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The Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX.
Tel: 028 9052 1135 · e-mail: simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 5 October 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matters of the Day

Culmore Road Bomb

Mr Speaker: Mr Pat Ramsey has sought leave to make a statement on the bomb at Culmore Road, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I shall call Mr Pat Ramsey to speak for up to three minutes on the subject. I will then call representatives from each of the other political parties, as agreed with the Whips. Those Members will each have up to three minutes in which to speak on the matter. The convention is that there will be no opportunity for interventions, questions or a vote on the matter. I will not take any points of order until the item of business is concluded. If that is clear, we will proceed.

Mr P Ramsey: Thank you for agreeing to the business being heard in the House this morning.

There has been much comment about the timing of last night's cowardly bomb attack on the Culmore Road in the city of Derry. Thankfully, no one was hurt, but it brought misery, heartache and distress to many thousands of people in the city. Some will see it as a response to President Clinton's visit to Derry last week, and others will remark that it may be something to do with the Tory conference currently under way in Birmingham, but perhaps the most apt for the people of the city will be today's date: 5 October. That was the day, in 1968, when thousands of people in Derry gathered on the streets to protest about civil rights.

Just as the people united then to speak out against injustice, we stand united today, as political parties in Derry and in this House, to condemn the born-again Provos responsible for this outrageous attack. Their actions have caused great inconvenience and distress to the wider community in Derry. That includes vulnerable elderly people, some of whom were

sleeping, who had to be evacuated from their homes late last night. Hard-pressed businesses have had their properties damaged, innocent children are unable to get to school and hundreds of workers and commuters have not been able to get to work.

As, I am sure, you know from listening to people, Mr Speaker, there is a great sense of anger today, which will be shared by many of my colleagues in the House. More importantly, there is a strong determination that those who are responsible will not be allowed to set back the growth and development of our wonderful city. Nor will they curb the plans and desire for a better future for everyone in the historic city of Derry.

I pay tribute to the staff of Da Vinci's hotel for their vigilance and swift action in reporting the bomb and evacuating people out of the hotel. I also acknowledge the tremendous work of the PSNI in protecting people's lives and putting at risk their own lives. Even now, there is a suspicion of another vehicle in the wider area.

Finally, I evoke the civil rights anthem of 5 October 1968. The message in the city then was "We Shall Overcome". The message today is that those who are responsible will not succeed, and the people of Derry will overcome.

Mr Campbell: Speaking on behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party, I join Mr Ramsey and, hopefully, Members from right across the House in supporting the widespread condemnation that has rightly been expressed regarding the latest attempt to disrupt life in Londonderry and across Northern Ireland.

It appears that the information — as much as is available — points the finger at dissident republican elements of one description or another. It is, of course, only two months since they attempted to bomb the Strand Road police station, which is less than a mile away from last night's attempted murder attack. There have

been other attacks in Newry and elsewhere. The message is very clear: the dissident republican elements intend to continue to carry out the type of attacks and atrocities that their predecessors carried out before them. Just as their predecessors failed, so must they fail.

We know that the condemnation is there, and it is good, right and proper that it should be. However, condemnation does not ensure that the propagandists and propagators of last night's violence end up in jail. The only way that we will stop attacks such as that is with convictions in a court of law. That is what is required. The local community is required to go to the police with information to bring about convictions in a court of law. We understand that those people have been called conflict junkies, traitors and Neanderthals. We know all of what they have been called, but we also know that they are still carrying out those attacks. The only way to stop them is convictions in a court of law. To prevent a recurrence, anyone who has any information, be they in this House or outside it, should give that to the police to ensure that those who are guilty of such attacks are brought before the courts.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat. I stand here, as Sinn Féin's representative, to unreservedly condemn the planting of the bomb in Derry last night and to call on anyone with any information to assist the PSNI with its enquiries.

Some politicians, perhaps inadvertently, give a degree of credibility to the actions of those who were involved in the planting of the bomb in Derry by attempting to connect those groups with the terrible conflict that we have emerged from. Of course, those who planted the bomb take a degree of comfort from those misguided comments. Republicans have only ever involved themselves in armed action when there was no other means to pursue their political objectives. The Good Friday Agreement changed all of that. It is quite clear that the conditions that we endured in the past no longer exist. We lived in a state whose institutions were designed and sustained in the interest of one dominant ruling class. It is unfortunate but true that it was a Protestant Parliament for a Protestant people. It was an Orange state, it was 50 years of oppression, but all of that has now gone, as have the vast bulk of the 35,000 British troops who were on our streets.— *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms M Anderson: The actions of those involved in planting the bomb last night are designed to bring British troops back onto our streets and remilitarise the North. They are also designed to close the democratic space that is now open to republicans. Those people want to end the power-sharing arrangements; however, they will fail.

Such attacks on the people of Derry and on the people of Ireland only make us more determined to build on our present opportunities in the all-Ireland and power-sharing political institutions that were achieved through long and arduous negotiations. Some of those involved in such attacks might genuinely but absolutely mistakenly believe that they are furthering some kind of republican cause. However, they do not have popular support for their actions, and they have a responsibility to put the needs of the people first.

Mr F McCann: On a point of order.

Mr Speaker: Order. I said that there are no points of order during speeches on the very sensitive issue of a matter of the day. I am happy to take a point of order after the issue is dealt with.

Ms M Anderson: My final comment is to say that the vast majority of the people of Derry and of Ireland overwhelmingly support the peace process and the political way forward. I ask people, in this Chamber and beyond —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms M Anderson: — to be very careful about comments that they make — *[Interruption]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms M Anderson: — so that we try to resolve this situation in a way that will benefit all. *[Interruption.]*

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

Mr McClarty: Thank you, Mr Speaker. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I thank Ms Anderson for that very jaundiced and misplaced lesson on the history of this Province. There is no excuse for violence in this Province: there never has been any excuse, and there never will be.

Mr Speaker, what a difference a day makes. Yesterday, here in Northern Ireland, we were in a state of euphoria after the magnificent victory of the European team in the Ryder Cup. Much of that success, of course, was owed to two of our finest golfers, Graeme McDowell and Rory

McIlroy. Today, unfortunately, the headlines are about Neanderthals who have not yet woken up to the fact that Northern Ireland has moved on. Such individuals can never be allowed to succeed. Thankfully, no one was injured, but there is huge disruption in Londonderry this morning, and it is the community which has been inconvenienced.

The perpetrators of this senseless, pointless act must be apprehended and convicted. That can only happen if there is a flow of information from the community. Therefore, I appeal to those who have even the smallest snippet of information to pass that on to the PSNI. I pay tribute to members of the PSNI who put their own life at risk last night to protect others. If the perpetrators are listening, indeed, if they are even out of their bed at this time of the morning, I say to them, "You cannot succeed, you will not succeed".

Dr Farry: This was a disgraceful attack on the people of Derry. There has never been any justification for violence in this or any society, and that statement remains as true today as ever. What was most striking about the attack last night in Derry was the anti-economy message that lay behind it. In that respect, it is such a betrayal of the people of Derry and of Northern Ireland. When people are battling hard to protect jobs, to bring new jobs, to bring in new investment and wealth, to try to improve people's living standards, the dissidents' message is the absolute opposite. It is nihilistic. They have no interest in the well-being of society. Their emptiness and lack of a message stand exposed to the rest of the world.

It is important that the House remains united in standing up to dissidents; that we provide a positive alternative of a shared future that includes everyone; that we retain our focus on the economy and on trying to improve people's standard of living; and that we give our full support to the Police Service of Northern Ireland for the extremely difficult job that it does every day and night in trying to protect the people of Northern Ireland from such threats. It is incumbent on anyone who has information relating to the attack to bring it to the attention of the authorities. I am certain that the people who carried out the attack have extremely low levels of support. They are rejected by the overwhelming majority of the people in Derry and elsewhere, and it is important that we eliminate this cancer from society sooner rather than later.

10.45 am

Mr Speaker: I will now take Mr McCann's point of order.

Mr F McCann: On a point of order, Mr Speaker, there was order throughout the Chamber as Members made their submissions. However, every time my colleague got up, she was heckled continuously by Members on the other side of the House. When people get up to deliver such a submission, they should receive the order that Members from other parties are given.

Mr Speaker: At times, Members from all parties try to speak from a sedentary position. I think that the Member will realise that I did bring Members to order. Members need to appreciate that I have a difficult enough job up here trying to maintain order. As I said, from time to time, Members from all parties are to blame for trying to speak from a sedentary position, and I hope that the Member understands that.

Mr F McCann: On another point of order, Mr Speaker, it is my understanding that the Minister for Social Development was to appear in the House today to explain the actions that he will be taking to restore morale in the Housing Executive, especially in light of current inquiries. Is there any reason why he will not be appearing before us today?

Mr Speaker: There is nothing in the Order Paper to suggest that the Minister for Social Development will appear in the House today. Yesterday, there were rumours that he might come in today to make a ministerial statement. That has obviously not happened, and my understanding is that he will not appear in the House today to make a statement or on any other business.

Mr F McCann: I had tabled a question for urgent oral answer and was informed at the time that the Minister would appear before the House today to tell us about the actions that he will be taking to restore confidence in the Housing Executive.

Mr Speaker: I know that the Member submitted a question for urgent oral answer. However, I decided not to accept it because it did not meet the criteria in Standing Orders. Yes, there were rumours that the Minister would make a statement; however, that is obviously not the case now.

Assembly Business

Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Speaker: I advise Members that I received Mr Tom Elliott's resignation as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, which took effect from 20 September 2010. The nominating officer of the Ulster Unionist Party, Mr Tom Elliott, notified me that he wishes to nominate Mr Roy Beggs to fill the vacancy. Mr Beggs accepted the appointment.

Executive Committee Business

Debt Relief Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mrs Arlene Foster, to move the Consideration Stage of the Debt Relief Bill.

Moved. — [The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster).]

Mr Speaker: One amendment has been tabled. Members will have received a copy of the Marshalled List, which provides details of the amendment. The amendment allows for payments to cover intermediaries and authorities' costs. I remind Members who intend to speak that they should address their comments only to the amendment. The Questions on stand part will be taken at the appropriate points in the Bill. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Clause 1 (Debt relief orders)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I beg to move the following amendment: In page 16, line 29, insert

“(10) The Department may, out of the proceeds of fees charged under Article 361(1)(za), make payments to competent authorities or approved intermediaries in connection with the exercise of the functions of approved intermediaries under this Part.”

Before I speak to the amendment, I thank the members of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee for their helpful scrutiny of the Bill. As the Committee's scrutiny was drawing to a close, officials brought it to my attention that it would be desirable if a minor amendment were to be made to the Bill. I agreed that the amendment would be beneficial, and I wrote to the Committee and my Executive colleagues to tell them about it. The amendment is to clause 1 and is to enable moneys raised through charging a fee to applicants to the debt relief scheme in respect of intermediaries' costs to be paid over either to the intermediaries or to their competent authorities.

The debt relief scheme is to enable the Official Receiver, who is an official in my Department and an officer of the court, to make what are termed “debt relief orders” on the application of eligible individuals. A debt relief order will be similar to a bankruptcy order made by the High

Court, but it will cost substantially less. It will afford protection against legal action in respect of debts covered by the order for a one-year period, at the end of which liability to pay those debts will be cancelled.

Applications to the debt relief scheme will be made through trained and experienced debt advisers acting as intermediaries. The intermediaries' function will be to assess whether debtors are eligible for the scheme and, if they are, to complete an online application form on their behalf. The intermediaries will then submit the completed form to the Official Receiver. Intermediaries will be appointed by the competent authorities designated by my Department, and those competent authorities will be organisations engaged in the provision of debt management or debt counselling services.

Paragraph 10 of the schedule to the Bill amends article 361 of the Insolvency (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 to enable those applying to the debt relief scheme to be charged a fee in respect of the intermediary's costs. The fee amount will be set in subordinate legislation. Amending the Bill to allow the moneys raised through charging that fee to be paid over to either the intermediaries or their competent authorities recognises the reality that the intermediaries work closely with the competent authorities and that expenditure associated with operating the debt relief scheme will fall on both the competent authorities and the intermediaries.

The amendment will mean that, in the case of training, fee income can be paid over to the competent authority to pay for the training of intermediaries, instead of being paid to the individual intermediaries and passed on by them to the competent authority. By providing for payment to the intermediaries and/or the competent authority, the amendment allows the payment regime to have the appropriate flexibility.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment

(Mr A Maginness): The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment welcomes the Debt Relief Bill, which is intended to provide a remedy for those who can neither fund an individual voluntary arrangement nor afford the cost of petitioning for bankruptcy and are therefore unable to free themselves from a lifetime burdened by debt that they have no reasonable prospect of being able to pay.

I thank the Minister and her officials for co-operating so fully with the Committee in its consideration during Committee Stage. The Committee had concerns about the provision of clear guidance and timelines on investigations, provisions to cover unforeseen changes in an individual's circumstances and upper time limits on debt relief restriction orders. The Department responded to the Committee's concerns by clarifying details on those provisions and, in the case of provisions to cover unforeseen changes in an individual's circumstances, by obtaining detail on the impact of equivalent legislation in England and Wales.

The Committee sought clarification from the Department on plans that it may have to charge a fee, as provided for in the Bill, to organisations seeking to act as approved intermediaries. The Department responded that it currently has no plans to charge a fee in connection with the granting or maintenance of designation as a competent authority, and the Committee was content that the Department's responses addressed adequately its concerns on those issues.

Towards the end of Committee Stage, the Minister wrote to advise the Committee that she had decided to table an amendment to the Bill at Consideration Stage. That amendment would allow a fee to be charged to applicants for the costs of persons acting as approved intermediaries. She advised the Committee that the amendment was brought following advice from the Insolvency Service in England and Wales that said that, because most intermediaries are likely to be salaried employees, it is better to be in a position where the proceeds of that fee can be paid to the competent authorities as an alternative to being paid to the intermediaries themselves. The Committee considered the proposed amendment to be appropriate and was content to note it.

Mr Irwin: I am sure that Members will agree that the legislation is very timely, given that Northern Ireland is experiencing a difficult economic outlook. Times are tough, and the Bill is a recognition of the fact that, in tough economic times, although the vast majority of people are able to tighten their belts and budget their income to meet a variety of challenges, there are those who are financially very vulnerable and have got into a vicious circle of debt from which they cannot get out. The Bill

is a reaction to those specific circumstances, and it brings Northern Ireland into line with England and Wales, where similar schemes are operated. I welcome the fact that the Bill is a remedy to debt for those who need it most without the prohibitive costs associated with filing for bankruptcy. Those people include those who have little income after necessary living costs have been paid and who have no assets.

