfortunate, and there is a huge amount of bridge-building to be done there.

5.45 pm

I will move on to the Alliance Party amendment. I am not surprised that the Alliance has been bought off on this, but I am surprised at how easily it has been bought off, without even having a document to see. The Alliance Party amendment says that it:

"notes the recent progress ... believes that publication of the draft for consultation will be an illustration of commitment to fruitful working relationships".

What great flowery language that is, but I would expect nothing better from that party. I would like to know whether its members have actually seen the document. If they know what is in it, perhaps they can give us a flavour of it.

Mr Ford: Had the Member been in earlier to hear my speech, he would not have made that particular point, because I made it absolutely clear that we have not seen the document.

Mr Elliott: In fact, I was here to hear Mr Ford's rant, and it did not tell me anything.

Mr Ford: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am at a loss. The Member says that he was in to hear me say it, yet he repeats the question. That sounds to me perilously close to him accusing me of lying.

Mr Elliott: I would not dare dream of accusing Mr Ford of lying. It is not for me to make that judgement; it is for others. However, quite clearly, the Alliance Party has been bought off in this process. As my party colleague Danny Kennedy said, it has sold its soul just to get agreement for some political role that it wanted. There goes its whole opposition to the Executive and to the process that has happened here. It

has simply been bought off by some agreement with the two main parties.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that it is important to keep this debate very good-natured.

Mr McDevitt: There is no question that the story of dealing with sectarianism and racism in this region has been one of denial and delay; denial of the cancer at the heart of our society and delay in even accepting that we have some responsibility to do something about it.

The opportunity provided by the peace process was that it would enable us to tackle our underlying issues head on. In a society that has made coming out of conflict its international calling card, the failure to agree policy ensuring a shared and better future has become "embarrassing and potentially dangerous". Those are not my words; they are the words of the chief executive of the Community Relations Council in September 2009.

We all welcome process progress, whatever that means. Last week we were treated to a statement from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister telling us that there was something in the process, but we are yet to see it. In fact, we do not even know whether Ministers have seen it. In fact, we know that Ministers probably have not seen it. So, the questions that we need answered in the response to this debate are: when will Ministers see the document? When might Mr Ford see the document? When was the document agreed or not agreed? As it stands, this does not feel so much like a debate about CSI in the cohesion, sharing and integration sense, but in the hit show sense. Frankly, you would need forensic skills like those that are displayed fictionally in Miami, New York and Las Vegas to find what we are talking about here, such is the disrespect with which the two big parties are treating this issue.

"Separate but equal" may be enough for Sinn Féin and the DUP, but it is not enough for the SDLP. Why would we ever agree to anything that was the basis on which Thatcher built her multicultural Britain? Separate but equal is the exact same philosophy on which Thatcher built her so-called multiculturalism. It is the philosophy that led to race riots and unprecedented social unrest throughout the 80s. It may be good enough for some parties in this House in 2010, but it is not good enough

for us. I have to say that I would never ever have thought that it would have been good enough for the Alliance Party.

Many of us respect the Alliance Party. We have always thought that it was the party that did the decent thing and did its best to try to stay out of the communal conflict. However, in the past year or so, it has made politics out of the issue.

As recently as September 2009, Mr Ford came to the House and, quite rightly, berated the First Minister and deputy First Minister for not progressing their CSI strategy. However, on 2 November 2009, five or six weeks after coming to the House, he wrote an e-mail to the Liberal Democrat team in Westminster, in which he said that the Secretary of State was concerned that his party was pushing a shared future too much, as another distraction on the way to the devolution of justice. That e-mail was sent by the Alliance Party leader to the Liberal Democrats in November 2009, in the context of their preparation for a series of questions in Parliament. It meant “go soft” on a shared future; do not push the Secretary of State.

What concerns me particularly is that four days later, ‘The Belfast Telegraph’ reports Anna Lo as saying that:

“It would be nearly impossible for progress to be made on issues such as policing and justice if we don’t have a shared future strategy agreed urgently”.

The question arises as to who speaks for the Alliance Party; its leader or my constituency colleague in South Belfast. Four days earlier, the leader says go soft. Four days later, my South Belfast colleague publicly toes the party line.

It is too important an issue to play politics with. It has been too serious —

Mr Ford: A selective quotation referring to what may or may not have been said by the Secretary of State is being somewhat tenuously extended to suggest that it is my opinion. Perhaps the Member could reflect that to comment on someone else’s opinion is not necessarily to endorse it.

Mr McDevitt: I could read the reference into the record again. However, I do not need to because colleagues will be able to read it in Hansard tomorrow morning. The reference is not taken out of context. Mr David Ford invited a colleague

in the Liberal Democrats, in Parliament, to go soft on a shared future.

The issue is a defining one for the Assembly. If we get it right, we will send a signal to future generations that we are serious, not just about bottom-up community building but about top-down structural change. That is why my party’s motion does not just call for the Executive to get serious about tackling a shared future and developing a CSI strategy; it talks about the Assembly getting serious about that. It is why my party has said that appropriate mechanisms should be put in place at Executive level and at Assembly level to test all our resolve and prejudices and to make the issue one on which we can truly build a new future.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The debate is welcome, although it may have been overtaken by events that have taken place over the last while.

Good relations must be looked at with regard to how to involve and include people. It should be about sharing. It should be about respecting everyone’s views, aspirations and outlook for the future. It should not be about everyone’s being neutral, as the Northern Ireland Office-created Community Relations Council would, sometimes, have it; that everyone should drop their aspirations and live in a neutral society in which no one really has any respect for anyone else, but in which everyone is together — whatever that might mean. We should respect different opinions and explore diversity in order to enrich society, not to divide it.

Accepting that someone else has a different point of view and political outlook does not mean that one agrees with it. However, one can respect it and work with it. The issue is about building and promoting trust that allows us to do that, so that differences are better understood and can be seen as enriching, rather than threatening. Unfortunately, some of the politics that have been used have been more divisive than collective or aimed at trying to build a better society.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member explain why Sinn Féin published its own document last autumn and why the DUP published its own document, on which it thought it had the agreement of Sinn Féin? Is that not divisive?

Mr Molloy: I appreciate the Member’s point of view, but that did not signal any division whatsoever.

Those documents outlined party positions on the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. We await the publication of the SDLP's document on that strategy. Perhaps its members will not have to rely on the Northern Ireland Office and the Community Relations Council to devise a document for them.

It is important to build a confident community that can stand up for itself, but that can respect and work with others to build a proper society that can accommodate and celebrate diversity and not make people feel under threat or fear. Our society has come through a difficult time of conflict, and we need to find a way to deal with that. We are often lectured by the great and the good about how we should make plans for a future society. We are told by such people that everyone is wrong except them. Sometimes, in reality, those parties do not make a contribution to plans for a future society. We heard Mr Elliott talking about a shared society and integration. However, the first issue that he talked about was walking up the Garvaghy Road. That was not about sharing; it was about how they can dominate again and regain the privileged position that they held for so long.

We must tackle the divisions in society. However, we do not have to tackle them head-on.

Mr Elliott: My issue is not about division. For example, I do not have any particular love for the GAA, which Mr McElduff knows; however, I respect its tradition and its right to do what it does. All that I am asking is that the same respect is given to my community in places such as the Garvaghy Road and other areas.

Mr Molloy: If the Orange Order were respected on the Garvaghy Road, no one would have any problem with it walking there. However, because it has been involved in a coat-trailing exercise for so many years, it has become a problem. The Orange Order must build trust with residents in such areas so that communities can accept and work with it.

We must tackle sectarianism, discrimination and racism. We must have a zero-tolerance approach to the racism that we have seen in the past and to division in our society.

