
Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 8 March 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Points of Order

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to today's business, I will refer briefly to some points of order that were raised during last week's sittings. I remind the House that, in the past, I have encouraged Members to raise matters of concern with me outside the Chamber rather than on the Floor of the House.

Over the past number of weeks, there has been an abuse of points of order in the House to the point where Members are using them to have debates on points of order. Rather than raising issues through points of order in the House, Members would be better off talking to me outside the Chamber, because they would achieve so much more.

I also caution Members not to seek to use points of order to start debates on points of order either with me or with other Members. I have already spoken to some of the Members who raised points of order last week, and I intend to speak to others today or tomorrow.

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

Mr Speaker: I warn the Member not to raise any point of order that he has already raised in the House. I have given the Member quite a bit of latitude. I have had two face-to-face meetings with him, and I have allowed him to raise the same point of order on at least four occasions. If it is a totally different point of order, I am happy to take it, provided that it is a point of order.

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You may recall that, beyond the matter that I have raised on four separate occasions, I raised a separate point of order last week with you in relation to the comment made by a Member who referred to the "stigma" in relation to applicants to the PSNI. I invited you to make a ruling on

that matter because it impacted not necessarily on Members but on —

Mr Speaker: Order. I made a very clear ruling on 24 November 2009 that we needed to move away from examining specific words that are used in the Chamber, because, when it comes to unparliamentary language, it means different things to different Members. On 24 November 2009, my ruling was absolutely clear. Members might believe that that is a weakening of my position; I assure them that it is not. I assure Members who still believe that they can cross the line that they will be dealt with, albeit in a different way, in the hope that we can bring dignity to the House.

The Member should not go there. I had a discussion with him and Mr McDevitt this morning about a range of issues and how I intend to deal with them in the future. I have sympathy with what the Member has said to me privately this morning and with his comments in the House. However, I ask the Member and the whole House to allow me to develop this issue.

Mr Attwood: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. *[Interruption.]* Some Members might yawn in relation to the authority and integrity of the House; that is a reflection on them. This morning's conversations were about comments that Members have made about other Members. This is about —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is coming very close to challenging my authority and ruling on the issue. I ask the Member to reflect on and be careful about what he is saying. I will not take any further points of order on the issue, and I will now move on.

Suspension of Standing Orders

Mr Cobain: I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 8 March 2010.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 8 March 2010.

Mr Speaker: As the motion has been agreed, today's sitting may go beyond 7.00 pm, if required.

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Special EU Programmes Sectoral Format

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

The Minister of Finance and Personnel

(Mr S Wilson): I note that the House was in enthusiastic form this morning for that first vote.

The North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) met in special EU programmes sectoral format in Dublin on 17 February 2010. The Council last met in that format in September 2009. The Government of the Republic of Ireland were represented by Finance Minister, Brian Lenihan, who chaired the meeting. I represented the Northern Ireland Executive and was accompanied by the Social Development Minister, Margaret Ritchie.

Mr Pat Colgan, chief executive of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), provided an update on the progress of its work since September 2008. He advised that the Peace II and INTERREG IIIa programmes, which relate to the 2000-06 EU funding period, are now in the final stages of closure. SEUPB remains confident that both programmes will earn all the relevant EU receipts.

Mr Colgan advised us of the progress of the current Peace III programme and the cross-border INTERREG IVa programme. Since 2007, both programmes have been receiving and assessing funding applications from throughout their respective eligible areas. Mr Colgan reported that both programmes were performing well. Between them, the two programmes have approved 139 projects, representing funding of around €265 million. He reported that in 2009 Peace III had spent €21 million and INTERREG IVa had spent €16 million, both comfortably above the relevant EU spending targets. As a result of that expenditure, neither programme will have any of its budget deducted by Brussels.

The Council noted SEUPB's progress on a number of issues relating to the Peace III and INTERREG IV programmes. Peace III projects included efforts to ensure that the needs of victims and survivors of the terrorist campaign are properly addressed. The Peace III theme of acknowledging and dealing with the past has

a particular focus on victims and survivors. To date, it has approved 55 projects, representing €23 million in funding. Ministers emphasised how important it is that that work continues over the remaining years of the programme and that the direct focus on victims and survivors is maintained.

Ministers also agreed that it is essential that both communities participate in the Peace III programme, and they noted and welcomed the work that SEUPB is doing to encourage applications from the Protestant community. Research expected towards the end of this year will provide the first indication of community participation in the Peace III programme. The Council noted that implementation of the local peace and reconciliation action plans has begun.

The Council noted that concerns raised by the five local authority-based groups regarding the approval of their multiannual plans for INTERREG IVa are being addressed. Pat Colgan reported to us that individual projects based on the plans are being progressed through the INTERREG programme selection procedures. There are 63 such projects across the five groups. Each will need to demonstrate its relevance to the agreed INTERREG aims and objectives and to demonstrate value for money in exactly the same way as any other application for INTERREG funding. It was reported that nine projects that were submitted by the groups have already been approved for INTERREG funding and that a further 37 remained under assessment. According to SEUPB's indicative timetable, all 37 should have their decision — either way — by July. The remaining 17 projects have so far submitted too little information to allow assessment to begin.

Ministers noted the following key activities and priorities for SEUPB in 2010: the management and delivery of the 2007-2013 Peace III and INTERREG programmes, ensuring that all targets are achieved; ensuring that SEUPB services are delivered efficiently; supporting North/South engagement with the EU-funded transnational and inter-regional programmes; and ensuring a successful closure of the Peace II and INTERREG IIIa programmes.

The Council noted that SEUPB had applied efficiency savings of £262,000 in the 2010 budget. In addition to those savings, SEUPB will reduce EU programme running costs, mostly for technical assistance, by €2.4 million in

2009 and 2010 and €3.1million for 2011-15. Those savings will enable higher expenditure on projects.

The Council approved the 2010 business plan of the SEUPB and recommended a budget provision for administration costs of £2.254 million and EU programme expenditure of £67.659 million. The Council aims to meet again in special EU programmes sectoral format in October 2010.

12.15 pm

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Weir): I thank the Minister for his statement. He mentioned the previous under-representation of applications from the unionist community. I appreciate that an evaluation of measures taken will be carried out at a later stage, but will the Minister outline what proactive measures have been taken to encourage and facilitate greater representation from the unionist community and to increase the number of applications from it?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Quite an amount of work has been done. As I said in the statement, we will not know how effective that has been until the evaluation of the work has been carried out. There has been direct contact with, for example, the Orange Order and institutions therein and with community associations that are representative of and exclusively in the unionist community. I visited some of the projects that received funding, and we hope to see an end to the under-representation of the Protestant community in the applications.

One of the problems has been that fewer applications have been received from groups in the unionist community than from the nationalist community. As a result, fewer applications are going through. That is where the under-representation has occurred. We have been working with those groups. There has been direct contact with them, and I have received good feedback from some of the groups that feel that they got a sympathetic hearing and that they received good advice and guidance on the projects that they are applying for. At the end of the day, they have to meet the criteria. The more capacity there is in the unionist/Protestant community, the more effective that work will be.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Ms J McCann): Go raibh maith

agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. He will be aware that the five partnerships raised concerns about INTERREG IVa funding. Will he assure the House that those five partnerships will still receive the €60 million for the multi-area plans that they submitted to INTERREG IVa?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There was some difficulty with the five local authority partnerships. The first action that we took was to make some changes to the application process so that the selection criteria are clearer. The selection criteria have not changed, but we provided clarification on the information that needs to be provided in support of the applications to enable them to be processed.

Nine applications worth €5.5 million have been received by the steering committee in respect of which approval has been given and letters of offer issued. There are 37 applications in the system on which we hope and expect a decision to be made by July 2010. That does not mean that a positive decision will be made on them, but they will be assessed by July. There are 17 applications for which insufficient information has been provided and on which no assessment or final decision can be made.

There is no guarantee that all 63 projects will succeed. However, we are happy that we are working apace to ensure that the money is spent and spent on time and that the help and clarification that may not have been there at the start is now available to the groups.

Mr Cree: I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council. I thank the Minister for his timely report. Is he aware that the multiagency plans suffered significant delay largely because of the board's changing advice to the various councils? Five local authority-based partnerships expressed no confidence in the programmes body. Is the Minister satisfied that enough has been done to restore the confidence of the local authorities involved?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The multiannual plans that the local authority-based groups developed were agreed some time ago. There may have been a misunderstanding that the multiannual plans were all that was needed, but they provided too little detail to allow funding decisions to be made. That is one of the reasons why we have now given clarification and explained the process, what has to be done

and what information has to accompany the applications so that they can be processed.

That message seems to have got through because, as I said to the Chairperson of the Committee, we have approved nine applications worth £5.5 million, and there are others in the pipeline that we should approve by July 2010. I hope that that is an indication that the local authority-based groups now understand and are doing what has to be done. We are determined to process applications as quickly as possible.

I met two local authority-based groups and got an understanding of the difficulties that they face and their misapprehensions about the multiannual plans. I hope that the issue has been sorted out. However, it is a complex area, and we do not want to give any money back. If Members are aware of any difficulties, I want to hear about them so that we can keep on top of the matter.

Mr O'Loan: INTERREG IVa, which is overseen by the Department, is progressing well. Having said that, I do not overlook the concerns that were expressed by the local authority-based groups, and I am hopeful that they are being addressed properly. Officials from the SEUPB present themselves extremely well when they come before the Committee, and they give me a lot of confidence about how the programmes are being operated. Departmental officials, who also come before the Committee, also engage well with the programmes. Given the success of INTERREG IVa, does the Minister, when reading from a wider script, feel that there are lessons to be learned about the immense benefits that the adoption of an inter-regional approach can bring for our economy and public service delivery?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have never made any secret of my belief that, because we share a land boundary with the Irish Republic, it makes sense to co-operate, where possible, to bring about a better use of resources. Any Finance Minister would want to achieve the best value for money and avoid duplication. Of course, where possible, we should marry plans on one side of the border with those on the other side of the border to avoid costly delays and so on.

Some of the programmes illustrate that sensible co-operation can lead to a better delivery of service. I am not saying that that is true all the time or that INTERREG IVa always represents

the best method of delivery, because there may well be other ways in which that can be done. However, any sensible person would want plans to be married so that we do not have unnecessary overlap.

Dr Farry: I commend the Minister for fitting in the NSMC meeting in Dublin, given all the long Budget debates that we had in the Chamber in February. Does the Minister agree that the real way in which we test the success of the programmes is not by the amount or efficiency of spend but by the impact of the schemes on the ground? Similarly, the quality of the projects will not be best measured by examining what side of the community they come from. If we are genuinely addressing good relations, the projects, by definition, will embrace both the Protestant and the Catholic sections of the community.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Let me take the Member's last point first. It is important that the money is spent as the Member describes within the theme that is designed to produce a greater understanding. It is valuable to spend it in that way.

I visited the headquarters of the Orange Order, which has benefited from some of this money for educational projects. Two points emerged from that meeting. First, a significant number of Catholic schools are invited to visit and to have explained to them the Order's background and what the Order is about. That is designed to try to destroy some of the myths that there are around the Orange Order and a whole lot of things associated with the unionist community. If that bears fruit, some of the contention around what many unionists see as a cultural event but what — as a result, sometimes, of the activities of mischievous people — is seen in the nationalist community as a bit of political coat-trailing will abate. The money will have been well spent, for it will have an impact on the security situation and on community relations. The Orange Order is to be commended for its work, as is SEUPB for the way that it has financed that. I use that as an illustration, but there are many other examples and that is just one that I am familiar with from conversations that I have had in the last couple of weeks.

The other point that the Member made related to impact on local communities. One of the changes in this funding is that we are now going for larger projects, some of which will have a

more lasting impact and leave a legacy. People sometimes look back at INTERREG IIIa and Peace II and ask what has been their long-term effect. I am probably off script here, but I do not mind. Some of the money could perhaps have been spent more wisely and made a greater impact. Members are concerned about delays or what they perceive as delays. However, they must accept that, when we target larger, more complicated projects, a lot more work is involved in getting them processed and assessed. There is an up-front cost in that but, in the long term, the benefits are greater.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his statement. What is being done to help the 17 groups that submitted too little information?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In all cases where groups have submitted too little information, they are made aware of what information is outstanding. They are told what has to be done to enable the projects to progress. In some cases, the reason why too little information has been sent is that the outstanding information is not there, and the projects may fail at the end of the day. However, it is not a case of our sending the application back and saying, "Tough. There is not enough information here". It is explained to them what additional information is needed and what is needed for the process. Hopefully, then, they will come back. For some of the 37 applications that are currently being assessed, some additional information was required. That was supplied, and they are now being processed.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. My question follows on from Adrian's. We must wait until July to discover how many of the 37 applications being processed and evaluated will succeed. The Minister referred to efficiency savings and technical support: will they have a detrimental impact on applications that have not come up to scratch or not satisfied the criteria?

A matter of more serious concern was not reflected in the statement, but I would be surprised if it did not arise during the sectoral meeting. Projects have had to be withdrawn not because they do not satisfy the criteria or are unable to draw down the European money but because they could not access, in the current economic downturn, the necessary matching funding. Has there been any discussion on how

to address that problem? The tentacles of the recession affect all sorts of programmes.

12.30 pm

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Technical assistance efficiency savings between now and 2015 should amount to £5 million, all of which will be poured into new projects. We identified superfluous technical assistance, which means that savings can be made that will not harm efficiency. The Member is right that there is no point in making savings only to find that projects cannot go ahead. We believe that administrative savings can be made, and extra money can be ploughed into projects.

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

The Member raised the issue of the financial difficulties in the Irish Republic, where some Departments had spent their full capital allocation, resulting in moratoriums being placed on projects. Peace III funding is offered to Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, so there are cross-border elements. If match funding cannot be found, a project cannot go ahead.

After discussions with Minister Lenihan, my understanding is that priority for new capital allocations will be given to projects that are already in the system. When capital allocations are made to departmental budgets next year, priority will be given to projects that are in the system or are required to meet international commitments. Rather than projects being halted, they will probably be delayed until those capital allocations are made in the next financial year.

Mr Bell: I declare my membership of the Committee of the Regions and an SEUPB funding body.

I welcome the Minister's positive statement. Will he join me in welcoming the good stewardship that means that there has been no reduction in finance from Brussels and that, at a time of unparalleled recession in Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland is receiving direct finance? Will he ensure that his statement underlines the fact that the direct focus on victims and survivors, who have suffered so much, is maintained and, if possible, enhanced? Given that the evidence base shows a lower application rate from the Protestant community, will the Minister ensure that SEUPB officials continue to encourage applications from the Protestant community

and that they monitor the effectiveness of that encouragement?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Mr Deputy Speaker, you will have to take that boy aside and tell him that he is allowed only one question, not three, on ministerial statements. I will try to answer all three questions.

We still need to evaluate whether the efforts that have been made so far have been effective. At the very least, more applications are being made, more help is being given and more attention is being paid to the under-represented section of the community. It remains to be seen what the outcome will be, but the SEUPB has not pulled back. The Minister for Finance in the Irish Republic, Brian Lenihan, supports the issue as much as I do. At the meeting, he emphasised that he wants a more even spread of money. The pressure comes not only from the unionist side but from the Irish Republic.

The Member's second question was on victims and survivors. I should have the figures somewhere in my big black book of answers. However, I will write to the Member with the precise figure. Peace III money places an emphasis on victims and survivors, and that will continue.

With regard to money's not being returned to Europe, there have been discussions about the N+2 targets for Peace III and INTERREG IVa. Given that other parts of the EU were not meeting some of the targets, there was discussion about whether they should be relaxed. We are meeting those targets, so that does not apply to us. Therefore, there is no danger of money being lost or sent back to Brussels. If anything, consideration is being given to changing the targets because other Administrations have failed to spend the money. However, we are well on target.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As the Minister said, Members should ask one question.

Mr Kinahan: I would love to ask the Minister many questions, but I have just one. I declare an interest as a member of Antrim Borough Council, which is part of the North East Partnership.

I am concerned that the advice and guidelines keep changing. I know that the Minister said that things are more complex, but will he consider some form of fast-tracking or dynamism to get the applications that were

mentioned in the statement processed before the end of July, or will we have to wait until then?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Some things have happened already. Perhaps I did not make myself clear: the deadline for the receipt of the 37 applications is between now and the end of July. The steering committee will process some applications before July, but the deadline to have all 37 processed is the end of July. I am sorry if I did not make myself clear about that.

I am interested in what the Member said. I know that people say that Members of the Assembly should not be members of local councils; however, the Member illustrated a very important issue in bringing to the Assembly some knowledge of what happens at local level. If there is still some confusion about what is required, especially for the local authority groups, I would like to hear from the Member. As I said, I listened to two of the groups concerned, and we sought to make the criteria and the selection process much clearer to them. If there is still contradictory advice, changing rules or changing selection criteria, I would be more than happy to speak to the Member or to receive a delegation from his council or the group of councils in which he is involved so that we can ensure that there is no misunderstanding.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for his statement. Returning to the issue that his party colleague Mr Bell raised, will the Minister provide to Members or lodge in the Assembly Library the details of the 55 projects that have been approved under the theme of acknowledging and dealing with the past? When it comes to funding those 55 projects and addressing that theme, is the Minister satisfied that the overall balance of that funding among groups, organisations, communities, and victims and survivors is appropriate?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As I am sure the Member knows, I do not have the details either in my head or in my papers of all the projects that have been funded. However, there should be transparency in the matter, so I am more than happy to provide that information. I suspect that the Member was alluding to the amount of money that goes to ex-prisoner groups as opposed to victims' groups. We should not forget that prisoners' groups qualify under all three themes. Before I took up my position, I was unhappy that the rules that were set perhaps favoured groups that many

people thought should not get such favourable treatment. Indeed, now that I am in the post, I remain unhappy with that situation.

However, the rules have been established, and applications must be processed on the basis of those rules. I think that we can supply information on the balance of the groups that have applied, the groups that have been successful and the total amounts of money awarded.

Ministerial Statement

Draft Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill

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

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. If the Finance Minister were to move from his position on the Front Bench, I would start, but with your permission —

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): The Minister may regret chasing me from my seat so quickly if he is looking for money. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of the Environment: We are not looking for his money on this occasion, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I wish to make a statement about the draft clean neighbourhoods and environment Bill, which I issued for public consultation on 1 March. I am delighted to have received Executive clearance to proceed with the draft Bill, and I appreciate the many supportive comments that I have received from ministerial colleagues in respect of it.

It is very important to understand the magnitude of the draft clean neighbourhoods and environment Bill. It is about much more than the individual elements of the Bill, important though those elements are. It is about more than litter, graffiti, fly-posting, noise, nuisance or dog litter. Although those issues and others addressed in the Bill merit our attention, taken together, they have a cumulative impact on people and communities that goes far beyond tidy streets.

First and foremost, the Bill is about promoting quality of life by taking care of the environment. Clean neighbourhoods are healthier, safer and happier neighbourhoods. Litter, noise, nuisance vehicles and vandalism attract antisocial behaviour, crime, long-term illness and all of the social problems that have a high cost for communities, the ratepayer and the taxpayer. That is the context in which the Bill's purpose must be seen and welcomed.

Since the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 was introduced by the UK Government in England and Wales in May

of that year, my Department has been receiving calls from many quarters about the introduction of corresponding legislation in Northern Ireland. MLAs, MPs, district councils, Tidy Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), the chief environmental health officers' group and other interested parties have called for the introduction of clean neighbourhoods legislation in Northern Ireland.

Until now, we have been unable to respond positively to those calls because of resource pressures. However, following a review, and despite the challenging financial circumstances that we face across the Executive, I have made a point of finding the necessary staff resources to look at the issue. We must now consider the task of how, with the support of appropriate legislation, we can help district councils in Northern Ireland to deal more effectively with a range of problems associated with local environmental quality.

My view, informed by representations from the local government sector in particular, is that we should aim to provide councils here with broadly the same powers that their counterparts in England and Wales have under the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005. Those powers are important, because they will enable councils to tackle the issues directly and because they will allow them to do so in a more streamlined and less resource-intensive way. Used properly, the powers proposed in the draft Bill should cut red tape and enable councils to do more with their resources to make a serious impact on the full range of issues addressed in the Bill.

The Bill will address the following issues: litter of all forms, including, for example, chewing gum litter that blights the appearance of the footpaths in our towns and cities; cigarettes and other litter that is casually cast aside; illegal fly-posting and graffiti, which degrade local environments; and irresponsible dog ownership and dog-fouling, which further degrade our public spaces and, at best, present an unpleasant hazard for young and old alike. There are other, no less important issues that affect the quality of life in our local neighbourhoods, such as noise levels, nuisance or abandoned vehicles and problems caused by poorly directed domestic artificial lighting.

The Bill deals with all those matters, which is why I say that it is important. It deals with a

wide range of local environmental quality issues, and, as a complete package, it is a significant piece of legislation. However, before seeking to introduce the Bill in the Assembly, I am consulting on the detailed proposals to ensure that they address our local circumstances properly. I am grateful to the Environment Committee, which has already expressed its support for the Bill, for its encouragement to make progress quickly.

In fact, I am not aware of any opposition to the legislation, which is not surprising. No one wants to live in a neighbourhood that is affected by a poor-quality local environment. Good local environments reduce antisocial behaviour and the fear of crime. They attract more investment and have a positive impact on our health, well-being, confidence and civic pride, and they help to promote tourism.

12.45 pm

I believe that the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland will accept that the Bill, which is designed to improve the appearance of local neighbourhoods and enhance our quality of life, is necessary and long overdue. That is because despite district councils' excellent endeavours to tackle the problems and despite ongoing campaigns that are designed to encourage those who create the problems to change their ways, those problems cost Northern Ireland councils millions of pounds to clean up.

Just last month, for example, I joined a local group of dedicated conservation volunteers and Tidy Northern Ireland to see for myself the incredible extent of the littering problem in a particular open space; a space that is by no means unique. What should have been a beautiful and scenic open space for the local community to enjoy was completely spoiled by excessive littering. Plastic bags, paper bags, broken glass, empty bottles, used nappies and crisp packets were clearly visible. In a very short time, we collected more than 30 black bin bags of litter. One could come up with all kinds of reasons and excuses for that, but the bottom line is that that sort of mess is not good enough. People have a right to expect more care and consideration from others in their community.

In this statement, I cannot cover every detail of the draft Bill. As Members will appreciate, the legislation is sizeable and complex, and it contains detailed amendments to several pieces of existing legislation, such as the Litter

(Northern Ireland) Order 1994. However, I shall summarise the draft Bill's key provisions.

As I said, for many people in Northern Ireland, litter continues to be a major concern. If left unchecked, litter in all its forms — such as chewing gum, cigarette butts, fast food, drink containers and wrapping paper — is an eyesore that leads to dirty streets and unhealthy and unsightly local environments. The Bill will strengthen existing law to enable district councils to deal more effectively with litter problems. The Bill will amend the offence of dropping litter in a lake, pond or watercourse; strengthen provisions to deal with people who fail to provide their name and address; give councils new powers to require businesses and individuals to clear litter from their land; strengthen existing powers for councils to require local businesses to help to clear up litter that they generate; and enable councils to restrict the distribution of flyers, handouts and pamphlets, which can end up as litter.

Fly-posting and graffiti are visual signs of neglect and degradation in a local environment. Therefore, to enable district councils to deal more effectively with fly-posting and graffiti, the Bill will strengthen existing law to give councils the ability to issue fixed-penalty notices to graffiti and fly-posting offenders; enable councils to serve defacement removal notices in respect of graffiti and fly-posting; make it an offence to sell spray paint to children; and make it harder for the beneficiaries of fly-posting to evade prosecution.

Irresponsible dog ownership gives rise to complaints from the public, and dog fouling contributes to the spread of harmful infections. The Bill will introduce new arrangements for controlling dogs by replacing the local by-law system with a system that is more streamlined, straightforward and easier for district councils to operate. It will replace dog by-laws with a new, simplified system of dog control Orders, which will enable councils to deal with dog fouling; ban dogs from designated areas; require dogs to be kept on a lead; and restrict the number of dogs that can be walked by one person.

Noise is a form of nuisance that the public still regard as a major problem. The Bill will give district councils new powers to deal with audible intruder alarms, and it will extend the provisions of the Noise Act 1996 relating to noise from private premises to cover noise from licensed

premises. Those provisions are designed to deal with noise nuisance problems that are caused by false alarms when keyholders are away and deal with the owners of licensed premises who ignore warnings to reduce excessive noise.

The existing statutory nuisance law is 131 years old and, despite its having been amended from time to time, the definition of what may be considered a statutory nuisance and the enforcement powers that are available to district councils have not kept pace with developments in statutory nuisance legislation applying outside Northern Ireland. The Bill will update the archaic law on statutory nuisance by bringing it into line with that which applies in England and Wales, as amended by the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005.

Fixed-penalty notices are a simple and visible way in which to deal with environmental offences. If used properly, they provide an effective deterrent and avoid the cost of court action. At present, fixed-penalty notices can be issued for littering and dog-fouling offences and also for some noise-violation offences. The draft Bill makes greater use of fixed-penalty notices as an alternative to prosecution and gives councils the flexibility, subject to upper and lower limits, to set their own fixed rates. The draft Bill's proposals extend the use of fixed-penalty notices for offences relating to nuisance and abandoned vehicles, litter controls, other dog controls and additional noise controls.

Back alleys and entries can attract a range of antisocial and environmental problems that reduce the quality of life in our local neighbourhoods. They can be magnets for litter, fly-tipping, abandoned vehicles and graffiti. They can increase the risk of domestic burglary and provide cover for those engaged in drug dealing, and, as a result, they can make the lives of local residents a misery. The Bill will contain proposals to make the existing procedure for closing off nuisance back alleys more effective. The Bill will contain amendments to the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 to give effect to gating order provisions. The Bill will give councils new powers, with the Department for Regional Development's approval, to make gating orders to deal with problem alleyways. The Minister for Regional Development has policy responsibility for the legislation and agrees with the proposals.

The Bill will give councils new powers to deal with businesses that sell or repair cars on the road. Such parked vehicles can be a nuisance. They can reduce parking opportunities and cause pollution; for example, where oil has spilled or leaked. Two new offences will be created: offering for sale two or more vehicles; and repairing a vehicle on the road as part of a business. Abandoned cars degrade streets and can become targets for antisocial behaviour and arson. The Bill will give councils the power to remove abandoned cars from streets immediately.

Abandoned trolleys can be a visible problem and a hazard, and when dumped in watercourses, they can cause a range of problems that may harm wildlife. The Bill will give councils the power to recover the costs of retrieving abandoned shopping trolleys from the trolleys' owners.

The draft Bill increases the maximum fine, from £30,000 to £50,000, on summary conviction that may be provided for in regulations made under pollution prevention and control provisions in the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002. That will enable maximum fines on summary conviction in the Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 — concerning, for example, contravention of the requirement for a permit to operate an installation or mobile plant; failure to comply with, or to contravene, a condition of a permit; and failure to comply with the requirements of an enforcement notice or a suspension notice — to be brought into line with the equivalent maximum fines for illegal waste activity that are set out in the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, in order to ensure consistency. The increase to £50,000 will also bring the level of fine into line with that which applies in England and Wales.

As Minister of the Environment, I deal with many large-scale environmental issues daily. Major challenges, such as waste management, air quality, climate change, water quality, marine planning and built heritage are all very important, and my Department's work is rightly targeted at alleviating major environmental concerns in those areas. However, it is clear to me, through my work as a local councillor, and more so since I became Minister of the Environment, how important the state and appearance of our local neighbourhoods and public spaces are to most people in Northern Ireland.

People want to live in areas that are clean and safe, and free from antisocial behaviour and the fear of crime. That is people's number one priority, and it must also be ours. Therefore, I am sure that Members will agree that the draft Bill is a very welcome development and will wish to see it enacted as quickly as possible to help bring about cleaner neighbourhoods for all our local communities.

The consultation period runs from 1 March to 23 April, and the consultation document may be viewed on, and downloaded from, the Department of the Environment website.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mrs D Kelly): If it is the guidance of the Chair that I need to declare an interest as a member of a local council, I hereby declare. The Minister is right: this will be welcomed across the 26 council areas. In fact, my party colleague Alasdair McDonnell was going to bring it forward as a private Member's Bill, and he is grateful to the Minister for bringing forward this legislation.

What are the timescales for the implementation of the amendments that relate to alley-gating? Will they be carried out in parallel? The Minister is right in saying that alley-gating is a major concern. Alleyways are a haven for antisocial behaviour, and there is an increased risk of domestic burglaries for people who live close to alley gates. Members of the community are also concerned about the proliferation of illegal flags flying from lampposts, and about kerb painting. Will the Minister, in consultation with the Regional Development Minister, bring forward any amendments in relation to those eyesores?

The Minister of the Environment: A number of orders have been made by the Department for Regional Development (DRD) as a result of the Belfast alley-gating pilot project. An independent evaluation of that scheme indicated that it has been effective in addressing crime, fear of crime and antisocial behaviour in those areas, and that it has led to increased requests for alley-gating to be extended to other areas. However, the existing regime for making gating orders has proved to be cumbersome, and it is felt that a more streamlined approach is required. It was also felt that responsibility for making gating orders would be better placed with local government, rather than central government, although it is proposed that district councils

will need the approval of DRD to make or vary a gating order. That is positive news on that issue.

The Bill is similar to what has been produced in England and Wales. I suspect that flags, the painting of kerbs and so forth are not such issues there, so I look forward to seeing what the Committee brings forward on those issues.

Mr Weir: I join other Members in welcoming the proposals; the Bill will be of great benefit to people across Northern Ireland. Will the Bill be self-sufficient with regard to costings, or will it end up with a certain level of charge? I know that the consultation is due to run until 23 April, but what does the Minister see as being the timescale for the legislation itself?

The Minister of the Environment: There are a number of ways of dealing with costs. Litter is a district council issue, as is the legislation that deals with dog fouling, etc. What we are doing is enhancing the powers of councils to ensure that they can carry out that work more effectively. A lot of these powers have already been vested in local authorities. A number of the issues that have been mentioned today are issues on which councils have a degree of discretion in how their money is spent. It is important that the fines that are levied go back to local authorities. If councils set up an effective and tough regime, they will, therefore, benefit in two ways. First, they will have considerably cleaner neighbourhoods, which I think the local community will appreciate; and secondly, they will bring in a degree of income from those individuals who will not learn and who will not co-operate in keeping their areas as clean as they should.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I remind Members that they are to ask a question on the Minister's statement, not to make another statement.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. Is it the intention of the Bill to provide resources to residents' groups or local community groups to assist them in keeping their neighbourhoods clean and tidy? There is a case and a need for alley-gating, but some alleys are walkways, and there does not seem to be proper consultation in that respect; consultation is, generally, held in specific areas. Is there any provision to expand the consultation in relation to alley-gating?

The Minister of the Environment: I have indicated that litter is the responsibility of local authorities.

It is up to local authorities to identify best practice schemes to ensure that local neighbourhoods are kept clean and tidy and to institute a regime in which people who do not co-operate are punished.

Giving local authorities the powers to deal with and to introduce alley-gating, in consultation with DRD, brings the matter to a much more local level. Local councillors are generally far more accountable in dealing with such issues and identifying a community's needs than — with no disrespect — a Roads Service official.

1.00 pm

Mr Beggs: I, too, declare an interest as a local councillor. I welcome the Minister's decision to overturn his predecessors' decision not to progress with this legislation. Will he advise the House why it has taken five years since the legislation was introduced successfully in England for it to be introduced in Northern Ireland? Why has it taken so long for it to be prioritised here and for the necessary resources and commitment to be found to introduce it?

The Minister of the Environment: Of course, during a number of those years, there was direct rule. When this Assembly came into being, Ministers had to bring forward various pressing issues. Considerable work was done on planning reform, for example. Does the Member suggest that a clean neighbourhoods and environment Bill is more important than planning reform, the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill or planning policy statement (PPS) 21? I am not saying that it is less important. However, I am not sure whether the Member is saying that it is more important.

Ministers have to prioritise a wide range of issues. When I came into office, I looked at this issue and was aware that there was considerable pressure to bring it forward. I decided that I would find the necessary resources to do so. It is not as though other Ministers decided not to do that; resources were not available to do it. I decided to identify and take resources from other areas to allow that to happen.

Mr Bell: I welcome the Minister's comprehensive and progressive statement. I want to ask him specifically about graffiti and fly-posting, which

are the scourge of my Strangford constituency. Will he assure the House that those measures will be effective and that their effectiveness will be monitored in order to ensure that the blight of graffiti and fly-posting in Strangford is brought to an end?

The Minister of the Environment: District councils indicate that existing legislation needs to be strengthened. I propose to do that by giving councils power to issue fixed-penalty notices in respect of certain fly-posting and graffiti offences, to issue defacement removal notices and to recover costs from the person on whom a notice is served. I propose to make it an offence to sell aerosol spray paint to a person who is under 16 years of age. Other changes that are being made enable councils to seek the removal of illegally displayed posters or placards by the people who displayed them or caused them to be displayed and make it easier for councils to remove posters or placards if necessary and to recover the cost of doing so.

One problem with the current legislation is that, if an advertisement for a certain nightclub, circus or event is illegally displayed, a council must prove that that person had given his or her approval for that advertisement to be displayed in the first instance. It is easy for people to get out of that. As a result of the new legislation, the burden of proof will change considerably. Individuals will have to prove that they took all reasonable measures to ensure that they did not act in defiance of the legislation. That could, potentially, have huge impact, particularly on the fly-posting that is often seen on our streets.

Mr Bell: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I declare that I am a member of Ards Borough Council.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also declare an interest as a member of Ballymoney Borough Council. I welcome the proposals on fly-posting. Fly-posting for concerts and other major social events is a common problem in my community. Does the Minister believe that there are alternative, affordable ways in which some organisations that are currently involved in fly-posting could advertise events publicly without degrading an area or making it look untidy?

The Minister of the Environment: I am surprised that an old boy like me should have to educate someone who is relatively young on the opportunities that are available in communication

nowadays — for example, various websites, such as Facebook, Twitter and so on. There are huge opportunities to spread the message, particularly for concerts and such events.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his statement, which I welcome. I declare an interest as a councillor in the south Antrim area. Like others, I long to see a tidier Northern Ireland. If I may make one little statement, I congratulate everyone who has helped to pick up litter throughout Northern Ireland, whether they are members of the public, councillors or Ministers.

How will the Bill deal with councils that have to work together? For example, rubbish from various council areas gathers at the south Antrim corner of Lough Neagh and will need to be dealt with jointly. How will that be managed and financed?

The Minister of the Environment: That ties in with my vision for local government in the future: there must be greater collaboration among local councils. There must be greater connectivity among councils, and they must work together in the best and wider interests of the public. That might involve cost-saving measures by councils to ensure that rates are kept low or ensuring that the environment in which we live is kept in the pristine condition that the public want. We will seek to encourage, persuade, cajole and, on occasions, legislate for that.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for getting us this far. I am concerned about a range of these issues, and I congratulate him on what he has done. The Minister mentioned nuisance parking and abandoned vehicles. I am worried that “abandoned vehicles” refers only to vehicles on the roads. I am just as concerned about vehicles abandoned adjacent to a road, near a road or on a public space other than a road. It is important that abandoned vehicles are not allowed to be left on any public space.

Secondly, if I might indulge myself, the Minister made no mention of hedges. High hedges and wide hedges are a serious issue. As a holy — or religious — person, I hate nothing more than the slap of a wet branch as I make my way to church on a Sunday morning. I believe that it is the Minister’s responsibility to ensure that that problem is avoided.

The Minister of the Environment: I return the Member’s tribute. He was one of those who pressed this issue and sought to have the

legislation introduced. It is good to see that the Assembly can work on a cross-party and a cross-community basis and that it is not as dysfunctional as some people make it out to be. We can work and co-operate with one another in the best interests of the public of Northern Ireland. Therefore, I pay tribute to Dr McDonnell for bringing this matter to my attention and for urging me to bring forward measures. That is one of the reasons why we are where we are today.

The requirement to give notice to the occupier of the land on which a vehicle has been abandoned will be removed. That will include private roads that pass through housing estates that are managed by registered social landlords as well as other housing estates, and it will, effectively, enable vehicles to be removed immediately from any road to which the public have access. When an abandoned vehicle is fit only for destruction, a district council will no longer be required to affix a notice to the vehicle prior to its removal, such as a van in Custom House Square, and will be able to remove it immediately.

