
Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 26 April 2010

The Assembly met at 12 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

High Hedges Bill: First Stage

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots):

I beg to introduce the High Hedges Bill [NIA 15/09], which is a Bill to provide for the control of high hedges.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

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

Construction Contracts (Amendment) Bill: First Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel

(Mr S Wilson): I beg to introduce the Construction Contracts (Amendment) Bill [NIA 16/09], which is a Bill to amend the Construction Contracts (Northern Ireland) Order 1997.

After the outburst from the leader of the Conservative Party at the weekend, I was expecting to be called the commissar in charge of financing the workers' collectives or something similar in the soviet republic of Northern Ireland. We may suffer for that prejudice at some stage in the future.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

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

Committee Business

Local Government (Disqualification) (Amendment) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr Boylan): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 28 June 2010, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Local Government (Disqualification) (Amendment) Bill [NIA Bill 7/09].

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Those familiar with the Bill will be aware that it consists of just three clauses. However, that should in no way undermine the importance or the significance of its potential impact, as it seeks to disqualify elected Members of the Assembly from holding office as councillors. On several occasions at the Bill's Second Stage, Members referred to the need for more detailed scrutiny of the Bill during its Committee Stage, which is exactly what the Environment Committee intends to do during the next few weeks.

This is the fourth Bill that the Committee has addressed during the current session, and the House will be aware that several more Bills are already at or about to come to Committee Stage. In order to give the Local Government (Disqualification) (Amendment) Bill the time it needs and deserves, I ask the House to support an extension to the period in which it remains under my Committee's scrutiny.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 28 June 2010, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Local Government (Disqualification) (Amendment) Bill [NIA Bill 7/09].

Debt Relief Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr A Maginness): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 2 July 2010, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Debt Relief Bill [NIA Bill 9/09].

It is unlikely that the Committee will require the entire duration of the extension period requested to consider the Bill. However, given the considerable workload of the Committee, an extension until 2 July has been requested as a precautionary measure.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 2 July 2010, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Debt Relief Bill [NIA Bill 9/09].

Special European Union Programmes Body

Mr Speaker: The motion has been jointly tabled by the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes in which to propose the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Ms J McCann): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the long and continuing delays within the Special European Union Programmes Body (SEUPB) in processing applications for project funding under the European Union INTERREG IVa programme, especially for those projects relating to enterprise, tourism, energy and telecoms, for which DETI is the accountable Department; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to continue to work with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and SEUPB to progress applications without further undue delay to enable good quality projects to be implemented quickly for the benefit of local communities.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. Over recent months, the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment have become increasingly concerned at the delays in processing applications for project funding under the European Union INTERREG IVa programme. I welcome the opportunity to co-sponsor the motion today, particularly as I am also a member of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee.

It may be beneficial if I begin by outlining the background to the situation under discussion. The INTERREG IVa programme is a European Union-supported structural funds programme which aims to promote greater territorial cohesion between the North of Ireland, the border region of the South and western Scotland. Priority one of the programme aims to diversify and develop the economy of the eligible region by encouraging innovation and competitiveness in enterprise and by supporting business and tourism development. The programme is administered by the Special European Union

Programmes Body (SEUPB), which is a North/South body for which the Department of Finance and Personnel is locally responsible. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is the locally accountable Department for enterprise, tourism, energy and telecoms, which are the themed projects under which the North's portion of funding flows through the Department to the SEUPB. That is why both Committees have tabled the motion today.

Altogether, five local authority groups are involved in the implementation of INTERREG IVa, and €60 million is available for locally based projects, within the main themes, until 2013. The five groups are: the North West Region Cross Border Group; the Irish Central Border Area Network; the Councils of the Metropolitan Area, which includes Belfast City Council and the councils of the surrounding area; the North East Partnership; and the East Border Region Committee.

In 2007, each of the local authority groups submitted a multi-annual plan (MAP) to the SEUPB. Those were strategic documents that outlined high-level development needs from which individual projects would subsequently be funded following more detailed applications. I have since had representation from the local authority groups that highlighted delays in the process of agreeing the multi-annual plans and the issuing of letters of offer. In turn, those delays have caused delays in the approval and implementation of projects on the ground. I know that other Members have been approached about those issues and that several questions have been asked in the Chamber about those concerns.

On Wednesday 6 January 2010, the Committee for Finance and Personnel received briefings from officials from DFP's European division and from the chief executive of the SEUPB. I have also held separate meetings with the SEUPB and the five local authority groups, along with the Deputy Chairperson of the Finance Committee and our counterparts in the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Those meetings have helped to assess progress and to identify continuing areas of concern.

The primary issues for the local authority groups are concerns that the goalposts for the assessment for the multi-annual plans were changed midway through the process, resulting in long delays in receiving approval. Although the

SEUPB contends that the MAPs did not contain sufficient detail for approval, the groups have indicated to me and others that they were not told until a late stage about the requirement to develop their applications further for assessment and appraisal.

The groups are not denying the need for proper procedures to be put in place, but they are concerned that, due to the revision of Treasury green book rule guidance and of the SEUPB's own appraisal process, the economic appraisal process was amended part of the way through the assessment of the MAPs. I echo the groups' concerns on that issue, and I ask why the SEUPB considered it appropriate to review its own process when the green book review was ongoing.

A major concern for us all must be the delay in approving projects on the ground. That could lead to the loss of some of the €60 million of funding that has been allocated to the programme under the EU's N+2 rules. The SEUPB has assured the Committee that there is no danger of that happening, but continuing delays have to cast doubt on that assertion.

In a meeting on 22 February 2010, SEUPB representatives assured me and colleagues on the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment that there is regular contact between the SEUPB and the five local authority groups. However, in a meeting with those groups that was held only one month later, we were told that the interactive process on the progress of applications that the SEUPB promised in September 2009 has not been forthcoming. We were also told that there is continuing uncertainty about the economic appraisal process and that the process for approving projects appears to be changing constantly.

The SEUPB has indicated to us that, under the INTERREG IIIa programme, the local authority groups were implementing bodies but that, under INTERREG IVa, they now have responsibility for the design and ongoing delivery of projects on their own. The SEUPB suggested that the groups have difficulty in developing a needs analysis and in bringing forward strategic plans. If the role of the local authority groups has changed between the two programmes, I suggest that the SEUPB should have been involved in preparatory work to build the capability and capacity of those groups in the first instance and, therefore, that of any

work that was done on the development of the MAPs in subsequent projects. Can the Minister tell me what assistance and guidance has been given to the groups to ensure that they have all the correct information that they need to carry out their work? The local authority groups have also told us that they have difficulties in recouping costs from the SEUPB, particularly where projects are based on council-owned premises or where councils provide IT support. Those extra difficulties have also caused us serious concerns.

The groups have said that they are quite capable of delivering and implementing the MAPs. The continuing delays and difficulties put in jeopardy not only the delivery on the ground but the reputation and credibility of the local authority groups. The motion calls for the SEUPB to,

“progress applications without further undue delay to enable good projects to be implemented quickly for the benefit of local communities”.

Given the state that the economy is in — we are talking about €60 million — the motion is important and will, I hope, be taken forward. I commend the motion to the House.

12.15 pm

Mr McQuillan: I apologise for being a minute or two late for the start of the debate. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion, the wording and thrust of which I refute. Having considered the evidence, I believe that the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment have been working together on the issue, as on many others brought before their Departments. I refute the claim that there has been a long and continuing delay in the application process for project funding.

The assessment of individual projects has been ongoing since last year, and the groups in question have been asked for further evidence. Every application for funding must meet certain criteria and be assessed on an equal and fair footing with other applications. Any application for funding, especially where government funds are involved, must be assessed under certain criteria, and, where any further evidence is requested to assist in making a decision, that should be provided. Getting that information can cause delays, which is unfortunate, but an application must meet certain criteria before it can be approved.

To date, the programme has allocated more than €100 million in funding, and no evidence of delays is forthcoming. I, therefore, reject the motion on the grounds that there is not sufficient evidence to suggest that delays are occurring. Any delays that may occur are a matter for the individual groups and funders who may request additional information. It is only fair to say that applications should reflect the high standard and hence promote the aims of the funding in enterprise, tourism, collaboration, energy and telecommunications. All applications should meet the aims of the project, and it is only fair that assessors make sure that the proper information is available when making their assessment.

Mr Cree: I also welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I am disappointed that there is some denial on the issue, because, in my opinion, it is not a matter of criticising DFP but of criticising the Special EU Programmes Body.

I am a member of the COMET board and have had first-hand experience of delays in implementing INTERREG IVa funding. I have been in regular communication with the five local government partnerships, and they have also attended various meetings here at Stormont, the latest of which was held on 22 March 2010. All have expressed their frustration at the lack of progress with the Special EU Programmes Body. Unfortunately, it appears to be a blame game, but it is certainly not the case that the partnerships are solely at fault. For example, multi-annual plans were submitted to the SEUPB in 2007. Letters of offer were not issued until December 2008. In June 2009, the SEUPB informed the local authority groups that there would be a new assessment process: the Treasury green book was being reviewed, and that would need to be taken into account in any assessment of applications, the main feature being the need for groups to submit business cases for each element of the plans.

The SEUPB undertook to issue a template for the required business case by September 2009. At a meeting held on 3 September 2009, the groups were informed by the SEUPB that it had reviewed the entire application process, that individual applications were now required and that the business case template would not be forthcoming. That was a further delay, and the blame for it certainly cannot be left at the door of the groups, yet a briefing to the Committee for Finance and Personnel advised that the

process of application and assessment was taking longer than hoped for.

In June and August 2009, DFP worked with the SEUPB and DETI to clarify what was required by way of assessment. The Committee was also told that all stakeholders had now indicated that they understood the requirements. Three groups had made the most progress — ICBAN, the North East Partnership and COMET — but some of their projects had been turned down. I speak from my experience as a representative of the COMET partnership. External consultants working for the SEUPB had conducted the economic appraisals. One of the projects was for an innovation and incubation unit for Belfast, Sligo and north Down. The consultants' comments appeared confused, and the SEUPB agreed to a meeting with the consultants to clarify the situation. At that meeting, which I attended, it was obvious that the consultants did not fully understand the subject, and, subsequently, new consultants were commissioned to conduct a further appraisal. That caused further delay.

There has been some suggestion that the entire fault for the delays lies with the groups because of their lack of knowledge of INTERREG IVa and lack of experience of controlling major spend projects. However, in the past, the groups satisfactorily handled major spend under INTERREG IIIa, and, if training was necessary — a point that has already been made — why was that not arranged?

On 6 January 2010, Mr Colgan of the SEUPB, in his evidence to the Committee for Finance and Personnel, admitted:

"We were all learning as we were going along."

He also flagged up a risk with the Dublin Government on the amount of money being spent on consultants. The Dublin Government are looking critically at any money that is spent in that way, and, as they are part of the funding mix with our Government, any further delay could have a detrimental effect on the future of projects. Both Governments will be tightening up on all expenditure.

I am concerned that there is still no money on the ground despite three years of bureaucracy. I am also concerned that the N+2 targets will not be met and that not all the funds will be delivered. We need all the financial infrastructure that we can obtain for the benefit of the economy this year. I know that the Minister will agree with

that. It is now time to deliver without any further blame-game tactics.

Mr Neeson: I support the motion. Like other Members, I am concerned at the delays in giving approval for INTERREG IVa projects, which the SEUPB is responsible for assessing. However, according to the Department, the delays are mainly because of insufficient detail on multimillion-pound funding commitments. Developing the amount of detail required has become burdensome for applicants. Like the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I must ask whether more assistance can be given to applicants in making their applications.

It is only right that the SEUPB must be satisfied that projects are sustainable and viable. I am aware that a number of project applications arrived at the same time and that that has created problems for the SEUPB. I am concerned that some of the tourism signature projects have been affected by the delays. In the present economic climate, tourism has taken on a more significant role in developing the economy. It is really up to DETI and the SEUPB to ensure that they have the necessary resources to deal with applications. The sooner they do that, the better it will be for all.

Mr Weir: I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council, which is involved with the groups concerned. However, I do not have the same detailed or intimate knowledge on the matter as, for example, Leslie Cree, who has been more directly involved. Although I welcome the opportunity to debate the motion, it is regrettable that it had to be tabled at all. If things were running smoothly, there would not have been the need to table such a motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, who moved the motion, said that responsibility for the matter falls, to some extent, to DFP and DETI. She indicated that the Committee had the opportunity to meet SEUPB representatives some time ago. Indeed, a few months ago, the Chairpersons and the Deputy Chairpersons of the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment held a joint meeting with SEUPB representatives. We had hoped then that the various problems could have been ironed out and sorted out behind the scenes. If that had been the case, today's motion would have

been unnecessary. Unfortunately, we are not at that position.

I welcome Mr Cree's remarks. He indicated that, although we want to see the maximum effort and ensure that DFP and DETI help to push matters forward, the fault seems to lie elsewhere, particularly between SEUPB and some of the applying groups. Like other Members, I am not aware of the pure level of detail. It may not serve us well — Mr Cree called it a blame game — to get too much detail. From a cursory glance, it is clear that certain issues about the quality of information have arisen from some applications. Moreover, the SEUPB has, perhaps, moved the goalposts midstream. From that point of view, if we were to engage in a blame game, there is maybe an argument that the blame could be spread around.

The issue is one of balance. Some criticisms have been levelled against previous European funding projects to the effect that there has been insufficient scrutiny; that, in many ways, public money was, at times, wasted; and that projects that were not sustainable were funded. That has led to questions about how much value, particularly in Northern Ireland, people have gained from the projects. Therefore, it is important to put proper structures in place that ensure that applications are thorough, viable and sustainable. There needs to be thorough checking. The question is, when we are putting those structures in place, whether the balance is entirely right and whether the process is too rigorous and could create problems in the other direction, such as delays.

The role of the local groups is, to some extent, an intermediary one, and the issue is about particular projects on the ground. I have spoken to people in local councils and in the voluntary and community sector who have experienced the delays, and it is clear that they are not particularly interested in where the blame lies. Their concern is that the money does not appear to have been spent swiftly enough. Consequently, we must take every possible action to ensure that it is spent. I have confidence that the targets for overall spend will, ultimately, be met. However, we must ensure that those targets are met as quickly as possible because, at the moment, despite the assurances that have been given, there is still a feeling of concern and uncertainty.

When we deal with, for example, Peace programme funding, it is important to provide people with peace of mind and reassurance. I am confident in DFP and DETI's ongoing work to try to push matters forward, and, from that point of view, I look forward to the Minister's remarks. All of us want a situation, across the board, in which money is spent well and in a way that is sustainable, viable and timely.

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

Mr Weir: We should ensure that that is the case.

Mr McHugh: As a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I raised this issue at an early stage in relation to my area. I have received feedback from groups and councils, and there are concerns about many issues, which quite a few Members have outlined. As Peter Weir said, some matters, such as the blame game, need to be ironed out, and I support the motion. I think that the question of scrutiny has already been sorted out. The SEUPB and all such groups have been in business so long that they know exactly what they are doing. There should be no blame game. However, we are hearing different things from the representatives of SEUPB and from the people on the ground. That is why the concern arose, and that concern has not been allayed.

The meeting of targets was mentioned. That is not happening. Therefore, principally, I have questions about the whole enterprise. There are three parts to the multi-annual programmes. The enterprise part is progressing; others can tell me otherwise, if that is not the case.

There are also the tourism and collaboration parts. ICBAN submitted proposals on the annual plans well over two years ago. Indeed, it was mentioned that those were submitted three years ago, which may be closer to the mark. However, there is no sign of anything coming from those proposals. An update was given recently after one had been requested, but I do not think that groups in our area have even been given letters of offer to say what is happening, what they will get, and so on.

12.30 pm

Fermanagh has a large geo-park, and there is an uplands project, which involves Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan and Fermanagh working together to

upgrade forest parks, trails and other tourist attractions. This is the tourism season, but we are losing ground because the upgrades have not happened. People are available to do the work, but the funding is not there for them to do it. Groups have not been able to apply elsewhere for funding. If a group expects funding from one source but does not get it, it cannot really apply to several other sources, because the system does not work like that. The aforementioned projects are key to attracting future tourism, including for next year, yet they may not happen. Will there be time to spend the money even if we do get it?

When will those matters be cleared up? Why has there been such a delay? Why has it taken so long? It has been said that funding will be cut from €5 million to €3 million. Why is the funding being messed with in that way? I ask the Minister whether a date has been set on which there will be movement. June has been mooted, but will groups be told that they will receive funding in June? Is there a North/South programme in place? The South is due to contribute 25%, so will budget restrictions in the South affect the overall funding? Let us know whether that is causing delay. How much funding is in place? How much will there be to spend? Areas need to know the answers to those questions, because some groups that hope to work on programmes later are struggling to remain in place now.

ICBAN, councils and others want answers to those key questions. They want to know when funding will be received, how much money is in place and whether the North/South element has caused problems and delays. We want to know all that urgently. I will leave it at that.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel

(Mr S Wilson): It would be dishonest of me to say that I welcome the debate, because I would rather be out electioneering. However, we will get it over with as quickly as possible. I thank Members for being brief, because it is a nice day for getting around the doors. There are plenty of people to speak to and plenty of stories to tell them. I have looked forward to going around the doors of East Antrim to tell people how Northern Ireland's Budget will come under severe pressure if the leader of the new Ulster Conservatives and Unionists group comes into power at Westminster after 6 May. However, let me get on with the business in hand, Mr Speaker, before you call me to order.

I am a bit disappointed at the debate, or at least at the motion. The speeches have not reflected the harshness of the motion. When Members look at the issue, at how much of the INTERREG IVa money has been spent and at the impact that that spend is already having on the ground, they will see that the accusation of long and continuing delays is not a fair assessment. INTERREG IVa funding amounts to more than €200 million. I hate it when the figures are given in euro. I thought that they had all been converted for me, but they have not. Therefore, I will have to use euro, but I assure Members that this will be the last time. I will try to make quick calculations as I go.

