

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 19 April 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Housing (Amendment) Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Housing (Amendment) Bill has received Royal Assent. The Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 became law on 13 April 2010.

Assembly Business

Standing Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: I advise Members that I have received notification of the resignations of Lord Morrow as Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures with effect from 12 April 2010 and of Mr Raymond McCartney as Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee with effect from 13 April 2010.

The Rt Hon Peter Robinson, the DUP's nominating officer, has nominated Lord Browne as Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures with effect from 13 April 2010. Lord Browne has accepted the appointment. Mr Pat Doherty, Sinn Féin's nominating officer, has nominated Mr Alex Maskey as Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee with effect from 13 April 2010. Mr Maskey has accepted the appointment. I am satisfied that the correspondence meets the requirements of Standing Orders, and I therefore confirm Lord Browne as Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures and Mr Alex Maskey as Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee with effect from 13 April 2010.

Public Petition

Camlough Road and Millvale Road Junction, Newry

Mr Speaker: Mr Dominic Bradley has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I wish to present a petition on behalf of the residents of the Camlough Road/Millvale Road area of Newry.

In the environmental statement record and subsequent local public inquiry, facilitated by the Department for Regional Development (DRD)-appointed inspectors Mageean and Chambers, into the A1 Cloghogue to Beech Hill dual carriageway, it was accepted that community concerns over local traffic access and egress to the Camlough Road would be catered for. That requirement was raised on behalf of the local community under records ES33 and ES42 respectively. In addition, the environmental statement is obliged by law to take into consideration the impact of the proposed scheme on the journeys that people, such as motorists, pedestrians, cyclists and equestrians, make in the locality.

By means of the petition, the Camlough Road and Millvale Road residents contend that the DRD, Roads Service and their contractors have not fulfilled the environmental statement duty of care to the local community. The residents wish to lobby the Minister for Regional Development, the Committee for Regional Development, Roads Service and their contractors to construct a roundabout at the Camlough Road/Millvale Road junction and, to alleviate current and future traffic problems, an additional eastbound lane from the roundabout to the Egyptian Arch.

Mr Speaker, I thank you for affording me the opportunity to present the petition, and I know that you will pass it on to the relevant agencies.

Mr D Bradley moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I shall forward the petition to the Minister for Regional Development and a copy to the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development.

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Aquaculture and Marine Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Fáilte romhat. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998 regarding the recent meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in aquaculture and marine sectoral format.

The meeting was held in the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute's (AFBI) premises in Hillsborough on Wednesday 31 March 2010. The Executive were represented by Edwin Poots and me. The Irish Government were represented by the Minister for Science, Technology, Innovation and Natural Resources, Conor Lenihan TD. The statement has been agreed with Minister Poots, and I am speaking on behalf of us both.

The council welcomed a progress report on the work of the Loughs Agency that was presented by the chairperson, Tarlach O'Crosain, and the director of corporate services, John Pollock. Ministers noted the importance and effectiveness of the Loughs Agency's conservation and protection work on the fisheries of the Foyle and Carlingford areas; progress with the implementation of the agency's marine tourism development strategy through the roll out of the projects that are supported by INTERREG IV; the successful engagement with the Tourist Board and the initiation of the Riverwatch Phase 3 project; the Riverwatch outreach environmental science programme with local schools; and the implementation of an unsocial hours allowance scheme for the Loughs Agency's field staff. Payment of the allowance to the staff last month brought a very lengthy process to a conclusion, and it rewards staff for the unusual hours that they have to work.

In the progress report, the chairperson highlighted the Riverwatch project and the work that is being carried out with local schools. Ministers were interested to hear that 140 girls took part and that they learned about a variety of issues, including the food chain, life cycles,

habitats and pollution. They finished by having a go at angling. We heard that, as a result of that experience, a number of girls expressed an interest in the agency's angling academy.

Ministers noted that the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission (FCILC) has applied efficiency savings to the draft 2010 budget in accordance with the efficiency delivery plan that was approved by the Finance Departments in November 2009. They also noted the draft 2010 business plan and the proposed budget for the FCILC. Furthermore, Ministers noted that, following approval by the two Finance Ministers, the business plan will be submitted to the NSMC for approval.

The council welcomed a presentation by the Loughs Agency on the monitoring of fish species diversity in Lough Foyle. Ministers noted the practical use of that information and how it is applied in management decisions by the Loughs Agency in the Foyle catchment. The monitoring related to a programme that was operated by the Loughs Agency in conjunction with Coolkeeragh power station in 2008 and 2009. Ministers heard that around 60 species had been identified, some of a high conservation value, and many which had not been expected so far up the estuary. We heard that relatively high numbers of smelt were being caught in the power station's water intake and how the Agency was working with the power station to find ways to reduce those numbers through new technologies and better timing of screen deployment.

The Council approved regulations that prohibit the retention of salmon, sea trout and brown trout from certain stretches of the River Finn and River Foyle, which is a necessary conservation measure in response to the observed decline of salmon populations in that river system.

Ministers considered the agency's legislation implementation plan, welcomed progress in its delivery and noted that further regulations will require NSMC approval during 2010. A proposal to introduce regulations to allow the suspension of netting and restrictions on angling in certain circumstances, including drought, flood and insufficient numbers of salmon, was of particular interest.

In recent weeks, Ministers from both jurisdictions met anglers from the north-west to discuss their concerns about salmon stocks. The contribution made to salmon conservation by the reduction

in commercial net fishing as a consequence of the offer of a hardship package which was taken up by many fishermen was noted, and we hope that the proposed regulations will allow the agency to take further measures to protect salmon stocks where necessary.

The Council also approved for a further year, to July 2011, a procedure to support the Loughs Agency in dealing, through regulations, with emergencies such as pollution incidents. Finally, the Council agreed that the next meeting in the aquaculture and marine sectoral format will take place in June or July 2010. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Elliott):

I thank the Minister for that report, during which she mentioned the Loughs Agency. There seems to have been a breakdown in communications between the Loughs Agency and the oyster fishermen. Has the Minister intervened? If discussions are ongoing or have taken place, what stage are they at?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

I have not been asked to intervene by either party. I have received no request for a meeting. Last year, the Loughs Agency and the oyster fishermen discussed regulations on how to measure retainable oysters in Lough Foyle, a matter that has been considered at further meetings with oyster fishermen. The Loughs Agency has suggested a compromise on the issue and has agreed to bring forward a further set of regulations to address issues raised in relation to the weight of retainable oysters. The original regulations will now be taken forward, and the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee indicated recently that it was content with that approach.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. Does she have any more detail on the school project, and on whether or not it was a success?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

The statement covered most of my information, but I understand that St Mary's College in Creggan was involved in something like seven classes of girls. The Council felt that that initiative was an excellent way to make girls more conscious of environmental issues around the river and to interest them in fishing. The agency pointed out that the river is not exclusively for men. The fact that some women

have been involved in poaching and that the record salmon was caught by a woman goes to show that. That is an important message to send to girls and, indeed, all young people.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. How effective has the programme involving the Loughs Agency and Coolkeeragh power station been?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: It has been very beneficial for everybody concerned. As I said, 60 species of fish were found, some of which we did not expect to find so far up the estuary. Quite a bit of work is under way with Coolkeeragh power plant to try to find mechanisms to reduce the amount of fish caught up in the station's intake. The high number of smelt being caught is of concern. Although there is not a lot of commercial or recreational value in smelt, it has an important place in the food chain for other species, such as sea trout. The Loughs Agency and the power station operators are looking at ways to reduce the intake. It is also important that Coolkeeragh and the agency work to cut down on any kind of environmental damage to the lough.

12.15 pm

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she elaborate a little on the Riverwatch project? It seems that that is for schoolchildren. The Minister mentioned pollution; is there any similar project for adults?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: To clarify, Riverwatch is the Loughs Agency's interpretive centre, which is located on the banks of the Foyle at Prehen. It is a unique education resource and a very important tourist attraction. It is not just available to schools; it is available to communities, business organisations and others. It is certainly worth a visit. If any Committees meet in that area, I encourage them to go to Riverwatch.

The aim of the centre is to ensure the environmental survival and maintenance of the economic benefits of the Foyle and Carlingford waterways by increasing the level of knowledge of those who directly and indirectly use their resources. It also helps with our behaviour, making us more conscious about using cleaning materials in the home that could get into our rivers and lead to pollution incidents. Septic tanks on farmland can also cause problems. We are aware of the

damage that a small amount of pollutant can do, especially when river levels are low. The Riverwatch centre has recently been refurbished. I encourage all Members to go to visit that very valuable tourism resource in Derry.

Mr Campbell: The Minister mentioned salmon stocks. There is concern about those stocks in various rivers. She also mentioned the proposed regulations that would allow the agency to take further measures to protect stocks. When will anglers be made aware of those measures?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The anglers are keenly aware of the work that needs to be done. I had an excellent meeting with them at the Loughs Agency office not that long ago. We hope that the regulations will be in place before the start of the angling season, but their nature means that they can kick in if there is a worry about stocks, or if there are drought conditions or flooding.

I assured our anglers that I would do my best to ensure that the regulations were in place before the angling season began. If we approve them over the next couple of months, they will be in place in time. The fishermen were generally content that, if we are worried about numbers, we can switch fishing activity on or off in light of environmental conditions to protect river stock. They recognise the benefits of line fishing to the tourism industry in the north-west. They made a very robust case about needing to protect our tourism product in the north-west, given the economic decline of the region. Seagate and other companies have laid off people, and the fishermen are concerned that the tourism potential of the area should be realised. It is important that the regulations are implemented, and I am very anxious to do that as early as possible.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. During her meeting with the anglers, I understand that she discussed the possibility of a further hardship scheme for commercial salmon netmen, which would remove the remaining nets from the Foyle area. Will she provide further details of that?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: That meeting was held on 24 March. I met representatives from Limavady Borough Council, the Roe Angling Association and the Ulster Angling Federation to discuss the issue of declining stocks. The angling groups presented me with a paper that outlined a

proposal for a further buyout scheme that would remove the remaining commercial nets from the area. However, I highlighted the fact that the numbers of commercial nets had already been significantly reduced through the salmon hardship package that was operated by the Loughs Agency. It would be difficult, therefore, to justify further public expenditure. The Loughs Agency believes that the further regulations that I have talked about, in conjunction with the reduction in nets, will address the issue of declining stocks without the need for a further buyout scheme. At the NSMC meeting on 31 March, Ministers agreed that that was the correct approach for the agency to adopt.

Mr Savage: There has been much comment about the salmon industry. Will the Minister give us an update on what has been taking place regarding salmon in that part of the country?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As Members will have heard, the reduction in commercial nets has resulted in fewer salmon being caught in the Foyle and Carlingford areas, and that has had a benefit to the numbers. However, we are continually monitoring fish stock numbers. A number of areas on the rivers have counters, and we monitor the levels of fish very carefully. We ensure that we manage stocks from a conservation point of view and also protect fish for the angling industry and for the tourism potential that it can bring. Therefore, a lot of work has been done.

There is also a lot of concern about the numbers of salmon returning from the Atlantic and the fact that the salmon numbers are falling there. What happens outside our control is important, but we cannot do a lot about the Atlantic. Nevertheless, fish are being monitored, and we are watching them coming back. We want to have those regulations in place so that we can switch the fishing effort off if we are concerned about the levels of fish in the Foyle/Carlingford catchment.

Mr McDevitt: I thank the Minister for her statement. Following on from the last series of questions, I am sure that the Minister will agree that a healthy angling stock, particularly in the Foyle catchment, has huge strategic tourism importance. Will the Minister update the House on the numbers through the counters in the Foyle catchment this year? How does it compare with the previous year?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: We did not discuss counters at the NSMC meeting, as we had done so at an earlier meeting. Therefore, I do not have that level of detail here, but I will be happy to respond to the Member in writing with updated statistics.

Ministerial Statement

British-Irish Council: Social Inclusion Sectoral Format Meeting

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

Mr F McCann: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Given that social inclusion and the third sector are the remit of the Social Development Minister, is there any reason why she will not be delivering the speech this afternoon?

Mr Speaker: I received the letter from Mr Newton. The issue sits with the Executive, and it is their responsibility.

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

In compliance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, as amended by the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, I wish to make the following report on a British-Irish Council (BIC) social inclusion meeting which was held in Edinburgh on 26 March 2010. The Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, also attended that meeting, and she has kindly agreed that I make a statement to the Assembly on behalf of us both.

The meeting focused on the contribution of the third sector to social inclusion across all eight member Administrations. Arrangements for the meeting, including an opportunity to hear about innovative developments in the third sector, were made in partnership with the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations and Community Enterprise in Scotland.

The meeting was chaired by John Swinney MSP, who is Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth in the Scottish Government. The British Government were represented by Rolande Anderson, director general of the Office of the Third Sector and the Social Exclusion Task Force. The Irish Government were represented by Don Sexton from the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs. The Welsh Assembly Government were represented by Carl Sargeant AM, Minister for Social Justice and Local Government. The Northern Ireland Executive were represented by Margaret Ritchie MLA, Minister for Social Development, and me, in my capacity as junior Minister in the Office

of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). The Isle of Man Government were represented by the honourable Eddie Teare MHK, Minister for Health and Social Security. The States of Jersey were represented by Senator Paul Routier, the assistant Chief Minister, and the States of Guernsey were represented by Deputy Hunter Adam, the Health and Social Services Minister.

The British-Irish Council discussed the recent developments in social inclusion in each of the BIC member Administrations, focusing particularly on issues relating to the contribution of the third sector, which is known by many here as the voluntary and community sector. In March 2008, BIC Ministers agreed that the contribution of the third sector to social inclusion would be the next theme of the social inclusion work area. At the Council meeting in Edinburgh on 26 March, Ministers reviewed a report on the work carried out by BIC's social inclusion group on the contribution of the third sector. Collectively, we noted that the third sector across all member Administrations is complex and diverse and that it has a significant social and economic potential. We also acknowledged that the third sector has a reach to people and communities who statutory agencies sometimes find more difficult to engage.