The rules on the disposal of abandoned vehicles will be simplified. Councils will no longer have to wait for the vehicle licence to expire before disposing of the vehicle. Abandoned vehicles that are fit only for destruction can be destroyed immediately, and vehicles that do not display a licence or number plate can be disposed of immediately. In all other cases, district councils will have to try to find the owner. If they are unable to find the owner or if the owner does not collect the vehicle within seven days of being contacted, it can be disposed of.

Similar amendments will be made to the road traffic regulations, which give powers to constables and the Department for Regional Development to deal with abandoned vehicles. The aim of those changes is to provide a more efficient way to clear abandoned vehicles from streets and reduce the instances of antisocial behaviour, such as vandalism and arson, which such vehicles can attract. This will also reduce the additional storage costs incurred by district councils while waiting for the expiration of the licence; where a vehicle is fit only for destruction; or where the owner cannot be traced or has chosen not to collect it.

As regards nuisance hedges, if the Member is saying that hedges are growing over the footpaths where he walks, that matter can be

dealt with by the DRD. If a hedge is growing over a footway or road, the DRD has the powers to instruct the owner of the hedge to cut it back. The high hedges legislation is separate and is going through the House. We are bringing forward that new legislation because the community in Northern Ireland wants it to be introduced. We are doing that in the community's best interests.

Mr McCarthy: I fully support and welcome the statement that the Minister has made. I think he will agree that, although his is the lead Department, this is a cross-departmental issue. He has just mentioned the DRD. Does he agree that education has an important role to play in that youngsters coming through the school system should be educated not to be litter louts when they grow up?

I wish to make two points; I know that the Minister could not have included them all in the statement. It is going to be difficult for councils to —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must ask a question.

Mr McCarthy: — catch the people who drive along in their car and fire out a bag full of stuff from a fast food outlet. The litter lying along our foreshores is also a disgrace. When the legislation is implemented — I do not know when that will be — will the Minister be able to monitor whether the position has been greatly enhanced six months or a year later by the legislation that we all welcome this morning?

The Minister of the Environment: Unless Big Brother is at every telegraph pole, we will not catch every individual who tosses litter out of their car. Nonetheless, community responsibility should mean that, when people see someone throwing litter out of a car, they should take the car number and pass it on to the local authorities and allow them to deal with it. These individuals are despoiling our countryside and should be punished for doing so.

The Member is right to say that it needs to be instilled in our young people from the earliest age that it is wrong to drop litter, throw litter out of cars or spit chewing gum out on the streets. All those things detract from the environment that they and, at some point, their children will grow up in and take away from the healthy well-being and the good environment that young people need to grow up in. Education needs to continue. Our job is to enhance the legislation

to deal with the people who refuse to be educated.

Mr I McCrea: I congratulate the Minister on bringing the consultation forward. There is no doubt that since he has become Minister his priority has been to bring forward legislation that deals with local issues. As regards fly-posting, posters are placed by church-based and charity-based organisations. Will those organisations be given a time exemption to remove their posters after an event, rather than having them removed as soon as they go up?

The Minister of the Environment: We want to stop fly-posters going up all over the place. We want to stop posters being pasted to telegraph poles and bridges, where a lot of vehicles pass, and then abandoned. If people want to advertise particular events in a responsible way, I want my Department and other Departments to cooperate with them. Some people are pasting up posters in a most irresponsible way and are leaving the mess for someone else to clean up. That is wholly unacceptable.

1.15 pm

Mr McDevitt: As other Members have done, I welcome the Minister's statement. What financial implications does he envisage? Undoubtedly, those will be quite significant for local authorities. Does he expect that local authorities will have to absorb the costs, or will extra provision be made? Does the Minister anticipate that the Bill will require local authorities to be proactive in fulfilling their new commitments, or will that be a reactive requirement?

The Minister of the Environment: It is in the interests of local government to be proactive. At some point, we could consider creating an index that would show how clean an area is and identify the local authorities across Northern Ireland that are being proactive in dealing with litter, deposits of chewing gum on the streets and graffiti. Such a measure would show up the councils that are not being as proactive as they should be.

I have discussed with Minister Ritchie and Minister Wilson the potential for introducing business improvement districts (BIDs). BID funding would be attractive to local authorities, particularly in the townscapes. Local businesses would pay a modest supplement to their rates, but, in return, they would get a considerably

cleaner and graffiti-free environment. That could bring additional money to local authorities. Additional money will come through higher fines and, hopefully, the easier enforcement of those fines. I do not expect that the resource that is being asked of councils will be particularly cost-intensive. Where it is properly implemented, it will be hugely beneficial to local authorities at a modest cost.

Committee Business

Statutory Committee Membership: Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: As with similar motions, the motion on Statutory Committee membership will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr P J Bradley replace Mr Patsy McGlone as a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. — [Mr P Ramsey.]

Housing: Savills Report

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hamilton): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the findings of the Savills report; calls on the Minister for Social Development to ensure equity in the delivery of new social housing and the maintenance of existing Housing Executive stock; and further calls on the Minister to limit the reduction in funding for Housing Executive maintenance contractors, in view of the adverse economic situation.

At the Committee's meeting of 25 February 2009, it was agreed that this motion on the Savills report should be tabled for debate in the House. It is only the second Social Development Committee motion of the current mandate, and, similar to our motion of June 2009, it reflects the Committee's concerns about maintaining and improving social housing.

The challenges that the Department for Social Development (DSD) faces in funding social housing have been well set out by the Minister and by others on a number of occasions. Although that is important, recent debate on the subject has been characterised by some as tired and the arguments as rather worn. The Committee, therefore, noted with great interest the findings of the Savills report, which the Minister referenced during her response to

the Committee motion on 22 June 2009. The Committee looked forward to the publication of the Savills report as a way of injecting new ideas and reinvigorating the necessary and important debate on social housing.

The Committee was disappointed that the Department did not make the Savills report available despite repeated requests. However, I am pleased to say that, after further correspondence, the Department subsequently agreed to bring the Savills report to the Committee. The Committee for Social Development is, therefore, happy to have the opportunity of this debate to air many important questions in the House.

Some Members may ask what the Savills report is about — it is not to be confused with something else that bears the name “Saville” — so I will tell the House about it briefly. The Savills report refers to the housing stock that the Housing Executive owns. The report was based on a large sample — some 9,000 — of Housing Executive homes, which is equivalent to about 10% of the overall stock that the Housing Executive possesses. Savills found that the housing stock was generally of very good quality. In fact, in the round, the Housing Executive stock probably represents the best social housing that Savills has reviewed in the whole of the United Kingdom. It is estimated that around 17% of Housing Executive homes do not meet the decent homes standard. In comparison with the housing stock of other social landlords, that is a remarkable claim and one that is worthy of note by the House. That said, members of the Committee took issue with that part of the report. Members highlighted examples of homes in their constituencies that were in severe disrepair and said that they found it difficult to reconcile those with the report’s findings. However, the Committee will give that issue further serious consideration and will feed back more detail on it to the Department shortly.

The Savills report suggested that the Housing Executive had achieved a quality of stock maintenance that exceeded even the decent homes plus standard and that it had done so while keeping procurement costs at levels that compared well when benchmarked with the rest of the UK. Notwithstanding the Committee’s concerns that I mentioned earlier, that is an achievement that deserves much praise.

Savills further characterised the Housing Executive stock by identifying groups of

properties that required significantly more maintenance and improvement than was currently provided by the single-element works that Egan contractors have undertaken. That characterisation showed that the difference between improvement costs and rental income was quite significant. It also illustrated how pockets of housing that amounted to several thousand so-called poor- and very poor-performing homes will certainly need significant improvements now or in the not too distant future.

The Committee recognises that there are, of course, major social housing budget challenges in respect of capital works for existing stock and building new homes. The Committee, therefore, calls on the Minister to address those challenges as equitably as she can. The Committee has spent a lot of time considering the equitable distribution of new homes built under the social housing development programme. It is, of course, vital that fairness and equality be maintained in the allocation process for new and existing homes. Additionally, the Committee suggested that there must be equity in the balance that is struck between capital improvements and the development of new homes.

Savills’ findings, of which there were many, may be interpreted in many different ways. It is possible that the proposed curtailment of Housing Executive capital works may disadvantage certain communities. A departmental investment strategy that is entirely weighted towards new social housing may not benefit those communities. The issue of equity is complex and does not appear to have been considered by Savills. The Committee believes that further study is required on the equality implications of the Savills report, and I look forward to the Minister’s response to that point today.

Having spoken about information, quality and equity, I turn to the issue of money, to which we tend to revert at some stage in debates such as this. How big are the proposed reductions to capital expenditure for poorer Housing Executive stock? The Savills report appears to suggest that a reduction of some £40 million should be made immediately. In light of that figure, the House can expect to hear today from Members from across Northern Ireland who are worried about delayed or cancelled Housing Executive capital works projects in their area. From Dunclug to New Lodge and

from Bangor to Banbridge, the message of concern will be the same. Those projects can have a hugely favourable impact by helping communities to rebuild and regenerate areas and turn them around. Aside from the impact on tenants living in poorer accommodation, a reduction of around £40 million in capital works expenditure will surely have a detrimental effect on the construction industry in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the Department estimates that every £1 million of investment protects 30 jobs in the construction industry, including its suppliers. Therefore, even using the Department's figures, the suggested cutbacks could endanger perhaps as many as 1,200 jobs.

The Committee recognises that many of these difficult decisions reflect the loss of capital receipts owing to the contraction of the housing market. Nonetheless, the Committee urges the Minister to reconsider the significant changes to the Housing Executive capital works budget so as to limit the ill effects for tenants in run-down estates and the impact on our beleaguered construction industry.

The Savills report included suggestions relating to above-inflation increases in Housing Executive rents over a sustained period. The Committee considered proposals for the establishment of an independent body, free from political interference, to set fair social rents and other related charges. The Committee believes that further study is required on that so as to ensure that any rent regime does not disadvantage the working poor. On behalf of the Committee, I welcome the Minister's proposed review of social rents and invite her to set out the relevant terms of reference for that today.

The Committee was deeply disappointed by the Department's apparent initial reluctance to share the Savills report and the Ford report with the Committee. The latter document would facilitate an informed debate on the contentious issue of social rent convergence. I again repeat the Committee's long-standing request that the Ford report be placed in the public domain to allow for scrutiny by the Committee and debate in the House.

I look forward to hearing Members' contributions and, in particular, the Minister's response to the debate.

I take one hat off and put my DUP MLA hat on. The DUP, as a party, wants to underline its belief in the need for equity and balance in the

funding of social housing newbuild and capital maintenance works, including the works that I have outlined. We echo the Committee's view that sensitivity and sympathy must be shown to the construction industry in the handling of any curtailment of funding for capital works programmes. From experiences in our constituencies, we all know just how difficult the downturn has been in Northern Ireland, in particular for the construction industry. Indeed, one reason why Northern Ireland has suffered is the impact that there has been on the construction industry.

I stress the issue of equality and, if there is a curtailment of funding for capital works programmes, the need for a proper assessment of precisely where that will hit. Looking at the extracts from the Savills report that deal with poor- and very poor-performing houses, Members will quickly come to the conclusion that, although the list includes housing in all parts of Northern Ireland with no favour one way or the other, the majority of homes listed are in what may be deemed Protestant, unionist or loyalist areas.

As others call for a fair and equitable distribution of social housing newbuild, I call on the Minister to be mindful and careful in dealing with any possible curtailment of funding and precisely where that will impact hardest. Some of the houses listed are in areas that I know which are run-down and in need of urgent regeneration. Perhaps my colleagues will be better able to speak from personal experience about areas that they know. Although there may be a need for significant investment, we cannot allow those areas to continue to degrade in the way that they have in the past. I urge the Minister to be careful in considering where and upon whom the impact of curtailment of funding would be most severe.

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: On behalf of the DUP, I have no qualms in supporting the motion.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In September 2008, the Department commissioned Savills to undertake a stock condition survey of Housing Executive housing stock and to provide information on its maintenance investment strategy and asset planning. The objectives were to support

strategic planning for Housing Executive stock; to enable the best use of resources in effecting the repair, maintenance and improvement of Housing Executive stock; to provide information to enable the achievement of the decent homes standard within a future five-year business plan; and to inform the evaluation of maintenance and improvement planning in Housing Executive stock over a 30-year term.

The report includes a comparison of Housing Executive stock with the decent homes plus standard, which is defined as a house complying with statutory minimum requirements; being in a reasonable state of repair; having reasonably modern facilities; having a reasonable degree of thermal comfort; and having its kitchens and bathrooms replaced when required.

1.30 pm

The social rented sector in the North comprises approximately 114,400 dwellings, 90,000 of which are owned and managed by the Housing Executive. Savills surveyed a representative sample of 10% of the existing Housing Executive stock across different property types, ages and locations, and its report concluded that the quality of the Housing Executive's stock was very good and was among the best that it had inspected. The Minister, for her part, stated that the report will allow her:

"to direct capital and revenue resources to ensure we get the best value regarding the repair, maintenance and improvement of the homes."

However, the survey also found that approximately 17% of Housing Executive stock failed the decent homes plus standard. The most significant reason for failure was thermal inefficiency, which is directly attributable to inefficient heating systems. Interestingly, we are to have a debate later on the proposed introduction of a boiler scrapping scheme, which could have some impact on that finding.

The secret of maintaining existing housing stock to a proper level is planned and effective maintenance. Savills recommended that the Housing Executive adopts a 30-year business plan model, which should be associated with the costs of meeting and maintaining properties to the decent homes plus standard. According to Savills, expenditure should be relatively low during the next five years because of the good condition of the existing housing stock, but will increase as time goes on and the housing stock

gets older. If the Housing Executive continues to maintain its housing stock properly, overall costs will logically decrease. The report suggests that the Executive should focus on areas that must be maintained and not necessarily on multi-element improvements. However, disabled facilities, such as ramps, must not be jeopardised in that plan. The reduction in expenditure will also have an impact on the existing Egan framework partnership contracts, and will inevitably impact on jobs in the construction industry as it is reliant on work from the Housing Executive.

There must be some reservations to the Savills report. It suggests raising NIHE rents, which will impact on those low-income households that rely on social housing. Also, the report must not be used as an excuse for cutting essential maintenance but should be utilised for the purpose of maintaining homes to an existing standard, and those standards must not be allowed to fall. Equality in the delivery of social housing and maintenance should be the key.

Mr Burns: I welcome the opportunity to say a few words on the Savills report and on other issues mentioned in the motion. I am sure that all Members will agree that those are very important matters.

As was previously stated, the findings of the Savills report were presented to the Committee for Social Development in February. The Chairperson of the Committee and others outlined those findings very well to the House today, and I will not spend too much time going over the fine detail of the report. However, it is worth stating that the report concludes:

"The NIHE stock is by far the best quality housing stock that we have inspected. NIHE has maintained the stock to a high standard and the work undertaken has been completed to a high quality."

That is quite a good report in anyone's book, and we should pay tribute to the Minister for Social Development, her predecessors and the Housing Executive for their dedication and hard work. We should also be grateful that so much money and hard work has been invested in maintaining our public housing stock.

Some shortfalls were highlighted in the report, the main one being that a sizeable minority of 17% of houses fell below the decent homes plus standard, which was mainly as a result of poor heating or insulation. Every Member would

agree that the warm homes scheme is the proper way to address that issue and that it has done a good job so far. Some Members have been critical of that scheme in recent debates, but it is a scheme that the Minister and I support 100%.

The main substance of the motion highlights the issue of newbuild housing versus maintenance and repairs. The Assembly has had many debates on that issue in various forms. In an ideal world, we would build new houses and upgrade the existing stock to the highest possible standard. However, as the money is simply not available for everything, newbuild housing is the priority. We have debated the matter countless times, and newbuild social housing is one of the best ways to give the local economy and the construction industry the help that they need.

The experts do not state that the best way to kick-start the economy and lift us out of recession is to install kitchens, paint fences, plant trees or build roads. Although there is no doubt that winning contracts for such work helps local firms, newbuild social housing is the best way forward. All Members have seen the report for themselves and have read that newbuild housing achieves better value for money and a greater economic multiplying effect, so it must be the priority. If anything, the Savills report adds further weight to that argument. The report states that the majority of public housing stock is in "excellent" condition.

I do not suggest that all maintenance, upgrades and repairs should stop. Many houses still require such work, on which DSD spends millions and millions of pounds each year. However, I repeat that the time is right to prioritise newbuilds. I accept that such an approach would have a negative impact on the Egan contractors, but they know that, in any one year, there is no guarantee of a certain volume of work. However, people who live in Housing Executive houses should know that money will always be available for home maintenance on which, this year alone, some £170 million was spent.

I say to those DUP Members who spoke today that, in recent days in the House and in the media, the Finance Minister, Mr Wilson, issued a public challenge to the Minister for Social Development.

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

Mr Burns: He challenged her to read, review and carefully evaluate all the evidence and advice that is received to ensure that value for money is achieved and no resources are wasted. That is exactly what the Minister for Social Development is doing.

Mr Armstrong: It is worth highlighting two statistics from the Savills report: some 17% of Housing Executive stock, which equates to about 15,000 homes, fall below the decent homes plus standard, and 31,500 homes in the Housing Executive stock cost more to maintain than is made from their rental income. The figure of 31,500 represents a massive proportion of that stock, and, in the long term, that must be investigated by the Minister and the Executive. It is not sustainable, or at least it should not be considered as such, because it is a huge drain on the Department's resources and affects the ability of the Housing Executive to reduce housing pressure.

I support the principles that people should have decent homes and resources should be available to contractors to enable them to get homes up to the standard required. A strategic examination of the stock is required, with a view to finding a new way to fix it. However, the problem that is faced at every turn is a lack of money.

The Assembly is superb at pointing out the problems and demanding action by a Minister or a Department. We are great at highlighting problems and saying that something must be done, but we are, unfortunately, not as good at coming up with workable solutions. All Ministers in the Executive would say that with more resources, in the form of money to throw at problems or more staff, they could tackle the problems that face their Departments. As we all know, in the current economic climate, more money is not forthcoming, and, therefore, what is required is a redoubling of efforts to ensure that the scarce and precious resources are deployed as effectively as possible. That will require a strategic look at the public finances, with a view to solving the problems that we face in that area.

There is a problem with the Housing Executive stock. However, there is also a problem with the public finances, which restricts the ability of the Minister to achieve what we want, and no doubt what she wants, in the short term.

However, the problem is not a short-term one; it is a long-term one that requires a radical

solution. I hope that the Minister is considering how she might solve the problem, because doing so would go a long way to achieving efficiency savings in her Department. Although those savings might not be made in the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, they are savings that the Department could be required to make.

The waste in DSD that the report highlights is not the Minister's fault, but it would be to her long-term credit if she could do something about it. That, more than the much needed additional funding, is perhaps a more realistic prospect.

Ms Lo: I support the motion and welcome the report.

The Savills stock condition survey was the first independent survey undertaken in Northern Ireland to assess requirements for maintenance investment and asset planning in social housing in light of budget restrictions that the Department will face over the coming years. I commend the Department for taking on that initiative as part of its forward planning.

The report found that Housing Executive homes are in a better condition than their counterparts elsewhere in the UK. The report stated that our housing stock was:

"by far the best quality housing stock that we have inspected."

That is something that we should be proud of, and I commend the Housing Executive for that excellent achievement. The quality of our housing stock is obviously a result of properly resourcing maintenance work.

The total cost of maintaining all 90,000 Housing Executive properties over the next 30 years is estimated to be £5.1 million; £1,887 each year for every property. The survey estimated that only 15,000 Housing Executive homes did not comply with the decent homes plus standard; about 11,000 of those homes failed due to inefficient heating systems. During an evidence session to the Committee, I was pleased that since the report's publication, thousands of central-heating upgrades or replacements had been undertaken in Housing Executive homes.

In previous years, the Housing Executive spent about £200 million on property maintenance. In the current financial year, that has come down to about £170 million. The Savills report stated that that could come down to about

£134 million if the Housing Executive focuses on areas that need to be maintained rather than carrying out multi-element improvement work, as was done in the past.

If the Housing Executive adopts the proposed cost profile, as recommended, there will be an impact on the existing Egan framework, as the Egan contractors are heavily reliant on Housing Executive work to sustain their businesses. Withdrawing a proportion of that work could affect the viability of many contractors, particularly during the economic downturn. The Housing Executive faces a difficult balancing act.

Mr F McCann: There have been a number of debates on the Egan contracts in the Chamber. During the course of those debates, we found out that there are also hundreds of other small contractors who employ three and four people and who rely heavily on maintenance contracts to survive. Any reduction in those contracts, whether they are for the replacement of kitchens or something else, will have a detrimental effect on many communities. Does the Member agree?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has another minute in which to speak.

Ms Lo: I agree with the Member and thank him for his intervention.

As I said, the Minister faces a difficult balancing act, as does the Department, which faces a shortfall of £100 million or more per annum over the next few years. However, it is important to bear in mind that we cannot be complacent with our well-maintained stock for ever. Adequate maintenance of the housing stock will save us money in the long run and will enable us to avoid the necessity of knocking down properties and rebuilding them, which is what we are seeing in the Village area of south Belfast now.

1.45 pm

Instead of cutting expenditure, we perhaps need to consider increasing our income to maintain the same level of output. Savills found that since 2007, rent levels in proportion to earnings in Northern Ireland have fallen behind those in the rest of the UK. He estimated that the maintenance costs for around 31,000 Housing Executive homes, which is one third of our stock, will exceed the rental income over a 30-year period. It is clear that that is not sustainable. We need an independent body that

has no political influence to set a realistic level for social rent in Northern Ireland that is in line with that in Britain. Over 80% of rent is paid by the Treasury through housing benefits anyway, and, therefore, the proposal will not negatively impact on the majority of our tenants.

The report also indicated that the Housing Executive undertakes environmental and security works, such as ground maintenance and fencing, that are considered to be outside its landlord functions and that are the responsibility of local authorities in Great Britain. We should take up Savills's recommendation to agree with other bodies a joint funding mechanism to share the costs.

Savills highlighted the difficulties with the Housing Executive's redevelopment of properties. Those difficulties are due partly to interface issues. That is further evidence of the cost of division, and we can only hope that, under the new community relations strategy —

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

Ms Lo: — and the strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration, the Department will have a strategic direction —

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

Ms Lo: — in tackling housing segregation in Northern Ireland.

Mr Craig: I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the motion.

I admit that I have a number of concerns about the Savills report. If we are to meet the decent homes standards, the report estimates that we need to spend about £157 million a year over the next 30 years. That spend is against the current estimate of £200 million a year. When I look at the existing maintenance budget but then see an estimated reduction of more than £40 million, I must admit that I have difficulty working out where we will find the necessary balance between newbuilds and maintenance. Other Members talked about how essential newbuilds are. I do not disagree with that assertion, but we must find the balance between newbuilds and maintenance of existing housing stock.

I have taken the Minister to see a number of projects in Lagan Valley, one of which, the Dales flats, does not even meet health and safety

maintenance requirements. She knows about that situation, and, in fairness to her, she found some maintenance budgets to try to deal with some of the more critical health and safety issues that exist there. However, not all those problems have been dealt with. I have taken that up with the Minister, and she knows about the problems. Therefore, I am struggling with the concept that reducing the budget by another £40 million a year will deal with such issues. I find that situation inconceivable, and it will lead only to further reduction to the existing housing stock. If we fail to maintain that stock, it will fall into disrepair and the number of newbuilds will increase. In the end, that is counterproductive.

Furthermore, I took the Minister to visit some pensioners' bungalows in Hillhall that have been waiting almost seven years for a major maintenance scheme. In fact, the Minister was taken to a bungalow in which the kitchen ceiling had fallen in. It had been that way for over a year, because the maintenance budget was not available to repair it.

That is why I am struggling with the idea that, by the wave of some magic wand, reducing the existing maintenance budget will allow us to continue to maintain our existing housing stock to the decent homes standard. The Savills report is all well and good. It looked at a 10% sample of the existing housing stock, but that is like looking at 10% of anything — where did it look for that 10% sample? I do not have the answer to that, nor am I accusing Savills of picking and choosing the areas that it looked at. Did it look at the worst examples or the best examples? I do not know.

The figures in the report say that 17% of homes — some 15,000 — do not comply with the decent homes standard, and that 11,000 of those homes failed to meet that standard because of inefficient heating systems. Should we believe that a £40 million reduction in the maintenance budget will deal with that? Are we really condemning the people who live in those homes to wait for another three, four or five years? If we fully implement the recommendations of the Savills report, those people will have to live for 11 to 15 years with what they have already got. I do not believe that the Minister or any member of the Committee wants that. However, I struggle with the concept that reducing a budget does not have an impact on existing maintenance schemes. I believe

that such a reduction will, unfortunately, have a detrimental effect.

I have looked at some of the figures in the report, and unfortunately, there is an area that the Minister will need to look at. It is clear that almost 70% of the areas in which maintenance performance was poorest were in unionist areas. Those are the areas that will feel the most detrimental effect of any reduction in the maintenance budget.

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

Mr Craig: There is an equality issue there that must be looked at and addressed. I support the motion.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tacaím leis an rún seo inniu.

I support the motion, which asks the Assembly to note the findings of the Savills Report. The motion is timely, and I hope that the Minister for Social Development will take its sentiments on board.

I will outline a number of serious aspects of the report that must be addressed because of possible grave consequences for the maintenance of housing stock in the medium to long term. No matter how one tries to dress up the report, it will have far-reaching implications for Housing Executive tenants, many of whom live in homes that are situated in the most deprived areas of the North.

The report points out that it surveyed 10% of the existing housing stock against the decent homes plus standard and found that, in comparison with other jurisdictions, our social housing stock was well maintained by the Housing Executive. It goes on to say that 15,000 homes, or 17% of the stock, did not comply with the decent homes standard, 11,000 of which failed because of inefficient heating systems.

One has to ask what the real purpose of the report was. It says that Housing Executive stock is of a good standard, but it recommends that we cut back across a whole range of environmental, security and maintenance programmes, and that huge savings could be made if we went down that road. I believe that the Minister intends to move ahead with the report's recommendations regardless of the consequences. I say that on the back of a

question that I put to departmental officials at a Committee meeting a couple of weeks ago.

How can the changes that are recommended in the Savills report be implemented, given the detrimental effect that they could have on what remains of the social housing stock? The report says that the average rent here is £51.89 a week, which is lower than in other jurisdictions, and goes on to say that rents should be increased over a number of years. That would raise a considerable amount of financial resources. What the report fails to take into account, however, is that, on average, people here are on lower wages but have to pay more for their fuel, travel and insurance, and for a range of household items.

Under the heading of low value units and high maintenance costs, the report states that 31,500 homes have a negative worth because of the cost of maintenance over rental income over a 30-year period. The report states that 10% are very poor, and goes on to mention poor performers in housing. It mentions Ballymena, Craigavon, Belfast, Derry, Carrickfergus, Larne and Coleraine. Those areas already suffer the worst social deprivation.

The report touches on the Housing Executive's maintenance of amenity land, grounds and trees, saying that it is excessive. However, that programme is essential in ensuring that land does not become overgrown and that trees do not grow out of control.

The report also targets disabled adaptation, and states that costs are much higher, especially for one-bedroom bungalows, than in other jurisdictions. If the Minister is to implement the recommendations in the report, she must spell out what the impact will be on adaptations, whether unit costs will be reduced and what that will do to the quality of work.

We in Sinn Féin have serious concerns. It does not matter that we do things better than in other places. We should be proud of the fact that we provide good housing and that we have a good policy of maintaining that stock. Any departure from that, based on a report that compares what happens in other jurisdictions with the way that we do things here, is a backwards step.

Can the Minister tell us how many people will lose their jobs in the maintenance sector? Egan contractors employ over 1,000 people, not to mention the suppliers and shops that

depend on their spend. Hundreds of small builders employ several thousand people, and they have told us that any reduction in work levels will hit them hard. We could be storing up trouble for the future if there is a reduction in the level to which multi-element improvements are carried out. Thousands of people could be out of work if the Minister pushes through the recommendations.

There must be a breathing space in which to work out the medium- to long-term impact that the implementation of the report would have on the quality of housing. The British Chancellor has called for more investment in housing stock as a way of creating employment and keeping our housing to a good standard, but we seem to be going in the other direction.

Many people are waiting for the Minister to answer the questions that I have outlined. Their livelihoods depend on it, as does the future of our housing stock. To take up one of Simon's points, one of the bywords that we often use is equality.

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

Mr F McCann: Money must be allocated according to need. To do otherwise is to store up trouble for the future, especially in the maintenance or the provision of housing.

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

Mr F McCann: One of the other myths is that most people would say that there are more people employed in maintenance than in social rebuild.

Mr Easton: I support the motion. Demand for modern, purpose-built, suitable social housing is on the increase. We must meet that demand in order to provide housing fit for the twenty-first century. However, that does not necessarily mean building new houses. I was concerned to read in the Savills report that 17% of the current housing stock, out of a sample of 10%, did not conform to the decent homes standard. Before my colleague Mr Craig gets ahead of me, I will mention that there are pensioners' bungalows in the Bloomfield estate that have been in need of repair for 10 years. I hope that the Minister takes that on board.

The report found that 12% of the housing stock has insufficient heating systems. That statistic is worrying, and it is relevant given that we will debate a boiler scrappage scheme later today.

It also raises questions about the Department, given that it operates the warm homes scheme, which seeks to combat fuel poverty. Heating inefficiencies are directly linked to fuel poverty as they raise the costs of heating one's home. We must remember that people in social housing have been granted homes because they are in poverty or have a need, be it medical or other.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

The Savills report argues that the cost of maintaining the current housing stock for the next 30 years will be much lower than was previously expected. How accurate can that assessment be? I am concerned about the proposal to use the tendering process to gain value-for-money benefits. Are we to see the Department squeeze contractors for everything that they have got? In other words, get them to do more work for less money. Contractors are struggling because the Minister has not provided them with the necessary financial guarantees. That is not good enough for any business. They have to plan for the future, especially with regards to staff. I would not want to see anyone lose their job in the current climate, particularly because of financial mismanagement. A Department should not be responsible for that.

The report lacks a detailed breakdown and assessment of current housing stock.

The report involves a sample of 10%, which I feel is not representative. Some 17% of houses were found not to meet the decent homes standard, but what is the real figure? Could it be much higher?

2.00 pm

I also have questions about the decent homes standard. I note that the Housing Executive strives to work to standards above those that are established. However, what if those standards change? We always strive to raise housing standards, so it is likely that the bar will be raised over the next 30 years. Surely that will have an impact on costs.

I support the need for new houses, and I accept that a considerable number of houses need to be replaced, because maintenance costs will outweigh newbuild costs. Having said that, many houses are in need of maintenance. However, the Department is loath to carry out the work and, instead, focuses on newbuilds for the sake

of them. I am concerned that that approach is linked to the Minister's policy of promoting shared housing.

We must watch costs, because the budget is tight. We must not forget about people who live in houses that are not up to scratch. As is stated in the motion, there must be equity in the newbuild and maintenance budgets. One cannot fix something just by buying a new one, nor is it always cost-effective to do so. I commend the motion to the House and make known my concerns about the Savills report. The Minister's Department may use it to reduce funding for maintaining existing Housing Executive stock.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

I thank Members who have contributed to the debate, and I welcome the opportunity to respond to, and clarify, some of the issues that have been raised. I will try to address all the points that Members raised. I assure them that I will study the Hansard report, and if I find that I have left any questions unanswered, I will write directly to the Member concerned.

There can be no Member who, by now, is not aware of the shortfall that the housing budget suffered as a result of the land and property market's collapse. With so much of my budget predicated on land and property sales, it was inevitable that the downturn in the market would have a more savage impact on housing than on elsewhere. I have been asked to find further savings of more than £30 million from my budget next year. If I am to continue to protect vulnerable people and those in greatest need, it is vital that I have reliable and up-to-date information on how best I can do it. That is precisely why I commissioned the Savills report.

Savills undertook the work between November 2008 and March 2009. With the support of the Housing Executive, it visited more than 9,000 homes and analysed data for all 90,000-plus homes that were in Housing Executive ownership at the time. The survey is the most comprehensive of its kind ever to be undertaken on Housing Executive stock. The conclusions reached, and the recommendations made, provide a detailed evidence base on which I, and future Ministers with responsibility for housing, can make informed decisions.

As an aside, Members may be interested to note the conclusion that Housing Executive stock was by far the best-quality housing stock in Britain and Northern Ireland that Savills had

ever inspected. The maintenance standard that the Housing Executive adopted is well above the decent homes plus standard. Only 17% of the stock failed that standard, and the majority of those properties failed only because of the lack of an efficient heating system.

The motion calls on me to ensure equity in our newbuild and maintenance programmes. I often hear suggestions that, as Minister, I am focused only on the newbuild programme, to the detriment of other programmes. That is absolute nonsense, and it ignores reality. In the past five years, we have spent £975 million on maintaining the existing stock. In that time, only £686 million was spent on building new homes. This year alone, we will spend more on maintenance than on newbuilds. I have not stopped our maintenance programmes: far from it.

I make no apology for wanting to increase our housing stock. I am proud that we will build more new homes this year than at any time in the past decade. It is a fact that, today, almost 40,000 people are waiting for social housing. The latest housing needs assessment from the Housing Executive suggests the requirement to build 3,000 new homes per year to meet housing need. At the same time, the quality of the housing stock has never been better.

Informed choices need to be made. There is the need to know that every pound spent makes the biggest possible impact on those in greatest need. That is why the fact can no longer be ignored that, although we have a housing stock that we can be proud of, there are record numbers of people on waiting lists. Over the past five years, there has not been equity in how the various housing programmes have been funded, and that is why there is now an imbalance that must be addressed.

The fact must not be lost sight of that my resources are intended, first and foremost, to help those in greatest housing need: I fear sometimes that Members might not grasp that. Whether my budget is focused on newbuild or maintenance, it generates work across the construction industry. The motion may have Members believing that only investment in maintenance helps the beleaguered construction industry. That is clearly not the case. Professor Mike Smyth of the University of Ulster produced a report last June that evaluated the case for public investment in social housing. He noted that this was a

particularly good time to increase investment in the social housing development programme, given the falling costs of acquiring materials, labour and, most importantly, land. Members with a genuine interest in the work of the wider construction industry, rather than in that of a few firms, will take comfort in that report and realise that my resources are already indirectly supporting the industry, irrespective of the programmes chosen for prioritisation.

Let me touch on some of the other issues mentioned. The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development referred to dwelling unfitness. The preliminary findings of the house condition survey for 2009 will be made available on the Housing Executive's website next week. Some interesting statistics have been compiled by that survey. In 2009, the total dwelling stock was approximately 740,000. That represents a net increase of 35,000 since 2006 and the high number of dwelling completions at the height of the housing boom.

Interestingly, the rate of dwelling unfitness has continued to decline. In 2009, it stood at 2.4%, compared to 3.4% in 2006 and 4.9% in 2001. The 2009 dwelling unfitness rates for social housing were 0.1% and 0.2% for the Housing Executive and the housing associations respectively. I ask Members to place this debate in that context. It demonstrates that we have been tackling the issue of dwelling unfitness and we have the best quality social housing stock in the Housing Executive sector in these islands.

Simon Hamilton also raised the issue that the reduction in the Housing Executive capital works will have a detrimental impact on minority communities. The Savills report does not recommend a complete halt to all capital works; rather, it suggests that the full multi-element works, where front door to back door replacements are carried out, should be replaced by elemental improvements to kitchens, windows and bathrooms. Those should be replaced when they reach the end of their useful life.

Simon also raised the issue of the terms of reference for the review of rent setting or rent convergence. That is still under consideration, and I will bring the report, on completion and following evaluation, to the Committee for its consideration.

Mickey Brady asked whether the reductions in expenditure will affect Egan contractors. It will not affect them. Savills recommended that there

be an expansion of the Egan-type contractors to make efficiencies. Billy Armstrong said that we should take a strategic look at how maintenance is carried out. The report recommends a new asset management strategy to best-plan for future maintenance of the Housing Executive stock.

That should address Mr Armstrong's concerns. Anna Lo raised the issue of a reduction in work for Egan contractors if the budgets are reduced. That is not the case.