There is about £220 million of funding in INTERREG IVa. Most of the comments that have been made this afternoon have concerned the part of the programme that refers to local authority groups. That accounts for about one quarter of the total funding.

However, to put that in context, 25% of INTERREG IVa's budget was spent in its first year. Up to now, 40% of the budget has been spent. Although Mr Cree talked about us missing our N+2 targets, the truth is that we have exceeded them by about 20%. That is the context in which I want to put the situation. As a result of the money that has been spent, many projects are in place and are benefiting local communities.

Mr McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for the information that he has imparted. The motion is not unduly critical, nor is it critical of any of the Executive Ministers. It exhorts two key Ministers — the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment — to work together. It is undeniable that the process has been protracted; I am sure that the Minister does not deny that. It is also undeniable that a number of previously viable projects have collapsed as a result of that protraction, and that is regrettable.

Although I welcome the assurance that the full budget will be allocated by June 2010, it could be interpreted at European Commission level that the fact that it took so long to spend the money — right up against the deadline — indicates that it is not as relevant and important as it should be. Does the Minister agree that it would be regrettable if we were to send a divided message from this House? We are not criticising the local allocation. We are criticising

the methodology behind the making of those decisions and the fact that it took so long for groups to receive the technical assistance that would have allowed them to meet changing circumstances. Does the Minister see things from that perspective?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member makes an important point about the methodology, and I will come to that. I wanted, first, to set out the context. The situation is not as bleak as it has been portrayed. Many projects have already started and are making an impact; they are spending money and providing services in local areas. The first of the five projects was approved in 2008. They included an enterprise project — an engineering initiative called KITE — worth €3 million; a €5 million energy project called BioMara; the €30 million Kelvin telecommunications project; and the €26 million budget for the Putting Patients First programme, which brought together a number of cross-border health initiatives that were designed to address key health priorities.

Projects are in place that are directly benefiting communities, delivering economic benefits such as jobs, skills and investment, and enhancing service delivery. However, a number of issues have been raised about the local authorities side of the equation, which accounts for about a quarter of the budget. We regard that as an important part of the INTERREG programme. Indeed, Members have drawn to my attention concerns that they have about some of the local authority projects. I have met representatives of those projects on a number of occasions to hear those concerns, to ensure that the SEUPB is aware of them and of surrounding issues, and to try to address them.

I want to make some things clear. There has been some talk about the changing of rules and how some people thought that the production of the multiannual plans was sufficient to draw down funding. They thought that, therefore, the funding should have been paid out. My understanding is that that was never the intention. I will explain to Members why it could not possibly have been the case.

The high-level multi-annual plans indicated the kinds of global figures expected to have been spent across the areas covered by the groups. The bids were for more than €200 million, but only €60 million was available. Some sifting would have been necessary because €60 million had

been ring-fenced and was available but the applications were for more than €200 million.

It was always understood, or least it should always have been understood, that the inclusion of a project in a multi-annual plan did not mean that it should go ahead. There were other considerations, such as whether the project represented value for money, duplicated an existing project or fitted in with SEUPB objectives.

The impression given by some Members, including the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel and Mr Cree, was that undue delay was introduced into the process at some later stage because there was a requirement to carry out economic appraisals of the projects. There would have been much more criticism from the House had we spent all that money without some critical economic appraisal of the individual projects that were being put forward.

Economic appraisals for the projects were no different than economic appraisals for all INTERREG projects. Members mentioned that some local authority groups are ahead of others in the way in which they have dealt with projects in their areas: the Irish Central Border Area Network, the North East Partnership and Councils of the Metropolitan Area (COMET) have had projects accepted because they carried out economic appraisals from the start, and £25 million was saved as a result. That means that money will be better spent and that more projects should be acceptable. Almost every Member who contributed to the debate mentioned economic appraisals, but they are essential.

Mr Cree asked one question to which I do not have an answer, and I will come back to him. He said that a promise was given that a template for economic appraisals would be made available to groups. I was not aware of that. If that promise was made, and I take what he said at face value, it seems strange. I am not sure that it is always possible to have a single template for economic appraisals given the multiplicity and variety of projects. However, if that promise was made, I will investigate it. I will find out why such a promise was made in the first place, and although it was an inappropriate promise, I will find out why it was not kept. I will write to the Member.

Mr Cree: Does the Minister agree that if partnerships had been advised that economic appraisals were necessary when multi-annual

plans were being prepared, they could have been done at the same time? That could have saved up to a year.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I accept the Member's point. However, three local partnerships knew about and carried out economic appraisals, which is why some of their projects have been accepted and others have not. I assume that the same information was communicated to all local partnerships. I can only speculate as to what the answer might be. I do not know whether information was misread, groups simply ignored it or thought that appraisals could be done at a future date. There seems to be a disparity in that some groups carried out appraisals and some did not, and, as a result, some groups have moved on much faster than others and have had projects accepted.

12.45 pm

Of the projects submitted, nine have already been approved and 31 are being investigated. It is wrong, therefore, to say that no progress has been made. Of the 61 projects, only 11 were sent back due to a lack of information. I am only making an assumption, but that would indicate that there was a fair knowledge of what was required when a project was submitted. In the light of that, I am not so sure that the allegation that the delay was because insufficient information was available holds water.

Nine projects were rejected on the basis that they were not value for money and did not meet the criteria. It is hoped that the timetable will be such that a decision will be made by the summer on the 31 projects that are still under scrutiny. However, I do not want Members coming back and saying that the Minister made a commitment that those 31 projects would be approved by the summer. They will be looked at by the summer. Given that one in six is being rejected at present, some may well be rejected because they do not meet the criteria. However, the timetable is on target to deal with the issue.

The money from the Irish Republic has been ring-fenced. Even with its budget cuts, there should be no difficulty there for the projects. My last point is about building the capacity of groups. Help has been made available to groups. Of course, accounting departments now get involved at the very start of the project stage. That has been welcomed by local authority groups, and it is one way to ensure

that there is early help available to the groups when they are looking at projects.

Mr Speaker: Will the Minister bring his remarks to a close?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I trust that at least most of the questions that Members raised have been answered. I appreciate the spirit of the debate, and I think that we all want to work together to make sure that that money is delivered for Northern Ireland in these constrained economic times —

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is up.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The economic times may be more constrained if the party down the road has its way.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr A Maginness): I will refrain from electioneering. *[Interruption.]* This matter affects the people of North Belfast very deeply. *[Laughter.]* I am prepared to defend every penny for the people of North Belfast.

I welcome the debate, which is useful and timely, and I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel for proposing the motion. I also welcome her remarks, in which she outlined fairly and in detail why the motion is before the House. The concern of, I assume, everyone on the Committee for Finance and Personnel, but most certainly on the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, is not to apportion blame, but to try to create movement where movement seems not to have happened. We are not in the business of beating up the SEUPB. We note the good work that that body has done and continues to do. It is not a matter, therefore, of ganging up on and beating up the SEUPB.

The important thing is to try to resolve the issue. Whether or not we have interpreted the factual situation correctly, we gained the impression that there has been excessive and inordinate delay.

That may be the fault of the local authority groups or of the SEUPB. However, the important thing to emphasise is that there has been delay, and everyone wants to move on. The Enterprise Committee and the Finance Committee were lobbied by the local authority groups, and we are most concerned about those groups. The Minister assures us that the rest of INTERREG is going ahead and that things are moving quite

well, and we are reassured by him. We have no issue in relation to that. It is not a matter of allocating blame, and no criticism of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment or of the Department of Finance and Personnel is intended.

Mr Cree reflected the views of most Committee members in his expression of disappointment at the slowness of the process, and he has first-hand experience of that, having been associated with COMET. There is a high level of frustration. I hope that, as a result of this debate, a fresh look will be taken at what is going on and a push will be made towards resolution of the process.

I note that the Minister has said that there are 61 projects, of which nine have been approved, 31 are being investigated and 11 have been sent back for lack of information. I hope that early approval will be given to many of the 31. Obviously, the Minister cannot assure the House that that will happen, but, nonetheless, that is our hope. This process started in 2007, so it has taken a substantial time. Whether or not anyone is to blame, an unacceptably long time has been taken to get money through to local communities.

I am happy to note that the money from the Republic is ring-fenced. It is important that it is guaranteed.

Mr Neeson considered the process to be onerous for applicants, and that reflects the views of the local authority groups. We can all argue the toss about that, but that is what they were telling us, the legislators. Mr Neeson emphasised the importance of the tourism signature projects, which are more susceptible to delays and can be undermined by them.

In his contribution, Mr Weir said that this is a matter of trying to strike a balance. It is necessary to have a level of scrutiny. All in this House support that. We all want to see value for money, and no one wants projects to be pushed through without proper analysis. Mr Weir asked whether we have the balance right, and my colleagues take the view that we have not always got the balance right in relation to this. Local groups are important to development throughout Northern Ireland, and it is important that we engage with and support them.

Mr McHugh described the experience of Fermanagh. Given the particularly difficult

circumstances that they now experience, it is important for the people of Fermanagh that projects such as these are expedited so that they can achieve maximum benefit from them.

I welcome contributions to the debate that were made by other colleagues. I also welcome the Minister's comments on all the issues that were presented to the House.

I reiterate that allocating blame is not important but allocating funds in a timely fashion so that we can get those projects under way is. If the debate has done any good, it will have been to raise that issue as one of concern and frustration for people at a local authority level. Hopefully, it will also impress upon the Minister, the Executive and the Special EU Programmes Body that those projects must be started in a timely fashion.

I thank everyone for their contribution to the debate and I hope that the House will not divide on this issue. The motion was not intended to divide the House but to act as a spur towards the timely completion of those applications.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the long and continuing delays within the Special European Union Programmes Body (SEUPB) in processing applications for project funding under the European Union INTERREG IVA programme, especially for those projects relating to enterprise, tourism, energy and telecoms, for which DETI is the accountable Department; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to continue to work with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and SEUPB to progress applications without further undue delay to enable good quality projects to be implemented quickly for the benefit of local communities.

Private Members' Business

Caravans Bill: First Stage

Mr McCallister: I beg to introduce the Caravans Bill [NIA 17/09], which is a Bill to amend the law relating to caravans and caravan sites.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

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

Private Members' Business

Development of a Jobs Strategy

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

Dr McDonnell: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the continued significant impact of job losses across Northern Ireland; notes the need for strategic cross-departmental planning on job protection and creation; and calls for the establishment of a ministerial committee to consider the development, co-ordination and implementation of the recommendations of the independent review of economic policy, the independent review of policy on the location of public sector jobs, the report on the inquiry into public procurement and the report of the MATRIX panel, in order to develop a jobs strategy for the region by September 2010.

I am privileged to propose the motion because, as it states, we all know that we are good with reports. The four listed in the motion relate to the independent review of economic policy, the independent review of policy on the location of public sector jobs, the inquiry into public procurement and the MATRIX panel.

All those inquiries produced useful, well-informed and enlightened reports and very useful recommendations. Unfortunately, we seem to be unable to get a cross-cutting effort here that will allow us to make something of them and to tie them into a single sheaf or bundle that would be relevant to the people who send us to the Assembly.

Many Members are out knocking on doors at the moment to talk to voters, and those who are not out there should be. On doorsteps, I hear that the big, key issue that affects everybody is jobs. People talk to me about jobs: some are worried about their present job, others about that fact that their children — aged 18, 20 or emerging from university at 22 — will not be able to get a job. Still others are concerned that their 16-year-old emerging from a secondary school will not be able to get a job, an apprenticeship or whatever.

1.00 pm

Jobs are the priority for most people, which is easy to understand. They know that they have to earn a living, and they know that they will not be able to go anywhere if they do not have a pound or two in their pockets. It probably takes £10 to buy fish and chips. People want to know how we will protect existing jobs. It is no secret that there is a lot of cynicism around. People are angry and frustrated — perhaps they are best described as being disappointed — that we have not been able to get our act together better and do something more about the economy. The Minister should not think for a moment that I blame only her: I blame all of us. We must get together an economic strategy that delivers for the people who sent us here. We need to create the high value-added jobs that are essential if we are to avail ourselves of the opportunities that the global economy could offer us in the future.

According to the March 2010 labour market report, 28% of Northern Ireland's working-age population is economically inactive. That is very significantly higher than the UK average of about 21% or 21.5%. Northern Ireland is the highest of all of the cited 12 UK regions and subregions. The jobs situation in this recession is particularly bleak for our young people. Nearly 32% of those who claim jobseeker's allowance are under the age of 25. That is scary. So much young talent, enthusiasm and energy are being wasted. Young people have been parked and left watching television when they could be doing something useful for the broader community and earning money for themselves.

Unemployment is not just an economic blow; it can strike a real psychological blow and seriously undermine young people's confidence, self-esteem, expectations and hopes for the future. The Executive and their associated agencies have taken steps, but individual isolated action from one corner of the Executive or one of the various agencies without joined-up government and a coherent, cross-cutting strategy is little more than "ad hoc-ery" and does not deliver the full benefit or potential. If we continue with this piecemeal approach, it will continue to produce the same limited and poor results.

The frustrating thing is that the strategies all exist; it is a question of tying them together. Considerable thought, time and energy have gone into producing a series of robust strategic

recommendations, many of which are referred to in the motion. Those recommendations have been shown to have dramatically improved the economic performance of other countries that were once in a similar position to us, yet many of those strategies are left on shelves gathering dust. One example is the much talked-about green new deal, which was brought together by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Sustainable Development Commission. If all of that were pursued to the last detail and implemented here, it could create up to 30,000 jobs in maintaining and sustaining our environment. If we are serious about protecting jobs and creating new high value-added jobs, we need to be comprehensive and strategic in our approach.

As one strategy document after another points out, it is only by building dynamic partnerships among businesses, government and the education sector that Northern Ireland will be equipped to successfully compete in the high value-added global economy and markets. Those partnerships need to be driven by a central point in government, as the independent review of economic policy document advised. We can no longer afford to produce more and more academic papers that are left to gather dust. We must get together an action plan, and we must act and make things happen. Going back to the green new deal, a range of Departments are doing a lot of good work, but, somehow or other, we are unable to bring it all together.

If we are to attract greater foreign investment, we must invest in people. In order to attract young people to STEM subjects, schools must promote them actively as leading to exciting and rewarding careers. To stop the brain drain, the number of university places here must be increased. Far too many young people are forced to leave Northern Ireland for a university education, and many of them never return. We need to give serious support to innovative entrepreneurs and to all the spin-off opportunities. To attract international investors, we need a competitive rate of corporation tax, which has been much discussed in recent times and is undergoing a second coming. Our thinking and planning must be ambitious and courageous. The experts are here, but, to create investment and action, we must bring their thinking together. We must use the downturn to gear up for the upturn when it comes. We must get more of our people skilled to a higher

level so that they can avail themselves of those upturn opportunities when they happen.

I am not just concentrating on new opportunities. We must protect existing jobs. For example, there is a desperate need to get the construction industry going again and to make things happen, because so many people have suffered. In the past two or three months, I have heard many stories about desperate people who are prepared to do drastic things to survive.

We must improve further our tourism product, because we could do a lot better. We have the impression that we are the most wonderful and hospitable people that the world has ever produced. Unfortunately, many tourists think that our hospitality could be much better. We spend too much time congratulating ourselves, rather than asking how we could improve.

I shall not go on, because other people want to speak. Mr Speaker, I thank you for affording me the opportunity to propose the motion and to make those points. I beg my Assembly colleagues, from all parties and none, to get their act together in order to create jobs. People send us here not because we are wonderful or good-looking — some of us are not — but to deliver. In the past month on the doorsteps, I have heard nothing except “What are you going to do up there?”, “Why don't you get off your backsides and do something about jobs?” and “Too many people are unemployed”. I make an earnest plea to the Minister: get things going by setting up a ministerial Committee to pull everything together.

Mr Bell: I welcome this important motion. If the House cannot deliver real jobs and help to secure and protect existing jobs when it has the capacity and the means to do so, we should not be here.

I shall divide my speech into two parts. First, I shall look at the carrot, namely the good work that a listening Minister has done for the economy and what has been achieved by investing not insignificant sums — millions of pounds — to address the crisis in which we find ourselves. Secondly, I shall look at the proposals that will emerge shortly from the Ulster Unionists and Conservatives. Having the name Bell, I thought that only a bell could clang, but Cameron's proposal to cut £200 million from the Northern Ireland economy is a real clanger. Where are the Conservatives? They are not even in the House today. As we face losing

£200 million from our economy, only one Member has been sent to the debate. That is the Ulster Unionist and Conservative response to a jobs and economy crisis. I hope that they will tell us, on top of the 3% efficiencies, where the £200 million will be taken from. Tell us the truth. What nurses and midwives will they make unemployed? In the elderly care sector, where will they take away care? Will they tell us where they will cut public sector jobs in the childcare sector, an area in which we have had child abuse scandals? Let there be no mistake: listen to what Cameron said. It is in black and white. He told Jeremy Paxman that, midterm, he would cut £200 million out of the Northern Ireland economy. The only interpretation that any reasonable person could make of that is that, if someone is ordered by his or her boss in London to take £200 million midterm, when spending plans are committed and when jobs have been committed, jobs will have to be slashed.

Mr Speaker: Order. I give all Members quite a bit of latitude, but I insist that the Member comes back to the motion.

Mr Bell: The motion is about jobs and what we are going to do to protect jobs. Approximately 12% of the Northern Ireland economy is dependent on public sector jobs. Let us be clear: Northern Ireland's job promotion in the public sector is largely no different from that in Wales or in any other comparable region in England. If, therefore, we are talking about a jobs strategy to increase jobs at a time when £200 million is going to be taken out of the economy and when jobs are going to be slashed, my point is directly relevant.