Although the heavy lifting of discussion and debate on the Bill was done prior to my membership of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I am conscious that a lot of thought and deliberation went into the process. That is fairly represented by the fact that only one amendment, on a technical aspect, has been tabled. That is a credit to the Minister and, of course, to the Committee.

The legislation should not be seen by anyone as a green light to accumulate debt and then walk away. The six-year re-entry rule is a clear marker that the Bill is a specific response to specific circumstances. It is designed to provide a lifeline to people who are in severe financial difficulties.

The amendment is a sensible approach to the obvious costs that will be associated with intermediaries getting to grips with the new legislation when it becomes active. I feel that it is a responsible amendment that will help to facilitate the training that is necessary to accurately provide advice on those who will be deemed eligible for a debt relief order.

Having looked at the Committee's report, I am keen to see greater emphasis placed on a system whereby, following a person's use of a debt relief order, an intermediary would be in a position to give more focused advice on that person's financial situation to stop them ending up in a similar position all over again. When a debt relief order is served, that should trigger a mechanism whereby advice services and intermediaries pay particular attention to that individual, who will need assistance in handling their financial affairs. In that mechanism, specific advice would be tailored to that individual to help avoid future debt building up.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Consideration Stage. I support the Bill and the amendment.

Mr Cree: We have discussed the matter at some length in Committee and in the House.

The Ulster Unionist Party is fully behind the amendment and has no difficulty supporting the Bill.

Mr Neeson: As a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I support the amendment and the Bill. I thank the Minister and her officials for listening to the Committee's concerns. The process has shown the importance of scrutiny by the Assembly's Statutory Committees. It is very welcome to know that we are having an impact on legislation in the House.

Mr Frew: I commend Mr Neeson's words in what he said about the Committees. In my short time in the House, I have found that the Committees seem to be working very well.

I find it enjoyable and educational being on Committees. I am on the same Committee as the Member. I find real benefit in sitting on Committees and in the work that they do.

11.00 am

The amendment is common sense and is needed in the Bill. For anybody who finds themselves in this position, it is a traumatic time, and it is only right and proper that they have someone to speak to and to work through their problems with. However, the individuals and organisations that undertake that work also need support and training. Citizens advice bureaux were mentioned. If people in this position do not go to their local politicians, they will certainly go to their local citizens advice bureaux. It is good and proper that these people will undertake that work on behalf of people in trouble.

It is also proper that the money be raised by charging the applicants a fee, because it would be unfair to place that charge and burden on the taxpayer. Given what applicants will go through and the support and guidance that they will receive, I do not think that it is too much to ask that they pay a small fee to obtain that service. Why should the taxpayer be burdened with that? It would be simply unfair. Given that the fee charged under the debt relief scheme in England and Wales is less than one third of the cost for a petition for bankruptcy debt relief, it represents a bargain for the person who finds themselves in that situation. The moneys will, of course, be used not only for time and labour but for training and the provision of computers to enable the people involved to do their work. It is, therefore, right that payments can be made

to the competent authorities. It would not be good, right or proper if intermediaries were paid and then had to pay, if you like, their masters. I believe that the amendment also covers that situation. The amendment is common sense, and it is good that we have it.

Mr Givan: The amendment is sensible. The Insolvency Service in England and Wales has suggested that this would be a better way for us to take forward the administration of the fee, because it has had to secure the agreement of intermediaries in order to pass that fee on to the competent authority. An unanticipated situation in which the moneys for an employee's work go to the employer as the competent authority rather than the employee may lead to a degree of tension and must be avoided. The amendment, therefore, makes sense.

The intermediaries carry out an important role. They will be designated as a professional in the field and will carry out the important task of assisting the applicant, who will often come to them in distress and in need of help because of the circumstances in which they find themselves. Now that the economy is suffering, more and more people are coming to our constituency offices and presenting their financial difficulties to us. As my colleague said earlier, we do not have the kind of professional skill required to advise them on debt management. We often refer them to the likes of the citizens advice bureaux, which play an excellent role. I know that four other organisations have expressed an interest in also carrying out that work.

Mr Craig: I declare an interest as a member of the management board of a citizens advice bureau. I concur with my colleague: it is remarkable that three years into a serious recession, CAB has already carried out sterling work in handling individuals' debt problems in particular. Locally, it deals with debt amounting to some £10 million per annum. It is right to pay tribute to that organisation for the help and assistance that it has given to individuals, and, through the amendment, it will no doubt continue to do so.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for his contribution. The employees of competent authorities are salaried individuals, and the amendment addresses the fact that the fee should not be going to people on salaries but

to their employer. The amendment will go some way to addressing that.

However, the amendment also builds in flexibility. If an intermediary is not employed through a competent authority, the Department will still be able to pass on the fee to those intermediaries. The amendment makes common sense, and I support it.

Dr McDonnell: On behalf of the SDLP, and without delaying the House, I endorse the Bill. It makes perfect sense, is workable and improves our financial sector's efficiency and effectiveness. The amendment is worthy of support, and I support it in every way possible.

Mr Weir: I have been considering this issue lately. As with yesterday's debate on property fraud in Europe, it is not a matter on which I anticipated speaking. Nevertheless, it is of high significance to constituents and it will be an increasing issue for people, whether they come from North Down, Londonderry, Belfast, a rural area or wherever. Consequently, as with any discussion on debt relief, it is important to get the legislation right.

I appreciate that legislation has come into force across the water. Although it is important for us to learn from the experiences in England and to try to draw from them, and, where right, we should learn from good practice and replicate experiences, we must realise that Northern Ireland is a special case. The Prime Minister acknowledged that Northern Ireland is a special case. However, whether he preaches it as a special case, and whether the actions of the Chancellor of the Exchequer match those fine words, remains to be seen. Nevertheless, the issue of debt impinges very heavily on people in Northern Ireland.

I hope to bring a slightly different perspective to the debate. The Chairperson of the Committee, Alban Maginness, dealt eloquently with the range of issues in the Bill, and it is clear that a great deal of hard work on the amendment has gone on in Committee and beyond. In looking at the intricacies of the Bill, I will not try to second-guess what happened in Committee, as it has done sterling work. Unlike any of the Members who spoke previously, all of whom have been members of the Committee and have dealt directly with the Bill, I hope to bring a fresh perspective to the legislation; a fresh perspective that is unencumbered by Committee Stage or any in-depth knowledge and is based

on genuine ignorance. Nevertheless, I hope to bring a fresh perspective. I see that my words are having the desired effect on the Public Gallery.

I suspect that there will be coverage in the media tomorrow of many of the comments made about the dreadful events up in Londonderry, but I suspect that the bread-and-butter issues of the Assembly, such as a Debt Relief Bill and an amendment to it, will not get the same amount of credit.

The amendment goes to the heart of protecting people from debt. We have a greater problem with debt in Northern Ireland, and, therefore, it is important that we get the arrangements in the amendment right and that procedures be put in place. There are a number of aspects to the amendment. First, there is the option of charging fees. It is clear that, although it is an additional service, it is meant to meet the issues that arise from the debt relief scheme in order to ensure that we are properly covered in Northern Ireland. In these stringent times, it is recognised that there is a need for a fee to be charged.

Any action that is taken should not be a burden on the taxpayer. It is right that the service should be provided, but the weight of responsibility on the taxpayer should be kept to a minimum. It is right that there should be a fee, but it must be dealt with in a proper fashion. I am interested to hear whether the Minister has any thoughts on the level of fee. The system must be balanced so that it is cost neutral and does not become a drain on the taxpayer. The fee must also be realistic; it must not be cost prohibitive to someone who is already in debt. The need for the scheme to be effective and the requirement for a reasonable fee to be charged lie at the heart of the amendment.

The amendment takes a sensible approach to the role of intermediaries and the competent authorities by whom they are approved. As the House heard yesterday during the debate on property fraud, it is important that people receive appropriate advice and are dealt with in a professional manner. Consequently, intermediaries must be authorised and have expertise in debt management.

All Members have been visited by constituents seeking advice on a range of matters. Often, those people have already been advised on debt relief and other issues. On some occasions, the advice is good and helps people greatly,

although they still require the assistance of an MLA. I suspect, however, that nine times out of 10, the advice is given by someone who is well meaning but does not have the necessary expertise.

That level of advice on debt relief possibilities has not been helpful, and the smiles that I see around the Chamber indicate that many Members have found themselves in similar positions. It is important that the intermediaries, particularly if there is the flexibility for them to be paid directly, do a professional job and are professionally competent to carry out that task. If intermediaries are to be paid directly, assurances must be given.

The amendment refers to “competent authorities”, and Members mentioned that there is a range of those. The one that most people will think of is Citizens Advice, which is well placed to help to provide and manage the scheme. Unlike Mr Craig, I do not have an interest to declare, but it would be remiss of me not to praise the work of Citizens Advice in my constituency of North Down. Its portfolio of activities would allow it to marry effectively with the debt relief scheme.

It is important that there is flexibility, because there will be slightly different circumstances in different areas. It is also important that we are not too rule-bound when a case goes to an intermediary or to a competent body. The amendment gives the Department the flexibility to choose and to work out a scheme. I am unsure whether any subordinate legislation will be required. The key to the amendment is ensuring that the debt relief scheme works in practice, and I suspect that similar amendments and legislation exist in England.

As I said at the beginning of my contribution, we must ensure that the amendment and the Bill achieve something that is fit for purpose in Northern Ireland and can deal with the problems on the ground. A reasonable fee, an opportunity for work to be carried out through professional intermediaries on behalf of applicants and the flexibility for payments to be made through intermediaries or competent bodies will give us that fit-for-purpose system. It will also allow us to deal with the problems that are likely to escalate during a recession. I commend the amendment to the House, wish the Bill well and look forward to the Minister's response.

11.15 am**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and**

Investment: I am grateful to the Members from across the House who contributed to the debate on the amendment and, indeed, on the wider reason for bringing forward the Bill. The amendment will allow us a more flexible and efficient way of managing the payment of moneys to meet the intermediary costs that are associated with the administration of the debt relief scheme.

Some Members commented on the timeliness of the legislation. We are operating about one year behind England and Wales in respect of the legislation. However, we have been able to learn from their experiences, and it is for that reason that we are making the amendment. I also want to join Mr Craig, Mr Weir and others in their comments about debt advisers, particularly in Citizens Advice, Advice NI and other bodies, who do sterling work to help those who are in debt across Northern Ireland.

Mr Weir asked about the level of fee that is to be charged to applicants in respect of the costs. The basic point is that the policy aim is that the debt relief scheme will not be a burden on the taxpayer. That means that the cost of operating the scheme, including the payment to meet intermediary costs, must be met through fees that are charged to applicants. However, under the debt relief scheme in England and Wales, the amount is £10. Therefore, the fee is considerably less than that which is levied in relation to bankruptcy and one that is appropriate in all circumstances.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Clause 1, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 (Conditions for making a debt relief order)

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to clause 2, but a Member has indicated a wish to speak on the clause stand part.

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Speaker. I also welcome the Bill. Obviously, it will help those who experience difficulty with debt

problems, particularly vulnerable people. I want to make some comments and seek assurances from the Minister.

When we look at debt, we have to make a distinction between people who habitually avoid paying their bills and those who, through no fault of their own, cannot afford to pay. I ask that all organisations to which people owe money, from the large utility companies right down, do that when they look at the way in which they try to recover moneys that they are owed. We need to make that distinction, which is why I bring these points to the Minister's attention today.

The first point relates to the six-year rule and exceptional circumstances. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment discussed the matter at length, and we heard evidence from Advice NI. Provision for exceptional circumstances should be added to take account of unforeseen changes. I understand the practicalities and the logic that we cannot keep getting debt relief orders through. However, circumstances, such as the death of a partner or an illness, can make a person unable to cope with their financial situation. Therefore, provision for exceptional circumstances should be included.

I also want to make a point about the criteria under which people are eligible. We have been given the criterion of £50 a month surplus income. I seek the Minister's assurance that that could be flexible. For instance, a single parent with four children and a surplus income of £51 is different from a single person who has a surplus income of £49. However, the single person will be eligible and the single parent will not. There should be some flexibility about that.

Debt liability should be increased to £20,000 instead of £15,000. When debt relief orders came into practice in England, pension pots were considered as assets. There is a £300 limit on the pension pot. Pensions give people some financial comfort in their old age. Therefore, it is something that we should look at again. I do not think that pensions should be seen as an asset, especially given that some people have small pots of money that they depend on in their old age.

I ask for the Minister's assurances on those particular points. As I said, my main issue is to differentiate between people who habitually avoid paying their bills and those who, through no fault of their own, genuinely cannot pay.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: Ms McCann raised those issues during Committee Stage. The reason why there is a six-year limit on reapplication for a debt relief order is, essentially, to strike a balance between the needs of debtors, which we have clearly heard over the past couple of years, and the rights of creditors. Some people think that six years is too long and others think that it is too short. However, in my view, a six-year interval is the minimum that should apply in all cases.

In relation to an applicant's surplus income, the question asked was how that could be measured. A person's income from all sources will be compared with their expenditure to determine what surplus, if any, exists. It is intended that a common financial statement will be used to provide an objective assessment of whether an applicant's expenditure is reasonable, and applicants will have to explain and justify any higher levels of expenditure.

Ms McCann talked about a £20,000 cap, but the eligibility cap will be set in subordinate legislation, and it will be subject to Committee scrutiny. Therefore, those points can be raised at the appropriate time. Some people think that £15,000 is too high, but that is a matter that will come before the Committee in subordinate legislation.

The final point relates to pensions being treated as income or assets. In line with what happened in England and Wales, it is the intention that most benefits and pensions will be counted as income. The aim is to have a scheme that will result in intermediaries being able to make a simple and straightforward comparison between income from all sources and expenditure. However, there are certain benefits, such as disability living allowance, which are provided for a specific purpose, and receipt of those benefits should not be seen as an obstacle to accessing the debt relief scheme.

I hope that I have gone some way to answering some of the points raised by Ms McCann. However, some of the issues that she raised will come back to the Committee in subordinate legislation.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 3 to 9 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule agreed to.