Jonathan Craig raised the issue of what property Savills looked at. The Savills survey was based on a representative sample of all house types in a broad geographical area, and the 10% sample is considered by the Department for Communities and Local Government to be sufficiently robust. If one takes on board other recent samples, that is broadly representative of the number of houses or people that are usually sampled in opinion polling. Mr Craig also mentioned Dales Flats and Hillhall, which I was happy to visit and saw examples of the work.

Fra McCann raised the issue of the impact of the recommendations on disabled adaptations. My officials are working with colleagues in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to improve the systems for adaptations. However, the Savills report does not suggest or recommend a reduction in adaptations; it just says that it should be researched further, and that is what we are doing. Other issues were raised about environmental works in estates and on amenity lands. The Savills report raises concern about the £10 million annual cost of ground maintenance. I share that concern, but we are looking at all those issues in the round.

I thank Members for their contributions and for providing us with a platform to debate the very real challenges that we now face in delivering housing in Northern Ireland. I trust that the Committee for Social Development, which brought the motion, will be reassured to learn that my scarce resources are being targeted at those in greatest housing need, and I am sure that they would want it no other way.

The Savills report presents us, for the first time, with a clear picture of what we need to invest in, and when, if we are to maintain the quality of our housing stock. Together with Mike Smith's report, it allows us to look more closely at those housing programmes that have, perhaps, not been as fully funded as they needed to

be. The report is to help to bring about that better balance in the allocation of funding, notwithstanding the housing budget constraints, over which no one in the House or Northern Ireland has any control. However, we now have the chance in the years ahead to redress that problem and provide for those most in need.

Finally, if nothing else today, we can dispel the myth that there is no money to maintain homes. There will always be a budget to maintain homes, and this year alone it will be almost £170 million.

I suppose that being a Minister is about making decisions, and sometimes they are difficult decisions. Those decisions are always easier when they are informed by reality, an evidence base and research. The Savills report now provides that reality. I made the report available to members of the Committee for Social Development, and I have placed a copy in the Assembly Library so that all Members can acquaint themselves with its findings. I would have appreciated more Members being in the House for the debate, because such reports are informative, but they also have far-reaching long-term implications. Naturally, I am anxious to get the views of all Members.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): On behalf of the Committee for Social Development, I thank the Members who contributed to the debate and, in particular, the Minister for her answers.

Much of the Savills report shows the Housing Executive in a positive and, indeed debatably, commendable light. I hope that the House will agree that, regardless of the controversial nature of some of its findings, the report has injected the social housing debate with a much-needed fresh impetus.

2.15 pm

The challenges that face the Department for Social Development in respect of the funding of social housing, both for newbuilds and capital works improvements, have been well set out by Members. The Social Development Committee has previously brought issues of concern relating to Egan contractors before the House. Today, however, our focus was on social houses that need more than a modest investment and on estates that require significant capital expenditure.

Everyone accepts that the decisions that flowed from the collapse of the property market were never going to be easy or welcomed universally. The Committee cannot provide the answers today, but this debate has set out some guiding principles, the first of which is one of transparency. The ramifications of significant changes in housing policy, be they related to rent convergence or capital expenditure profiles, should be debated and scrutinised by the Committee. The outworking of decisions about where money is or is not spent must be demonstrably equitable, and cannot, through error or omission, disadvantage parts of our community. Where substantial housing policy changes are to be made, primary consideration must be given to tenants, and then to the impact on the construction industry and the wider economy.

Today's debate was characterised by many insightful and forthright contributions. I will take a little time to remind the House of the key thoughts of the Members who spoke. Mickey Brady highlighted the possible adverse impact on tenants and contactors of the proposed reductions to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive maintenance and improvement works. Thomas Burns spoke about the aspects of the Savills report that highlighted the achievement of the decent homes standard in a large percentage of Housing Executive homes. He also identified the benefits of new social house-building for the local economy and indicated that that should be a priority for the Department.

Billy Armstrong called for a strategic review of housing planning and the effective use of existing resources. He also identified longer term issues that related to public finance. Anna Lo commended the Department for commissioning the report and for its achievements in respect of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's stock quality to date. She highlighted fears about the impact of the proposed reductions in expenditure for Egan contractors and others, and warned the House of the danger of complacency with regard to the Housing Executive stock quality. She also called for an independent body to set social rents and for a new funding mechanism for other housing costs.

Jonathan Craig spoke about the balance between newbuild and maintenance in social housing, and the danger of further disrepair in the social housing sector. He questioned the findings of the report and indicated his

difficulty in reconciling the Savills report's recommendations with the impact on Northern Ireland Housing Executive tenants. Like other Members, he raised the question of equality in respect of the strategic housing decisions. He also gave some examples of areas of concern in his constituency.

Fra McCann questioned the report's recommendations on raising social rents and the impact that that would have on deprived areas in Northern Ireland. He called for the Minister to continue the Housing Executive's maintenance policy, particularly the multi-element improvements, at least until equality consideration was undertaken. Alex Easton highlighted disrepair issues in his constituency. He spoke about how the adverse economic impact of the proposed reductions in expenditure would affect contractors. He suggested that equality was important in respect of the balance between newbuild and maintenance.

I thank the Minister for her response. She reminded the House of the background to the financial difficulties that face social housing in Northern Ireland. She also pointed out that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has adopted a maintenance standard that is well above that in the rest of the UK.

She further advised Members of the breakdown in spend between newbuild and maintenance and how she intended to address what she deems existing inequities. The Minister told the House of the benefit of newbuild to the construction industry, and detailed the general reduction in unfit levels in the social housing stock. She said that she would advise the Committee of the outcome of the rent review being conducted by her Department.

The Minister refuted that Egan contractors would be adversely affected and defended the statistical basis of the Savills report. She highlighted that her Department is also to review environmental and grounds maintenance costs and concluded that the Savills report would create an opportunity to deliver future funding allocations to housing based on better evidence.

It has been a very good debate, during which Members spoke about or touched upon most of the issues of concern. I commend the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the findings of the Savills report; calls on the Minister for Social Development to ensure equity in the delivery of new social housing and the maintenance of existing Housing Executive stock; and further calls on the Minister to limit the reduction in funding for Housing Executive maintenance contractors, in view of the adverse economic situation.

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

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Maternity Services

1. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety which hospitals with maternity units will exceed capacity limitations as a result of the planned maternity closures at hospitals such as Lagan Valley; and for his assessment of any possible health and safety implications for patients. (AQO 879/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Safe, sustainable maternity services are a top priority for my Department. It is precisely because of the need to ensure safe services that the obstetrics unit at Lagan Valley Hospital will close. Work is already under way to ensure that any hospital affected by the withdrawal of obstetric services from Lagan Valley Hospital will have the extra capacity to meet any increase in demand.

I recently invested £4.2 million in maternity services at the Royal and £3.5 million at Craigavon Area Hospital. A community midwifery unit has opened in Downpatrick, and there will be a midwifery-led unit in place in Lagan Valley Hospital before the withdrawal of obstetric services. I also have plans to increase maternity capacity at the Ulster Hospital.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an freagra sin. I welcome the Minister's answer. In the Developing Better Services document, the trust stated that people from Lisburn who need to avail of maternity services will travel to the Ulster Hospital in Dundonald. However, there is a view held by many, in particular the Royal College of Nursing, that that will not happen and that most women travelling from Lisburn will go to Craigavon Area Hospital or to the Royal Jubilee Maternity Service. Given that those hospitals are under increasing pressure, does the Minister accept that they will not have the capacity to deliver a quality maternity service?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As far as capacity is concerned,

the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust operates Lagan Valley Hospital, and expectant mums in that trust area will go to that hospital. I also anticipate that they will avail of Craigavon Area Hospital and the Royal Jubilee Maternity Service, which is why, as I said in my previous answer, I have invested in maternity services at those hospitals to address the point that Mr Butler makes.

Mr Craig: From answers to questions a number of months ago it was clear that there was a lack of capacity of around 700 births, and I know that the birth rate in Lagan Valley Hospital is 1,200 at present. Will the Minister give us some assurances that the new midwifery-led unit will be in open and in place before any reduction in numbers takes place in Lagan Valley Hospital, which would cause a major issue around capacity in the whole South Eastern Trust region?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As I said in my previous answer, there will be a midwifery-led unit in place in Lagan Valley Hospital before the withdrawal of obstetric services. That is my intention, and we will go forward with that. There is capacity in the entire system, but getting the capacity to match the demand is always an issue, particularly with the dramatic rise in the birth rate over the past number of years. However, there is still spare capacity in the system to deal with demand, particularly following the investment that I referred to today, as well as the new midwifery units at Downe Hospital and at Lagan Valley Hospital.

Mr Gardiner: Does the Minister agree that further investment is needed in the maternity units due to the increase in demand for our hospitals' maternity services? Is there any reason why the health budget should be cut, as advocated by the DUP and Sinn Féin, when finances are needed?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can only make the argument that the health budget should not be cut, and I have made that argument repeatedly, particularly because demand has risen so dramatically over the past few years, not just in maternity services but in services generally.

At the weekend, I listened to the president of Sinn Féin say at his party's ard fheis that Sinn Féin would not accept cuts to the Health Service, or words to that effect. There was an irony to those remarks, bearing in mind the stance of Sinn Féin in the Chamber.

Mr McDevitt: In light of the further pressure that the current budget will place on maternity services, will the Minister explain to the House how he can stand over the payment of £11 million in bonuses to consultants, including obstetric consultants, this year? Will he follow the lead of his Scottish counterpart in seeking to have that controversial consultants' bonus scheme suspended until the economic situation improves?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have never regarded that award as controversial; it is viewed as controversial by some who have a desire for consultants' pay to be cut. I note that Mr McDevitt has talked along those lines on a number of occasions, as he did at a Health Committee meeting, where he spoke about cutting low pay and ensuring that low-paid workers would see a pay freeze.

The merit award is for exceptional personal contributions made by individual doctors who show commitment to achieving the delivery of high-quality care and continuous improvement of the health and social care service. It also helps to ensure that Northern Ireland remains competitive in the international consultant labour market. A consultant in Northern Ireland could double his or her salary by moving to a job south of the border or in Scotland. One paediatrician is currently doing that, and, recently, we lost a consultant from Altnagelvin Area Hospital to the Irish Republic. Consultants can quadruple their salary if they go to the United States. The awards are for the best performers in the consultancy teams. We have some of the best doctors in Europe. Our service depends on them, and we must do what we can to hold on to them and to benefit from their knowledge, skills and experience.

A recent review of the scheme found that the recognition and reward of the achievements of the consultant workforce continues to be appropriate. Scotland has a different merit award system, and, since it has a larger workforce, its merit award scheme is more expensive. Our scheme costs less than 0.3% of the relevant budget.

Carrickfergus and Larne: Health Centres

2. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what his Department is doing to improve health centre facilities in Carrickfergus and Larne. (AQO 880/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In November 2008, I announced a significant capital investment of £175 million to improve health and social care services and facilities in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. That investment will enable key projects to be taken forward, including new health and care centres for Larne and Carrickfergus. The Northern Trust is developing business cases for new health and care centres, and they are due to be submitted to my Department later in the year.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for his response. Is he aware that Carrickfergus Borough Council has spent millions of pounds on a new leisure centre in Carrickfergus and that Larne Borough Council is spending a substantial amount of money on its recreational facilities? When does the Minister hope that work on those projects will commence?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In the investment strategy for Northern Ireland, as it stands, I have allowed for new health and care centres in Larne and Carrickfergus. I am not in a position to announce the date on which that work will commence. Much will depend on announcements about the money, capital and resource available to my Department. We are also developing a health and care centre in Ballymena, which is also in the Northern Trust. There are, therefore, three important primary care developments planned for the Northern Trust area, among others. Much depends on capital and resource. I hope to be in a position to make a definitive date known, as far as I can.

Mr Hilditch: I declare an interest as a co-author of the health village concept in Carrickfergus. We have received a good interagency response. We have also received a good response from the Minister. Will the Minister and the Department initiate further talks on that joined-up and innovative way to deliver related aspects of well-being in Carrickfergus? Perhaps, they will stumble upon some of the extra resources that are required.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In pursuit of that development, I met Mr Hilditch at Carrickfergus Borough Council. I also met other Members, such as Mr Neeson and Mr Ken Robinson. It is a good idea to form a brigade of units, such as leisure facilities, libraries and health-and-care centres. In particular, I look to the Grove Wellbeing Centre on the York

Road in Belfast, which is the result of work between the Belfast Trust, Belfast City Council and the library authority. There are savings on the cost of site acquisition and build. The centre fosters good working and symbiotic relationships between staff and people who visit it. It all works together. I am keen to do that in Carrickfergus, as I am keen to do it in other places. That is very much part of the calculation.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for his positive comments about health provision in Carrickfergus and Larne. I want to draw his attention to the third element of the East Antrim constituency, Newtownabbey, where people feel somewhat neglected because they have lost certain facilities from Whiteabbey Hospital. Will the Minister tell the House what facilities will be brought to the Whiteabbey/Newtownabbey area that will enhance its health provision?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Mr Ken Robinson will be aware that the Department has plans for a health-and-care centre to take forward primary care provision on the Whiteabbey Hospital site, as well as other plans for Whiteabbey.

We are moving towards the Developing Better Services model. That will require changes on a number of hospital sites, rather than closures. I hope to be able to announce some exciting changes for Whiteabbey, which are part of planning that is going forward. The Whiteabbey and Newtownabbey area has certainly not been overlooked. I consider it to be another key area for development.

Swine Flu

3. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if and when he will launch a review into the response of his Department and the Health Service to the swine flu outbreak. (AQO 881/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Northern Ireland has been one of the best prepared countries in the world. My Department's response has been proportionate, appropriate and robust. That has been part of a UK-wide response to the pandemic. At all times, Health Ministers have collectively based decisions on the best scientific advice from national expert groups. I have already commenced a review of Northern Ireland's pandemic response. The review's findings will

contribute to wider assessment of the overall UK response proposals, which are currently under consideration.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer, in which he referred to a review. Does he agree that there is a need to co-ordinate a regional response to epidemics, such as swine flu, given that his Department holds a considerable stockpile of unused vaccines?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The pandemic response was very much a UK-wide response. England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland operated on the best scientific advice that was available from the World Health Organization, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, and the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. I have set out a number of steps that were taken as we progressed through treatment into containment, such as strategies for communications, surge capacity, hospitals, community services, critical care, equipment, vaccines and so on.

It is important that the response is reviewed because that is not the last pandemic that Northern Ireland will see. The swine flu virus is still circulating. There is still a possibility of a third wave of infection. It is also anticipated that swine flu will make up the bulk of the seasonal flu virus in 2010 and in some years to come. Therefore, the virus will stay with us.

Northern Ireland got its share of vaccines according to the UK-wide order. At present, the bulk of those vaccines is with primary care providers and trusts. The vaccination programme continues. It is important that a strategic reserve is kept in Northern Ireland and in the UK.

The reviews that I am announcing for Northern Ireland and the review that I anticipate being announced in due course for the UK as a whole will better inform us all.

2.45 pm

Lord Morrow: I listened carefully to what the Minister said when he was cross-examined about the £11 million bonuses. I understand that the Minister recently made a statement in which he said that he had overestimated the swine flu vaccine to the tune of £61 million. Will he give an undertaking to the House that when he carries out the review that he spoke of he will also carry out a financial review? Does he

accept that he made a gross overestimation in this financial year? Will he assure the House that that will not be repeated?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No doubt, the benefit of hindsight is a key entry requirement for the House of Lords. The health and well-being of the people of Northern Ireland are foremost in my mind. All the way through the pandemic, we followed every piece of advice that we were given on swine flu. We began with estimates from epidemiologists, who made particular estimates on our ability to cope. The £61 million was an estimate. However, that estimate came down, and, before moneys were ever allocated, it was well down. Indeed, there is a long story to be told about the money for swine flu. I am quite sure that the review will take that story on board and have a good look at it and that individuals in the Executive who deal with finance will not come out of it particularly well.

The review will be as wide-ranging as I can make it, because this is not the last pandemic that Northern Ireland will see, and it will certainly not be the last worldwide pandemic that we will have to deal with. The lessons that we learned in dealing with the pandemic will be important. However, a key element was getting the vaccine in place while the swine flu was surging, because that had a strong effect on reducing the surge.

Podiatry

4. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he can provide an assurance that there will be long-term investment in podiatry services despite public spending cuts. (AQO 882/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am fully committed to providing a high-quality, safe and effective Health Service for the population of Northern Ireland. However, it is proposed to cut my budget by £92 million, which is more than the total £76 million budget for new services. I can give no assurances about long-term investment in podiatry or other services at this stage. The current financial uncertainty requires creative thinking, and, therefore, all services in health and social care will be required to ensure an effective use of services that maximises outcomes and provides value for money. In that regard, podiatry services are no different to any other service, and trusts will need to ensure that the services

that they provide are targeted at those who need them most.

Mr Spratt: I partly thank the Minister for his answer. Some very good work is ongoing in health centres etc on diseases such as diabetes and on podiatry services and the preventative measures that they provide. Does the Minister agree that spending money on preventative medicine reduces the burden on the main health budget at a later stage?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I could have written Mr Spratt's comment about spending money on preventative medicine. Clearly, he has been reading and listening to what I have been saying in here for the past three years. The need to press down on demand on the Health Service is about working upstream rather than always working downstream, which is about prevention. That is why I decided to set up the Public Health Agency, the establishment of which the DUP decided to oppose. Indeed, it was the only party in the House to do so. However, I agree with the Member's sentiments about allied health. Podiatry, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, dietetics and so on all have a significant role to play in ensuring that we keep people out of hospital.

Mr O'Loan: The question refers to cuts in public spending. I understand that the Minister has not yet briefed the Committee on his plans to address the reduction in his budget for next year. Will he care to outline his plans on this occasion? To what extent does he feel that he can address the pressures on his budget through efficiency savings without reducing front line services in any way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am sure that Mr O'Loan is aware that we have several hundred lines of service in health and social care, and all of that has to be carefully balanced to maintain, as far as possible, a service that addresses the needs of the population of Northern Ireland. However, currently, because there is not enough money available, we are providing health and social care according to budget, money and resource, rather than according to need. I recall that Mr O'Loan was one of those who voted for those cuts and those efficiencies.

We are in a situation that is largely created by a rise in demand and the inability of the House to see a way forward to meet that demand. Therefore, we have a Health Service that is not

entirely meeting need, so I have to make very careful decisions. I will make the plans known in due course, but I hope that I will not be listening to a chorus of people telling me that I should not be doing something or other, when the very people who will make up that chorus will be those who engineered the situation in the first place.

Pharmaceutical List

5. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the fairness of the application and appeal process, known as “control of entry”, for inclusion on the pharmaceutical list. (AQO 883/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has been contacted on several occasions recently by pharmacists aggrieved at the refusal of their application to join the pharmaceutical list and the failure of their appeal to the national appeal panel. I am aware that officials in England and Wales have looked at the issue of control of entry and have made changes to the application process. A review is planned in Scotland. My officials will look at the issue as part of the development of a new contract for community pharmacy.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. I know that he has been slated for previous answers, but it is to be welcomed that his officials are looking at what is happening in England and Scotland. I have also raised concerns indirectly with the Minister’s office about that issue, and there is genuine concern about the involvement of people on that list. I welcome the fact that the Minister is considering the possibility of a review. If possible, will he tell the House whether he will do that and, perhaps, give a timescale for it? There is genuine concern about that matter in constituencies.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Pharmacy is clearly an important area because of the cost of the drugs budget. The issue is that the bulk of the drugs budget goes through community pharmacy, so I am looking at procurement and the provision of generic drugs. The Member will be aware that the percentage of generic drugs used here has risen in the last three years from 43% to 64%. We are rapidly catching up on England, where

59% of drugs were generic at the time when it was 43% here. The percentage there is now 68%, so we have a wee bit to go, but we can catch up, and that will make major savings.

There are other savings to be made in relation to procurement, and I am considering that. On the key point that the Member makes, which relates to control of entry, one of the issues is that, pro rata, there are far more pharmacies here than in England, Scotland or Wales. In fact, we have 524 pharmacies; working roughly on a benchmark with England, Scotland or Wales that number would be around 340 or 350. We have an oversupply and overprovision, so the people who are carrying out control of entry are clearly looking at that and wondering about the need. That does not actually address the central issue for the Member, which is that community pharmacies should be placed in areas of disadvantage where there is need. That is all part of the mix as far as I am concerned.

Community pharmacy plays an important role in prevention, which relates to Mr Spratt’s point earlier. I am looking at that issue very closely.

Mr Shannon: The Minister’s response to that question was very positive. In relation to the control of entry and drug procurement, we are all keen that savings be made through drug procurement. Those savings could, in turn, be used to ensure that some other drugs that are not currently available are made available. Can the Minister assure us that the savings that will be made will be used for other drugs, such as the cancer drugs?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Mr Shannon makes a good point. Drugs that generate important advances in the treatment of conditions are coming on the market constantly, and I invest and have been investing in that, year on year. Part of my resources for new service developments for the coming financial year, budget cuts permitting, is for new drugs. I am always looking to make savings, and I will continue to do so. However, one issue that arises is resistance in the industry, and I have to be able to work with the industry and take it with me as far as possible.

Although significant savings have been made to the drugs budget and significant advances have been made in the use of generic medicines, much more progress can be made. I shall continue to do my best to make that progress, because every penny that we save in that area

will, as Mr Shannon said, be made available for important new drug treatments on the market.

Mr Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Family Restoration Fund

7. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions he or his Department has had with British ministerial counterparts in relation to the operation of and access to the family restoration fund, announced by the Prime Minister on Wednesday 24 February 2010. (AQO 885/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The family restoration fund will benefit child migrants from the whole of the UK. Discussions are taking place among officials from the Northern Ireland Office, my Department and the Department of Health in London on how the fund will operate. The detail has not yet been finalised.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answer. As the details are worked through, I encourage him to take account not only of the needs of the people who went to Australia and elsewhere and who know that they are child migrants but of those of the many people who were left here in all-too-abusive care who believe that their siblings and friends were transported. Those people have been trying to make enquiries but have been told that information and records are not available. Will those people also be able to seek assistance and support through the family restoration fund?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Mr Durkan's question indicates that he is aware that the family restoration fund was announced by the Prime Minister on 24 February. I had no advance knowledge of the detail of the fund, and I am asking questions to find out how it will affect Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. The fund will support travel and other costs for former migrants who wish to be reunited with their families.

When I examined the statistics and the background, I was shocked to learn the number of children who were involved in the process over 150 years. We will obviously be considering the more recent cases. Between 1947 and 1967, between 7,000 and 10,000 children were sent to Australia from the UK. Before that, Canada was the main reception country, but the

Canadian Government stopped and banned the practice through an Order in Council in 1925.

Between 1938 and 1956, Catholic agencies sent a total of 1,109 children from the UK to Australia, 103 of whom are known to have come from Catholic agencies in Northern Ireland. The detail is as sparse as that. I am also aware that a number of other voluntary agencies, such as Dr Barnardo's, played a role.

It is a question of tracking down the families of migrant children and trying to make a connection. It seems that it will prove quite a stretch for £6 million to deal with the numbers concerned.

Mr McCarthy: I apologise for being late, but I have had a last-minute thought. The Minister mentioned the years between 1947 and 1967, and I know that a Government were in this Building during that period. The statistics may be somewhere in Northern Ireland, so the buck may not need to be passed to Westminster.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Mr McCarthy has had a last-minute thought on passing the buck. It is a serious issue, and I am not aware of any records outside of, perhaps, the Public Record Office. All of that must be considered, and we have to determine how best to find the information, particularly by using the organisations that dispatched the children. Those organisations will be the first port of call.

It is very difficult. I think that the onus is on the migrant children who are seeking to come back rather than on us, because some of those affected might not be interested in coming back. The process is complex and is at a very early stage.

3.00 pm

Regional Development

Northern Ireland Water: Investment

1. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the long-term investment plan for NI Water, given that its existing strategic business plan ends this month. (AQO 892/10)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Northern Ireland Water's (NIW) investment plan for the next three years has

been developed in light of draft ministerial guidance that I consulted on last spring. That was informed by research on customers' views conducted by the Consumer Council. The key themes of the research were: improving service quality for customers; meeting EU obligations; promoting sustainability; and delivering efficiency. The priorities for investment have been agreed with stakeholders in the water sector, including the Drinking Water Inspectorate, the Environment Agency and the Consumer Council. NIW issued a draft business plan in June 2008 setting out its plans and the costs involved. That has been scrutinised by the Utility Regulator, which issued its recommendations last month. I am considering those recommendations, and I will put my proposals to the Executive shortly.

Mr McNarry: I appreciate the Minister's reply. The existing NIW business plan states that the objective for the period ending this month was to build a business that delivers efficient, sustainable water and waste water services for its customers. However, does the Minister agree that Northern Ireland Water's billing systems were not up to scratch during that period? Does he intend to monitor the business more closely in the next period to achieve a service that is fit for purpose? If so, does he expect to see an immediate improvement?

The Minister for Regional Development: I agree with the Member that there were difficulties with the billing system. The information systems that NIW inherited from the Water Service contained difficulties that became apparent during the course of that business plan. I scrutinise closely the operations and workings of NIW, as an entity, and I intend to do so to ensure that it continues to improve. There have been improvements since that error was discovered, but we need to continue to strive for further improvements across all aspects of its functions.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin agus as an cheann eile.

Has the Minister received the independent report examining governance issues within NIW?

The Minister for Regional Development: I received the report last week. It brought to light a number of serious issues, and I am considering its recommendations. I have been in consultation with officials from NIW and the Department about the report, and I will take a decision on its recommendations in the near future.

Mr Shannon: It is important that we have some idea about NIW's long-term investment plan. There has been long-term investment in my constituency of Strangford, and yet NIW has not returned to fix the roads and to finish the system as it should have done. Will the Minister, therefore, assure the House that NIW's long-term investment extends to a monitoring system that ensures that it actually finishes the work that it starts?

The Minister for Regional Development: I would have been surprised if the Member had not raised an issue relating to Ards.

There is a statutory requirement on the water company and all utilities to restore roads to the state in which they found them. A recent Public Accounts Committee report on the issue contained a series of recommendations with which the Department agreed, and I expect that scrutiny of that type of work will improve accordingly. Although a requirement already existed, the Public Accounts Committee felt that that needed to be tightened up substantially, and the Department intends to do that.

Mr Gallagher: Given that Northern Ireland Water will have £527 million to spend on capital expenditure schemes over the next three years, will the Minister tell us whether he will take steps to amend and widen the procurement framework for contracts in order to provide greater opportunities for Northern Ireland companies to participate and, indeed, for their employees to have more stability and security in their jobs?

The Minister for Regional Development: The general sense in the Executive, not just in my Department, is that we must ensure that public money spent by the Executive, particularly on capital projects, is used to maximise the benefit for the local economy. Certainly, in any of my discussions with NIW, I have repeated that advice. I asked NIW to invite in all the contractors that are on its books, big and small, to ensure that they are fully au fait with how procurement will operate and fully informed of all the information necessary, so that they can bid for work and be quite sure that they stand as good a chance as anyone of getting it. It is not just a matter for NIW. All Departments and government agencies that spend public money must try to maximise the benefit for the local economy, particularly in these difficult times.

Road Repairs

2. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an estimate of the total cost of repairing potholes caused by the recent bad weather. (AQO 893/10)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Roads Service has advised that a repeated freezing and thawing cycle, as experienced during the recent spell of cold weather, has a damaging effect on the roads network, causing carriageway to split and potholes to form. Due to the size of the roads network, it may be some time before assessments are completed and the full extent of the damage and cost of carrying out repairs is known. Additionally, as it would not be practical to diagnose every individual failure that led to the formation of the indentified potholes, one cannot say with any certainty whether they were caused by the recent bad weather or by other factors. For those reasons, an estimated total cost of repairing the potholes caused by the recent cold spell cannot be provided.

However, I can confirm that, since the beginning of January, additional funding of approximately £16.6 million has been allocated to Roads Service divisions. That money will be used to progress predetermined programmes of work targeting the worst roads and to deal with the effects of the recent cold spell.

Mr Lunn: The Minister will probably agree with the rest of us that the greatest frost damage this year, caused by an exceptional winter, has been to minor and rural roads. Therefore, can he confirm that he will allow Roads Service to give some priority to those minor roads?

The Minister for Regional Development: We attempted to get additional money, and have received approximately £16.6 million. That will be allocated fairly across Roads Service divisions and applied on the basis of which roads have been most damaged and need the most attention. I have stated many times in the Chamber, and the Member will be aware, that the budget for structural maintenance is not sufficient and, therefore, the roads are more susceptible. However, we accept that this was an exceptionally cold winter — the most protracted cold spell since 1981 — and one which caused a substantial amount of damage to the roads. Nonetheless, it is recognised that there is not enough money in structural maintenance and that means that, in

spells of weather such as this, the roads get a particular pounding.

Lord Morrow: I was interested in the Minister's reply concerning the severe winter. Is the Minister prepared to commission a report in relation to roads in the Dungannon, Aghnacloy and Caledon area, which have suffered severely as a result of the construction of the A4? Heavy vehicles, which would not normally use those roads, are using the roads, and they are in a deplorable condition. Can the Minister give assurances that he will carry out a survey of that area to ascertain the damage that has been caused?

The Minister for Regional Development: I advise the Member that a broader report was commissioned on structural maintenance and the effect on the roads of the shortfall in structural maintenance. I recommend that the Member take the opportunity to study that report, which was conducted by Professor Snaith. In relation to the roads that the Member mentioned, I have the opportunity this week to visit that project and I will certainly take up with Roads Service managers the matters that he raised.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister said that he needs additional money for the roads structural maintenance budget. How does he go about trying to secure additional funding for that very necessary project? Will he encourage the divisional Roads Service managers to carry out a PR initiative aimed at explaining what people should do when they come across potholes? They should not just ring elected representatives; they should ring Roads Service directly. I would like that to be said. Give out the phone numbers, please.

The Minister for Regional Development: The Department commissioned the Snaith review of structural maintenance funding, which underlined what Roads Service, the Department and I had been saying for some time. Based on 2009 prices, it is estimated that £108 million will be required for structural maintenance this year. Roads Service has received only £85 million, which equates to a shortfall of £23 million for 2009-2010 alone. The Snaith review reinforced the message that more money is required for investment in structural maintenance here, but Roads Service and the Department are competing with other Departments' very worthy demands for Executive resources for areas such

as education and health. The Department bats as best as it can to secure the money that is required, and I have said in the House on many occasions that the single biggest asset owned by the Executive is the roads network and that it needs investment.

Information is available to the public, and I can ensure that it is made more prominent. However, the telephone numbers of Roads Service divisional offices are quite easily available to the public. I accept that the Member would prefer that Roads Service managers were bothered about potholes rather than him, and I will ensure that people are made aware of that.

Mr Kinahan: Will the Minister clarify whether roads are being repaired well enough? We have had a really bad winter, and we will probably have more bad winters in the future. Therefore, should we review how we repair roads so that they stay in good condition when we have such appalling weather?

The Minister for Regional Development: Again, I recommend the Snaith review to the Member. It provides evidence that it is necessary for some repair work to be carried out on our roads so that they do not become dangerous or a hazard for drivers. However, the resources are not there to carry out all the longer-term repairs that are needed and the roads are suffering as a result. The patching work that is carried out is necessary because the safety of the travelling public is paramount. However, it does not do the job of addressing the long-term interests of the roads structure.

Road Gritting

3. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the expenditure for the current winter gritting programme for rural roads. (AQO 894/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service has advised that it is unable to provide specific details of expenditure on rural roads but that the overall expenditure on the current winter service programme up to 31 January 2010 was £5.1 million. Some 67,123 tons of salt were used up to 31 January 2010, of which 8,677 were targeted at secondary salting of roads in the vicinity of the 46 rural schools that were identified as being most affected by the winter weather conditions, as well as at filling salt boxes and replenishing grit supplies.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer, and I note the answers that he gave to questions from Mr Lunn, Mr McElduff and other Members. Does the Minister agree that the ever-increasing severity of our winter weather means that some level of preparation should be undertaken to deal with the worst long-term scenarios, which are more likely to occur in the winters ahead?

The Minister for Regional Development: It is not always easy to predict the winters that we get. This winter was the coldest since 1981, but previous winters were not as bad. We suffered more from heavy rain and flooding than from freezing conditions.

Roads Service was probably better prepared than any other service across these islands. It was the only service that did not get into a panic over salt supplies; it had a full stock. There was an early cold spell around October when some of the salt was used, but Roads Service topped up its supplies and kept a regular supply coming from the salt mines in Carrickfergus. Roads Service was alone among roads service operators across these islands, in either Ireland or Britain, in being well prepared. It had adequate supplies of salt while others were running short. As I said when I answered the Member's initial question, not only did it salt the main road network but it put a substantial amount of salt on secondary routes and in and around the schools that we identified last year as having difficulties in the cold weather and which had to close as a result.

Just like with structural maintenance, Departments argue and bid for as much money as possible and compete with other Executive demands on a range of other issues. As the Member will know, the Minister from his party has focused on the need for more money to be allocated for social housing. All Departments argue for money so that they have better resources to help them to prepare for whatever situations they face. Roads Service did a very good job this year with the resources that it had.

3.15 pm

Mr I McCrea: Will the Minister assure the House that if there is a continual cold spell, the weather worsens or next year turns out to be as bad as this year, Roads Service will work with local councils to ensure that grit is available to local communities, particularly those in a rural setting?

The Minister for Regional Development: The issue of replenishing grit piles and salt boxes

can be tackled through elected representatives or by rural communities and Roads Service. Local councils do not necessarily need to be involved. Roads Service is willing to work with all local representatives and councils to ensure a proper supply of grit and salt.

I suggest to the Member that the best option is to identify the location of grit piles and salt boxes in the summer and to ensure that Roads Service comes out to replenish them. People often report, in the middle of a cold spell, that it is impossible to drive up a particular road, but it is also impossible to drive up that road to replenish a grit pile. People should ensure that the key work is done before the winter by identifying problem areas and talking to their local divisional managers to ensure that grit piles and salt boxes are topped up. There are about 4,500 grit piles across rural areas, and Roads Service is willing to ensure that local communities can use them.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister intend to use local farmers to clear blocked roads during adverse weather conditions?

The Minister for Regional Development: On occasions, a provision has been used for local farmers to clear snow from blocked roads. If that is the provision to which the Member refers, it is ongoing, and some farmers are engaged on an as-needed basis. The question has been raised of whether farmers could be involved in gritting, and I discussed that with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and officials from both Departments. Our conclusion was that the best option, for a range of reasons, was for Roads Service to continue its operation of the gritting service. The arrangement will continue whereby local farmers become involved in clearing roads that have become blocked by snow.

Speed Limits: Schools

4. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he plans to extend the 20 mph speed limit pilot project that is in place outside school premises. (AQO 895/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: In September 2008, Roads Service introduced part-time 20 mph speed limit pilot projects at two rural schools. In September 2009, a further pilot project at an urban school was added. Roads Service has been monitoring the pilot

projects over the school year and is finalising its report on the findings to date. I expect that the board of Roads Service will consider the final report in the near future.

Roads Service is also reviewing its speed management policy, and it is expected that the details of that review, which includes the use of variable speed limits at schools, will be published shortly. Should it be decided to extend the initiative beyond the pilot projects, each site will be considered on its merits, and appropriate criteria will be developed to determine the priorities. In the current financial climate, any possible future implementation of such a programme will depend on the availability of additional capital funding.

Miss McIlveen: I welcome the Minister's response to my question. I have a specific concern about schools that sit on the periphery of rural towns and thus are neither in the countryside nor within a built-up conurbation. Will he include such schools in his deliberations? How much has he allocated to the project?

The Minister for Regional Development: The first of the two ongoing studies is the pilot project on the use of variable signs. Those signs activate at particular times, such as when children arrive at or leave school, and they can be switched off in the school holidays. The pilot runs at two locations in the northern division of Roads Service, one of which is an urban area. The initial findings have been extremely positive, as the signs have reduced the speed of passing vehicles. I expect the confirmed results to lead to requests from other schools in urban and urban/rural settings for similar projects. That will depend on the availability of funding. The results of the speed management survey, which also examines speed management outside primary schools, should be published soon.