The Hillsborough agreement was a good visual sign of agreement between Sinn Féin and the DUP. Who criticised that agreement? The Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP did when they tried to rip the back out of it at every opportunity.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Molloy: No. I have already given way a couple of times.

That opportunity to build respect between communities and to build trust between the parties has been torn apart by opposition parties. They did not do so because they saw anything wrong with the agreement but because they want to score political points. That brings me back to my earlier point —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Molloy: I already said that I will not give way.

Sometimes the people who lecture the rest of us about what we should be doing are the last people who want agreement. They want to divide — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Remarks must be made through the Chair.

Mr Molloy: Those people want to cause division and break up any sense of coming together. They do not want to see progress. They want to play on the fear and division in society so that they can score political points and gain some political leeway. That is why Sinn Féin will not support the motion, which calls for the establishment of a new Standing Committee. Why would we weaken the Statutory Committee that already exists to scrutinise OFMDFM? I am surprised that Mr Kennedy and the Ulster Unionist Party proposed an amendment. Mr Kennedy is no longer in the Chamber, but he is the Chairperson of the Committee that should be scrutinising OFMDFM. Why should we weaken and take away from its authority? That Committee should be doing the job that it is there to do. We support the Alliance Party's amendment because it supports the coming together of the two communities through consultation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr Molloy: We should work with what we have and build on it for the future.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Newton): I welcome the opportunity to discuss and debate the proposed good relations programme, which aims to achieve greater cohesion, sharing and integration across Northern Ireland.

The development of the programme has been a priority in OFMDFM since devolution. Strong public ministerial commitments to the agenda have been given and statements have been made throughout that period. We now intend to reinforce those words and our significant funding of projects over the last number of years with this detailed Executive programme. Despite a long and at times frustrating process, we are reaching the critical final stages before we go out to public consultation.

6.00 pm

Much has been said over the past years and months about the issue, including in the House, with debates, speeches, questions and, at times, disagreements. However, despite that, it has been clear that all political parties have been united by one desire and aim, which is to produce a blueprint and a framework for a shared, brighter and better future for Northern Ireland.

Once again, today presents us with an opportune time for reflection. The loss, pain and trauma of those lost decades must serve as a reminder of why we must continue to strive together to secure the peace. No more victims must be created, hurt and trauma caused or divisions deepened because of sectarianism and hate. We must never forget the past, but we must not revisit it. The overwhelming majority of people across Northern Ireland want to move forward, and we must do so together. We must aim to bring every part of the community with us as we step forward with hope and optimism towards our shared future.

We have already come far on this journey. Since 2005-06, there has been a 31% reduction in sectarian-motivated crimes, and over 70% of young people believe that relationships between the Roman Catholic and the Protestant communities are better. That is testimony to the hard work carried out thus far. However, we cannot become complacent and there is much still to do.

The reprehensible murder of Kieran Doherty last Wednesday night, the attacks and violence in Craigavon and the other disturbances in Dunmurry and Belfast, combined with the bomb at Newry Courthouse serve as a stark reminder of what we want to remove utterly from our society.

It has been said that if nations want peace, they must not ignore the pinpricks that precede

the cannon shots. That is precisely why we are urgently trying to tackle the seeds of violence and sectarianism that are still attempting to grow at the heart of communities. There is no place for that destructive evil and malignant activity within a shared and better future.

We must, and we will, do all in our power to tackle the scourges of hate, prejudice and sectarianism. This programme attempts to identify the problems, commits us to finding solutions, and it fully resources a programme to reach our ultimate objectives of greater cohesion, sharing and integration right across our society.

It is critical that we ensure that the prejudices that have marred our past will not be repeated towards and within new communities who have decided to make Northern Ireland their home. That is an essential and central part of this new programme. Although the programme will focus on tackling sectarianism and racist attitudes and behaviours, it will be clearly stated that all manifestations of intolerance and prejudice are unacceptable in our society.

Considerable and valuable hard work has taken place in our communities over the past decades engaging in exactly that type of work. Since devolution, we have significantly increased resources to support that. We will now use that experience, research and best practice to move forward with renewed vigour within the context of an agreed programme. Every single one of us has the opportunity to contribute to that work. We must continue to identify what went wrong in the past and the reasons for segregation, hate, intolerance and division, and commit to work together to eliminate them.

We must all build a clear vision of where we want to go as a community and how we want our society to behave and interact. Without that, we are destined to repeat the mistakes of the past, when hopelessness and division blighted the ambitions and lives of generations.

Over the next few weeks, the final draft of the programme for CSI will be sent to all Departments. OFMDFM will work closely with its ministerial colleagues in areas such as education, transport, housing, youth provision, health, economic provision and rural communities to develop and secure the essential departmental actions that will become an integral part of the strategy. The strategy will also build on and enhance its cross-cutting nature by embedding good relations

at the heart of all Departments' policies and procedures. That is a key component of building a shared and better future so that government will work seamlessly, and in full partnership, to deliver real and meaningful benefits to all.

We must work hand in hand with community groups, churches, faith organisations, businesses and statutory agencies that already carry out such good work, because it is only through partnership that we can achieve our goals. We are committed to building on the work of the past, securing those foundations and reaching new heights through community collaboration. That top-up and bottom-down approach is the only way to ensure that the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration speaks for and represents the diversity of all our people and, crucially, is owned by all our people because it is the framework that they want, and it delivers what they want.

There are key aims in the CSI strategy, and the programme will support changes for people to promote fairness, equality, rights, responsibility and respect, with an emphasis on inclusion, interdependence, acceptance and understanding. It will embrace and support minority ethnic communities arriving into our society and create practical and open networks across communities and ethnic groups, North/South and east-west, to the benefit of all. It will also build on the shared values of human rights and equality to create a society that honours rights and accepts our civic responsibility to one another, and it will promote partnership communities that celebrate difference.

The strategy will support changes in places so that we have shared and safe spaces for working, shopping, socialising and playing; shared accessible and welcoming facilities that provide high-quality public services; greater sharing, respect and understanding for the expression of cultural diversity; safety for individuals and groups that wish to express and celebrate their identity peacefully; and cohesive integrated communities that share in education and integrated workplaces. However, what we do from here on in to give effect to concrete actions on the ground will build strong communities and give hope and pride to those isolated by physical, geographical or any other barrier. That work is vital.

Much work on the ground has continued unabated by individuals and groups working together in

and across communities to deal with difficult issues. Their commitment and hard work has allowed us to enjoy some of our most peaceful times for many years. The Executive have committed over £28 million during the current CSR period to resource such work, and we continue to work closely with the Special EU Programmes Body and other funders to deliver and ensure the maximum impact of our programmes and initiatives to guarantee real and meaningful good relations benefits.

Economic growth and prosperity are underpinned by stability, while violence, division and hate undermine that and rot away at the very foundations of our community. We require a stable society in which our children can play together, people can work together and families can live happily side by side regardless of their community or ethnic background or beliefs. That mutual acceptance and respect are the determining factors that will give us a stable, prosperous and growing economy.

In conclusion, and trying to look to the future, this is still a time of relative peace and opportunity in Northern Ireland. Although it remains a very challenging time both in economic and social terms, I believe that the will, the drive and the mindset of all of us is that we will deal with those challenges best by moving forward together. We must build for tomorrow. People who live in divided communities must be able to see and feel the impact of this new dispensation on the ground.

Our role, whether in the Executive or the Assembly, is to give leadership, work in partnership and lead by example to ensure that the effective implementation of the programme across government and its agencies is delivered. We must also ensure that the mechanisms that we put in place to guarantee its effective delivery and implementation are meaningful, targeted, robust and capable of standing the test of time, so that, over time, we are able to map progress on the health of good relations and make the necessary policy changes as and when appropriate.