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

Ministers commended the excellent examples of investment and good practice across all member Administrations, and we agreed that the theme had led to a dynamic process of learning and co-operation, which reflected the original intention of the British-Irish Council.

With regard to the future work programme, the Council agreed that there are major immediate challenges facing the third sector and member Administrations. Those include challenges on how the third sector, working together, can make communities more sustainable and socially cohesive and how we can enable wider civil activity and enable the third sector to become part of the mainstream in service delivery. We, therefore, agreed to the continuation of the third sector theme, rather than selecting a new theme at this stage. The work carried out by the officials will continue to seek to strengthen and consolidate the ongoing co-operation and exchange of information, experience and best practice between member Administrations.

Ministers welcomed the report and noted that the next ministerial meeting will take place in Wales on a date to be agreed.

Mr Weir: In light of the fact that public finances are likely to tighten after the election, regardless of whether it is a Brown, Cameron or Clegg Administration, what reassurance can the junior Minister give to people in the third sector from a financial point of view?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): The Member's question is extremely relevant. I have no doubt that the question of cutbacks and the cutback promises that are being made in televised electoral broadcasts are foremost in the minds of those who are engaged in our community and voluntary sector, or the third sector, as we are referring to it.

As colleagues will be aware, the Executive agreed their 2010-11 Budget about 10 days ago, and, at this stage, I am unable to tell Members what the breakdown of budgets will be. However, at this time of economic recession, I believe that the voluntary and community sector has a key role to play in helping the Government to deliver on their social inclusion agenda, and I said that in my remarks. There is a potential there that should be harnessed and exploited, and I use that word in its positive sense. We must ensure that every pound that we spend delivers maximum benefit for the most disadvantaged throughout our communities, and the focus must be on delivering effective and efficient services that meet the needs of our communities, rather than the survival of an organisation that, in some cases, may not meet existing needs.

That said, however, there is, as I have said, potential that should be harnessed. There is willingness in OFMDFM and permeating through every aspect of government to ensure that our service delivery is as effective and economical as possible.

12.30 pm

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. My question follows on from that of Mr Weir. The statement accepts the third sector's contribution not only to communities but to society as a whole. The issue of possible cutbacks has been raised. In order for the third sector to operate effectively, it needs proper and sustainable funding, not the mishmash of

funding that exists at the moment. Was there any discussion of the possibility of mainstream funding for the third sector in the light of the work that it does? Most statutory organisations would accept that, pound for pound, funding in the third sector is well spent and achieves maximum value.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I accept the Member's point, which is well made. We are all aware of the experience during previous years of community and voluntary organisations in the third sector that had reached a point at which they were right at the very edge of their agreement before a final or other agreement was put in place. In fact, some are beyond a current agreement before another one is put in place. There is a lot of concern about that.

I take the member's point. I am not sure that, at this stage, we can indicate that there will be mainstream funding. However, if we are to ensure that service delivery is effective and economical, we have to get our act together a bit better, if I may use that expression, so that in the longer term a plan and process can be implemented in which there is engagement on both sides — from statutory bodies, government, OFMDFM and the voluntary and community or third sector. It is only when that level of professionalism, budgetary allocation and so on is built up that we can expect service delivery to be efficient and effective.

Mr Elliott: I thank the junior Minister for his statement. I note his comment that the Council will:

"enable the third sector to become part of the mainstream in service delivery."

Does the junior Minister mean delivery which is right at the heart of the public sector? If so, how will that be achieved?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I am trying to find the exact phrase that I used in my statement. Following on from the previous question — obviously, the two questions are linked — I can say that it is certainly our ambition to deliver services in a much more effective way. How we do that is still to be explored fully. Although the question is relevant, I cannot give it a definitive answer at present.

Mr McDevitt: I am sure that we all recognise the social capital that exists in the community and voluntary sector and, increasingly, the

positive economic contribution that the sector makes to the region and the island. Does the junior Minister accept that the mechanism by which the community and voluntary sector was funded, the Executive programme funds, which were abandoned by his party and Sinn Féin, should be reconsidered now so that we can be sure that, when money is made available for the community and voluntary sector, it gets to that sector and is not lost in administration?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I do not accept the Member's comments at all. There is always room for improvement. I have acknowledged that in my remarks and in my responses to previous questions. There is work to be done. I do not accept the Member's point that it is the fault of the DUP and — it is not for me to speak for that party — Sinn Féin, if it is coming through OFMDFM.

Mr Dallat: I also welcome the Minister's statement. I am sure that, in the lengthy discussions that took place, an awful lot more was discussed than is included in the statement. Has the Minister picked up on good ideas in other regions, particularly in the Gaeltacht areas, that could be introduced and built on here? Will we have the opportunity to have a more detailed report on what went on with regard to the community and voluntary sectors and how they can be promoted and grown in these awful times?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): The Member has asked a positive question. I will build my answer around the focus of the social inclusion group. Yes, we will have further information. The Member asked for an in-depth report. Work on the topic has focused on the contribution of the third sector to the promotion of social inclusion, which I am sure the Member will welcome. The work fell under three main themes, with initial priority being given to the first theme of responding to the effects of the economic downturn — something that we are all suffering from at the moment — which includes developing the roles of the third sector and broadening the appeal of volunteering and citizen involvement.

We all recognise that the third sector is an important part of the economic and social recovery from recession. At the same time, it is affected by both an increased demand for the many services it provides and the financial pressures resulting from the economic

downturn. Appropriately targeted responses to those pressures, jointly developed with the sector, are evident across all the BIC Administrations. However, as pressure grows on the amount available to spend on public services, the third sector, because of its ability to respond innovatively and quickly and to reach people in the communities with which the statutory agencies sometimes find it more difficult to engage, can provide alternative service solutions.

Members asked about developing the role of the third sector. The sector has an evident ability to bridge the gap for those furthest from the labour market. Partnership working is often the key to the sector's contribution to social inclusion. Some possible success factors have been identified. However, current and future challenges for the sector include increased demand and reduced income; the impact of information technology; building sustainable communities; social and political change; and, perhaps most importantly, relationships between the third sector and government.

There have been many innovative developments in volunteering and citizen involvement. The evidence review shows how volunteering plays a crucial role in programmes where third sector organisations engage with and support people facing multiple and complex needs on their journey to employment, with many of the volunteers acting as positive role models. That particular theme was less well developed, given the scope of the work involved in the other two themes, and we all recognised that it would benefit from further work, particularly given the future demographic trends and developments in active citizenship.

The Member asked what had been learned. Involvement in the BIC social inclusion group has allowed officials in the Department for Social Development's voluntary and community unit to make valuable contacts with colleagues across the BIC Administrations. Those contacts and the work of the group have allowed us to share our experiences and good practice. Sometimes our experiences have been much more focused than those in other areas, and that can be understood when we are talking to Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man.

Outside the work of the group, there have been reciprocal visits between Administrations and jurisdictions to discuss areas of common

concern. Specifically, there have been visits to and from England and Wales to share details of approaches to the management of relationships between government and the sector. That sharing of information and ideas has greatly assisted us in the development of a new concordat for relationships in the sector, which is intended to replace the 1998 compact and to reflect our newly developed political institutions.

I could go on if the Member wishes —

Mr Weir: Please do not.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): Perhaps I will take my lead from my colleague Mr Weir. Considerable benefits will come from the approach being taken to learning and the sharing of information across the devolved Administrations.

Executive Committee Business

Local Government (Finance) Bill: First Stage

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): I beg to introduce the Local Government (Finance) Bill [NIA 14/09], which is a Bill to make provision for the financial affairs of district councils; to make provision relating to grants to district councils and for payments to councillors and other payments by district councils.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

Committee Business

Standing Committee Membership

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

Resolved:

That the Lord Browne and Mr Stephen Moutray replace the Rt Hon Jeffrey Donaldson MP and Mr Jonathan Craig as members of the Public Accounts Committee. — [Lord Morrow.]

Resolved:

That Mr Mickey Brady replace Mr Billy Leonard as a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges; and that Mr Paul Butler replace Mr Raymond McCartney as a member of the Committee on Procedures. — [Mr P Maskey.]

Resolved:

That Mr Fred Cobain be appointed as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. — [Mr Armstrong.]

Private Members' Business

Cafe Culture Society

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

Mr P Maskey: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to bring forward legislation to enable the hospitality industry to create a cafe culture society similar to that in other European cities, towns and villages to help promote the tourism, leisure and hospitality industries.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Business Committee for rescheduling the motion. It was scheduled to be debated a number of weeks ago but was moved with my agreement to allow Executive Business to be tabled.

The motion is important, because there is some confusion when it comes to the hospitality and tourism sector. In some cases, councils have commended cafes and restaurants on what they have done with the outside of their buildings by placing flowers, tables and chairs to allow people, especially on a day like today, to enjoy the weather as well as their food. People may wish to enjoy a cup of coffee or another type of drink, and they could enjoy the good weather on days such as today. Councils have commended some cafes and restaurants, and, on the very same day, Departments have told them that they must remove their outdoor furniture. That is a contradictory approach. Councils have approved and agreed to the provision of outdoor facilities and commended many of the restaurants and cafes that have taken forward the idea, and I also commend them. Those businesses have invested much money in the current economic climate of hardship.

12.45 pm

I have been contacted by restaurant, cafe and bar owners in Belfast, and there is much anger. At one time, I was a member of Belfast City Council, where a big debate took place on promoting a cafe culture society in Belfast. However, the issue is much larger than being only a matter for

Belfast. Derry city centre management and some of the other smaller towns and villages in the North of Ireland have been trying to move the idea on much more speedily.

Three Departments are responsible for taking the lead on the issue: the Department of the Environment (DOE), the Department for Regional Development (DRD) and the Department for Social Development (DSD). Those Departments will work in tandem with some of the councils. We are calling for legislation, and we hope that we can reach agreement on that in the Assembly even though attendance today is reduced, perhaps because some Members are electioneering. Regardless of the attendance in the Chamber, the motion is important. We want joint working in the Executive, especially among DOE, DRD and DSD, to allow the legislation to be introduced more speedily.

Considerable investment has been made in the streetscape and landscape of our city centres. I urge that more thought and imagination be put into the planning process when cities, towns and villages are being regenerated. That will allow businesses to put forward proposals for outside tables, chairs and awnings to allow people to enjoy their coffee, alcohol or food. It is an important issue.

Businesses have stepped up to the mark by putting their own money into creating a better atmosphere in towns and a nicer society outside their buildings, yet they are being restricted from doing so. A cafe culture encourages the use of the frontage of some of the buildings that are used in the hospitality industry. Specific legislation does not allow for that in places such as Belfast, Omagh and Derry, about which my colleague Raymond McCartney will say a few words. That shows that we lag behind our European counterparts when it comes to providing for hospitality and the tourism industry. There is frustration and confusion out there, and I highlight the difference between councils commending those businesses and Departments telling them to remove outdoor furniture.

The research paper in the Members' information pack contains much discussion about extending licensing hours. The motion is not about that, so I urge Members not to take that from the information pack. I am not calling for licensing hours to be extended. Any of us who have been to European cities will know that people can take their meals outside a restaurant and enjoy

them. Most people sit and “people watch” when they are on holiday. It would be illegal to do that in some of our towns.

It is important that the legislation be introduced as a matter of urgency. We must encourage local people to have pride in their communities and their cities and ensure that tourists who come to the cities, towns and villages of the North of Ireland can promote that pride when they return home. That is an important step.

Some of the cafes in Belfast city centre and throughout the North are not allowed to open until 1.00 pm on Sundays, and I hope that we will be able to debate that issue at a later stage. I have seen hundreds of tourists walking empty streets on Sundays because no businesses are open. The important issue of Sunday opening hours should be looked at when it comes to legislation.

The key to this motion is that the legislation should be brought forward as a matter of urgency to allow businesses to move into the future in a more focused way. Currently, they cannot do that. If it is a nice day in places such as Dublin and Galway, there will be hundreds of people sitting outside cafes enjoying their food. It is wrong that people cannot do that here.

At the moment, if someone has an accident outside a cafe, he or she can bring a claim against that business, because the legislation is not in place. Businesses are, therefore, left open to such claims. Clearly, there are issues with having chairs and tables on footpaths and pavements, because that can restrict wheelchair users, people with disabilities and those pushing prams or buggies. Therefore, legislation needs to be brought forward that allows businesses to see exactly what the criteria are. There must be room on the pavements for people with disabilities such as the blind, who may need a walking aid, and people with prams. It is, therefore, important that that be included in the legislation.

I urge DOE, DRD and DSD, which, I think, took the lead on this issue at one stage, to work together. I looked at some of the debates at Belfast City Council, and this problem has been going on for years. Local businesses are, therefore, frustrated that the issue has not been taken forward. I wish to see more joined-up working among the Departments and councils, because that will enable businesses to move forward. I note that Belfast City Centre

Management has in place a memorandum of understanding among some businesses, but that is not legally binding. I raised the issue of people advertising on the streets. The memorandum states that outside areas cannot be used for advertising purposes but are for people to be able to sit down, relax and enjoy their surroundings.