Mr McDevitt: The Minister will know that the chance of being killed when hit by a car travelling at 30 mph is about one in five. That reduces to one in 40 when hit by a car travelling at 20 mph. Does the Minister agree that it is time for a serious region-wide conversation about extending the 20 mph speed limit to all urban residential streets?

The Minister for Regional Development: That conversation is ongoing. As I said, I hope to publish the final policy document within the next month and I am quite happy to hear the views of elected representatives on it. The draft speed management

policy is based on guidance produced by the Department for Transport and the regional Administrations. That guidance was subject to public consultation in 2009 and, based on the comments submitted, received considerable support. The new policy will also contain the latest thinking on encouraging a greater take-up of 20 mph limits and zones in residential areas.

Belfast Rapid Transit System

5. **Mr B Wilson** asked the Minister for Regional Development why the public consultation on the preferred routes for the Belfast rapid transit system is being deferred until after the primary legislation has completed its Assembly stages. (AQO 896/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department sought advice from a number of sources, including the Office of the Legislative Counsel and the Departmental Solicitor's Office, on the timelines for the proposed rapid transit legislation. Those discussions identified the need for accurate timetabling of legislation to enable it to be delivered within the mandate of this Assembly. In addition, there was a possibility of confusion arising if the public were also being consulted on the details of route alignment options during the enabling legislation process.

As a result, my Department decided not to engage with the public on route options until early 2011. That will also allow greater detail on route options to be made available to the public during the consultation phase. Belfast rapid transit is a key priority in the Programme for Government and in the investment strategy, and it is the subject of an important commitment from me and the Department.

Mr B Wilson: I thank the Minister for his response. I am disappointed, because there seems to be some slippage. I hope that that does not reflect commitment to the rapid-transit project. When the legislation comes to the Assembly, will it include route options beyond the three that we have already?

The Minister for Regional Development: I assure Members that there has been no slippage. The reason why we have held back the consultation on route options is so as not to confuse people. The legislation coming before the Assembly is enabling legislation, and it does not specify routes. It does not even specify Belfast. The

legislation will enable the roll-out of rapid transit anywhere in the North.

A number of route options are being looked at as part of the three pilot schemes. Further work to be done prior to the consultation will allow for greater information to be provided on the pros and cons of each of the route options.

As I said, the scheme is a priority for me. It is a key part of the Programme for Government and a priority for the Department. I do not see there being any slippage.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister assure the House that it will be possible for the routes selected for the scheme to be easily upgraded, so that they can serve commuter towns outside Belfast in the future?

The Minister for Regional Development: The pilot routes that we are looking at will serve the Belfast area. They will not serve rural areas or other towns. The enabling legislation that is being brought forward applies to anywhere. It is not location specific.

If the Member had looked at the report by Atkins and the follow-up publications, he would have seen that three route options are being looked at specifically as part of the pilot scheme, which will be developed in the first instance.

Roads Service: Compensation Claims

6. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many pothole-related claims were made against Roads Service in 2008-09 and 2009-2010 to date; and the total compensation paid during each period. (AQO 897/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: In 2008-09, my Department's central claims unit received 1,472 pothole-related claims. The figure for 2009-2010, up to 26 February 2010, is 1,530. In 2008-09, £371,979.66 was paid in compensation for pothole-related claims. The corresponding figure for 2009-2010, up to the end of February 2010, is £382,295.83. As it takes a minimum of a few months to investigate and conclude compensation claims, the amount of compensation paid in any year will not relate solely to claims received in that year.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister for his reply. Given that my question was the second one that he received about potholes today, and given the high level of pothole-related claims and

the quantity of money paid out over the past number of years, what roll-out has there been by Roads Service of the Jetpatcher vehicle, which is immensely popular in Great Britain, not just because it fills in potholes very quickly but because it is cost-effective?

The Minister for Regional Development: The jet-patching vehicle is used extensively here, and, as I said in response to earlier questions on structural maintenance, an additional £16.6 million has been allocated to that area since January. However, that money, which has been allocated across the divisions, still does not bring us to the level that is required for structural maintenance this year. Roads Service, the Department and I continue to argue that we need the required funds for structural maintenance to ensure that we not only patch the roads but repair their full structure. Some of the methods that are used to keep the roads safe are effective in the immediate term. However, in the longer term, ongoing structural damage will cause even greater problems.

Mr Cree: Is the Minister satisfied with the speed with which Roads Service carries out repairs, and is there scope for contracting more small firms to assist with the work?

The Minister for Regional Development: I am sure that areas for improvement can be found in any service. However, few organisations can take receipt of £16 million in January, spread it across their divisions on a need basis and spend it before the end of the financial year. Roads Service is used to spending properly the money that it receives, and it responds as quickly as it can.

The Member will know — as all Members, whether they represent rural or urban constituencies, will know — that this year's cold spell has had a very severe effect on roads. Demand on Roads Service to fix roads has been high, and it approaches that on a priority basis. It found that it has enough resources at its disposal to spend that money.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister assure the House that the £16 million that we have heard so much about this afternoon will be used to fill in the massive number of potholes in rural areas? I raised that matter with Sammy Wilson last week, and he was doubtful whether the money will be spent on such repairs.

The Minister for Regional Development: Perhaps he was hopeful rather than doubtful

because he wants the money back. However, from the information that I have received, I understand that Roads Service fully intends to use the money for that purpose. Roads Service has experience of receiving money that other Departments have not spent late in the financial year, and it has always been good at ensuring that that money is spread equitably across all divisions and put to use very quickly on roads. I have no doubt that, were it available, much more money could be spent on roads. However, the intention is, based on any evidence that I have seen to date, that Roads Service will spend the money that was made available in the December monitoring round.

Mr Speaker: Question 7 has been withdrawn.

Residential Car Parking

8. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an outline of progress on residential parking schemes. (AQO 899/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I had intended to take questions 7 and 8 together. Nonetheless, my response will cover both eventualities.

First, I will provide an update on the progress of residential parking schemes in general. Members will be aware that I amended the policy on the introduction of residents' parking schemes to address residents' concerns during the first phase of residents' parking schemes in Belfast. However, following the most recent public consultation exercise, those schemes have again failed to obtain the support required to allow them to be implemented.

In response to that and to subsequent requests from elected representatives for further consideration, I have decided to re-engage with the local community in three areas, namely Barrack Street, the Markets East and the Markets West. Officials from Roads Service will have further meetings with community representatives to discuss the issue and to gauge the likely support for our proposals. If the response is positive and the community representatives agree to promote the benefits of the scheme actively, I will instruct Roads Service to resurvey the residents to confirm whether support is sufficient with a view to finalising details and implementing the schemes.

In addition, I have asked officials to begin to engage with residents in the lower Malone and

Stranmillis areas of Belfast with the intention of developing schemes. Following meetings with residents and representatives from Queen's University, my Department has established a joint group to consider parking management in the lower Malone area. The group will soon produce a short report that sets out a range of options. There are plans to pilot similar schemes in other towns, and a consultation exercise has just been successfully completed on a proposal for a scheme in the Bogside area of Derry, and details are being finalised in preparation for the necessary legislative procedures.

Mr Durkan: The Minister will be aware that some people who have been through the pilots and consultations find them convoluted. However, people who have a clear demand for such schemes are particularly frustrated, not least, as the Minister is well aware, those in Aberfoyle Crescent and Aberfoyle Crescent South in Derry and in Clarence Avenue and Lawrence Hill.

Can the Minister give the people in those areas any hope that his Department will move to accede to their reasonable demands, given the pressures that they face?

3.30 pm

The Minister for Regional Development: My colleague beside me, and others in Derry, have raised the issue of the Aberfoyle residents on a number of occasions, and I am aware of it. The Member will know that the situation there is different from that in which all-day commuter parking prevents people from parking outside their own houses. In Aberfoyle and in some parts of the lower Malone area of Belfast, people have driveways, so it is not the case that they cannot park outside their homes. The difficulty lies in getting access to and from their homes, which is the case in and around the Magee campus. I have assured the people there, and the elected representatives who have written to me, that when the pilot scheme is launched in the Bogside, we can look clearly and more urgently at the situation in Aberfoyle, and at the report on a similar problem in the lower Malone area relating to parking at Queen's University. That situation does not prevent people from parking outside their own doors, but it creates hazards and difficulties for people who have driveways to park in. There may be lessons from that situation that can be applied in the Magee area.

Private Members' Business

Local Government (Disqualification) (Amendment) Bill: Second Stage

Ms Purvis: I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Local Government (Disqualification) (Amendment) Bill [NIA 7/09] be agreed.

In accordance with Standing Order 32, I would like to outline the general principles of the Bill. The purpose of the Bill is to end the practice of dual mandates between the Assembly and local district councils. Dual mandates occur when an individual holds more than one level of elected public office at the same time. The Bill will disqualify any individual who is elected, appointed or otherwise selected as a local councillor from holding the position of MLA. The Bill will come into effect at the next local district elections after Royal Assent is granted. According to the calendar, that will be the local elections anticipated in 2011.

It is important to note that the Bill does not create any new prohibitions on candidacy. It will not prevent an individual from standing for a local council and the Assembly at the same time, if, for example, local and Assembly elections were to be held on the same day. Although that form of spreading the odds, as it were, was distasteful to some who responded to the public consultation on the Bill, most felt that creating a prohibition to stand limited choice and the principles of political participation. If a sitting councillor stands for, and is elected to, the Assembly, or vice versa, when local and Assembly elections are held on different dates, that individual will be disqualified from holding the local council seat.

That is the extent of the legislation. I know that, customarily, Members are given four weeks to familiarise themselves with new legislation. It is my sincere hope that it did not take as long to read through the three clauses that comprise the Bill. Its brevity speaks to its effectiveness, and it says exactly what it will do.

The original proposal for the legislation contained two additional provisions: one would have changed the way in which vacant seats are filled in local councils outside an election to mirror the arrangements that are in place for the Assembly; the other would have created a body to co-ordinate the work of local and regional

government. The provisions for local council vacancies would have permitted political parties to co-opt another party member into a council seat if that seat were made vacant by the departure of a party member. That course of action would prevent costly by-elections, ensure that the make-up of local councils reflected the mandates given by the voters on the day of the election, and give political parties the opportunity to prepare new individuals for the work of government. However, that was deemed to be an excepted matter and that proposal was subsequently removed. Nonetheless, I am pleased to see that that issue is being addressed.

Following the consultation on filling vacancies in local councils, Minister Paul Goggins recently laid a Bill at Westminster that will alter the manner in which vacancies in local councils are filled to match the arrangements that are in place in the Assembly. It is hoped that that will be completed by the end of March.

The final provision of the original proposal, the co-ordination body, was designed to ensure effective communication, complementary efforts, and shared visions and agenda between local and regional government, particularly if the review of public administration is to be realised and councils are to be given enhanced responsibilities. Such systems are used in a number of countries, including Wales and Australia, where dual mandates are not the norm. It would also address the assertion that there are benefits in efficiency and information flow when the same people are MLAs and local councillors. However, efficiencies should not have to rely on individual personalities and capabilities; they should be systemic. Any value in that arrangement is outweighed by larger more serious problems that occur when the flow of information and access to government are limited to a small, narrow pool of individuals.

The wording in the proposed Bill about the co-ordination body was ultimately removed when the Environment Minister informed me of his intention to bring proposals to the Executive to create such a body. I look forward to seeing that progress.

The rationale behind the Bill is simple but compelling. The legislation is about making the principles of good governance part not only of the rules but of the dominant culture of politics in Northern Ireland. That means making inclusion, transparency and accountability

part of the daily operating principles of our governing structures and promoting regulations that ensure that decisions that are made by elected officials are taken with the needs and interests of the public first. It means ensuring that this nascent Assembly strives to achieve the gold standard for good governance and public representation, even when it is personally inconvenient or uncomfortable for those elected to the House. This is a post-conflict Government, and instilling the highest values in all that we do is paramount not just to having peace but to keeping it.

Northern Ireland has the worst record in the UK and one of the worst in Europe on dual mandates. Out of 108 Members of the Assembly, 67 hold mandates as local councillors. That equates to 62% — the vast majority. That is a problem. Having power, decision-making and public representation concentrated among the same limited number of people is preventing the growth of a culture of inclusion, transparency and openness. Rather than working to bring new people in, we are striving to maintain a system that keeps new people out. That has been the dominant political culture in Northern Ireland for decades. Ending dual mandates has the potential to bring at least 67 new voices into our government structures, give or take what actually happens with the review of public administration. It will force us, the political parties, which are meant to be a mechanism for public expression, to work harder at reaching out to the public, to do a better job appealing to and involving more people, and to present the work of elected government as worthwhile and valuable.

There is an opportunity to bring in under-represented voices with new recruits. Of the 67 Members holding dual mandates, 55 are men. That is to say that 88% of dual mandates between the Assembly and local government are held by men. That highlights the startlingly low number of women in the House, despite the leadership of women in every other aspect of our society. The end of dual mandates would create an opportunity for all parties to bring women into decision-making positions. The same is true for young people, those with disabilities, members of minority ethnic communities and those from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds. All those groups make real contributions to our communities every day, but are sadly under-represented in our elected bodies.

When government more accurately reflects the make-up of its population, it delivers better policy, more accountable governance and engenders higher levels of public confidence. Confidence is a key component of this legislation. Public sentiment towards the Assembly sometimes fluctuates between frustration and fury. This body is too often perceived as bickering, ineffective and self-interested. I hope that those Members of the Assembly who are genuinely concerned with public confidence will see the Bill as an opportunity to demonstrate that the Assembly puts the interests of people first and that Assembly Members are willing to make what may seem like personal sacrifices in the name of better, more transparent and participatory government.

There is also the issue of conflict of interest, which could potentially become even more of a concern if the review of public administration comes into effect and councils are given enhanced responsibilities. It is a fact that different levels of government make decisions about each other. Indeed, there have been prime examples of potential conflicts of interest in the past year in particular. Members of the Assembly took on ministerial portfolios and retained their seats as local councillors. They went on to be involved in decisions that undeniably violated standards for transparency in government decision-making.

If councils are given enhanced responsibilities under the changes proposed in the review of public administration (RPA), it will be much more difficult to make the case that the roles of MLA and councillor are complementary rather than conflicting. That was clear in the responses to the public consultation on the Bill. The members of the public who responded do not see the roles of councillor and MLA as complementary. Rather, they see one individual taking both roles as excessive and unwarranted. Local councillors also raised concerns and indicated their support for an end to dual mandates. One councillor stated that, on a number of occasions, he or she had worked diligently on an initiative to benefit the local area only to have those efforts derailed by MLAs who are also councillors working to a different agenda.

The consultation solicited the opinions of more than 140 organisations and individuals on the matter of dual mandates. All responses favoured an end to the practice, and only one objection was raised by a local council. That

concern is that the legislation should not create barriers or restrictions that make it difficult for elected officials to move from local government to regional government to national government, and so on. The idea is that local government can, of course, provide upcoming politicians and political leaders with important experience of how governance works. I am sensitive and sympathetic to that argument, and the Bill has been intentionally constructed so as not to diminish or inhibit the importance of local government as a training ground or stepping stone to higher office.

The single consultation response in opposition to the proposal suggests that ending dual mandates should be done voluntarily by political parties; I could not agree more. That is what happened in Scotland, Wales and many other societies in which dual mandates are aberrant, and that should be the case in Northern Ireland as well. However, we see little meaningful progress towards the achievement of a voluntary end to dual mandates.

All the parties in the Chamber have put on record that they favour an end to dual mandates, and most have held that position for some time. However, little has happened to make it a reality. I welcome the small steps that have been taken recently, but the deadline for full implementation keeps moving, or parties seem to take a step forward in ending dual mandates only to take a big step backwards. Therefore, an achievable reform remains merely aspirational, and our pace towards political maturity remains painfully slow. Legislating for the change will create a firm deadline for parties to work to. It will make the change irreversible and set an important, permanent standard and principle for our democracy.

Outside the consultation, others have argued that although they see a case for the prohibition of dual mandates between the Assembly and Westminster because both are full-time jobs, they find the case for ending dual mandates that concern the Assembly and local councils less compelling. Those jobs are viewed as complementary, and the workload at council level is regarded as decidedly part-time.

Allow me to make it clear: although elected Members may see a difference between those two levels of government, the public do not. The consultation found no perception of difference between those levels of government and a

strong sense that individuals who have been selected for the privilege of public office should focus fully on doing that job well no matter what, rather than seeking to use the position to amass further power, as that can give the appearance that individuals are working harder for personal gain than for the representation of the public.

3.45 pm

The consultation also indicates that the public believes that a higher standard of conduct is required when a person holds public office and is in receipt of public money; that it is not appropriate for one person to draw multiple salaries as an elected official; and that there is a degree of unfairness in elected officials holding more than one elected position at a time when many of those whom they represent are losing or struggling to hold on to the only job that they have.

Let me be clear that the perceived problem is with dual mandates, or holding more than one elected position, and not with double-jobbing whereby a person may hold an elected position as well another job that may also be supported by public funds, such as a doctor or a teacher. The difference in those cases of drawing two salaries from the public purse — for example, someone who is a doctor or a teacher and a local councillor, as distinct from someone who is an MLA and a councillor — is partially one of perception. The voters know what a doctor or a teacher does on the job. They know how such individuals earn their money and what they do to earn it. They understand the contribution that those professionals make to society, the essential nature of their work and how to hold them to account if they have a problem or complaint with their work. The same is not true of elected officials. Ask anyone on the street what an MLA or councillor does all day, and you will be hard pressed to get a positive answer. The dominant image involves attending receptions, making speeches, and that is about all.

Ask voters what can be done if they have a problem with, or a complaint against, an elected official and you will encounter an immense level of frustration and, possibly, a few adjectives unfit for children's ears. Whether or not that perception is accurate, voters consider most elected officials to be less effective, less essential and less accountable than their doctor or teacher. When it comes to good governance,

perception is important. Voters perceive a real conflict with dual mandates, and, therefore, there is one.

The other problem is the concentration of power and decision-making in the hands of a few, at a time when we need new people with good ideas to refresh and revitalise our political institutions and leadership. We tend to overvalue experience in that assessment, and want to keep or reward people who have been involved in politics for a long time. Many politicians and political leaders deserve accolades for their courage and involvement over the years, but let us not pretend that all experience is valuable, or that experience has always meant that positive contributions are made.

I have also heard proponents of the status quo argue that the voters elect the folks with dual mandates and that, therefore, the voters do not mind. The logic is that if the voters did not want those people to be elected, they would not vote for them. That suggestion is both inaccurate and disingenuous. Political parties, not voters, select who will be on the ballot paper on election day, and whom the voters get to select. The parties then appeal to the voters, in the name of party loyalty, to support their candidates on the ticket. The parties put forward the double-dippers, not the voters, and the parties lobby the voters to support the double-dippers. In such a situation, do voters have a genuine freedom of choice?

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Ms Purvis: No. You are up next.

Dissenting opinions are the exception. I have received extensive expressions of support for this legislation, not only through the public consultation but from Members, and I am grateful for that.

I have discussed the mechanisms for implementation in detail with several Members. Some suggested the addition of a waiting period or a period of grace after an election to allow an individual who may have been elected to both the Assembly and to local office to decide which seat he or she will take up, and to allow the party to decide whom to co-opt into the vacant seat. I am sympathetic to that idea, and it was considered in the early stages of drafting the Bill. However, it was not incorporated because it will add complexities and delays to newly elected bodies when they start their work. I believe that Northern Ireland's political parties

have the strategic capacity to plan for those decisions well in advance of election day.

Another Member expressed the concern that parties will intentionally place high-profile individuals on the ballot for local elections for the sole purpose of increasing the party's vote and that they will then allow that person to be disqualified to co-opt a lesser-known individual on to that seat. Indeed, that is a possibility, and any system, if it is approached with cynicism, is open to abuse. However, voters would also be aware that any individual who is in receipt of a dual mandate will have to surrender one of those seats, and voters may have a sense of what is coming before they cast their votes.

Some responses to the proposed legislation were a bit more disconcerting. More than one Member argued that it is necessary to retain dual mandates as a form of employment insurance in case the Assembly collapses. That is troubling on a number of levels. For the past few years, as the economic downturn has hit, thousands of our citizens have been made redundant without such a luxury as employment insurance. If the Assembly falls, or if an election is lost, Members should find themselves in exactly the same situation as any member of the public who is faced with redundancy. That argument also has an impact on public confidence, in that if Members are not confident about the continuation of the Assembly, how can we expect the public to have confidence in it? Ending dual mandates is an indication of our confidence that the Assembly is here to stay.

I thank Members for their time and for their consideration of the Bill. I hope that its implications and intentions are compelling and convincing and that they match the system of values that they feel should be in place in Northern Ireland politics. I am grateful to those members of the Assembly secretariat who have been extraordinarily helpful throughout the process, which began in December 2008. I am also grateful to those Members who have been supportive of the Bill and of the process of political growth and maturation to which the Assembly strives to make a real contribution.

I also offer gratitude to those politicians who have dedicated years to public service even in the darkest and most desperate times. Let us ensure that the experience of the past few decades and the contributions that those individuals made are used as lessons in moving forward.

Mr Weir: I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council and as a vice-president of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association. However, I will not make my remarks in either capacity.

The Member who proposed the legislation congratulated the work that councillors have done over the years, and I echo those comments. Her remarks are true of councillors of all parties in the Chamber. There was virtually no money at all involved in being in local government, particularly in the 1970s, 1980s and into the 1990s, so for many years, people became involved for reasons other than financial reward. Even at present, the public responsibility that comes with being involved with local government is not particularly well paid. Many councillors acted more out of a sense of service and for no real remuneration. We should also remember that elected representatives from across the political divide, particularly councillors, were on the front line of democracy at the height of the Troubles. Indeed, members from different parties paid the supreme sacrifice, being murdered during the Troubles. Therefore, we need to put this issue into context and ensure that we do not treat it lightly.

I also thank the Member for consulting with each party about the proposed legislation. We had a productive session, if not one in which we necessarily saw eye to eye. However, the Member had a useful exchange of views with our party and with other parties, and we thank her for taking the time to speak to the parties.

I understand, at least in theory, some of the thinking behind examining the real issue of public confidence in the system. The Member peppered much of what she said with statements about public perception. We need to move beyond perception and towards reality. It is not simply a question of how we deal with issues of public confidence or perceptions of roles; rather, we must ensure that we offer leadership and that we do the right thing. Although the DUP has sympathy with the Bill's general thrust, we have a number of reservations, which I will outline.

I have a philosophical difficulty with the legislation. The Member does not support the argument that it is up to the people to decide whom their representatives will be. She said that people do not have a fair chance to vote for whom they want to represent them. I reject that

analysis. Parties should voluntarily tackle the issue of double-jobbing, because they decide who runs for them and where. The public then determine whether candidates are right for particular areas. Similarly, I have a philosophical problem with term limits in America, where there is a cut-off point after which people are not entitled to run again. Ultimately, it is up to the people to choose.

The Member told us that the public, because they are given the choice of voting only for the particular incumbent, who happens to be an MLA, do not really have a fair choice. The larger parties provide a slate of candidates for whom people have the opportunity to vote. I acknowledge that the smaller parties may be an exception. Nine times out of 10 or more, however, people vote for the person whom they believe to have the most experience.

There are occasions when incumbency can be a major detraction. I suspect that Mr Farry will speak about that later. I am old enough to remember a time in North Down — I think that it was in 1989 — when the council was very unpopular, owing to decisions that it had made. On that occasion, people voted with their feet. As a result of a backlash against the council, parties chose new candidates ahead of councillors who had served for a number of terms. Fundamentally, however, people judge whether to back incumbents or MLAs. Equally, they can decide that they want to see a fresh face or to elect someone who is unencumbered by the pressures of being an MLA. That is a choice for the electorate to make. People are not stupid.

The Member mentioned voluntary movement by parties. There has been a certain level of voluntary movement, although it has been quite slow. The DUP is committed to reducing the number of its MLAs who are also councillors. Sammy Wilson recently stood down from Belfast City Council and Peter Robinson from Castlereagh Borough Council.

Up until now, co-options in this proportional representation (PR) system have been possible only when the council unanimously agrees to them, so political parties have been able to try to gain an advantage by forcing a by-election. All parties have probably been guilty of attempting that at some stage, and I do not claim sainthood on behalf of my party. Fortunately, however, there has been greater movement

away from doing that. When Peter O'Hagan, the distinguished Lisburn councillor, died, a co-option was agreed. In the past, however, we have not always been so fortunate. Parties may have restricted some of their senior members from standing down from councils because of the threat of a resulting by-election.

As was indicated, it was originally intended that the Bill would allow co-option. Fortunately, events have somewhat overtaken that, and the British Government are progressing legislation that will mean that, by the end of the month, co-option will become automatic. That will provide some reassurance for parties to move some of their representatives out of local government, because, to use Lisburn as an example — a council area that, I think, at one point, had only one nationalist seat — parties will be less tempted to take advantage of that situation for their own party political ends.

4.00 pm

The public perception of dual mandates was mentioned, and I also have reservations about that. Whatever arguments and time frame are used, comparing MPs with MLAs — clearly two full-time and, to some extent, overlapping and complementary jobs — is not the same as comparing MLAs with councillors. I can speak if not from a unique perspective in the House then a slightly unusual one, in that I served purely as an MLA for some seven years. For five years, I have served as an MLA and a councillor, whereas most Members of the House tend to be councillors when they are first elected to the House to serve a dual purpose. Personal experience has shown me that there is a high level of complementarity and that the two posts marry.

My being a councillor at the same time as being an MLA has been an advantage to me in giving me a wider perspective. That cuts both ways. In North Down Borough Council, five of the 25 councillors are MLAs. That means that the MLAs can bring a useful central government perspective to the council chamber. It also means that, in reflecting local concerns and issues, I freely admit that, as a councillor, I am much better informed as an MLA than I previously was. On that basis, I am able to convey attitudes from the council to the Assembly. My perspectives from the council and the Assembly have been advantageous to me in my wider local government work, as, I suspect, they have been to others.

I question the idea that the Bill's sponsor may have had at least one disgruntled councillor complain about MLAs having different agendas and so on. However, the idea that some brilliant local initiative can be stymied by MLAs' being members of a particular council does not hold water. No council in Northern Ireland has a majority of MLA members. In every case, councillors who are MLAs are in the minority. Therefore, the idea that MLAs can veto council matters simply does not add up.

I have reservations about the distinction that is drawn between the public purse and dual mandates. Anyone who has served in local government will know that all councillors, unless retired, have other jobs. The sponsor of the Bill may not have that perspective because, to the best of my knowledge, she has never served in local government, so the advantages of doing so may be lost to her. However, it is a financial necessity for all councillors to have other jobs. I find it a little bit odd for someone to say that one can be a councillor and a doctor or a councillor and a teacher, but one cannot be a councillor and a professional politician. That proposition seems illogical.

There are also practical reservations. Mention was made, for example, of a situation where council and Assembly elections take place at the same time. If, on election to the Assembly, a person automatically lost his or her council seat, there would be certain practical implications which must be looked at in a wider context.

Under the RPA process, which achieved cross-party agreement among all five major parties, at the first council meeting after an election responsibilities and key positions will be allocated, probably through d'Hondt or another form of proportionality, according to party strength. If people are automatically removed from council seats, there would be two unforeseen circumstances. First, do we weaken that party by one seat on the council? The first council meeting after an election will probably take place before any co-option, albeit compulsory, has taken place. There are practical difficulties with that.

Secondly, unlike the present situation, whereby in the next few months in the run-up to the RPA a number of councillors will vacate their seats to make way for others, if, on the same day, people vote for someone who is running as an MLA and as a councillor — this will create a dilemma for

a lot of individuals who are not in secure seats — they may elect Joe Bloggs on a Thursday only to find that, within a month, he is replaced by another councillor. That is another practical difficulty. This is where the exploration between the parties has to happen, and perhaps this is a vehicle that can be used so that this is progressed by agreement between the parties as to the best way forward.

I am not claiming any particular special knowledge, but I do not foresee the conflict of interest and friction that the proposer of the motion suggested will exist in 2011. In my 12 years in the Assembly, that has not been my experience. As part of the RPA process, severance arrangements will be put in place for the many long-serving councillors who will be leaving office. Under this Bill, in 2011 we will all be stripping out all 67 councillors who are also MLAs.

There will be additional powers for councils but also a high level of cultural change because of the division of responsibilities between parties but also because, to take one example, when planning comes to councils, instead of all of us who are on councils throwing rocks at the planners and using it as a vehicle to object to particular things, we will become judge, jury and executioner. That is going to be a huge cultural change, and there needs to be a high level of capacity building. In 2011, will we simply remove everyone who has served in the Assembly, along with a wide range of serving councillors who have been there for many years? On any council, the best team is a blend of youth and experience.

Mr Simpson: Yes.

Mr Weir: I hear Mr Simpson saying yes. I am not sure whether he counts himself as youthful or experienced. I think that he was claiming both. I suspect that, in politics, the older one gets, the higher one tends to raise the bar of what counts as youthful.

I want to see new blood coming into councils, but I want that to be balanced. That is the best way to bring people on, and the present system affords us the opportunity to do that. The challenge, therefore, under RPA, is to balance bringing in new talent with retaining people who have a degree of experience in local government.

The DUP has a range of reservations about how the Bill is drafted. Consequently, we have a degree of scepticism about it. However, we

will see whether the Bill can be improved and worked on. Therefore, if the Bill passes its Second Stage today, we will work proactively on whatever Committee is charged with dealing with it. From that perspective, although we have major reservations about the Bill, which we have highlighted, we believe that it indicates some level of motivation to rebuild public confidence. Consequently, although we have a lot of scepticism towards the Bill, we will not divide the House. If the Bill passes this stage, we look forward to working in Committee to see whether something can be salvaged from it that will benefit our democracy in Northern Ireland.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the principles of the Bill. The Bill is short and contains only three clauses, but its implementation and outworkings will lead to proper, transparent representation in public office and should instil confidence in local communities and the general public.

Mr Weir talked about public perception, but he knows the reality. Irrespective of how people try to cover over the issue of MLAs being local councillors — the work of a councillor is presented as a part-time job — some people still see them as two jobs. A lot of people, especially in the construction industry, do not have a job, and in relation to the whole debacle —

Lord Morrow: I would like the Member to explain whether he is saying that he is opposed to double mandates or to double-jobbing, because, in my book, there is a fundamental difference. We listened to the proposer of the motion state that she was opposed to double mandates. She was not opposed, for example, to a doctor also being a councillor, but she voiced great opposition to an MLA being a councillor. However, those of us who have been sitting on councils — some since the early 1970s — always had another job. In fact, at that time, there was no remuneration for councillors. Furthermore, those were the bad old days when we were going through a horrendous period in the history of this Province. Indeed, at that time it was not popular for someone even to put their name forward for election, and I suspect that all parties had that difficulty. Therefore, some of what has been said smacks a bit of jumping on the bandwagon. Perhaps it is more popular to be in politics now than it was then. Should some recognition not be given to that?

Mr Boylan: To clarify, I am talking about mandates. I am responding to what Mr Weir said. We are talking about representing the public and leading from the front. I have spoken about the perception that is out there, and that is the point that I am trying to get across. We recognise the good work that local councils have done in the past; I am not arguing about that. The key point that I want to make is about public perception.

Sinn Féin supported the recommendation under the review of public administration that a Member of the Assembly cannot stand for election under the proposed new council structures, and we believe that it is a matter for individual parties to regulate on the issue of dual mandates. My party has already taken steps to support the ending of dual mandates. Sinn Féin has seen a number of local councillors — myself included, I am pleased to point out — who have been co-opted out of local councils to give someone else that opportunity.

In most cases, the Bill will remove the issue of conflict of interest, which, at present, may be inhibiting the decision-making process, and, therefore, impacting on local ratepayers and local communities, whether people want to recognise that or not. It would address the present situation in which a Minister who is a local councillor is legislating on planning, the review of public administration and all other aspects of their ministerial role and then sitting on a local council making a decision as part of a corporate council, which may be contrary to policy or to that ministerial role. Therefore, there can be conflicts of interest. Members should not fail to recognise that

4.15 pm

Mr Weir: Does the Member agree that, in the argument over a potential conflict of interest, there is a difference between someone who is both a Minister and councillor and someone who is both a Member and a councillor, where the position is a lot less acute? From a practical point of view, it is difficult to find many cases of conflict of interest on that basis. Does the Member agree that there will be occasions when conflicts of interest arise in councils? I have been present when a person has declared a conflict of interest. An example occurred recently in my council when a potential grant for a primary school of which I am a governor was debated. I declared an interest and left

the meeting for the duration of the discussion. Such conflicts of interest will be taken care of by a mandatory code of conduct, which will be put in place as part of the review of public administration. Its objective will be to ensure that councillors will not have conflicts of interest.

Mr Boylan: I accept the Member's point. However, Mr Weir will be aware that, if we are legislating for the planning process to be part of local councils, for example, the Minister will have made that decision based on a recommendation from his Department. If, when the new responsibilities are being rolled out in council, the Minister is sitting as a councillor, it will not do for him merely to declare an interest and walk out of the room.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: No, I have given way already.

It is about public perception. It is not enough for the individual merely to walk out of the room and say that he or she will not take part in the conversation, because, in essence, the individual has sat in the House, has gone through the legislation and knows what is there. There are opportunities for conflicts of interest, and they need to be removed.

Sinn Féin supports the Bill. The removal of the dual mandate will ensure that there is public confidence, and it will lead to open and proper representation that will be of benefit to the communities that we represent.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest as a serving local councillor.

I commend Dawn Purvis for the brevity of the Bill and for introducing it as a private Member's Bill. The brevity of the Bill helps to concentrate our minds on the issues, without allowing others to add red herrings. The Bill is concentrated and short, and Ms Purvis referred to the length of the Bill in her opening speech. The Ulster Unionist Party supports the principle of the Bill.

Northern Ireland has suffered, perhaps more than any other region, as a result of double, even triple, mandates. With regard to the regional assemblies and Westminster, I understand that it is only the First Minister in the Scottish Parliament who retains a double mandate, and no Members of the Welsh Assembly hold double mandates. The number of MSPs and Welsh Assembly Members who are also local councillors is in single figures.

Can an individual effectively serve on a council, in a fully functioning Assembly and even at ministerial level at the same time? At the same time, can they effectively participate at Westminster, in their local Assembly and in their local council? Or are they in danger of giving the perception that they are active on all three but are not effective in any of them? There is a danger that, the thinner individuals spread themselves, the more they will simply cover a number of issues fleetingly. Dual mandates may give huge office cost allowances that allow one's staff to pump out press releases, but, in reality, the public representative can be in only one place at one time and can deal with only one issue at one time.

Dr Farry: Does the Member think that his father did a poor job as an MP and a councillor, given that he could be in only one place at a time?

Mr Beggs: I was referring to the situation that may have occurred in the past and to the things that may have happened. However, we have to plan to do things better in the future, particularly in light of the super-councils, where local councillors will have considerably increased roles. There will be increased responsibilities. Active participation in dual mandates will become increasingly difficult. In addition, the Ulster Unionist Party has made it clear that our Members of Parliament will be full-time MPs.

My dad served as a Member of Parliament and a councillor for a considerable period. He did so at considerable expense to himself and his family. If people run for election to councils, the Assembly or Parliament and are, perhaps, also Ministers, are they ever at home? What is the cost to their personal life? Can they be rounded individuals if they have multiple mandates? That is another issue that must be carefully considered. I have learnt from the past that there are dangers in trying to do too many things. Even when local councils had limited responsibilities, there were dangers in trying to hold down too many jobs.

Lord Morrow: I am interested in what the Member is saying. However, I am also slightly confused. Perhaps he will clarify his position. He has tried to explain where he stands on dual mandates. Does he speak as Roy Beggs the Assembly Member or on behalf of his party? He has been at pains to say, for instance, that it may not be compatible for a Minister to also be a councillor. I understand that his party's two

Ministers are also councillors. Therefore, is he saying that they will, effectively, step down? Now that his father has stepped down, the Member seems to be saying that he would have been stepping down anyway. Was his father, in fact, stepped down? Which was it?

Mr Beggs: The Ulster Unionist Party's position is clear and will become increasingly apparent in the forthcoming Westminster elections. If elected, all my party's candidates will be full-time Members of Parliament. They will not attempt to temporarily fly in and out of Westminster for public relations opportunities. Any of my party's successful candidates will be full-time MPs at Westminster. That is unequivocal.