The planning of the consultation process for the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration is at an advanced stage and will be robust and meaningful. We want to hear from all those interested, whether that is the person on the street, the business sector, the community workers, volunteers or the young people who will

move forward from the foundation that we are building. This debate is an excellent start, but it is only the beginning of the discussion. To quote Eleanor Roosevelt:

“For it isn’t enough to talk of peace. One must believe in it. And it isn’t enough to believe in it. One must work at it.”

Let us all commit ourselves to this project today. I hope that all Members will fully contribute their thoughts, views, ideas and actions to the programme as we move through the consultative stage.

I thank all of those who have taken part in what has been an informative and spirited debate, but there is perhaps a need to answer some of the misinformed, perhaps politically motivated and mischievous, comments. In the very short time that I have left, I will mention a few of those.

It is unfair for the proposer of the motion, Mrs Dolores Kelly, to suggest that we are so far behind in community work. She has demonstrated a clear lack of understanding and knowledge of the sheer scale of valuable and good work that is done day and daily by groups and individuals, including volunteers. Much of that work is supported by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and indeed by the Minister from the Member’s own party.

The proposer of the motion also referred to the flags protocol for the management and removal of flags. All expressions of cultural diversity will be dealt with in the CSI strategy. A flags protocol already exists, and we recognise that updates are needed. That work is ongoing.

She mentioned the good relations panel. That panel will be convened as part of the implementation of the CSI strategy and will oversee the development and progress of departmental goals and action. The panel will be chaired by an OFMDFM Minister. She mentioned the Executive commitment to the elimination of racism and sectarianism, and I think that I have covered that issue already. She also referred to the relationship between the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration, and, again, I think that I covered that, too.

I will address a point that Mr Kennedy made earlier — I think that he was referring to how we arrived at the strategy after the discussions around the Hillsborough Castle Agreement. He said that if it was that easy, many people

will ask why it was not done before. Obviously, developing the strategy is not that easy. Had it been easy, it would have been done during the Trimble/Mallon reign.

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

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank those who have made a contribution, and I hope that they will contribute positively to the consultation process.

6.15 pm

Mr McCallister: I thank the Members who spoke and those who said that they supported our amendment, although they were mainly from our own party. *[Laughter.]* That shows the vision in the Ulster Unionist Party.

My colleague Mr Kennedy, in opening the debate, made an excellent speech.

Mr McElduff: I did not hear the Member correctly. Did he say “vision” or “division” in the Ulster Unionist Party?

Mr Ford: He will let you know.

Mr McCallister: I will come back to the Member. It was “vision”, of course; he was right the first time.

In proposing our amendment, Mr Kennedy spoke about what we regard as important for a shared future. My party colleagues and I do not believe in the concept of separate but equal. When I attended the SDLP conference, I said that getting something on parades and something on the Irish language was not the way forward. Being constantly separate but equal is not the way to share our society.

Mrs Kelly drew attention to the SDLP’s record over the years on reconciliation and to that party’s commitment to completely nonviolent means, and it is important that that contribution be noted. Mr Ford said that he was determined to speak to the motion, only to spend most of his speech attacking the SDLP.

It has been an important debate. It was strange that Mr Bell talked about the success that has been built on the watch of the DUP and Sinn Féin and did not shy away from his partners in government, yet we hear that if the Ulster Unionist Party does not support the DUP next week, it may collapse the whole place. One

minute the Ulster Unionist Party is insignificant; the next, we are at the centre of his attention.

Mr Bell: I thank my friend Mr McCallister for those serious remarks on the devolution of policing and justice next week and the Hillsborough accord. Will he join me in thanking his leader, David Cameron, for his positive remarks on what the DUP achieved at Hillsborough?

Mr B McCrea: Can Mr McCallister help me to recall whether Mr Bell was ever in the Ulster Unionist Party, the Conservative Party or any other parties? Does he join me in welcoming Mr Bell to this place? For three long years, we laboured without his contribution, but, fortunately, he is now here to put us all right. I wonder to which party he will belong in the not too distant future.

Mr McCallister: I believe that Mr Bell has been in all those parties and in a fancy-dress party as well. *[Laughter.]* I congratulate him on breaking away from the traditional DUP mould and going to something fun and exciting.

He has been round all parts of the Province, and we heard about some of those great places in the debate. Mr McElduff gave us the Ulster-at-the-crossroads speech, although it turned out that he was talking about a crossroads in west Tyrone, where, hopefully, he flies an illegal flag.

Comments were made about how a shared future can be built. Make no bones about it: building a shared future is not easy. As the junior Minister made clear, many elements and many groups need to be involved. We have to make a start. No progress has been made in the past three years, although we are now led to believe that the imminent arrival of the Alliance Party into the Executive means that huge progress has been made. If the DUP and Sinn Féin had known that the Alliance Party was so cheap, they probably would not have set the bar quite so high.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member join me in thanking Mr Ford for all his efforts, because without him no progress on the strategy, in any form, would have been possible?

Mr McCallister: That is the Member's opinion; I could not possibly comment.

There are signs that something may be happening at last in OFMDFM. However, many other Executive functions need to move forward quickly. The strategy is long overdue. The

Minister did not say when it will be published, so we are still waiting to hear about that.

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

Mr McCallister: I support the Ulster Unionist Party amendment, and I urge other Members to do the same so that we can build a better society for us all.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Ms Lo to make a winding-up speech on amendment No 1. The Member should not feel that she has to follow the contribution of the previous Member to speak.

Ms Lo: It is a pity that the SDLP and the UUP do not feel that they can support our amendment, because, in so doing, people on the outside will think that the House is not united in supporting the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy, which has been making some progress.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Her remarks are somewhat premature, given that we have not yet seen the agreed cohesion, sharing and integration strategy.

Ms Lo: Would the Member not agree that at least some progress has been made? All of us have been asking questions over the past two and a half years. Certainly, I know that the SDLP and the Alliance Party have been doing so. At least we are seeing something, and that is a plus. A lot of Members —

Mr B McCrea: I swear that I just heard Ms Lo say:

"At least we are seeing something".

However, I am not sure that we are actually seeing the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy, so perhaps the Member will clarify what she meant. I hope that she will carry on in her humorous manner, because it is very entertaining. I thank her for that.

Ms Lo: I am glad that there is good humour here. I said that there has been some progress in seeing the strategy published in the future. I think that the Minister said that it will be published next week. We will wait and see.

A number of Members spoke about the delay in publishing the new CSI strategy. It is unsurprising that Mr Bell and Mr Shannon defended the delay and said that that it was better to get it right than to rush it through. However, the two-and-a-half-year delay in publishing the strategy has obviously created a huge vacuum of political leadership in the Executive's ability to provide a

vision for community harmony and to lead the way in tackling division in Northern Ireland.

Over the years, the people of Northern Ireland have earned a bad reputation worldwide for being sectarian and racist. I recall that 'The Guardian' called Northern Ireland the "race-hate capital of Europe." That is not justified. As my party leader mentioned, the New York Mayor said at our conference that we need to bring down the peace walls if we want to prosper from inward investment. That important strategy must be put in place in Northern Ireland to allow us to take such action.

I am pleased about the progress that has been made, and I welcome the future publication of the policy to tackle sectarianism and racism, which are the twin evils of prejudice in society. Other members of ethnic minority communities and I were instrumental in bringing about the racial equality strategy.

It broke my heart to see that strategy fall apart in its second year, and it is extremely important that it be brought back and included in the mainstream CSI strategy. I do not agree with what Mrs Kelly said about ethnic minority groups not wanting the racial equality strategy to be diluted. They are pleased to see that racial equality is part of a mainstream policy. When we talk about tackling sectarianism, we are also talking about tackling racism.

As a member of the all-party Assembly group on ethnic minority communities groups, highlighted the importance of —

Mrs D Kelly: It was my understanding that NICEM and others were extremely concerned that, if the racial equality strategy were contained in the CSI strategy, it would be diluted. Will the Member clarify their position?