I want to see cafes here brought into line with those in other places. DETI, the tourism board, the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau and the regional tourism partnerships also have a part to play in promoting a cafe culture. DOE, DRD and DSD need to sit down and work on this. They have been talking about the issue for years. However, I now wish to see legislation to ensure that the hospitality and tourism industry moves forward in a more positive manner by creating jobs and generating more revenue.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. I was in Conway Square in Newtownards this morning, and, although it was a wee bit on the cool side, the sun was shining. There is one restaurant there that opens at about 7.00 am every day, and I saw the intrigue and interest that people had in that venue. I hail from one of the most beautiful of our counties. It has untold tourism potential, with its rich history and modern facilities. I, therefore, agree with the promotion of the tourism, leisure and hospitality industries in the Province and Strangford, in particular. If I did not mention Strangford at least once every time that I spoke in the Chamber, there would be something wrong.

I am not entirely convinced that a cafe culture can help us to achieve our potential, but it can play a part. We need a tourism explosion in the Province that can and should be ignited from the Chamber, and perhaps today's debate is one method of doing that. I have stated in a previous debate on Strangford's tourism potential that the Lonely Planet travel guide said that Northern Ireland is:

“abuzz with life: the cities are pulsating, the economy is thriving and the people, the lifeblood that courses through the country, are in good spirits”.

Belfast was also mentioned in another part of that guide as one of the top 10 cities “on the rise”.

Views of our beautiful historic Province, coupled with the vivacity that is linked with anything that

originates from Northern Ireland, cannot help but draw others to our shores. Perhaps that will be enhanced through today's debate.

Whether it is for rest and recuperation in our salons and five-star hotels, nature holidays, touring the country and residing in quaint B&Bs, touring in a caravan and using our mini-caravan parks or shopping in the city followed by dinner and a show, Northern Ireland has it all. Therefore, it is important that there is a sincere push to show the rest of the world just what we have.

The hidden jewel in the Province's crown is, undoubtedly, Strangford, and Members will shortly hear my colleague from Strangford make similar comments. The breathtaking view from Scrabo Tower in Newtownards to the Mourne on one side, Scotland and the sea on the other and Belfast city behind it is one that cannot be matched or surpassed. In Newtownards town, there is a superior hotel and superior nightlife, a weekly market, cinemas, a great shopping complex and beauty salons aplenty, one of which was an all-Ireland beauty salon finalist. Down the peninsula, there is beauty and wildlife aplenty, with many coffee shops, tea shops, antique shops and superior places to eat. That is just a small selection of what is happening in Strangford.

History and culture are rich around the Ards, with the well-known Scrabo Tower and Mount Stewart house and gardens. We also have the only example of a working fishing village, Portavogie, and the beauty of its landscape is coupled with caravan parks and B&Bs.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to return to the subject of the debate and leave Strangford for the moment.

Mr Shannon: I will mention the debate every now and again through tourism. The reason that I said all that, Mr Deputy Speaker, is quite simple: it is an example of what we can do and what we can use.

In Portaferry, Exploris had 200,000 visitors last year and has the capacity for more. The motion gives us an opportunity to promote that and to do more. In our area, the Battletown gallery of craft and industry has been very successful, as many other folk will tell you. People can come to Eden pottery to buy or make pottery. There is the Castle Espie wetland and wildfowl centre near Comber, and the monastic life is represented by St Patrick and his history in

County Down. All those things are part of the tourism, leisure and hospitality industries that we are trying to promote.

We cannot forget country sports. The game fair at Ballywalter attracts a record number of people through tourism and leisure and is promoted by Ards Borough Council and others. Some American shooters came to that event and spent £50,000, which is an example of what can happen when something is promoted right and taken advantage of.

Through the Budget, the Minister has shown the emphasis that is put on tourism so that it can take its rightful place in the future of Northern Ireland. I ask all Members to recognise and exploit the potential of their constituency, while realising that few will compare with what beautiful Strangford has to offer. The potential and the backing are there. For the benefit of the whole Province, let us make something of it and show Northern Ireland as a beautiful nation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Shannon: I urge Members to support the motion. I am sure that they will and that Members will all come to Strangford next week for their holidays.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The advertisements are over. I call Mr John McCallister.

Mr McCallister: I assume that the Member means Strangford town in the beautiful South Down constituency. However, I will draw the advertising to a close.

Mr Shannon: I mentioned in my introduction the ferry from Portaferry to Strangford. That is the one that I am referring to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. That was an easily earned extra minute.

The Ulster Unionist Party supports the development of the cafe, restaurant and tourism industries. Tourism is recognised as one of the key areas for growth in our economy, and we recognise how a cafe society could promote a vibrant tourist industry in the cities and towns in every constituency across Northern Ireland. We recognise the genuine need for the Department for Regional Development to legislate to regulate sitting-out areas on pavements.

At present, that does not happen. Roads Service has a duty to maintain the public highway and, therefore, can remove anything that causes an obstruction. It should also be noted that, owing to old shop frontage areas, some cafes and restaurants own the areas immediately outside their premises, and that allows their business to spill out on to the streets. However, in the interests of businesses and pedestrians, it is crucial that adequate regulations be introduced that encourage an outdoor service industry while ensuring a free flow of pedestrians around our urban areas and into local shops and amenities.

1.00 pm

The Ulster Unionist Party supports the cafe, restaurant and licensing industries, which play an important role in our society. However, we are cautious about the wording of the motion and its potential ramifications. In calling on the Executive to introduce legislation, Sinn Féin has proposed a motion with a wide scope, which potentially goes beyond the use of pavements by cafes and restaurants.

We must not forget that the intention of the Licensing Act 2003 in England and Wales was to introduce a cafe culture on the mainland. However, by permitting a more flexible licensing regime, the Act allowed pubs and clubs to extend significantly their opening hours and, in some cases —

Mr P Maskey: Will the Member take a point of information?

Mr McCallister: I will.

Mr P Maskey: I thank the Member for giving way. That is why I mentioned that example. The purpose of the motion is to allow businesses to use the space in front of their premises; it does not call for an extension to drinking hours. The motion is about allowing customers of cafes and restaurants — even pubs in some cases — to sit outside and eat their food. It is not about creating additional drinking hours.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful for that clarification. I apologise for not being in the House to hear the Member's opening remarks.

It is important that we learn lessons from our colleagues across the water, who, by extending licensing hours, let a culture of all-day drinking develop. The concept of moving towards a more European culture is fine, but the Member will understand the problems that it creates,

such as binge drinking, which puts enormous pressure on policing resources. Binge drinking also has enormous implications for our Health Service, which is already struggling with financial pressures.

That point needs to be made. It would have been very useful to include wording to that effect in the text of the motion, because there would be huge concern if we were to extend the licensing hours without proper debate and scrutiny. An extension of licensing hours would require serious consideration, because of all the problems that I mentioned. The Member, like me and other Members present, knows that we are experiencing many antisocial behaviour problems and that our towns are almost becoming no-go areas at certain times of the day. All-day drinking is not something that we want to promote.

We should learn lessons from across the water and promote the positive aspects of having a cafe culture. One has only to think of the example of the Holylands area of Belfast, which has been blighted by antisocial behaviour and serious binge drinking problems. Therefore, we need to be cautious.

The Minister for Social Development proposed changes to the licensing laws. We need to ensure that any changes would benefit all our society and tackle health and antisocial behaviour problems.

We support the concept of promoting a cafe culture. The benefits of such a culture to tourism could be enormous, and it is something that we want across constituencies in all parts of Northern Ireland —

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

Mr McCallister: — particularly in beautiful South Down.

Mr McDevitt: If the debate highlights one point, it is the disconnect that still exists in this region's Executive. The debate is an important one, and the SDLP thanks its colleagues for bringing the motion to the House.

However, it points out how little connection takes place in reality, because, to fulfil the potential for a cafe culture, we need a planning system that understands the economic opportunities of tourism, a regeneration strategy that is willing to

support that in the long term and a civic culture that is embracing and open.

A famous economist in America called Richard Florida talked about the concept of a creative city, which is the very place where a cafe culture would flourish. He said that a creative city is a brilliant place that brings together people who disagree. It is a place where there is talent, not only in the street-watching sense of the word, but where there are people who have the ability to use their brains and knowledge to deepen the economy. It is also a place with a technological base where business flourishes because the community welcomes difference. Most importantly, it is a place of tolerance.

I wish that we could debate cafe culture or the broader questions of a tourism strategy in a much more strategic way and that we did not have to bring private Members' motions to the House to give some voice to such opportunities. By definition, a private Members' motion — welcome as it is — will fall short of what is needed. Quite simply, we need to transform Belfast from the ghost town that it is every Sunday morning. I am sure that, like me, many Members have, from time to time and in a desperate attempt to redeem themselves, offered to take their family for a Sunday morning breakfast. I am sure that Members who, like me, represent a constituency that extends to the city centre feel a duty to bring their family into the centre. However, there is nowhere to eat and, in the summer, there is practically nowhere in the city to sit outside. Although I do not know for certain, I suspect that it is the same in Derry, Enniskillen or Newry.

In fact, the opportunity to create great civic spaces and great open spaces and to bring people together to enjoy the civic amenities and the great historical environs do not exist because, simply, the legislation does not reconnect. For example, the Highways Act 1980 puts barriers in place of the successful creation of a cafe culture, because it prevents the use of pavements. Although the draft tourism strategy, which spans from 2010 to 2020, welcomes the principle of a cafe culture and says that it would be great at a regional level, it does not identify any of the barriers that exist in other Departments that could prevent it coming into being. I welcome Mr Maskey's acknowledgement that the Department for Social Development (DSD) has made efforts to stimulate debate on the area. However, because of that Department's limited powers,

the regeneration policy falls well short of what is needed to fulfil the opportunity for the establishment of a genuine cafe culture.

At the weekend, I visited Galway to spend some time with colleagues in the Labour Party. On Saturday afternoon, we left our conference for an hour or two to enjoy the summer sun. The walk along Shop Street was a truly wonderful experience. It was bunged; there is no other word for it. People were sitting outside every shop, cafe and pub enjoying the atmosphere, the craic and the weather in a city that all of us cannot help but feel a huge affinity towards. We could have the same. However, for that to happen, our Executive need to change the way that they do business. I welcome the motion and, even if it does nothing other than stimulate that point and begin to question all our parties about how we do business together and how we approach problems that do not fall neatly to specific Departments, it will have been worthwhile.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I speak on behalf of the Alliance Party to support every effort to encourage and expand our tourism industry, including, of course, the hospitality industry.

Northern Ireland has a wonderful opportunity to increase the visitor footfall in every part of the region, and we must seize every chance to encourage visitors from all over the world. The motion puts forward ideas that could enable Northern Ireland to catch up — I stress the words “catch up” — with other areas.

It is unfortunate that we do not have long periods of sunshine, but that is no reason to do nothing. Indeed, I understand that a cafe culture is enjoyed in some European countries that have even harsher weather than we do. Some establishments in those countries provide heaters on the pavements outside their properties in wintertime, thus offering visitors continued enjoyment outside. If we are serious about catching up with other areas, a cafe culture must be available seven days a week. There must also be an opportunity to enjoy a beer or whatever outside in a controlled manner. As a teetotaler, I do not mind anyone having a beer outside on a Saturday or Sunday.

We must be serious about competing with cities, towns and villages across the water and in the Republic. Tourists who come here are astonished at the lack of facilities that are available and open for business, particularly

on a Sunday. Our comrade Conall McDevitt mentioned his own experience, which is also relevant. As I listened to the wireless on my way into work this morning, I heard an American visitor who was caught up in the current air disruptions complain bitterly about having had nothing to do in our capital city of Belfast yesterday. We have many lessons to learn.

To achieve the goal of having a cafe culture in Northern Ireland, we need new legislation on licensed premises and their environs. Members have already mentioned that, and it is outlined in the motion. I understand that planning permission, or at least approval from Roads Service, would be required to site chairs and tables on public footpaths. The last thing that we want is footpaths being restricted by any obstacle that inhibits the free passage of prams, wheelchairs and the general public. There is much to do to promote our tourism potential. As Mr Shannon said, the Strangford constituency, for example, has everything to offer as regards tourism. I fully support the motion.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé ag labhairt le tacaíocht a thabhairt don mholadh. Ba mhaith liom fosta mo bhuíochas a ghabháil le Paul Maskey agus le Barry McElduff as ucht an moladh a thabhairt os comhair an Tionóil inniu. I thank Paul Maskey and Barry McElduff for tabling this important motion, which will be welcomed by those in the cafe and restaurant industries, the hospitality industry as a whole and, indeed, other tourism and retail outlets in city centres.

As Members pointed out and is evidenced in Members' information packs, the de facto situation is that many of our coffee shops already have outside sitting areas that are well used and are of great benefit to the owners of the premises and the trade in the surrounding area. Unfortunately, as regards the exact legal position, outstanding issues such as liability and access to premises have still to be resolved. Some cafe and restaurant owners have gone ahead and created the de facto situation. However, others have not done so because of their pressing concerns, and they do not want the hassle of having to confront or deal with issues such as access and liability.

As has also been pointed out, a number of Departments including DRD, DSD and DOE have a role to play in resolving the matter.

Departments should recognise what is said in the debate and come together to do that. The memorandum of understanding contained in our information packs provides the basis for discussion and, perhaps, legislation. Conall McDevitt described the situation in Galway, and anyone who has visited Galway will understand what he meant. The legislation and regulation is there, so it may not be hard to lift it and translate it to here.

Most importantly, many in the industry believe that it will not take a huge amount of work to facilitate a move forward. They feel frustrated; where a number of Departments are involved, progress can be slow and cumbersome and difficulties are not resolved as quickly as they could be.

1.15 pm

The owners of premises are clear that outside access increases their trade. Examples of other cities are cited. People in Derry point to the experience of Galway, and even Belfast, as examples of how cities can be improved. I know that a number of cafes in the centre of Derry are attached to large shopping malls and therefore have access to space outside the premises. The cafe owner will tell you that that is an added benefit of the location. Regulations protect his cafe, so he does not have to worry about that aspect. Even in enclosed malls, it is obvious that cafes with outside access enjoy an enhanced trade because people see the cafe and use it much more often.