As regards future public representation, we are moving towards super-councils that will have increased powers and responsibilities. I foresee that, going forward, people will have individual mandates. That is a much healthier system, which will produce more rounded individuals, decisions and policies. Otherwise, there is a danger that individuals will live in a political bubble. They will not understand issues in the wider world because they are encompassed by the world of politics. If they are not in the Assembly, they will be in their council chamber or at Westminster. There is a danger that because they have too many meetings they will have limited time to experience real issues and to be available for their constituents.

Dr W McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I have given way numerous times. I want to proceed with the rest of my comments. I may allow someone the opportunity to intervene later.

The Assembly cannot make determinations that affect Westminster with regard to dual mandates. However, it can take decisions about councils because they fall under local government matters, for which the Assembly has responsibility. It is right that the Bill concentrates on that limited area of dual mandates between the Assembly and councils. As I said earlier, someone cannot be in two places at once. Clearly, through the review of public administration, it is planned that more powers will go to local government. That increased role will place additional pressures on individual councillors.

Why is it that some Assembly Members have poor Committee attendance? They are

meant to be full-time Assembly Members. Clearly, that is supposed to be a full-time job that pays a full-time wage. Some Members' attendance is not good. Others pass in and out of meetings fleetingly for a brief period and get marked as present.

Dr W McCrea: Like yourself.

Mr Beggs: If the Member examines my record on both the Public Accounts Committee and the Environment Committee, he will find that, generally, I attend meetings from start to finish. He will also find someone who misses very few meetings. I ask the Member to consider that and to verify what he is saying, because I think that he will find that it is incorrect.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I had the privilege of serving with him on the Finance Committee, and I can testify that he is a dedicated attender.

Has the Member done any analysis to compare the attendance in Committee and in the Chamber of Members who are also councillors and those who are not? He has made the point that Members who are MLAs only seem to be better attenders overall. I have not looked at any figures, but, anecdotally, I do not see a pattern. I am aware of MLAs who are also councillors and who are extremely dedicated to the Chamber and to their Committees. Has the Member done any analysis to back up his point that an MLA without a council role is a far better attender in the Chamber?

Mr Beggs: I am sorry, but I have not done any detailed analysis; it is merely anecdotal evidence. However, one hears Members saying that they are going to a council planning subcommittee and skipping part of their Assembly Committee meeting, but, to my mind, it would need to be a major process at local government level for me to miss my Assembly Committee. If my full-time job is being an Assembly Member, then that is where my priority lies.

Dr W McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I am trying to proceed with my speech, if I may.

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

The Environment Minister has advised that individual planning decisions, area plans and the wider and important issue of community planning will devolve to local councils, and

that will be a huge area of work for local councillors. That will be on top of their existing responsibilities, and it will place an increasingly intolerable burden on those who wish to retain multiple mandates. As I said, there is the issue of the sort of individuals that we are creating through the multiple mandate ability that exists, and the situation will become even more troublesome. Councillors will have further new responsibilities. Today, we heard about the clean neighbourhoods and environment Bill, the provisions of which will be introduced into local government. There are other areas of work, including regeneration and increased local economic development roles, which will enable local councillors to have a greater involvement in improving their communities.

Clearly, a change point is coming with the local government reorganisation that is planned for 2011. That presents an opportune time to bring about that change. I appreciate the wording that the Member has included in the Bill, in that that would coincide with the next local government elections and, again, that is the right sort of ballpark.

At this early stage, I flag up the precise trigger mechanism. The Member who presented the Bill indicated that the chosen mechanism came from the consultation. However, I have some concern about allowing someone to be nominated and to go forward for election and then to be dismissed. If that person were an independent and was unable to nominate someone else in the process, another election might be required. Therefore, there is a danger of public moneys being wasted. I would be looking to see whether there could be a better mechanism, and I would be happy to engage with the Member and others to try to come up with a more appropriate trigger mechanism if it is available.

Why is there a need to legislate? It must be remembered that MPs and MLAs have office cost allowances, and that may be why they are popular at local government level. They have public resources, and they have a secretary and other staff who can assist them, which gives them a significant advantage over other public representatives who may be councillors only. MPs and MLAs have public resources that strengthen their position, and I accept that that would apply to me as it does to others. Is it appropriate for that to continue, or should we

open the system up and no longer allow power to be concentrated in limited hands?

There is a danger when those who are responsible for policy development, and who may even control Departments, also work at a local council level on individual planning applications. We have seen in recent times the difficulties with planning and developers because of power being concentrated in too few hands and those individuals being led astray and ignoring the Nolan principles.

4.30 pm

It is unfortunate that that has been the case, but the likelihood of that happening would be lessened if dual mandates came to an end, because there would not be councillors who were also Assembly Members and MPs. The concentration of power and the concentration of attention from planning officials would not be there to the same extent. They would have to appreciate that there were a range of views.

As others said, we even have a ridiculous situation ongoing in the Assembly in that the Minister who is responsible for local government, planning, boundaries and the RPA process continues to be a local councillor. What an impossible situation that we put our officials in. Take, for example, a planning official who gets lobbied by a Minister wearing a different hat. Officials can easily get confused about who they are to please. Are they to please the planning Minister or to consistently work according to the policies that have been developed over time? Which hat is the Minister wearing when he writes to and lobbies an official on an issue? We are placing our civil servants in an impossible situation when there is a dual mandate.

On 31 March 2008, Minister Foster said:

"I intend to work with colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office in order to introduce legislative proposals to end the dual mandate of those councillors who are also Members of the Assembly and/or Parliament." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 29, p3, col 1].

That was almost two years ago. In the intervening time, there was a new Minister, who apparently adopted a different policy, and was not minded to end the dual mandate. Now we have another Minister, Minister Poots, and I have yet to hear where he stands on the issue. There was certainly a clear commitment given by the Minister of the Environment in March 2008, and

I am not aware of how the issue has progressed since then. It appears to me that some may simply have made some of their comments at the height of the expenses row, just as Peter Robinson promised the end of dual mandates at one point during that row, only to roll back a few months later when some members of his party decided that they were not ending their dual mandates when the heat was off.

A commitment was made to address the issue, yet I am not aware of anything coming forward from the Department. That is why I am grateful to Dawn Purvis for bringing forward the private Members' legislation. It is clear that some will need to be weaned off their dual mandates, which is why I am happy to support the principle of the Bill. It is clear that we must move forward with a mechanism that will increase transparency and accountability and give the public confidence in how democratic politics work. I support the principle of the Bill.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for bringing forward the legislation, which the SDLP can broadly support. However, we have some concerns, which I will try to outline during my contribution. It is right and fitting that the Member pointed out that today is International Women's Day. There is a real need for all political parties to have representation that more truly reflects the community at large, and we all know that more than 51% of the community is female. I also look forward to a greater participation of representatives from ethnic minorities. If we were to see such changes across the political parties, it would all add to the rich diversity of this House and others.

I also support the Member in saying that there is a need to grow the next generation of political representatives, and I pay tribute to all those who stood for office over many years when it was not easy to do so and when there was nothing to be gained financially. In fact, it often cost people money to be representatives. Our party thanks the many people who allowed their names to go forward for election to local councils, which, as we all know, were the only democratic platforms for people in the North at one point. That must be recognised. There is a real need for greater participation in democracy in Northern Ireland, and local councils provide good grounding and are good places in which people can cut their teeth in representational politics.

Unfortunately, a number of DUP Members who spoke have left the Chamber. They seemed to be rolling back from their position. Mr Weir said that some of Ms Purvis' comments were a little bit odd. I found some of Mr Weir's comments to be a little bit odd, given the fact that, as Mr Beggs said, the DUP was categoric in its wish to end dual mandates and that it had said that it would do so by the end of last year. Many Members of the House are MPs and councillors and, as others have pointed out, some are also Ministers.

I am grateful to Mr Beggs for sourcing the comments of the former Environment Minister Arlene Foster who clearly saw that there was a conflict of interests between her roles as councillor and as Minister with responsibility for local government, and she stood down. The fact that she ended up running for election to Fermanagh District Council was a little bit odd, but we are where we are.

Over recent months, the SDLP has made moves to end dual mandates. We have done so in areas where we know that there will not be the expensive necessity of by-elections. Mr Weir mentioned the co-option to Lisburn City Council following the death of Councillor Peter O'Hagan. We are grateful to the councillors on Craigavon Borough Council, who, following the death of my esteemed colleague Councillor Ignatius Fox, allowed for a co-option. That pays tribute to their contributions in local government during many years in the wilderness.

As we all know, legislation is going through Westminster that will do away with the argument that many have tried to articulate about by-elections, co-options and expense. That will take the ground from under many Members.

Ms Purvis said that experience is overvalued. I support the need for youth and experience, but, in some cases, people went to council chambers to oppose something rather than to vote for it. Many people should ask themselves about their records in local councils. Did they represent their communities well and make the councils better places for everyone, or did the old slogan, "what we have we hold" prevail in many council chambers?

Mr Boylan said that the wider public had a perception about politicians and dual mandates. That is true, but, unfortunately, the issue has been viewed as being a plague on all our houses, and each of us has a huge piece of

work to do to overcome that. Although that was highlighted initially during the expenses row that began at Westminster, it had an effect on the North. The SDLP wants to end dual mandates. We want to grow the next generation of politicians, but we want to consider closely the Local Government (Disqualification) (Amendment) Bill. In our private discussions with Ms Purvis we said that when the Bill is scrutinised at Committee Stage we will discuss further the period of grace and whether a local councillor who stood for election to the Assembly would have to stand down in advance of the election or after it.

The SDLP broadly supports the Bill, but other parties are rolling back from the positions that they stated last year. I do not accept Mr Weir's arguments; I find many of them a little bit odd. There is a real need to encourage more people to come into councils and into representational politics. However, that will require attitudinal changes, because, unfortunately, very few people put their name forward, even in today's relatively peaceful times. There is a question mark over why that is the case.

I know that some Members of this House are also Members of the House of Lords. What barriers and dilemmas do they face in their decision-making? Perhaps there is no conflict, but many people will wonder what is going on in that regard.

I wish to address the issue of people finding jobs as councillors. When I started out as a local councillor, I also worked full-time and raised a very young family, and I do not think that people were confused about what I did. The role of local councillor has always been seen as a voluntary role that people never made much money from. After RPA, there may be better salary provision for local councillors, but the scenario will have changed by then because local councils will have additional powers and responsibilities, so such a move would be right and fitting.

Although the SDLP broadly welcomes the Bill, we have some concerns, and we may seek to either table amendments or, at least, seek clarifications from Ms Purvis at a later stage.

Dr Farry: I declare an interest as member of North Down Borough Council.

The Alliance Party also has considerable reservations about the Bill. Indeed, we view it as a populist measure that is set in the context of

wider concerns about conduct in public life that exist at the moment. We believe that the issue is a soft target in comparison with some of the more difficult and pressing issues that we face in re-establishing public confidence in elected representatives. Like others, we will not divide the House at this stage, but we will consider the Bill at its subsequent Committee Stage.

There are two issues to consider in discussing the principles of the Bill. The first issue is whether the dual mandate of those serving as both a councillor and an MLA is a problem. The second is whether it is appropriate to legislate on that, if it is, indeed, a problem. I will deal with the second issue first. Given that there has not been a full local government election since the last Assembly election in 2007, the matter may be resolved naturally in 2011, without the need for legislation. It may, therefore, be more appropriate for us to consider addressing the issue of dual mandates after 2011, if we still judge it to be an issue of public concern, rather than legislating at this stage. We should follow the principle that says that government should not legislate to address particular circumstances that exist at a particular time but that it should, rather, legislate to put in place measures that are required to address problems at a more general and sustained level. We should not, therefore, rush to legislate on issues that do not require legislation. However, we will see how the matter develops.

The Member who proposed the legislation argued for the importance of encouraging diversity among elected representatives. I am sure that few Members disagree with that. She pointed out that the Bill would free up a number of places for new representatives to fill. However, it is important to set that in the context of a potential reduction in the number of councillors after the implementation of the RPA and a campaign from some parties in the Chamber to reduce the overall size of the Assembly. Given the sheer number of elected representatives here, Northern Ireland is already viewed as being over-governed in comparison with other similar jurisdictions. Therefore, I do not think that much argument exists about the number of places and how we can encourage diversity.

Political parties are being fundamentally challenged to ensure that they have a diverse field of candidates. I can speak only for the Alliance Party in that regard. We stand as an Assembly party and as a group of councillors

that have a mix of Protestants, Catholics and other religious traditions. Almost 30% of our Assembly group is female, and a similar percentage of females work for our councillor group. We are far from perfect, but our figures stand up well by comparison. The Alliance Party also had the first ethnic Chinese legislator anywhere in Europe, of which not only the Alliance Party but the Assembly can be extremely proud.

Not that we advertise it, but we run a diverse field of candidates based on sexual orientation also. Therefore, we feel that we achieve diversity in what we do. However, we recognise that there is much more that we could do.

4.45 pm

There is perhaps a slight flaw in the argument that Dawn Purvis set out, in that the replacement of a councillor would follow the point at which they were elected as an MLA. At that stage, under Westminster legislation, it would fall back to the parties to fill the vacancy. Therefore, the idea that diversity would be delivered by the electorate outside the context of the parties does not stand up; it would be the selfsame parties that have been identified as the problem that would be asked to fill any vacancy that arises.

There is a wider issue around the desirability or otherwise of councillors being MLAs and vice versa, and that needs to be looked at in the context of conflicts of time and of interest. I agree that there are conflicts of interest. I can readily identify conflicts of interest for MLAs who are also Ministers, which is a problem that has not worked itself out quickly enough. On Belfast City Council there is a very clear, established policy of co-option. Therefore, there is no excuse for any Minister to stay on as a councillor at the same time as exercising Executive power.

There are issues and questions around potential conflicts of interest with respect to the current situation regarding the local government blockage and the RPA. That being said, the conflict of interest in Executive matters is much more acute than it is in legislative matters. However, I concede that it is a potential issue that needs to be raised and thought through.

Until now, the system has worked reasonably well and Members have declared their membership of councils. I do not necessarily buy the argument that there is a fundamental

clash of interests between a regional Assembly perspective and that of local government. On many occasions, the two can be in harmony. That conflict has the potential to be exaggerated, although I concede that it is an area on which we need to focus.

Conflict of time is most clearly an issue for those who are both MPs and MLAs, both of which are quite clearly full-time elected posts. One cannot do justice to both at the same time as full-time posts. It is further complicated by the travel issues between Northern Ireland and London, and is something that will have to be resolved rather quickly. The issue has, perhaps, evolved over time. My understanding, as someone who is still young, is that, historically, being an MP was seen as an adjunct to a job. MPs were very London-based, perhaps practising at the Bar in the morning and the early afternoon before popping down to the House of Commons for the late afternoon and evening sessions. Visits to constituencies happened on rare occasions and with great fanfare. However, in the modern world, being an MP is very much seen in professional terms and as a full-time post.

I am disturbed that the focus is solely on the MP/MLA aspect of double-jobbing, without wider consideration being given to the problems that arise from MPs having other paid commitments outside Parliament. It is there that the much greater risk for clashes of interest lies, in particular for clashes of financial interests, but also for clashes of time. If someone has significant outside commitments to other forms of employment or business, then, by definition, they cannot give full account to their job as an MP. That is certainly an area where I see the need for much greater consideration. The same logic applies to MLAs with outside paid interests.

However, there is a line to be drawn between trying to be a full-time MLA while doing additional voluntary work, work in certain community organisations, being a silent partner or having residual business interests, and actively engaging in what are significant private sector pursuits.

However, the position of councillor needs to be seen in a different light. As other Members have said, councillors are not full-time employees. Indeed, it is even debatable whether they are technically considered as part-time employees, because they receive allowances and not

salaries for the work they do on behalf of their constituents. When proposing the Second Stage of the Bill, Dawn Purvis flipped between viewing councillors as jobholders and as holders of a purely elective office. Although, I fully recognise that a councillor's workload can be extremely heavy and that people come to it with a very committed attitude; nonetheless, it is not considered to be a job, and that point applies in the rest of the UK, the Republic of Ireland and, largely speaking, the rest of the world. Being elected to local government is not seen as holding a job, and we are in danger of sending out a dangerous message if we start talking about councillors as jobholders. If that perception exists at the moment, we should seek to correct it, not feed it.

Essentially, there are two reasons why we need to make those clarifications. First, if we treat the role of a councillor as a job, there will be cost implications relating to the salary that will have to be paid to them. There are already cost/benefit issues concerning the local government aspect of the review of public administration, and moving to fully-paid, full-time councillors, at a salary level that would need to be competitive to attract people, would add significantly to those costs.

Mr McCartney: The Member has talked about the definition of the role of a councillor. Should we not be looking at this from the public's perspective of Assembly Members? When people elect a person to the Assembly, they expected that person to carry out the role exclusively and not have something, whatever that might be, as a backdrop.

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McCartney for his intervention. I will address that point fully in a moment.

The other implication, if we speak about the role of a councillor as being a job, is that we will be sending out a message about the type of people that we want to recruit to local government. We will be saying that we want senior citizens, students, housewives or househusbands, the unemployed or those who are otherwise economically inactive. We need to attract professionals, businesspeople, and people at all levels of the public sector into local government, where they can make a contribution and potentially bring experience to decision-making.

Mr Beggs: I agree with the Member's point that it is beneficial for those in full-time employment to bring their experience to local government.

Does he accept that it is also useful for professionals and those with wider interests to become an MP? It is not possible for people who are doctors to give up their professional status to become a full-time MP, because they only have a four- or five-year guaranteed period of employment and, thereafter, will probably not qualify to go back to their jobs and will have to retrain. Does the Member agree that some amount of paid employment should be tolerated to bring in wider knowledge and experience?

Dr Farry: I do not disagree with that necessarily. I fully appreciate that people will want to have the ability to return to a profession in which the law, in practice, can move rapidly even during the course of one Westminster term.

However, a balance must be struck and common sense applied. There cannot be a situation in which people try to combine a full-time job with being a full-time public representative. That was the sense in which I made that comment.

Other people, to keep their future options open, may wish to keep their professional knowledge up to date and maintain a level of participation. That same argument could be applied to local government: someone who has a long track record in local government and is committed to local service may enter the Assembly for a brief period of one term, or even for part of one term, and wish to return to local government thereafter. The proposed legislation would arbitrarily cut off that option.

To ensure that people are attracted to working in local government, councils must hold their meetings during family friendly hours. An attempt must also be made to avoid clashes between the normal working day and the holding of council meetings. Proper investment must be made in childcare for councillors. Some people whom we are trying to attract to local government are starting families and feel that it is not feasible for them to commit to serving the community.

I can speak from my considerable experience as an MLA and a councillor. Unlike Peter Weir, I served as a councillor for 14 years before being elected to the Assembly three years ago. I have, therefore, a total of 17 years' experience in local government. When it comes to youth versus experience, it may be that I combine the two, because I was first elected to council at the age of 22, which is another mark of the diversity in local government.

I have found that being a councillor, particularly the way in which it increased my knowledge of local issues, has added to my understanding and helped me as an MLA. Councillors tend to have a much more rounded appreciation of local issues. I recall a time when members of my party who had been both councillors and MLAs stepped down from council. During their subsequent experience as MLAs, they sensed that they had, to some extent, lost touch with some aspects of local issues. In some respects, they missed having their previous breadth of knowledge.

Equally, as an MLA I feel that I can help my council with local issues. I do not particularly regard that as a conflict of interest, because there is no financial gain to me or my family. Essentially, councillors and MLAs serve the same constituents, and we try to provide them with the best well-rounded service that we can. I do not ask people whether they approach me in my capacity as a councillor or an MLA. People approach me because they want to find a solution to a problem, and it is helpful that, in seeking to resolve their problem, I can look in both directions and consider whether a regional agency, a Minister or a local council official is best placed to help. Rather than having to refer people to someone else who must then be briefed by me or the constituent on the relevant first principles, I have the ability to turn quickly in either direction to find a remedy. Thus, someone who is a councillor and an MLA can, in certain situations, provide a more efficient local service to his or her constituents.

From a council perspective, our experience as councillors means that we can have some input into the rates process. In particular, we made a strong case for the introduction of transitional relief in connection with the £400,000 cap on rateable values. That had a considerable impact on the amount that people in my community had to pay through their rates. The process of building the new Olympic swimming pool and leisure centre in Bangor has been made smoother by councillors who are also MLAs. Their ability to engage with the Minister in trying to overcome some of the inevitable bureaucracy that is involved in such projects ensures that we keep to the timetable for completion. If the project had come off the wheels and was not going to be delivered on time, that tangible benefit to the local community would not be felt.

5.00 pm

I recognise the point that Mr Beggs made about the problem of people who are both MLAs and councillors sometimes giving priority to their local government duties over their MLA duties. Councillors who are also doctors or teachers cannot leave their day jobs to go to council meetings or council events; their first obligation is to their employers. In our case, our employer is the Assembly. I concede that that is a problem.

However, it is fair to say that some people who are MLAs and councillors give very dedicated and dutiful service to both aspects of their elected mandates. I know people who are MLAs and councillors who are very dedicated to attending and speaking in debates in the Chamber. Those MLAs have very good voting records and good Committee attendance records, and they table questions, develop policy and act on behalf of their constituents. Equally, there are people who are only MLAs and who do not have the same good attendance records or the same commitment to the job.

The 108 of us are a very mixed bunch, and it is dangerous to make the broad generalisation that people who are only MLAs do the job better than those who are MLAs and councillors. The evidence is, at best, mixed. If anything, the performance figures for those who are committed to the Assembly and a council could be surprising. As the saying goes, "If you want something done, ask a busy person".

I was honoured to be the Mayor of North Down during the first term of the current Assembly mandate. I gave my full commitment to being a Member of the Assembly during that time, and my voting record, my speaking record, my participation in Committees and my service to my constituents would bear that out. I also attended and hosted over 400 events as mayor, as well as fulfilling other council duties.

Naomi Long is a Member of the Assembly and is also the Lord Mayor of Belfast. Very few people would disagree with me when I say that she is doing an outstanding job on behalf of all the citizens of Belfast.

We will see where the process goes. There is a wider debate to be held. There are issues to be considered at Committee Stage, such as whether the disqualification should apply to all MLAs or only to those who are Ministers. The discussion on the detail of the Bill is for another

day. We look forward with interest to the rest of the debate.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I declare an interest as a member of Ballymoney Borough Council.

I welcome the Bill and support the principles outlined in it. As far as I am aware, this is the first time that a private Member's Bill has reached Second Stage in the current mandate of the Assembly, and the Member for East Belfast Dawn Purvis should be commended for her work. I am in the process of putting together a private Member's Bill, and the amount of work required is considerable, so I commend her and the Assembly staff involved in compiling the Bill.

My party and I support the ending of dual mandates. Sinn Féin supported the recommendation in the review of public administration that a Member of the Assembly should not be allowed to stand for election to the new council structures. We did that because membership of both could have a negative impact on the smooth and efficient running of the Assembly and the new councils. The Member for East Belfast Dawn Purvis is correct to argue that we need to see new faces coming through, especially women and, as the Member for North Down Dr Farry said, people from under-represented groups.

Sinn Féin has already taken, and is taking, measures to ensure that under-represented groups in society are better represented in our party, on our Front Benches in the Assembly and on local district councils. Other parties, especially the Ulster Unionist Party, should take note of and learn from that.

Structures and procedures are in place in the South in the Dáil to ensure that when members of local town and county councils are elected to that House, co-option can take place without a by-election. We should learn from that. A number of Sinn Féin TDs in Dublin had roles as councillors, and when they were elected to the Dáil, they gave up those posts and allowed other colleagues to take their places. I look forward to the next council elections in the North and to an end to the parallel holding of seats in the Assembly and on local councils.

The legislation is short and simple. Nonetheless, it will be extremely effective. Peter Weir recognised the benefits of being a council member as well as a Member of the Assembly.

As a member of a council, I recognise those, too. However, I know of other elected representatives in the House who have agreed to co-opt someone of equal measure to their place on the council. Those MLAs are aware of the detail of council work because of good communication practices with their party colleagues on councils. That is a way to ensure that MLAs know what is happening in their local council areas.

Like other Members, I recognise the work that councillors have done in the past. However, local government needs a new beginning with new responsibilities and roles. That is why local government needs a new face, of which the dual mandate is not a part. Roy Beggs and Dolores Kelly referred to comments that Arlene Foster made a number of years ago, when she committed to introduce legislation to address the matter. I sincerely hope that the DUP follows through with that message, acts in the spirit of Arlene Foster's words from that time and commits to supporting the legislation to bring dual mandates between the Assembly and councils to an end.

In conclusion, I look forward to the legislation's Committee Stage. It represents an important change and will help to make local governance much more effective and robust. It offers an absolutely great opportunity to change the make-up of councils as regards gender, race and sexual orientation, among other things. I firmly support the principles of the Bill and look forward to its further consideration and eventual adoption.

Mr Kinahan: I am very pleased to be able to speak on the Local Government (Disqualification) (Amendment) Bill and congratulate Dawn Purvis for bringing it to the House. However, before I start, I think that some of you have come here today to listen to another debate and might like to know where we are. I understand that three Members are left to speak. That is the good news. The bad news is that they can speak for as long as they want. I hope that you will bear with us.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should refer all remarks through the Chair and should not refer to the Galleries.

Mr Kinahan: Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. As I said, I am pleased to speak in the debate. I declare an interest as a councillor on Antrim Borough Council. That is relevant in that it is the one council in Northern Ireland that meets

during the day. I will stand down the moment that the co-option laws are enacted, because I cannot organise it through the council myself, and I do not feel that I can do my council job and MLA job at the same time.

I am glad that we are concentrating on limiting dual mandates; we should all concentrate on our jobs here. However, we need the workplace experience that people outside politics provide, be they doctors, businessmen, farmers or whatever. They could all bring their experience to bear on what is said in this Building.

We need new blood. I salute all the experienced councillors who worked for many years for nothing, and all those who worked through Northern Ireland's more difficult years. Like Dawn Purvis, I wish to see 67 councillors change. I want to see more women, people from ethnic backgrounds and other groups get involved in politics. Another Member said recently that Northern Ireland is not as divided as the politicians make it out to be. Bringing in new blood may demonstrate that. We do not want that to happen all at once, but I am confident that if we enact the Bill, it will not happen like that. We will work through the process, and each party will find plenty of people willing to fill the spaces.

The Bill does not deal with MPs' dual mandates but seeks to disqualify MLAs from being elected, or being, councillors. That is why we are focusing only on that clash of interests today. However, I have a concern that a big name will be used simply to win an election, after which he will stand down immediately. A common-sense balance needs to be found. For example, someone might be elected, spend some time in the job and then stand down to let in new blood. We should try to find a way to stop the big names from being run all the time so that new people can be brought in behind them.

Much in our electoral system needs to be changed. Such changes are linked to this debate, and I referred to them in the recent debate on compulsory voting. MLAs' offices should be made more open so that MLAs can work with councillors or publicise the fact that councillors are working from those offices. At present, that is not legally possible. We need government bodies and others that make it difficult for people to get interested or to participate in politics to change their ways. We

need to see a change in public attitudes, and we need more people to get involved in politics.

A problem exists for people who, in many cases, have to resign from their government job before standing for election. How many people will give up a job before they know whether they will be elected? We also need to change our approach to schools. We need to teach children about the politics of this country and about the parties and personnel involved. Everyone in school should know those details, not just politics students.

Mr Weir said that we should not go on public perception alone. However, perception is what matters, for that is what the electorate sees of us. We know that his party does not want to see changes until 2015, and it may even roll back from that decision. Many Members have made the point that we need to ensure changes in the operation of dual mandates. Similarly, recent events, from the expenses scandal to the council scandal, add to the very poor perception that there is of politicians. All are linked.

If the RPA goes through and works, councillors will have much more work to do. They cannot do all the new jobs that the RPA will put their way and continue to be MLAs at the same time. Alliance Party Members talked about not legislating when we do not need to. I was brought up to do what I can today and not to put it off until tomorrow. As I said, it is good to have elected representatives who have outside jobs.

We were told how Minister Foster said that she was going to legislate yet has not. I want to touch on some remarks made by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who said that that is a party matter and should be left to parties to sort out. I see the vital way in which an MLA works: it is good to be on a council and to be in touch with the public, but the onus is on us as MLAs to work with our councillors to build good teams and to talk to one another all the time. At present, however, we are split: one person is a councillor, while another is an MLA. Even in instances in which people hold two positions, they are not speaking to everyone. The onus is on us to get a good team guideline and to work together.

5.15 pm

Ultimately, as Mr Wilson said, the electorate will decide. I look forward to that; Westminster elections are coming up, and we might even have Assembly elections, when one looks at what is going to happen tomorrow. I welcome

the Bill and look forward to everyone being honest with the electorate. The Ulster Unionist Party supports the motion.

Mr Dallat: Mr Deputy Speaker, I assure you before I begin that this is not a party political broadcast about my previous wonders as a mayor. Nevertheless, I declare an interest as I have been a member of Coleraine Borough Council for the past 33 years, which is exactly the length of time Our Lord lived on this earth, but I am not planning to depart just yet. The Bill has a great deal of credibility, and my party will broadly support it.

As Members have said, it is time to recognise that councillors played a major role down the years in trying to keep democracy alive. The name of Senator Paddy Wilson is recorded in one of the Rotundas in this Building. He was one of the first public representatives to lose his life in the dreadful times that we have gone through. As my colleague Mrs Kelly said, legislation is going through Westminster at the moment, to which we will look with interest. On a personal basis, I want to implement what I say, and since it is International Women's Day, I can tell Members that my replacement will be a woman.

The Bill is important because it provides the basis for discussion. There will be an opportunity for political parties to make whatever amendments that they feel appropriate. The fact that we are discussing double-jobbing means that progress has been made. When I set out in public life, it was virtually impossible to get anyone to stand for election such was the fear at that time. Also, there was no joy in living behind bulletproof glass and changing one's route to work every day.

On a positive note, things have moved on. I hope that today's discussion will be the preparation for a new generation who will, hopefully, have things easier than some of us did in the past and that democracy can be bedded down in a way that allows for enough flexibility for co-options. That is what we need more than anything at the moment. At times, those of us who are in councils where we are not the majority party take the word of other people before hearing about a by-election somewhere else. That makes one wonder. I think people know what I am saying. It is not entirely straightforward.

I am sure that every political party will apply itself positively to the Bill. I congratulate Dawn on bringing it forward. It is a piece of history.

Let us hope that many more private Member's Bills will come through this tortuous system successfully. This is another tier of the cake of democracy that we have all striven to work for and achieve.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil le Dawn Purvis as an Bhille seo a chur os ár gcomhair inniu. Beidh Sinn Féin ag tabhairt tacaíochta don Bhille seo.

I thank Dawn Purvis for proposing her private Member's Bill today. As other Members have said, it is a good piece of work by an individual MLA. It has brought an issue of great public debate to the Floor. As previously outlined by my party colleagues Cathal Boylan and Daithí McKay, Sinn Féin is broadly supportive of the Bill. We agree with the principle that there should be no dual mandates and that people should not be councillors and Members of the Assembly.

As a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, the issue of dual and multiple mandates is part of the Committee's forward work programme. I ask the proposer to be conscious of that Committee and to work closely with it and with the Environment Committee.

As has been said, the matter formed a large part of the discussion in the review of public administration. Therefore, we need to work with everyone involved to avoid any duplication or waste of public resources.

Arguments have been put forward about why there should not be an end to dual mandates now or in the future. We heard that councils are the first rung on the ladder, where the young and the inexperienced can cut their teeth. However, as Daithí McKay pointed out, an individual cannot be both a councillor and a TD in the Twenty-six Counties. All the same arguments were trotted out when that decision was made, and we have to avoid using them as a cover.

It may have been acceptable for people in the North to not want to give up their council jobs because of the fragility of the institutions. However, we need to have confidence in this institution and, indeed, in our party colleagues. It is not fair, right or proper for people to argue that they have to let go in order to give other people an opportunity. There are people within our party who are able and willing to do the job of a councillor and who do not see that role as

part of a graduation towards being an Assembly Member or whatever. They see it as part of the political work and programme in which we are involved. It may have been unintentional, but Members were almost patronising when they seemed to suggest that they could not let go of their jobs as councillors because the people coming behind them may not be good enough or experienced enough. We have to avoid that type of language, because it only adds to the sense that people want to hold on to their council jobs for the sake of holding on.

Members talked about lack of attendance, but that is a matter that parties have to be on top of. I listened to Stephen Farry talk about his previous role as Mayor of North Down Borough Council, Naomi Long's role as the Lord Mayor of Belfast and the good jobs that they have done. No one doubts that, and, indeed, my party colleagues have held similar roles. However, when people seek a mandate, they must be able to confidently say that the political representation will continue to be of the highest standards possible and that representative roles do not necessarily have to be carried out by the same people in each of the different institutions.

It will be better for all Members, all parties and everyone whom we represent when we have the confidence to say that our candidate is the best person to do the job. Danny Kinahan spoke about putting up big names for election. Any party that has to rely on the tactic of putting up a candidate who has to stand down three weeks later displays a lack of confidence. Indeed, the electorate will see through such a tactic and vote accordingly.

The Bill, in principle, captures what is right; it is not just a matter of capturing the popular mood. Members spoke about double-jobbing, expenses and other issues. Ending dual mandates is the right thing to do. Some representatives say that they work 18 hours a day when they are in the Assembly and then try to convince people that they have the other six hours to work as a councillor. We must provide the best representation possible, and that means representatives having single jobs.

Ms Purvis: I thank all Members who contributed to the debate, from all sides of the House, for their consideration of the Bill, their supportive comments and the concerns that they expressed about the Bill.

I approached the Bill on the premise of every party in the House having committed itself to ending dual mandates. When I listened to Peter Weir, I wondered whether his party is still committed to the end of dual mandates. However, Mr Weir did raise issues about the practical implications of the Bill, particularly a situation in which someone might wish to stand in two elections that are held on the same day and find themselves disqualified from one of those. Indeed, I mentioned that possibility in my opening comments and I share concerns about that.

I said that, originally, I had considered a period of grace being a part of that, but it would have complicated the Bill. However, that can be considered at Committee Stage. I look forward to working with the Committee in trying to improve the Bill.

Mr Weir spoke about standards of democracy, and I spoke about public confidence and perceptions. He said — I paraphrase his words — that we should not allow public perception to dictate our policy. However, public perception is at the core of the health of our democracy. If the public have a negative perception of what Members try to do, it impacts on the level of public confidence in political institutions, including the Assembly and local government. Public perception is absolutely real. There is a problem with dual mandates, and if the majority of voters perceive that to be so, there is a problem.

Mr Weir spoke about co-option being an opportunity and the complementarity between the roles of councillor and MLA. He saw that as an advantage, which might be so. However, the public see no advantage in someone holding two elected positions at the same time. He misses the point of the dual mandate issue, which is about political power being held in a limited number of hands.

Mr Farry also missed the point when he spoke about a conflict of time, whereby one part-time job is not a job at all whereas the other job is full-time. The issue is that the public perceive two elected positions being held by the same person as being a concentration of power in that person.

Cathal Boylan rightly said that the issue is still about two jobs. He said that the public perception is important because it is extremely negative, and it affects the level of confidence in our institutions. He made a strong case based on conflict of interest.

Lord Morrow rightly spoke about the role that councillors played in the past. He recognised, as did other Members, the importance of that role and councillors' contributions to democracy in Northern Ireland. However, do we not want the opposite for our future? We are concerned about the here and now, and the building of public confidence in our political institutions so that we can bring in new blood and new people who are under-represented. That is what we are trying to work towards. It is not about harking back to the past but trying to create a better future.

Roy Beggs commended the brevity of the Bill and said that Northern Ireland's credibility has suffered because of dual and triple mandates. He pointed to the devolved institutions of Scotland and Wales, which brought in mechanisms to end dual mandates. He said that there are few elected representatives in Scotland and Wales who hold dual mandates. He asked how Members who hold down two jobs and spread themselves thinly can be effective. He outlined the personal cost for those who choose to do so. He also talked about the new super-councils and the increased responsibility for local councillors and how it would become more difficult to do two jobs. He said that it is better for elected representatives to be more rounded, and although we cannot legislate to end dual mandates between the Assembly and Westminster, it is right to concentrate on ending the dual mandates for which we can legislate.