Long Title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes Consideration Stage of the Debt Relief Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Private Members' Business

Green New Deal

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. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Before I call Sean Neeson to move the motion, I call the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to speak at this point. Unfortunately, as I have indicated to you, I must leave the House to attend a funeral. I have informed the proposers of the motion and the amendment that I will be absent for part of the debate. I hope to return to the House after 2.00 pm. I apologise to the House. No discourtesy is meant by my absence, the reason for which is that I must attend to a particular matter.

Mr Neeson: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the benefits that can be achieved through implementing the green new deal in Northern Ireland; supports the need for improved energy efficiency to reduce fuel use and meet European Union and United Kingdom carbon emissions targets; and calls on the Executive to implement a cross-departmental strategy to ensure that the potential benefits of the green economy are realised for Northern Ireland.

The adoption of a green new deal offers the Government an opportunity to tackle the environmental, economic and social issues that face our society. Northern Ireland is almost completely dependent on imported fossil fuels to meet its energy needs. It relies heavily on oil, which is an unregulated and rapidly depleting finite resource. That presents a number of risks for the future of Northern Ireland's economy. We are heavy polluters, lead unsustainable lifestyles and contribute disproportionately to climate change.

The impact of rising carbon emissions on the planet has been well documented. The

island of Ireland will not be immune to those changes. Research has shown that the likely effects of climate change include rising annual temperatures, wetter winters and drier summers. Those changes will have consequences for agricultural production. As a result of rising sea levels, Belfast and Dublin could become more susceptible to flooding.

Energy costs are high and will continue to grow. The impact of rising fuel costs has been higher bills for consumers. Northern Ireland has the highest level of fuel poverty in the United Kingdom, with approximately 45% of households living in fuel poverty. Households here spend twice as much of their disposable income on energy as households in London, and around 60% more than the UK average.

Fuel poverty is not a phenomenon that is restricted to people who are dependent on benefits, although they are at greatest risk. Of fuel-poor households, around 27% earn between £10,000 and £15,000 a year. The vast majority of homes that are in fuel poverty are owner-occupied. As we are all aware, energy costs are often cited by businesses as their greatest competitive disadvantage. That issue has been discussed in the House on many occasions in the past.

Current sources of energy supply and levels of energy demand are simply unsustainable. The adoption of a green new deal can address those issues. However, the green new deal is not purely about improving Northern Ireland's green credentials and creating a more sustainable supply-and-demand network. It also offers the Executive a viable job- and wealth-creation opportunity. That is particularly relevant in the current climate of austerity and rising unemployment. Potential employment opportunities range from high-tech manufacturing jobs to maintenance jobs at wind-power plants. Employment in the agricultural sector could also be sustained and grown through biomass production.

President Obama has adopted the green new deal in the United States, and that has already had a major impact on the economy there.

11.30 am

In the short term, the retrofitting of our existing housing stock through the implementation of cost-effective energy-efficient measures would create and sustain jobs in the construction

sector. Opportunities for job creation have already been realised by local businesses, including Harland and Wolff. I commend to the House a supplement on energy in Northern Ireland that was produced by the 'Belfast Telegraph' last week. It outlined the major impact that the green new deal has had on production at Harland and Wolff. The jobs created represent only a fraction of what could be achieved if a co-ordinated and ambitious approach were adopted by the Executive. We are already behind our neighbours and European and international competitors, and we urge the Executive to urgently prioritise this agenda.

On a positive note, we believe that there are several factors that can make the growth of the green economy a reality. They include our large pool of highly qualified young people; our strong manufacturing base; our low cost base for labour and physical resources; the slack within the labour market, particularly in the construction sector; our potential to generate renewable energy — Northern Ireland has the second best potential for wind energy in Europe and is second only to Scotland; and the strong research and innovation that is based in our universities.

At the core of a green new deal is improved energy efficiency. It is estimated that the implementation of cost-efficient measures could reduce final energy demand by up to one third. Improved energy efficiency is the quickest and most cost-effective means of reducing demand for energy, emissions and household bills, and it has a short lead-in time in respect of jobs creation. Reducing demand also reduces the investment required in renewable energy provision. When Members were talking about the social economy in the House yesterday, the benefits of the warm homes scheme were highlighted. That is another example of how the green new deal can be improved in Northern Ireland.

With the domestic sector accounting for around 40% of our energy use, tackling energy efficiency in our homes should be a key priority. The Government spend some £70 million per annum on energy-efficient measures. We welcome the fact that that funding is available and that consideration of a supplier obligation is noted in the strategic energy framework. However, we call on the Executive to ensure that available resources are leveraged, as much as possible, to ensure maximum impact and

reach. Additional sources of finance include the European Investment Bank and commercial and social finance institutions. Such mechanisms as pay-as-you-save schemes have the potential to offer an alternative to a grant-driven approach.

We call on the public sector to show leadership as well. Not only would improved energy efficiency reduce the proportion of public money spent on energy, but it might help to drive down the costs of technologies for homes and businesses. The creation of a zero carbon public sector estate by 2015 was stated in the 2006 sustainable development strategy. That target will not be met, and the absence of a target for the public sector from the current sustainable development strategy is disappointing.

With the transport sector accounting for 28% of our energy consumption, tackling energy use in that sector should be a priority. A current lack of emphasis on transport is disappointing and indicates a failure by government to grasp the step change that is required to ensure sustainability. In tandem with expanding renewable energy provision, we must ensure that we have an infrastructure that encourages, supports and facilitates its growth. We support investment in the electricity grid, the ongoing development of the single energy market on the island of Ireland and the development of the North/South interconnector. We also support the proposed EU-wide renewable energy supergrid. An efficient planning system is also required.

Enshrining targets in legislation can drive action and encourage investment. We have targets in place to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to increase the proportion of electricity that is generated from renewable sources. We are underperforming against our emission targets. Not only that but they fall significantly short of the targets set at international, EU and UK levels. I am pleased to say that the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment is about to embark on a major investigation into energy from renewables.

EU targets for 2020 include a 20% cut in greenhouse gas emissions and energy consumption and a 20% contribution to energy generation from renewable sources. Renewable energy has been broadened to include heat and transport fuels. To meet its obligations, the UK has set a target of 15% of energy from renewable sources by 2020. It has also set a

legally binding target of at least an 80% cut in greenhouse gas emissions.

I realise that the SDLP has tabled an amendment to the motion. The Alliance Party will support it.

Dr McDonnell: I beg to move the following amendment: Insert after "targets;" and before the third "and"

"believes there is a real opportunity to create 30,000 sustainable green-collar jobs;"

I fully support the motion and our brief amendment, which we feel adds to the equation and makes more sense of it.

Turning to the broad thrust of the motion, we talk a lot about energy and about what we should do. However, we cannot go on squandering our resources. Although we have limited resources, we have some considerable, potentially usable, renewable resources here at home. However, we continue to import fossil fuels, such as oil and a little bit of coal. Those meet some 93%, 94% or 95% of our energy needs. That is crazy, economically as well as environmentally. Economically, in effect, there is an energy tax on everything that we do because 10% of our money has to go on energy before we even start looking at making a profit on any of the things that we make, sell or export.

The green new deal is about getting a joined-up approach, and God knows we need it. It is about cutting the consumption of expensive fossil fuels, which eat up 10% of our money. We are told that 90% of homes are still not energy-efficient. In many cases, that leads to severe fuel poverty, which then spills over into welfare needs. We are told through the green new deal that there is a need to improve the energy performance of public and commercial buildings. I think that that is self-evident to most of us. The objective is also to promote renewables in microgeneration and to redirect thousands of people into working the alternative energy. It is about creating a rational, sensible and efficient public transport option. It is also about creating jobs, not just in running the energy service but in making the green goods and services that we can use ourselves and export. Perhaps most of all it is about creating the funding levers that are necessary to unlock the changes.

I will briefly return to domestic energy efficiency. An awful lot of energy is wasted because our houses were built when energy was cheap and

we were flush. There was no issue then. We now have homes being built even today that are not fully energy-efficient. We have to do what is necessary to upgrade building standards to ensure that all new homes are much more efficient and use much less energy. In that way, we must reduce, slowly but steadily, the high levels of fuel poverty, because it is all-pervasive out there.

It makes perfect sense to improve energy efficiency and performance in public buildings, but we have a big job there. We all know that many public buildings are underheated or overheated — more often than not, they are overheated. Even in this Building, how often do we have to open a window to reduce the temperature when the Building is overheated? That is unforgivable. If nothing else, we have to do something in this Building to ensure that we reduce energy consumption and set an example.

Promoting renewables and microgeneration is essential. That is where we most need to get our act together. It requires a cross-departmental approach, as it runs across a number of Departments and interests. If the Assembly does anything, it should create a cross-cutting project on renewable energy.

I appeal to the Minister to take whatever action is appropriate. She will find total support from me and my colleagues. She should act quickly because we are very far behind and very ineffective when it comes to doing something about getting the team working together. I appeal to the Minister to urgently establish the resources in whatever shape or form necessary to drive a meaningful renewables programme, whether in biomass, biogas, wind, wave or even a little bit of hydro. All those items of renewables are here to a greater or lesser extent. They all have potential, yet we do not have a joined-up approach to them. We need more people working together in a more proactive energy division in the Department.

I could go on, Mr Speaker. I could talk about public transport, and we all know the implications of that. I will not delay you today. However, I want to make two other points and make them heavily. We believe that up to 30,000 jobs could be created in Northern Ireland if we attacked renewable energy and its potential in the way that the Danes and other Europeans have done. Those jobs are badly needed and would be

accessible to many made redundant from the construction industry — jobs not only to keep the renewables industry on its feet through projects but jobs in goods and services for the renewables industry, which we, in turn, could export. In this pitch I cannot commend Queen's University highly enough, because it has devoted a lot of its engineering department to energy and renewable energy. Those jobs would be vital to us. I emphasise again, however, that we need a joined-up approach between the energy division in DETI, DARD and Departments such as DRD with regard to public transport.

I am not keen at this difficult time to promote quangos or further quangos, but we need a driver on energy. Further, we need to create the levers to make the green new deal a reality. By that I mean that, despite the difficult times, we need to set aside some small amount of money to stimulate, incentivise and encourage those who are prepared to be entrepreneurial and take risks. That is the echo that I hear every time I meet anybody. I was at a meeting recently with 18 people from the renewables industry who between them had a £1 billion turnover and employed 2,000 people. That is not to be sneezed at in these difficult times, and our renewables industry is in the very early stages. We have to back those who are prepared to take risks and spend their own money. We have got to help those who can and will, if they are allowed to, make the green new deal work. We have got to create the allowance for them and make sure that they are allowed to make it work. I mentioned Europe, and most European countries are far ahead of us on this issue, including Denmark and Germany. Nearly half of energy in Denmark comes from renewables.

The motion and the amendment are self-evident and are easy to support. I endorse them, as do my colleagues, and I urge the whole House to fully back them.

11.45 am

Mr Hamilton: I wholeheartedly endorse the vision behind the green new deal, although not necessarily for some of the reasons that have been put forward by Members so far, including the continued selling of the idea that the consequences of not addressing the problem will be catastrophic. I accept entirely the points that were made by the proposer of the motion about the effects of carbon and the negative effects that it could have on our country and,

indeed, globally. The huge incentive for grasping the potential of a green new deal is not just to help to make Northern Ireland's contribution to fighting those problems; it is the transformative effect that it could have on our economy.

The green new deal is backed by the CBI, ICTU, the community and voluntary sector, the Ulster Farmers' Union and Friends of the Earth — an eclectic bunch, if ever there was one. Ordinarily, those organisations would not be able to agree on what day of the week it is. There is probably less agreement among those organisations than there is in the House on occasions. If all those organisations wholeheartedly endorse the green new deal, that should alert us to the positivity that is inherent within it.

Anything that is particularly aimed at gearing our economy and our workforce towards tapping into that huge potential through developing skills is positive. We keep talking about the potential of Northern Ireland in respect of renewable energies. How many times have we heard phrases like, "We could be the Saudi Arabia of renewable energies"? There is a lot of truth in that, but, instead of talking about the potential, we need to start to make it a reality.

There are many positive examples. Harland and Wolff, which operated in a sector that was heavy and hugely industrial, has transformed itself and is now tapping into the renewable energy market. Although it is doing that on a small scale, there is huge potential for the future, which points us in the right direction.

We may have missed the boat in respect of some renewable technologies. I am continually exasperated at how, despite the huge potential here, we have missed the opportunity or are getting in late on the curve with wind power. However, Northern Ireland has huge potential to use tidal power. The SeaGen project in Strangford Lough is the first commercially viable tidal project in the world, so Northern Ireland is at the forefront. Again, Harland and Wolff is involved in that. We have huge potential to get ahead of the market in respect of tidal energy.

I will now focus on my responsibilities in the House as regards social development. I am particularly keen on elements of the green new deal that focus on fuel poverty. We have all heard how the last house condition survey in 2006 found that one third of homes in Northern Ireland were in fuel poverty. All the indications are that the latest house condition survey will

show an increase in that number. So, despite all the actions that have been taken and despite all the effort, it looks like we are going to suffer an increase in the number of homes in fuel poverty, with the figure heading towards 50%. If that happens, we will all have to say that, in spite of the good efforts and the concentration of resources, something else must be done.

The age-old cry "Something must be done", which is regularly heard on phone-in shows across Northern Ireland, is certainly apt, but this report highlights what could be done, particularly in respect of a retrofitting programme. There is some talk already about getting a pilot project to do that. That is inspired by the Kirklees model in Yorkshire where, instead of participation being on the basis of qualifying benefits, the worst hit areas are targeted. We all know that the people who suffer most from fuel poverty tend to be owner-occupiers and tend not to qualify for the likes of the warm homes scheme because they are not on qualifying benefits. If we can find smart information about which areas are in fuel poverty, target them without regard to incomes in the area or the individual's income, retrofit them with insulation and, where appropriate, put in renewable technologies, we can start to get to grips with this problem in a much more concerted and beneficial way than by taking the sporadic, here-and-there approach that we have taken to date.

The other attractive thing is that it is not entirely dependent on public finance but on leveraging in money from the private sector.

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

Mr Hamilton: There is huge potential. We need to act quickly. The changes recommended in the document will take a long time to achieve, and we need to start now.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members to please check that their mobile phones are switched off. Mobile phones or a mobile phone are affecting the recording system in the Chamber.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. My party supports both the motion and the amendment.