For a trader, that is important. Ensuring that customers know that the premises are there is a big part of bringing them into the premises. Owners of small restaurants and cafes do not have large advertising budgets, so they need people to see their premises, and having outside facilities allows them to be seen. If Jim Shannon ever retires from politics, I have absolutely no doubt that he will get a job in PR. I have heard of Tourism Ireland, but Tourism Strangford seems to have sprung up this morning.

The issue is important. Last Tuesday in Parliament Buildings, the six Foyle MLAs, representing parties across the board, met traders with premises in the centre of Derry. The meeting was not restricted to owners of cafes and restaurants, but included other traders. They pointed out that, increasingly, city centres are becoming less attractive to retail traders and small businesses. That trend may be seen in many

towns and cities throughout Ireland. They told us what they required for their trades, and they talked about the bigger issues such as rates and out-of-town shopping.

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

Mr McCartney: Sin é. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

It falls to me to make the winding-up speech. Someone rather unkindly asked Paul Maskey earlier whether this debate could be characterised as 'Tiocfaidh ár latte'. I thought that that was unusual.

All Members have entered into the spirit of the debate. It is a very positive motion that is aimed at regenerating town and city centres. Paul Maskey has highlighted the anomaly of cafes or restaurants receiving recognition or awards one morning and being told by a government Department to remove the outside seating that afternoon. Paul drew attention to best practice in other parts of Europe. He said that the motion was not about extending drinking hours, which would throw up community safety concerns and others about binge drinking. He emphasised that it is about facilitating customers who want to eat food outdoors in a pleasant environment. He mentioned Belfast, Derry and Omagh. I was glad to hear him mention Omagh, because, like every other Member, I represent a constituency. If there was a competition for Members' speedy reference to their constituencies, Jim Shannon would definitely win. It is like the competition for the fastest goal of the season. Jim reaches Strangford in seconds: he does not take minutes.

This issue is all about legislation and joint working, as Paul Maskey reminded us, not least between the Department for Social Development, the Department for Regional Development, the Department of the Environment and local government. He also mentioned that Sunday opening hours were unduly restrictive in cities such as Belfast.

Like other Members, including Kieran McCarthy, he mentioned that no one would want to restrict access for people with disabilities or visual impairment and parents with prams or buggies, and, therefore, the legislation would need to take that into account.

Jim Shannon, who spoke next, reached Newtownards in record time. At one point he talked about tea shops, although I was not sure whether he said "Taoiseach" or "tea shops".

Mr Shannon: "Tea shops" would be right, Barry.

Mr McElduff: I know. In a Hansard Report from Westminster from about 100 years ago, or perhaps less, a reference to a meeting with the "Taoiseach" in Dublin was wrongly recorded as meeting in a "tea shop" in Dublin. That is why I was confused when Jim talked about tea shops.

Raymond McCartney was right to say that tourism needs champions and ambassadors, and Jim Shannon is definitely one of those. However, he could have tabled a motion for an Adjournment debate called "the promotion of tourism and visitor attractions in Strangford" and that would have fitted the bill too.

John McCallister had an early spat with Jim Shannon when he claimed ownership of Strangford town. He emphasised that tourism is a major growth area, and he reminded us about DRD's responsibility to maintain and control the use of pavements. He was concerned about the wording of the motion because he, too, was worried about the problem that has been experienced in England and Wales with extended licensing hours. Paul Maskey intervened to remind the House that that is not what the motion is about; it is essentially about traders making use of the front of their premises and allowing people to take and consume food outdoors. Hardly anyone mentioned that the weather in this part of the world is not terribly clement for that sort of thing, but we all make do with what we have.

Conall McDevitt welcomed the motion and said that he felt that it would help to stimulate wider debate in the Assembly and the Executive on issues that do not fit neatly into one Department or where it is not obvious that one Department is responsible. He said that the debate served to remind us of the disconnection in our government system and that the planning system should be about enabling economic development and regeneration. He talked about a civic culture and his recent experience of the atmosphere, weather and craic in Galway, which was certainly enhanced by the opportunity to consume food outdoors, as he witnessed at the weekend. He bemoaned the fact that Sunday morning in Belfast can be rather ghostly, with nowhere for people to eat or sit outdoors. He

explained that legislative hurdles exist, that there are barriers in many Departments and that, therefore, considerable joint working will be necessary.

Kieran McCarthy acknowledged that there is great scope for us to catch up. He said that a cafe culture is not totally weather dependent and that people can come up with ways and means of making it appealing, even in inclement weather. He seemed to catch Cathal Boylan's attention when he mentioned a beer. I felt that Cathal was distracted at that point. His ears pricked up when you mentioned a beer, and he said, albeit from a sedentary position, "Now you're talking."

Mr Boylan: Only if he is buying, Barry.

Mr McElduff: He is hoping that you are buying, Kieran.

Mr McCarthy: No chance.

Mr McElduff: OK. Kieran McCarthy reminded the House that we are talking about putting chairs on public footpaths and people's freedom of movement must not be restricted. That reminded me of a debate that took place in Omagh about street furniture and how, for example, users of the Blind Centre made a vital contribution to the consultation. They made sure that their voices were heard in the debate on what street furniture would be installed in Omagh town.

As I have just mentioned my county town, I want to praise the private sector for its involvement in stimulating the development and regeneration of Main Street in Omagh. Essentially, the main thoroughfares in Omagh are High Street and Market Street. However, a new street called Main Street has been created.

Mr McCartney: It would be interesting to see who would win: Barry McElduff racing to Omagh or Jim Shannon to Newtownards?

Mr McElduff: I thank Raymond for that; he is very helpful, as always.

Main Street in Omagh is an enclosed space but, again, it has the ambience that we are trying to create in our city and town centres. Raymond McCartney referred to the memorandum of understanding. He said that it is not rocket science and that there are examples of best practice that could be used here. However, such examples would have to be amended to suit the

particular circumstances of Belfast, Derry, other towns, or Newtownards for that matter.

Raymond McCartney also said that, because the creation of cafe culture society would involve a number of Departments, the process tends to be slow and cumbersome. Like other Members, he referred to the fact that there has been a lot of exploration of the issue, and that it is now time to move towards legislation. He said that, as a number of cafes in Derry are attached to shopping malls, an atmosphere has already been created. He mentioned the fact that it is increasingly difficult to get people to visit city centres because of the existence of out-of-town shopping facilities. Therefore, the creation of a cafe culture society would obviously help in that battle. Raymond went on to say that owners of small and medium-sized cafes and restaurants do not have large marketing budgets. Therefore, the creation of such a society would also enhance their ability to compete in business.

I thank all Members who contributed to the debate. I would like the motion to be resolved with unanimous support.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We cannot put the Question because we do not have a quorum.

Notice taken that 10 Members were not present.

House counted, and there being fewer than 10 Members present, the Deputy Speaker ordered the Division Bells to be rung.

Upon 10 Members being present —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank Mr Kennedy. We now have a quorum.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to bring forward legislation to enable the hospitality industry to create a cafe culture society similar to that in other European cities, towns and villages to help promote the tourism, leisure and hospitality industries.

Private Members' Business

St Patrick's Day

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

Mr McCarthy: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Secretary of State to proclaim St Patrick's Day a full and permanent public holiday in Northern Ireland to help boost tourism and the local economy.

Once again, I am delighted to have the opportunity to seek the consensus and, hopefully, the support of the Northern Ireland Assembly to put the request to the Secretary of State to have St Patrick's Day — 17 March — proclaimed a public holiday for everyone in Northern Ireland.

It is now more than 10 years since I stood in this very spot and proposed a similar motion, to which an amendment was tabled. The then Assembly agreed to call on Her Majesty's Government to proclaim St Patrick's Day a public holiday. Unfortunately, that has not happened. Let us hope that the incoming Secretary of State, whoever it is, takes a more positive attitude to the decisions of the Assembly and acts accordingly —

Mr Kennedy: It could be me.

Mr McCarthy: It could be you.

I thank Research and Library Service for preparing the information packs for the debate. It is most interesting to look back on the proceedings of 7 February 2000 and read what Members had to say. It is 10 years on and, thankfully, there is now more maturity, and a lot of political progress has been made. Indeed, there has been a lot of coming together for the common good and recognition of issues that we all agree on. Certainly, many things were said 10 years ago that quite possibly pertain today. However, something that was agreed in 2000 and remains the same is that St Patrick brought a message to this country, and we should build on that to share in the heritage that is good, positive and recognised throughout the world.

1.30 pm

My motion emphasises the potential for tourism and the local economy by making St Patrick's Day a public holiday for everyone. To capitalise on that, many material issues need to be considered and put into practice. Indeed, the previous motion would, if and when implemented, contribute in a positive and beneficial way to encourage visitors and locals alike to come to these shores and experience the warmth, culture, music and arts etc, all of which have the potential to expand our economic opportunities considerably. St Patrick's Day is celebrated on every continent, and such potential must be exploited to the full in Northern Ireland.

There is an anomaly that we wish to see addressed. St Patrick's Day is a bank holiday, but not everyone works in a bank, the Civil Service or, indeed, the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Secretary of State could take the necessary steps to secure the holiday for everyone, and we hope that he will do so. The Assembly and Executive have given their commitment to pursue a shared and better future for the people of Northern Ireland. A perfect opportunity for that exists through all our citizens being able to attend, and join in with, community activities to celebrate our patron saint on 17 March. At present, many schools do not enjoy those festivities, and I am certain that they would value the opportunity to join in. It is also interesting to note the many changes and advances since our last debate on the subject, including St Patrick's Trail, which is well organised and signposted. It has, and will undoubtedly, bring tourists to our shores all year round.

The business section of the 'Belfast Telegraph' of 16 March 2010 showed how the hospitality industry is cashing in on the potential of St Patrick's Day. It states that Downpatrick's:

"week-long St Patrick's Festival pulls in 35,000 visitors and generates £1m for the Down district".

Such opportunities could be replicated around Northern Ireland. The same article mentions a local bakery having a 15% growth in sales over the St Patrick's Day period.

I hope that Members support the motion, that the Secretary of State acknowledges the voice of local people and takes the necessary steps to fulfil the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland, and that we do not have to wait another 10 years for action on this important matter.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. I agree with the previous Member and hope that it will not be another number of years before a decision is made and the matter moved forward.

We all know the ebbs and flows in how St Patrick's Day has been viewed throughout Ireland as a whole. In the North, things have obviously been quite different in recent decades, although there has been some improvement. There have also been various efforts to claim ownership of St Patrick. Most were based on the well-practised routine of reading history backwards, a practice that has gone on in this Chamber and in local council chambers. That was the negative side of how things were. There was some polarisation, although I would not call it deep polarisation.

I remember a case in which parents took two of their children out of a school that did not close for St Patrick's Day. They went to the festivities and next day gave the brothers little notes for their respective teachers explaining that they were off school the previous day because they had gone to enjoy the St Patrick's Day celebrations.

The teacher referred to them by name — for convenience, I shall call them “the Smiths” — saying that, yesterday, the Smiths were away at a republican gathering. The young fellas felt under pressure because no one else had been to such a gathering.

That is the sort of negative thing that happened in the past, but we are in a new, evolving and positive era. We are where we are, and although it would also have been opportune to do so all those years ago, we must take the positivity forward by upping our game to ensure that St Patrick's Day becomes a public holiday — not merely a bank holiday — bringing commonality with other regions on the island.

To pick up on the commonality theme, another parallel across the island is the schools' cup rugby final, which many northerners associate with St Patrick's Day. They might think of that as a grand but isolated sporting occasion; however, on St Patrick's Day, similar sporting occasions take place throughout Ireland. That has been a tradition for many years. Throughout Ireland on St Patrick's Day, rugby and Gaelic — hurling and football — finals take place. Such commonality has existed for many years, and those occasions have been enjoyed by people the length and breadth of the island.

Such commonality would be complemented by the measure that we are discussing today, which would enable all the Provinces to get involved in the various events that take place throughout the island. Let us look to the whole island and endorse the making of St Patrick's Day a public holiday, because it would be a major step forward. Without taking sides or favouring one tradition over another, it would be a great sign of civic commonality for all people, not just those who get a bank holiday. Everyone should enjoy the benefits of a public holiday on 17 March.

Supporting this straightforward step today would enable those who look on the religious heritage of the day to enjoy it while the sporting occasions and other events that are scheduled for St Patrick's Day would be open to all to take part in or view. At some stage in the future, I can even imagine an annual rota for each of the four Provinces, with people from each one attending events and coming together to celebrate symbolically the national day.

Tourism is at the core of the motion, and the freedom that a public holiday would give us would promote that tourism. For once, tourism on the island of Ireland should benefit from the potential that major St Patrick's Day celebrations enjoy elsewhere. Why should Ireland, north, south, east and west, not be part of that?

Mr Kennedy: I welcome and support the motion to make St Patrick's Day a public holiday. In the past, when the proposal was debated in the Chamber, it received widespread political support, and it is a matter of regret that no action has been taken to upgrade the bank holiday to a full public holiday. Everyone should be able to honour St Patrick, who, it is important to remember, did not bring religion to Ireland; he brought Christianity, which is a different matter entirely.

The motion affords us an opportunity to honour St Patrick's reputation properly and to restore it, because, unfortunately and for whatever reason, in the past, certain people sought to make St Patrick a card-carrying member of some republican group.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Member agree that one of the most positive signs over recent years, and one that continues today, is that the Orange Order in Ballymena honours St Patrick by way of a parade? In the past, when St Patrick's Day fell on a suitable day, Orangemen in Belfast were proud to walk wearing their collarettes and the shamrock at the same time.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member may have an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for drawing to our attention that important and welcome aspect of St Patrick's Day, which, like the custom of presenting shamrock to British Army regiments of the line, in the past, some people have chosen to overlook or even deny. Those are important traditions that can be built upon.