I thank the Minister for what she did: she listened, and she acted quickly. The House launched two major initiatives, the first of which was the accelerated fund. We are not talking pennies; we are talking £5 million that was put into the accelerated fund to help where necessary. The Minister may correct me if I am wrong, but I understand that that £5 million has been fully committed and that it has been used. The House has delivered £5 million into the accelerated fund, and that sum has been further committed. A listening Minister responded. That is why devolution is right for Northern Ireland, despite the critics. Not only did Minister Foster listen but she responded with an accelerated fund and with the short-term aid scheme. We are not talking insignificant amounts of money in that initiative either. In fact, we are talking

about some £15 million. If I am not mistaken, 30 of our companies have used the short-term aid scheme and drawn down the money that is available. Companies have already drawn down almost £3.7 million to look at the diagnostics and at what can be done. That is the proper response.

We are — rightly in many ways — critical friends of Invest Northern Ireland. We can be critical friends, but, equally, we have to acknowledge that, in the previous financial year from April 2009, Invest Northern Ireland contributed to the securing of 2,200 jobs in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland should not be bullied. It should not be taken as a set-apart. We will be reasonable with the cuts that have to be made to the public sector in these economic times, but we cannot be taken out for special treatment. The Cameron clanger of taking £200 million and putting nurses and teachers on the dole is a no-brainer.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion. We should add to the work of the Economic Reform Group, which was led by, amongst others, George Quigley and Mike Smyth, the referenced reports that the Assembly, Assembly Ministers and Committees generated. That group made a timely and important contribution to the consideration of this matter.

I find that there is considerable common ground between the parties on this issue. The Assembly has agreed, as its priority, that we should grow the economy. That will remain the focus of the Assembly going forward, when global economic circumstances permit. As a result of the economic decline, we perforce have to concentrate to the best of our ability on defending and protecting the jobs that exist and retaining them in the economy. All that comes back to the question of whether the Assembly has the necessary equipment in its toolkit to achieve those goals.

1.15 pm

We have no choice in the matter. The recent, unfortunate comments from Mr Cameron gave some indication of Whitehall's view of this region. Despite common ground between parties and the fact that it was an all-party group that raised the issue of corporation tax variation, which would give the Assembly the ability to compete for inward investment,

the prevailing view from the Treasury and the Whitehall officials who advise the ministerial team at Westminster is that they are more than generous to the region. Their view repudiates our argument that, in fact, the Executive have been set up to fail in their goal of economic growth because they do not have sufficient tools in their armoury and do not have a sufficient budget to bring a community and an economy out of many years of conflict and division.

The argument has come round full circle. I welcome the fact that, despite initial reticence, there appears to be emerging consensus in the comments of Members from all parties represented in the Assembly that tax-varying powers and the ability to address the issue of corporation tax are, indeed, desirable. The sentiment that we should be careful what we wish for has begun to take on a much more realistic consideration of our ability to manage the economy in our own interests, as opposed to being required to work within the constraints of a one-size-fits-all approach which, I think, was designed primarily for south-east England. The presumption is that, if it works in that region, it will work everywhere else. The evidence demonstrates otherwise.

The Assembly needs to take the motion's action point about the setting up of a ministerial team, which, in essence, means a ministerial task force; begin to develop that consensus to the point of proposals that we can take back to the incoming British Government, whoever they may be; and begin to put forward our case to be able to invest in recovery, rather than to preside, into the foreseeable future, over circumstances where there is the continual threat of reduction in the budget and the cake to be divided. It is a clear choice: do we want to be proactive and act with self-determination and our own judgement on what is best for the economy, or do we want to continue to preside over the process, which is hardly a budgetary process, of dividing a cake that is getting smaller by the month in order to ensure that there is equitable division between various Departments? Therefore, I urge the House to support the motion and to take it forward in a strategic approach to achieve more powers for the Assembly.

Mr Cree: For the past two years, Northern Ireland has faced a precarious economic position, mired in instability and uncertainty. As Assembly Members, it is our duty to recognise

and react to our constituents' concerns and to do what we can to help.

The current position in Northern Ireland is that 53,000 people are unemployed. More than 500,000 people of working age are economically inactive. That means that in Northern Ireland just 68% of adults who are of working age are employed, compared with 72% in the UK as a whole. The people of west Belfast have been hit hardest, with an unemployment rate of 9%. Those figures demonstrate that it is vital that we take active steps towards the development of a jobs strategy.

Progress has been made towards assessing the current state of the economy. It has succeeded in producing essential information and recommendations for policy decisions. The recommendations made by the reports mentioned in the motion must be studied and, where appropriate, taken into account as we enact economic policies. Our decisions on the matter are so important that it is entirely in order — indeed, desirable — for the Executive to establish a subcommittee whose sole priority is the development, co-ordination and implementation of the recommendations.

Over the weekend, there was considerable coverage of our desire to see Northern Ireland's economy rebalanced from public sector dominance to a revitalised and expanded private sector. There has been considerable misquoting, even today, and irresponsible comment, so I want to take some time to establish the facts. The public sector soaks up the vast majority of economic activity in Northern Ireland. The high level of economic inactivity plays a role in that, but the fact that a majority of jobs in Northern Ireland are in the public sector also plays a major part. That is unsustainable.

Public services are vital, and the Ulster Unionist Party and the Conservative Party are their keen defenders. However, those services do not pay for themselves. The state requires a strong private sector to pay for and maintain public services. A situation in which the state accounts for 70% of economic activity is not sustainable, as the First Minister recognised in 2006. As a result, any jobs strategy that emerges from this useful motion will rely, to a large extent, on building the private sector in precisely the manner that David Cameron outlined on Friday. It will not require immediate and massive cuts

to public services in the hope that the private sector can plug the hole. It will require action —

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Cree: No.

It will require action to make Northern Ireland a better and easier place in which to do business and to build up the private sector so that it can gradually take over as the driving force of our economy. That is what all of us in this place want to see. However, it is worth noting that only my party has the opportunity to be part of a national Government and influence taxation policies that will achieve the goal of making Northern Ireland a better place in which to do business.

Mr Speaker: Order. I know that Members' minds may be somewhere other than in the Chamber, but I really stress that the Member should, as far as possible, keep to the content of the motion.

Mr Cree: I apologise for going along the same track as Mr Bell, but I could not resist it.

I support the motion and the plans to ensure that, over time, the private sector will drive the economy.

Mr Neeson: I support the motion. I am not electioneering — I am not even a candidate — but I believe that David Cameron's remarks at the weekend did not help the situation.

I agree entirely on the need for cross-departmental planning on job protection and creation. In essence, we require the development of joined-up government. All Departments have a responsibility to develop the economy. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has welcomed the independent review of economic policy.

The Alliance Party firmly believes that the green economy provides major opportunities for job creation in Northern Ireland. Harland and Wolff has shown the importance of the green economy through its production of wind turbines.

The motion is all-embracing, and I hope that Alasdair McDonnell will not take exception to my saying that I am disappointed that the reduction in corporation tax in Northern Ireland does not form part of it. Northern Ireland must become more competitive. However, like Dr McDonnell, I

hope that we will have the opportunity to debate that issue in the Assembly in the near future.

Given the present economic climate, it is vital that we develop a jobs strategy for the region as soon as possible. As I said in the previous debate, tourism provides major opportunities to create jobs and grow the economy. I particularly welcome the go-ahead for the signature projects that will benefit many areas of Northern Ireland and a recent letter from the chairman of the Heritage Lottery Fund that highlighted the tourism opportunities that our heritage and heritage sites provide.

I welcome the motion and hope that there will be significant cross-departmental co-operation in growing the economy.

Mr Hamilton: I also support the motion. We sometimes think that creating jobs and delivering new jobs and inward investment in Northern Ireland is simply about growing our economy, but the important point that we always need to focus on is that it is not simply about creating jobs for jobs' sake or for wealth creation, it is about helping the worst off in our society.

As everybody knows, all sorts of social interventions can be made, but the best way out of poverty for an individual or a family is for people to have a good, well-paid job. We should always keep in mind and as our focus the fact that creating jobs is also about lifting people out of poverty. That task, which I would have thought that we would have all subscribed to, has been made all the more difficult by the global recession.

I do not want to re-rehearse some of the figures that others have touched on, but I will say that the 25% increase in our unemployment level, bringing it to 56,000, has certainly hit families all across Northern Ireland quite severely. That figure is not as bad as the figures for other regions. Indeed, our total figure is comparable with some of the monthly increases in unemployment in the Republic of Ireland, for example. Our unemployment figure being less than the UK average is a far cry from the days when unemployment in Northern Ireland was regularly in and around 15%. That, therefore, shows a big change.

Even though those jobs have been lost, that has happened very much in spite of decisive action taken by the Executive, not only in prioritising the economy and economic growth

in the Programme for Government but through investing record amounts in our infrastructure. That investment includes the £3 billion of procurement at central government level annually and another £500 million at local government level. That shows the difficult task that we all, particularly the Executive, face.

I regularly speak to people from companies and firms across Northern Ireland who tell us that, even though times are tough and they are still having difficulties and having to shed numbers, if it were not for that investment in infrastructure and the procurement regularly coming from the public sector, they would be in real, severe trouble. It is worth acknowledging, as it is sometimes overlooked, that even in spite of all the difficulties since devolution returned Invest Northern Ireland has been able to attract and secure something like 10,000 foreign direct investment jobs in Northern Ireland. That is in spite of everything that has gone on and proves that, even in this very difficult climate, Northern Ireland is still a good place for people to do business.

I, certainly, want to see the contents of the motion being carried forward and a good jobs strategy for Northern Ireland put in place. However, what we cannot have is, on one side of the equation, the Executive, our Ministers, doing their best to create jobs in Northern Ireland if, at the other end, the rug is being pulled from under Northern Ireland's feet so that we are forced to lose jobs. That is what we face. I do not think that there is anybody here, no matter what Bench they sit on, who can honestly, hand on heart, say that pulling the rug of public finances from under Northern Ireland will help a jobs strategy at all. What will not help Northern Ireland are the severe, savage, deep and early cuts that are being put forward by the Tory and Unionist party. It is not a matter of misinterpretation. It is a matter of fact that the Tory and Unionist party has said that it wants to cut £6 billion from the public sector in 2010-11. Our share of that would be roughly £150 million to £200 million, as Mr Bell said earlier. Can anyone imagine saying to our Departments mid-year, as we are trying to create jobs and shore up the jobs that we do have, that our public sector is to take cuts of £200 million in this financial year?

The point was made that that is not something that is going to happen immediately, but the Tory and Unionists' own manifesto says that there is an overwhelming case for starting early

and that that party would have an emergency Budget within 50 days. That is what is going to savagely and severely cut away at our Budget in Northern Ireland. What help is it to the creation of jobs in Northern Ireland to cut so severely and savagely at our budgets? What help is it to the creation of jobs in Northern Ireland to lay off nurses or schoolteachers or to be forced to lay off classroom assistants? Those who are voluntarily taking the Tory Whip are lining up to make Northern Ireland the whipping boy for the Tory party.

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

Mr Hamilton: Neither I nor my party will subscribe to that. I thought that we were all pulling in the same direction in the Chamber, but it seems that there are some who are quite happy to subscribe to making Northern Ireland the whipping boy of the Tory Party.

1.30 pm

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the motion, and I thank those who proposed it for doing so. Once again, we are debating job losses at a time when more people are becoming unemployed. It was announced recently that some workers at Quinn Insurance will lose their jobs, and we will also have the sale of the First Trust Bank. We are debating the motion under that shadow.

Members have already referred to reports that have been published recently. However, we must go beyond strategies and reports, because strategies and reports that sit on shelves will not make any difference to people. The report of the independent review of economic policy provides evidence that we need to bring about a new approach to developing the economy. Some Members said that the issue is not just about creating jobs to grow the economy but about creating jobs to take people out of poverty. Tackling disadvantage and need is a challenge. I, along with other Members, attended a seminar on fuel poverty in the Stormont Hotel this morning. One in two households is now living in fuel poverty, compared with one in three previously. Poverty is growing, and more children than ever are living in severe poverty in the North. Therefore, it is important to sustain jobs, because that affects people and their families, and there is hardship if jobs are lost. We must find ways of creating new jobs.

The report of the independent review of economic policy illustrated that there is a clear need to push the SME sector and to grow the export potential of existing businesses. It also highlighted that the challenge is to deliver better jobs and prosperity and to tackle poverty and disadvantage.

Remarks have been made about how we use public money to grow the economy, and west Belfast, in particular, was referred to. There are areas of disadvantage and need, such as west and north Belfast and west of the Bann, that organisations like Invest NI have let down over previous years, and that must change. We need investment in all areas across the North.

We must have a new and innovative way of thinking if we are to sustain jobs. There must be a mix of different jobs, as too many jobs have not been secure and have offered low wages, which has done nothing to raise living standards or to tackle the poverty and inequality at the heart of our economy.

The social economy sector is important as it has the potential to reduce deprivation and to increase labour force participation, particularly in areas of disadvantage and need, while, at the same time, regenerating local communities. That potential is not being realised. The social economy sector has not been given enough financial investment, and sometimes it receives only lip service. If we are serious about trying to develop and grow the social economy sector, we must be realistic and put in the required financial investment.

My colleague Mitchel McLaughlin referred to the fact that we cannot keep on trying to develop and grow when economic agencies, North and South, are competing for investment and developing unco-ordinated strategies. Reference was made to the separate corporation taxes, North and South. We can no longer stand over having two separate economic systems on an island this size. It is not practical any more; it does not make economic sense. We could do so much more to retain existing jobs and to create new jobs if we acted in a more co-ordinated fashion, North and South, developed co-ordinated services and put an end to existing inefficiencies.

I am certainly not talking about making further cuts to front line services, but cutting the real inefficiencies.

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

Ms J McCann: OK.

A raft of other measures could be considered, such as how the use of social clauses could help in public procurement, and the way in which the investment strategy works. We must use that double-edged sword —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms J McCann: We must sustain employment, create new jobs and combat and tackle poverty.

Mr Weir: I welcome the debate. There is no issue more pressing to the people of Northern Ireland than jobs, and the events of the past week have brought that sharply into focus. I note that the motion makes reference to both the protection and creation of jobs. It is important that both sides of that coin are tackled, and a wide range of activities have been led by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in an attempt to secure and protect jobs.

We must be cognisant of the overall jobs picture. Although the focus has been on the private sector and the importance of and need to grow that sector, there must also be protection of public sector jobs. Therefore, I was very disconcerted by the recent comments that were made by the Conservative leader, which will have major impact on jobs here. During the past few days, various Ulster Unionist spokesmen have tried to use an imaginative reinterpretation or, to use a film term, reimagining of what was said, but rather than an accidental gaffe, the comments of the Conservative leader on Friday were really a slipping of the mask on public sector jobs. Today, a spokesperson reading out a prepared text on behalf of the Conservative and Ulster Unionist parties said that they will not slash public sector spending or jobs. However, David Cameron and Reg Empey are inextricably linked, and rather than trying to prevent the slashing of public sector jobs, they are the Freddy Kruegers of the Northern Ireland economy: cutting, cutting and cutting again. That is what we face in the area of public sector jobs.

When devolution was re-established in Northern Ireland, it was right that the Executive placed the economy at the heart of their Programme for Government. That was done before the worldwide economic tsunami, and the key commitment to grow the Northern Ireland

economy is as relevant today as it was a number of years ago.

The wide range of activities that have been introduced in an attempt to counteract the recession have already been mentioned, and include the use of the accelerated support fund and the short-term aid scheme under which millions of pounds have been spent wisely to ensure that our jobs are protected and supported. Over £100 million has also been spent by Invest NI during the past number of years, with the dividend of attracting hundreds of millions of pounds — perhaps over £1 billion — of new investment to Northern Ireland. If the Conservatives and Unionists are untrammelled in implementing their plans, it will be schemes such as those that will face the axe because, when considering government spending and what is absolutely necessary in areas such as health and education, an undue burden will be placed on schemes that offer added value.

The work that has been undertaken by my colleague Arlene Foster, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, has provided a cushion against the recession, which shows the value of devolution. However, there are some in our society, at both ends of the political spectrum, who seek to wreck that good work at a time when it is clear that devolution is of benefit.

Although worthy, the motion has been somewhat overtaken by events, and, as I understand it, the Executive have already agreed to establish the subcommittee that is called for. It seems that some Members have not been as well informed by their Ministers as we on the DUP Benches, but I will leave that issue until a later stage.

I welcome the Committee for Finance and Personnel's report on its inquiry into public procurement, which other Members mentioned. That issue must be considered.

References were made to the Bain report, but I add a note of caution. The relocation of public sector jobs is not particularly applicable or beneficial at this stage. Implementation of the report would be an expensive luxury of £40 million, which would not create new jobs but simply shift jobs around the Province. We must move away from a zero-sum game —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is coming to a close.

Mr Weir: We must move away from a zero-sum game of seeing which areas of Northern Ireland get jobs towards creating more jobs for Northern Ireland for the future. I support the motion.

Mr McDevitt: We are encouraged by the support that our party's motion is receiving from all sides of the House. However, the issue is not whether we all agree to the motion but why the motion is before us. As Mr Weir and other Members said, the economy is at the heart of the Programme for Government, but, despite that, and this is not only my opinion but the opinion of independent experts, that has not led to change. Placing the economy at the heart of the Programme for Government has not led to an improvement in economic performance, to a better jobs strategy or to a closer integration of innovation, skills and economic development. As I said, that is not only my opinion but that of the members of the independent review team and of senior businesspeople across the region. I suspect that, privately, that is many Members' opinion.

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

We need to put the economy at the heart of our regional government. To do that, we will need to rely on not only the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to do her job well. I echo Dr McDonnell's remarks that we do not question that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is committed to doing her job well, but we wonder why the culture of putting the economy at the heart of what we do does not seem to be able to break out of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

For example, 18 months ago, a green new deal paper was submitted, which we have since debated in many other contexts. I think that we can all agree on that paper. Mr Hamilton debates aspects of a green new deal when he debates the boiler scrappage scheme. The report drew on many of the most credible independent voices on the economy in the region, but why, 18 months on, have we still not figured out a way in which to fund its recommendations? The truth is that we do not have a way in which to fund them because we have chosen not to review our Budget, despite the economic downturn.