We are all concerned about the impact that climate change can and will have on the global environment. It is imperative that all

stakeholders take every opportunity to reverse the trends that suggest that we are in danger of causing irreparable damage to our planet. The green new deal initiative will help in the fight for environmental sustainability. The original New Deal of Roosevelt and the US Government of the 1930s was an attempt to drag that country out of the Great Depression. It is ironic that, although the green new deal was initially formulated to help with the climate change problem, we now find that it can help us to fight our way out of the current financial and economic crisis.

It is clear that the best way to tackle our economic problems is to invest in and support small and medium-sized enterprises. That is the battleground on which we may reverse our fortunes. It is to those businesses that we look for innovation and ideas on the green economy that will translate into jobs and sustainability. That will only be successful if we ensure that we do not merely pay lip service to the initiative. Support and funding need to be accessible to those who require them. The application process for funding needs to be simplified to ensure that support can be enjoyed by businesses other than those already in the upper echelons of success.

Some 90% of our housing falls short of being energy-efficient, much of it publicly funded social housing. The burden of trying to address that issue can be spread out to the private sector, allowing businesses that have a record of success in that area to expand and employ more people to get the work done and greatly reduce the number of homes that fall below the efficiency benchmark.

This is not a dig at any Minister, but, a couple of years ago, we bought off-the-shelf housing and, unfortunately, those houses were not up to the decent homes standard. We must look at building regulations and ensure that they apply across the board in private and social housing standards.

The Department for Employment and Learning has a role to play in ensuring that we have people in research and development who are trained on the viability of the green economy. We must specify training and courses for those required to implement any new employment unique to the sector.

An issue that can be addressed in a relatively short time frame is the part planning policy

has to play if we pursue an agenda of green economics. At present, the system is not green-friendly as regards the time it takes to deal with applications or the success of such applications. There are also questions to be asked about the cost of applications dealing with renewable energy. All those must be addressed if we are to implement a policy that will benefit our environment and help to address the economic problems that we face.

Not so long ago, we released PPS 18, which is a policy on renewable energy with supplementary planning guidelines. Even so, in my constituency, people still find it hard to get approval for small wind energy projects, and those are projects that the House should support. Unfortunately the Minister is absent, but I want to draw to her attention the issue of the Small Wind Energy Group, which, unfortunately, as a result of EU regulations, misses out on the benefits of the renewables obligation certificate system. I put that on record and ask that it be addressed.

Mr I McCrea: The Member raises an interesting issue in respect of wind energy. Many applications go through the system, and, unfortunately, people who do not know a lot tend to object to them. Will the Member encourage all elected representatives to take what is sometimes the less popular position and support what can be a very effective way of producing energy?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute to speak.

Mr Boylan: Thank you Mr Speaker, and I thank the Member for his intervention. As long as the proper process is followed, I certainly would support that approach. However, on the SWEG issue, if we are to follow EU regulations, we need the resources and funding that comes with that.

Trillions of pounds have been spent worldwide to prop up the financial sector following the reckless behaviour of some lending institutions. The banks must support the small and medium-sized enterprises at this time, given that 70% to 80% of business in the private sector is made up of them. It is time that the Assembly stood up to the banks and the malpractice that has happened. We have only to look at what is happening in the Twenty-six Counties. I urge the Assembly to look at measures to ensure that banks support the small and medium-sized enterprises that are finding it very difficult at this time. That applies right across the board and goes for innovation as well.

Supporting green fiscal stimulus measures will go some way towards averting an impending environmental crisis, meeting European targets, reducing our dependence on fossil fuels and kick-starting our economy. Maybe it will even go some way towards ensuring that we do not find ourselves in such a situation. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Gardiner, I remind Members once again of one of the conventions of the House. On two occasions this morning, I watched Members walk in front of the Member who was speaking in the Chamber. This issue has been discussed by the Business Committee, and it has been agreed that it is totally discourteous for a Member to walk in front of the Member who has the Floor.

Mr Gardiner: I support the motion and the amendment. Green energy not only provides a sustainable way forward that will help us to guard against the running-down of our carbon resources but has the potential to create jobs, which, given mounting unemployment, has to be an absolute priority for the Assembly and the Executive. Unemployment has grown from 20,000 to almost 60,000 since the recession began. Most disturbing is the growth of youth unemployment, which is higher here than in any part of the country and stands at well over 20%. Like many Members, I am outraged at the squandering of the talent and hopes of our young people, and I want something to be done about it. I have hopes that the creation of jobs in the green economy, which the Carbon Trust believes is capable of producing 33,000 jobs, will help us to address the great social evil of youth unemployment.

At present, there are around 200 companies in the energy sector in Northern Ireland, and they employ about 4,500 people and generate an annual turnover of £300 million. We have a long way to go. According to the Green New Deal Group in Northern Ireland, energy users in the domestic, commercial, industrial, transport and public sectors spend a total of £2.3 billion a year on energy. To put that in context, that represents between 9% and 11% of our gross value added, which is the main measure of economic output. Ninety-nine per cent of that energy is derived from imported fossil fuels. That is alarmingly and dangerously high.

Northern Ireland has already taken some important steps in the field of green energy. The SeaGen

tidal energy converter in Strangford Lough is one indicator of the future.

It was installed two years ago and is based on technology that has been used successfully in Devon.

12.00 noon

Other facilities could follow, with studies reporting significant opportunities for tidal energy capacity off the Antrim coast at Rathlin Island. Harland and Wolff is one of the long-established companies adapting to new circumstances and is firmly established as a provider of equipment for renewable energy supplies. The company uses its experience of the offshore oil and gas equipment market and recently assembled 60 wind turbines for use offshore in the Irish Sea near Scotland. It has won another contract to manufacture a prototype tidal turbine for use in the Orkney Islands.

The use of biomass is also progressing here. The plant at Enniskillen is recognised as a world leader in the conversion of wooden pellets to energy, and I am delighted that one of the first eco-villages at Brokerstown near Lisburn is powered by willow pellets produced near Lurgan, which is in my constituency.

There is also the good news of increased competition in the supply market for commercial residential customers. Scottish and Southern Energy has just entered the residential market through its Airtricity division, promising its customers cost savings of up to 14% on their electricity bills. It already supplies 10,000 business customers in Northern Ireland and 200,000 in the Republic of Ireland. Airtricity operates six wind farms in Northern Ireland.

The new green policy is much more acceptable to unionists than the old green policy. Green energy means sustainability.

Mr Frew: I support the motion and the amendment in principle. In an economic depression, when a country is on its knees and is unable even to crawl forward, that is the time to plan and prepare for the next sprint. The priority for the Assembly must be, and is, the economy and everything that springs from it. We have to ensure that we have set the conditions to lessen the burdens on the most vulnerable people, to soften the blows to business and, most importantly, to plan for the future and for recovery.

US President Franklin Roosevelt knew that only too well when he galvanised the American people at the time of the national banking system collapse in the 1930s. Roosevelt told his people that it was:

"time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper."

He said:

"the only thing we have to fear is fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance ... a host of unemployed citizens face the grim problem of existence, and an equally great number toil with little return."

Roosevelt said:

"Only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the moment."

He also said:

"when there is no vision the people perish."

What is our vision? Knowing what we want to achieve is not enough. We must know how to achieve it. Words can be spoken in the House, but it is the actions that we take outside that count. What will be the factors that will keep our country in recession? When this country recovers, what will be the next big crisis? Those are the issues that we must concern ourselves with.

The next problem could well be the cost of energy. Around 10% of Northern Ireland's income is spent on importing fossil fuels, on which we are 99% dependent for energy. We spend £2.3 billion a year on energy. As a country, we could be held to ransom by rising energy prices. Unless we act quickly to reduce that dependence, it could cause serious economic failure and push many more people into fuel poverty. The best time to do that is now, as we plan our recovery. We need to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and create a stimulant for employment.

There are some 705,000 dwellings in Northern Ireland, over 90% of which still fall short of the best energy performance standards. Surely, it is the same in our factories, commercial buildings, schools and hospitals. Around 25% of our unemployed have come from the construction

industry. There are people waiting to be re-employed who know and can do the work. There are people from the electrical and mechanical engineering sector who have knowledge of energy sources, the ability to integrate energy systems and experience of project management. They know and understand the built form. If those buildings were targeted, it could reduce unemployment and help the needy who are caught up in fuel poverty.

We could retrofit most of the building stock with energy-efficiency measures, which would provide work and a market for products from the environmental goods and services sector. I believe that that is the way forward. It will help our people and create employment at the same time, but it will not be enough on its own. We need to keep up our capital spending and to maintain our infrastructure. However, practices will have to change. The equipment and its installation will have to be affordable. That is where the problem has lain to date. People cannot afford to put such equipment into their houses.

Who will pay for this, and what incentives can the Government give? How many years will it take to pay for itself? Those are the questions that the people have been asking and will continue to ask if we move forward in this vein. I am not sure whether the House has the answers to those questions.

I also mention lignite mining. It would be a very retrograde step if that were to raise its head again in north Antrim or elsewhere in this country.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion and the amendment. I thank the Members for tabling it.

I pay tribute to the green new deal group, which drew inspiration from the tone of Roosevelt's comprehensive response to the Great Depression and proposed a modernised version — a green new deal — that is designed to power a renewables revolution and to create thousands of green-collar jobs in Europe and the world.

The green new deal, as many other Members touched on, provides us with a good opportunity to tackle the recession, rising energy prices and climate change. We are an island; we need to waken up to that reality. Fossil fuels are running out. Oil prices continue to rise, and, when we get into recovery, they will go through the roof. We will not be able to afford to run our cars or

heat our homes, so we need to plan now. That is what the green new deal is about.

The energy efficiency of our homes is just not up to spec. Too many homes are letting too much energy escape. People may as well just open their windows and let the heat out of their homes. That is the scenario for the vast majority of homes. The Member across the way who spoke before me touched on the fact that too many people cannot afford to make their homes energy efficient. People in the middle income brackets cannot afford to do so, and people in old social housing do not have the efficiency that they require.

Members will probably talk about funding and ask how the green new deal will be resourced. An innovative scheme has just been launched in Birmingham. The Birmingham new deal plans to fit power-generating solar panels to council-owned properties. It is being pushed through this week, and around 10,000 homes will have that new technology put in place.

The Birmingham energy savers programme will be funded jointly by the city council, energy suppliers and, above all, commercial banks. It follows the success of two pilot schemes in Birmingham. Banks and financial institutions largely got us into this mess, so they have to step up to the mark by backing schemes now by providing borrowing on long-term agreements. Residents and businesses in Birmingham have the opportunity to cut carbon pollution and to save thousands of pounds by reducing their bills, and what is happening there could be replicated in the North. Under the scheme, commercial banks will provide half the up-front investment, supplemented by £25 million from energy companies and £25 million borrowed by the council. Consumers will pay a levy on their energy bills over the repayment period of the loans — around 25 years.

I will touch on some of the difficulties that I find in my constituency. Simon Hamilton mentioned one of the good projects: the tidal project in Strangford Lough is a success and is leading the way in new technologies. However, we in South Down are working on a district heating scheme in Newcastle that has the potential to create jobs. The project would benefit people through the use of a central, biomass heating system that would provide power for sheltered accommodation, schools and a new leisure centre, yet to be built. However, trying to get

Departments around a table to even look at such a proposal is like banging my head off a wall. The public want it to be done and people are willing to do it, but there are always obstacles. Civil servants will always find obstacles. Even if four or five Departments are brought around a table, they will blame somebody else.

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

Mr W Clarke: I will indeed, Mr Speaker.

To finish, the banks have a duty to provide money and to be at the forefront. We need to look at our social housing stock.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr W Clarke: And use that as collateral to obtain the necessary funding to introduce the green new deal.

Mr Speaker: I must insist that the Member's time is up.

Mr Beggs: I support the motion. The green new deal contains a lot of ideas, some of them radical, that will bring environmental issues to the fore, and I commend that. More needs to be done to create a green economy. More sustainable methods of producing electricity, in particular, and of heating our homes need to be created. We are over-dependent on fossil fuels that must be imported — more than 90% of our energy comes from them. Oil and gas prices have fluctuated hugely in the past years. In 2009, oil prices reached \$150 a barrel. With peak oil production thought to have already occurred, we can expect only high prices and continuing rises in the future. That will endanger local companies and cause additional problems with fuel poverty, and so on.

The utilisation of onshore and offshore wind farms, bioenergy, tidal energy and geothermal energy will mean less dependence on other energy sources and will create sustainable sources of power. Fortunately, Northern Ireland has excellent companies at the forefront of the field. I think of B9 Energy in my constituency, which has led the way in Northern Ireland on wind power and is investigating the tidal energy prospects at Torr Head.

We need also to rethink energy use in our power stations to ensure that they do not waste energy. At the moment, waste energy is simply pumped out to sea. That is a waste and does

not happen in many plants on mainland Europe, where secondary use is made of waste heat from power stations.

We need to encourage combined heat and power schemes. Ideas such as refurbishing thousands of homes with full insulation and renewable energy are not new. We have seen that happen elsewhere. We have the warm homes scheme, which could be extended so that more could benefit from better homes with more insulation.

As others have said, the Calderdale and Kirklees energy savers scheme and Kirklees Council's warm zone project, which began in 2007, show that, with incentives, it is possible to encourage significant improvements and to leverage significant additional amounts of money to enable that to happen.

12.15 pm

Our dependence on imported fossil fuels will have to be replaced increasingly by an emphasis on sustainable energy and energy efficiency. The green new deal mentions creating 24,000 green-collar jobs, which would be commendable if it were possible without unduly affecting other forms of employment. It is essential that we create additional jobs, and there is potential for that. However, we must take care that we do not drive up the cost of electricity here unduly and simply endanger other jobs, such as those in manufacturing. We must keep energy prices competitive.

The amendment mentions 30,000 new jobs. I must admit that I was surprised that that amendment was selected. That point could have been made in debate, and it would be helpful in the summing up to hear evidence of a business case to back up that number.

Another area that should be worked on is Building Control's insulation standards, which have increased in the past number of years. Nevertheless, surely they should be further increased now, not many years in the future. The most efficient time to insulate a house is when it is built. There is no point coming back to existing homes in 10 or 20 years to upgrade them. It is uneconomical to do that, so it is much better to do it now. However, we must appreciate that doing even that involves cost. Not only is there a cost involved in retrofitting; there is a cost to increasing standards.