There are opportunities for the tourism industry to better promote St Patrick's Day. Many of our councils have gone to considerable trouble to try to make parades more inclusive. Down District Council has made great strides in making its parade open and accessible to all sections of the community. Unfortunately, that has not been replicated in other districts, but we look forward to further progress being made.

It is particularly important that schoolchildren throughout our education system have the opportunity to learn more about St Patrick and appreciate the huge contribution that he and others made to bringing Christianity here. Making St Patrick's Day a school and public holiday would be an important step in that direction. That raises the wider issue of how public and bank holidays are currently spread across the year.

It strikes me as very odd that the year's principal religious festival, Easter, is over before anyone can be given a public or a bank holiday. Admittedly, the banks and some government offices close on Good Friday, but, it is my view that Good Friday should be a full public holiday. It is a bizarre notion that something called Easter Tuesday — without any historical link or rationale — is simply given as a holiday in conjunction with Easter Monday, because those days begin the working week and thus mark the religious festival of Easter. That is an issue that needs to be addressed. The Assembly and the Executive can make a contribution locally by restoring St Patrick's Day as a public holiday and looking again at the present public holidays to see whether we can properly mark an important festival such as Easter with Good Friday as a day off.

Therefore, I broadly support the motion tabled by Mr McCarthy, who has doggedly pursued the issue of designating St Patrick's Day a public holiday. I wish him well.

Mr A Maginness: I thank Mr McCarthy for tabling his motion. He comes from County Down, which

is very much associated with the patron saint of Ireland, St Patrick. It is a measure of Members' political maturity that the motion is non-contentious and is supported by everybody in the Chamber. I welcome that as an important step, as, I am sure, does the motion's proposer.

My one regret is that we have to go to the Secretary of State to seek the creation of a public holiday on St Patrick's Day. That is a poor reflection on the Assembly's current powers. However, if the opinion of the House is united, I am sure that that request will be successful.

1.45 pm

Mr Leonard and other Members talked about the commonality of St Patrick to all traditions in Ireland, including Catholic, Protestant and those who have no particular religious tradition. All cultural and political traditions value St Patrick in a religious sense and, to some extent, in a secular sense. For many centuries, this island was regarded as one of saints and scholars, an isle of people who were dedicated to spirituality and learning. If we bear that in mind, St Patrick's Day could become an important focal point for all of us, no matter what our tradition. It could become something in which we could celebrate our identity, whether that be Catholic or Protestant, nationalist or unionist. It is a great tribute to St Patrick, who brought Christianity to this island, that people, no matter what their tradition or how diverse their views, regard him symbolically as the patron of this island.

As the proposer of the motion pointed out, there is tremendous value for tourism and the economy. However, St Patrick has even greater value in respect of bringing people together. In many ways, St Patrick is an exemplar of partnership on this island.

Mr K Robinson: I agree totally with the Member. However, does he agree that some of the scenes that we have witnessed on St Patrick's Day, particularly over recent years, do nothing to encourage the image that all of us in the Chamber wish to see and the potential that lies in the day?

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

Mr A Maginness: I think that the Member is referring to the rather bacchanalian scenes in the Holylands area of Belfast, which is a matter of great regret. That issue is being addressed by

the universities, the police, the civil authorities, Belfast City Council and others. It denigrates the celebration of St Patrick and what he stands for.

Ulster has a particular place in the life of St Patrick, because many of his works took place in Ulster. In particular, we recall his sojourn on Slemish as a slave. We also recall the fact that he is reputed to be buried in Downpatrick, County Down. There is a tremendous association between St Patrick and Ulster, which could be of great value in developing a tourist attraction for visitors to the North of Ireland. St Patrick's Trail is underdeveloped; it is important that we emphasise that because we are emphasising a cultural tourism that is attractive to those outside this island who genuinely see it as a focal point for spirituality and learning. If that can be developed, that is well and good.

Belfast has made considerable and significant strides to make the celebration of St Patrick a truly cross-community event. I hope that further efforts will be made in that direction. We are breaking through and creating a genuine non-sectarian celebration of St Patrick in Belfast. Let us hope that further work on that can develop. I support the motion.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. When one looks at the attendance in the Chamber today, one would think that this is a public holiday. People talk about abstentionist parties. Where are the DUP Members today? There were no SDLP Members present at the start of the debate. Maybe people who talk about abstentionism should look in the mirror and ask themselves if they too are abstentionists.

I thank Kieran McCarthy for bringing the motion to the Chamber today. I know that he has raised it with the Business Committee on many occasions, but it has finally been agreed and brought forward to the House today. So, fair play to you, Kieran, for sticking with it.

When one looks at St Patrick's Day celebrations around the world, one does not have to look any further than New York, where it takes somewhere in the region of seven hours for the parade to pass. Many people leave this island to go to New York and other places around the world to celebrate our patron saint, St Patrick. That is all well and good, but the motion talks about tourism, and it is very important that, at the very least, we create a public holiday here on St Patrick's Day. Someone mentioned that it

is a shame that we have to call on the Secretary of State to achieve that. Sinn Féin wants to see more powers devolved from Britain so that we can make such decisions in this Chamber. If we were able to do so, with the support of all the parties, things would happen sooner rather than later. We should use this debate to make that happen sooner. Therefore, we want more powers to be devolved please.

There is confusion, because some schools are closed and some are not, some businesses are closed and some are not, and people are asking how they can plan for the future. In recent years, I have been a regular attendee at the Belfast parade, and, when I was a councillor on Belfast City Council, I and my party colleagues fought very hard to ensure that Belfast recognised St Patrick's Day and put some funding towards the parade that is now a yearly event in Belfast city centre. That is a step in the right direction. For too long, people sectarianised St Patrick when they voted against the parade in Belfast city centre. It is a good sign that, when it comes to the patron saint, sectarianism is reducing. If the motion is passed, and if St Patrick's Day becomes a public holiday, that will, hopefully, reduce the sectarian aspect, because everyone will be able to enjoy it.

Some Members mentioned the events that have taken place in the Holylands in recent years. Universities do not have any right, at this stage, to have a public holiday, but, if it were a public holiday, I am sure that a lot of people would go back to where they live rather than staying in places such as the Holylands. That might reduce the numbers of people —

Mr K Robinson: Does the Member realise that his colleague Mr McElduff, who is sitting at the far end, would have to wrestle with all those problems if students were to go back home?

Mr P Maskey: I do not think that there would be any better man than Barry McElduff to deal with some of those issues, because he is a very hard-working constituency member. Mr McElduff and the rest of the Sinn Féin MLAs would prove to be very effective on that issue. Thank you for pointing that out.

It is a very important issue for tourism. Let Northern Ireland have the best tourism product. St Patrick is buried near the constituency of the Member who tabled the motion. Let us promote St Patrick's Day, and let us bring thousands of people from America, England and elsewhere

around the world here to celebrate the patron saint's day and spend money here instead of elsewhere. People fly all over the world to celebrate St Patrick's Day. Let them stay locally, and let us move forward in the right direction to ensure that we, and the tourism infrastructure here, can benefit greatly.

As was said in the previous debate on the creation of a cafe culture, such developments can create more employment opportunities. People in businesses are crying out for more such activity; it is about product development, and that is exactly what we need to do.

St Patrick is the patron saint and many people worship him, but it is important to say that he is also part of the tourism product. I thank Kieran for bringing the motion to the House. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Neeson: I did not expect to be called so soon to make my winding-up speech. Like other Members, I thank Kieran McCarthy for bringing forward the motion; I also thank Research and Library Services for their research on it. Interestingly, their paper includes the Hansard report of the previous debate on the issue in 2000. It is interesting to note that half those who voted on that occasion are no longer Members. That debate was quite acrimonious, but, hopefully, we are moving forward and are being seen to be moving forward and providing leadership to the community.

Mr A Maginness: I recall that debate. Fortunately, I am in the half that is still in the House. I recall that Dr Paisley came out in support of the motion, whereas some of his colleagues, notably Mr Sammy Wilson, who had spoken before Dr Paisley, did not. Following Sammy Wilson's contribution, Dr Paisley came in and, much to Mr Wilson's embarrassment, said that he agreed with the motion.

Mr Neeson: As Sammy Wilson is my MP, I will have a word in his ear to try to persuade him. He is looking for votes at the moment, but, unfortunately, I cannot promise him mine.

Every year, numerous politicians trip off to the United States and to the White House. Why not invite President Obama to come here for next year's St Patrick's Day? That would be a significant step forward.

There is general recognition that St Patrick's Day should be a public holiday. I will quote from the

comment column of the 'Belfast Telegraph' from St Patrick's Day 2009, which was included in the report by Research and Library Services. It said:

"Finding a common way to celebrate St Patrick would be another step towards normality and better community relations. The power sharing Executive and Assembly should start preparing the ground for next year by devising plans for bigger and more inclusive festivities throughout Northern Ireland on March 17. They should build on what is already happening in cities and towns like Newry, Belfast, Downpatrick, Londonderry and Armagh. And the politicians could give the celebrations a real boost by declaring St Patrick's Day a public holiday. Now that would be an added reason to party."

That editorial reflects the feelings of most people.

Members referred to the fact that some schools are closed and some open. If we are to make St Patrick's Day a cross-community event, we need to look at schools' policy for St Patrick's Day.

Billy Leonard, rightly, spoke about civic commonality. Danny Kennedy said that he regretted that action had not been taken so far and that all schoolchildren should be given more opportunity to learn about St Patrick. Alban Maginness is correct that the motion is not contentious. He regrets that we have to ask the Secretary of State to proclaim St Patrick's Day a public holiday. Paul Maskey referred to that as well. Alban Maginness also said that St Patrick can bring people together. Paul Maskey reflected on the low attendance in the Chamber for the debate. I agree with him. It is disappointing that there are not more Members here.

2.00 pm

I look forward to a unanimous vote in support of the motion. We, as an elected Assembly, should not hold back and should go to the Secretary of State now to ask that St Patrick's Day 2011 be made a public holiday, so that preparations can be made for that. Once again, I thank Kieran for bringing the motion forward. I hope that the vote is unanimous.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Secretary of State to proclaim St Patrick's Day a full and permanent public holiday in Northern Ireland to help boost tourism and the local economy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item of business is Question Time. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.30 pm. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 2.01 pm.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mr Speaker: I give Members advance warning that Mr McCann is not in his place to ask question 1, and question 9 has been withdrawn. It is useful to give Members advance notice, especially of questions that have been withdrawn.

Mephedrone

2. **Mr McDevitt** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to regulate the supply of mephedrone, in light of the increased use of and deaths from consumption of the drug. (AQO 1049/10)

3. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the dangers of mephedrone and the need for this substance to be banned. (AQO 1050/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 2 and 3 together.

Following recent reports of the availability of mephedrone and emerging evidence of its harms in Northern Ireland, I wrote to the chairperson of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) and the Home Secretary asking them to take forward the issue as a matter of urgency. I also spoke directly to the Home Secretary on the matter. On 29 March 2010, the ACMD recommended that mephedrone and all generic cathinones should be classified as class B drugs. The Home Secretary has accepted this recommendation, and mephedrone became illegal to possess or supply on 16 April 2010. In addition, its importation was banned on 29 March 2010.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr McDevitt to ask a supplementary question, did the Minister intend to group questions 2, 3 and 15?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I beg your pardon. Yes, I intended to group questions 2, 3 and 15.

Question 15 was as follows:

15. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking in relation to mephedrone. (AQO 1062/10)

Mr McDevitt: I thank the Minister for his reply, and I welcome the decisions that he mentioned. However, does he agree that it is time to review the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and, in particular, to review the principle at the heart of that Act: that we have to wait for a drug to be proven to be dangerous before it can be withdrawn? That is anomalous and contrary to the procedure used for commercial drugs, which are assumed to be dangerous until they are approved. Does the Minister agree that we should call on the British Government to review the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 at a regional level?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have done exactly that. In my conversations and correspondence with Alan Johnson, I suggested a new class D for dangerous drugs. Mr McDevitt is quite right: it is long past time to update the 1971 Act. As a drug emerges, it is tested to determine whether it should be legal or illegal. Drugs are coming forward swiftly. BZP was made illegal at Christmas. Mephedrone emerged at exactly the same time, and it is now illegal, along with the generic group. However, there is no doubt that the next drug is coming down the line as we speak. Therefore, the proper approach is that the next drug should be classified as illegal and then proved to be harmless and beneficial and allowed in due course. It should be the reverse of what is happening now.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his answer and the work that he and his Department have done recently on this serious matter. On the back of a packed public meeting in Carrickfergus last Thursday night, I ask what support is now available for families and victims. Is there any increased support, particularly as the Minister has alluded to the new drug NRG-1, which is coming out, and as MDAI is already on websites?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I will write to Mr Hilditch in more detail. A wide range of support is available,

and that information is published on the Public Health Agency's fact file, which began with mephedrone on 5 February 2010. We also have the national drugs helpline and a range of local services, such as FASA, ASCERT and the Dunlewey Substance Advice Centre for those who are concerned about the harm that drugs can cause. The Lifeline helpline on 0808 808 8000 deals with self-harm and suicide, and it will signal and counsel the next step to access services. The whole health and social care family is also on alert so that people can present at GP surgeries. However, I am happy to write to the Member with further information.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his response and for the actions that he has taken. What liaison has there been between the Minister and either the Department of Health in England or the Department of Justice here on replacement drugs for mephedrone? My understanding is that new drugs have already taken the place of mephedrone on the streets and are being sold at a cheap rate, which is placing our young people in great danger.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Even though we have established the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland, making drugs illegal remains a reserved matter that falls within the remit and authority of the Home Secretary, who is advised by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. However, as I said in my answer to Mr McDevitt, a way forward could lie in short-circuiting the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971.