The motion is as much about how we stimulate economic activity as it is about how committed we are to the concept of economic activity and jobs growth. To stimulate the economy, we will have to make decisions. To do that, we need

a different budgetary framework to the one in which we are operating.

Much that we could do at a regional level we do not do. There is much that we could do that would benefit us and make us more attractive to foreign direct investment. There is much that we could do that would make our skills strategy more relevant and give us the opportunity to provide people in all levels of education with the prospect of a real job at the end of their studies. We could do much to stimulate what we already do well, including core engineering, construction, agrifood and tourism. To do that, we need a new Budget, so we welcome the soon-to-be-announced news that the Executive are to set up a subcommittee to look at jobs.

Yes, the election has been about a four-letter word. However, that word is not “pact” but “jobs”. If the Executive can prove that they are responding to that issue, that will be welcome news. However, they must be capable of going beyond the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in doing so, and they must be willing to do so.

In my final minute, I will pick up on the policy trends that should be to the forefront of conversations at the Executive subcommittee. There is an acknowledgement that we should and must grow the private sector, and we need to find interesting and important ways in which to do so. Mr Neeson spoke about corporation tax, which we did not include in our motion owing to its not being a devolved matter. However, its absence from the motion does not take away from the importance of the issue, because we all share a commitment to changing the rate of corporation tax here.

1.45 pm

It is also about growing the social economy and acknowledging, in a way that most other Governments in these islands do not, that the social economy makes a positive economic contribution, that it has a capital value, and that it does things better, more cheaply and more efficiently than the private sector, or sometimes the public sector, could. Of course, it is also about understanding that the foundation on which we will build in this region is a public sector that we are proud of and the jobs that it creates.

I thank the House for its support for the motion.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion.

Labour force survey after labour force survey points to an increase in unemployment and job losses. One of the documents referred to in the motion, the independent review of economic policy, recognised that Invest NI and DETI policy needed to change. The authors of the report also acknowledged that a reduced rate of corporation tax would help the local economy, which is a recommendation that has support right across the House, but over which we have no influence whatsoever.

The stark reality that many parties continue to ignore is that economic policy and taxation rates are set in Britain in the interests of people from Britain; the interests of people here do not enter into the equation. That is why those powers should be devolved to the Assembly and the Executive, as that is the only way that the interests of our constituents will be served, because we will put them first. We cannot be as competitive as we would like until those powers are devolved, a point that my colleague Mitchell McLaughlin outlined earlier.

We need to strike a balance between foreign direct investment and small and medium-sized enterprises. SMEs are the bedrock of the economy, and Invest NI must recognise that and provide support accordingly. We also need greater emphasis on innovation and on research and development.

Other Members referred to the construction industry and construction workers; they need to be back at work and they should be made a key economic driver in a wider sense. In north Antrim alone, more than 1,000 construction workers are in the unemployment queues: that needs to be tackled. Deployed effectively, the construction industry can tackle the high levels of energy inefficiency in homes, businesses and public buildings as well as helping to reduce the high levels of fuel poverty. Those levels are increasing, as my colleague Jennifer McCann outlined.

Economic policy must reflect the need to create green jobs, and it is welcome that there seems to be a degree of consensus in the House in that regard. It must also reflect the need to create renewable energy jobs and ensure that that is accompanied by the necessary research and development — that is crucial. There is an opportunity for us to become pioneers in that

field, which is a goal that the Scottish Executive have already set for themselves. Key to that will be planning policies that allow renewables to flourish. That is another area that requires work.

Economic policy must also reflect the need to tackle regional imbalance, and the independent review of policy on the location of public sector jobs should not be shelved at this difficult economic period. It needs to be embraced. Rural communities in the Ballymena area, for example, should have local access to public sector jobs, and the Executive should prioritise that work. I disagree with Peter Weir: the redeployment of those jobs will have a ripple effect and create other jobs in the six towns that were recommended in the report on small to medium-sized businesses. Areas outside Belfast are, of course, entitled to those jobs, as the report outlines.

The priority for the Executive in the months and years ahead should be primarily to maintain jobs and, of course, create new ones. The economy should remain a priority for the Assembly, and we need to ensure that we look at our opportunities, particularly in the green economy. There is consensus in the House that the green economy should be a priority and that we need to get our heads together and get the relevant Ministers to discuss how we can move the issue forward, how we can learn from other Governments, particularly the Scottish Government, and how we can cut through bureaucracy and other obstacles in our way to ensure that we lead in the field. There are opportunities there, and it is about time that the Executive grasped them.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am delighted to be able to take part in this debate on an issue that is somewhat similar to what we talked about earlier.

A number of Members mentioned the fact that there is no cross-departmental co-operation on developing a jobs strategy. I know that DETI's main priority is to try to deliver on jobs. However, I think that a jobs strategy should take into account the need for all other Departments to co-operate with DETI as well as to collaborate with the Dublin Government on an all-island basis to find out how they intend to roll out their strategy. The Dublin Government have an advantage because of the difference in corporation tax. If we get the £1 billion worth of investment that was mentioned earlier,

we will be doing quite well, regardless of the high level of corporation tax. However, we are disadvantaged, and that is a fact. We need to look at corporation tax and at any advantages that we can have over our global rivals in Europe and further afield. If we want to grow the economy, we will have to consider that. Either we do that for the future in what is a high-cost economy, or we have emigration, which does not offer a lot to young people. We will face constant cuts, and people's standard of living will be downgraded.

Inward investment: I always like to mention that it is Belfast or Fermanagh and South Tyrone. We do not get our fair share there, in terms of moving present government jobs or otherwise. The public sector question has been raised in relation to the political field today. We do not have many public sector jobs in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, so that is not such a worry for us. However, it is obviously a very big thing in this part of the North. That is where it sits.

The issue of renewables has been mentioned. That is a vital area of growth that we should push forward. That is where the Government should spend money; they can put money into that. However, it looks as though the next phase of government will be about spending in the economy or cuts. That seems to be the theme. However, it is not a sound footing on which to start.

The costs in the economy are excessive for businesses. Utilities believe that there should only be upward costs — just push it on up and people will meet it, whatever the cost. Fuel poverty is another thing that was mentioned earlier, and it all comes into that. It costs a fortune to try to run a business here or to even think about starting a business. We talk about entrepreneurs as a possibility, as compared to the public sector. At least those in the public sector can rely on their pensions being paid. There is a fair share of that in government; they do not want to have to support anything beyond short-term jobs.

Places such as west Belfast and parts of Fermanagh have had to move towards the social economy, which is an area of growth. However, it is short-termism. People cannot rely on those jobs to pay their mortgage, because in five minutes, they will be gone and those people will have to apply for something else. Social economy jobs do not have stability — not where

I come from, anyway. That is a big thing when looking at strategies.

The other issue is about Quinn Insurance and job protection. Are we doing enough? The Minister knows about this, because it relates to her area. We could be facing hundreds of immediate job cuts in Enniskillen. I do not know how bad the situation is, but it is bad. People must realise that the region could be decimated, as it was when the railways were removed years ago. It is curious that that infrastructure was removed at a time when we did not have roads. That is a curious thing that happened in the 1950s. Why did it happen?

We could maybe spend money on our roads now given that our quarries and people in that sector, which also provides a lot of jobs, are on the floor at the minute. Maybe that is where government should put some of the money. However, the British Government want to make cuts of hundreds of millions of pounds in every Department and cut the next Budget. The block grant —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr McHugh: — which, in essence, is pocket money, is all that we are allowed to spend. We need to consider all that to progress in the future.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I very much welcome the debate, which comes at a hugely important time for the Northern Ireland economy. Members have already commented at length on the nature of difficulties that we face locally, and I will take a while to go through some of those.

First, I will take a few minutes to outline broadly my assessment of current economic conditions before I turn to the specific issue of developing the employment strategy for Northern Ireland. In my capacity of Enterprise Minister, I try to get out as much as possible, not because I do not want to be in the House, but to meet as many companies as possible and to hear about the very real pressures that local businesses continue to face as a result of the downturn.

The number of unemployment benefit claimants has risen significantly over the past 18 months to just under 56,000 in March 2010. That represents a 26% increase from this time last year. However, as Mr Hamilton said, the

Northern Ireland unemployment figure of 6.4% is somewhat lower than that in other regions of the British Isles; we have the joint lowest figure in the UK. The Republic of Ireland's figure is closer to 14% at the moment, whereas the rest of the UK sits at around 8%. However, we will not be complacent about the fact that many people have lost their jobs.

There are some strong sectors in our economy. Members will know about that because they will have read reports in newspapers of announcements of research and development projects and of the creation of jobs at this difficult time. The farming industry and companies such as Almac, Randox and Warner Chilcott, which last week announced an investment of more than £6 million in research and development, are doing well. Furthermore, the agrifood sector is doing very well, and I had the great pleasure to be at Dale Farm recently when we announced a £40 million investment in that company.

I understand why we need to talk about the loss of jobs; that is the case in every region in the world. Mr McDevitt said that he has not seen evidence of us putting the economy at the centre of the Programme for Government. I remind him that a little thing called the worldwide recession hit us just as I became Enterprise Minister, although I must point out that there was no correlation between the two. *[Laughter.]* We have dealt with that issue in a way that would not have been possible under direct rule. I think that Members will acknowledge that.

Members will be aware that the UK economy returned to growth in the fourth quarter of last year. Although I welcome that news, I know that it is difficult for many to reconcile it with the reality of the conditions on the ground. There are tentative signs that elements of the Northern Ireland economy are beginning to stabilise. For example, output in the services and manufacturing sectors have increased, albeit marginally, in the fourth quarter. Moreover, I note that some economic forecasters predict that our local economy will grow over the course of this year. However, as with other recessions, lagging increases in unemployment are also expected. I know how that looks to inward investors. Unlike every other region of the UK, our unemployment figures rose last month. That said, it remains my hope and that of the

Executive that unemployment levels in Northern Ireland will begin to decline.

I want to mention the comments that were made at the weekend. I listened very carefully to some of the debates over the weekend, and I heard members of the public say that they want more investment in tourism. I listened today to Ms McCann and others talking about the value of the social economy. I value the social economy greatly, and I visit some of those projects. I recognise that it makes a real difference to the areas in which they work.

2.00 pm

I look at the amount of work that we have to do in energy. A number of Members have spoken about the green new deal today, and I assume that Mr McDevitt was talking not about the deal in South Belfast but the energy deal. There is huge potential for the development of green energy. Mr McKay said that we need to look more at what is happening in Scotland: we very much keep in touch with Scotland. Indeed, at the last British-Irish Council meeting, we were in contact with Scotland again to see what is going on there and how we can learn from what they do in relation to new jobs.

Some Members may not be totally au fait with the strategic energy interdepartmental working group that I set up not so long ago, but it looks at the potential for green jobs and the whole area of sustainable energy. We have heard a lot today about Departments not being joined up, but every Department in government sits on that interdepartmental working group. One of the subcommittees deals with the potential for green jobs, and Invest Northern Ireland leads on that matter. There is real potential there.

The changes to the Northern Ireland renewables obligation will help to develop the green sector here. We are finalising the strategic energy framework, and it will be out very soon. In a couple of weeks, I will be making a key announcement about a company that is investing in Northern Ireland in relation to new green jobs. Therefore, we are moving ahead with the green jobs agenda. I want to move ahead with that agenda, and I will do it within the Department and in conjunction with other Departments where possible.

Mr Neeson talked about the value of tourism and heritage. I agree with him, because I am a great lover of heritage. When I was Minister of

the Environment, I really enjoyed the work that that Department does to develop our tourism. Many of our signature projects are based in and around the value of heritage.

Programmes have been set in relation to tourism, energy and Invest Northern Ireland, and those programmes need money. We need to stick within the budget that has been set. What sort of impact will £200 million-worth of cuts have on the green new deal, the social economy and my agenda for DETI moving forward if Chopper Cameron gets his way and moves in to deal with our Budget in Northern Ireland in the manner in which he indicated he would over the weekend? We can talk about it in abstract terms but, as a Government Minister here in Northern Ireland, I am very concerned about the impact that it would have on tourism, energy, Invest Northern Ireland and the green new jobs agenda. All those areas will be impacted if the sort of cuts that were mentioned at the weekend are made.

As economy Minister, I want to do all that I can to support the recovery. Indeed, the Department has taken important steps that Members kindly mentioned. As Mr Bell indicated, the accelerated support fund has been totally utilised, and I am very pleased about that. The short-term aid scheme has also been utilised widely by firms, and I am pleased to say that we have offers of assistance out totalling £3.7 million. We continue to make as much as we can of our advisory service, not just for Invest NI clients but for the largest possible number of people across Northern Ireland.

Finally, the importance of Invest Northern Ireland in supporting the labour market at this critical time should be recognised. It is easy to say that Invest Northern Ireland is not doing enough, that it is not doing this and not doing that, but the facts tell a different story. I wish that Members would look at the facts before coming to the House and making allegations against Invest Northern Ireland. It is easy to do that, but a look at the facts shows that Invest Northern Ireland assistance helped to safeguard more than 2,200 jobs between April 2009 and February 2010.

Ms J McCann: Does the Minister have details of how many of those jobs are in areas of disadvantage and need across the North?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In the Member's constituency

of West Belfast, £361,000 was recently offered towards a £3 million investment at the company's Springbank site, which will create 12 new jobs over a base of 26 jobs. The project will generate approximately £250,000 per annum in wages and salaries, and eight positions have already been filled.

During the period, Invest Northern Ireland also assisted in the promotion of almost 3,400 jobs. The Member made a point about an all-Ireland economy and the need for us to re-examine that. If she thinks that going into an economy of five and a half million to six million people is better economically for Northern Ireland than being in an economy of 60 million people, given the export value that we can place on our goods in that economy, she should go back to nursery school economics and start again.

Invest Northern Ireland's actions complement a wider range of actions that it, DETI and the Executive have taken, including a £44.5 million package of measures that was announced in December 2008. However, let us look at the economic strategy and the jobs strategy, which is the subject of the motion. We will continue to support local businesses in the short term, but Members will recall that I asked for an independent review of economic policy. The motion calls for the establishment of a ministerial committee to develop a jobs strategy for Northern Ireland, but we have already taken steps in that regard.

In my statement to the Assembly on 25 January 2010 on the independent review of economic policy, I announced some strategic decisions on the future direction of the economy. I said that Members would have to make the choice between looking for high-value jobs, dealing with productivity issues and simply looking for jobs for their constituencies. I see no evidence that that debate has started on some Benches.

I supported the recommendation of the independent review to set up an Executive subcommittee to be chaired by me and to prioritise action on the economy by developing an overarching economic strategy. I am pleased to confirm that the Executive agreed to those proposals at our meeting on 15 April 2010. The subcommittee has been established, and I will chair the first meeting on 20 May 2010. Its membership includes the Minister for Employment and Learning, the Minister for Regional Development, the Minister of Finance

and Personnel and the Minister of Education, and OFMDFM will be represented at junior Minister level. At our first meeting, a key focus will be to consider the steps required to develop urgently a new economic strategy that will include short- and longer-term issues.

The independent review of economic policy recommended that the strategy should be an overarching one that builds on its findings and shapes and aligns with other Executive strategies. That is the correct approach. Tackling unemployment and providing increased employment opportunities will undoubtedly be key priorities, particularly given the present economic conditions. However, a strategy to address those issues should be developed not in isolation but as part of the broader economic strategy work that I have already initiated.

Increasing employment, promoting enterprise, developing skills, encouraging greater innovation in research and development and improving economic infrastructure are all closely interrelated and should be considered as such. That is one reason why those Ministers will sit on the subcommittee. Therefore, the new economic strategy will need to reflect not only on the independent review but on the MATRIX report, as the motion suggests. It will also have to take a strategic approach to skills, infrastructure, planning and other areas that are directly relevant to the economy.

It is no secret that I am not a lover of the Bain proposals. They did not take into account the new telecommunications infrastructure that was coming into Northern Ireland. I am sure that Mr McHugh has considered the Bain proposals in relation to Enniskillen. They are limited and, therefore, make for a dated piece of work that must be re-examined. Furthermore, the Finance Minister has made it clear that he believes that implementing the Bain proposals at a cost of £40 million is not affordable. He believes that relocating existing jobs, rather than creating new jobs, is not a good use of public funds, and I agree.

I join Sammy Wilson in welcoming the Committee for Finance and Personnel's comprehensive report on public procurement. The report makes many useful recommendations, and I hope that we will be able to use it.

Steps have already been taken to establish an Executive subcommittee. There is no need to duplicate that, and I believe that the new

economic strategy should inform and influence the next Programme for Government.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: That is why I want that to be significantly developed, if not completed, by the end of the calendar year.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank Members for their contributions. People outside the Chamber, particularly at this crucial time, will be reassured by the commitment from all parties. I welcome the Minister's statement. Clearly, the motion may have triggered a more proactive approach by the Executive in the setting up of a subgroup of ministerial colleagues. We look forward to the output of that group.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: The Member is wrong to say that, bearing in mind that I tabled a paper to the Executive some time ago. It is wrong to say that nothing has been happening. Things have been happening, and that paper went before the Executive on 15 April.

Mr P Ramsey: Good minds think alike. I am sure that the Minister concurs.

We look forward to new announcements from the Minister, particularly around the green energy jobs and the key announcements that she has to make. I know that the Minister is active, and I am aware of the hard work that she does in my constituency, particularly with tourism and the Walled City signature project. We look forward to more co-operation on such projects.

In proposing the motion, Alasdair passionately raised the concerns of all in the community and particularly those of young people. Their sense of responsibility, confidence, self-esteem, morale and motivation are being hit hard. He highlighted the good and well-informed reports and how we can bring it all together. That was the theme of the motion. Alasdair was clear about the need to promote STEM subjects and ensure that there are more university places for young people to prevent the brain drain and the loss of our young people to other economies. Alasdair openly and exclusively brought together the themes of the motion.