Nevertheless, we should face those costs and ensure that it happens.

There are some flaws in the ideology of the green new deal, most worryingly the figure of £2.3 billion that will be required to fund such a venture. I understand that some £750 million will be required locally. Therefore, we need a clear business case for how it will happen. I would like it to happen, but where exactly will the money come from? I understand that European regulations will restrict DETI's flexibility to support companies in the area of the environment.

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

Mr Beggs: Energy efficiency will be an important way to assist the economy.

Mr McDevitt: The Government in Northern Ireland spend about £2.4 billion a year on goods and services. In some ways, the question that we are debating is whether we are using that amazing purchasing power to promote local jobs and sustainability in its widest sense. On so many fronts, the sad answer is no. Our new roads are being built by multinationals; the social clauses are hardly worth the paper that they are written on; employment opportunities are temporary and the profits leave; our oil comes from Russia; our training needs are sometimes being met by companies with little more than a mobile telephone number in the region; and, as many of us feel, the Executive spend more time investing in other people's economies, than doing so sustainably in our own.

It is an obvious example, but many Members mentioned the fact that £9 out of every £10 that we spend on energy leaves the region. One wonders why oligarchs are able to own Premier League football teams. The answer is in any NIE bill; we are paying for them, and if we do not change our behaviour, we will continue to pay for them. It is for that reason that we are long past the point at which we need a big idea. We need a strategy with the short-, medium- and long-term potential to transform our regional economy, which understands its great strengths and can build on its industrial, engineering and agriculture heritages, and which must be capable of coalescing those of us in the Chamber and, apparently with much more difficulty, those who work in our silo Departments.

As Mr Hamilton said, a green new deal is not just a programme to address the sustainability challenges that the region will face. It could become the key platform on which we build jobs for future generations.

It is not the case that green-collar jobs do not exist today. Mr Beggs asked where we got the figure of 30,000 from. We got it from the report, which estimated that, if the proper investments were made in the right way, the potential out-turn would be 30,000 jobs. The truth is that jobs that are being done by people in all sorts of sectors are not sustainable, but they could be if we were to change the focus of the economy.

Green-collar jobs are bus builder and bus drivers' jobs, but those will exist only if DRD invests seriously in sustainable transport, which it does not do today. Over the past decade, we have missed all our targets, choosing instead to invest in unsustainable transport. There are fitter and electricians' jobs, but only if DETI unlocks the opportunity for renewable energy, something that it does not do today. We simply talk about renewable energy, but we do not invest in it meaningfully or seriously. There are jobs for builders, brickies, carpenters and plumbers, but only if we go beyond talking about the retrofitting opportunity and start to look at the business models that would deliver it.

Government in this region has an obsession with delivering services, but, sometimes, it should just commission them. Many in the community and voluntary sector and in the social enterprise sector can and would create local jobs in the sort of projects about which Mr Frew spoke so eloquently.

Green-collar jobs can be science jobs and academic jobs, but only if we align our innovation policies with our economic strategy. That is what the independent review of economic policy told us to do. If truth be told, we paid no attention. Green-collar jobs can be entrepreneurial, but only if we unlock the funding opportunities by investing in bonding and other imaginative new ways of raising revenue for the region. We must also understand that venture capital has a place but that it must align itself with the rest of the economy.

The SDLP was happy to table the amendment outlining the jobs potential, because it makes the motion real. It makes this a tangible debate about something that could transform the economy, but only if Departments fundamentally

change their behaviour. They must stop regarding sustainability as something to put at the end of reports. They must start to see it as something that they put right at the beginning of reports and at the centre of policy.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion. In the current economic climate, there is a danger that green issues and climate change will be forgotten. I welcome the motion, and we should all realise that, by tackling the issues innovatively, we can create key economic drivers that will aid economic recovery.

A more sustainable economy is one that is less reliant on finite fuels, and, fortunately, we have wind resource in abundance, as well as many wave and tidal energy opportunities. The ongoing work in Strangford Lough, which has been highlighted, is a good example of that. To reduce the total energy costs, we must prioritise simple insulation measures, the introduction of renewable energy into domestic homes and the improvement of public transport. As my colleague Cathal Boylan said, 90% of housing is not energy efficient, and that simply is not good enough.

Planning applications for renewable measures such as wind turbines must be processed more efficiently. I agree with Mr McCrea's point about the objections to a number of such applications. He is correct to say that non-genuine objections that are reactionary, based on Nimbyism and designed to scaremonger should be countered. Political leaders from the Assembly should do so.

Dr Farry: I concur fully with the Member. In light of his remarks, will he consider the opposition to the North/South interconnector, which is part of a smart grid that is important for renewables?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute added to his time.

Mr McKay: Reactionary objections and those that are based on Nimbyism should be opposed, but any genuine concerns about health effects should be taken into account.

In my area of North Antrim, I am very supportive, and always have been, of wind energy applications. We are opposed to Nimbyism. However, if a planning application has an impact — for example, if it is too close to an area that relies on tourism — that should be taken into account. However, a carte blanche approach should not

be taken to planning applications, because that would result in a free-for-all. Certain key issues need to be taken into consideration.

Even if there is wide public opposition to some planning applications, political leadership needs to be shown. Politicians should put their foot forward and ensure that those planning applications go ahead. We have renewable energy targets to meet, and, as the Member for South Belfast Mr McDevitt said, we need to be less reliant on oil from Russia and finite fuels. There is a need for politicians from all parties to unite around applications in certain constituencies. If there were joint political leadership on applications from the renewable energy industry, we would see our targets met more rapidly.

Wind turbines are much more pleasing to the eye than incinerators, nuclear power plants and, as the Member for North Antrim Mr Frew said, lignite mines. Therefore, there are many benefits to developing the wind turbine industry.

Social impacts could be offset by proposals in the green new deal. Many older people live in homes that are energy inefficient, and we are well aware of the campaigns run by non-governmental organisations on older people having to choose between heating and eating. According to statistics, older people's poverty has increased in recent years, and that is something on which we need to take action. Ensuring energy efficiency in the homes of those who need it most must continue to be an Executive priority, particularly given the economic challenges that lie ahead.

To summarise, the green new deal has a great deal of potential. It has the potential to create new jobs; to assist the construction industry in a meaningful way; and to develop the island, and this part of the island, to make it a world leader in renewables. We need to grasp that potential and ensure that the issue becomes a priority for the Assembly and the Executive. We need to be mindful that the issue does not get left behind because of the current economic climate. The green new deal needs to be a priority and must form part of the Executive's strategy for economic recovery.

Mr B Wilson: I support the motion and the amendment. I am delighted to see such unanimity in the Chamber today.

The Green Party has been a long-standing supporter of the green new deal. Indeed, it was a supporter long before the green new deal group was set up, and our party manifesto for the 2009 European election was titled 'A Green New Deal for Europe'. That was a common manifesto with 27 other Green parties throughout the European Union, and it highlighted how the green economy had created thousands of jobs in many European countries, particularly in Germany, Denmark and Spain. In Germany alone, 250,000 jobs have been created. We argued that, on the basis of the experiences of those countries, we could create five million green-collar jobs throughout the European Union. It is clear that many voters recognised the potential of green jobs, with the Green Party achieving its greatest success, returning 53 MEPs and, locally, our candidate, Steven Agnew, tripling the green vote.

I launched that manifesto at Harland and Wolff to highlight how that company was reaping the benefits of new green technology. The company, which was at the forefront of the industrial revolution, is now at the forefront of a new green revolution and is adapting traditional local skills in construction and engineering to promote the new green economy. Since then, Harland and Wolff has expanded its involvement in the green economy, and I congratulate it on its recent announcement of a £10 million contract to construct 30 huge wind turbines and a multimillion pound contract to design and build two platforms for an offshore wind development. Those will provide more much-needed jobs.

12.30 pm

Harland and Wolff has been one of the few good news stories during the recession, and that is clearly due to its foresight in entering the ever-expanding green economy as well as its expertise and facilities, which are unique. It is an example of the green new deal in action. It is not enough to say that we are focusing on the economy. We must focus our energy and investment on the new technologies that are required to help us to move to a low-carbon economy that is not reliant on imported fossil fuels but is based instead on sustainable forms of energy, transport and food production. A success story such as Harland and Wolff should not be an isolated incident: it must become a common occurrence. Fossil fuels are running out, but Northern Ireland, with its natural resources of wind and wave, can become a world leader in green energy.

Another green success is the 150 new jobs that solar energy firm Kingspan Renewables created. It bought Thermomax, which was based in Bangor and which we were very supportive of. That is where we should be targeting investment, and that example demonstrates the potential of new jobs in the green economy. We have been pointing that out for many years with perhaps somewhat limited success.

Our targets for renewable energy should be more ambitious. Scotland's First Minister, Alex Salmond, has increased Scotland's targets for renewables to 80% by 2020, and the Welsh Assembly recently announced that its share from renewables will increase by 200% by 2020. There is potential for growth, and we should expand our renewables targets and exports. Those are ambitious targets, but with our natural resources and the support of the Executive, we can achieve similar targets.

Unfortunately, the record to date shows that the Assembly has not fully grasped the green new deal. For example, we had a situation some years ago where DETI stopped funding the Reconnect grants for the development of renewable energy and small microgeneration systems as well as the Renewable Energy Installer Academy that trained people to work the installers. That was very short-sighted.

I also refer to the Programme for Government. We are talking about sustainability —

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

Mr B Wilson: There is a proposal from Westminster to scrap the Sustainable Development Commission. I appeal to the Executive to fund that commission even though it may not be funded by Westminster.

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

The sitting was suspended at 12.32 pm.

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

2.00 pm

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I apologise for my absence during the debate. However, my copious note-takers will, I hope, enable me to reflect the debate in my comments.

The debate is timely, in so far as Members are aware that the Department's strategic energy framework was formally launched on 27 September, and I understand that Members referred to that. A key priority in that document is ensuring that energy savings are gained from improving energy efficiency and that such savings are recognised, prioritised and put into action. The green economy is another key area that is highlighted in the SEF, and it was acknowledged by several Members, as is the need to strengthen cross-departmental working. I am pleased that DETI already leads the way on those issues, and I am glad that many of the same issues are to the fore in the green new deal proposals.

We all recognise the current lack of investment in energy efficiency measures in homes and non-domestic buildings. That has resulted in many properties across Northern Ireland having poor energy ratings, and virtually all Members who contributed to the debate raised that issue. That is despite the fact that investment in such measures can produce tangible savings on future energy bills. It is clear that, alongside investment in new energy infrastructure, we need to reduce our energy demand. Therefore, energy efficiency must increasingly become part of energy policy. The green economy is not only about the ability to produce clean energy; it is about growing the market for products that consume less energy.

By improving Northern Ireland's energy efficiency, we will, undoubtedly, help to deliver our climate change targets and those of the UK, which will help with the security of supply. Mr Neeson raised the important point that we are underperforming by not meeting our targets to reduce emissions. However, we must be aware that emissions in Northern Ireland tend to be higher because of its more dispersed population and the resultant heavy reliance on road transport. Undoubtedly, that presents us with more of a challenge.

Mr Wilson felt that our renewable targets were, perhaps, not as ambitious as they should be, and he made a comparison with Scotland. However, our 40% target is evidence-based and approaches the maximum that even a strengthened Northern Ireland grid could accommodate without jeopardising its stability. Therefore, the 40% target in the SEF is correct, and that is without taking into account the obvious geographical differences between Northern Ireland and Scotland, the most notable being how much of Scotland is covered in forestry and the fact that it has a much longer coastline, both of which have an impact on its targets.

Energy efficiency will also help us to save money for business. It is increasingly clear that energy efficiency will become a key benchmark of globally competitive companies in this century. Increased energy efficiency is necessary for many of our international companies. Although we know that energy saving is the cheapest way of closing the gap between demand and supply, it remains the Cinderella at the energy ball.

On the near horizon, energy saving will mean smart meters and smart grids that will give the consumer control over appliances. Although those will take a long time to develop, there is much that we can do now. A great deal is already being done across government, some of which I will outline.

Paul Frew, Simon Hamilton, Roy Beggs and Willie Clarke all mentioned the first of those issues, which is a reduction in carbon emissions. There is no doubt that the approach of the green new deal offers substantial opportunities to retrofit energy efficiency in a significant number of domestic and non-domestic buildings. It will also help to create new jobs while reducing energy bills and carbon emissions.

The business sector is driven to reduce carbon emissions through a variety of mechanisms such as the EU emissions trading scheme, climate change agreements and the carbon reduction commitment. The latter, in particular, covers large public and private sector organisations and will capture around 10% of our emissions in Northern Ireland. Organisations that qualify for participation must monitor emissions from energy use, report those emissions annually and purchase and surrender a corresponding number of allowances. A number of Members made the point that government should lead by example in this area. I am pleased to say

that we are doing so in Northern Ireland, and a number of Departments participate in the scheme, even though they do not meet the qualification threshold. By 2020, the carbon reduction commitment is expected to have delivered emission savings of at least 132,000 tons of carbon dioxide in Northern Ireland and to have saved those participating in the scheme between £20 million and £30 million a year through cost-effective energy efficiency measures that have not yet been taken up.

The green new deal approach, working alongside existing government initiatives, could unlock significant expenditure in the coming years. By creating a new market opportunity, we could provide another major opportunity for economic growth and employment. Indeed, that is the main thrust of the amendment. That would also undoubtedly help to drive economic recovery. The market is big, and Northern Ireland needs to strive to improve its energy efficiency in all properties and make them affordable to all. However, we must be mindful to put the correct financial framework in place at the outset. A model with a pay-as-you-save concept at its heart offers the best opportunity for everyone. In that model, the private sector would pay for the work up front through networks of green deal providers, and it would allow house owners or tenants of non-domestic buildings to pay their energy bills back over time from the energy savings that they make.