5.30 pm

Roy Beggs rightly pointed out Arlene Foster's statement in March 2008 about ending dual mandates. The commitment was given, but no action was taken. This private Member's Bill came about because there was no action from the Minister responsible. The commitment was given in March 2008, and by December 2008 I decided to look at legislating against dual mandates, because there was no action.

Although some may argue that the Bill is populist, it has been in process — Daithí McKay spoke about the process of bringing forward a private Member's Bill — since December 2008. That shows how long and drawn-out a process it is to get a Bill to this stage. It is not a populist measure, as Stephen Farry said: wanting inclusive, transparent, participative democracy is not populist. The Bill is about the principles and values that we want to uphold in our democratic system.

Mrs D Kelly: I suppose it should come as no surprise that the Alliance Party is not currently for inclusive democracy, given that it signed up to the transfer of policing and justice powers on the basis of 'A Shared Future' document, which no one has seen.

Dr Farry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is this a discussion on local government or a discussion on policing and justice?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, Dr Farry.

Ms Purvis: I thank Mrs Kelly for her intervention; she sums the matter up well. SDLP Members, as Mrs Kelly said, are broadly supportive of the Bill, although they raised concerns with which I have a great deal of sympathy. I look forward to working with the Committee on those concerns.

Mrs Kelly spoke about the greater representation of women and minorities, including young people, by opening up our politics and making it more representative. She appreciated, as did others, the service of local councillors but believed that co-option and the co-option mechanism, which we will, hopefully, have by the end of the month, will do away with expensive by-elections and help the passage of the Bill.

Mrs Kelly said that public perception in this place was a huge piece of work and she understood the levels to which we have to go to build public confidence. She raised an important point about the Committee looking at those who sit in the House of Lords, for example; that may be something for the Committee to examine with regard to ending dual mandates between local government and the Lords, MEPs and those at Westminster. I look forward to working with Mrs Kelly and others through the Committee.

Mr Farry said that he thought that there may not be a need to legislate in advance of the next election, although I was unclear about his argument why. He talked about his party's achievements in its representative nature in selecting people for election and the number of people whom they have elected. However, I notice an absence of those from a disadvantaged social and economic background.

Dr Farry: For the Member's information, my father worked in a factory and was unemployed for many years, and Naomi Long comes from a single-parent family in Mersey Street. Therefore I wonder whether the Member wishes to

retract that comment about the breadth of the advantage or disadvantage among Alliance representatives.

Ms Purvis: I thank the Member for his intervention, but I have absolutely no intention of retracting that comment. I probably enforce the perception that others have about the Alliance Party being a middle-class party.

Stephen Farry said that there was a flaw in the Bill in that if a vacancy arose it would fall back to the party initially to fill. I do not see why that is a flaw when it is up to the party to select the candidates in the first place, and if the party was committed to achieving a diverse group of candidates for election, surely it would be committed to filling a place with like?

That is a matter for parties, not for this Bill. He talked about conflicts of interest, and rightly agreed that an MLA who is also a Minister and a councillor has a conflict of interest because they could be involved in decisions that concern local councils. However, he said that the roles of MLA and councillor could be in harmony.

The Member also talked about a conflict of time, which I have addressed already. He said that he does not see being a councillor in local government as a job, but I have difficulty with that. If a person receives benefits through their elected office, they receive benefits in kind. Therefore, it is seen as a job. Mr Farry misses the point of this Bill. If his party is committed to ending dual mandates, it should support the Bill.

Daithí McKay talked about the importance of ending dual mandates as it would bring forward under-represented groups. He talked about legislation in the Republic of Ireland that allows councillors to become TDs to vacant council seats and allow co-option. He said that this is a short but important piece of legislation that will herald a new beginning for local government with new responsibilities, which is what we are trying to achieve by ending dual mandates. It is an opportunity for change.

Danny Kinahan stated his intention to stand down from council as soon as the co-option becomes law. He does not believe that he would be able to do both jobs. I appreciate his honesty. He said that we need new blood, and he paid tribute to councillors and their work. Like many others, he would like to see more women and ethnic groups involved in politics. He said that that would show that Northern Ireland is not as divided as

it is perceived. Like others, he was concerned that a big name could be used to stand and then stand down to let in a new and unknown person. That is the potential in this Bill. Mr Kinahan also talked about the need for change in our electoral system. He said that MLAs' offices should be opened up to partnership working with councils. He talked about the need to encourage more people, particularly young people, into politics, and he criticised the fact that those who work for government are not allowed to stand for election. He said that that needs to be reviewed.

Raymond McCartney said that Sinn Féin was broadly supportive of the Bill. The issue of dual mandates is part of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's forward work programme, and he highlighted the need for me and others to work closely together, particularly with the Environment Committee, to ensure that there is no overlap. He said that that would get the best out of this Bill as regards any amendments.

Mr McCartney also raised the same issue as Daithí McKay: that a person in the Republic of Ireland cannot be a councillor as well as a TD. In addition, he raised the issue of employment insurance, which I brought up at the very start. There is a need to have confidence in this institution. Holding on to another mandate does not demonstrate a sense of confidence; it demonstrates a lack of confidence in moving forward. He said that when people seek a mandate, they have confidence that they will carry out their duties to the best of their ability. In addition, he said that the Bill catches what is right, and that it is the right thing to do.

I really appreciate the points that were made by everyone today. This Bill shows what is good about our institutions and our Assembly. It shows that politics can work. There is an opportunity to show our voters and the public that we are serious about ending the practice of dual mandates, within a specific time frame towards which every party is committed to working. All parties are on record as favouring the end of dual mandates. My question is: why the delay? I look forward to working with the Committee, and I thank Members for their consideration.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Local Government (Disqualification) (Amendment) Bill [NIA 7/09] be agreed.

Private Members' Business

Farm Modernisation Programme

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee previously agreed that when 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 will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes 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.

Mr Elliott: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to bring forward fair and practical criteria for implementation of tranche 2 of the farm modernisation programme.

As the day moves on, people may lose interest in some of the matters that we debate, but this is a very important issue for a wide range of our people, particularly in the agriculture and farming community. I declare an interest as a farmer and a member of the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU). My declaration comes from a slightly different angle: sometimes, one declares an advantageous interest, but, in common with those surrounding it, my farm is in a severely disadvantaged area. I am not sure whether Members want to refer to me as a severely disadvantaged farmer, but that is the classification of the area from which I come.

We must first look at tranche 1 of the farm modernisation scheme, which is part of the rural development programme. When we saw queues lasting for at least one full night for applications for tranche 1, most people realised that the delivery mechanism was pretty much an abysmal failure. That is not to say that the Minister and the Department were not warned. Months previously, I had warned that the application process for the farm modernisation scheme would be like the January sales queues. That spectacle disappointed farmers, because our community got a lot of very bad press at the time, with some media commentators likening the application process to soup kitchen queues. Others questioned how desperate farmers must be to queue up all night for a few thousand

pounds. That is how the event was portrayed in the media.

The mechanism that was used resulted in a large section of the farming community not getting any support or help at all. I am sure that the Minister will put me right when she speaks, but, from memory, I think that of the more than 9,000 applications for tranche 1 of the farm modernisation scheme, something over 1,200 — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. If Members wish to carry on private conversations, they should do so outside the Chamber. It is difficult enough to hear what the Member is saying.

Mr Elliott: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was saying that of the more than 9,000 applications for tranche 1, I think that only around 1,200 applicants got letters of offer. That was a huge disappointment for the nearly 8,000 farmers who submitted unsuccessful applications. Those farmers feel that a better system must be put in place.

I was accused here last week by the Minister's party colleague Mr McElduff of never saying anything positive in the Chamber. However, on this matter, I felt much more positive that the Department was bringing forward criteria-based proposals as part of a fairly simplified process that was not laden with bureaucracy, as so often happens with such applications.

I felt that that was helpful and positive. However, when we saw the criteria, we felt somewhat differently. Out of a total of 95 marks, one criterion — farming in a severely disadvantaged area — produced 36 marks, which equates to more than 36% of the marks that one could possibly get for being in a single land classification. We did not believe that that was fair or practical. When we raised the matter with the Minister, at first, she proposed awarding nil marks for lowland farmers. Eventually, she raised that to 10 marks.

5.45 pm

I am not saying that land classification should not be a criterion at all. Some people think that it should not, but I believe that land classification should be included in the mechanism, although in a much smaller range. For example, submitting one's application by e-mail is a criterion for which one is awarded five marks; whereas, delivering it by hand or

posting it do not qualify for any marks. That is a difference of only five marks. If the difference between severely disadvantaged areas and lowland areas ranged from five to 10 marks, most farmers could live with it. We want further engagement and consultation about such outcomes. When an organisation such as the Ulster Farmers' Union, which represents a wide and varied range of farmers from throughout the community, including hill farmers, who, incidentally, come mainly from severely disadvantaged areas, supports the farmers' view that the proposals are not fair or right, the Minister must appreciate the community's enormous opposition to them.

An equality impact assessment (EQIA) should be carried out on the proposals. The Department carried out an equality impact assessment on the rural development programme. The farm modernisation programme will severely affect one section of the farming community — lowland farmers — and we can assess from which community the majority of those farmers come. I have heard it suggested that it amounts to sectarian discrimination. Therefore, an equality impact assessment must be carried out on the proposed scheme.

I am also disappointed that the Minister has yet to tell the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development whether the scheme is past the post. Will there be no turning back? We need to know — I hope that the Minister will address the point — whether there is still room for discussion and consultation. In order to establish a fairer way forward, we want discussions to involve the Ulster Farmers' Union, the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association (NIAPA), the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and, indeed, all other interested groups.

The age of the farmer is another criterion that has been used. To be fair, I support that, because young farmers need such assistance. They are the farmers of the future. Compared to other businesses, the average age of farmers in Northern Ireland is very high. Therefore, we must do all that we can to encourage the young farmer. E-communication and submitting applications by e-mail is a positive move. Hopefully, that will cut bureaucracy and paperwork for the farming community.

The degree of modernisation is another criterion that gives me concern. How will that

be calculated? Is a yard sweeper a less modern piece of equipment than a cow cubicle, or is a tractor sprayer more modern than a grass topper? It will be interesting to see how all that is worked out. I do not believe that there should be a 20-point difference between top- and low-level equipment. That gap is much too wide. If the money is for modernisation, it should be for modernisation: full stop. I do not know where the top level and low level come in.

I wonder whether the Minister has clearly thought through the matter with the union, the Committee and NIAPA, in order to explore all the other avenues fully, because I am aware that other proposals were put forward that the Department has not accepted. For example, one suggestion was that people engaged in full-time farming would be one criterion, and that, perhaps, there could be a bracket for full-time and part-time farmers. Many farmers come from lowland areas, and a lot of them rely on farming and agriculture for their sole income; those people need help.

The Minister has indicated that one of the reasons for using the severely disadvantaged area land classification is that she wants to target disadvantaged areas, but surely the less-favoured area compensatory allowance does that, because there is a payment for severely disadvantaged and disadvantaged areas. However, there is no payment for lowland areas. In fact, severely disadvantaged areas get more than £40 per hectare and disadvantaged areas get in the region of £20 per hectare. I ask the Minister and the Department to review the decision urgently.

Mr P J Bradley: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Development" and insert

"to re-engage immediately in discussions with the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association with a view to bringing forward fair and practical criteria for implementation of tranche 2 of the farm modernisation programme."

I have no difficulty with the motion and with amendment No 2. It is a pity that we did not get together and draft one motion, because I can live with the motion and both amendments.

The last two decades have seen a marked decline in farming activities across the North, and nowhere is it more in evidence than on farms located in severely disadvantaged areas

and less-favoured areas (LFAs). On a drive through the countryside, it is clear to see that everything is not as it should be. Farm buildings and farm land are in a dilapidated state as a result of inactivity. The decline began when many farmers of small farms could no longer make a living from their holdings. Therefore, to supplement their income, they took up employment mainly in the construction industry, in quarries and in construction related businesses. As we all know, such opportunities are no longer available; but, if such farmers were sufficiently encouraged, I know that many of them would only be too willing to reactivate their small farms. They are located mostly in less-favoured areas. They are not looking to purchase combine harvesters, John Deere 8RT series tractors, or top-of-the-range machinery; but, given a sufficient level of encouragement and financial support, they could become active again.

As I have said, the lack of farming activity on many small farms has resulted in the deterioration of sheds, farmyards and out-offices. It should be the aim of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and all interested parties to make some preparation that would encourage part-time farmers and farmers of small farms to become active in farming activities. That appears to be what the Minister is planning to do, and I have no difficulty with it. Indeed, I welcome such an incentive. However, there is one thing that we must not do in the process, and that is to ignore the full-time, more productive, farmers who form the backbone of the agriculture industry that we are all so proud of and that so many people depend on. I look back to the nights of 15 February and 16 February 2009 when farmers queued for up to 60 hours outside DARD offices hoping to get a slice of the farm modernisation programme. Many of them were unsuccessful. The vast majority simply had to accept what happened then and be prepared to wait for the announcement of tranche 2.

Had the Minister made some effort this time to assist those disappointed farmers, we might not be having this debate today. However, by her proposal for tranche 2, the Minister is walking along the line to single people out in a "you", "not you" manner, which is a totally unacceptable manner of selection.

In February 2009, and as the old saying goes, many were called but few were chosen. It should not happen like that again. I accept that getting

the balance right might be difficult to achieve, but some form of pro-rata arrangement must be agreed. I am aware that the Minister met with the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association and that no agreement was reached.

I believe that the SDLP amendment is the road to follow, as it will introduce further professional debate to the issue. I say "professional", as both unions referred to in the amendment have played active roles on behalf of their members, and they deserve praise from everyone for their dedication to the farming industry.

I do not wish to be told by anyone today that we have no money. Recently, I sent the Minister a question for written answer in which I questioned her on the amount of money that has been deducted from the single farm payment cheques. She informed me that the sums collected in the past three years were: €28.7 million in 2007; €34.25 million in 2008; and €38.7 million in 2009. In 2004-05, when the Minister was determined to increase the sums being deducted from the single farm payment, we were told that a large percentage of the funding would be returned to the farming community via improvement schemes. Given that €101.6 million has been collected as a result of the modulation process in the past three years, surely sufficient funding should be available to allow the Minister not only to deliver on the proposals for the less-favoured areas but to make an accommodation for lowland farmers who have been denied equality.

Other questions could be raised about the €101.6 million and about how it has been allocated. For example, how much of it has gone to full-time farmers? How much has gone on non-farming projects? How much has gone towards administration? However, those questions provide material for another debate on another day.

I have a number of questions for the Minister on her proposals. Will she confirm that her proposals were equality proofed? Mr Elliott touched on that. Is the Minister certain that her proposals are beyond legal challenge? If she is, will she provide the Chairperson or the Committee Clerk of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development with a copy of the advice that she was given?

I note that points are to be given under the heading "Succession opportunity". I have some

difficulty with that element of the proposal. Perhaps the Minister will explain her thinking behind the succession benefits. I agree that all of us must support young farmers. In fact, most people would describe a farmer who is in his or her 40s as a relatively young or even middle-aged person, who, perhaps, has children of primary school age. I could accept the age of 60 being given in this instance, but I fail to understand why those who have crossed their fortieth birthday are to be denied points solely because they are considered too old.

I recognise that the Minister does not always carry out the wishes of the House or, for that matter, those of the Committee. Therefore, it is important that she meets immediately with the Ulster Farmers' Union and NIAPA in an effort to reach an agreement that will be acceptable to the farming community in general. The Minister must listen closely to the voices of the industry.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, lest there be any confusion, and for your clarification, regardless of whether amendment No 1 is made, amendment No 2 can still be made.

Mr Irwin: I beg to move amendment No 2: At end insert

“; and to ensure that, following the underspend in the manure efficiency technology subprogramme (METS) in tranche 1, more farmers are given an opportunity to access the METS element in tranche 2.”

In moving amendment No 2, I should say that we support the motion, and I am assured that the proposers of the motion support our amendment.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I declare an interest as a farmer. The farm modernisation programme has been a welcome benefit to those farmers in Northern Ireland who were successful in the first round of funding. At its core, the programme has the capacity to help farming here to improve its competitiveness and to meet new challenges in the sector. However, we have heard and are aware of a number of important issues that have come to light following the administration of the first tranche. We have grave concerns over the proposals that the Minister has issued on criteria for the second tranche.

I have received many calls from concerned farmers stating that they are unhappy with the Minister's proposals at this time. The Minister

stated her desire to target less-favoured areas in the second tranche. Although I have no problem with the scheme being open to farmers in less-favoured areas, it is wrong to focus the majority of the scoring on land classification.

For a Minister who regularly triumphs the word “equality”, this is an inequality for lowland farmers. Making the second tranche open, fair and based on equal opportunity must be addressed. The current proposed criteria effectively close the door to lowland farmers by weighing the scoring heavily towards severely disadvantaged areas, and the negative message that that will send out to lowland farmers will be damaging to the industry. That has to be addressed through the Department's use of criteria, based on equality.

6.00 pm

As regards my party's amendment, which concerns the manure efficiency technology subprogramme, many lessons are there to be learned on how the Department could greatly improve administrative procedures in order to better spend available cash and, of course, assist more farmers. Figures that I obtained in a written answer from the Minister show that £1.68 million was allocated to that subprogramme. A commendable 853 applications were received. Of those 853 applications, 176 were considered successful. However, just 117 of those applicants accessed the available funding, which left a clear underspend. The Minister confirmed to me that 59 applicants would not be proceeding with their investment, for a variety of reasons.

We all realise that plans can change rapidly in the agriculture business, especially in the current economic climate, in which banks are ever more cautious. I understand fully why some farmers did not go through with their METS projects. The important fact is that a significant amount of METS funding has not been spent. Ultimately, the Department should have had a system in place that went to the next applicant and invited him or her to draw down that funding. Of course, that did not happen. Unfortunately, other applicants had their applications sent back, rather than held in a queue, which meant that, in order to spend the unspent cash, the Department would have to reinstate applications, which would incur yet more administration costs.

In her written response, the Minister suggested to me that farmers are reluctant to make substantial investments in that type of equipment in the current economic climate. I argue that the Minister's conclusion is not reflective of the situation, given the vast number of applications that were received — 853, to be precise.

There is also concern that removing the METS element will mean that the hundreds of unsuccessful farmers who have waited patiently to avail themselves of the second tranche will be unable to do so and will, undoubtedly, feel short-changed by the Department. The level of interest that has been shown in the subprogramme has been proven by the number of applications to the first tranche. I ask the Minister to reopen the METS element in tranche 2 and, through better administration practices, to ensure that the allocation is fully spent.

The Minister and her Department must go back to the drawing board and address deep concerns about the proposed criteria and inequalities in the second tranche. She must also ensure that the many farmers who have been waiting for the reopening of the METS programme in the next tranche are given the opportunity to avail themselves of that important funding element.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister has brought forward fair and practical criteria for the implementation of tranche 2 of the farm modernisation scheme. I contend that it is the duty of the Department and the Minister to target disadvantage and to deal with inequality in her sector of responsibility. That does not mean that the Department should hand out the same sum of money to every applicant; it means that there is a responsibility to create a level playing field for everybody concerned. The Minister and her Department have attempted to do that in the delivery of tranche 2 of the farm modernisation scheme.

Mr Elliott: Does the Member agree that giving 35 points, which is well over a third of the total number of points, to someone who farms in a severely disadvantaged area is a fair and equal way to do that?

Mr Doherty: I thought that I covered that when I made my point about a level playing field. Perhaps, in time, the Member will understand what that means.

I also note that NIAPA and the National Beef Association support the scheme. The Ulster Farmers' Union has some concerns. However, in the second last paragraph of its letter to Minister Gildernew, dated 5 February 2009, which was copied to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, it states:

"Despite our concerns around the delivery of tranche 2 of the Farm Modernisation Scheme the UFU recognises that there are some very positive aspects of the scheme; most notably that it represents a significant amount of support to help farmers modernise their businesses, and promotes substantial expenditure in the rural economy. The simple application form used in tranche 1 should also be commended."

Although the UFU was concerned, at least it saw some solid value in the proposals. The Committee met members of the Ulster Farmers' Union on 9 February and asked questions on their submission. They talked about awarding at least five marks for lowland farmers. In the event, the Minister listened, took their advice and went on to award 10 marks. Therefore, there has been consultation and a degree of listening.

I draw the attention of the House to a letter that everyone in the Committee agreed to send to the Department on 2 July 2009, which highlighted the following possibilities for inclusion in tranche 2. I will not read out the content of the letter, but I will highlight the six key points. The first is aid to encourage young farmers to enter or remain in the industry; that has been covered. The second is support to poultry farmers; that has also been covered. The third is grants to fruit growers; again, that has been covered. The fourth is targeting small farmers; that has most certainly been covered. The fifth is modernisation of energy provision, and the sixth is modernisation of facilities for pig farmers.

Mr Irwin: Fruit farmers are, in the main, in the Loughgall/Armagh area. I am not aware of any in the less-favoured areas.

Mr Doherty: That is fair enough, and I believe that the Minister has responded to that. However, when the Committee wrote to the Minister and the Department in July 2009, they took account of all that it said. As they have gone through that process, it is unfair to try to accuse the Minister and the Department of not creating a level playing field. I support the motion, even though the Members opposite have yet to consider why.

Mr Ford: At the outset, I declare my wife's shared interest in a family farm, which is in an original LFA or severely disadvantaged area (SDA), and, therefore, probably much of what I will say will be seen as arguing against her personal interests.

I congratulate Tom Elliott and his colleagues on tabling the motion. My initial response was something the same as that given by P J Bradley when he proposed his amendment and said that he supported the original motion as amended by him to refer to consultation issues and with the addition of the DUP amendment. Having just heard Mr Doherty's response to that, I advise the proposer of the motion to accept the SDLP's amendment or he will be seen as not having stated what needs to be stated: that there has been insufficient consultation and that there needs to be much greater consultation, particularly with the Ulster Farmers' Union and NIAPA, to ensure that the matter is dealt with properly.

If we look at the criteria in the most recent revision of the scheme — this scheme has been through a number of different revisions — it is clear that no one could object to the notion of a small number of marks being awarded for encouraging e-communications. That is part of modernisation. However, broadband communication is less easy in more remote rural areas than it is in other areas. By the same token, the concept of handling succession issues by awarding a modest number of marks seems entirely reasonable. However, whether a 40-year-old is young, middle-aged or old is a matter that will generate some discussion.

Once we hit the modernisation marks, an issue arises that will create difficulties. As someone said, what is modern on one farm may still be something that is to be aimed for on another. There are real issues as to whether modernisation can be seen in such a simplistic, cut-off way, in which points are awarded for certain items but not for others. I am not entirely surprised that that seems to be one of the reasons why the UFU was unhappy to engage with the Department in dealing with the issue. I am not sure how one can categorise what is more modernising and what is less modernising on a simplistic basis across the whole region, when, clearly, some farms are already more modern and advanced than others.

The major issue that has caused so much concern is the issue that I referred to at the beginning: the fact that land classification

carries such a substantial number of marks. That effectively means that, even if someone is getting marks for e-communications, youthfulness and the most modernising equipment, if they do not fall within a disadvantaged area (DA) — potentially even a severely disadvantaged area — they will have major difficulties in getting any money at all under the scheme. That is the point where the scheme is fundamentally unfair and is failing to meet the aim of modernising farming across every part of Northern Ireland, not just in one particular area. I believe it is wrong, simply because every farmer has had money taken from him or her through so-called voluntary modulation, which may be voluntary according to the determination of government but is certainly not voluntary according to the determination of the farm.

There are real issues about the way in which the scheme appears to be attempting to balance out other schemes in a way that is fundamentally unfair. There are other schemes that are more likely to benefit people in less-favoured areas but do not completely rule out applications from lowland farmers. It seems that it is easier to get countryside management grants or some of the forestry grants in less-favoured areas than it is in the lowland. Yet, those schemes do not rule out applications from lowland farmers; they are simply schemes that deliver in such a way. To attempt to compensate for those schemes by twisting this scheme seems to be fundamentally wrong, because the way to compensate for those schemes is to ensure that grants are given fairly in every scheme, regardless of how to apply.

It seems that the Minister has questions to answer as to why there was so little consultation. If there was no proper consultation with the stakeholders, that would seem to be fundamentally at variance with what we would expect. In particular, when we consider all that went wrong with the first tranche of the scheme, those ludicrous pictures of people queuing endlessly in order to apply for the scheme have surely highlighted the absolute need to get tranche 2 right —

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

Mr Ford: — and not to go through a further and difficult decision on the way in which this tranche operates.

Dr W McCrea: I wish to express my grave concern at the decision of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to deliver tranche 2 of the farm modernisation scheme in the manner that she has proposed. I accept that the manner in which the first tranche was delivered was not acceptable to Europe and that, therefore, relevant and necessary changes had to be made. We all acknowledge that. However, the steps taken by the Minister to change the scheme are, in my opinion, unacceptable to many in the agriculture industry and are looked upon by many as discriminatory.

I am not saying that there is nothing in the scheme that is worthy to be kept; many things are, but changes need to be made. Should the Minister be permitted to proceed with her present proposals, they would be detrimental to a large number of farmers from whom the money was taken in the first place. The lowland farmers would be disadvantaged significantly and denied a fair and equitable opportunity to access limited funding for farm modernisation.

One of the major faults with the proposed scheme is the manner in which the Minister decided and announced it without proper and meaningful consultation with stakeholders, the unions or even the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. To present a scheme that is a fait accompli is scandalous, and one must ask why there was so much secrecy. The Committee has asked for certain papers; we will wait to see whether those and all the relevant documents have actually been presented to the Committee.

Let me make it clear: I do not wish to discriminate against any sector of the farming industry, whether it is in less favoured, severely disadvantaged or lowland areas. All I wish to do is ensure that all farmers have an equal opportunity to modernise their farm and be eligible to do so. What is wrong with such a position? The Minister's scheme, as it stands, will deliberately disadvantage many people simply because they happen not to be in a particular area. To virtually exclude such people from a modernisation programme would surely be detrimental to the future of the industry and would be an act of open discrimination.

6.15 pm

I had hoped that a way forward could have been found that would satisfy the vast majority of farmers in the Province. Unfortunately, however,

that has not been possible because of the Minister's intransigence. The Ulster Farmers' Union has proposed a greater number of criteria than have been selected by the Department, and the outworking of that would provide a more acceptable spread. The real sting in the tail from the Minister has been the fact that one single criterion, land classification, has been allocated such a high percentage of overall marks.

I understand the right of any individual to hold political aspirations, but those cannot be carried into a scheme in the agriculture industry. Farmers throughout Northern Ireland have given so much to the Province and to its prosperity in good times and in difficult times over the years that I cannot allow party politics to influence the right of a Minister to discriminate against farmers. The issue is sensitive, and it strikes at the heart of equality. Reducing equity of opportunity is against the Programme for Government and the other fundamentals that have been proclaimed and are supposedly held sacred by the Assembly, although, it seems, only when it suits.

I therefore call on the Assembly to demand that the Minister takes back the proposal and the present scheme and that she not only assists a particular grouping in the farming industry but allows equity of treatment and opportunity for all farmers. That is in the best interests of the Province's greatest industry.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the modernisation proposals that have been put forward under tranche 2 of the farm modernisation programme. Members complained about the way that tranche 1 was administered at the time, said that it was embarrassing and raised other issues.

The Ulster Farmers' Union raised a number of points in its briefing paper that I wish to question. It said that lower land is virtually excluded from assessment under the modernisation programme. As my colleague Pat Doherty pointed out, the Ulster Farmers' Union proposed that five marks be allocated for that group of farmers in a specific area. The Minister accepted that and has, in fact, doubled that by allocating 10 marks.

We have not heard complaints about those who were excluded in the past. When the dairy sector and the beef sector received funding, we did not hear about farmers in less-favoured areas who had not received funding. No one spoke on their behalf to ensure that they

received funding. The Ulster Farmers' Union has proposed six criteria that it feels could be part of the programme. It appears that the Minister and the Department have taken on board a number of those points, excluded some and added others, and they have done so to create equality and a level playing field.

Equality does not mean that everyone gets the same when privilege and rank already exist. Equality means trying to create a level playing field, not dealing with it by making double payments to others. One of the proposals from the Ulster Farmers' Union is that those who are getting single farm payments should get another payment. Those people already get a single farm payment, and some of them get an amount that is in excess of what they would have ever got from business. Double payments are not a way of doing it.

Young farmers are included in the scheme, as is the option to apply online. Full-time farmers already get the payment, and some are farming in less-favoured areas. Those people would not be excluded from that position.

DARD's census figures show that 58% of dairy farms, 77% of beef and sheep farms, 76% of suckler cows and 80% of all sheep are in less-favoured areas. Given those figures, it is clear why the farm modernisation programme targets farms in those areas.

We must move on. It should no longer be said that the people who applied for a grant the last time but failed should get a second chance before those who were excluded in the past and who have yet to get a chance to apply for the first time. I am sure that the debate about the farm modernisation programme will continue, because different people have different interpretations. Some people view the provision of a machine on a farm in a less-favoured area as modernisation. Such people would also like those who are well off to get even more money. That goes back to the point about 20% of people owning 80% of the wealth; that is not equality. Therefore, when we talk about equality, we need to deal with it. The advice from Europe is that those who work in difficult areas of farming should be supported in any new tranche of funding, and the scheme is in keeping with that recommendation.

Some Members said that the programme discriminates against certain areas. Those Members cannot have it both ways. You cannot

drive people up hills and into bogs, as Cromwell did, and then say, when those people start to make money, that they should not get funding. Those who were discriminated against by the old Stormont regime, driven off good land and put into debt cannot be excluded again from receiving money. We must be fair. We are long past the stage when advisers from the Agriculture Department went round Orange Halls advising the Protestant and unionist community of what they were entitled to, while excluding the broad community from the funding to which they were entitled. Those days are over, and change has happened. We are now moving to —
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Continue, Mr Molloy.

Mr Molloy: We are now moving to real equality, where everyone is treated equally and where everyone has the same opportunities.

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

Mr Molloy: Everyone will get the same opportunity to apply for funding. The programme recognises those in less-favoured areas so that they can get funding to modernise their farms.

Mr Shannon: I wish to make it clear and put it on the record that I am not aware of any Agriculture Department officials going round Orange Halls to encourage people to do that. That did not happen. What the Member said is more akin to 'Jackanory' than factual evidence.

I must have missed the memo that said that Camelot has taken over the allocation of funding from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. I was unaware that we are advocating a postcode lottery system in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Make no mistake: that is exactly what is being proposed, which is why we are concerned about it.

I have consulted the Ulster Farmers' Union about the issue, and I declare an interest as a member of that union for some 25 years. I live on a modern farm within a farming community, and I have seen at first hand the need for modernisation on all farms in the Province. There is a strong farming tradition in Northern Ireland. Given that farms have been handed down through the generations and that it is currently difficult to turn a profit on a farm, it is obvious that paying a mortgage and the food bills, buying a new tractor when the old one

finally quits and ensuring that the farm meets health and safety standards while still paying for normal day-to-day bills ensures that the improvement and modernisation of farms, while important, is far down the list of what can be done with present funds.

We are all aware of the reasons why issues arose with the first tranche of the scheme and why the second tranche needed to be different. However, it is clear that the Minister, for whatever reasons, has not grasped the need for equitable and fair criteria.

The UFU haes alloood at Aa fairmers wha pit catter intae the scheme maun bae fit tae access hit. Hit bes unnerpinned bae thair catter niver min' airt ir cless o' fairmin. Thon bes a notion at A gree wi completely, fundin' maun bae thair fer ivrieboadie at hes need fer hit an' no oan a poast code lottery at bes what the Minister bes indicatin' micht happen bae targetin' airts o' specific need onie.

The Ulster Farmers' Union has said that all farmers who contribute financially must be able to access a scheme that is underpinned by that money, irrespective of location or sector. I totally agree with that. Funding must be made available to all who need it and must not be based on a postcode lottery, which is what may happen if only areas of specific need are targeted. All farms in the Province should be allowed to apply for a grant no matter where they are located, and criteria should be based on a fair points system that does not automatically exclude a farm simply because it is located beside other thriving farms.

The Minister has not taken into consideration the views of the farming community or elected representatives in that no meaningful consultation has taken place. The Ulster Farmers' Union consulted its internal policy committees, which are made up of 400 members from all sectors and all areas, including the less-favoured areas, to discuss possible options for the delivery of tranche 2, bearing in mind the need for new selection criteria. A clear recommendation came from the broad church of the Ulster Farmers' Union. At a meeting on 23 September, a final position was agreed on the six criteria that, it was felt, would allow all farmers a fair opportunity to access funding but, at the same time, would allow a selection process to be carried out. The top six criteria — that sounds similar to something from 'Top of the Pops',

which I remember from long ago — are farmers who were successful in tranche 1; younger farmers; full-time farmers; farmers with any simple management records; farmers with agricultural qualifications; and farmers who submit online. The Ulster Farmers' Union is concerned that only four eligibility criteria have been selected by DARD as a greater number of criteria would provide a more equitable spread of opportunity. The Ulster Farmers' Union has clearly indicated where the problems are.

The points system that the Department plans to implement will mean that more than 36% of the overall marks will be allocated to the land classification category. We request that that be changed. The farm modernisation scheme is not the way to do that. Instead, it should be done through the existing less-favoured area compensatory allowances. Some 13,000 LFA farmers avail themselves of that scheme, and that is the system that should be used.

I also express concern over the METS scheme, as was mentioned by my colleague when he moved our amendment. The scheme is necessary to deliver environmental objectives and, through tranche 2, should be open to all who need access to it. The need for modernisation is not confined simply to severely disadvantaged areas but applies to disadvantaged farms no matter what their allocation. That is the point that we make in our amendment.

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

Mr Shannon: I ask Members to support the DUP amendment and, by so doing, support the Ulster farmer.

Mr Savage: I declare an interest. I support the motion in my name and the names of two of my party colleagues. We are happy to accept the DUP amendment, as it raises a relevant issue that needs to be explored. However, we have concerns about the SDLP amendment, as it only suggests re-engagement:

“with a view to bringing forward fair and practical criteria”.

The reality is that criteria must be brought forward urgently.

The motion concerns an issue around which there is tremendous strength and depth of feeling, especially following the events surrounding tranche 1. We trust that the Department has

learnt many lessons in that regard, and I remind the Minister of her duty to serve and support all farmers across Northern Ireland.

Members should take note of the farm modernisation programme's purpose. It is designed to provide financial support for existing farm businesses to improve overall performance on their farms through modernisation. That, in turn, may lead to farm expansion, which is to be welcomed.

On 12 January 2009, in a DARD press release, the Minister outlined tranche 1 and stated that £15.25 million would be made available in funding. The press release went on to say that that £15.25 million would include administration costs. I ask the Minister to give a breakdown of how that £15.25 million was spent, detailing how much went to farmers across Northern Ireland and how much was spent on administration costs. My concern is that the funds were from the modulation money, which was given up voluntarily and in good faith by farmers from their single farm payment. The funds ought to be used to benefit farms across Northern Ireland and not spent on administration. Modulation money should not be squandered, and it was not meant to be used in that way.

I am concerned that, under tranche 2 plans, more than 36% of the overall marks have been allocated to land classification. That decision may disadvantage other applicants, and that may leave tranche 2 open to legal challenge and thus to further delay. That is an avenue that we do not want to go down.

To ensure that an equitable spread of opportunity exists, our party, along with the House, shares the objectives of the Ulster Farmers' Union.

All farmers who contribute via voluntary modulations should be able to access the programme, which, after all, is underpinned by their money.

6.30 pm

It appears that DARD has failed to properly consult on this issue. Indeed, I have been told that the approach taken by the Department towards the Ulster Farmers' Union has been nothing short of appalling. DARD must not only invite stakeholders to its offices, but must allow them to have their say. The Ulster Farmers'

Union has told me that between October 2009 and 20 January 2010, the Department refused to facilitate a meeting to discuss tranche 2 of the farm modernisation programme. If that is true, I am most concerned at the Department treating farmers' representatives with such contempt.