Through the British-Irish Council, representatives from England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic routinely participate in meetings in misuse of drugs sectoral format, which are held at least three times a year. That group plays an important role in liaising on drugs policy. The misuse of drugs is a common problem that we all face. The Home Secretary acted very quickly on mephedrone, but we need to short-circuit the process.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the move to ban mephedrone. Does the Minister agree that we should examine the supply and demand issues of drugs in our communities? To do that, a multiagency approach is needed. Will the Minister confirm if he has carried out any multiagency work on illegal drugs?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Several issues are involved, including the supply issue, which we have already spoken about, the legislative issue, which I believe needs to be worked on, and the demand issue. They are very much the focus of the 'New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs (2006-2011)', which is a key strategy of my Department.

The Public Health Agency is also working with parents and professionals. It published a fact sheet on its website on 5 February 2010 that alerted the health and social care family to the problems of legal highs, and it is working with councils and locally elected representatives. The Department of Education is also issuing a letter to schools based on the information contained in that fact sheet.

The misuse of drugs is a societal problem and not one that either the Public Health Agency or the Department can solve individually. However, steps are being taken, and further meetings will be held involving the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education, the Public Health Agency and the new Department of Justice, under the auspices of the old Northern Ireland Office, to carry forward information on suppressing demand, dealing with supply, legislation and the further work that we are engaged in.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has already been answered.

Families Matter

4. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the Families Matter strategy, particularly the involvement of health visitors and the Public Health Agency. (AQO 1051/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department established a strategic implementation group, which includes representatives from the Public Health Agency and health visitors, to prepare the initial Families Matter implementation plan for 2009-2011. That plan has now been finalised, and it sets out the initial priorities identified in the development of the strategy. It will be used to monitor, evaluate and review progress and to identify future areas for development. The

Regional Health and Social Care Board will lead on that implementation.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he advise the House whether there are any proposals to introduce a pilot of family nurse partnerships in Northern Ireland and whether he will launch an action plan for the Families Matter strategy?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As Miss McIlveen will be aware, I launched the Families Matter strategy in March 2009, following publication. It aims to assist parents to be confident and responsible in helping their children, working in conjunction with children's services and planning in the Regional Health and Social Care Board. I have invested moneys in that area.

The other part of the work that the Department is carrying out is the Healthier Future strategy, which is being led by the Public Health Agency. That strategy focuses particularly on the work of health visitors and nurses to ensure that children in care and in need get the services that they require. That work is ongoing, and it ensures that the universal services are identified for families of children in need and that that universal service is provided. We have a five-year plan to modernise health visiting and nursing.

Mr Gardiner: Will the Minister do everything possible to ensure that funding for public health projects will not be cut as a result of DUP/ Sinn Féin cuts to the health budget? Is it not the case that we should be investing in as opposed to cutting health funding? It is one Department that needs funding more than any other —

Mr Speaker: Order. I must remind the House and the Member that supplementary questions must relate to the original question. The Member's question goes outside the original question. I will allow the Minister to answer the question if he wishes to do so.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is a pity that I did not get advanced warning, Mr Speaker. I agree with the Member, and I make no secret of the fact that I will continue to argue strongly for the need for funding for health, particularly in relation to Sinn Féin's claims. Yesterday, I listened to Gerry Kelly on television talking about "equality, equality, equality". The cuts are hitting health specifically, and the people who benefit most

from the Health Service are the elderly and the very young. What is equal about that?

The Member who was due to ask the first question for oral answer failed to turn up, but that question was on the new women and children's hospital at the Royal. That is needed, but the funding is not available. The DUP was alone in voting against the establishment of the Public Health Agency. That is another example of health not being a priority of the two parties that form the bulk of the Executive. That will be reflected on the doorsteps.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister investigate a situation that has arisen in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area? Temporary respite services for families of children with disabilities and autism have been removed in the Omagh area. A residential facility will open in February 2011, but, between now and then, there is a gap in temporary respite services, which were making a difference to families of children with autism. Will the Minister look into that and give a commitment that summer schemes for those same families will be retained?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am happy to give that commitment, provided that Mr McElduff gives a commitment to voting against the cuts to the health budget that are about to come forward. He is bound to understand that the resource that is available to fund the Health Service determines the activity that takes place. As he is aware, a new residential facility is opening in Omagh. I have also carried out an autism review and action plan, and considerable funding has been invested in that. It is pointless for Mr McElduff or any other Member to ask for services when the House is voting for cuts to the Health Service. A Health Service that is free at the point of delivery and is determined by need can work only if society is prepared to fund it. If society is not prepared to fund it, there will be consequences and gaps will appear all over the place.

Child Abuse

5. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on action he has taken regarding historical child abuse in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1052/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Historical child abuse is a

complex and sensitive issue, and any decision on the way forward is a matter for the Executive as a whole. Whatever course of action the Executive decide on, we must ensure that no victims are left behind and that all those who perpetrated abuse are investigated by the police and, where appropriate, are subject to the full rigours of the law. On 19 March 2010, I submitted a paper to the Executive that outlined the range of options for the way ahead.

2.45 pm

Mr B McCrea: I wish to ask the Minister about a letter that he wrote to the Minister of Education on 2 October 2009 seeking her views on a Ryan-style inquiry. I wish to know the Minister of Education's response to that letter. Is it the case that she replied saying that she had no policy considerations in that area? If so, will the Minister join me in expressing surprise that a Minister of Education would take such a position?

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

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister join me in expressing surprise that the Minister of Education took that view on such an emotive subject?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I was indeed surprised. On 2 October 2009, I wrote to OFMDFM — I copied in all Ministers — to highlight the issue of clerical abuse in the Republic of Ireland and its implications for Northern Ireland and to seek views about the way forward on a Ryan-style inquiry. Regrettably, the Minister of Education wrote to me on 23 December to express the view that her Department had no policy responsibility in that area. I wrote back to her on 3 February to highlight her Department's current and historical responsibilities. I was able to do that simply by looking at the Ryan report and at past and current legislation.

I received a further letter from the Minister of Education on 24 February that indicated that her officials were now looking at the Department's responsibilities and that they were to report to her by 30 April 2010. I took the view that the matter was too urgent to wait until that time. Therefore, I went to the Executive with my report, which set out a range of options on the way forward in addressing the issue of historical child abuse. I await with interest the Department of Education's input to that report.

It is an Executive matter and one that must be discussed with them.

Mrs M Bradley: Does the Minister believe that the Executive should apologise on behalf of the state to victims and survivors of institutional abuse?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It would be wrong of me to pre-empt what the Executive's determination will be. That is a matter for the Executive as a whole, not the Department of Education, to consider. However, one of the options is that there should be an apology from the Executive. However, it is up to the Executive to determine in due course whether to do that.

Mrs Long: Given the timeline that the Minister outlined, what plans does he have to meet the Minister of Justice to discuss the issue? There will be considerable overlap between the two Departments and, indeed, a number of others on that issue.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Executive will discuss and determine the best way forward and will look at the options available. The Member may wish to know that I have arranged to meet the Minister of Justice tomorrow.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. You would think that there was an election going on, Mr Speaker. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Kennedy: Question.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms S Ramsey: Settle yourself, Danny. I am concerned that Basil may have been referring to an internal letter.

I welcome the Executive's commitment to try to take forward the issue of historical child abuse. Has the Minister had any discussions with the victims and survivors of historical child abuse about the proposed options?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As far as discussions are concerned, my officials have, of course, considered the issues. At this stage, it is a matter for the Executive. Once the Executive have made a determination on the way forward, they will point the House in that direction. The Member asked whether I had met any of the victims. I have met victims over the past three

years. My officials are constantly meeting victims in various situations.

The issue is one that I feel merits urgent response, and it is one on which the Department of Education needs to be active. Laying aside the electoral side of things, perhaps Ms Ramsey could make that point to the Minister of Education.

Mr Bell: Given the high level of recidivism among paedophiles, will the Minister join me in calling for anybody with any information about any alleged paedophile activity to immediately bring that information to the police for proper investigation and, if necessary, investigation under the joint protocol procedures of social services to prevent there being any future victims?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As I indicated in my answer, it is important that no victim be left behind. We should move urgently to address the pain and distress of victims and ensure that all those who perpetrated abuse are investigated and, where appropriate, subject to the full rigours of the law. That means that it is necessary for those with information to come forward.

Neonatal Nurses

6. **Ms Purvis** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how his Department will address the shortfall of 70 neonatal nurses, as identified in the Every Baby Matters report. (AQO 1053/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In recent years, my Department has invested extensively in maternity and neonatal services. At each level of care, we strive to consistently meet the British Association of Perinatal Medicine standards for the ratio of neonatal nurses to cots. However, as in other parts of the UK, peaks and troughs in demand mean that that is not always possible. Northern Ireland has a strong record on stillbirth and neonatal mortality, and the most recent official figures available show that Northern Ireland is performing better than any other UK region. However, we do not see that as grounds for complacency and are always striving to improve services for mothers and babies. The figures quoted in the question are based on a report that is now a few years out of date. We are currently reviewing neonatal nurse staffing levels, and, when the results are available, I

will be in a position to make decisions on any further investment.

Ms Purvis: I thank the Minister for his answer and acknowledge that Northern Ireland leads the way in perinatal nursing. Given that that work takes place in a very specialised and highly demanding environment, what is the Minister doing to provide adequate support for the specialist nursing staff and midwives who work in that environment?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The key thing that I am doing is keeping up the recommended numbers. The Member asked about the shortfall of 70 neonatal nurses in accordance with the report to which the question refers. However, using the Bliss standard, there is a need for 277 neonatal nurses. I provide funding for 269 posts, and, therefore, we are not that far away from the recommended number. I am far from complacent and, indeed, have just launched a review of maternity services to match that. Further support comes, of course, from midwives who are skilled in this area. The ratio of midwives to births is 1:26, whilst the national recommended ratio is 1:28. Again, we are better than average. However, I am not complacent; hence the review.

The Member will be aware that there are three neonatal cot types. We meet the ratios in that area too. Indeed, through a business case, I am about to provide funding for a further three special care cots to be put into the system.

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister say whether the Wilson cuts, under which the Health Service budget is being slashed, are having a detrimental impact on issues such as this? Should the message be that, if you do not want to see the health budget cut, do not vote DUP?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Although I smile at the question, this is a very serious issue. The Health Service is not properly funded and is constantly being cut. Members voted for those cuts not once but twice, and they voted for £700 million in efficiency savings to be taken out of the Health Service budget.

We can see those cuts coming through. Those cuts will have and are having grave consequences for the Health Service. As a result, the Health Service is no longer in a

position to address need; instead, it addresses need according to the resources available.

Adoption Legislation

7. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the proposed new adoption legislation. (AQO 1054/10)

13. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the paper submitted to the Executive on the adoption Bill. (AQO 1060/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 7 and 13 together.

In June 2009, a draft Executive paper was issued outlining proposals for the development of an adoption and children Bill. I recently received the final outstanding report from OFMDFM on that draft paper, some nine months after I issued it to my Executive colleagues in June 2009.

An adoption and children Bill was scheduled for 2010-11. However, I must now reconsider that legislative timetable and the possibility of progressing the Bill any further in light of the delay in the response to the draft Executive paper on the development of the Bill, other Assembly legislative and departmental priorities and the lifetime of the Assembly.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The performance on adoption here is poor. Will the Minister provide some justification as to why the number of children adopted from care has fallen significantly on his watch?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: One of the key ways of addressing that problem is through a change in the legislation. I have had legislative proposals with the Executive since June last year. Those legislative proposals have stalled in OFMDFM, primarily in the office of the First Minister. That was the case until last week, when I was told that the First Minister was content to proceed with drafting the Bill subject to further scrutiny of the detail of the Bill, which should be brought back to the Executive. That stunned me, because it was no reason to hold up the proposals for nine months.

I was further stunned when the office of the deputy First Minister said that it was concerned that the draft paper did not clearly set out the policy proposals, because, along with all other Departments, I had always understood it to be content to go forward. That amazes me. The office of the deputy First Minister requested a further version of the paper clearly listing the policy proposals. I am stunned and astonished that the Bill was held up for so long, when the deputy First Minister and his party understand the need for it. Mr Brady clearly indicated that he understood the need for rapid action in that area. Despite that, we have had obfuscation and delay since June last year.

I am sitting with a 100-clause Bill. I have deliberately excluded the eligibility side, which would be more controversial, so that the Bill could be fast-tracked. I do not believe that I have any time left in the Assembly mandate to allow me to bring forward the legislation. It is a sad reflection on the House that I will have to abandon a Bill on such an important matter. I am looking at other measures that I can bring forward without legislation. However, the key way to make changes is through legislation, and organisations and interested parties on adoption will be scandalised by what has happened.

Mr Beggs: The Minister mentioned a nine-month delay. Does he agree that it is an absolute disgrace that there has been a nine-month delay, which will affect the lives and opportunities of many of the most disadvantaged children? Does he also agree that the way in which the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has handled the issue has shown that the DUP and Sinn Féin are dysfunctional at the expense of our children?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I cannot disagree with that. *[Interruption.]* I know that Sinn Féin Members might find that funny, but let me explain some of the things that we are asking for in the Bill. We are asking for the introduction of the statutory principle that delay is likely to prejudice a child's welfare; a more child-centred adoption law to ensure that a child's welfare is paramount; the creation of a welfare checklist; the creation of a designated trust; the introduction of new pre-adoption and placement orders; and the putting of the adoption regional information system on a statutory basis.

In addition, I plan to introduce a special guardianship order to provide greater permanence for young people for whom adoption is not appropriate.