Jonathan Bell welcomed the important motion. He spoke aggressively about Cameron and

job losses. I support what Jonathan Bell said; we all do. We talk about protecting existing private sector jobs but, as he said, we have to retain and protect public service jobs as well. We welcome the £5 million that has been committed to the accelerated fund that he referred to.

Mitchel McLaughlin supported the motion and referred to a document from the Economic Reform Group by George Quigley. He said that stopping the decline in public service jobs was crucial. He said that coming out of conflict is a difficult period. He was the first Member to mention the importance of a reduction in corporation tax, an idea that is gaining momentum. He also mentioned the action point and the ministerial task team that is needed to bring that forward.

Lesley Cree is the only member of the Ulster Unionist Party still here today, and he has been taking a bit of flak from different parties about that. He referred to the 53,000 unemployed people in Northern Ireland. He rightly said that we need an active approach towards a job strategy and that we must take into account the co-ordination of all the reports to bring a new direction to that strategy. He is supportive of public services, which, he said, are vital.

Sean Neeson, who is no longer present, spoke about Harland and Wolff doing well with its green turbines. He welcomed the motion and talked about having a job strategy as soon as possible. Simon Hamilton said that creating jobs was not just about growing the economy. He was the first Member to talk about targeting social need to give confidence back to so many long-term unemployed. He also referred to procurement and its importance to businesses in Northern Ireland.

Jennifer McCann was the first Member to acknowledge the valuable contribution that the social economy makes across Northern Ireland in regenerating local communities. That is important, and I welcome that in my constituency. She said that we must be guided by strategies and reports and tie them all together. Taking people out of poverty was one of the key themes of Jennifer's comments.

Peter Weir said that no issue is more pressing to communities in Northern Ireland than unemployment. We all agree on that. The focus was on the private sector, and Peter, too, was Cameron-bashing. He said that the economy is

at the heart of the Programme for Government, and he was the first to let us know that the Executive have set up a new subgroup.

2.15 pm

Conall McDevitt said that the economy needs to be put at the heart of our regional government. He acknowledged the importance of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's commitment. However, he made a clear point — one which the SDLP has made continually — about the need to review budgetary constraints and stimulate the economy through the introduction of a different budgetary framework. He also said that the region needs to be developed to make it more attractive to foreign direct investment. He also spoke about the capital value of the social economy.

Daithí McKay, who is not in the Chamber at present, spoke in favour of the motion and of a change in the rate of corporation tax. He talked about research and development, the green economy and green jobs. There have been 1,000 construction jobs lost in his constituency. No constituency can sustain that level of job losses. He also spoke about regional imbalances.

Gerry McHugh talked about investment in infrastructure, particularly in roads, which in itself could create a good economy. He talked about the need for an all-Ireland focus, about bringing both Governments together to create a jobs strategy, and about the importance of all Departments working on such a strategy.

Minister Foster spoke at length about what she is doing. I acknowledge her work, and we look forward to further co-operation. We need to invest in jobs now and in sustained economic development for the future. Leslie Cree talked about DETI's April 2010 labour market report, which states:

"The working age economic inactivity rate for NI stands at 27.2 . This is significantly higher than the UK average rate (21.5) and is the highest of the twelve UK regions."

That statistics bulletin put the unemployment figure at almost 300,000.

During a recession, as Alasdair pointed out, the job situation is particularly bleak for young people. Almost 32% of those claiming jobseeker's allowance are under 25 years of age. Given that that is the case, we must

ensure that every opportunity is taken to use public procurement and investment to provide as many jobs as possible, thereby building our regional infrastructure. Such a policy provides jobs and training to unemployed people, without causing local inflation. That is why the SDLP has been arguing long and hard for investment in, for example, public housing.

At the same time as protecting employment now, we need to invest in our long-term economic competitiveness. There is general recognition that public sector employment sustains the Northern Ireland economy, with too few private sector jobs in fields in which there are high levels of innovation and export. That is reflected in poor GDP and low gross value added per capita relative to the Republic of Ireland and Britain, and that problem pre-dates the recession.

Some Members made the point that we need good, high-value jobs to come here. We have not built an economic system that has allowed us to compete effectively enough in high value-added industry. That has led to high levels of long-term unemployment and low levels of economic participation. We need to invest in and engineer an economic system that will provide sustained regional competitive advantage and high value-added industry.

On the supply side, we need to invest more in our people and our industrial product. Our economic system must be more export-focused, based on high levels of education and skills and focused on areas that target the economy at all levels, with a determined investment strategy in education. Most Members would agree that that is one of the key issues. We should invest sufficiently in higher education to stop the brain drain of 12,000 students going to university in Britain or elsewhere, which many Members mentioned. If students and families are prepared to invest in themselves, our Executive should step up to the plate and invest in them.

To ensure that everyone can participate in the new economy, we need to break the demoralising annual cycle of moving from jobseeker's allowance to low-level training for the thousands who are unemployed. We need to look at training provision for unemployed people and ensure that courses are offered that will make a real difference through sustained education and training.

Of course, many people with low job skills were lost in the school system and emerged with no qualifications, not even in mathematics and English. We have had several debates on this topic over the past two years. We need consensus on the way forward in this sector, particularly on education and the developmental needs of our children, rather than on the needs of the system. We must ensure that every child's schooling is a good schooling.

The independent review of economic policy details a range of initiatives that would improve the performance of the various DEL and DETI delivery agencies by reducing bureaucracy, artificial barriers and duplication of effort so that we can deliver better for all our businesses and respond with greater efficiency to investors.

I thank all Members for their support and welcome the opportunity that the subcommittee, which is now set up, presents.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

"That this Assembly recognises the continued significant impact of job losses across Northern Ireland; notes the need for strategic cross-departmental planning on job protection and creation; and calls for the establishment of a ministerial committee to consider the development, co-ordination and implementation of the recommendations of the independent review of economic policy, the independent review of policy on the location of public sector jobs, the report on the inquiry into public procurement and the report of the MATRIX panel, in order to develop a jobs strategy for the region by September 2010."

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

The sitting was suspended at 2.21 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Spending Cuts

1. **Mr Beggs** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what protocols have been put in place to prioritise government programmes that have suffered from spending cutbacks which inhibit the achievement of preset targets. (AQO 1091/10)

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): The Executive are conscious of the difficult financial conditions that everyone has to manage in the current economic climate. Government are not exempt, and we recognise that it is more important than ever that we redouble our efforts to meet the challenging targets in our Programme for Government.

On 12 April 2010, the Executive approved revised departmental spending plans for 2010-11 to reflect the changing circumstances and pressures that Departments face. As the new plans have only just been approved, it is too early to report with any degree of accuracy how they have impacted on the delivery of targets. However, I emphasise that although the funding that is available to individual spending programmes is a matter for the respective Ministers, all Departments are fully aware of how important and necessary the step is. They recognise the importance of continuing to work towards meeting the targets that were set out in the Programme for Government to enable us to drive progress and, if necessary, make proactive interventions.

Last year, the Executive put in place a comprehensive monitoring and reporting framework, a key element of which is the preparation of delivery reports that set out an overview of progress against Programme for Government targets. Successive delivery reports will allow us to identify where targets are off

trajectory, where remedial action is required and the extent to which financial pressure has impacted on delivery.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Roy Beggs for a supplementary question, I remind the House that I normally give advance notice of questions that have been withdrawn. Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Mr Beggs: Does the First Minister acknowledge that if funding issues are not addressed at an early stage — for instance, by limiting new recruitment into the Civil Service — major issues such as redeployment, which is being discussed in the Planning Service, may arise? Does he agree that it would have been much better to have addressed the £8 million overspend by the Planning Service at an earlier stage and to have limited the new recruitment —

Mr Speaker: The Member should come to his question.

Mr Beggs: — at that earlier stage?

The First Minister: It is brave of the Member to turn up and not withdraw his question, given the mess of the Ulster Unionist Party in relation to spending plans. However, it is even braver of him to talk about the need for early alert and intervention in respect of spending cuts when his party proposes £200 million of spending cuts in Northern Ireland, not at the beginning of a financial year when preparations could be made for efficiencies to ensure that front line services are not hit but at the end of the process of determining spending proposals. He should learn from his advice and ensure that we do not have cuts to our spending programmes after the financial year has started.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: In light of the Conservative Party pledge to target Northern Ireland for public sector cuts, what does the First Minister suggest that we do now to ensure that we protect public services in Northern Ireland?

The First Minister: My Rt Hon friend rightly draws attention to the second factor. We face the issue of a substantial cut in public spending after we have approved our spending plans. Therefore, that cut will go directly to jobs and services. In fact, about 2,000 jobs in Northern Ireland will probably be lost. That is the kind of impact about which we are talking.

Beyond that, we are told that Northern Ireland is to be the number one target of a Tory

Administration, which is worrying. As regards the number of public sector jobs in relation to the size of our population, statistics show that there is not a great deal of difference between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Speaking as First Minister, I cannot give the real advice about what people should do, but the Rt Hon gentleman knows what people should do in these circumstances.

Mrs Long: I share the concerns that the First Minister has been expressing about people's plans. Given the unseemly haste with which the current Leader of the Opposition singled out Northern Ireland as a target for cuts, and given that other regions, such as Wales, are in the same position but were not singled out, what does the First Minister read into those comments for the future delivery of services, should we be so unfortunate as to inherit a Conservative Government?

The First Minister: At an earlier stage of his career, the former leader of the Ulster Unionist Party David Trimble indicated that the sort of influence that a regional group of Tories might have on overall Tory thinking would be somewhere between minimal and non-existent. We have seen that proved, and it probably indicates that the Conservative Party leader does not expect to pick up too many seats in Northern Ireland.

Mr McDevitt: Mr Speaker, you will be glad to hear that, for a change, I am going to ask the First Minister about something that he has some responsibility for.

Will the First Minister tell us when the office that he is the joint holder of will allow the funding decision for the emergency services college to come to the Executive? When will the House hear the good news, which is of concern to the Policing Board and the Northern Ireland public, that the inability to fund the new emergency services college has been dealt with and we are now able to make progress on the matter?

Mr Speaker: The Member knows that supplementary questions must, as far as possible, relate to the original question. The Member's question is outside the scope of the original question, so the First Minister may decide whether he wishes to answer it.

The First Minister: I am sure that the Member was attempting to show the impact that public expenditure has on jobs in the Cookstown area.

We all recognise that the proposal is first class, and in our negotiations with the Prime Minister, when we got an extra £800 million for policing and justice, the deputy First Minister and I argued to ensure that we would have funding for the project. Therefore, from the police's point of view, funding exists and is available. We are waiting to see whether those who are responsible for other elements of the proposal, including the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, are prepared to join in on the project.

Mr Speaker: Question No 2 has been withdrawn.

Strategic Investment Board: Chief Executive

3. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister if they will ensure that the salary level for the new chief executive of the Strategic Investment Board is appropriate in the current economic climate. (AQO 1093/10)

The First Minister: The chief executive of the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) will stand down at the end of the month, and the board has launched a recruitment process for a new chief executive. The Strategic Investment Board fulfils a vital role in developing the Executive's investment strategy and in helping Departments to deliver key infrastructure projects. Therefore, the role of the chief executive of SIB is an important position that must be filled by a suitably qualified candidate. We have considered carefully and agreed with SIB the specification for the role, and we are giving consideration to the appropriate level of remuneration, which requires our approval.

The SIB is one of a small number of public bodies where senior positions require people with skills and experience who may have to be recruited from the private sector. That has implications for the level of salary that is appropriate. However, the economic climate has changed significantly since 2004, which was when the present chief executive was recruited. In addition, the Executive have taken a robust line on the payment of bonuses in the public sector. When reaching our decision on remuneration for the SIB's new chief executive, we will take those factors fully into account.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Although I accept many of the issues

that the First Minister raised, will he accept that, as he said, given the new economic climate in which we are governing, public sector pay and the pay of those who work for the public should also reflect the downturn in the economy?

The First Minister: Yes, and I think that I said that in my comments. The economy is different to what it was in 2004, which is when we began to look at that position. Furthermore, since then, the Executive have taken some decisions, particularly about bonuses. To ensure that the public get value for money and that, at the same time, we get the person with the right experience to do the job, all those decisions will have to be taken into account.

Lord Browne: Given the role that SIB plays in co-ordinating infrastructure development, does the First Minister agree that it has a key part to play in Northern Ireland's recovery from recession? Furthermore, does he agree that although pay should be sensitive to the current economic situation, we must ensure that we can attract a suitable candidate to fill that important post so that we can build Northern Ireland's recovery through investment for the future in schools, hospitals and roads, rather than slash the budget by £200 million, as proposed by the Conservatives?

The First Minister: The Member almost answers the question in the terms in which he offers it. I pay tribute to David Gavaghan. He created the role around himself, and everyone will recognise that it has been difficult, over the past number of years, in the mouth of a recession, to move forward in the way that he has. In many ways, we recognise that the construction industry, in particular, was under heavy pressure during the recession and that it was vital that public sector projects continued. As the Member indicated, there is a real danger that those projects will not continue if there is a massive slashing of public expenditure before we have full economic recovery.

Mr B McCrea: Given his earlier comments, will the First Minister extrapolate on the changing circumstances relating to pay and conditions? Is it time for a complete review of all public sector payments, or will a review cover senior staff pay only?

The First Minister: One must recognise that most of the salaries and payments to public sector workers result from negotiations at a national level. We looked at that at a recent Executive meeting, and, in general terms,

everybody recognised that there has to be that restraint. We also recognise that we have very limited controls. Indeed, if we were to act only on payments over which we have control, there would be significant disparities among people who do the same kind of jobs.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

4. **Mr P Maskey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether recent media reports accurately reflect the Executive's proposals for resolving the Presbyterian Mutual Society issue. (AQO 1094/10)

The First Minister: Recently, there has been considerable public commentary and media reporting on developments relating to the Presbyterian Mutual Society (PMS) issue. We very much welcome the meeting of the Presbyterian Church's special general assembly on 13 April, which endorsed a proposal that the Church should make a contribution to the hardship fund designed to help PMS members. The hardship fund is one element of a package of measures to support PMS members, which the deputy First Minister and I put to Gordon Brown on 24 March. He has replied to us, recognising the importance of continuing our work to resolve the PMS crisis and the need to finalise the way forward urgently, once the general election is concluded.

At their meeting on 16 April, the Executive agreed, in principle, the key features of the PMS support package. They include the provision of loans to a hardship fund and to the administrator to facilitate the orderly run down of the PMS over a period of seven to 10 years. With the inclusion of a contribution from the Presbyterian Church, we should be able to establish a hardship fund of at least £51 million to provide financial relief to Presbyterian Mutual Society members who are facing financial difficulties. That fund will be targeted mainly at small savers. It is anticipated that it will be administered by a panel, which will consider applications from Presbyterian Mutual Society members and award payments based on individual circumstances.

The full package of measures will also include the provision of a loan of up to £175 million to the Presbyterian Mutual Society administrator to allow him to run down the society's affairs over a period and to prevent him from having to

act as a distressed seller of PMS property in a deflated market.

Repayment of the loan and its interest will be met by the rental revenues received from PMS properties, other incomes and the sale of property that is owned by the Presbyterian Mutual Society as the market improves. The loan facility will be financed by the Executive drawing down an additional £175 million through a one-off increase in the reinvestment and reform initiative borrowing facility. Beyond the support of the Assembly and the Executive, that proposal will need the support of the Treasury and the Prime Minister if it is to be implemented. It must also be tested against state aid rules and cleared through the European Commission. However, I can assure the Assembly and PMS members that we will do all that we can to resolve the matter as quickly as possible.

2.45 pm

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the First Minister for his reply. Can he assure the House that the proposals with regard to PMS savers will not mean that those who have additional savings will receive an extra percentage of annual interest on top of their deposits as has been suggested in recent media reports?

The First Minister: There has been a fair bit of conjecture about the proposal in some sections of the media. The reason for the vagueness of what we have said thus far is that we await the Treasury's approval of it.

The deputy First Minister and I have met the Prime Minister and spoken to him on the telephone on a number of occasions. He has indicated that the steps that can be taken during the purdah period are that the Executive could agree in principle to the proposals and that he would have his officials move to try to clear state aid issues. The issue would be one of the first items on the desks of the new Prime Minister and Chancellor as soon as the new Government are formed.

I hope that those outstanding issues can be cleared. Certainly, the Executive supported unanimously the proposal that was put to them by the deputy First Minister and me. That hurdle has been cleared. The next hurdle is to get the approval of the European Community and then the Prime Minister and the Chancellor.

Mr Bell: I thank the First Minister for his quiet industry and the efficiency with which he has handled the situation. Does he understand, however, that in my constituency of Strangford, retired people who do not have a great deal of time need that money desperately? Can he tell the House when he hopes that the matter will be resolved finally?

The First Minister: There are probably Members right around the House who will have had constituents come to them about the hardship that they face as a result of the PMS crisis. Certainly, I have been approached by many retired people who cannot access their savings and people who are distressed because they require funding for their own care and cannot access their assets. Therefore, the matter requires urgent attention.

Regrettably, however, the matter is outside the Administration's control. Indeed, we must be honest and indicate that we felt that we should not have needed to come to the rescue to deal with the situation, but that it should have been dealt with by the national Government. In the absence of that, we have put forward our own package rather than see savers, particularly small savers, suffer further.

The matter requires action from the European Union and the new Administration at Westminster. Until the election is over and a new Government are in place, the decision cannot be taken.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the First Minister for his detailed response. Obviously, one welcomes progress in that respect and looks forward to the final package. However, many people saw the way out as being a bank's taking over of PMS. Does the proposal that the First Minister has detailed to the Assembly preclude that solution to the problems that beset PMS, or does he still consider it to be a possibility?

The First Minister: I think that all of us felt that a commercial solution whereby a bank would take over responsibility for PMS's debt and assets would have been the best way forward. A number of banks looked at that. One or two even got to the stage of due diligence. However, none of them went beyond that. That does not preclude the possibility that a bank could have second thoughts on the matter. I am sure that the administrator would be very willing to speak to it.