Ms Lo: There is some concern, but they are pleased to see the two strategies coming together in the mainstream shared future strategy. That was the point that I was trying to make.

Mr Leonard mentioned the protection of ethnic minorities and an increased dialogue between groups. Importantly, he also highlighted the need for a change in attitudes.

As the junior Minister said, a shared future strategy will result in cross-departmental actions to tackle division in public housing, schooling and shared places. I was pleased to hear him say that we should all move together towards

a shared future and away from the hurt and the harm that division has caused in Northern Ireland.

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

Ms Lo: We must not forget that the cost of division in Northern Ireland is estimated at £1 billion each year. That money would be much better spent on public services.

Mr Attwood: I concur with what Dolores Kelly said about the shared future strategy going to the heart of our society. I also agree with the comments of Jonathan Bell, Mr Shannon, the junior Minister and everybody else who acknowledged that there must be a resolution because of the bitterness that has been created over the past 40 years. Over that period, so many people were needlessly killed, and tens of thousands of people were hurt.

In moving amendment No 1, Mr Ford said that the agreement between the First Minister and deputy First Minister on a draft strategy had changed the situation and, consequently, the motion was not particularly timely. Mr Ford has four or five questions to answer. In his speech, Mr Ford identified a shared future — not the security threat, unemployment, poverty or people suffering hardship — as "the biggest issue" facing our society. Mr Ford said that a shared future was the biggest issue facing every party, every Minister and every public body. He thought that a shared future was so important that he said that twice. He said that the final published strategy must apply to every part of government, every Department and every public agency.

Given that Mr Ford set such a high hurdle for the shared future strategy, and given that it is so central to, and has such primacy in, the future of our society, why does he place his confidence and that of his party in an unpublished document that the junior Minister said was not even in final draft form? How can someone who has based his high standard for the shared future strategy on a secret, unpublished and unfinished document tell people that he is prepared to be nominated for the post of Minister of justice? There is no consistency in that approach.

6.30 pm

However, in his own way, Mr Ford conceded the point. He said that he believes that, when the document is published, it will contain "significant

gaps” and that he will want to strengthen it. In his opening comments, Mr Ford said that equality laws had changed the nature of equality in the North and that there is now equality in every workplace. He may be right, but the reason that he is right is the rigour and vigour around the enforcement and monitoring of fair employment laws. However, Mr Ford is telling members of his party and people in the North that he can put himself forward for the justice Ministry even though he knows that there are “significant gaps” in the shared future strategy that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have decided on. I do not understand that inconsistency.

The inconsistency goes deeper. Mr McDevitt referred to the comments that Ms Lo made four days after Mr Ford’s email to his Liberal Democrat friends in the House of Commons. In her statement, Ms Lo, rightly, said that the Executive cannot duck the issue of a shared future any longer and that they need to produce a CSI strategy to show that they are doing all that they can to eradicate prejudice. Ms Lo set the Alliance Party standard: that the Executive had to take the issue forward and had to demonstrate how they were standing up for a shared society. What did Mr Ford do? He said that an unpublished secret document that OFMDFM has not yet even finished fulfils his standard for nominating himself for justice Minister. Ms Lo may wish to consider those matters.

Mr Ford replied on a point of information to Mr McDevitt about the email that he sent to his Liberal Democrat friends last year. He said that the Secretary of State may be:

“concerned at us pushing Shared Future too much as another distraction on way to devolution of justice.”

Mr Ford did not deny that that is in the email. The real issue is how Mr Ford responded to the Secretary of State’s view. Mr Ford’s response to the Secretary of State’s concern on the issue of a shared future was:

“If we wanted to be slightly nice to Shaun”.

He added:

“It’s not that I particularly want to be nice to him, but he is more or less doing the rights things at present.”

That is Mr Ford’s standard for creating a shared future threshold and template for his entry into government. He said that the Alliance Party should be “slightly nice” because the Secretary of State was concerned about the party pushing the issue of a shared future because it might be a distraction on the way to devolution.

Mr Ford said that it is an indictment on the leadership of the SDLP and the UUP that, when they led the Government in this Building, they did not make progress on a shared future. That confirms how mean-spirited and desperate Mr Ford is. He did not comment on the fact that during the short period when the SDLP and the UUP led the Government, the DUP was not fully in the Executive, Sinn Féin was not on the Policing Board, not one weapon had been put beyond use, banks were being robbed and intelligence was being stolen. That was the difficult, unstable and turbulent context that that Government worked in, and Mr Ford should applaud rather than denigrate their achievement.

None of us — neither Ford nor I, nor any party, other than the leaderships of the DUP and Sinn Féin, and certainly not any public body that has a right to know or any community that needs to have a stake in a shared future — knows whether any progress has been made on the shared future document.

We should be vigilant, however, because we know from experience that sensitive issues, left to the DUP and Sinn Féin alone, whether they be the devolution of policing and justice powers, parading or the shared future process, have not matured and developed in good time and in a proper way. Even if that were not the case, junior Minister Newton has urged the parties and the people to take the issue forward. He said that he wants to bring every part of the community forward together. To emphasise that point, the opening paragraphs of the Hillsborough Agreement rely on and refer to having a spirit of inclusiveness, partnership and equality.

If the DUP and Sinn Féin are real about having those sentiments — I trust that they are — and junior Minister Newton is sincere about bringing every part of the community forward together — I trust that he is — they should publish the shared future agreement between the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. One cannot, in this society, on issues of primacy and great sensitivity —

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: Yes.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I said that the document will be published shortly. It will be published so that Mr Attwood, his colleagues and all Departments can have the opportunity to scrutinise it and comment on it. If the document is found to be deficient in any way, they can have positive input into it. I hope that Mr Attwood's input will be positive. The document will be made available to him to scrutinise.

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

Mr Attwood: I can assure junior Minister Newton that he can rely on the SDLP, at least, to have that input. However, on issues of sensitivity and primacy, one cannot do business over the heads of the people. On issues such as parading, a shared future and the like, the people have the first right to know. Given that Mr Ford is relying on an unpublished document that is not yet even in final draft form, and given the issue of the devolution of policing and justice powers, on that ground, and on broader grounds, the document must be published now. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I am sure that Members did not mind my giving Mr Attwood a few extra seconds because the Minister took up some of his time. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will you inform the House under which Standing Order you have discretion to grant extra seconds? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Can we have some silence so that I can at least put the Question?

Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, Members should note that if the amendment is made, the Question will not be put on amendment No 2, as it will have been overtaken by the decision on amendment No 1. If that is the outcome, I will proceed to put the Question on the motion as amended.

I am sorry if some Members did not hear what I said, but some Members will just not keep quiet.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 43; Noes 23.

AYES

Mr Bell, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr T Clarke, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Leonard, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mr McKay, Mr McQuillan, Mr Molloy, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Paisley Jnr, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Lo and Mr McCarthy.

NOES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Cobain, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mr Gallagher, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McFarland, Mr McGlone, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Kennedy and Mr McCallister.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Tellers have been appointed as follows: Tellers for the Ayes are Declan O'Loan and Dominic Bradley, and Tellers for the Noes are Sue Ramsey and Jennifer McCann. The Assembly will —

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. That does not sound right.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I apologise. I am very grateful to the Member for putting me right. Tellers for the Ayes are Sue Ramsey and Jennifer McCann, and Tellers for the Noes are Declan O'Loan and Dominic Bradley.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 42; Noes 23.

AYES

Mr Bell, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr T Clarke, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Leonard, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mr McKay,

Mr McQuillan, Mr Molloy, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Paisley Jnr, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir.