Roy Beggs and Sean Neeson mentioned the implications of being able to build a business case on a sustainable way forward. Mr Clarke gave Birmingham as an example. Banks and energy suppliers have been working together to find ways to make energy efficiency work for them in that city. I absolutely believe in that method. Realistically, substantial recurring government funding will not continue to be available in the current economic climate. Therefore, rather than have a system that relies on that funding, the best model is one in which savings pay for the efficiencies in the future. However, such a system will need some form of legal underpinning to give it the necessary longevity to bring confidence to investors and those involved in the supply chain. Such a longer-term view will deliver a green growth sector that can offer a big boost to our economic recovery. All in all, I believe that a private sector-financed green new deal concept could transform the energy efficiency of Northern Ireland's building stock while sending

the right signal to the energy efficiency industry and providing investment confidence and job opportunities.

The debate also focused heavily on fuel poverty. An approach that ties energy savings to the people who pay the energy bills will be a breakthrough for house owners and tenants. Some people, such as the fuel poor, will need extra help. Energy savings alone will not be enough, and I recognise that. However, a competitive market will provide the best value and confidence in products for the customer.

In Northern Ireland, 70% of the houses that we will live in by 2050 have been built already. Added to that, we have some of the oldest housing stock in Europe, much of which was built in the era of cheap coal. However, that is no excuse. Much work is under way to improve the housing stock, and I know that Sammy Wilson and his Department are moving quickly to strengthen those building standards.

In addition, the implementation of the EU directive on the energy performance of buildings has resulted in the production of almost 94,000 certificates. That is a visible sign of the energy efficiency of buildings within which services are provided to the public. The Executive have already agreed to use domestic rates relief to drive the energy efficiency measures. Both the energy efficiency homes scheme and the low carbon homes scheme have been introduced recently to improve the energy efficiency of the housing stock here by encouraging the development of low- and zero-carbon homes. The Department will continue to work with the Department for Social Development in relation to fuel poverty matters.

In line with the aspirations of the green new deal, there is huge potential for green jobs in the region, both in energy efficiency and renewable energy. Members mentioned specific examples including Harland and Wolff, B9 Energy, the Marine Current Turbines installation at Strangford and the Kingspan works in Portadown. The renewable energy sector is one of the fastest growing sectors in the economy. The opportunities to create employment, generate wealth and develop a local skills base in the sector are substantial, as colleagues acknowledged today.

The growing demand for renewable energy and renewable energy technologies is one that Northern Ireland is very well placed to meet,

not only because of our geographical location but because of the capabilities and skills of our local businesses, universities and colleges; I say that very strongly. Dr McDonnell mentioned Queen's University specifically in that regard, but there are other colleges of further education that do a tremendous job in the renewable arena.

Developing the sector is a strategic priority for Invest Northern Ireland. Significant activity has been undertaken, not only to provide support for the small and medium-sized enterprises in the renewable energy sector but to develop new technologies and provide companies that have a desire to look at the new export markets with a framework of support to develop and grow their business. Since April 2009, Invest NI clients in the renewable energy sector have received financial assistance amounting to £5.2 million, against total investment costs of £25.6 million, for a range of activities including research and development, training, job creation and the development of collaborative networks.

Cross-departmental working has been mentioned throughout the debate. For some time now, DETI has, through the sustainable energy interdepartmental working group, co-ordinated cross-departmental working on sustainable energy to give a clear message to stakeholders, whether from industry, energy companies or environmental groups, that we in the Executive recognise the opportunities and the challenges that the sustainable energy agenda presents. Indeed, we were instrumental in ensuring that many of the green new deal priorities were included in the Executive's options package for addressing the economic downturn.

Shortly, I will bring forward proposals from the work of that interdepartmental group with recommendations on how to maximise sustainable energy policy initiatives in Northern Ireland. In addition, the Department for Employment and Learning is already working with stakeholders to address identified skill needs and develop new fit-for-purpose courses and qualifications to support and advance the sector. We will continue to work cross-departmentally on energy efficiency and renewable energy. We will seek to work with others to develop the green new deal concept with a sufficient legal underpinning that offers opportunities to all.

I welcome the green new deal proposals. However, we must be mindful of the current financial

climate and, therefore, work together to develop an innovative green deal financing option that will stand the test of time and, thereby, embed energy efficiency and renewable energy across all aspects of our society.

2.15 pm

Mr A Maginness: I thank Mr Neeson and his colleagues for tabling today's important motion. They have done us a service by highlighting the issue of the green new deal. I feel a bit sorry for Mr Wilson, not because he is not a passionate supporter of the green new deal but because the Green Party pioneered the original concept of the green agenda and, in a way, his political clothes have been stolen by all of us. We owe it to the people who pioneered the green agenda politically to recognise what they did and to highlight the fact that they brought about a radical change in thinking not only on the environment but on the economy and many other aspects of our society.

It is important that we continue to develop the green agenda in the Assembly and in the Executive. The Minister rightly pointed out that she regards it as a priority. The Minister and the Executive accept the concept of the green new deal. However, it seems to me and to colleagues that the issue of the green agenda, renewable energy and so forth is relatively confined to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and there does not seem to be collective acceptance of the entire Executive's responsibility. We should try to persuade the Executive to embrace the issue in a much more wholehearted fashion.

Many Members spoke today. Simon Hamilton, who is not in the Chamber at the moment, spoke in a slightly sceptical mode, not quite à la Mr Wilson — Mr Sammy Wilson, I hasten to add — but in that political school of thought. Nonetheless, he recognised the need for the green new deal. Whether for reasons of climate change or not, the fact is that it is good for our society and our economy. Generally speaking, he was supportive, which is important.

Other Members who spoke included Mr Boylan, Mr Gardiner, Mr Frew, Mr Clarke, Mr Beggs, Mr McDevitt and Mr McKay. They all emphasised the need for the Executive and the Government to embrace the new ideas arising from the green agenda. It is important for us to remind ourselves that, geographically, the island of Ireland is probably uniquely placed to develop,

in a great sense, renewable energy. We have wind, sea and grass here, and those three elements are important in the development of renewable energy. We know about wind, and we know that we can harness the potential of wind here more than any other part of Europe. We should increase and deepen our efforts to do that and build that potential, not just onshore but offshore.

Mr Gardiner, Mr Frew and others mentioned SeaGen.

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

Mr A Maginness: In conclusion, I support the motion and the amendment, and I hope that colleagues will pass the motion today.

Dr Farry: We have had a healthy and positive debate. However, it will only be meaningful if it used as a platform from which the Assembly can move forward. I certainly recognise the work that has been done and is being done, not only by DETI but by other Departments, but we need to take it to a new level.

The motion is not an endorsement of any particular set of proposals from one organisation; rather, it is about the Assembly embracing the concept of a green new deal and, indeed, the opportunities that it presents for Northern Ireland. That said, it is appropriate to pay tribute to the Green New Deal Group and the work that it has done, as well as to recognise, as Simon Hamilton mentioned, the almost unique coalescence of the business community, trade unions, the community and voluntary sector, farmers and the environmental lobby behind a common agenda. There is certainly a powerful lesson in that.

There are three important rationales for why the Assembly should address the green new deal. Obviously, there is the environmental agenda with regard to the need to combat climate change and to adapt to the reality of it, partly to avoid the negative economic consequences that will flow if we do not do that. The Stern report set out those consequences and the economic cost in graphic detail. There is also the economic rationale. I want to talk about opportunities for new types of economic activity and increased employment. Indeed, the amendment brings more detail to that. Now we talk about green-collar jobs as well as white-collar jobs and blue-collar jobs. There is also the important issue of the energy costs faced

by businesses, households and, indeed, us in the public sector and how to move to a greater sense of energy security. The problem is not so much that energy comes from overseas but our overdependence on fossil fuels that may not be available for ever. Finally, we have the social benefits. Most clearly, there is a need to address fuel poverty, which my colleague Sean Neeson explained ably at the beginning of the debate.

There are probably four key areas for action. One is energy efficiency, which is, perhaps, the key area in which most work can be done in the shortest period. It is also the area where there is potential for quite a labour-intensive set of activities to be taken forward. In view of the unemployment problem, particularly in the construction sector, that is very relevant. Another area is renewable energy, where there is a platform on which we can build. It is important to stress, as Alban Maginness mentioned, that that covers more than just onshore or offshore wind. A further area is the grid infrastructure and the need for a smart grid and smart meters, as the Minister said. I want to emphasise the importance of the North/South interconnector in that framework. Another important issue is transport. The transport system is inefficient and a strong contributor to Northern Ireland's carbon footprint, which is the highest of any UK region.

The Minister set out what is being done in Northern Ireland not only by her Department but through the actions of other Departments. I certainly recognise what is happening. I welcome the publication of the strategic energy framework. Indeed, I acknowledge that we have our own local renewables targets and are on track to meet them.

The issue for us today is to focus on what more can be done, not just by DETI and other Departments but by the Executive as a whole. First and foremost, it is important that government embraces the language of the green new deal and the green economy. Indeed, I hope that it becomes a clear theme in the next Programme for Government, which, hopefully, we will address later on this autumn. Other societies have embraced that language and concept more actively than Northern Ireland. Scotland, Denmark and Germany were mentioned in the debate. Certainly, there is a perception that the UK as a whole is behind the

curve when compared with the wider European Union and other international examples.

In the UK context, Northern Ireland is behind other regions. Therefore, there is a lot of room for improvement. We have targets for renewable energy but not for energy efficiency or the transport sector, both of which are major problems in Northern Ireland. There are no local targets for climate change. Northern Ireland would benefit from its own dedicated climate change Act, such as those that other UK regions have taken forward. The cross-sectoral advisory group addressed the use of renewables as a short-term action. That was welcomed, but, bizarrely, energy efficiency was seen as a long-term action to be taken forward in areas such as the wider market. Access to resourcing for the green new deal was seen as something that could not be done in Northern Ireland. Those are warning signs that I think we should be worried about.

There is a clear need for leadership when considering the energy efficiency of the public sector estate. We used to have targets on how quickly we would have a zero-carbon estate. However, those targets are now not going to be met. Again, we would still have the opportunity to make that happen. We need to reconsider the issue of grant aid for energy efficiency in homes. That has also been taken off the table, but it needs to come back on to the table. We need to look at feed-in tariffs as an evolutionary step away from merely talking about renewables obligation certificates, the so-called ROCs. We must address our transport system and look at the balance that we have between the use of the private car and public transport. The ratio in the investment strategy is 80:20 in favour of private transport. That is well out of line with most other regions in Europe, even those that have a similar rural population profile to ours.

We also have to look at our planning system and ask ourselves whether it is fit for purpose. Are PPS 18 and, in particular, the supplementary planning guidance sufficiently robust to ensure that we are able to make speedy decisions with investments? Feedback is still coming through that the process is taking too long and there is still too much uncertainty. People do not mind being turned down; they object to being left hanging around and being made unsure about whether their plans will be taken forward.

There is a critical issue with how we fund what needs to happen. Like everyone else, I am conscious of our difficult public expenditure context. However, we are talking about leveraging the private sector and about creating the necessary levers and incentives to ensure that the work that needs to happen in our society is encouraged. In that context, we are also talking about the need to stimulate a strong private sector and market-focused approach to addressing the problems.

It is important to recognise that a host of Departments can bring something to the table. A theme that has emerged from the debate is that, although good work is being done and Departments are co-operating with each other, the Executive are not embracing the issue properly as an overarching theme. There is no sense of how all the available programmes, policies, levers and incentives fit together into a single model that will demonstrate how the green economy can be taken forward and how we in Northern Ireland can meet our share of the wider climate change objectives that we have to face up to.

We need to see how all that can work together. Under DETI, we have the strategic energy framework and the good work that Invest Northern Ireland takes forward in encouraging the sector. The Department for Employment and Learning has an important role to play in providing the skills for the green economy. Indeed, the Minister referred to the work of the universities and colleges in that area. The Department of Finance and Personnel has a role to play with building regulations and the speed with which we can move ahead with the code for sustainable homes. There are still issues to deal with on the level of uptake in the rate rebates under low- and zero-carbon homes, on energy efficiency for homes and on the responsibility for energy efficiency in the public sector estate. OFMDFM has a role to play in the sustainable development strategy, which has been recognised as not being sufficiently robust. That Department also has a role to play in ascertaining how we integrate the green economy into the current investment strategy and any future investment strategy. DSD has responsibilities with fuel poverty and social housing. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has a role to play in biomass and energy efficiency in the rural sector, and the Department for Regional Development has a role to play in transport and energy

efficiency. Finally, DOE has a role to play in planning and climate change responsibilities. Indeed, I am glad that the Minister of the Environment has joined us for the grand finale. Therefore, a collective effort is required from the Government. It is important that an overarching strategy emerges and, in particular, that that is reflected in a future Programme for Government.

The debate has been encouraging. We welcome the proposals from the Green New Deal Group. This is a platform on which we can build, and I look forward to that happening. I am happy to support the motion and the amendment.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the benefits that can be achieved through implementing the green new deal in Northern Ireland; supports the need for improved energy efficiency to reduce fuel use and meet European Union and United Kingdom carbon emissions targets; believes there is a real opportunity to create 30,000 sustainable green-collar jobs; and calls on the Executive to implement a cross-departmental strategy to ensure that the potential benefits of the green economy are realised for Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to switch off their mobile phones, as they are interfering with the sound system.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Environment

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Environmental Crime

1. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of the Environment what resources he plans to give to address environmental crime in the next year, particularly in relation to the illegal disposal of tyres, which is a major source of pollution when dumped in the countryside or burnt on bonfires. (AQO 209/11)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots):

I am committed to maintaining and enhancing my Department's capability to address and combat the full range of environmental crime that it enforces. Over the next few months, the proposed recruitment of additional staff to the environmental crime unit is expected to take place, further strengthening our ability to tackle the scourge of waste crime, including illegal tyre disposal. Clearly, the economic climate means that all departmental resources are under review, and until the details of the next comprehensive spending review are known, I remain cautious. However, I will ensure that tackling environmental crime will remain a top priority for the Department over the next year and beyond.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is developing a range of policy and legislative tools to make its work more efficient and effective, from PSNI-level training and additional Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 powers to undertake financial investigation of criminal assets to the forthcoming Waste and Contaminated Land (Amendment) Bill and fly-tipping protocol. I am confident that the message that we have been striving to publicise over the past few years about the risk posed by burning tyres is being heard and acted on. There have been some high-profile examples of large-scale tyre fires in recent months, but my officials have been working hard behind the scenes to encourage the legitimate disposal of tyres through licensed dealers and to prevent further fires.