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

All sides of the House want to see the farm modernisation programme delivering for farmers across Northern Ireland. To that end, I call on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to introduce fair and practical criteria for the implementation of tranche 2 of the programme. I ask Members to give the matter the consideration that it deserves and to support the motion and amendment No 2.

On a personal note, farmers want to work with and not against the Minister —

Mr P J Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Savage: No; I am nearly finished.

We do not want to put obstacles in the Minister's way, but I plead with her to allow the farmers to do what they do best, which is to farm. If the Minister supports farmers, we will support her.

Mr Burns: I support the amendment tabled by the SDLP. I am not a farmer nor do I belong to any of the farming unions. However, I live in the countryside and I want to make a brief contribution to the debate.

I am glad that the motion is before the House, because many farmers seem to be very unhappy with the Minister's proposals. I will not get into the fine detail of every criterion, how each is applied, and the different sets of circumstances, but everyone agrees that there is a need for modernisation on every farm, and that we must do everything that we can to make the farming industry as competitive as possible. The recession has hit us all hard, the farming industry always seems to be struggling even in the best of times, and we must not make life even more difficult for farmers. However, that is what the farmers are saying is happening, and they are saying it very loudly.

On a personal note, I agree with the position of the Ulster Farmers' Union. It has been very critical of the Minister's handling of tranche 2 of the programme, and all of us with an interest

in the topic will be aware of the very public disagreements that have been aired in the media. The farmers have argued strongly that the scoring system that the Minister wants to introduce will rule out lowland farmers, and we have heard many complaints about the manure technology system and how farmers will not be able to apply for extra money to bring in the latest technology. I understand the points that farmers have made. They are very angry, they feel that there was a lack of proper consultation, they claim that the ideas that they put forward were ignored, and they protest that hundreds of farmers have made applications for grants and only a few have been successful. They also feel that they have been personally snubbed by the Minister and her Department.

Farmers have told me that the decisions that the Minister has made on the farm modernisation programme have been poor and that if she wants to support farmers in less-favoured areas, it could be done through an enhancement of the EU's farmers in less-favoured areas payment scheme, rather than through the farm modernisation programme. They also feel that if that programme does not allow farmers in certain areas to get access to the latest equipment, it will send out the wrong message about the benefits of embracing and using new technology, which will put us dangerously out of step with EU policies.

The Minister, in common with all Members, wants to do her best for all farmers, particularly those who experience genuine hardship and disadvantage. However, we must avoid a repeat of the shambles of the first tranche, when farmers with blankets queued overnight on deckchairs outside DARD offices. Lessons must be learned from that. The Minister and her officials must take time to listen to the farmers, take their concerns on board and take their opinions seriously. The farmers are best placed to know what it will take for the agriculture industry to become and remain more competitive. I support the SDLP amendment.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The entire House shares the view that it has been a difficult period for all sectors of the agriculture and horticulture industries and for society as a whole. The programme will provide farm businesses with fiscal support to invest in new technology to modernise their holdings, and it will provide a stimulus to the local economy.

We should bear in mind that 70% of farms are located in disadvantaged or severely disadvantaged areas and that some schemes are better suited to certain areas than to others. In many instances, farmers cannot avail themselves of the grants under the farm modernisation programme. Many farmers from less-favoured areas could not avail themselves of the METS scheme in the first tranche. Their ground was simply not suitable for the utilisation of such specialised equipment, either because it was in bad condition or was too steep, and, therefore, it had to be farmed. For the record, financial support of up to £10,000 was made available for a limited list of advanced slurry-handling equipment.

In my South Down constituency, I continually hear from farmers that not enough is being done to support small farm businesses. I tried to illustrate that general point to the Department's officials in Committee. The figures on farm make-up from the recent agriculture census show that 76% of farms are very small, 13% are small, 5% are medium and 6% are large. Therefore, 89% of farms are small or very small. When Members take into account that 70% of all farms are in less-favoured areas, they will see what the Department, the Minister and, indeed, Sinn Féin are trying to do.

The promotion of equality of opportunity requires proactive measures to ensure such equality among the groups that are identified in section 75. The equality duty should not hold back action to tackle disadvantage among certain sections of society. It is not enough simply to treat everyone equally; the inequalities must be eradicated first. In tackling disadvantage through neighbourhood renewal or fuel poverty through the warm homes scheme, for example, disadvantage is targeted while many other groups in society are excluded. The Minister and Sinn Féin are eager that the second tranche targets disadvantage by focusing on farms that are situated in less-favoured areas. In those areas, there is a great need for modernisation, and farmers there face an even bigger challenge to eke out a living from the land than those in the lowlands.

Tom Elliott said that full-time, as opposed to part-time, farmers should be prioritised. However, farmers work part-time because they cannot earn a living from their land. The current recession makes their situation even worse because they cannot fall back on their second jobs.

Mr Elliott: Does the Member accept that the inability of part-time farmers to earn a living from their farms also applies to some full-time farmers?

Mr W Clarke: I accept that, but the current recession means that the need in the part-time sector is greater. Many part-time farmers had a second job in construction or manufacturing, but those jobs no longer exist, and they are in dire straits now than they were a year ago.

Discrimination was mentioned earlier, and it is a very topical issue. There is very little that farmers can do about where they live. Many farms and farm families are where they are because, as was said, they were driven into the mountains at the time of the Plantation. Many Protestants, too, were driven from the lowlands into poor, mountainous wetlands. Those people were mainly Presbyterians and dissenters who would not join the Church of Ireland. I put that on record, because Jim Shannon had an argument with me about that before. I recognise that many Protestants as well as Catholics were driven into the mountains.

The agricultural census for 2009 gives some interesting statistics, which can put to bed the argument about discrimination. In Ballymena, 66% of farms are in less-favoured areas; in Belfast, that figure is 68%; in Carrickfergus, it is 96%; in Fermanagh, it is 99%; in Larne, it is 98%; in Moyle, it is 93%; and in Newtownabbey, it is 57%. That is a funny sort of discrimination, because a large majority of those areas have unionist-dominated councils. Therefore, I find the Department's criteria for the scheme to be a very strange way of discriminating against Protestants. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr G Robinson: I still have visions of freezing farmers queuing outside DARD offices for the launch of the first tranche of funding. From that day, the entire method that was used to roll out the scheme has been rightly condemned by those who are in the industry and those who speak for it.

My major concern is that there is an obvious exclusion for lowland farmers, which results in their having little prospect of being treated with equality. All farmers are having a difficult time due to the recession, and they should all be treated equitably. When the European money was made available for farm modernisation, criteria should have been imposed to ensure that there would be no disparity between

farmers. The scheme was not administered properly, and that has created bad feeling between neighbouring farmers. That is understandable, when farmers perceive that they are being discriminated against.

On 23 February, the Ulster Farmers' Union described one of the Minister's recent announcements about the scheme as "a very poor decision". Again, that was due to the negative effect that it would have on lowland farmers. The decision to remove funding for the manure efficiency technology scheme has also been condemned by the Ulster Farmers' Union, which described it as "incomprehensible". It is obvious that DARD has not fully consulted the farming industry; had it done so, the condemnation that is coming from all quarters would not be warranted.

The Minister got the criteria for the implementation of tranche 1 funding disastrously wrong. I urge her to ensure that there are fair and practical criteria for the implementation of tranche 2 funding so that there is equality of opportunity for all farmers to avail themselves of that welcome funding. I support the motion.

Mr Armstrong: I declare an interest as a farmer and a member of the Ulster Farmers' Union.

All our farms, whether they are large or small, are important and contribute to our local food industry, the countryside and the economy. Farmers are a vital source of jobs in rural areas, whether they provide full-time employment, as is the case with larger farms, or part-time work, as is often the case with smaller enterprises in which the farmer often has a second job.

As other Members said, there was criticism the last time that applications for the scheme were taken, because there was a first come, first served policy. The method of distribution this time has also come in for criticism, because priority is being given to smaller farmers in less-favoured areas. I do not dispute that farms in less-favoured areas are in need of modernisation, but the same is true of all farms. By their very nature, larger farms tend to be more productive, and it could be argued that the resources should be spent on them, because that would have a greater impact on production and on our economy.

I would rather see the Minister opening the scheme to those farmers who were

unsuccessful last year to ensure that everyone has the chance to benefit from at least one tranche of the funding.

6.45 pm

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion, which I support. I am completely confident that the criteria that I am minded to bring forward for tranche 2 are fair and practical and will deliver a good scheme that will impact positively on the rural community, particularly on those farmers who suffer permanent hardship.

Most of the proposed criteria that I have decided on reflect what consultees said that they want to be introduced. For example, the average age of farmers is higher than that of people in other industries in the North of Ireland, and I suggest the awarding of marks to members of farm businesses who are under 40 years of age in order to encourage young people to continue with a career in farming. P J Bradley asked why I decided on people under the age of 40; that is the EU definition of a young farmer. I particularly want an emphasis on young farmers, and the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and farming representatives have said that succession planning should be a key criterion of this tranche, which it is.

Stakeholders have warmly welcomed e-communication, and people realise that it will make the grant application quicker and easier. It reflects our desire to make use of technology to further modernise the way that we do business.

I have asked my officials to meet industry representatives to discuss the list of eligible items to ensure that it best reflects what farm businesses want and need to help their farms to remain competitive. Those meetings are scheduled to take place next week, and I hope that the industry grasps the opportunity for consultation on eligible items, participates in discussions and puts forward its views.

Although I am pleased that NIAPA has agreed to attend, I am disappointed to have received a letter from the president of the UFU on 3 March 2010 to indicate that it will disengage from assisting our discussion on the banding of items for modernisation. However, I am pleased that the letter suggests an additional 120 items for consideration at the meeting. With

reference to amendment No 1, I look forward to the UFU's reconsideration of its position and its re-engagement with the process, and I support that amendment.

During the consultation process, my officials had discussions with farming representatives and sought proposals for tranche 2 at quite an early stage. Thereafter, they sought further views as soon as they were able to clarify proposals and to put them to the monitoring committee and other groups. We believe that consultation with the committee, the industry and Europe was adequate. The fact that they do not agree with all aspects of the scheme does not mean that they were not consulted. The EU Commission was informed about the selection criteria before Christmas and raised no objections to the proposals.

I have listened to today's debate, and it seems that we have forgotten the purpose of the scheme. It is a small grant scheme to help farm businesses to modernise. It will not, and was never intended to, resolve every difficulty that our farming industry faces. However, I hope that the list of eligible items will offer some useful measures to help all sectors, especially our hard-pressed poultry sector. It is a scheme to help farmers to remain competitive.

Tranche 1 focused on introducing equipment for new technologies and innovation. It included items to improve animal health and welfare, to increase hygiene control and product storage, and to enhance occupational safety, business efficiency and environmental status. A few of the most purchased items were rubber slat mats, cow cubicles, cattle crush gates, vermin-proof bulk feed bins, grass toppers, creep feeders and animal identification collars. That is the reality of what the grant can provide. That is what our farmers need for their businesses, and that is what I want to provide again and to provide more of. I want this tranche to be opened as soon as possible, because farmers need that help now, not next year. Therefore, let us keep focusing on what is important: offering financial support to those who need it most.

Members have said that my intended focus on businesses in severely disadvantaged areas is unfair and may be discriminatory. Perhaps it would be helpful to reflect on the facts. Over 70% of all land that is farmed in the North of Ireland is in a severely disadvantaged area or a disadvantaged area, and many farms have a mix

of land in areas that are severely disadvantaged, disadvantaged and lowland. The markings that I consider should be allocated to SDA, DA and lowland will enable all farmers to obtain marks through working in a wide range of situations.

There is no discrimination, no sectarianism and no unfairness. Indeed, Members will be aware that following consultation with the rural development programme monitoring committee, the Agriculture Committee and other stakeholders, I increased the suggested score for lowland areas from nought to 10 marks.

I also want to focus on some of the remarks that were made in the media by an MLA who said that the scheme is in some way sectarian. I totally reject that allegation. Others are trying to sectarianise the issue, not me. As I said, 70% of our farmers live in less-favoured areas, and, as Members have heard, farmers of small holdings come from all religions and none. Let me be clear: my strongly held belief is that, in today's difficult economic circumstances, tranche 2 is an opportunity for me to target disadvantage through modernisation and to help smaller farm businesses that are working in a very challenging environment, and facing poor agricultural conditions, to remain competitive.

Without that type of targeted support, it will be very hard for those farmers to sustain agricultural activity. For example, between 2002-03 and 2006-07, the level of farm income on SDA farms, after the LFA payment, ranged between 54% and 61% of the farm income that was achieved on lowland farms. That finding clearly demonstrates that the earning capacity of SDA farms is much lower than that of farms in other areas. Therefore, those SDA farmers require a boost to modernise and to help them to earn a better living. To my mind, that is fair and practical. However, it is not true to say that lowland farms will not benefit from tranche 2. Those farmers will attract a score under tranche 2 for land classification and could score well on the modernisation criteria and those relating to young farmers and e-communication. No farmer in the North is prevented from applying to the scheme.

In the past, some grants, such as the new entrants' scheme, benefited lowland farmers. Larger farm businesses, particularly dairy farms, received aid from that scheme. I agree with Tom Elliott and other Members; the word "shambles" was used to describe the first come, first served approach that was taken last year, and it did not

work well. Tom knows, as a UFU member, that that approach was taken at the industry's request.

I want to clarify a point that was made by Willie McCrea. The first tranche was not changed. Although the European spokesman made certain comments about it, that tranche went ahead exactly as envisaged. Farmers for whom more than 50% of their farm lay within an LFA accounted for 6,025 applications to tranche 1, but of those, only 713 were successful — a ratio of 8.45 applications received to 1 successful application grant aided. If success was in direct proportion to applications received, well over 100 more applications would have come through. Although it was down to the luck of the draw last time, it clearly demonstrates the need to be fair to those farm businesses and to provide the financial support that they need. Furthermore, it needs to be pointed out, as many Members have done today, that LFA farmers contribute financially to the scheme through modulation. Their contribution of voluntary modulation is estimated at around 65%. There is no question that those farmers are entitled to benefit from the scheme.

Let us think a little more about the actual effect of the funding from tranche 2. It was proposed that we should offer more farmers the opportunity to avail themselves of a grant and the lower threshold. The average farmer took up £3,400 in tranche 1. Therefore, I feel that to meet the evidence from tranche 1 and the views of stakeholders, tranche 2 should be limited to a £4,000 grant. Stakeholders also requested that the current minimum expenditure be lowered. Therefore, I propose to lower it from £1,000 to £500. Depending on how much of the £4,000 on offer each successful applicant takes up, at least 1,600 farmers will be able to avail themselves of the scheme. That is a 40% grant, so farmers have to find their 60% contribution. Overall, that will mean that over £15 million will be spent in total in rural areas. That will be of huge assistance to a wide range of businesses in the North of Ireland, which is very good news for the entire rural economy. We need to ensure that that enormous benefit is secured as soon as possible. When the spend on tranche 1 is completed, I hope that a figure of over £10 million will have gone into the economy.

I am aware that the funding in tranches 1 and 2 will not satisfy all the demand that exists. Much as I would like to, I do not have the funds to give a grant to all 27,000 farm businesses in the

North, as some press articles have claimed that I should. However, if we focus tranche 2 on SDA and DA, we can at least assist small farmers in real need.

I hope that there will be funds for a tranche 3, and I am considering the opportunity for a further METS scheme this year that will focus on where the need for that equipment and aid is greatest. Although there was a high number of applicants to the METS scheme in the first tranche of the farm modernisation programme, the actual take-up of financial support by those who were awarded grants has been disappointing. The latest figures suggest that over half of those farmers who received a letter of offer will not proceed with the investment.

The method of spread of slurry is an important factor in addressing environmental commitments under the nitrates directive and the water framework directive. I am prepared to consider the merits of a further tranche of funding for METS and, subject to affordability, I hope that that might open later this year. That would satisfy amendment No 2.

To some of the larger farmers, grant aid of £4,000 may not seem like a lot. However, for the smaller farmer, it can be a lifeline. To put that in context, some of our larger farmers have over £100,000 of single farm payments, and a £4,000 grant equates to around a fortnight's worth of single farm payment. To the people who will apply for that funding and who need it most — that is, the smaller farmers who are in hardship — it will be a lifeline. They will still have to find the other 60% — £6,000 — which will not be easy for them in these challenging times, but they want to do that.

I want all farming areas, particularly those in the LFA, to have the opportunity to develop and play their role in providing high-quality raw material for the processing sectors. We need to try to keep our agricultural sector buoyant and viable. It is important for everyone with an interest in the farm modernisation programme to realise its potential benefit, not just to farms but to manufacturers and suppliers of the equipment that will be grant-aided. All that helps our economy: money will be in circulation and jobs will be secured, perhaps even created. It is up to all of us to ensure that we do not miss an opportunity and delay the opening of a scheme that can deliver benefits, directly on the farm

and to the manufacturing industry, and indirectly to rural commerce.

Some time ago, I met with the five local banks to ask them to be more aware of the need to open up their loan portfolio to small rural businesses that are trying to survive. I hope that that discussion will prove useful. I want tranche 2 of the farm modernisation scheme to open in the spring. As I said, it is my intention to try to fund another tranche next year.

Finally, an equality impact assessment was carried out on the whole of axis 1 at the beginning of the programme, which includes the farm modernisation programme. The formal consultation period for the EQIA began on 10 August 2007 and ended on 2 November 2007. Fourteen responses were received from groups and individuals. In addition, rural development division met 18 equality groups during the pre-consultation stage to inform them about the EQIA and the rural development programme generally.

In total, 108 separate comments or recommendations were received during consultation. Five EQIA roadshows, each comprising two information sessions, were held at locations across the North of Ireland during October 2007 to provide more information about the EQIA and to encourage responses. Copies of the EQIA document were sent out to organisations representing all aspects of society. The EQIA was also widely advertised in the media, and copies of the document could be downloaded from the DARD website or requested in hard copy over the phone.

The final report of the EQIA, which covers axes 1 and 3, was published on 17 July 2009. That is available to download from the Department's website. During the recent consultation period on the proposed tranche 2 selection criteria, concerns were expressed that lowland farmers — the majority of whom are Protestants and likely to be of a unionist political opinion — would be excluded from funding. There were also concerns that older farmers may be disadvantaged through the proposed succession opportunity criterion. I requested that my officials carry out an equality screening exercise on the selection criteria of tranche 2. That will be brought to the attention of our section 75 consultees and stakeholders.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to draw her remarks to a close.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: If there are any significant equality issues that we are unaware of, I would like the consultees to bring them to our attention before the end of the consultation period, and we will take their concerns on board.

7.00 pm

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

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: My proposals provide a fair and practical scheme that will deliver many benefits for those living and working in the rural community.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Ian Paisley Jnr to wind up on amendment No 1.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I congratulate the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr Elliott for getting this motion on the Order Paper, and my colleague and Mr Bradley for their amendments, which we welcome as they add to the substance of the motion.

The matter that we are discussing ought not to be a contentious issue. Indeed, we should be able to welcome unanimously the Department's position in any debate on it. At the end of the day, the money should be about developing farms and helping farms to move forward. It should not be divisive in any way, and, therefore, it is unfortunate that we are in a position in which division exists.

Mr Ford indicated the nub of the issue and the reason why there is division: there has been a breakdown in consultation. If tonight's debate is about anything, it is about consultation or the lack thereof. It is about a breakdown in the relationship with one of the key stakeholders involved in that consultation, namely the Ulster Farmers' Union.

I welcome the Minister's saying that she will support the motion and the amendments. However, I urge the Minister to move beyond supporting the principles that are outlined in the motion. They are good principles and issues that we should not be divided on, but she should go further and open afresh the consultation with the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Committee to try to take matters forward to a more positive and unanimous conclusion.

We have members of the Ulster Farmers' Union — indeed, its executive committee — in the

Public Gallery. How much better would their time be spent negotiating with the officials and the Minister to find a way forward on which we have unanimity? That would be time well spent. I hope that the words that we have heard tonight from the Minister, on behalf of the Department, are words of encouragement that that consultation can be opened up, that there is a chink of light, that we can move forward and that we can get a more positive conclusion.

When all the talk and debate is cut aside, all that is being asked for is a narrowing of the gap between those in SDAs, DAs and lowlands. I say that as a Member who represents an area, North Antrim, that benefits from the way that the Minister has cut her cloth on this matter. If that gap could be narrowed, we would have a position in which the breakdown in communication and consultation could be healed and we could move forward on a positive footing. Therefore, I welcome the positive approach that the Minister and her party have taken in responding to the matter positively by saying that they want to get a fair outcome. We want that fair outcome, but let us make it a practical move that brings about agreement on a way forward.

I call on the Minister to look at two matters. The first is negotiations with the UFU on the METS scheme, which she has already identified. I welcome that. I also want her to see whether there is another way of getting more money into the scheme in the first instance. We should be able to welcome the scheme, because it is a benefit in bringing about modernisation.

I am not speaking as Chairman of the Committee but as a member of the Committee and a Member of the Assembly. The Committee has a good working relationship with DARD, with the Minister and the officials. There is also a good working relationship between DARD officials and the Ulster Farmers' Union. However, there is a healthy tension, and that is good. We should get to a position where that healthy tension results in a positive outcome and an agreement. I would like to see that, and, therefore, I urge the Minister to try to close the gap between the lowland farmers, the SDAs and the DAs.

Finally, I would like to put on record a note that appeared in 'Farm Week' from one of the farmers in an SDA in my constituency. He outlines very clearly the controversy and division among the farming community that happens

when money has to be rationed. I support young farmers and the advantages that they should receive, but we need a scheme that gives all farmers a chance to claim back money that has been appropriated from them. If we could get to that point, we could get some sort of agreement. We could learn from the breakdown that has occurred over this scheme and move forward on a healthy basis.

I thank the Member for proposing the motion, and I look forward to this matter getting a fair wind in the days ahead.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Paisley was making a winding-up speech in support of amendment No 2, not amendment No 1, as I said. I call Patsy McGlone to make a winding-up speech for amendment No 1.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Ulster Unionist Party for introducing the motion. My party entirely supports the bringing forward of:

“fair and practical criteria for the implementation”,

not “with a view to” doing something about the situation, but to actually do something about it. I hope that that clarifies the point to that party’s satisfaction.

I listened carefully to Mr Elliott as he outlined the problems and difficulties that occurred last year. No one in this Chamber or elsewhere wants to see people queuing outside DARD offices, waiting for money that never comes, as happened then. That episode was referred to as “the soup kitchens”. Large sections of the community got no support from the scheme. Farmers and their families were disappointed. However, Mr Elliott referred also to the criteria for the severely disadvantaged areas, the proposed classifications and the disadvantages arising from them, the degree of modernisation, and the exploration of other avenues.

A consistent theme throughout the debate has been the need for further dialogue with the farming organisations. That is the purpose and basis of my party’s amendment, which was proposed very eloquently by my colleague P J Bradley, who suggested that such consultation was in line. I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, Mr Paisley Jnr, for drawing that to our attention and conceding that point.

I pay tribute to P J Bradley, who was with the farmers in his area and witnessed at first hand the difficulties that the previous funding episode created. People spent up to 60 hours queuing outside DARD offices, and that is not a place that anyone would want to be. It could be entirely summed up by the quotation:

“For many are called, but few are chosen.”

P J Bradley stressed the need for further consultation with UFU/NIAPA and especially with the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, which should be rather more than a statutory consultee. That point needs to be stressed: the Committee is the legislative consultee and the elected consultee of the people of the North. All Departments should work more closely with their Assembly Committees and consult them, rather than dump such matters on them at the last minute.

Among other issues raised was the question of whether the measure had been equality proofed. The Minister did not clarify that point. If legal advice was provided to the Department, can it be shared with the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee? The Minister ought to use such information to assure Members that advice was sought and to give elected Members confidence that the project has been given some thought and that we will not find ourselves in unwelcome territory as we did last year.

Mr Irwin referred to the need for the programme to be a success and to unhappiness with tranche 2 of the programme in his constituency. I heard the word “equality” bounced around this Chamber as never before. If the debate on this programme leads to equality becoming a linchpin of the Assembly, that is to be welcomed. Perhaps we can hear more of it. However, I am sure that that will arise in other contexts, particularly in tomorrow’s debate on the devolution of policing and justice.

In support of the motion, reference was made to creating a level playing field. Mr Doherty referred to the meeting with the UFU on 9 February 2010, at which issues were raised. Mr Ford called for further consultation, and he supported the motion and the amendments. Mr W McCrea outlined the steps and requirements needed to deal with this issue, and he emphasised the need for re-engagement with the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee and stakeholders’ groups. He, too, referred to the need for equality.

We then heard from Mr Molloy, and the issue of equality again emerged. We received a wee bit of a necessary history lesson, which I accept. When he moved on to the redistribution of wealth, however, I was not too sure whether I was listening to Mr Molloy or Mr Marx.

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

Mr McGlone: However, I am sure that we could listen to that again. Something was mentioned —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up. I am sorry, Mr McGlone.

Mr McGlone: During the course —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr McGlone: I am sorry. OK. Thank you very much.

Mr McCallister: I thank all Members who contributed to the debate, which was wide ranging. I start by declaring an interest in some of the matters that were raised. I am a member of the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster and of the Ulster Farmers' Union. I am under 40, I am a Presbyterian, and I received money from the new entrants' scheme. I did not receive any money from tranche 1, and because I am a lowland farmer, I am not likely to receive any from tranche 2. However, I do not think that I was moved anywhere during the Plantation, which also got a mention.

My colleague Mr Elliott opened the debate by criticising how tranche 1 was handled. The Minister agreed with and accepted that point, and admitted that there were difficulties. Mr Elliott went on to talk about an equality impact assessment. As other Members mentioned, equality was talked about a lot today. It is strange that the very party that prides itself in always talking about equality seems to be doing the least about it today. The Minister may have to be sent back to Connolly House for retraining.

Mr Elliott mentioned other groups, including the hill farming group, which were opposed to the programme because of some of the payments to less-favoured areas. He mentioned the under-40 group, which I personally support. I have already declared that I am in that age bracket. He also questioned some of the scoring for the eligible items, which the Minister said would be looked at.

Mr Elliott: Although we appreciate that the Minister indicated that she will consult on the eligible

items, there was no indication that she would consult on any of the rest of the issues. That gives me concern, and, I am sure, my colleague.

Mr McCallister: I share those concerns. If, at any point, the Minister wants to make a clarification, I will happily take an intervention from her.

P J Bradley spoke about the state of farming, and said that we need to contribute much to farm modernisation. It is always worth reminding the House that agrifood is the biggest private-sector employer in Northern Ireland, makes a huge contribution to the economy of Northern Ireland, and is, obviously, the backbone of our rural communities. Farms do, therefore, need that support. Mr Bradley mentioned the huge sums that were taken from single farm payments via modulation, both the voluntary — well, the not-so voluntary — and the completely compulsory.

Mr Irwin, in moving amendment No 1, welcomed the programme and its contribution to rural areas. He spoke about inequality for lowland farmers, and I agree that such inequality exists. He spoke about METS funding, and getting a better system in place to deal with the second tranche of the programme.

Mr Doherty, in support of the motion, wanted a level playing field, but it seems that how level the playing field is depends on whether the field is in a less-favoured area or a lowland area. There was broad support for the marking and weighting system to be looked at again. The points system weighs too heavily against lowland farmers.

7.15 pm

Mr Ford said that there has been insufficient consultation on the matter. He welcomed some of the modernisation elements of the programme, including those that award marks to the under 40s and online applications. Dr McCrea expressed grave concerns about the unacceptable and discriminatory nature of the proposals, and he said that they need to be looked at.

Although the debate has been fairly good-natured, Mr Molloy's remarks about meetings in Orange Halls somehow gearing up unionist and Protestant communities were particularly offensive and unhelpful. Mr Shannon spoke about a postcode lottery, which is what the scheme will become if we do not do something to narrow the gap in the scoring system. Mr Savage and Mr Burns were

unhappy with the scoring system in the land classification element of the programme. It comes back to the very crux of the land classification issue, which is that the gap in the scoring is too wide. Indeed, that matter keeps coming up.

Willie Clarke spoke about the need to get money into rural areas. There was general agreement that that is right and very important. However, he went on to defend the way in which funds are targeted at disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged areas. That comes back to our view that the current criteria need to be wider, because under the current plans, it is almost impossible for a lowland farmer to meet them.

We are always hoping to hear some good news from the Minister. At least she held the door open for some of the issues. I hope that she takes the opportunity to do whatever she can to engage with stakeholders where possible to get the problem sorted. We have a good programme that is worthwhile for our industry. Of course, we would all like to see more money dedicated to the programme and sent quickly to farms so that they can be helped. The Minister spoke about helping smaller farms and how such help can be almost like a lifeline for them. Everyone in this House will welcome getting money into the rural communities and the farming sector, but we have to do that in the best possible way. I am afraid that we do not agree with the weighting that has been given to land classification. Therefore, it has to be changed.

Some of the Minister's comments, such as the speed at which the scheme will move, were welcome. It is good that the application forms will be kept as simple and as easy to manage as possible. That was very welcome in the tranche 1 funding. The Minister said that an equality impact assessment was carried out on the rural development programme, but no equality impact assessment was carried out on the farm modernisation scheme.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I said that an EQIA was carried out. The Member asserted that mine is the party that defends equality. That is absolutely right: we do defend equality, and we will do so to the hilt. We have a situation in which the gap in farming is wide, and we want to address that. We also have an obligation to tackle disadvantage and inequality. I make no apology for wanting to do that.

I reiterate that consultation took place. Although the UFU does not support the proposals, as the Member heard already, NIAPA and the National Beef Association do support them.

We have consulted widely. In fact, in its evidence to the Agriculture Committee, the UFU said that even five points in the assessment would help. I responded by giving 10 points to lowland farmers. Therefore, I have been listening to and engaging with our stakeholders. I welcome and respect the fact that they do have a very —

Mr Elliott: Your time is up.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I have a very listening ear. I do not think that anyone has —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCallister: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I do not think that I said that the Minister defended equality. I said that her party talked most about equality. However, I do not think that its members are the only people to defend equality.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up, Mr McCallister.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Minister for her intervention, although we think that she is wrong on this. Move a wee bit further, Minister, and close the gap.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr McCallister, your time is up.

Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that whether or not amendment No 1 is made, the Question on amendment No 2 can still be put.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to re-engage immediately in discussions with the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association with a view to bringing forward fair and practical criteria

for implementation of tranche 2 of the farm modernisation programme; and to ensure that, following the underspend in the manure efficiency technology subprogramme (METS) in tranche 1, more farmers are given an opportunity to access the METS element in tranche 2.

Private Members' Business

Boiler Scrappage Scheme

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

Mr Hamilton: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the introduction of a boiler scrappage scheme by HM Government and calls on the Minister for Social Development to examine the scope for the future introduction of a similar scheme in Northern Ireland.

[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members should leave the Chamber quietly.

Mr Hamilton: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

To set the debate in context, I acknowledge that between the motion being tabled and the Business Committee choosing it for debate, the Department for Social Development (DSD) has responded positively to a request from the Social Development Committee, of which I am Chairperson, for a boiler scrappage scheme for Northern Ireland to be examined. I want to put that on record, and also that correspondence from the Department to the Committee outlines:

"The Department is currently working on a review of the fuel poverty strategy, and one of the areas they are looking at is a boiler replacement or boiler scrappage scheme."

Therefore, I acknowledge and commend the progress that the Department is making.

Most Members will recall that the boiler scrappage scheme was one of the few positive headline-grabbing initiatives in the Chancellor's pre-Budget statement in December 2009. Most Members should also be aware that the scheme proposed a payment in England of £400 to

help people to convert from energy efficiency G-rated boilers to A-rated boilers. That was widely heralded at the time and it received much positive press coverage. However, the nature of our devolved arrangements meant that the initiative would not automatically be rolled out to Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

As I said, I acknowledge the progress that the Department has already made on the issue. The debate affords Members an opportunity to support the idea of a boiler scrappage scheme and to encourage the Department to introduce such a scheme in Northern Ireland.

Undoubtedly, a boiler scrappage scheme would provide a plethora of benefits, many of which Her Majesty's Government outlined when they proposed their scheme for England. Broadly speaking, three key advantages can be identified: energy efficiency, carbon reduction, and enhancing the economy.

Replacing a G-rated boiler with an A-rated one improves energy efficiency. A G-rated boiler is the worst of the worst. For every £1 of oil that such a boiler consumes, around 50p is literally wasted. Money is being burned. On average, each household in England that has switched from a G-rated boiler to an A-rated boiler saves £235 a year, so one can see how the £400 cash incentive per household is recouped within two years. Moreover, energy-efficient boilers continue to perform at the optimum rate, so those reductions remain in subsequent years. In a climate in which erratic energy prices are the norm, having an energy-efficient boiler, which does not burn money, is of great assistance to people and affords them certainty and control over their energy bills.

It is anticipated that, in its lifetime, the English scheme will result in the replacement of approximately 125,000 boilers. That will reduce CO₂ emissions by approximately 14,000 tons, which, I am reliably informed, is equivalent to taking 45,000 cars off the road. That is the impact that the scheme will have on the environment, and we are all acutely aware of the importance of that argument.

The economic advantages of a boiler scrappage scheme are often overlooked but are equally important, because introducing such a scheme would boost and incentivise a certain sector of the economy. Not only are there a great number of boiler manufacturers in the United Kingdom, including some in Northern Ireland,

but there are a great many plumbers and boiler installers who such a scheme would advantage. Therefore, by investing a relatively small amount of money, as well as providing energy-efficiency and carbon-reduction benefits, a short-term, targeted boost to the economy can be achieved. The advantages of a boiler scrappage scheme are transparently obvious.

The real advantage of a boiler scrappage scheme, however, is in seeking to tackle fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. As I am sure the Minister will outline later, the Department is focusing its attention on how such a scheme might further reduce fuel poverty. I do not need to rehearse the arguments about fuel poverty. Members sit with a sense of shame as a result of Northern Ireland's having among the highest level of fuel poverty in the United Kingdom, if not in western Europe. Around one in three households here suffers from fuel poverty, and we all know the shocking headlines when one drills down to the figures: half of those who suffer from fuel poverty are pensioners, and around 40% of households in fuel poverty have children. Those statistics are a cause of shame for everyone in Northern Ireland.

Efforts have been made to reduce those numbers through the warm homes scheme and the Housing Executive's heating replacement scheme for its existing housing stock, and we acknowledge that positive work. However, a certain section of society is still very difficult to reach in order to help it out of, or, in some cases, to prevent it from slipping into, fuel poverty. The people who belong to that section of society can be described as the working poor: the great mass of people who, although they work hard, do not qualify for benefits and, therefore, are not entitled to benefit from the warm homes scheme. Nonetheless, they are in fuel poverty.

7.30 pm

The data in the 2006 house condition survey, which is where the 34% in fuel poverty figure comes from, show that around 12,000 households have a household income of £20,000 or more. Indeed, 4,390 households that are estimated to be in fuel poverty have an income of £30,000 or more. An income of £30,000 is well above the Northern Ireland average, yet those people are still in fuel poverty. I do not wish to make a sweeping generalisation, but I will hazard a guess that

the vast majority of those houses would not qualify or be in receipt of qualifying benefits that would entitle them to the warm homes scheme. Therefore, they are a difficult to reach group, but they are in fuel poverty. The reason that they are in fuel poverty is, by and large, that they are spending 10% of their income, which is in excess of £3,000, on fuel. People might feel sometimes that they are filling their oil tank every other week and that they are spending a clean fortune on their fuel, but £3,000 is a lot of money to spend in a year. Therefore, I suggest that the very reason that those individuals are in fuel poverty is that their boiler and heating system are inefficient. Therefore, a boiler scrappage scheme that is targeted particularly at those people would take them out of fuel poverty. Such a scheme could also be very effective for similar groups of people who may be at risk of slipping into fuel poverty.

I am not personally hung up on what sort of system we should introduce in Northern Ireland. We could replicate the system that is in place in England, which has now been adopted in Scotland, but that would not be particularly focused on fuel poverty. We could go for what the Welsh have done, which is to target the scheme at people who are over 60, or we could come up with a Northern Ireland innovation that suits our needs; and we have real needs in respect of fuel poverty. Therefore, a boiler scrappage scheme that is targeted at tackling fuel poverty could be quite successful.