However, had we left it at that and not put forward an alternative, the worst of all options would have occurred, and some of the larger lenders in the PMS would have gone to court. The administrator would then have been forced to hold a fire sale of assets, and the small savers would have been left without any funding. In the absence of a commercial solution, this is the best option available. However, should a commercial solution become a possibility, I am sure that the administrator will want to explore it.

Mr Speaker: Mr McCartney is not in his place for question 5.

Community Relations: East Londonderry

6. **Mr McQuillan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what funding has been allocated to community relations projects in the East Londonderry constituency over the last three years. (AQO 1096/10)

The First Minister: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister Robin Newton to answer that question.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for his question, which is important, particularly as we move further into the year. The past three years have seen significant progress in improved relationships, with historic low levels of violence and tension. We want to ensure that improved relationships in the whole community continue and we want to address the challenges that face new and host communities. Funding for the promotion of community relations and good race relations has increased by one third from £21 million in the previous comprehensive spending review period to almost £30 million in the current 2008-2011 period.

A key element of the investment proposals is a significant increase over that period in the promotion of inclusion and integration at local level. The constituency of East Londonderry straddles three district council areas: Limavady Borough Council, Coleraine Borough Council and the Claudy and Banagher wards of Derry City Council. Community relations projects in the East Londonderry area received funding from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) via the district council community relations programme or the

Community Relations Council's programme of grant aid. As the Member requested information relating to the past three years, I have provided that in written format and placed a copy in the Assembly Library.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the junior Minister for that answer. Will he tell the House whether he has received any feedback on the impact of the funding on the East Londonderry constituency?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): All of us want to ensure that we get a return from such a substantial investment. I say, with some degree of satisfaction, that the good relations indicators show that we are receiving such a return. Improvements have occurred in certain areas: for example, there has been a 68% decrease from a 2005 baseline of 174 casualties from paramilitary-style shootings and assaults to 56 in 2008.

Although there was little change in the number of sectarian incidents from 2007-08 to 2008-09, crimes of that nature fell by 4%. Since 2005-06, sectarian crimes have been reduced by almost one third or, to be precise, 31%. In 2008, 65% of people believed that relations between Protestants and Catholics were better than they had been five years earlier. That figure is the same as it was in 2007 and maintains the highest ever level since recording began in 1989. Many other indicators are available, and I am happy to forward those to the Member in the form of a written submission, if that is of interest to him, in addition to the information that has already been provided.

Ms Lo: It is community relations week in Northern Ireland, and yet we have just heard from the Minister of Education that there will be drastic cuts in the community relations programmes in schools and the Youth Service, as well as in the core funding for 26 community relations organisations. Will the junior Minister assure the House that those cuts will not impact negatively on the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) strategy?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for her question. I was also concerned as I listened to the comments being made in the media this morning, which was the first time that I heard about the line that the Minister of Education is preparing to take.

We all realise that investment in our youth and our schools is important, not just for the

short term but for the longer term. From our side, the cuts to the Youth Service budget that the Minister of Education has announced will not impact on the OFMDFM funding. In 2009, the funding of summer youth programmes, particularly the intervention projects, included £400,000 from OFMDFM to the Department of Education and £100,000 to the North Belfast Community Action Unit. A final decision has not been taken on this year's funding allocation for summer intervention programmes. However, there is no intention from our side to reduce any funding to that important area of work.

Mr McKay: Given that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister previously funded work to promote good relations between people of different sexual orientation in areas including east Derry, what steps is the Department taking to continue and build upon that good work?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): The answer is very simple and straightforward: I am not aware of any differences in the funding that we are putting towards that type of work.

Mr Speaker: The Member is not in his place to ask question 7.

Parades

8. **Mr McGlone** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their proposals on the abolition of the Parades Commission and the creation of new structures to oversee parading. (AQO 1098/10)

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Speaker. Ceist uimhir a hocht.

The First Minister: Sorry, what was that? I did not catch that.

Mr Speaker: Order. Whatever language a Member wants to speak in is not an issue for the House, but the Member must then translate it into English.

Mr McGlone: Question 8. Ceist uimhir a hocht.

The First Minister: Consultation on the draft public assemblies, parades and protests Bill (Northern Ireland) began on 20 April and will run for 12 weeks until 14 July. The draft Bill details the proposals for the future handling of all issues relating to public assemblies, including parades and protests, and the new structures

that will be created. The deputy First Minister and I look forward to hearing the views of all stakeholders on the draft proposals.

Mr McGlone: Thank you, Minister. Go raibh maith agat a Aire. Will those proposals protect the rights of residents to not have provocative parades march through areas where they are clearly not wanted?

The First Minister: The proposals set out a framework within which any disputes can be resolved. If it is not possible to resolve them, it provides for an adjudication process. However, the emphasis that the deputy First Minister and I have put in the strategy is to encourage resolution, respect for each other's traditions and tolerance of the various cultural expressions that are manifest in our Province. Of course, there should not be any sectarian harassment, either to residents or to those on parade.

Dr Farry: Does the First Minister agree that the disputes around parades are a reflection of the continued divisions in our society and that any new legislation on parades should be complemented by a strategy on community relations? It is not just an issue about balancing rights; it is about how we build good relations in communities.

The First Minister: I will not quibble with what the Member has indicated. Not only is that the right way to go forward generally, it is the specific way that we have gone forward. Along with our proposal on how to deal with public assemblies, parades and protests, we have our CSI strategy moving through the system. It is the right way to move forward, and there needs to be a greater understanding and appreciation of the cultural differences in our society and greater respect of and tolerance for them.

3.00 pm

Justice

Administration of Justice (Language) Act (Ireland) 1737

1. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Justice whether he has any plans to repeal the Administration of Justice (Language) Act (Ireland) 1737. (AQO 1106/10)

The Minister of Justice (Mr Ford): The Act to which the Member refers is the subject of legal

proceedings. We expect that the judgement of the Northern Ireland Court of Appeal will be made shortly. In the meantime, when a party to legal proceedings is unable to speak English, he or she is able to use their own language in court with the services of an interpreter. More generally, the Assembly knows that language is a cross-cutting issue on which policy needs to be agreed by the Executive. I will wish to discuss that matter with ministerial colleagues following the court judgement.

Mr Durkan: I welcome the Minister to the House for his first Question Time, and I wish him well in all the responsibilities that he is undertaking.

Notwithstanding the fact that court proceedings are taking place and have to run their course, will the Minister say whether he is willing to consider legislating on the matter as part of the miscellaneous provisions Bill that he is determined to bring forward during the lifetime of the current Assembly? It would be remiss of the Assembly not to take the opportunity of such a Bill to correct the serious anomaly and inequity that remains in existing legislation.

The Minister of Justice: I thank the Member for his good wishes and the genuine way in which he and other members of his party have co-operated with me in recent days. Nonetheless, I fear that, in the context of the need for the Executive to agree an overall strategy for Irish and Ulster Scots, it would be inappropriate, particularly in the absence of any consultation, to promise any speedy action by my Department on a single piece of legislation that might come forward shortly.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I also welcome the Minister to the House in his new position. I find it extraordinary that ethnic minority languages are accommodated in the judicial system and the Irish language is not, given the demand for that indigenous language. More generally, what will the Minister do to ensure that the Irish language and Irish speakers are not discriminated against in the courts? Will he also look at the many symbols and emblems in the courts, with a mind to making courts more politically neutral places?

The Minister of Justice: I thank the Member for his good wishes. I hope that I do not have to precede every response by saying that today.

The Member needs to be aware that anyone who is an Irish speaker and solely an Irish speaker is

treated by the courts in exactly the same way as anyone who speaks only a different language. However, the Member raises a real issue, and the Executive as a whole must develop a collective strategy for languages, as his party and others negotiated at St Andrews. It is not possible for the Department of Justice to take forward that matter at this stage.

With regard to the slightly extraneous issue of the symbolism of the courts, that matter is kept under review by my Department in the context of its equality obligations, and I have no doubt that it will continue to be so considered.

Mr Speaker: Question 4 and question 8 have been withdrawn.

Security

2. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the present security situation. (AQO 1107/10)

3. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Justice what discussions he has had with party leaders regarding the threat from dissident republicans. (AQO 1108/10)

12. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Justice what discussions he has had with the Chief Constable regarding resources to combat the threat from dissident republicans. (AQO 1117/10)

14. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Justice what discussions he has had with the director and co-ordinator of intelligence for Northern Ireland, the Secretary of State and the Ministry of Defence. (AQO 1119/10)

The Minister of Justice: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 2, 3, 12 and 14 together, although I am not sure whether all the Members who have asked those questions are currently in the House.

All Members will join me in condemning unreservedly those who were responsible for Friday's bomb in Newtownhamilton. They want to undermine the political process and drag Northern Ireland back to the dark days of the past. We must all stand together to ensure that they do not succeed.

Since becoming Minister, I have received a full security briefing from Paul Goggins, the Security Service and the Chief Constable, as well as reviewing cross-border security co-operation

with Dermot Ahern, the Chief Constable and the Garda Commissioner. From the briefings that I have received, and from the latest published Independent Monitoring Commission report, it is clear that the threat level across Northern Ireland remains severe. There have been 10 terrorist attacks to date this year and, as recent events at Newtownhamilton police station and Palace Barracks in Holywood highlight, there remain small but dangerous groups who are intent on dragging Northern Ireland back to the past. I am committed to working with all who have operational responsibility for countering terrorism, with the Executive and with the wider community to ensure that they do not succeed.

Turning to the issue of resources, I have discussed with the Chief Constable the resources that he needs to combat the threat, and he has outlined the compelling case that he has submitted for additional funding for this year, 2010-11. I have also been assured that NIO Ministers have made that case to the Treasury, and I will be meeting the Secretary of State tomorrow to follow it up. I fully support the case that the Chief Constable has made.

I have not yet met party leaders to discuss security, nor have I held discussions with the MOD.

Lord Morrow: I also welcome Mr Ford to his first Question Time as the Minister of Justice, and I recognise that the long answer that he gave was an attempt to answer four questions in one. Does the Minister accept that the present security policy is not working and that it is vital that the latest round of terrorism not be allowed to get a hold as it did during the past 35 years through pandering to terrorists? Does he agree that the only way forward is to take the terrorists on and defeat them?

The Minister of Justice: No, I do not agree with the Member, although I thank him for his welcome, which is the same welcome that he gave me when I appeared before the Committee for Justice last week. I do not agree that the present security policy is not working. The Police Service and other agencies are striking a balance between fulfilling their security responsibilities and ensuring that they maintain community policing — that has been one of the major successes of recent years — across every part of Northern Ireland. The task requires resources to deal with the direct security threat and to build community links.

It is essential that politicians, the community, the police and other responsible agencies act together to ensure that we counter the threat and move forward together to build new structures in every part of Northern Ireland's governance. There is no doubt that the dissidents are trying to kill police officers and to damage relations between the police and the community. I am determined that they will not succeed in either aim, and I am sure that Members will support me in that.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for incorporating question 3 in his answer, and I wish him well in the onerous task that he has undertaken. When does the Minister envisage holding a meeting with party leaders on his Department and its workings?

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr Gardiner for his good wishes and his supplementary question. I have met some Ministers and will, no doubt, meet others at the Executive meeting this week, at which we will consider issues that will impinge on my Department. At present, I have no formal arrangements to meet the party leaders; however, if party leaders wish to meet me, I will be happy to facilitate them.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree with me that the way forward is not the old rhetoric of the past and neither is it what those people are doing on our streets, whether in Newtownhamilton or at Palace Barracks? Politics is the way forward, and it is for us politicians to ensure that politics rules supreme.

Does the Minister agree with me that the changes to policing must be allowed to continue and that we do not allow anyone —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to finish.

Mr O'Dowd: I will. Whether through the actions of so-called dissidents or whether through politicians coming out with strong statements, we must not allow policing to go backwards. Politics and policing must move forward.

The Minister of Justice: I agree with the Member. It is vital that we build on the successes of policing in recent years and that the priority that the Chief Constable set for community policing continues. However, it is also important that we assist the police and provide them with the additional resources that they need to counter the threat from those who

wish to drag us back. There is an important job to be done in confronting terrorist actions directly and in ensuring the widest possible community co-operation. I will do all that I can to assist the Police Service in both respects.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that it is important that the focus on community-based policing is not lost, as that could increase dissident recruitment? Robust community policing, alongside the community and with the community, is the best protection that the police have from attacks and our best protection against further terrorist developments.

The Minister of Justice: I thank my colleague for her question. She is, of course, absolutely right: one of the successes, even in the current difficult circumstances, is how well community policing is being rolled out. The Chief Constable has referred to the number of officers that he is determined to get from behind desks into community policing and response policing. Undoubtedly, there have been major successes in many parts of Northern Ireland in that respect. I know that as a constituency MLA, and, last Friday, I was pleased to hear from senior officers in Newry about the successes that they are having. Even in parts of that district, where there have been particular difficulties with dissidents, a strong community policing role is being carried through. That is vitally important as we seek to build new structures and new co-operation.

Mr Speaker: Mr Armstrong, your question has been grouped with question 2. Do you wish to ask a supplementary question?

Mr Armstrong: Yes, I will. Will the Minister outline his policy on the prison estate, including the female unit at Hydebank?

The Minister of Justice: I am not entirely sure how to connect that question with the Member's initial question on the security situation. Elsewhere in Question Time, I will answer questions about aspects of the prison estate. Clearly, an issue on the prison estate needs to be addressed. A number of buildings are substandard and in need of renovation, but I suspect that Mr McQuillan will not wish me to go further at this stage.

Maghaberry Prison

5. **Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Justice what measures he is taking to ensure

that prisoners in Maghaberry prison are being treated in accordance with human rights legislation and that industrial action by prison staff is not impinging on visiting rights for legal representatives or family members.

(AQO 1110/10)

Mr McLaughlin: I am not quite sure whether that is the next question. My question is question 5. Does the Minister wish to take it?

The Minister of Justice: Yes, I am quite happy to take questions in the order that they are intended.

As Minister, I am committed, as is the Northern Ireland Prison Service, to ensuring that all prisoners are treated in accordance with human rights legislation. The action by the Prison Officers' Association (POA), to which the Member referred, ended on 9 April, since when the prisons have been operating normally. During the period of action by the POA, the governor of Maghaberry deployed staff from other parts of the prison to ensure that the adverse impact on family and legal visits was kept to a minimum. I am not aware that any prisoners were denied their statutory entitlement. Prisoners also continued to have access to mail and to telephones. Where individual visits were curtailed, staff have attempted to make up the shortfall subsequently. Indeed, Maghaberry prison was praised by inspectors in their most recent report for its support to families.

As Members will be aware, I indicated last Thursday my intention to establish a review of the prison regime, starting at Maghaberry, in line with commitments set out in the Hillsborough agreement on 5 February. I will provide further details to the House shortly, and the review will relate to all regimes across all prisons but will start at Maghaberry.

Mr McLaughlin: The Minister has anticipated my supplementary question. The Minister indicated his intention to conduct a review. Does he have a timeline for that review, and will the review examine the conditions of detention, the management of prisons and the oversight of all the prisons?

The Minister of Justice: Following on from the Hillsborough agreement, it is my intention that the part of the review that relates to Maghaberry will be completed by the autumn of 2010 and will then roll on to the other two

institutions. I am afraid that I cannot give the Member a timeline for those, but it is clear from the emphasis that was given in the Hillsborough agreement and from the comments that I and others made in the feed-in to Hillsborough that there are issues that need to be addressed. I have already informed the Committee for Justice and other Ministers of my intention to carry out that review and the draft terms of reference, and I will seek to advance the review as fast as possible.

Mr K Robinson: I add my best wishes to the Minister in his new position. Can I press him on the specific measures that he is pursuing on improving the prison regime for prisoners and prison staff at Maghaberry?

The Minister of Justice: I thank the Member for his good wishes. He can press, but the point of having a review is to ascertain the appropriate way to move forward. Therefore, it seems fairly inappropriate to set out details at the point at which I have asked the review to commence.

3.15 pm

Mr P Ramsey: I wish the Minister well. Will the Minister assure the House that he will take legal action against the Prison Officers' Association if it recommences its threat to withdraw goodwill?

The Minister of Justice: I thank the Member for his good wishes and his question. What was described by the POA as withdrawing goodwill — it appears to have been more a matter of unlawful industrial action — was ended because of a court agreement by the POA. There is no doubt that the Prison Service and I will have to continue to respond robustly should there be any suggestion of such a withdrawal. However, I am determined that, with devolution having happened since the ending of that withdrawal of goodwill, we will take the opportunity under the new institutions and arrangements to build a fresh start. I am fully aware of good work being done in parts of the prison estate by members of the Prison Officers' Association and other colleagues. I am determined that we will use that as the basis to go forward and not look backwards at the difficulties of previous industrial action.

DOJ Priorities

6. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Justice to outline his priorities for the next twelve months. (AQO 1111/10)

7. **Mr Bell** asked the Minister of Justice to outline his key priorities over the next twelve months. (AQO 1112/10)

The Minister of Justice: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 6 and 7 together. As I said earlier, security and resourcing have been a priority for the Department of Justice since I took office. On the wider front, I intend to bring a draft addendum to the Programme for Government to the Assembly for approval in line with paragraphs 6 and 7 of the Hillsborough agreement. That will set out my key priorities for the next 12 months. Although I do not wish to prejudice the content of that document, I want to ensure that we will have a safer community for everyone in building a shared future and an effective, fair and speedy justice system and in reducing offending and reoffending. I shared that vision with the Justice Committee when I met it last week.

One of the ways in which I intend to make that possible is through the creation of a justice Bill. Although the contents of such a Bill are not yet finalised and will have to be discussed with the Executive, I am considering creating crime reduction partnerships, building on the successes of community safety partnerships (CSPs) and district policing partnerships (DPPs) and bringing our law on violence and intimidation in sports grounds up to date.

The Bill will also, importantly, focus on victims. In line with paragraph 7 of the Hillsborough agreement, I will ensure that criminal justice agencies provide the highest standard of service possible to victims of crime. To that end, I have already had meetings at Laganside courts with Victim Support and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which provide services to witnesses, adults and children.