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

NOES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Cobain, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mr Gallagher, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McFarland, Mr McGlone, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr D Bradley and Mr O'Loan.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the recent progress made by the First Minister and deputy First Minister in agreeing their draft cohesion, sharing and integration strategy; believes that publication of the draft for consultation will be an illustration of commitment to fruitful working relationships and to the building of a shared and better future; recognises the importance of a commitment at all levels of government and within civic society in creating a shared and equal society; and looks forward to early public consultation on the draft strategy which will give all parties and the wider community the opportunity to make a contribution to the shape and direction of final policy.

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

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Antisocial Behaviour: Holylands Area of South Belfast

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who speak will have approximately 10 minutes.

Ms Lo: I welcome the Minister. He is not here yet, but I know that he is coming.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I am here.

Ms Lo: Oh, sorry. I expected to see you on another Bench. Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I welcome the Minister and my fellow MLAs for South Belfast to the Adjournment debate, even though it is so late in the day, to consider antisocial behaviour in the Holylands in general and the measures put in place, particularly for the forthcoming St Patrick's Day.

No doubt, all of us have received frequent correspondence in relation to antisocial behaviour in the area. I have tremendous sympathy for residents there whose daily lives are affected by often sustained antisocial behaviour. I have been to meetings at which women were in tears as they told public representatives how they had been tortured by noise and unacceptable behaviour on the streets. I can only imagine the stress and anxiety caused by having to deal with those issues regularly, and I commend the residents for their continued patience and commitment to improve the area for everyone.

My staff and I regularly attend the partners and communities together (PACT) initiative, which has proved to be a positive step in providing a platform for residents to articulate their views, request specific actions and receive feedback on a monthly basis. Clearly, good communication with those who are most affected is at the heart of working towards a lasting solution for the Holylands.

The difficulties that residents in that area have experienced are widespread, and they require meaningful input from a range of agencies. That need was never demonstrated better than on St Patrick's Day 2009, when a disgraceful display of extreme antisocial behaviour —bordering on the riotous — was witnessed. In light of that, I was pleased to welcome the establishment of the Holylands stakeholder forum by the Minister for Employment and Learning. The forum draws together key individuals, agencies and organisations in order to hone a strategic approach and to implement an effective series of short- medium- and long-term measures. In October 2009, the forum issued its first action plan, which detailed ongoing and proposed initiatives from the agencies involved. In addition, Belfast City Council reconvened its Holylands inter-agency steering group in order to assume responsibility for monitoring progress on the action plan.

I must also commend the continued work of the PSNI, which committed itself to providing the Holylands with appropriate resources, particularly during peak periods, to deal with antisocial behaviour. I have heard many positive comments from residents in praise of neighbourhood and senior officers' commitment to tackling issues on all levels. Through the provision of funding, training and grass-roots co-operation, the PSNI has expressed its ongoing support for the community safety warden scheme.

As well as providing essential services, such as waste management, cleansing and environmental health, Belfast City Council has played, and continues to play, an integral role in drawing key players together. Through dedicated staff members and the community safety warden scheme, the council's community safety department has taken the lead in dealing with antisocial behaviour.

Since St Patrick's Day last year, Queen's University, the University of Ulster and the students' union have made a concerted effort to improve students' conduct by initiating an education campaign, which includes the distribution of literature and e-mails that warn of the consequences of engaging in antisocial behaviour; personal and auditor visits from university representatives; and campaigns that promote the sensible use of alcohol. They deserve our praise for taking their roles and responsibilities seriously. Since the start of the academic year, the universities have disciplined

more than 370 students for acts of antisocial behaviour; measures include advice, warnings, fines and suspensions.

With St Patrick's Day only a fortnight away, I am heartened to know that all the relevant agencies and education institutions have come together to roll out the action plan, which began yesterday, 1 March, and which will run until 18 March. Over the next two weeks, an awareness-raising and education programme will be launched to remind students about their neighbourhood responsibilities and to promote the students' union as an alternative venue to congregating in the street. Students will be bombarded with publicity, including an inter-agency educational leaflet, which will be distributed by community safety wardens and, in the wider university area, by PSNI officers.

There will also be educational messages on Cool FM and Queens Radio, which is run by the students' union. Messages from the Queen's University vice chancellor, the students' union president, the University of Ulster and Belfast Metropolitan College will remind students of their responsibilities. In addition, there will be educational articles in both universities' house magazines and a three-day — 9, 10 and 11 March — programme will involve calling on all students who live in the Holylands area to distribute the festival leaflet and to educate students about living in the community. From 14 March to 17 March, a drink-awareness campaign will take place in the students' unions at Queen's University and the University of Ulster.

Around St Patrick's Day, operational plans will be put in place by the various agencies. A special PSNI operation is planned from 14 to 18 March, with substantial resources for 16 March and 17 March. Neighbourhood officers will be employed, with technical support officers on close standby. There will be a graduated police response. If necessary, the police presence will increase as numbers on the streets increase. Police and community safety wardens will have joint patrols, and there will be a full quota of 21 wardens for 17 March. Wardens and police will enforce alcohol by-laws, which forbid on-street drinking.

Belfast City Council officers will be operational in the wider university area from 14 to 18 March, enforcing legislation regarding underage drinking and monitoring off-licences in the area. Belfast City Council's noise team will be fully

operational over the St Patrick's Day period. About 80 students' union sabbatical officers, university representatives, chaplains and representatives from Queen's University's clubs and societies will be present from early morning on 17 March to advise students and their friends not to congregate on the streets. Tea, coffee, water and food will be served at four points in the Holylands/university area.

Eight CCTV cameras are due to be installed in the Holylands before 17 March. That will be in addition to police mobile CCTV. Additional street cleaning has been organised for before and after 17 March. Extra night buses will operate from Queen's students' union, commencing on 15 March and running until 18 March. The buses will transport students home to the wider university area.

Between 15 March and 17 March, a range of events and activities will take place to take the focus away from alcohol and to help to reduce the potential for antisocial behaviour. The programme contains sports competitions in the Queen's Physical Education Centre and arts and culture events, including music and spiritual/religious activities, in Queen's University and the students' union. The students' union will host cultural events throughout the day. Low-alcohol drinks will be sold and low-cost food will be on sale from early morning. The students' union will be open from 10.00 am.

Both universities and key statutory agencies have undertaken considerable planning in advance of this year's St Patrick's Day to avoid a repeat of last year's disgraceful episode. I commend them for their joint efforts, and we hope that the day will be enjoyed in peace and good spirits by all who are in the area.

However, there are still many ongoing wider issues that the Executive need to consider in order to have an overarching long-term strategy regarding the character and quality of life in the area. We have seen the area undergo a major transformation, due to the unregulated development of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) and apartments to facilitate the demand for student housing. However, that has been to the detriment of a locality, the majority of which was once residential.

It is important to highlight the fundamental role that landlords and developers play in influencing the demography of the Holylands. Therefore, there is an urgent need for landlord registration

and regulation to hold landlords accountable for tenants' behaviour and for standards of housing. For example, an antisocial behaviour clause in a tenancy agreement allows a landlord to take action if a tenant is the cause of antisocial behaviour, but not all private landlords have that in their agreements. The Planning Service must take tougher enforcement action on unregistered HMOs and have control over applications for flats and HMOs in the area to stop the over-intensification of population there.

7.15 pm

Queen's University must explore avenues to increase student accommodation and to guarantee living quarters for first-year students at least. Perhaps that accommodation could be in the city centre, away from the Holylands.

We need to investigate the possibility of increasing the powers of the police to deal with antisocial behaviour in the area, so that they are able to move people on, apply spot fines and confiscate alcohol. The Department for Social Development's liquor licensing and registered clubs Bills will have the capacity to empower the PSNI to close nuisance licensed premises that have breached regulations and guidelines. That legislation needs to be enacted quickly to deal with irresponsible off-licences.