Obviously, there is a resource issue. I understand that an amendment has been tabled. I am not sure whether it will be moved, but it calls for the scheme to be brought in immediately. I am not sure that the Minister has the money to introduce it immediately. She is shaking her head vigorously to indicate that she does not, but I would hazard a guess that the Minister needs time to develop a scheme as well as to find the money. I would not get particularly hung up about the quantum of money. If it is a good scheme and it is worth doing, even if we find a small pot that can be adapted to do some good work and to tackle that need, it is better than nothing.

There is an opportunity to do something off the back of the scheme that was introduced in England and adopted elsewhere in the other devolved regions of the UK. The warm homes scheme is in place for people who are on certain benefits and there are heating replacement

programmes for people in Housing Executive properties, but there is nothing for the working poor. That group of people do not qualify for the warm homes scheme, but they are every bit as much in fuel poverty as anybody else. There is a unique opportunity for the Assembly to endorse that principle today and let the Department analyse what is possible in Northern Ireland and bring forward a scheme that will help tackle fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

The following amendment stood on the Marshalled List:

*Leave out "future" and insert "immediate". —
[Mr Armstrong.]*

Amendment not moved.

Mr F McCann: I had intended to say something about the amendment, but the Member has pulled the carpet from under my feet.

I support the motion. There has been quite a lot of debate about the boiler scrappage scheme since it was introduced elsewhere. I was going to say that, although the amendment calls on the Minister to implement the scheme immediately, we need to step back, take a deep breath and look at what is happening in other jurisdictions to ensure that we get a scheme that fits here. The offer of £400 for each household that wishes to change its heating system could, if used in the right way, help towards the replacement of outdated and environmentally unfriendly heating systems. The Savills report highlighted the fact that more than 14,000 houses do not reach the decent homes standard, and, of those, 11,000 failed the test due to inefficient heating systems.

We must ask what procedures will be put in place to ensure that the system is made easy for those who wish to tap into a grant and ensure that they are not bogged down in bureaucratic delays and application forms, which put off those who need assistance from applying. If the scheme is to be taken on, it needs to be targeted at those who are most in need and who, because of their financial situation, cannot afford to replace their heating system.

I was shocked but not surprised to find out from the information supplied that major energy companies had been involved in the superinflation of prices. The worst of those mentioned was British Gas. The research highlighted the fact that many of those major

companies also said that they would give an additional £400 towards the price of replacing the systems, but the prices quoted cancelled out the £400 grant and the additional £400 from the companies. An article in an English newspaper stated that a customer received a quote of £5,012 from British Gas and, after deducting both allowances, was asked to pay over £4,200. That is way outside the financial range of many people. Unless we get it right before the implementation of any scheme, confusion will reign. We need to ensure that people are not being asked to pay above the odds. The article said that there is already confusion about how the scheme works in England. Quotes that were received from local plumbers were almost £2,000 cheaper than those of the multinationals. We must ensure that major companies are not allowed to abuse the system.

We should examine the possibility of the boiler scrappage scheme being handled through the warm homes scheme. I take on board the Committee Chairperson's comments, but surely a scheme such as the warm homes scheme, which targets the systems towards those who are most in need, could be stretched to take in the working poor. The warm homes scheme deals with those who are most in need, and it would allow grants to be targeted at those people. That scheme is up and running. If we have control of the administration of the warm homes scheme, we can tailor it to allow it to administer the boiler scrappage scheme. Alternatively, could the Housing Executive not begin the process of not maintaining the out-of-date systems of people with medical problems who are refused help with the maintenance of their heating system and replacing them with environmentally safe systems, which will protect not only those in need but the environment?

Mr Burns: I support the motion, and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on the boiler scrappage scheme. It was first introduced in England, and it has since been introduced in Scotland and Wales.

I support the introduction of a boiler replacement scheme. It came as a surprise to many when the plans for such a scheme were announced in the Chancellor's pre-Budget report. When I heard about the scheme, I thought that it was a good idea to give people £400 towards the cost of a new boiler, and I am fairly sure that there will not be much

disagreement on that in the House, especially if someone else is paying. If the Finance Minister gives the Minister for Social Development the required money, few people will disagree with his decision.

Other Members said that the scheme has been a great success in England, and they are right. It is a good idea. I can see the advantages of such a replacement scheme: the new technology is much better; new boilers increase fuel efficiency, reduce energy bills and have much lower emission levels; and there is the added bonus of a cash injection to the local plumbing and heating industry.

It is my understanding that we are not under any obligation to have exactly the same scheme as England, Scotland or Wales. If we were thinking about introducing the same scheme as in England, it would be only to help the environment. Would it be the responsibility of the Department of the Environment (DOE) and not DSD? If a scheme were to be introduced here, given the level of fuel poverty here, I would call for it to be targeted directly at the households that are in fuel poverty. It would be much better for the boiler replacement scheme to be part of the warm homes scheme, under the supervision of the Minister for Social Development.

I do not want a first come, first served voucher scheme for people who have a few thousand pounds to invest and are upgrading the underfloor heating in their second bathroom and need a more powerful boiler.

Mr F McCann: Is that your house, Tommy?

Mr Burns: No, it is not. Households in fuel poverty and on low incomes are not doing that sort of thing. They are far more likely to have a basic boiler that is on its last legs. Therefore, I say to the Minister that it would be better if her Department would make a much more significant contribution and pay at least half, if not all, of the cost to households that badly need new boilers but cannot afford them.

The idea of a boiler replacement scheme is worthy of careful consideration. I know that the Minister will give it the attention that it requires. The SDLP and, indeed, all parties in the House are strongly committed to helping the most needy and vulnerable people. I am sure that the Assembly will not miss the opportunity to help once again the people who need it most.

Ms Lo: I support the motion. In comparison with people in Great Britain, people in Northern Ireland are more likely to live in fuel poverty, because of the lower average income and the higher cost of energy.

Northern Ireland's fuel poverty strategy aims to eliminate fuel poverty in vulnerable households by 2010 and in non-vulnerable households by 2016. The strategy is due to be reviewed shortly. It is imperative that meaningful ways are sought to help those who are most in need.

England introduced a boiler scrappage scheme in January to encourage homeowners to replace their old boilers with more efficient, A-rated boilers in order to reduce CO2 emissions and heating costs by up to a quarter. As with the car scrappage scheme, it also aims to boost the economy during the current recession. Likewise, in February, the Scottish and Welsh Governments announced their commitment to implement similar schemes, albeit with different criteria. In Wales, the scheme will be targeted at the over 60s. It is important that Northern Ireland's scheme replicates one of the models in England, Scotland and Wales so that households here are not left behind and benefit from that initiative.

The scheme in England does not aim to reduce fuel poverty; it benefits only people who can afford the large cost to install a new boiler, rather than people who struggle to meet their heating bills on low incomes or benefits. I support National Energy Action Northern Ireland's call for a boiler scrappage scheme that targets people who are at greatest risk of suffering fuel poverty: older people, young families, people with disabilities and people who are chronically ill.

The DSD warm homes plus scheme offers insulation and heating measures to homeowners and private tenants who receive qualifying benefits if they use Economy 7, solid fuel or bottled gas for heating or have no heating system at all. In Northern Ireland, more than 70% of homes use oil heating. The warm homes plus scheme can be extended to include a boiler scrappage element to help people who have oil-fired boilers that are now old and inefficient but who, under the current warm homes plus criteria, are not eligible to have their boiler replaced.

Housing Executive tenants would be omitted under the scheme as it exists in England, which

applies to homeowners or private tenants. Housing Executive tenants have presented themselves to my constituency office as suffering from fuel poverty due to the high cost of having to operate inefficient Economy 7 heating systems. A new boiler scrappage scheme should include Housing Executive tenants in order to reduce their heating bills. During winter, constituents came into my office whose boilers had totally broken down due to the cold weather. Under the scheme as it stands in England, those people would not benefit because applicants who are under 60 years of age must have boilers that are in full working order.

I received a briefing from the Scottish and Northern Ireland Plumbing Employers' Federation. It says that it has already received enquiries about those new initiatives. Obviously, it supports a scheme in Northern Ireland. However, it warns that we need to think about other costs, not just the cost to replace the boiler. That involves other costs, such as a new control panel. It also suggests that instead of just axing the lowest grade — the G grade — we should expand the range to include the E and F grades, as they are fairly inefficient. It is essential that we include a wider range in the scheme, and I would support such a proposal.

7.45 pm

Mr Hilditch: I welcome the motion. Along with the Chairperson, I acknowledge the Minister's commitment to the matter since the motion was tabled.

If we are serious about reducing fuel poverty and CO2 emissions, it is time for Northern Ireland to consider a boiler scrappage scheme similar to that initiated in England. The scheme there allows households with the least efficient boilers to claim £400 towards a new boiler. That scheme is targeting around 125,000 households who own or privately rent their homes. If such a scheme were introduced here, and I hope that it is, it would have the potential to benefit around 75,000 homes throughout Northern Ireland.

The scheme is designed to encourage people to replace inefficient boilers that are likely to be around 15 years old. New boilers have rated efficiencies of 90% or more, meaning that they use less fuel, which results in lower CO2 emissions and running costs. Renewable heat technologies do not use fossil fuels. If we upgrade a G-rated boiler to an A-rated boiler,

household heating bills should drop by about one quarter, which is an average saving of around £235 a year.

In England, people under 60 years of age can apply for the scheme if their boiler is in working order and it is the main source of heat for their home. Those who are over 60 years of age can apply for the scheme regardless of whether their boiler works or not. However, it still needs to be the main boiler used in the home. I am not sure whether I agree entirely with those criteria. I see no reason why people over 60 years of age should be eligible for the scheme if their boiler is in perfectly good working order. However, that is a matter for England. To apply, one must either be a homeowner or a private tenant. Landlords of multiple properties can apply, as long as each voucher is assigned to a different property. Registered social landlords and housing associations cannot apply as they are covered by alternative support in the English scheme.

Replacing old boilers has the potential to slash household energy bills and carbon emissions, while providing an important boost to our heating industry. It will help to secure jobs in small and medium-sized businesses that form a vital component of Northern Ireland's low-carbon economy. The scheme will show how our Government continue to invest in our industries and in jobs for the future.

Given the fact that Northern Ireland has the highest rate of fuel poverty in the United Kingdom, with one in three households suffering its effects, I urge the Minister to consider the proposal seriously and to introduce it sooner rather than later. Our vulnerable households need most help. Higher energy prices have led to an increase in the number of households in fuel poverty. There are many benefits to Northern Ireland's economy if we reduce our heating costs. Effectively, if people are not paying for more gas or heating oil, that money is at their disposal and can help the local economy.

Small companies and businesses here are struggling for sales to survive, and the scheme has the potential to help them to boost their sales. The collapse in house building has hit our heating industries hard, and this is their chance to secure work. It will also help our unemployment figures, and it has the potential to increase the number of apprenticeship

placements. Companies will be encouraged to become more competitive, with special offers involving complementary deals to entice people to use them when scrapping or replacing a boiler.

However, we need to be mindful of the disadvantages of the scheme. Some companies in England have taken advantage of the scheme and have overpriced boilers and installation work. That puts our vulnerable people at even greater risk, and it makes a mockery of the proposal. Some modern boilers are not built to last in the way in which old boilers were, and it has been known for them to burn out after 10 years. Some boilers that are 15 years old work perfectly well and, therefore, there would be no need for some people over 60 years of age to replace their boiler. I encourage the Minister to be mindful of those flaws when looking at ways in which the scheme can be implemented.

This winter alone has taken its toll on those who cannot afford to heat their home sufficiently or, in some cases, at all. Northern Ireland still has at least 1,000 cold-related deaths every winter, and the figure is likely to be nearer 1,300. Being fuel poor seems to be worse than just being poor. To make matters worse, it will be 30 years before we address all the households that need to be in the warm homes scheme. The pace of the present assistance simply is not fast enough, and I urge the Minister to look at the daunting figures. The message is blunt: if people cannot afford to keep warm, they will get ill and die of cold. It is time to figure out fuel poverty once and for all, and the scheme is another way to help. We simply cannot wait any longer.

I had other comments to make on the amendment, which has now not been moved. I support the motion.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like everybody who spoke today, I am happy to see the motion brought before the House. Before I speak to the motion, I wish Margaret, Anna, Loretta, Mairead and any other women in the Assembly this evening a happy International Women's Day.

We were in the Long Gallery this morning at an International Women's Day event, meeting women from all sections of society. The main focus was on how the Assembly works, how politics works for them and how women can get involved in politics. During the round-table discussions, many of the women, who were of

all ages and from all backgrounds, raised the perception of this place and what is done about the issues that affect people's everyday lives. The feedback that I was given today — I am sure that members of other political parties received the same feedback — was that sometimes there is no business brought before the Assembly that can affect people's lives. This is one motion to which we can point — we used it today as an example — to say that, if a scoping exercise takes place and a scheme is implemented, it will indeed affect people's lives, for all the reasons that Members have outlined.

The North has extremely high levels of poverty as well as many people on disability benefits. David, in his final remarks, mentioned the links between poverty and ill health. I was talking to two ladies this morning who are carers. We have had a particularly bad winter. They would now consider themselves poor and living on the poverty line, even though they have worked all their lives. They are living on pensions. They were saying that, if it is bad enough for them trying to heat the house on their wages, what is it like for people who are less well off, particularly when they are looking after people who are unwell. Judging by the sound of the conditions, they are looking after people with long-term or perhaps terminal illnesses.

The other thing that has to be commended is that progress seems to have been made with the Minister and the Department taking the issue on board. I was pleased that the Ulster Unionist Party did not move its amendment, because — I just had a quick glance — it looked like an amendment for the sake of it. From the excellent information that we received from the Assembly research service, it is clear that it is very complex. There is some stuff on England. There are concerns in Scotland and Wales about what should be brought forward. There is a need to consider local issues and the conditions that people are living in locally and to feed that into any scheme that is introduced. I assume that the Minister will be feeding that into her comments. For example, some places here in the North do not have access to gas, which is a difficulty in itself. Anna spoke about Economy 7, and the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, Simon Hamilton, raised a point in relation to oil. That was one of the issues that came up today. It is a common conversation among most of us that it seems that only a matter of weeks after filling an oil tank it has to be refilled. The boiler replacement

scheme could save households at least £240. Even some of the stuff that NICVA brought forward suggested that up to 50% of households could benefit from that.

I am also intrigued about the local employment aspect of the scheme. Although there was some fraud in England among people who were working under the scheme, if there were local and social labour clauses included in the scheme, whereby there were strict criteria that there must be benefits for apprenticeships and training, that would certainly reduce the prospect of fraud and assist certain local opportunities.

This is a good motion. It is a pity that the debate has taken place late in the evening; nonetheless, all political parties have given their support to it. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments on how the issue will be taken forward. I have no doubt that most of the women whom we spoke to today will read the Hansard report tomorrow, because they informed us that they will do so to find out how the debate went.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will, surely. This is one example of all Members speaking from the same page. I support the motion.

Mr Easton: I support the motion. In Northern Ireland, heating bills are approximately one third higher than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. Fuel poverty is, therefore, more likely to be a factor here than in any other part of the United Kingdom. In addition, incomes in Northern Ireland are lower than those in the rest of the UK, and that heightens the prospect of fuel poverty here. People who are in fuel poverty are defined as people who spend more than 10% of their annual income on fuel. Given the recent cold weather, which is continuing, many people in Northern Ireland are suffering.

I praise the Minister and the Executive for providing people who are experiencing difficulties with their heating bills with some extra help this winter. The warm homes scheme in Northern Ireland is a good idea, and it has already helped thousands of people. However, the eligibility criteria are highly restrictive. To qualify, an applicant must be in receipt of one of the following benefits: income support, income-related employment and support allowance, income-based jobseeker's allowance, pension credit, child tax credit, working tax credit,

disability living allowance, attendance allowance, housing benefit and rates rebate. We must accept, therefore, that the scheme misses out many people who are not in receipt of benefits but are on a low income and are experiencing the effects of fuel poverty. In fact, in the current financial year, the number of successful applicants to the warm homes scheme has plummeted compared with previous years. That is because of the adoption of new criteria, which, as I stated earlier, are clearly restrictive. The warm homes scheme is proving to be ineffective, as take-up has fallen. How many people are being left out and are suffering from fuel poverty as a result?

The boiler scrappage scheme, which is currently available in England, offers many benefits. It reduces household carbon emissions, which helps to meet the emissions targets that are set in Europe and further afield. It reduces household heating bills and increases heating efficiency. In England, the Government invested £200 million to improve energy efficiency and tackle fuel poverty by offering £400 to up to 125,000 households to upgrade their old boiler to the latest efficient models and to provide extra resources to tackle fuel poverty.

The boiler scrappage scheme in England is not means-tested, but it is based on the efficiency of the boiler. The scheme promotes fuel efficiency and seeks to reduce the loss of heat and carbon emissions. The scheme offers receipts of £400 off the price of a new boiler that meets those efficiency targets. We must tackle fuel poverty, and I am concerned that the warm homes scheme is missing out on many people who experience fuel poverty but are excluded because of the criteria. If this year's winter were to be repeated next year and the year after, people will be under extreme financial strain in a recession, especially as oil and gas prices continue to rocket. People are under considerable financial strain already because of an increase in food, travel and heating costs. The price of oil has almost doubled in two or three years, and people are struggling. That is why it is important that we assist people to reduce their heating bills and enhance heating efficiency. A boiler scrappage scheme can help people to achieve that. Therefore, I welcome the debate, and I commend the motion to the House.

Mr O'Loan: I support the motion, although I am slightly surprised by where it has come from. I will come back to that point later.

The English scheme offers £400 a household to 125,000 households at a total cost of £50 million. It is not designed as a fuel poverty measure; it is, essentially, a measure to reduce carbon emissions. It seeks to encourage the installation of fuel-efficient boilers. If it were introduced here, it would advantage and make more fuel-efficient homes that directly avail themselves of the scheme, and it would create a momentum of its own in that other households that did not receive the voucher subsidy would be more inclined to replace their boiler.

8.00 pm

Its second policy objective is to support boiler manufacturers, the industry and installers. Members might have received a communication today from the Scottish and Northern Ireland Plumbing Employers' Federation in which it argued for a replication of the English scheme. The car scrappage scheme was designed for exactly that purpose, and it was very successful in stimulating that industry. Northern Ireland has a substantial boiler construction industry as well as an installation industry.

We should note that in the pre-Budget report, the boiler scrappage measure ran alongside improved fuel poverty measures that cost £150 million. The total package was, therefore, £200 million. However, as I say, the boiler scrappage scheme was not a fuel poverty measure. An equivalent Northern Ireland scheme would affect around 4,000 houses, perhaps a little more. At a cost of £400 a house, the total cost of the scheme would be £1.6 million. We received a Barnett consequential of £0.7 million. The English scheme was not totally funded with new money, and the Barnett consequential would not fully fund an equivalent scheme here. However, we had an option of doing something with that money in exactly the same terms as it was originally used for. It would have been much more imaginative to have topped that money up with the modest sum that was needed to replicate the English scheme.

For that reason, I find the motion a little bit disingenuous, particularly given my experience at the Finance Committee. When I raised the issue at the Committee, the strongest terms in which I could get it to write to the Department were to say that the Committee agreed that it

would be content for the additional funding to be used to create a similar boiler scrappage scheme for Northern Ireland, which I count as a lukewarm response. I would have welcomed a much stronger argument for the use of that Barnett consequential when the opportunity arose at the Committee. Of course, the Department replied to the Committee in the same terms that it replied to me on a question for written answer:

“all the addition Barnett consequentials from the 2009 PBR are used to offset the spending pressures for 2010-11.”

As we heard, a different approach was taken in Scotland. My party has argued for measures to stimulate the economy at this time. The Scottish Parliament is committing the Barnett consequentials, in full, to support boiler scrappage. As far as I can see, that scheme is like the English one in that it is not merely a fuel poverty measure. However, a boiler scrappage scheme that is based on fuel poverty has been created in Wales. That scheme costs £2.5 million and will benefit up to 5,000 households. We must recognise what the Department for Social Development can and cannot do. I assume that, legally and according to its terms of reference, it can create only a fuel poverty targeted boiler scrappage scheme that is needs-based. DSD cannot create a general carbon reduction scheme. That can only be done through a different Department, probably the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

I support the motion, but a better outcome could have been achieved. If DSD can do this within its own resources, and if it deems that to be a good use of the funds available for fuel poverty, I will be pleased to see that. However, we could have had both. We could have ensured that we used the Barnett consequential for the purpose from which it was derived and created a scheme that would have led to significantly more carbon reduction and stimulated the industry. I regret that we did not do that.

Lord Browne: Like most Members, I support the introduction of a boiler scrappage scheme in Northern Ireland. The scheme currently operating in England has received a good response from the public, and many people, particularly pensioners on fixed incomes, have received the benefit of a new heating system at much more affordable prices. Other Members have already outlined the advantage that such

a scheme brings by stimulating the economy and reducing the environmental impact of heating homes. However, I believe that the real success of such a scrappage scheme would lie in the improvements that it would bring to the quality of life for Northern Ireland pensioners in particular, because they live on a fixed income and have been hit particularly hard by the increase in fuel prices over the past number of years. Although winter fuel payments have helped them, much of the additional money has been eaten up by inefficient boilers.

Indeed, as we heard, the Energy Saving Trust estimates that simply replacing an old boiler with a new energy-efficient one could result in savings of more than £200 a year on heating bills. That is a truly monumental figure, considering that many of our pensioners have very old and inefficient boilers. Any move to make new energy-efficient boilers more affordable to people on fixed incomes is to be welcomed.

However, I have one slight reservation about the scheme. In recent years, the growing trend has been for people to purchase gas boilers for home heating rather than oil boilers. That is understandable, because gas heating and hot water systems tend to cost less to run than traditional oil or electric hot water systems. Therefore, to be capable of providing a boiler scrappage scheme, we must be sure that Northern Ireland has enough fitters with the necessary qualifications to fit gas-powered boilers.

As Members are aware, from 1 April 2010 all gas appliance fitters must be on the Gas Safe register to be legally allowed to fit gas appliances. I recently checked the register and found that only four Northern Ireland firms are listed, and, therefore, able to install home heating systems. That figure is certainly not adequate to meet the demands that will come from homeowners wanting to take advantage of a boiler scrappage scheme. That concern should be addressed before a scrappage scheme is introduced.

The local contractor deficit is particularly pressing, considering that ‘The Sunday Times’ recently revealed that the larger gas companies in England are raising the price of new gas boilers in order to profit from the scheme rather than allowing customers to make savings. Members will also be aware of the problems experienced in England over the maintenance of boilers that were installed under the scheme. The problem was due mainly to installers being so busy

putting in new boilers that they did not have the manpower available simultaneously to perform maintenance on boilers that they had previously fitted. That led to considerable problems. The number of local Gas Safe registered fitters is a salient issue to be addressed if we are to avoid the problems experienced in England and deliver a scheme that would be to the overwhelming benefit of people here.

I am confident that, with good planning, those problems can be overcome. Therefore, I very much welcome the motion.

Mr G Robinson: I am glad to be able to contribute to the debate, as many of the complaints that I received in my constituency office this winter concerned the exclusion of boiler replacement from the warm homes scheme. The main questions asked were why some people got new boilers last year and others did not, and why people in England, Scotland and Wales got boiler scrappage schemes but people in Northern Ireland did not.

My colleagues who secured the debate referred to the scheme's potential to help the economy, and I concur with their remarks. At a time when the building trade is suffering from lack of work, the extension of the boiler scrappage scheme would provide work for plumbers, electricians and builders, and be an economic boost for the sector. However, the main reason for having such a scheme is to ensure that people can live in warm, cost-efficient homes. Older boilers use more fuel to heat the home and to heat water, and those boilers hit people where it hurts: in their pockets. A new boiler largely cures those problems and saves people money. Obviously, the introduction of a boiler scrappage scheme would be an ideal way to ensure that more people are removed from fuel poverty, which, rightly, is an extremely important factor for the Assembly. However, at present, the warm homes scheme is very limited in what it can do. The scope is there for an extended programme to be introduced, and I ask the Minister to examine ways in which to do that.

Ironically, although a boiler scrappage scheme would lead to warmer homes, the more efficient new installations would have the knock-on effect of reducing greenhouse gases and global warming. At the scheme's launch in England, Labour's Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, Ed Miliband, said:

"The Boiler Scrappage Scheme will save around £200 off heating bills per year for families that are replacing their old boilers, and in total will save the same amount of carbon equivalent to taking around 45,000 cars off the road."

Minister, I foresee a three-way benefit from a boiler scrappage scheme for Northern Ireland: warmer homes for more people at less cost and reduced levels of fuel poverty; employment created in the construction industry at a time of recession; and a small step towards lowering carbon emissions and aiding the fight against climate change.

The motion is carefully worded, and states:

"to examine the scope for the future introduction of a...scheme in Northern Ireland."

I urge the Minister to examine that scope and, hopefully, we will see a scheme introduced in Northern Ireland equivalent to those in England, Scotland and Wales. I support the motion.

The Minister for Social Development

(Ms Ritchie): I thank the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee for tabling the motion, which examines the introduction of a boiler scrappage scheme. I also thank all of the Members who have contributed to the debate.

The motion calls on me, as Minister for Social Development, to examine the scope for the introduction of a boiler scrappage scheme in Northern Ireland similar to those that have been introduced in England, Scotland and Wales. The debate gives me the opportunity to clarify some of the issues that have been raised. I will try to deal with all of the concerns that Members have raised, and I assure Members that I will read the Hansard report of the debate and if I have left any question unanswered I will write directly to the Member concerned.

I feel the sense of urgency in the House regarding the boiler scrappage scheme very clearly, and I am aware that that was the import of the tabled amendment, which was withdrawn by Billy Armstrong of the Ulster Unionist Party.

In his pre-Budget report, the Chancellor announced that a boiler scrappage scheme was to be introduced in England. The aim of the scheme is to reduce carbon emissions by offering a financial incentive to householders to replace their inefficient boilers, and £400 has been made available for up to 125,000 privately owned or rented households across England on

a first-come, first-serve basis. The installation of a new boiler could cost householders in the region of £2,000 to £3,000. The Welsh and Scottish Governments have also announced similar boiler scrappage schemes.

The introduction of the boiler scrappage scheme in England has generated considerable interest from MLA colleagues and the wider public, and my officials have briefed the Social Development Committee on the matter. Therefore, the debate also gives me the opportunity to clarify some issues surrounding the scheme. I emphasise that the English scheme is aimed at reducing carbon emissions primarily and is not targeted at vulnerable groups or fuel-poor households. A scheme to mirror the English scheme would involve a much greater investment, and, as it would be cross-departmental in nature, it would likely require Executive consideration and would not be solely for my Department to deliver or take the lead on. The Department of the Environment has responsibility for climate change, and I would want my officials to discuss any potential boiler scrappage scheme with officials from that Department.

Although I support a local boiler scrappage scheme similar to the English model, my first concern, as Minister with responsibility for the fuel poverty strategy, is the alleviation of fuel poverty in vulnerable households. As all Members are aware, and has already been said during the debate, the definition of fuel poverty is when the cost of heating a home requires more than 10% of the household income, and there are various determinants in that, including low incomes, high fuel prices and energy efficiency measures. None of us in Government have any control over incomes or energy prices, but we do have control over energy efficiency measures.

8.15 pm

I accept that improving the energy efficiency of households that have old or inefficient boilers will contribute to the alleviation of fuel poverty. That is why I asked my officials to include proposals for a boiler replacement scheme in the new fuel poverty strategy that will be available for public consultation in the spring. However, any such scheme that I introduce will target vulnerable households in which people live in fuel poverty; it will not focus solely on reducing carbon emissions, as is the case with the scheme in England. The reduction of carbon

emissions is a welcome by-product of all the energy efficiency schemes.

A boiler replacement scheme should not be delivered on a first-come, first-served basis. Given the limited availability of resources in the current economic climate, I must ensure that resources are specifically targeted at those who are most in need. I have reservations about introducing a scheme that would require those on the lowest income to provide an additional £1,000, at the very least, towards the cost of installing a new and efficient boiler. The boiler replacement scheme that I will propose as part of the new fuel poverty strategy will not require households to make a financial contribution. I will take on board the comments made during the public consultation process in the spring.

Some Members expressed concern about the removal of repairs and upgrades of heating systems from the warm homes scheme, and they linked that to a boiler scrappage scheme. The removal of repairs and upgrades enabled DSD to open up the heating element of the warm homes scheme, for the first time, to families who receive working tax credit. Research has shown that there are long-term health benefits for children who live in a warm house. I should point out that a boiler can still be replaced under the warm homes scheme in the exceptional circumstances of there being a significant danger to the health and safety of the occupants. As the administrators of the contract, that decision is at the discretion of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. I hope that I have provided some reassurance to Members who expressed concern about that issue.

Heating systems are one element of improving the energy efficiency of homes, but I want to highlight the importance of improving the insulation of our housing stock. Insulation plays a key role in improving the energy efficiency of homes. According to the Energy Saving Trust, about half the heat lost in a typical home is through the walls and loft. The warm homes scheme offers insulation to people on disability benefits and to those on income-related benefits. Given the current cold weather, there is no better time to make homes more energy-efficient by installing or improving insulation. I ask Members to encourage their constituents to apply to the warm homes scheme for assistance with insulation. They will feel the benefit of doing so through the increased warmth of their homes.

However, tackling fuel poverty is a cross-departmental issue that no Department can tackle on its own. All Departments have a role to play in alleviating fuel poverty, as will be emphasised in the proposals in the draft strategy. After public consultation, a strategy will be submitted to the Executive for their approval. I hope that my Executive colleagues will support the new strategy and ensure that all Departments play their part in the alleviation of fuel poverty.

I will touch on some of the issues that were raised during the debate. Some Members spoke about their abiding interest in, and repeated request for, the introduction of such a scheme, and I found that compelling.

Simon Hamilton raised the issue of the working fuel poor. I have extended the criteria of the warm homes scheme to capture those families who have young children and who are in receipt of working family tax credit. They are now eligible to apply for assistance.

Anna Lo referred to the Housing Executive tenants who live in homes with inefficient heating systems. The Housing Executive operates a rolling programme to replace old and inefficient heating systems. The warm homes scheme is different in that it targets owner occupiers and privately rented homes with inefficient heating.

My colleague Declan O'Loan made an interesting point about Barnett consequentials, and he was right: a Barnett consequential of £700,000 was received for boiler scrappage by the Department of Finance and Personnel, but all the additional Barnett consequentials from the 2009 PBR are being used to offset the spending pressures for 2010-11. Apart from Mr O'Loan, nobody referred to that issue, but it is interesting and worth amplifying. It is a matter of regret that that issue was not addressed by the Department of Finance and Personnel, and I would be happy to raise it again.

Alex Easton mentioned the criteria for the warm homes scheme being too narrow. The warm homes scheme has assisted more than 80,000 households in Northern Ireland with a range of heating and insulation measures. The scheme was amended following a Northern Ireland Audit Office report, because we needed to address need, disadvantage and poverty. I have given a commitment to review the scheme once it has been in operation for one year. To review it any

earlier would not give us the evidence base and the research base that we require.

I thank all Members for their contributions. I take on board the import and purpose of the amendment, and I want that to be conveyed to Ulster Unionist Party Members. I am charged with dealing with boiler scrappage, but it must be done on the basis of need. We must target the vulnerable and the disadvantaged so that we get to the people who need the facility the most.

I reaffirm my total commitment to the alleviation of fuel poverty and look forward to Members' support for our new fuel poverty strategy, which will include proposals for a boiler replacement scheme.

Mr Craig: I declare an interest. I was interested in boiler scrappage a long time before I was elected to the House. Purely because of some of the Ballymena blood in me, I wanted to reduce my home fuel bills. A number of years ago, I made the decision to replace the boiler in my house with a new super-efficient model. The effect of that was to increase the efficiency of my boiler from 60% to 97%, which is an efficiency improvement of more than 50%.

Some Members mentioned gas, but I do not have the luxury of getting gas where I live. Although there has been an increase of more than 50% in fuel prices over the past two or three years, the net effect of replacing my boiler has been that I am still paying the same fuel bills that I was paying five years ago. Such an effect would go a long way to tackling the fuel poverty that is felt by vulnerable individuals.

I had the luxury of being able to fund the replacement of my boiler myself, but not all people have that luxury. For that reason alone, it is only right that we support the motion and try to get something done as quickly as possible. I commend the Ulster Unionists for dropping the amendment, because we cannot just jump straight into a scrappage scheme. Members highlighted the difficulties that some of the schemes in England are experiencing.

The Chairperson of the Committee, Simon Hamilton, talked about the effect that those schemes are having on more than 40,000 homes in England, how they will improve the system and how, as the Minister highlighted, their main remit is to target carbon reduction. It is good that targeting carbon reduction can have

the wonderful side effect of targeting the fuel poor; I welcome that.

Mr McCann said that companies had abused the English scheme. Some emails that I have received have hinted at the inflated prices that people faced when taking up the £400 grant, and I know that the Minister will take that matter on board. We will not repeat that mistake in Northern Ireland; we are more canny than that. Thomas Burns rightly pointed out that another benefit of the scheme is the huge cash injection that it would give to local industry. We have all received emails from boiler installation companies and their representative bodies. Most companies in that industry are very small, perhaps comprising only two or three people, and such a scheme would have a huge benefit for locally based industry. David Hilditch hinted at those benefits.

Anna Lo queried whether the Housing Executive could be included in the scheme, and the Minister answered that question. Alex Easton said that heating bills in Northern Ireland are one third higher than those in the rest of the UK. That adds to the great difficulty that Northern Ireland faces, with the hugely inflated fuel prices in the world market at present.

Mr F McCann: Simon Hamilton mentioned hard-to-reach areas. One thread that has run through many of the Committee's discussions is the serious problem of fuel poverty in rural constituencies, where people may have obsolete boilers or terrible heating systems. I hope that the Minister takes that on board. Does the Member agree that we should put a special focus on rural areas to try to ensure that people receive the assistance that is required to change their boilers?

Mr Craig: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I hope that the Minister takes that point on board. I was about to raise it.

Mr F McCann: I read your notes earlier.

Mr Craig: I will not comment on that.

It is a recognised fact that people who choose to live in rural areas, such as I do, do not have access to gas or other forms of heating. Therefore, we are stuck with the choice of oil, electricity or solid-fuel heating, and those heating systems have inbuilt additional costs. Another issue is that, because the population of rural areas tends to include more elderly people,

many heating systems in rural areas are much older than those in urban areas. Therefore, I plead with the Minister to consider that issue and address it in some of her proposals.

Lord Browne raised a most interesting point; he said that there may not be enough fitters to carry out a scheme, even in the urban areas of Northern Ireland where gas is more prevalent. That is slightly concerning. I have no idea why the standards were changed, but I know that the original gas-fitting scheme created huge difficulties for gas fitters. Therefore, I hope that that situation is not replicated. We need to keep a watching brief on that, because it could lead to huge difficulties in the gas boiler industry in Northern Ireland and could even have implications for the maintenance of existing boilers, not only in the private sector but in the public sector, because much of the Housing Executive stock has converted to gas.

8.30 pm

I noted with interest what the Minister had to say about the introduction of her proposed new fuel poverty scheme. I welcome that new scheme and the fact that it will be targeted at those who are most in need. No one will disagree with her about that, but I hope that any new scheme will also have an impact on those who fall just outside the criteria for receipt of benefits. Like most Members, I know that there are people who, because they have a relatively small pension income or choose to work in low-paid jobs rather than sit at home and take benefits, fall outside the benefits system and receive no support whatsoever from the Government. Can those people be targeted and helped? They have less money in their pockets than some people who are on benefits. The House has failed to address that issue sufficiently.

I also listened with interest to what the Minister had to say about some households not having to make any contribution whatsoever towards a new boiler. Although, in some circumstances, that is to be welcomed, I just hope that the gesture is not abused. I know that the Minister will put fail-safes into any such scheme to ensure that that will not be the case.

It is interesting, for a change, that my party, more than others, is supporting green issues in the House, and we look forward to the fuel-efficient benefits of the proposed scheme. More importantly, however, we look forward to tackling

the issue of fuel poverty by yet another means in Northern Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the introduction of a boiler scrappage scheme by HM Government and calls on the Minister for Social Development to examine the scope for the future introduction of a similar scheme in Northern Ireland.

Adjourned at 8.32 pm.