Other examples of priority areas for my Department include a reform of legal aid and tribunals as well as a review of prisons, which I have mentioned. As I said on 12 April, I want a Justice Department that is accountable to the people of Northern Ireland working in partnership with other members of the Executive.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister join me in sending sympathy to the family of Seamus Fox, who was murdered outside Woodbourne PSNI station last Thursday? I am glad that the Minister mentioned community safety in his answer, because that

is a key issue. I am sure that all Members have been approached on the issue of community safety in their constituency. Can the Minister ensure that there will be a proactive approach to community safety, given that that incident has led to more questions because the murder took place outside Woodbourne PSNI station? Can he ensure that community safety is properly resourced whether through crime reduction or community safety programmes?

The Minister of Justice: I thank the Member for her question. Of course, the murder of Mr Fox concerns us all, so I join her in expressing my sympathy. On the wider front relating to community safety, it is clear that there have been significant successes by the community safety partnerships, as they have worked until now; however, there has also been, particularly in some smaller districts, an ambiguity at times between the role of DPPs and CSPs with, in some cases, many of the same people discussing the same issues. That is why I welcome the consultation initiated by the NIO under Paul Goggins to look at the rationalisation of those partnerships. I believe there is a real opportunity to promote community safety by ensuring that all the relevant statutory agencies, together with the local voluntary and community sector, the councils, and the Police Service, are brought into a wider partnership that can work on the necessary measures — different measures in different districts — to enhance community safety. Clearly, that must be done alongside the district policing partnerships' accounting role in respect of the work of police in their districts.

I believe that there will be real benefits from bringing those bodies together. That is why I trust that there will be a positive response to the consultation. Such a response will enable the inclusion of that provision in the Bill, which I hope will come before the House this term. It is clear that there is an ongoing wider community safety role that the public, councils and all other statutory agencies must sign up to. That has not always been the position.

Mr Bell: I welcome the Minister as a professional colleague. I appreciate that he began his career when I was aged three.

Given the severity of the threat against the men and women of the Police Service, will the Minister join me in saluting their courage and that of the RUC George Cross before them? Will

he ensure that that those men and women, who face a severe threat in protecting all of us, will have all the resources that are necessary for their protection and safety?

The Minister of Justice: I thank my young colleague for his good wishes. In this corner of the Chamber, it was suggested that some people have aged worse than me; however, I shall not follow that any further.

The Member makes a serious point. Of course I am happy to pay tribute in the House, as I did in Committee last week, to the work of police officers in the PSNI and the RUC in upholding the law for the benefit of the entire community. I now wish to see the necessary resources provided so that the policing task of the Chief Constable and all his staff can be carried out to best effect in dealing with the imminent security threat, which we talked about earlier, and the wider long-term task of building partnerships with all the people of Northern Ireland so that we can promote community safety, which we just spoke about. In that context, I believe that the police will not be found wanting. I have seen significant enthusiasm for that new agenda in my Department and many of the agencies related to it. I trust that all Members will play their part in ensuring that the community acts along with the agencies in bringing that about.

Mr Kennedy: I, too, welcome Mr Ford to his first occasion at the Dispatch Box. I thank him for his earlier condemnation of the bombing incident in Newtownhamilton, which is in my constituency, last Thursday. Will he join me in congratulating local members of the Fire Service for all their important and necessary work that evening?

The Minister referred to his key priorities, including public confidence. The Minister will be aware that, in the aftermath of the Newtownhamilton incident, the local Presbyterian minister, Rev Kerr Graham, said that people in that area of south Armagh felt abandoned. What is the Minister's reaction to that statement? How does he intend to address the issue of resources, which affects public confidence so much?

The Minister of Justice: I thank the Member for his good wishes. He raises serious points about resourcing. I am not going to second-guess the Chief Constable's operational responsibility or the Policing Board's role. As I said earlier, if the Chief Constable wishes to make a case for additional resources and if that case is valid,

I will ensure that that is put to the Northern Ireland Office and the Department of Finance and Personnel, both of which have relationships with the Treasury.

I am as concerned as the Member about the suggestion that people think that parts of Northern Ireland may have been abandoned. Let us be very clear: what happened last Thursday night was not the fault of the Chief Constable or any member of the Police Service. What happened last Thursday night was a terrorist attack by dissident republicans on the people of Newtownhamilton, members of the Police Service and the entire community. In that context, police officers on the ground must determine how to deploy resources, while ensuring their safety and that of the public. Given that members of the Fire Service were already on the ground, carrying out the necessary evacuation, it is clear that people were being protected as well as possible at that time. Clearly, the police face difficult issues in certain areas. However, those issues should be blamed on those who caused the problem, not on those who, unfortunately, have to respond on behalf of all of us.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I congratulate the Minister on his appointment; I have conveyed my congratulations to him privately.

A couple of issues are important to the community. The first issue is sentencing. Is it the Minister's intention in the none-too-distant future to conduct a review of sentencing? Secondly, the PPS deals with issues on the prosecution threshold that I am sure have already been conveyed to his Department.

The Minister of Justice: I am grateful to the Member for the good wishes. The issue of sentencing guidelines was part of my answer to a question that has been withdrawn. I will deal with that point elsewhere. However, guidelines apply on other parts of these islands, and we need to learn lessons from other sentencing guidelines councils to ensure that we introduce the best possible arrangements for sentencing that provide public confidence. Indeed, I raised that issue last week with the Lord Chief Justice.

The Member asked me to stray into discussing issues that relate to the Public Prosecution Service. I remind him that the PPS has no formal relationship with my Department and maintains its operational and professional independence.

Mr Speaker: Question 7 has been answered, and question 8 has been withdrawn.

Magilligan Prison

9. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Justice to outline progress in relation to the new prison at Magilligan. (AQO 1114/10)

The Minister of Justice: I have serious concerns about the state of large parts of the accommodation and infrastructure at Magilligan prison, and, although I pay tribute to the work of the management and staff at the existing facility, I agree with the inspectors and the Prison Service that a prison to replace Magilligan is an urgent priority. I know that the comprehensive options appraisal that was published in December 2007 pointed to the advantages of rebuilding on the existing site. On that basis, the Prison Service appointed separate teams to take forward the business case, the design and the programme management. Since devolution, discussions have taken place between my Department and officials in the Department of Finance and Personnel. I look forward to receiving the outline business case, which is due for submission by the summer and will include an assessment of all the options.

Mr McQuillan: I welcome the Minister to the position of Justice Minister. After the loss of facilities such as Shackleton Barracks, does the Minister realise how important the facility at Magilligan prison is to the local economy?

The Minister of Justice: I am aware of the strong support of the Member and his party colleagues for the economic contribution of Magilligan. At the moment, under the Department of Finance and Personnel's guidelines, the Department of Justice must ensure that the business case that is ultimately adopted is the best possible and most robust business case for the location of the facility that will replace the somewhat out-of-date buildings at Magilligan. Until that business case is completed, I cannot give the Member any more assurance.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. How does the Minister intend to deliver a fit-for-purpose facility for women? Will he confirm to the House whether he has had conversations with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on the

latter's responsibility for prisoners' healthcare, particularly for their mental health?

The Minister of Justice: I congratulate the Member on her creativity in working those two questions in. I am fully aware of the issues that have been in the public domain for some time concerning facilities for women prisoners, and I will keep the matter under review. Last week, one of my first acts as Minister was to visit Hydebank Wood, specifically Ash House, to see the facilities for women prisoners there. It is clear that Ash House is doing good work but that the physical layout of the site has created difficulties.

The Member asked whether I had met the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to discuss mental health issues. I met him briefly, and a review is under way of the health services that the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust provides to the Prison Service. Those services have now been in place for 18 months. Given my professional background, I have particular concerns about the mental health aspect, and I will report to the House on the review's outcome.

3.30 pm

Mr Leonard: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last Tuesday, we did not have time to get to a listed question that was put to a Minister. Is it in order that I, the Member who asked the question, have still not got a reply all these working days later? I thought that there was a protocol that if we do not get to a particular question, the Member should be furnished with an answer on the same day. The Minister concerned, the Minister for Social Development, waxed lyrical about the great and grand achievements in South Down for a particular reason called an election. However, maybe the news about Dungiven and east Derry is not so good. Will you look into that to see whether I will, at last, be given a reply?

Mr Speaker: My understanding is that your question is being followed up. I will keep a watching brief on it.

Before we move on to the next item of business, I want to inform the House that during questions for oral answer to the Justice Minister, quite a number of Members wanted to ask supplementary questions to question 2. I must remind Members that question 2 was grouped with three other questions. Understandably,

Members whose questions have been grouped are called first to ask a supplementary question. Therefore, it is not easy to allow other supplementary questions.

Let me say to the whole House that I will not have Members who feel that they should have been allowed to ask a supplementary question come up to the Table and abuse the Clerk or the Speaker. Let me make it absolutely clear to every Member that I will not allow that to happen. All sides of the House get a fair balance when it comes to supplementary questions during Question Time.

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. It is not always easy to let every Member ask a supplementary question. Some Members feel that they should be allowed to ask a supplementary question because they stand up so often. However, I will not have Members coming to the Table and abusing the Clerks and, especially, the Speaker.

Private Members' Business

Funding for Army Cadets

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

Mr Shannon: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the positive effects of the Army cadets on the young people who enlist, as well as the benefits to army enrolment; and calls on the Defence Secretary to ensure that the necessary funding is allocated to this organisation to ensure its continuance.

I urge the Assembly to support the motion. As an introduction, I will relay some information that I retrieved from the cadets' website. I have to say that, when reading it, I wanted to relive my youth and join the cadets because, unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to do that.

The Army Cadet Force is a youth organisation sponsored by the Army that provides challenging military, adventurous, sporting and community activities. It aims to inspire young people to achieve success in life with a spirit of service to the Queen, their country and their local community, and to develop in them the qualities that are required of a good citizen. It is important that we outline those qualities.

The aim is achieved by providing progressive cadet training, which is often of a challenging and exciting nature, to foster confidence, self-reliance, initiative, loyalty and a sense of service to other people. Those are qualities with which everyone would wish to be associated. The cadet force encourages the development of personal powers of practical leadership and the ability to work successfully as a member of a team, which is another tremendous quality. It stimulates an interest in the achievements, skills and values of the Army. It provides advice and prepares young people for a career in the services or the reserve forces.

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

The Army Cadet Force's motto is "to inspire to achieve". That is a very grand motto and one that we should all aim to achieve. Army Cadet

Force training aims to produce self-reliant and fit young people who have an understanding of basic military subjects, are initiated in the art of leadership, are aware of their responsibilities as citizens, and have a well-developed interest in the Army and the community. The Army Cadet Force is the Army's voluntary youth organisation, which is made up of young people between the ages of 12 and 18.

The cadet force has been successfully helping young people in their development for more than 125 years: the anniversary is this year. It is one of the country's leading youth organisations. As it is run along military-style guidelines, a certain amount of discipline is to be expected. Cadets follow a standard training syllabus — the army proficiency certificate — and many other courses and activities are also available to them. The syllabus training consists of four progressive levels. Training at each level consists of drill, skill at arms, map reading, field craft, shooting, first aid, physical training and citizenship training. Various additional courses are available to the cadets, depending on their interests and skills, including the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, which is closely linked to the training syllabus and is also available through other organisations.

I was not surprised to learn that a new emerging crisis surrounds the Army Cadet Force. That is why the motion has been tabled. When I was contacted by the chairman of the Royal British Legion in Newtownards last October, I was horrified to learn that due to cutbacks in spending, the Royal Artillery would not be standing watch at the cenotaph in the town as they usually did. Thankfully, that did not happen after a barrage of complaints from MLAs, councillors and people on the street. After seeing what lengths attempts at cost-cutting were going to, I was not surprised when my colleague Jeffrey Donaldson spoke out amid concerns that the cadet organisation will collapse if a proposed stoppage in funding continues this year.

More than 3,000 youngsters in Northern Ireland are involved in the various branches of the cadets. Ulster has produced two of the past three UK cadets of the year. We have a proud history and an active service level that we must maintain. In my constituency of Strangford, there are four cadet forces — one each in Comber and Greyabbey, and two in Newtownards, at Regent House School for the Air Cadets and at the Movilla camp.

The organisation, which is due to celebrate its 150th anniversary this year, received around £60 million in funding from the Ministry of Defence (MOD), but after it was forced to find savings of £120 million last year, the cadets lost out. There is a pecking order, and the Labour Party must take responsibility for the recent crisis. Originally, the funding cut was to last from October 2009 to April 2010, but there is now a suggestion that the freeze will extend to October 2010. That must not be allowed to happen without a battle.

The cadets' funding goes towards two bases in Northern Ireland at Magilligan and Ballykinler, as well as paying the adult instructors for taking the cadets away for weekends. I know that more than one young man's life has been turned around through the skills learned and the discipline taught through the cadet programme. I have seen real, practical change in young people because they are in the cadets. I know of one young girl who joined the cadets and who has completed her second tour of duty in Afghanistan. She returned home last week after eight months of service, and her husband, who is also a serving soldier, returned home after his tour. They saw each other for the first time since January. That was hard on their marriage, but her family told me that she has no intention of leaving and will renew her contract.

That girl, along with many others, had their passion sparked and inflamed by being cadets. They are now in service to their Queen and country and are doing us proud on the field of battle in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere in the world. To dispose of the cadet service will have untold negative effects on recruitment and service in the Army, and it is essential that we keep it going.

Although the Government provided extra funding for the Territorial Army, they did not do so for the cadets, and a crisis will emerge if that situation is not resolved in the next month. Trainers who supervise children on weekends have agreed to continue doing so for six months without pay or reimbursement, but will not continue indefinitely. That is only equitable and fair. One cannot expect adult trainers to give up their time and commitment indefinitely without recompense.

There is a justified fear that if funding were to cease now, it would be very difficult to get the organisation going again when more money is available and the MOD realises how

essential that funding is to cadets' training. I believe that that may not happen at all. I understand that the MOD's current priority is overseas operations, and that money is tight. All Departments have to make efficiency savings, but it is clear that our boys and girls on the front line must come first. Measures are necessary to focus remaining resources on the main effort, yet I cannot help but think that the relatively small amount of funding that is needed to run the cadets is somewhere to be found in the Ministry of Defence budget. I ask Members to join me in asking the MOD to find that money to ensure the future of the cadet forces.

Young men and women benefit from the discipline that cadet training brings. We all benefit from the security provided by those who go on to be members of the British Army, Air Force or Navy. We are blessed with the best armed forces in the world. That does not come about through sheer luck. It comes through the institutions that train and work with our soldiers during their time as cadets, through recruitment and as fully fledged soldiers. If that proud history and superior service is to continue, it will happen only if the funding is provided. The Assembly owes a duty to our current and future cadets to stand up and ask for the appropriate commitment and dedication from the MOD and the Secretary of State for Defence, Bob Ainsworth.

I am aware of the funding cuts that may head our way if the Tories get into power. However, such cuts cannot halt our security measures. We should have no doubt about it: these boys and girls become the men and women who sacrifice all that they have for our security. We are grateful to them for what they do each and every day. Those cuts cannot extend to help not being given to such young people so that they can be instilled with confidence and discipline. Therefore, such cuts cannot be tolerated. The Assembly must stand up today for the development of thousands of young men and women from all social, economic and religious backgrounds.

I ask Members to put aside any preconceived notions that they have about what the cadets are and what they do. Members should realise that the cadets form disciplined, adjusted young people of good character and personality. That is what our Province needs.

I should have declared an interest at the beginning of my speech, and I apologise for

not doing so. I am Ards Borough Council's representative to the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association for Northern Ireland.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt i gcoinne an mholta seo, agus seo iad na fáthanna nach mbeidh Sinn Féin ag tabhairt tacaíochta don mhóladh.

Let me state clearly that Sinn Féin does not support the motion. Although we accept the right of Members to bring to the Assembly issues that are of relevance to them and to those they represent, we certainly do not support the motion. An election is in the offing, so this may be a case of seeing who can wave the biggest Union flag. I have to be clear when I state that to republicans and nationalists, the history of the British Army, particularly in Ireland, has had no positive effect that I can see. Therefore, I do not support the motion.

Mr Shannon: As I said, I have represented the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association for Northern Ireland on Ards Borough Council for 25 years. Therefore, the motion is not a matter of who waves the biggest Union flag; it is a matter of supporting that organisation as I and others in the Chamber have done consistently for 25 years.

Mr McCartney: I do not doubt the Member's integrity or honour, but the timing of the motion is very appropriate for the election and for flag-waving. Perhaps it represents a good opportunity for him in the election campaign, so I wish him good luck with that.

I live in Derry. Bloody Sunday is deep in the consciousness of the people of that city. Civil rights demonstrators marched peacefully on that day and were murdered on the streets. If that were not enough, the history of the British Army and the British Ministry of Defence since that day has been one not only of supporting murder but of cover-ups, denial and the destruction of evidence. All those elements run right through that history. The Member may feel that the British Army has support or has had some sort of positive effect in Ireland, but from a republican and nationalist perspective, nothing could be further from the truth.

Mr Bell: The Member used the word "denial". However, does he accept that the Provisional IRA denied to the families of the disappeared the dignity of where those bodies lay? Does he also accept that the Provisional IRA was

involved in torture, that it was involved in murder and that it was involved in booby-trapping the corpses of those whom it murdered?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask all Members to return to the subject of the debate.

Mr McCartney: I hope that I am sticking to the subject of the debate, which is about whether the British Army has a positive effect. That is what I am speaking to.

Bloody Sunday was not an isolated incident. The list of British Army murders in Ireland is extensive. It goes from Ballymurphy to Dunloy and from the Creggan in Derry to Coalisland. It goes right throughout the North and the island. Members should always remember that the British Parachute Regiment murdered two people on the Shankill Road. Those people were described at the time as Protestant, working-class people, and there was no —

Mr Shannon: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. You know that I am not one for causing any bother — that is not the way that I do things. However, are the Member's comments relevant to the motion? The motion is about the cadet forces and about the young boys and girls who are being trained in the military for the RAF, the Navy and the Army. With respect, I think that the Member should focus on the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have asked Members to keep to the subject of the debate. I am quite certain that the issues that come into the debate are part and parcel of it, but I ask Members to focus on the debate.