Many of the issues that I mentioned are raised in the stakeholder forum's action plan. I urge the Executive to take a collective approach to solve the perennial problem of antisocial behaviour in the Holylands.

Mr Spratt: I congratulate my colleague Anna Lo for bringing this debate to the House. We have been here many times before, and I know that the Minister for Employment and Learning has answered many questions in relation to the Holylands. I want to put on record my appreciation of what the Minister and his Department have done in trying to bring the various groups together, as it has been very important.

The problem that is experienced in the Holylands is creeping into other areas. In the past 10 days or so, I organised a visit with Minister Poots to the lower Malone area. We found that the problem with HMOs is creeping up towards Eglantine Avenue and is found in the whole lower Malone area as well. The problem is not confined to the Holylands area, although that

area saw the worst of what happened last St Patrick's Day.

I welcome the many moves that have been made by the various agencies over the past 12 months; I will not go over them all again. Much of the blame is placed on the universities, but sometimes the criticism that is directed at Queen's University in particular is ill-founded, to say the least. Of the 35 people who were arrested last St Patrick's Day, fewer than half were students. The others were people from various walks of life who came to the Holylands area and were involved in all sorts of antisocial behaviour.

Queen's University and the University of Ulster have done tremendous work over a protracted period, particularly Queen's, with various residents' groups. We should not take away from that; we should thank the universities for doing it and encourage them to continue going down that route. It is important to say that it is totally unfair when the blame is placed on students all the time. It is not always students, and it is unfair that sometimes they bear the brunt of the whole thing. However, let us face it: it is not just a St Patrick's Day problem, it is a problem in that area on, basically, a nightly basis. Most of the trouble is fuelled by alcohol and parties, and we all know what happens with all of that.

The police need to take robust action. I hear what they say about a gradual police response and all the rest of it, but they need to get in there and deal with antisocial behaviour and the many other problems. Some of those problems need to be nipped in the bud at a very early stage.

That can be done most effectively by having a large number of police officers, wardens and community stewards in the area and visible to the community, and who are there to deal with issues and to mingle with people from morning, throughout the day and, indeed, regularly at night. Some folk need to be trained to behave properly toward residents, not only on St Patrick's Day but on every other day of the year that they live in the area. Residents have a right to expect that. Landlords also have their part to play; as do those licensees who are quite happy to regularly sell cheap booze to people who are already intoxicated. There needs to be a much more responsible attitude shown.

During the past while, the Assembly has discussed policing and justice issues, and it will do so again next week. If policing and justice is

devolved in the near future, one of the first actions that the Assembly can take is to empower the police with the fixed-penalty system that works effectively in many other cities and parts of the United Kingdom. That legislation can deal with offences such as breach of the peace, minor criminal damage, disorderly behaviour, indecent behaviour, obstructing the police, and purchasing and selling alcohol to minors.

Many offences can be dealt with under a fixed penalty notice system. First and foremost, it sends out a warning to people without giving them serious criminal records. It tells them that their cards are marked and that if their behaviour continues, they will find themselves with criminal records that they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. First and foremost, young people should be given a chance. That system has worked well in many cities throughout the UK. I am aware from information that I received from Sheffield that the system has worked particularly effectively in that city. The Assembly must look at that seriously.

In her comments, Anna Lo referred to HMOs. Unfortunately, HMOs have almost gone beyond redemption in the Holylands. The problem is evident, and, frankly, I do not know which Minister in the Assembly would try to solve it. The mess was created by direct rule Ministers and the Planning Service prior to devolution. An absolute mess has been created in that area. It is disgraceful. The Minister saw it creeping into other areas when he visited the residents of the lower Malone Road during the past few days. That opened his eyes. Co-ordination is needed so that another Holylands is not created in a different area close to the university. I have tried to impress on planners and other people that they must look at that problem. Responsibility must lie with landlords as well.

It is incumbent on all of us to do what we can to try to make the situation better. I welcome all the measures that Anna Lo mentioned in her remarks, which are being put in place for St Patrick's Day 2010 by the students' union, the universities and many other people in the area. I hope that in 2010, people will be responsible and will listen to what the various agencies are saying. I hope that the new camera system, and so on, will bring added bonuses and benefits.

If similar misbehaviour occurs, the police must deal with it robustly. They must deal with it at

an early stage and take people to court. People must learn their lesson.

The sort of behaviour that took place on St Patrick's Day 2009 is not acceptable in any part of our city, any village, any town or anywhere else in the Province. I urge the police to ensure that they have the necessary resources in place. Alex Maskey and I raised that issue at a previous meeting of the Policing Board. I will be speaking to the police this Thursday to ensure that the proper resources will be available from a community and every other perspective on St Patrick's Day. I thank the Member again for securing the debate.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also thank Anna Lo for securing the debate. As she said, it is, regrettably, getting late in the evening, so we are not playing to a large gallery. Nevertheless, this is an important and timely issue.

I implore anyone who lives in the Holylands and anyone who wants to visit the area on St Patrick's Day to behave responsibly and to remember that people, whether students or non-students, live in the area. They should also remember that there are long-standing residents in the area who are trying to raise families, and so on. Anyone who is planning to go into the area should remember to treat such people and the community with respect.

As Jimmy Spratt and Anna Lo rightly said, some of the scenes that erupted in that area in recent years were disgraceful. No community should have to endure that. As Jimmy said, such incidents do not happen only on St Patrick's Day. Unfortunately, they take place regularly. That is a sad reflection on the people who are involved in that sort of antisocial behaviour. It is also a gross burden on the people who reside in the Holylands. Their homes are there, it is their area, they owe their lives to that community and they want to remain there.

It is fair to say that, in the past, the Holylands has been a highly desirable residential area. It always had a healthy mix of residents, including long-term residents who raised families there and professionals who moved to the area for relatively short periods. Such people were particularly associated with university or Health Service facilities in the locality. Of course, students also live in the area. Therefore, for many years, a healthy mix existed in that area, and it functioned very well as a thriving and

much sought after area in which to live. Many of the properties were desirable; in fact, many had considerable architectural merit. However, over the past number of years, for a variety of reasons, the area has been dramatically transformed to the point where what goes on is a burden on many people who live there. Many of the students who live there also have to endure some of the antisocial behaviour that takes place because by no means are all students in the area involved in such behaviour.

Ms Lo said that a longer-term plan is required for the area, and I agree. Unfortunately, too many people, whether government officials, people from other bodies or agencies, or, indeed, some elected representatives, regularly refer to the Holylands as "gone". Let us be honest: a lot of people will say that the area is lost and cannot be fixed or sorted out. I do not subscribe to that view.

As Jimmy Spratt and Anna Lo said, the problems are not confined to the Holylands. The problems associated with houses in multiple occupation and the existence of such a dense population with no management and no proper regulation have spread to the lower Ormeau area, Stranmillis, Ballynafeigh, the Lisburn Road, the lower Malone Road, and so on. The list is endless. Not only is it possible to reclaim the Holylands as a residential community, it is imperative that we do so. Not only would that help to fix and alleviate the difficulties that people in that area suffer from, but it would prevent problems from continuing to spiral out of control in other areas.

7.30 pm

I have been a representative of that area for the past nine years and, in truth, all the various stakeholders and agencies involved have done better at one time than at others. Frequently, people will be critical of the universities. At other times, they will be critical of landlords, while at other times, they will be critical of the universities or the Departments. During the past few years, if truth be told, each and every agency has, from time to time, done more and done better. That includes the police, who have been referred to.

Many people and many agencies — from the universities through to the students' union, the police and the various Departments with responsibility for aspects of work in that area — have done their best. I also commend Belfast City Council, which convened the inter-agency

group that has tried to manage the day-to-day problems. Over the past few years, the university has tried harder to tackle the problem at source, not just by enforcement but by encouraging students, if they are the target audience, to behave more responsibly. In that regard, I welcome the implementation plan designed to counteract or prevent any problems next week.