I am told that we cannot proceed with those initiatives because the deputy First Minister's officials say that the policy proposals have not been clearly set out. Moreover, the First Minister's officials say that they are now content for the work to proceed after nine or 10 months. That is not a matter for levity or for smiles and giggles from the Back Benches. We should all feel ashamed about that.

3.00 pm

Regional Development

Northern Ireland Water

1. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the performance of NI Water. (AQO 1063/10)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Northern Ireland Water (NIW) extracts, treats and distributes approximately 614 million litres of drinking water every day to more than 800,000 homes and businesses. It collects, treats and returns safely to the environment over 134 million cubic metres of waste water every year on our behalf. That involves operating and maintaining around 1,100 water and waste water treatment works and more than 26,000 km of water mains and 14,000 km of sewers.

While maintaining that extensive infrastructure, the company has met or exceeded many of its key performance indicators during the past three years. For example, the quality of water from the tap is now higher than ever, and we have the highest levels of waste water quality ever. While improving quality, the company has made operating efficiencies of £44 million from the 2003-04 base.

NIW has successfully implemented a capital programme of more than 300 projects in the past three years, including the £160 million Belfast sewers project, which is the biggest project of its kind in the North and involves an upgrade of some 500 sewers and the construction of a 10 km storm tunnel with a 4 m diameter beneath the streets of Belfast.

The project was completed with minimum traffic and noise disruption and won a Considerate Constructors award: that is an example of how well NIW has performed. Other investment has resulted in improvements to the infrastructure and services throughout the region and has enabled us to meet our EU obligations. For example, nine sites that faced EU fines when I took up post are now compliant.

Of course, NIW has further to go in some areas. For example, improvements can be made to waste water leakage, supply interruptions and operating efficiency. There have also been some well-publicised governance issues. We need to continue to provide investment to enable NIW to deliver improvements. Moreover, we must avoid complacency about how funding is needed to keep our high levels of water quality and also be realistic. The independent review panel cautioned against spending money simply to match levels that water companies in England and Wales have achieved after 20 years of sustained investment. Through my social and environmental guidance for the next three years, the company has been given locally relevant targets that have been set by local stakeholders. As we move forward, intelligent regulation of NIW's performance will ensure that it continues to deliver improved services for customers and taxpayers across the North.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Minister for highlighting some of Northern Ireland Water's noteworthy initiatives. However, I want to ask him about an initiative that he introduced in 2008: water charges for businesses and church and community properties. Is he aware that there is considerable chaos in that system and that, in some cases, wildly inaccurate bills have been levelled against customers —

Mr Speaker: The Member should ask a question.

Mr Gallagher: — followed by the threat of court proceedings? Is he aware that, when people follow up with enquiries, the staff are, in some cases, unhelpful and, in other cases, bad mannered? What does the Minister plan to do about that?

The Minister for Regional Development: I want to correct the Member's statement that I introduced those water charges. The Executive, including his party colleague, unanimously endorsed the introduction of the move to send bills to all non-domestic properties, including churches and charities. Therefore, the Member

should be corrected on his assumption. That initiative was not made singly by the Department for Regional Development but drew full support from all parties in the Executive.

I am aware of some performance issues. The Member's description of widespread chaos does not register with me, but I am aware of some instances when mistakes have been made. The highest standards are expected, and if, as he alleges, people have not been treated properly by NIW staff when they have challenged or questioned the extent of their bills, complaints can be made to the Consumer Council. Indeed, when anyone brings any such issues to my attention, my first response is to inform the chief executive of NIW and simultaneously inform the Consumer Council. Allegations of the type made by the Member constitute a complaint that the Consumer Council has a responsibility to examine. If the Member finds that the service is not satisfactory, I urge him to inform those bodies. However, if he wishes to bring individual instances to my attention, I will be happy to pass those on to the Consumer Council and NIW on his behalf.

Miss McIlveen: The Minister mentioned governance in his initial response. He will be aware that there have been press articles on the future governance of Northern Ireland Water. Is any work under way in the Department in relation to that? Does he plan to bring the matter to Executive colleagues and the Committee?

The Minister for Regional Development: As a consequence of very serious issues in NIW, I ended up dismissing a number of board members, which has obviously left a deficit in the governance of NIW. At that time, I wanted to examine future governance. The Member will know from her position on the Committee that NIW is being run almost as a hybrid of a Go-co and a non-departmental public body, with different responsibilities in different regards. That is not satisfactory going forward, so I want to use the opportunity of a hiatus in the company to examine all the options. When I reach a conclusion on the options, I will bring it to the attention of the Committee and, if necessary, to Executive colleagues as well.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister detail his approach for going forward since the procurement review at NIW?

The Minister for Regional Development: As I said in my previous answer, serious issues were brought forward as a result of the procurement. The matter merited being investigated and dealt with in public, and no attempt was made to hide either what happened or the investigation into those occurrences. That evidence was brought to my attention, and decisive action was and is being taken to address it. However, all that does not distract from the steady improvements that we have been making in delivering water and sewerage services, including the best-ever drinking water in the North, which I referred to in my original answer. Nonetheless, the instances that were brought to my attention are serious and merit immediate action. I will continue to keep the Committee and the House informed as we take measures going forward.

Mrs Long: Can the Minister reassure the House, particularly those of us who represent constituencies that have been affected by flooding in recent years, that the ongoing work to review governance structures will not impact in any way on Northern Ireland Water's ability to make rapid progress on infrastructural improvements that could prevent repeat occurrences and that it will be adequately and properly resourced and supported to do that?

The Minister for Regional Development: I can assure the Member that that is the case. My original answer highlighted the fact that, despite all the difficulties at management and governance level in NIW over the past number of years — there have been ongoing issues as well as the most recent one — it has still managed to achieve the set targets. NIW has created significant improvements and made significant investment. I am sure that the Member is familiar with the Belfast sewers project and many of the significant projects that have been completed in a timely fashion and within budget. Indeed, some of those projects won awards for the improvements that they brought about. That should provide some assurance that, despite the governance difficulties, the operation of the company has continued at a very high standard, which is what we expect.

I will continue to argue strongly for NIW to be given resources to allow it to carry out that very necessary work. The independent panel that I appointed when I first came into office confirmed that it needs continued investment. We are starting from a very low base: a lack of investment over 20 years. Investment needs to

continue to bring us up to the proper standards. All the sites that were on the brink of infraction proceedings from Europe are now compliant, which indicates that investment continues to be made and is working.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Tom Elliott, who is next on the list to ask a question, I give Members advance notice, in case they are sitting about waiting to ask a supplementary, that questions 3, 5 and 7 have been withdrawn.

A5: Protected Sites

2. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department has discussed, with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, any potential damage to protected sites from the proposed A5 route. (AQO 1064/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service and its consultants Mouchel have liaised with the NIEA regarding potential damage to protected sites throughout the duration of the A5 western transport corridor project. The NIEA provides regular updates to ensure that the mapping of protected sites, such as areas of special scientific interest, special areas of conservation and scheduled monuments and zones, is kept up to date. In addition, regular meetings are held at the agency to discuss the potential environmental risks associated with the project.

My Department has also engaged in consultation with NIEA about completion of the relevant habitats directive article 6 assessments on possible impacts on European sites, in accordance with the regulations. The purpose of discussions between DRD and NIEA is to ensure that any adverse impact of the scheme on protected sites is avoided or minimised and that mitigation works are conducted in accordance with established good practice. The general principle adopted by Roads Service has been to avoid protected sites; however, where that has not been possible, there is ongoing liaison with the NIEA on possible mitigation measures.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that round-up. Will he give me an indication of which environmentally sensitive sites are in the area of the proposed A5 route? I am particularly interested in ASSIs, special areas of conservation and other environmentally sensitive areas. Does the Minister accept

that, if the proposed route goes ahead, it will mean environmental destruction in that part of Northern Ireland?

The Minister for Regional Development: Some of the sites that may be affected are of scientific interest; others are of heritage interest. They include Castletown House, which is in a part of the Sperrin area of outstanding natural beauty; the River Foyle and Tributaries special area of conservation; Harry Avery's Castle, which is a scheduled monument; Tully Bog special area of conservation; Errigal Keerogue church and graveyard; and McKean's Moss area of special scientific interest. It is vital to ensure that, where the road passes through or affects those areas, particular attention is paid to it. That is why there is close liaison with NIEA, which provides strict guidelines on how those measures should be undertaken.

It is impossible to build a new road through open countryside without doing some environmental damage, but the onus is on the designers, developers and Roads Service to do so in a way that avoids, where possible, areas of particular environmental, scientific or heritage interest. Where it is impossible to do that, they must ensure that the highest standards are met to mitigate any adverse impact.

Lord Morrow: Does the Minister accept that the route of the A5 has become a most controversial subject? It creates more problems than it solves. Does he not accept that the line of the existing road is the proper route for the new road? If it were adopted, there would be little upheaval to the sites mentioned. The route that has been adopted causes tremendous hardship to farmers, and I ask the Minister to take a long, hard look at it.

The Minister for Regional Development: A long, hard look has been taken at all the routes suggested, including one that is largely unlined on the existing route. When one considers the number of access points, exits and entrances along the existing A5 that would have to be stopped up to create a high-grade dual carriageway, that route could have an even more significant impact on those living along it than the route through open countryside, which affects farms. A great deal of study has been done to find the best possible route; a preferred route has been identified, and further work is being done on it. Roads Service and the consultants, Mouchel, are discussing with

landowners how it will affect them and what mitigating circumstances can be put in place for them. Compensation has also been discussed. Environmental impact statements have to be produced, and a public inquiry will have to be held. If the Member or other Members want to challenge the decisions taken, that is the occasion on which to do so.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his response. The A5 is an important part of the infrastructure of the north-west. When does the Minister hope to conclude the land negotiations? Will consideration be given to farmers to whom, at present, environmental grants are given? Is that part of the negotiations?

3.15 pm

The Minister for Regional Development: Negotiations with individual landowners are ongoing. As I said, the purpose of the negotiations is to provide compensation in cases in which the road will have an impact on farms, to provide mitigation measures so that farmers can continue to use their land on either side of the road and to sort out access issues. Discussions are taking place with the people who own areas of particular environmental or heritage interest and with the Environment Agency and the Rivers Agency, particularly where the road will run close to the River Foyle and its tributaries. The intention is to conclude those discussions by the autumn, to publish environmental statements and to move towards holding a public inquiry at that stage.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. When will the environmental statement be published?

The Minister for Regional Development: The environmental statement will be published with the other draft statutory Orders in November of this year, and details of all environmental issues and the proposed mitigation measures will be included in that document.

Mr Speaker: I wish to give the House advance notice that questions 8 and 9 have been withdrawn.

Glen 10

4. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his Department's role in taking forward the Glen 10 development lands in west Belfast. (AQO 1066/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am aware that there are a number of master plans, proposals and initiatives for developments in west Belfast, including the Glen 10 Ard na Glinne site. Those are at different stages of development and are being laid by a number of Departments and lead organisations. As the regeneration of that area is a cross-cutting issue, I intend to bring a paper to the Executive to seek endorsement of an Executive-led approach to the regeneration of west Belfast, including the Shankill Road.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer, because the Glen 10 Ard na Glinne site is an important site in west Belfast. I think that it covers a greater acreage than the Titanic Quarter, so it will be a very important development. We must get it right; otherwise, we will end up with a massive failure on our hands. Will the Minister assure the House that a co-ordinated approach will be taken to that west Belfast development?

The Minister for Regional Development: As I said, a number of plans and initiatives for west Belfast are at different stages of development. There are some very exciting potential developments, such as the transport hub at the Grosvenor Road, the developments at the Casement Park and Glen 10 sites, and the Andersonstown gateway project, all of which are at different stages. Such a wide range of initiatives means that our efforts can be diluted and we can waste scarce resources on overlapping studies and raise false expectations about our capacity to deliver results. As we face increasing pressure on our budgets, it is important that we show leadership in regenerating west Belfast and that we manage expectations by prioritising and delivering key projects.

We are showing Executive leadership on other regeneration initiatives, such as the work of Ilex and the development of the Titanic Quarter in east Belfast. The high levels of deprivation in west Belfast also warrant such leadership. Owing to the number of possible approaches, as I said, I will present a paper to the Executive that will propose the establishment of a ministerial subgroup to achieve a co-ordinated approach.

Mr Attwood: I agree with the Minister's view that leadership is required in the regeneration of west Belfast. However, while we and west

Belfast wait for that paper to be sent to the Executive, does he not welcome the co-ordinating group for the Glen 10 project that the Minister for Social Development set up? Does he not welcome the fact that the Minister for Social Development has already given approval for the development of 144 houses on the site of the former Bass brewery? Does he not think that it is time that his Department took up Margaret Ritchie's warm invitation to join that co-ordinating group in order to maximise everybody's efforts for that part of west Belfast? Is it not time for him to take such action as she has demonstrated?

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

Mr Attwood: The Minister's Department should not wait any longer to join her in progressing the Glen 10 proposals.