When education and encouragement fail, officers in the NIEA environmental crime unit can, and do, take enforcement action. The environmental crime unit has investigated and prosecuted a number of cases, including the illegal disposal and burning of tyres. The most recent conviction was secured in Newry on 20 September.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that it is wrong to allow tyre depots to collect money for the safe disposal of tyres without any procedures, guidance or enforcement measures in place to ensure that tyres are disposed of safely and in an environmentally friendly way? At a recent meeting of the Committee for the Environment, it seemed that some of the Minister's officials were not necessarily aware of methods for evidence gathering and how best to liaise with the PSNI to gather evidence so that people involved in disposing of and burning tyres illicitly can be prosecuted for the environmental crime that they have committed.

The Minister of the Environment: I understand that it is an ongoing issue. We are constantly looking at how we can improve work on that front. Large scale fires, particularly the one that took place just outside Londonderry, have drawn the public's attention to the weaknesses that exist. We are certainly aware of those weaknesses; we are seeking to ensure that we can deal with them and have a more affirmative, robust means of dealing with them.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. He is well aware that the Committee is considering the Waste and Contaminated Land (Amendment) Bill. Does he intend to introduce a clause to address the issue, or does he believe that the new protocols will address it?

The Minister of the Environment: We are looking at the protocols in conjunction with everything else in relation to how we tackle the issue. We think that there are methods that can help. However, that is what legislation is about, and if the Committee, or Members, think that areas can be strengthened, we will be happy to consider amendments. If something will improve the Bill, we will be happy to support it.

Mr Kinahan: Is the Minister aware that approximately one third of all used tyres disappear, often making a profit for somebody, and not necessarily the people who are dealing with them legally?

The Minister of the Environment: Yes, we are aware that many tyres for which people pay money to be disposed of correctly are not disposed of correctly. That is an issue of concern, and one that we wish to pursue.

Local Government: Legal Costs

2. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions he has had with the local government auditor in relation to the possible misuse of ratepayers' money by local councils in the settlement of legal cases brought against them. (AQO 210/11)

The Minister of the Environment: I have not had any discussions with the Chief Local Government Auditor on that matter, and it would have been inappropriate for me to have done so in connection with any specific case. Local government auditors are designated staff at the Northern Ireland Audit Office, and they act independently of my Department in carrying out their audit functions on district councils. The role of the Chief Local Government Auditor is to audit the accounts of councils and take appropriate action when any irregularity is found. I am confident that he has been, and will continue to be, meticulous in fulfilling that role.

Dr McDonnell: Does the Minister agree that there have been scandals involving some local councils, which put bad behaviour and bigoted practice before good practice and left the ratepayers to pick up the legal costs? Does he also agree that spending money in that way must end? Does he have any ideas about how to bring some control to local councils?

The Minister of the Environment: Yes, I am aware of such practice. Newry and Mourne District Council, for example, was reprimanded for demonstrating bigoted behaviour in not allowing the public to use its facilities. I appreciate the Member's bringing to the attention of the House the misdemeanours of that council on that occasion. However, I am sure that it has learned from that.

Mr Craig: I declare an interest as Chairperson of the Audit Committee. I thank the Minister for his initial answer. Had he given any other response, I would have rapped his knuckles. Does the Minister agree that the use of public funds by any council to take legal cases against another council cannot be justified and should be the subject of an audit report?

The Minister of the Environment: That is a matter for the Chief Local Government Auditor. If the Member has concerns, he should draw them to his attention. In all such matters, councils should seek to resolve their differences through the normal channels without proceeding to legal mechanisms.

Mr Gardiner: I declare an interest as a member of Craigavon Borough Council. Does the Minister agree that the failure to finalise the reorganisation of local councils under RPA meant that some councils appointed temporary members of their staff to the senior management team, which might result in legal disputes and a cost to ratepayers?

The Minister of the Environment: I do not want to get into the internal affairs of any particular council. That is neither my role nor my responsibility. However, the Member should be aware — if he is not, I will make him so — that councils can legitimately employ people now. There is no ban on the recruitment of senior officers. It may not suit some councils to do that, as they may achieve better value for money through how they do things now. I do not know, and I have not investigated any of those cases because that is not my role.

George Best Belfast City Airport: Flight Times

3. **Ms Purvis** asked the Minister of the Environment to provide a definition of a “special circumstance” which would allow a flight to take place at the George Best Belfast City Airport outside the 21.30 time limit set out in the planning agreement; and what measures he is taking to enforce the terms of the planning agreement. (AQO 211/11)

The Minister of the Environment: The 2008 planning agreement makes provision for delayed scheduled flights during extended hours — between 9.31 pm and 11.59 pm — in exceptional circumstances. However, that phrase has not been further defined.

The report of the examination, which was held in public in 2006 to review the planning agreement, noted that a definition of the phrase “exceptional circumstances” that was acceptable to all interested parties was unlikely to be attainable. However, although the phrase is difficult to define, we take the view that its inclusion highlights the need to keep delayed air

traffic movements (ATMs) after 9.30 pm to an absolute minimum. That said, my Department recently wrote to the airport seeking information about the reason for the delayed flights and how the airport considers that those meet the terms of “exceptional circumstances”.

Ms Purvis: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he answer the second part of the question and tell the House what measures he is taking to enforce the terms of the planning agreement to protect the public interest, given that his Department, which has powers of enforcement for legislation, has not enforced the agreement on the seats-for-sale limit?

The Minister of the Environment: With regard to the exceptional circumstances, everything is up for consideration because there was no agreement on what that term meant. Last year, of 39,328 flights, 360 — 0.92% — came in between 9.31 pm and 11.59 pm. One per cent may be regarded as exceptional by some but not by others. It is a relatively small proportion of the number of flights, and, given the nature of airlines, flights out of London and all other factors, there has to be some latitude. Less than 1% is not a significant enough figure for us to become involved.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister acknowledge the fact that Belfast City Airport is one of only four airports in the EU that is designated a “city airport”? Does he also acknowledge the fact that a European directive enables higher environmental standards to be applied to such airports? What higher environmental standards have been applied to Belfast City Airport?

The Minister of the Environment: The airport has to operate within certain zones. The standards applied to it are that it operates only between 6.30 am and 9.30 pm, and there is a limit on the number of flights at 48,000 per annum. Those are fairly significant limitations on the airport.

A flight regularly goes over my home after 12.00 midnight on its way to Belfast International Airport, which I can hear clearly. Therefore, I understand where many people are coming from on such issues. I am particularly sympathetic to the views of the people in east Belfast who live closest to Belfast City Airport. However, as with all things, there must be a balance. If Mr Beggs is suggesting that we be punitive with Belfast City Airport, seek to ensure that it is not a good business model and, as a consequence, ensure that business is driven out of Northern Ireland at

a time of recession, that is not somewhere that I intend to go, and I will not take that route with him.

Mr McDevitt: Does the Minister accept that 326 flights a year equates to a late flight every day — with the exception of weekends — at the airport? Does he also accept that that should amount to an exceptional breach of the licence? What steps will he take to enforce the terms of the licence?

The Minister of the Environment: If there are 100 flights a day and one flight is late, that may not be deemed wildly significant. I encourage the Member and the whole House to keep their rationale. There is an issue, particularly for the people in east Belfast, whom Ms Purvis represents.

Mr McDevitt: It is also an issue for people in south Belfast.

The Minister of the Environment: I have considerably less sympathy for the people of south Belfast, because I happen to live under a flight route for Belfast City Airport and Belfast International Airport. I know what it is like to have a lot of air traffic over my home, whether that is in the morning or at night, and it does not particularly perturb me.

In east Belfast, the planes are flying really low for landing, so I can fully understand where Ms Purvis's constituents are coming from. Therefore, we will try to achieve a balance. The restrictions to limit flights at 48,000 and operating hours to between 6.30 am and 9.30 pm will remain in place. We have no intention of removing them. I can give that assurance to the local community of east Belfast.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

2.45 pm

Single Waste Authority

5. **Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister of the Environment how many of the 26 local councils objected to or supported his Department's proposal for a single waste authority. (AQO 213/11)

The Minister of the Environment: In April 2009, my Department consulted on the need for, and timing of, a single waste disposal authority for Northern Ireland. Some 14 councils responded directly to the Department. Of those,

two opposed the Department's proposal and one supported it. The remaining 11 councils suggested amendments to the Department's legislative proposal.

The three waste management groups that carry out waste management functions on behalf of their constituent councils also responded to the consultation. The North West Region Waste Management Group, which comprises seven councils, commented that its constituent councils did not believe that there was any need for a single waste authority in Northern Ireland once current procurement exercises had been completed. The Southern Waste Management Partnership, SWaMP 2008, which comprises eight councils, suggested that the Department's proposals should be developed for one or more waste disposal authorities. It also stated that its members were adamant that there should be no single waste disposal authority, although one of SWaMP 2008's constituent councils had previously expressed support for the Department's proposal. The response from arc21, which comprises 11 councils, suggested that the Department should legislate for discretionary powers that would enable groups of councils to voluntarily establish a waste disposal authority on a subregional basis.

Mr McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for his full and detailed reply. Will he give us a similar analysis of the responses of the 26 councils to the proposal for a single business organisation?

The Minister of the Environment: That is a wholly different and separate question, and I will give the Member an answer in writing. There seem to be Members of the House and members of local government who are afraid of change that will bring about real savings. The Members opposite would do well to see how they can devise real savings, because, at a time when there will be greater austerity, their actions will lead to job losses in the community. They are not prepared to make difficult decisions that will bring real savings that can then be passed on to the public through lower rates and taxes or better services. I would prefer to deliver better services and lower rates, unlike the Members opposite.

Mr Givan: The Minister has alluded to my point already. Given that the councils that make up SWaMP 2008 were opposed to a single waste authority and that, at the Strategic Leadership Board, Sinn Féin stated explicitly that it was

opposed to a single waste authority, how were we to derive the financial benefits to justify moving ahead with the review of public administration?

The Minister of the Environment: The problem with the review of public administration was that we needed to spend £118 million to achieve it. The additional savings were to come from doing things like developing a single services organisation for waste and corporate services for councils. That was clearly rejected. Sinn Féin was opposed to those difficult decisions, so when the savings were taken away, we were left with the option of amalgamating councils, which was going to cost the taxpayer money. That made no logical sense to anyone. I suspect it does not even make sense to Sinn Féin, but nonetheless, that is the line that it took.

Mr Armstrong: What savings have been shown to be possible through the establishment of a single waste authority?

The Minister of the Environment: Work is being done to identify the savings that can be made. I have received a note from SWaMP 2008 asking if it can delay its response on that matter until 18 October. Work is coming to a conclusion on that front, and I hope that we can identify the tangible savings that could be made and should be made and which are of benefit to the wider public but which some people do not want to make.

Local Government: Waste Management and Recycling

6. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister of the Environment which local councils are currently not meeting their targets in relation to waste management and recycling. (AQO 214/11)

13. **Lord Browne** asked the Minister of the Environment what steps his Department is taking to ensure that local councils meet their Northern Ireland Landfill Allowance Scheme targets for the recycling of household waste. (AQO 221/11)

The Minister of the Environment: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I propose to answer questions 6 and 13 together.

According to the latest available published data, all district councils met their Northern Ireland landfill allowance scheme (NILAS) targets in 2008-09. Recycling targets apply to Northern

Ireland as a whole but do not apply at local council level. With the household recycling rate in 2008-09 standing at 34.4%, Northern Ireland is also on track to meet the waste management strategy recycling target of 35% by 2010.

The Department has implemented a range of interventions to meet the targets. Those include the £200 million of funding that has been allocated to the strategic waste infrastructure programme; £5 million for the Rethink Waste capital fund; £1 million annual funding for the waste and resources action programme; and £200,000 for the Rethink Waste revenue fund and the revision of guidance and advice to local councils on their responsibilities under NILAS.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response. What I am trying to get is an assurance that councils that do not reach or exceed their targets will not be penalised through regional fines. That is a worry for councils. Moreover, what incentives will the Minister give to councils to exceed their targets?

The Minister of the Environment: We recently introduced the Rethink Waste capital fund, for which we identified £5 million of funding, and that programme has seen significant uptake by local authorities. The first element of the programme was announced a few weeks ago, and we will be in a position to announce the next portions of grants in the very near future. That money will be spent before this financial year is out. Local government has the funding. It recognises that it needs to recycle, and, by and large, local councils are stepping up to the plate.

Given that we reached a household recycling rate of 34.4% in 2008-09, I am confident that we will well exceed the 35% target by 2010, so the imposition of fines on any council will not be an issue. Albeit, the Member makes a fair point: some councils need to do more, and we will continue to encourage those councils to do more. The fact that many of the figures are in the public domain creates a league of shame for councils at the bottom of the table. I would not want to be a member of the Strabane or Belfast councils at the bottom of the table. I would much prefer to be a member of the Antrim or Banbridge councils at the top of the table.

Mr Cree: I was interested to hear the Minister's comments. He is quite right. What conclusions can be drawn from the variation in recycling figures among the different local authorities

in Northern Ireland? Is there any method of waste collection that produces higher recycling results?

The Minister of the Environment: Some councils have simply taken the bull by the horns, so to speak, and decided that recycling is the way to go. They are to be commended.

As for means of recycling, some councils use kerbie boxes, and the quality of the recycling material is generally better and has a higher end value. However, it is easier for the general public to use mixed recycling schemes, which are still quite successful. The North West Region Waste Management Group suggests mixing five different materials in its bins, and that is for that group to determine. I do not know which is the best way or the perfect way to recycle. All that I can do is encourage councils to continue to work on it.

I said before that I believe that not only can we meet the 50% recycling target by 2020, we can exceed it. If that is the case, perhaps we can drive down the costs of the infrastructure fund that is required for energy recovery, and instead of having to spend £200 million of capital from central government and £400 million from local government, we can drive down those costs by recycling more.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister outline any discussions that he has had with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment about businesses that could be established in the recycling market? Obviously, one incentive is that there has to be an endgame for recycled materials.

The Minister of the Environment: I think that one of the key companies is actually in the Member's constituency. Cherry Polymers is in Annaghmore, which is, I think, just about in her constituency. Huhtamaki is in the Member's constituency; it supplies 50% of the egg boxes used in the United Kingdom and recycles a huge amount of paper. There is also Quinn Glass, which recycles glass. A lot of materials that are selected for recycling in Northern Ireland are recycled in Northern Ireland. Let me dispel the myth that there are no organisations recycling materials in Northern Ireland and that it is all being shipped off to China. Much of it is being dealt with here.