However, those are all short-term measures. It is unfortunate that we have to keep referring to the Holylands as a problem area. Most of the solutions put forward are about enforcement and about law and order, which play an important role. However, outsiders looking at the documentation would see that the actions that have been talked about and which are, unfortunately, necessary, involve powers of seizure, fixed penalty notices, alcohol-disorder zones, banning orders and confiscation orders. The list of enforcement measures is endless. Unfortunately, from time to time, they all have to be implemented.

Surely, it is a sad reflection when the bulk of what we are doing is trying to enforce some sense of law and order on St Patrick's Day. All the Members here this evening, and others who are not, accept the fact that people understand that there needs to be a much more comprehensive approach taken to the problem, and that is also true for all the stakeholders.

Several Departments are responsible, and I commend Minister Reg Empey for taking the lead on the establishment of the stakeholders' forum. However, Reg acknowledges that there is a limit to what he can do in his bailiwick. I call on all the Ministers who have a responsibility for the situation to co-ordinate their efforts. We must have a comprehensive, radical plan because the area is in crisis. It is not just about the antisocial element, although it is important and timely that we talk about that.

A radical, comprehensive approach must be taken. We must look at a compulsory requirement on first-year students living away from home to stay in university-regulated accommodation — whoever may supply that — as it has been demonstrated elsewhere that it moderates their behaviour. It is about changing the behaviour of people in the area. However, we must remind ourselves that those first-year students may move on somewhere else next year, while the residents who live in the area must suffer year

on year from those first-year students who, unfortunately, misbehave.

The Holylands encapsulate the fact that there is a wider problem in that area, which is likely to get worse if the University of Ulster moves into Belfast. I welcome those plans, but it must be stated that we need to manage that situation in the years ahead so that we do not burden other parts of the city with the same problems. We must prevent the same situation from happening elsewhere.

All Members present are committed to improving the situation. All the stakeholders who have been working with the Minister on the stakeholders' forum need to up their game and increase their response to the difficulties in that community. It has been said already that the Assembly has inherited the problems associated with the Holylands, but if we do not take the necessary radical approach in the years ahead, we will have failed. I do not want to stand here as a representative of that area at the end of this term and say that we did not do much about the problem. We owe it to that community to do much more than we are doing.

Mr McDevitt: In my opinion, the Holylands is a particularly nice part of Belfast. It is a place in which I first arrived in the early 1990s when it was the destination for weekends to meet friends in Belfast. Ironically, in the days before the ceasefire, it was a safe part of the city. The accommodation may have been dire and the standards poor, but it was a place to which young people could come to enjoy positive social interactions and to party with other young people in a community that had not been lost on streets that were considered to be safer than those in many other parts of Belfast. It was a place in which no one would ask where someone was from or where they were going to. People simply wanted to be part of a community that was diverse, deep and interesting. It is a terrible tragedy that the Holylands is not such a place in 2010.

The irony is that the accommodation is much better. A house in the Holylands now is not the sort of house that I remember walking into. It is a house in multiple occupation (HMO) that, generally speaking, has been built to a certain standard. However, by any stretch of the imagination, the area is overpopulated, and the original community has been squeezed to the point of practical destruction.

I hope that, this St Patrick's Day, Irishmen — be they nationalist Irish, unionist Irish, Hindu Irish or whatever — will come out and celebrate a shared festival. However, there is nothing positively Irish in behaving in the way in which some people behaved last year. That is not a positive expression of identity. It is not the right way to celebrate this island, and it is not the sort of image that this island should be portraying to itself or to the outside world.

I welcome the many and significant steps that have been taken since last year to better manage St Patrick's Day this year. I commend Minister Empey for taking the leadership on the issue, even though not everything that has fallen to the inter-agency group is directly within his remit. There is no question in my mind but that we will have a better experience this year than last. I know that because, in the past couple of weeks, I have met with the police, Belfast City Council and residents. I have attended a PACT meeting. I have met representatives from Queen's University at a university and a students' union level. I have also had conversations with the University of Ulster team. To say that all those groups are throwing the kitchen sink at trying to contain any potential issues this year would not be an understatement. Every possible and conceivable measure that could be taken is being taken. As a public representative, I join my colleagues from South Belfast in wishing those groups all the best and in saying that we will, of course, support the statutory agencies in doing what they can to make sure that we do not have a repeat of last year's behaviour.

That is great, but what we really need in South Belfast is a change in culture. We need to be able to reclaim the community for those people who wish to be part of it not for one or two years but for their lifetimes. We need to be able to bring the streets back into the ownership of our great city and to make them be what they used to be: a safe, interesting and diverse part of Belfast. We will have to take a few tough decisions in order to do that.

Some day the Assembly will have to come to terms with the problem of the "HMOisation" of the Holylands. I agree with Ms Lo, Mr Spratt and Mr Alex Maskey that that problem is not contained to the Holylands. It is creeping out of the Holylands, down the Ormeau Road, the lower Lisburn Road, the lower Malone Road, and into Stranmillis. We will have to reflect on how we

can unpick the mistake of a previous direct rule government. I do not know what the solution will be, but I do know that we cannot turn our backs on the community, fence it off into a pseudo-student village and tell the landlords, universities and transient population that it is theirs to do what they like with.

In the short term, there is much that we could do. We could continue to put pressure on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to enforce its regulatory powers over HMOs, including its powers to control health and safety, fire escapes and bins, and to enforce tidiness and general conditions in front gardens.

I have asked the Minister for Social Development to give those issues some attention in the next few months. We must be careful that the matter does not fall between two stools in the run-up to the implementation of the review of public administration, because that power will be transferred from the Housing Executive to the councils, so it would be easy for the regional agency to wait for the councils to pick up that responsibility. That should not be so, and we should continue to pressure the Housing Executive to deal with those problems today.

We could also have serious conversations about the incorporation of antisocial behaviour clauses into tenancy agreements. That relates to a motion that Alex Maskey brought to the House in January 2010, in my first week as an MLA, about the registration and greater regulation of landlords. Those conversations have not yet happened, and most landlords are resisting the incorporation of antisocial behaviour clauses into their tenancy agreements. That would be an obvious way to put a young person, a not-so-young person or any tenant on notice that when they live in a certain place, they must live by certain rules.

This evening's Adjournment debate, which Ms Lo commendably secured, relates to general antisocial behaviour in the Holylands, and it is worth acknowledging that there has been some serious antisocial behaviour in the past few weeks. Two weekends ago, on a Friday night, there was a disturbing incident in which three young people were stabbed. On the Sunday night, another person was stabbed. The police are concerned because the incidents came out of the blue. There had been no pattern of knife crime in that part of the city, and we must all resolve to ensure that a pattern does not

develop and that those incidents do not become a sign of things to come.

At a lower level, all sorts of irritable behaviour impact not only on long-term residents but on students who are trying to enjoy a quality of life in the Holylands. I am thinking of the noise of taxi horns in the middle of the night. In the Holylands, taxi drivers think that it is OK to pull up outside a house and blow the taxi's horn. They do not do that on my street; I guess that they do not do it on Mr Maskey's street, Ms Lo's street, Mr Spratt's street, the Minister's street or, indeed, the streets of any of the officials sitting here. However, they do it in the Holylands. That is antisocial not only because drunk students are running amok but because the cabbie who insists on doing that will not get out of a car to ring a doorbell.

It does not stop there. Dial-a-drink services are rife in the Holylands, and the police are playing cat and mouse with the few firms that insist on continuing to make that service available to thirsty students at 3.00 am. Yet again, that impacts not only on long-term residents but on students who are trying not to spend the entire night awake and who are looking forward to a good social life, followed by some good rest.