Mr McCartney: Again, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I am not one to question your position on the matter, but the motion very clearly uses the words "positive effects". I am trying to point out that they do not have a positive effect. Therefore, Members may not wish to hear my contribution, and given their point of view, that may be understandable and fair enough. However, if they are going to tell us that the cadets, which clearly act as a recruiting sergeant for the British Army, have a positive effect, I am saying that they do not. I shall outline my reasons for that.

3.45 pm

The recent history of the North is one laced with murder, attempted murder, oppression and brutality. The British Army infiltrated and used unionist death squads. In case people think

that this is a nationalist and republican issue: in recent times, with the case of Raymond McCord Jnr, the British Army actively recruited people to kill Protestants, unionists and loyalists. This is not a sectional issue. The British Army has not had, and does not have, a positive effect here. The Member mentioned people going to Afghanistan, and there have been recent stories from Afghanistan, and, indeed, from Iraq, that resonate with people from the North: the exact same occupying Army, bringing with it the occupation Army's style, which has not had a positive effect.

I note the absence of the SDLP. Perhaps too many of them are away in Afghanistan on British Ministry of Defence-sponsored trips. However, it is a shame that they are not here to state their position. From a nationalist and republican perspective, I say again that there is no positive effect from the British Army's history in Ireland, and Sinn Féin will not be supporting the motion.

Mr Cree: Unfortunately, the behaviour of Northern Ireland youth does not very often reach the House for positive reasons. Young people throughout the United Kingdom get a very bad press, whether it is because of the perception of them in the local community or excessive demonising by the media.

I gladly welcome the debate, because the work of the cadet organisation plays a major role in changing attitudes and in developing young people. It is regrettable that what should be a motion about young people has degenerated into a political discussion about the role of the British Army. From my experience of serving in the forces, many people from the republican and nationalist tradition served with the Royal Air Force, Royal Navy and the British Army for centuries, and continue to do so. However, the Army Cadet Force is not an organisation that recruits directly into the army. About 75% of cadet movement members adopt careers and professions in civilian service.

The cadet forces of all three services develop physical and mental skills in young people, encouraging self-confidence, teamwork, friendship and leadership. Cadets of all abilities and backgrounds are welcome to participate in activities and exercises that they would not have otherwise considered due to a lack of opportunity or confidence. There is a definite value in having well-rounded, community-minded, experienced young people who are ready to

assume their places as tomorrow's leaders and decision-makers.

The cadet movement also gives young adults a realistic view of military life through hands-on experience in a variety of career fields, while instilling strong values, positive character traits and an important sense of civic responsibility. Cadets are under no obligation to serve in the armed forces later. However, many have gone on to highly successful military and civilian careers, including myself.

Mr McCarthy: The Alliance Party supports the motion. I have very little to add to what has been said, other than that the cadet services are a very important youth activity, and provide a good direction for all our young people, giving them a sense of community and responsibility towards wider society.

The cadet services can and do encourage our young people to pursue a career in the service of the country, and recruitment can be from the age of 16. By offering help and support, the service is steering our young people to live a good and positive life. In this day and age, when there are so many opportunities for young people to get into mischief and trouble, it is incumbent on the cadet services to provide excellent direction for our young people, which they do.

I am happy to support the motion.

Lord Browne: I support the motion, and I declare an interest as a member of the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association. The association, amongst other things, works to oversee the Army Cadet Force in Northern Ireland, so I know very well the good work that cadet forces can deliver for young people.

We are all aware that cadet forces can continue to provide that important opportunity to our young people only if it has the funding to do so. The issue of funding has been raised several times recently in the House of Lords. It is worth noting that while cadet forces across the United Kingdom have suffered cuts to their funding, cadet forces in Northern Ireland have been hit even harder than the detachments in Great Britain because of the much higher travel costs involved in attending the annual camps, events and training that take place in England and Scotland.

I remember, as a young cadet, being put in charge of transferring baggage from the ferry in Scotland

to the train on the way to the annual camp. Those were the days when the trains may have run on time, but the luggage went astray, and I regret to tell you that the kit ended up in Dundee, rather than in Lancashire, and I spent a week peeling potatoes. However, that is by the way.

The previous cut to the cadet budget took place last October and amounted to some £4 million. That forced the association to immediately cease providing paid training days. The officers and instructors who are volunteers have now to give even more of their free time, and, in many cases, they have to take unpaid leave from their civilian employment in order to attend the training camps, which are vital to the quality of the instruction delivered to cadets.

It is right that we pay tribute to the dedication shown by volunteers to the cadet forces and to the cadets themselves. Without those selfless volunteers, the cadet forces would simply be unable to function and their members would be unable to experience the many benefits that come from involvement.

The cadet forces play an important role for young people. They provide them with the opportunity to develop personal skills that will help them throughout their lives. Although the ethic of military discipline was — and still is — lost on me, it can have a positive impact on the lives of many young people by providing them with a structured environment in which to develop.

The cadet forces allow young people to gain leadership skills and encourage them to work together as part of a team, and through the BTEC and Duke of Edinburgh's Award programmes, cadets can gain qualifications that are equivalent to GCSEs. That is why they are important. Not only do cadet forces work to complement education in schools, they can help to catch the young people who fall through the gaps in the formal education system, give them real qualifications and equip them with the skills that they require for success in later life.

It is unfortunate that there is a perception that cadet forces operate only with children in private schools. However, in truth, only 9% of the cadet budget goes to detachments that are based at fee-paying schools. The vast majority of resources go to cadet groups that work at community level across Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. That makes it vital that the cadet forces receive the money required to continue

delivering that resource to young people. That is why I support the motion.

Mr G Robinson: The Army Cadet Force today comprises:

“131,000 young people, led by 25,000 adult volunteers, in well over 3,000 sites across the country.”

My quotation is from the Ministry of Defence, regarding all cadet services on 18 February 2010. It is a demonstration of the value of the cadets to our young people. I was highly impressed when, together with my colleague Gregory Campbell, I visited an excellent open day for the cadets and their families in Magilligan Training Centre in my East Londonderry constituency.

“To inspire to achieve” is the motto of the 47,000 Army Cadet Force members, and to fulfil that motto, the force’s members are able to avail themselves of challenges that include community activities. This is of value to society as a whole and to local communities in particular. Another major benefit is the development of a young person’s self confidence and esteem. That is done through helping young people to increase their physical fitness and to learn the skills required for teamwork and leadership. Those are positive skills for the cadet and society to have. Young people are our future, so equipping them with such skills is an important part of securing the future of the cadets and of society. Proper funding is essential to ensuring that that positive contribution continues.

The present funding for Army cadets amounts to less than 0.3% of the entire MOD budget, and even that is to be reduced. As was said earlier, the cadets are assisted by adult volunteers, so that money is used only to fund the activities. Therefore, for opportunities to continue to be offered, it is essential that funding be secured.

I want to point out that cadets are drawn from all backgrounds, which I welcome. There can be no accusations of religious bias — a remark that I direct across the Chamber. Nor are they expected to join the Army when their time as cadets is over — I again direct that across the Chamber.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to address his remarks through the Chair, not across the Chamber.

Mr G Robinson: I state again, Mr Deputy Speaker, that some cadets progress into serving their country, but doing so is not a requirement.

The nature of sea, Army or air cadets and their positive experience makes it vital to ensure that they are properly funded. Therefore, it is with great pleasure that I support the motion.

Mr Bell: I thank Alderman Shannon for tabling the motion. Anyone who knows him knows his love for Strangford. He has served it for a quarter of a century and knows that the Army cadet movement has seen hundreds, if not thousands of children pass through its ranks. He knows how that benefits the people of Strangford, and he wants the best for them. That is why, after his distinguished record of 25 years serving the area, he has tabled the motion. Those who would diminish the reason for bringing the motion here are not looking at it correctly.

Why do we look at the benefits of Army cadetship? Let us take a second to realise what it can do for the development of our young people. Let us look at the intelligence quotient (IQ). We are told that one of the greatest problems in education today is that young people are not taught enough problem-solving skills. They are not taught enough about independent thinking. They are not taught enough about basic subjects to make progress in their careers. Aside from character, which my colleague from North Down Leslie Cree described so well, what does Army cadetship offer? Aside from discipline, Army cadet training offers key skills in problem-solving and logistics. Every subject area of the curriculum, from physics to geography, is taught, enhanced and supported by Army cadet membership.

Army cadetship offers more than the IQ: it offers the EQ — the emotional quotient. Industry tells us our young people need a strong EQ as well as a strong IQ. Industry wants young men and women who can work as part of a team; young men and women who can accept discipline; young men and women with a strategic focus and an ability to work to a plan; young men and women capable of independent thinking, but also capable of working as part of a corporate body. I can think of few organisations for young people other than the Army cadets that can give them all those skills, which can subsequently be put on a CV.

Through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, the investment is not, as has been made out from across the

Chamber, in training young people for conflict, although we cannot shy away from the security needs that we may have in the future. People talk about Afghanistan, but is it correct that teachers in Afghanistan are murdered and tortured for teaching girls? Is that right? Is that something that the world should turn its back on and look away from?

Are those the standards that we want for the twenty-first century? Whether it is murdering teachers in Afghanistan or blowing 80-year-old women off their feet and causing criminal damage to public property in Newtownhamilton, there will be a need for security in the future.

4.00 pm

I shall take some time to respond to points that were made. The Member for Londonderry did not answer the question about the IRA's torture, which was in contravention of every Geneva convention. He did not answer the question about the IRA disappearing single mothers of 10. He did not answer the question —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I asked Members to return to the subject of the debate, and it was agreed that we should.

Mr Bell: I want to answer, Mr Deputy Speaker, because allegations were made during the debate. I want to highlight the distinguished role of the British Army, and I have no hesitation in doing so. Members should realise that the IRA murdered more Roman Catholics than the British Army did. Therefore, Members should not point their finger when three are pointing back at them.

The purpose of today's motion was to ensure future funding for our young people so that they have opportunities that, in many cases, their mothers and fathers, although genuinely loving them, do not have the resources to give them. That funding will give them opportunities to travel and see the world, learn new technologies and enhance their educational skills base. That is what the Army cadets do without any commitment to the future.

Mr Shannon: Businesses and organisations recognise the Duke of Edinburgh's award, which can be attained through the cadet forces, as an achievement. Does the Member agree that people can do more good inside the cadet forces than outside them?

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

Mr Bell: I agree entirely that any young person who passes through the Army Cadet Force will leave as a more rounded, better-educated and better-skilled young person than they would have been without the experience. Alderman Shannon knows only too well about the young people in my constituency who did not have the opportunities that many of us had but who, through the Army Cadet Force, were able to travel, learn new languages and skills and learn how to play their role as part of a team. Many young people are in a job today because they were able to present a CV that showed the skills that they acquired through the Army cadets.

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

Mr Bell: I support the motion.

Lord Morrow: Some good things have come out of the debate. Unfortunately, some regrettable remarks were also made. However, I assure the House that the thrust of the motion was not to cause division or rancour. It is unfortunate that some decided to go down that road. If we brought a motion to the House on the Boy Scouts, the Girl Guides or the Boys' Brigade, some Members would try to turn that into some sort of political debate. That is regrettable.

I was a member of a cadet force in my youth, so I speak from experience. Members will know by looking at me that it certainly did not discriminate against me because of my height or anything like that. No discrimination was ever practised in the Army Cadet Force, of which I was a member in Ballygawley. I have many happy memories of it. Many of the lads who went through the force at that time achieved many things.

Jim Shannon set out very well the role of the Army Cadet Force. He showed his full appreciation of what the Army Cadet Force has done. Unfortunately, Raymond McCartney took a different line. He thought that there was something very political about it. He thought that there was something very British Army about it, but I assure the House that many former cadets never served in the British Army or in any security forces, yet they are better citizens as a result of being in the cadets. Indeed, as a result of serving in the Ballygawley cadets in the 60s, I am a better citizen.

Unfortunately, some of the then leaders are deceased, but I pay tribute to them publicly. The endless hours that they sacrificed to train boys, including me, are much appreciated.

Leslie Cree spoke about the self-confidence that the Army cadets bring to young men and women. In my day, it was just young men; nowadays, it is both, and there is nothing wrong with that. Mr Cree was right: by giving young people a good start in life, the cadet force encourages self-confidence and ensures that they turn out to be better citizens. Kieran McCarthy's remarks were brief, but, again, they showed appreciation of the ACF, and his support is valued.

Lord Browne spoke enthusiastically about what the ACF is all about, and he relayed some of his experiences in it. I was going to claim that I was probably the only Member who was a former member of the Army Cadet Force, but I stood back because I am not sure that that is totally accurate. Members, present and absent, who were not in the cadet force do not know what they were missing. They should encourage their children and grandchildren to join the cadet force, because it would make them better and more rounded citizens.

George Robinson spoke in glowing terms, saying that he and his colleague Mr Campbell had witnessed at first hand the activities of the cadets in his area. He showed great appreciation for what cadets do and what they are trying to achieve in so many people's lives.

In his usual eloquent manner, Jonathan Bell outlined what the ACF is all about, and he concentrated on the thrust of the motion. I ask the House to reflect on exactly what the motion states. Unfortunately, people take perceptions into their head and think that that must be how things are. It is not that way. People may not agree with me about everything, but perhaps they will agree that the cadet force exists to help, encourage and support young people from all walks of life. There is no discrimination or elitism, which is an excellent standpoint that must be encouraged. I hope, therefore, that the House will not divide. On reflection, perhaps even those who expressed reservations about the cadet force will stop to think that the motion deserves the House's full support. Perhaps, at least, they will not attempt to divide the House on this important issue.

It may have been said, but it needs to be said again: this year, the Army Cadet Force

celebrates its 150th anniversary. As a former member of the cadets, I take great pride in speaking to the motion. I thought that I would never get the opportunity in my lifetime to speak in a public arena about the Army Cadet Force, so I do so with pride. I found it to be an excellent organisation, which instructed me on discipline, how to be a good citizen and how to look out for others and not to be self-centred. For me, the best part was the camaraderie; friendships that remain to this day were developed. Similarly, the valuable skills that are taught stay with one throughout one's life.

At present, across the United Kingdom, 47,000 teenage cadets are supported by 8,500 selfless adult workers. To service all those young men and women takes approximately 1,700 volunteers. Extra pressure is being put on volunteers in today's society, and Members will appreciate what I am saying. There is much red tape to go through to be a volunteer in any youth organisation, but people stick with it and get on with it. I acknowledge what the volunteers in the ACF do.

In this country, the Army Cadet Force has the first and second battalions, with 36 and 35 detachments respectively. It is one of the most successful youth organisations in the United Kingdom, and it remains committed to the development of boys and girls from the age of 12 and of all backgrounds and abilities.

Mr Shannon: In the past two years, it has been a cadet from Northern Ireland who has excelled and been the UK cadet of the year. That is an example of what the organisation does in the Province.

Lord Morrow: I thank Mr Shannon for that; it is a good point to make and to reinforce. Unfortunately, I did not reach the dizzy heights of being the best cadet in Northern Ireland, but we had other achievements of which we were proud. In my day, we had an excellent shooting team — a target-shooting team, I emphasise. I think that we got to the finals of the Belfast Telegraph Cup eight years running and won it on a number of occasions.

Through a broad range of fun-filled, exciting and challenging educational and adventure opportunities, the Army Cadet Force strives to help young people towards a responsible adulthood. It aims to inspire young people to achieve success in life, with a spirit of service for their Queen, country and local community.

That goes a significant distance in promoting the qualities of a good citizen. Throughout their time as cadets, they work towards the army proficiency certificate, which has five progressive levels of difficulty. It covers a range of topics, such as personal standards, first aid, weapon safety, fieldcraft and team tactics. Alongside those areas, the cadets are taught music, piping and drumming, and there is a range of adventure training opportunities, including abseiling and climbing. Team sports are also encouraged at every level, with competitions at regional, national and international level. There are field trips to European battlefields and international exchanges. Expeditions can range from a few nights camping in the Lake District to weeks on safari in Kenya.

The Army Cadet Force is also one of the largest operating authorities for the Duke of Edinburgh's award. If funding is not maintained, there is a danger that the organisation, which has given so much to our youth and society, will no longer exist.

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

Lord Morrow: The invaluable role that it has created and maintained will be lost. I strongly commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the positive effects of the Army cadets on the young people who enlist, as well as the benefits to army enrolment; and calls on the Defence Secretary to ensure that the necessary funding is allocated to this organisation to ensure its continuance.

Adjourned at 4.13 pm.

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Regional Development

Department for Regional Development's Corporate and Business Plan 2010-11

Published at 1:00 pm on Friday 23 April 2010

The Minister for Regional Development

(Mr Murphy): I am pleased to inform Assembly Members of the publication of the Department for Regional Development's (DRD) Corporate and Business Plan 2010-11.

The Corporate Plan takes account of the fact that we will be facing constraints in public expenditure in the coming year. While this is a major challenge, we will continue to have a significant budget to spend in laying the foundations for the type of economy and society we all want to see in the North. We do important work for all our people and this will not change in the year ahead. Roads will still need to be built, improved and maintained. Our public transport arrangements and water and sewerage services likewise. During 2010-11 we will spend almost £1.1 billion on our roads, public transport and water programmes.

The Business Plan, which incorporates the Balanced Scorecard, details our targets for 2010-11 as we work towards delivering our longer-term Public Service Agreement targets and other commitments set out in the Programme for Government 2008-11.

The Plans are available for viewing in the Assembly Library or on the DRD internet site at www.drdni.gov.uk. However, if any member would prefer a personal hard copy, it can be obtained by contacting the Department's Strategic Planning Branch on (028) 9054 0930.