The Minister for Regional Development: I welcome the development of the Glen 10 site. It is important for Belfast, and, as my colleague Paul Maskey said, it may cover a greater acreage than the Titanic Quarter site. However, senior cross-departmental groups examined the development of the Titanic Quarter. That was certainly the case under direct rule. However, middle management-level officials are overseeing the Glen 10 development. I have not been warmly invited to participate in the group. A middle-level official from my Department has been warmly invited to participate in the group, and that is my concern. I raised that concern with Mr Attwood's colleague the Minister for Social Development. I invited her to establish a cross-departmental ministerial subgroup, which she could lead, if she wishes. However, that offer was spurned. As a consequence, I feel that I need to ask the Executive to consider the matter. There is such significant potential across west Belfast, and it would be a shame if — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister for Regional Development: It would be a shame if the Executive were to miss the opportunities that exist. A co-ordinated approach is required, because, as I said, as well as the Glen 10 site, there is the Casement Park development, the proposal for a rapid transit system through west Belfast, the regional transport hub at the Grosvenor Road and the Andersonstown gateway. There is a need to ensure that all the proposals complement one

another and move forward together. There are other development proposals; I have simply listed some. Rather than having a group of officials from middle management dealing on an ad hoc or piecemeal basis with Glen 10 and a different group dealing with another proposal for west Belfast, proper intervention at a senior level is required. Whoever takes the lead on the issue, proper intervention at ministerial level is required to ensure that the maximum potential is delivered to west Belfast. I am sure that the Member would welcome that.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Community Transport Association

6. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to extend the remit of the Community Transport Association. (AQO 1068/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have no plans to extend the remit of the Community Transport Association (CTA). However, I value the help that the CTA gives to the community transport sector. My Department continues to support the CTA, including through grant funding, and it will work closely with the association in implementing departmental transport plans.

Mrs M Bradley: Does the Minister not believe that the Community Transport Association deserves to have a role in the reform of public transport, which is what the public expect?

The Minister for Regional Development: A wide range of groups has been consulted and engaged in discussions about the reform of public transport. We want to ensure that we get public transport correct, properly linked up and integrated to make it even more accessible and get more people using it. That is essentially the purpose of the reform of public transport. A huge range of stakeholders is involved, and the Community Transport Association is an important part of that. A range of other groups is involved in transport initiatives, including representatives of disabled people and people from rural areas. Therefore, it may not be possible for every group to be included on an official body to deal with the issue, but all stakeholders will be properly consulted, and their input will be valued and listened to as we go forward.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that they must continually rise in their place if they wish to ask a supplementary question. Members still seem

to be of the belief that they have to rise only once or twice and that will be enough.

Mr G Robinson: I commend the work of the CTA, which does a great job for those who use such transport in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister update the House on the discussions he has had with other Departments to channel some of their services to the CTA to avoid duplication and provide a streamlined, accessible transport service for rural dwellers in Northern Ireland?

The Minister for Regional Development: I have had discussions with other Departments and, as part of the reform of public transport, we intend to have further discussions. The Health Department and the Education Department have responsibility for some transport services, and the Department for Regional Development obviously has responsibility for transport for the general public. Opportunities exist to discuss cross-departmental measures to ensure that we are not wasting resources and that buses that are used for school runs do not sit in yards for the rest of the day but are used to their full potential. Therefore, a range of discussions will be ongoing.

The CTA plays a valuable role. We are looking at how community transport can become more involved in the provision of a door-to-door service. As the reform of public transport progresses, there will be opportunities to talk to other Departments about their transport requirements and the resources that they are putting into transport to see where efficiency savings can be made together.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. There is no doubt that community transport, rural transport etc has an important role to play in communities, particularly for those with difficulties in accessing transport and in getting from place to place. What financial support has the Department given to the Community Transport Association?

The Minister for Regional Development: In the financial year 2009-2010, £230,000 was paid to the Community Transport Association. That support paid for staff salaries, accommodation and the delivery of a work programme that was agreed with my Department.

Mr Speaker: I call Leslie Cree for a supplementary question. Once again, I remind Members that they must rise in their place. We cannot guess here at the Table.

Mr Cree: I was getting round to it, Mr Speaker.

I, too, thank the Minister for his response. However, I am disappointed to hear that there are no plans to develop CTA. Is this purely for the current year, or are there opportunities ongoing for the development of that important network?

The Minister for Regional Development: There are no plans for the immediate future. As part of the reform of public transport, however, we have to look across the whole range of people who are involved in transport provision to ensure that we get the best, most streamlined, joined-up service for transport for the general public. As I said, however, other Departments use transport, and we are all increasingly facing restricted budgets and have to use our resources as best we can. Therefore, there will be a role for everyone who is involved in transport provision to pull together and get the best possible system.

The objective is to get more people using public transport. Therefore, we need it to be accessible, integrated, efficient, comfortable and joined-up. That is the intention of the exercise, and there will be a role for everyone involved in public transport in providing that.

Mr Speaker: Questions 7, 8 and 9 have been withdrawn.

Bangor: Traffic

10. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Regional Development what action his Department is taking to ensure that there is no repeat of the recent traffic chaos in Bangor. (AQO 1072/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service has advised that the closure of Bryansburn Road was required to facilitate the installation of new foul and storm sewers by NI Water. Rathgael Road was closed to facilitate essential carriageway resurfacing and drainage improvement works. Both schemes were part of the Department's ongoing investment in the roads and water infrastructure in north Down.

During the planning stage, it was not envisaged that those works would have a significant adverse effect on traffic progression. However, when both schemes commenced on 22 March, it was quickly recognised that the simultaneous closure of Bryansburn Road and Rathgael Road was causing unacceptable traffic delays. Roads Service promptly responded to the situation and

introduced a one-way system on the Rathgael Road for Bangor-bound traffic. That operated daily from 4.00 pm and successfully alleviated delays to the evening peak traffic flow.

Roads Service took all reasonable steps in both the implementation of the works and the introduction of prompt traffic management remedial measures to alleviate traffic delays. I am pleased to confirm that the work to install the new foul and storm sewers on Bryansburn Road, as well as the resurfacing work on Rathgael Road, has been completed, and both roads have reopened. Although utilities have a statutory right to place apparatus in the street, they are required to register their intention of such works with Roads Service within notice periods laid down in article 6 of the street works Order. That register provides an effective basis for conveying information to all concerned about the proposed work. In addition, Roads Service officials are in daily contact with utilities, agreeing traffic management plans and adjusting utility project plans, all in an attempt to mitigate disruption.

In discharging its responsibilities, Roads Service is continually striving to achieve a key principle of co-ordination, which is the need to balance the potentially conflicting interests of road users and the customers of the utility companies.

Mr Weir: Thank you, Minister. I do not think that anyone doubted the need for the work to be done. The problem was that the two projects were carried out simultaneously and were authorised by Roads Service to be carried out simultaneously. That is disappointing. In light of the experience of Bangor, will the Minister give an assurance that there will in future be consultation with, for example, local councils prior to works being done and a decision being taken on the timing, so that the traffic bottlenecks that we got in Bangor as a result of those works happening at the same time will not reoccur?

The Minister for Regional Development: There is a sense from the answer that was provided to me by Roads Service that there was not the correct anticipation of what the traffic problem would be when there was a simultaneous road closure. Obviously, measures were required to try to mitigate that, and lessons will have to be learned from that.

With regard to consultation, Roads Service officials will continue to meet district councils

on a six-monthly basis to advise of programme schemes. Officials will, when requested, also meet elected representatives to discuss work programmes in more detail. It is important to note that the details of the annual works programme may change due to the availability of funding.

3.30 pm

Regional Development Strategy

11. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the review of the regional development strategy. (AQO 1073/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department is drafting the revised regional development strategy, and I intend to seek the Executive's clearance for public consultation in the autumn.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Minister confirm that he is liaising with his counterparts in the Twenty-six Counties to ensure that we have an all-Ireland development plan?

The Minister for Regional Development: We have worked in ongoing close liaison with the Department of Transport in the South through the North/South Ministerial Council in transport sectoral format. We also liaise with the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in the South with respect to spatial planning and on the general approach to the regional development strategy. I assure the Member that we will continue such liaison on our proposals. A key aspect of the revised regional development strategy will be to take account of development opportunities North and South and to continue to develop both an all-Ireland and a regional approach to regional development and to the economy.

Mr Speaker: I have received notice of a question for urgent oral answer, tabled under Standing Order 20A, to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on matters relating to the volcanic ash cloud over Europe. Members will be aware that business has moved on quicker than expected today. Therefore, by leave of the Assembly, I propose to suspend the sitting until 3.45 pm, when the question will be taken.

The sitting was suspended at 3.31 pm.

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

3.45 pm

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Volcanic Ash Cloud

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has received notice of a question for urgent oral answer under Standing Order 20A to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mr McDevitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many people from Northern Ireland are believed to be stranded abroad as a result of the volcanic ash cloud over Europe; what liaison they have had with the British and Irish Governments and the air traffic control authorities on this issue; and what arrangements are being made to assist local people to get home.

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): I understand that this afternoon's reports suggest that there is evidence that the volcano has subsided and that ash is no longer feeding into the weather system. We hope that, if that position continues, airspace may start to open tomorrow.

We are extremely sympathetic to the plight of those who are currently affected by the travel chaos caused by the volcanic ash cloud, particularly those who are stranded abroad. Since the first information on the volcanic ash plume became available on Wednesday 14 April, we have continued to monitor reports from the Met Office and to liaise with other Departments and agencies here, as well as with our counterparts in Britain and Ireland, to monitor the potential impacts on public health and the environment.

A range of information specific to the volcanic ash was available on the NI Direct website from early on Thursday 15 April, including links to airports and advice on the implications from a health perspective. That provided the main points of contact in one place. That information was also issued via the social media platforms Twitter and Facebook. As the situation developed, the information was updated and supplemented

with details about passenger rights and travel insurance. That is updated as the situation develops.

It is the responsibility of the British Government to deal with the return to London and other British airports of those who are stranded. The Member may be aware that the British Prime Minister has announced that Navy ships will soon be deployed to help individuals stranded abroad. We received a readout from the Secretary of State following the COBRA meeting this morning, and we will continue to liaise with him to provide information in relation to passengers from here who are stranded, so that that can be taken into consideration at further meetings of COBRA.

I have been in contact with Micheál Martin, and we agreed the need for Ministers and officials from both Administrations to work closely together on the developing situation. In addition, we are, in association with Translink and the ports and airports, doing everything that we can to help passengers. To ensure that our efforts are fully co-ordinated, the Minister for Regional Development has been in direct contact with Noel Dempsey, the Southern Minister for Transport. His officials are in continuing contact with both the British and Irish Transport Departments.

Translink is operating additional bus and rail services to help to cope with the increase in the number of foot passengers using ferry services. Additional cross-channel coach services are being operated in conjunction with Scottish Citylink, National Express and Eurolines. Up to 9,000 passenger places each day between Belfast and Stranraer can be provided by Stena Line; Norfolkline is providing 1,000 passenger places each day between Belfast and Liverpool; and P&O is providing up to 10,000 passenger places each day between Larne and Cairnryan and Larne and Troon.

Peak services for Stena Line have been fully booked as passengers divert to surface routes, but there is generally up to 50% spare capacity on overnight sailings. There is still some spare capacity on the Larne routes, but Norfolkline is fully booked until Thursday 22 April. Translink is also working closely with ferry services P&O and Stena Line to meet the demand coming off the ferries at Larne harbour and Belfast. We shall continue to work closely with transport providers

to ensure that additional demand on ferry, bus and rail services can be accommodated.

Mr McDevitt: I join the deputy First Minister in welcoming any good news with regard to the situation at the volcano itself. Can the First Minister and deputy First Minister tell us specifically how many of our neighbours are stranded abroad? Do the Ministers understand, as many of us do in this House, that very many of those who are caught abroad are young, vulnerable schoolchildren? Some of them will be running out of money and medication. What specific steps, at a devolved Administration level, are the Ministers going to take to make sure that those people have the means to get home? Some of them may now find themselves in very critical situations indeed.

The deputy First Minister: We are conscious of the difficulties faced by the many people who have found themselves stranded as a result of this phenomenal development, particularly those who do not have at their disposal the means to ensure that they could travel by alternative ways. It is too early to say how many people are directly involved, because we all know that that is a fairly massive task. Figures are being collated, and, on completion, they will be supplied to COBRA. Given that we are facing a more optimistic situation, with the prospect of airways being open within the next 24 to 48 hours, if the subsidence continues, the task will turn to the expenses that people have incurred as a result of their prolonged stays. That raises all sorts of questions that will have to receive some consideration, not least by insurance companies, airlines and Administrations. Whether anything can be done to assist those people is something that will have to be explored.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): I am grateful for the opportunity to ask the deputy First Minister a question on this important issue. I welcome his earlier comments and the indication that it appears that progress will be possible in the coming hours. Is there any estimation as to what the shutdown of flights at airports is costing the Northern Ireland economy? Has an assessment been made of the number of people who are stranded in Northern Ireland and unable to return to other venues? Will the deputy First Minister assure the House that regular updates to Members of the House,

members of the OFMDFM Committee and, most importantly, the public, will be provided as quickly as accurate information becomes available?

The deputy First Minister: On behalf of OFMDFM, I give the commitment that we will endeavour to keep people as fully informed as possible as things develop, and we will continue to maintain contact with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Information on the number of people who have found themselves stranded here is also being collated. There are people from different parts of the world stranded here. Those from European destinations have endeavoured to use the seas to get back to the continent, by travelling through England, Scotland or Wales, but it is too soon to say what the exact figures are. We will make those numbers available when they have been established. All of that will become superfluous if, as is expected, the hopeful news that we received in the past short while that the volcano has ceased, for the moment, comes to pass. If the airways are open within 24 to 48 hours, we must ensure that the obvious resultant demand will be met as quickly as possible.

All of that is important, and we understand that information is the key ingredient, particularly at a time like this. People detest nothing more than being in the dark and not knowing how they are fixed. Some of us heard the complaints that were aired on the radio this morning about the situation in Barcelona, where it has been suggested that people who were on an Aer Lingus flight from Dublin were being provided with assistance and information, while people who were on an Aer Lingus flight out of Belfast believed that they were being treated differently. I spoke to Micheál Martin today about that issue, and he has undertaken to raise it with the Aer Lingus authorities, as we have done.

Adjourned at 3.55 pm.