Litter is an ongoing problem, and there is an onus on landlords to tackle that problem and to enforce their duties under tenancy agreements.

I will not go on for much longer, except to say that I would be happy if we returned to this topic in a year or so to talk about how we had reclaimed that part of Belfast and to think, in a structured way, about how to tackle the HMO problem. That should be done on a cross-party basis because people should not make party politics out of the issue. We could debate how to begin to unpick the mistakes of the past and how, ultimately, to provide a place for students to stay, for families to grow and for residents to remain in an area that we can all still call part of this city and not a separate place for a separate group.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I thank the Members who contributed to the debate for their comments about my Department and its activities. Last year, I was in the Holylands on the night of St Patrick's Day and saw the situation for myself. For residents, there were very distressing scenes. Most residents had been moved from the area, but for those who remained, and for

students and other tenants who were trying to have a normal life on a day of celebration, the situation was utterly impossible. It was a riot scene. The place was a filthy mess, with glass everywhere and people in a very disorderly state. Generally, the area had been turned into a hellhole.

7.45 pm

Although I accept all that Members have said, my Department does not have exclusive opportunities to deal with those matters. However, it does have a role in higher education, and I felt that my Department was responsible because the public see the problems in the area as a student issue, even though, as Mr Spratt said, other people have come into the area and, indeed, other people have been prosecuted. The addresses that were given by many of those people were well outside the area.

I commend Belfast City Council and all the groups that prepared the plan. Two forum meetings have taken place, and people have come in to be part of editorial groups to work up the plan. We have tried to broaden the base of people who are involved, so students, residents, landlords, Departments and others are being brought in. It is a multi-departmental issue. I have been in touch with the Minister of the Environment, the Minister for Social Development, Minister Goggins and others.

I have spent many years on Belfast City Council's planning committee, and, year after year, we warned planners about what was happening in the area. You could not talk to them. They did not listen, and they have allowed the situation to get to an extreme point. The guidelines on HMOs reflect the situation that has been created. The question now is how will we fix the situation?

It is a long-term issue, but we took the view that something had to be done this year to try to avoid the terrible situation that developed last year. I commend the work of the people who have been trying to find a solution for many years, and we know that Belfast City Council contributes large resources to that effort. Every week of every year, the council puts substantial resources into cleaning the place up. Around 15% or 18% of the council's cleansing budget is spent in that area. That is totally unreasonable and unacceptable. As Mr McDevitt and Anna Lo said, landlords may be resisting the inclusion of certain measures in tenancy agreements,

and there are issues to do with front gardens. Everyone will have to put their shoulders to the wheel to get a solution, because there are so many different facets.

I totally disagree with the idea that has been floating around that the area should be cleansed of residents. It is a stupid idea, because it goes against people's human rights. We want to do what we can physically to try to at least make the area habitable for as many people as possible. It should be one of the most sought after residential areas in Belfast. It is a beautiful setting. It is extremely convenient in that it is close to educational facilities, social life and the city centre. In any other part of the world, it would be one of the most sought after areas of the city. It is one of the few areas that has a real sense of potential for a community to be developed and which has potentially high quality housing stock. We should be concentrating on the area.

I have never seen the issue primarily as a law-and-order problem. I do not want the problem to be solved by sending in Land Rovers at 7.00 am to occupy and to hold the ground and make people's lives a misery as well as making life a misery for police officers. No one wants that, but, as Mr Spratt said, if people refuse to conform to reasonable social norms, there has to be a response. I know that the police do not want to get involved if they can avoid it, and I do not want to see lines of Land Rovers parked across the street with people chucking stones at them. That is not where we are or where we should be going.

Anna Lo raised the issue of first-year students living in university-owned accommodation, and that point has been raised before. We know that both universities have a stock of accommodation. Given that Northern Ireland is a relatively small place, people who attend university here, particularly those who live in the Belfast area, have the option of going home at the weekends. I do not know how successful we would be in enforcing a policy with regard to residential university accommodation. However, if the universities come to us with suggestions, we will, of course, consider them. The issue affects not only students of the two universities but students of Belfast Metropolitan College. Moreover, there are non-student tenants in the area who work in the hospitals and other agencies. Therefore, it is not entirely a student issue.

Last year, I was asked what action the police and universities had taken against the people who were involved in the disturbances. During the day's trouble, 35 persons were identified, 16 of whom were students. Those are my figures, and they might be similar to those of other Members. So far, there have been 16 prosecutions. Six prosecutions directed by the Public Prosecution Service are still in the system and there is no result as yet. In three cases, it was directed that there would be no prosecution, and one individual was found not guilty. In addition, I believe that there were nine cautions, informed warnings or advice and warnings. The University of Ulster disciplined 15 students who were found to have breached the university's ordinances, and Queen's University disciplined 23 students as a result of complaints that were received between 16 March and 20 March 2009. That is the stick of the carrot-and-stick approach.

I have been working with, and have had meetings with, the student representatives. I took the view that students should take on as much responsibility for dealing with their peers as possible, and I must say that they responded positively and showed interest in doing that. They were prepared to take responsibility, and we were prepared to offer some modest financial assistance to help them. Any reasonable person would say that everybody in the statutory sector has stepped up to the plate to try to make St Patrick's Day a day of real celebration for the people in that area rather than one of dread. That is what we are trying to do through the substantial range of engagement that is taking place.

I commend my colleagues in the Department and in other agencies who have worked so hard throughout the year to achieve as much as we have achieved. CCTV may prove instrumental in ensuring that people realise that there is a high risk of their being prosecuted. I agree with Conall McDevitt that people who ring dial-a-drink to get alcohol delivered into that area in the middle of the night during those celebrations are grossly irresponsible. The licensing trade has said that it is prepared to participate in addressing the issue. We have got the right mix of people to tackle that type of behaviour, so I can only hope that, with the support of all those organisations, especially the students' union, we can ensure that the day is one of celebration, not destruction.

Mr McDevitt spoke about finding long-term solutions to the problem, such as planning, and I hope that the House will return to that issue at a later date. I hope and pray that people in the Holylands have a happy St Patrick's Day.

Adjourned at 7.54 pm.

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Regional Development

Rathlin Island

Published at 11am on Tuesday 2 March 2010

The Minister for Regional Development

(Mr Murphy): I am pleased to inform Assembly members that the Executive has endorsed its Policy for Rathlin Island on 25 February 2010.

Public consultation on the draft Policy concluded on 18 September 2009 with a total of 14 responses received from organisations and individuals, including a combined response from the Islanders. The responses were supportive of the overall policy and its aims and objectives and also the proposed Forum and Action Plan.

Officials from my department held a very productive and successful consultation event on Rathlin Island on 7 October 2009. The event was attended by around two thirds of the Islanders who among other things expressed a desire for a healthy community with affordable housing and education all playing their part; better roads; help for farming and fishing industry; nursing cover and efforts to keep young people on the Island. There was also the suggestion that a Rathlin brand should be created, i.e. a green island with a neutral carbon footprint; to expand the use of renewable energy and recyclables; to maximise the use of local produce; to extend the attractions beyond the puffin season; and to establish an island of festivals.

The issue of post primary education provision was identified as an additional strategic objective and has been subsequently incorporated into the policy.

Copies of the final policy are available in the Assembly Library.

Work has now commenced on the development of an Action Plan designed to implement the policy and officials from my Department are continuing to engage and work closely with the islanders, other government departments and bodies who are all participating in its development.

I am very conscious that we will be developing the Action Plan at a time of increasing pressure on our finances. The purpose of the Action Plan is to identify priorities for the island, to make progress in addressing the needs of the islanders but also to manage their expectations.

A Forum will be established to monitor progress chaired by myself and will include island representatives and senior officials from relevant government Departments and local bodies.

I intend to make a further statement when the draft action plan has been prepared.