I have recently visited companies involved in recycling building waste: McKinstry Skip Hire

and Wright Recycling. They are moving towards 95% recycling of building materials. Much good work is being done at a local level, not just in the public sector but in the private sector.

Planning Applications: Charges

7. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of the Environment if there is a cap on the amount that Planning Service charges for commercial planning applications. (AQO 215/11)

The Minister of the Environment: The Planning (Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 came into force on 4 October 2010. The general effect of the regulations will be to increase fees by approximately 2.9%. The fee payable for an application for industrial, commercial, community and other buildings, other than dwelling houses or buildings covered by category 3 in the schedule to the regulations, is £237 where no floor space is created, or £237 for every 75 sq m subject to a maximum of £11,834.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. We have been talking about social economy and kick-starting the economy. Does the Minister's Department have any plans to reduce those fees for community-based projects?

The Minister of the Environment: We are looking at fees. Members regularly complain to me about the loss of planning officers as a result of the downturn. It is believed that we could raise an additional £2 million to £4 million by amending the planning fees.

Before any Member gets into a blind panic, what we are looking at are things like the North/South interconnector; a few thousand pounds was paid for that planning fee. The planning fee for the bridge over the River Foyle was some £237, yet I recently spoke to a farmer who paid almost £10,000 to lodge a planning application for a farmyard. If someone wanted to build 1,000 houses, the maximum fee would be just over £11,000. All in all, the planning fees that we have are not fit for purpose. They need to be amended; that is in the public interest. Those proposals will be coming before the House in the not too distant future.

Mr Gallagher: Is the Minister's Department considering linking genuine job creation potential to an appropriate reduction in the planning fees for commercial applications?

The Minister of the Environment: When we look at those regulations, the Floor will be open to Members' suggestions. One suggestion to help economic development is charging for the pre-application discussion scheme. That may be something that we make available to smaller applicants as well, so that people get good advice from the Planning Service prior to lodging an application, the result being that they get a quicker decision and spend less money identifying the right solution for their particular need.

Mr Campbell: The Minister has just mentioned a review of charges for planning applications. Will his Department bear in mind a sense of proportionality so that small applications will entail a smaller price and larger applications will have a price that is, not horrendous, but at least relative to the commercial propriety of the application?

The Minister of the Environment: The direction we intend to take would be to remove planning applications from some of those smaller projects. We are looking at removing the need for planning approval for porches and single-story extensions and things like that, and simply using the building control exercise to ensure that everything is done to a proper quality. A lot of planning applications are not necessary, and we want to weed a lot of them out.

3.00 pm

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Electricity Interconnector

1. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made on the extension of the North/South electricity interconnector. (AQO 224/11)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): As highlighted in the recently published strategic energy framework, investment in and the strengthening of the electricity network is absolutely essential. The new North/South interconnector is a key element of that. NIE applied for planning approval in December 2009 for the Northern Ireland section of the new interconnector. To ensure that public concerns are considered

fully, my colleague Minister Poots wrote to the Planning Appeals Commission to request a public local inquiry. Further progress on that very important strategic project is dependent on the outcome of that inquiry.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her reply. It is a very good project that will probably benefit all consumers, north and south of the border. We very much support the project. Why did the planning application for the interconnector have to be resubmitted?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The planning application in respect of the Northern Ireland section was not resubmitted, but the planning application in the Republic of Ireland had to be withdrawn. It may not yet have been resubmitted, but there were certainly some technical difficulties. However, the planning application for the Northern Ireland section of the interconnector is still live.

Mr Craig: I know that there has been a bit of controversy about underground and overground cabling. As an engineer, I know that risks are associated with both. There are huge risks with putting it underground. That would have immense cost implications. Will the Minister outline what those may be?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: There has certainly been a very big debate about whether to have overground or underground cabling. As energy Minister, my duty is to ensure that the consumers have access to a reliable electricity supply and that the line will burden electricity customers in Northern Ireland only with costs that are strictly necessary. I am sure that the whole House wants me to ensure that consumers do not receive increased bills because of unnecessary burdens.

NIE published a report by PB Power that compared the cost of the cable options. It indicated that, on 2009 prices, building the line overhead could cost some £760,000 a mile, compared with an estimated cost of £5.6 million a mile for an underground line. I know that those who are campaigning for an underground line for the interconnector dispute those figures and say that there is too much of a differential. However, there always will be a differential between an underground and overground line. We have to consider that very carefully because, as I said, I will burden consumers here only with what is strictly necessary.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her answer. We all know that the grid in Northern Ireland needs to be reinforced to take additional loads from renewable energy sources, but has that demand been factored into the costs of the interconnector? Who will pay the costs involved?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: That is part of the work that we are doing at the moment in the strategic energy framework. We are setting out very clearly the costs going forward, part of which will be the capital expenditure in respect of the interconnector. Of course, we cannot settle that until we know the situation regarding underground or overground cabling. I will resist making the Wombles remark again, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister will be aware from a previous Adjournment debate of the very real concerns that people who live along the route of the interconnector from Moy to Meath have in relation to health, visual and environmental impacts and the tourism industry.

I welcome the Environment Minister's decision to hold a public inquiry into the application. The Minister has said that, on figures from NIE —

Mr Deputy Speaker: A question, Mr Bradley; ask a question.

Mr D Bradley: If you give me the opportunity, I will ask the question.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have given you the opportunity to ask the question, Mr Bradley.

Mr D Bradley: Bhuel, seo í an cheist mar sin.

The Minister said that the figures she received from NIE show overheading to be the cheaper option. Will she take into consideration the other studies that she mentioned, which show that, over a longer period, undergrounding works out cheaper.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: We await the translation of that bit in the middle of the question, Mr Deputy Speaker. We are not clear what was said. However, as I have clearly said, significant technical issues and costs are associated with placing high-voltage electricity cables underground. I hear what the Member has to say in relation to public concerns about environmental and health issues. I hear those

messages very clearly, and he knows that I have met people along the route. The line must and will meet current safety standards. I hope that all those concerns will be addressed in the public inquiry.

Ms J McCann: What is the Minister's view on the proposed sale of parts of NIE to the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and of any potential investment that would come from that sale?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My concerns about the proposed acquisition of NIE by ESB are well documented. In early summer, I had discussions with ESB and the Republic's Energy Minister at that time, principally to talk about the importance of maintaining existing NIE jobs, of NIE continuing to operate as a separate entity in Northern Ireland and to seek assurances that there would be local representation on any ESB board.

The transaction between NIE and ESB is entirely a commercial matter between two private companies. I have received assurances from both a commercial and a departmental perspective. However, I have to say that I remained uncomfortable at a political level in respect of the matter, and I spoke to the First Minister about it. After that, as the Member will be aware, a joint letter was issued by the First Minister and the then leader of the Ulster Unionist Party. It is a commercial decision that lies outside of government. However, the UK Office of Fair Trading is still scrutinising the proposed transaction, and, as I said on 7 July, I continue to keep a close watch on the situation.

Gas (Applications for Licences and Extensions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996

2. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the result of the recent consultation on the amendment to the Gas (Application for Licences and Extensions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996. (AQO 225/11)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The public consultation ended on 7 September 2010 and seven submissions were received. No objections were raised. All respondents were broadly content and agreed that the proposed amendments were necessary to ensure compliance with the EU services

directive. A decision note on the outcome of the consultation is available on the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) website. The regulations came into effect on 30 September 2010.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for her reply. Will she explain why there was such a delay in promoting the legislation that it breached the 21-day rule, despite the EU services directive being dated 2006?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department breached the 21-day rule to avoid infraction procedures. The Member will ask why it was not brought in before that. I will explain. The possible need for an amendment to the Gas (Applications for Licences and Extensions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996 to remove the requirement for a company applying for a gas licence to provide a point of contact in Northern Ireland for the duration of the application process was initially raised by the Utility Regulator in autumn last year. The Department sought legal advice on the issue from the Departmental Solicitor's Office, which indicated that the gas regulations were, arguably, already compliant and did not require a company to be established in Northern Ireland for that purpose. Based on that advice, work on the amendment was not taken forward.

However, at a later stage, the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills insisted that the change be made, and we moved quickly to do so. I recognise the Member's frustration, but the decision was based on the fact that we believed that we were already covered in that respect. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills is the ultimate arbiter on European matters, and it insisted that we make the change. I thank members of the Committee for working with me in that regard.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat. Is the Minister aware of the widespread concern that gas may not become an available energy option in the north-west due to the failure to extend the licence to build a network there?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member will know that, in general, I am in favour of rolling out the natural gas network not just to the north-west but across Northern Ireland. Recently, I received the results of a study commissioned by the Department and the Utility Regulator into the technical and economic feasibility of extending

the natural gas network to not only the north-west but to the generic west of Northern Ireland. The results are extremely interesting, and they will be used by DETI and the Utility Regulator to consider how best to take forward new gas infrastructure to areas with sufficient gas loads and to where large infrastructure investments of that nature are deemed to be economically viable. It is also hugely important to consider the views of the gas industry on any gas network extension and on the whole area of mutualisation, which needs to be taken forward as well.

Mr S Anderson: What is being done to create more competition in areas that are currently held and operated by Firmus Energy?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: We are looking at opening up the areas operated by Firmus Energy to competition, but we need to look at the pricing implications of that on companies that are currently with Firmus Energy. Furthermore, as I said in relation to electricity prices, I must ensure at all times that both domestic and business consumers get the best value for money.

EU State Aid

3. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the impact of the anticipated changes in EU state aid rules. (AQO 226/11)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The European Commission has still to indicate how it wants to change the state aid rules after 2013, so it is not possible to assess the impact of any changes now. We expect the European Commission to start consulting with member states later this year or early in 2011. Of course, I will make the case for the best deal for the Northern Ireland economy.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for her answer. In light of the inevitability of some changes, what contingency plans have the Minister's Department and Invest Northern Ireland put in place to ensure that resources can be redeployed to other areas in order to support the local economy?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As the Member will be aware, the matter was raised in the independent review of economic policy, which stated that the impending state aid rule closure post-2013

means that we should be moving towards innovation and research and development. That is still the view. However, following the review, I took the view that I need selective financial assistance (SFA) as a tool in my box when I am trying to get investors to come to Northern Ireland. I still hold that view. SFA is a useful tool; indeed, some of the investments that we have been able to secure recently have been based on the fact that we can give quite generous amounts of SFA. I know that next year the percentage of SFA available will drop considerably, but I will be arguing that, given the recessionary period in which we have been, we will need to continue to have SFA post-2013.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her reply. I ask the Minister to make strenuous efforts to retain financial assistance for businesses in Northern Ireland, because, hopefully, we are moving out of recession. When we move out of recession, we will need every assistance that we can get. If we do not make the strongest possible case to the European Commission, we will be bereft of that tool to which the Minister referred. I hope that she will do that.

3.15 pm

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I agree with the Member, and we will make the strongest possible case to Europe in respect of SFA. As was stated in a recent independent review by Ernst and Young, Northern Ireland has become second only to London as an attractive place for foreign direct investment. I want to be able to continue with that, and Members will know that part of that is about rebuilding, which we are currently doing, and another part is about rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy. The Finance Minister and I are currently working with the Treasury on a paper that Her Majesty's Government will bring forward on rebalancing the economy. We will wait to see what comes forward in that on corporation tax, research and development grants or tax credits, and training credits or tax relief. If SFA is to slowly go away, we will need to look to other mechanisms to get stand-out for this region to ensure that we continue to get the sort of FDI that came to Northern Ireland on Friday and Monday of this week.

West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Forces

4. **Mr Adams** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline her commitment to the full implementation of the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Force, in light of the deprivation index published in May 2010. (AQO 227/11)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Considerable progress has been made against the issues that were identified in the task force's 2002 report. Some £20 million was allocated for projects that are specific to west Belfast and the greater Shankill, and 16 out of the 17 of those projects have been or are in the process of being implemented. Those include a £7 million education initiative to address educational under-attainment in the area and a pilot social economy fund, which aims to provide an opportunity of work experience and personal development in a social enterprise environment. I have also issued a draft Executive paper outlining options on the way forward for the task force initiative, and I await a response from colleagues, which will allow the issue to be discussed by the Executive.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat. Tá mé buíoch den Aire. I thank the Minister for her answer.

The Minister will recall that, before the summer, she and I had a positive discussion about the realignment of the task force under the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). In May 2010, the deprivation index located six out of the 10 areas of most social deprivation in the Shankill and west Belfast.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Ask a question, Mr Adams, please.

Mr Adams: Does the Minister agree that there is now an urgent need for a renewed commitment by the Executive to refresh and implement fully the task force report?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: As I indicated to Mr Adams at that meeting, I had put forward a draft Executive paper in 2009. That paper details a number of options for taking the initiative forward, one of which is to transfer responsibility for the initiative to OFMDFM. When the paper comes to the Executive, it will be a matter for the Executive to decide.

Mr Campbell: Does the Minister agree that that project, worthwhile as it is, is probably symptomatic of many problems in working class areas across Northern Ireland? Does she agree that the Executive and the Assembly probably need to examine more closely areas of high deprivation and unemployment where there are people without hope for the future and to try to identify mechanisms whereby we can bring hope for the future to them, not only for the present generation but for future generations in areas where unemployment has been endemic for many years?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am hopeful that, when the paper comes to the Executive, looking at the wider issues surrounding generational unemployment will be exactly the sort of conversation that we will have. Although we continue to bring high-value jobs to Northern Ireland, I am not blind to the fact that the unemployment statistics for Northern Ireland keep rising. Therefore, there is a fundamental difficulty, and it is a difficulty about which I have been having discussions with the Minister for Employment and Learning and at which Invest Northern Ireland has been looking carefully to try to think of imaginative ideas, including the involvement of social economy partners, to deal with generational problems of unemployment and with people who are finding it more and more difficult to find work in these difficult times.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the fact that the Minister will look at that on a much wider basis than just west Belfast, although I understand its particular need, given the number of wards of deprivation in the area.

Did I hear the Minister correctly when she said that the paper has been with the Executive since 2009? Does she have any idea whether it has been discussed in the Executive? What is the hold-up in bringing it forward?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am simply waiting for the matter to come on the agenda. I am also waiting for outstanding comments from a number of Departments: the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; OFMDFM; and one other Department, the name of which I cannot think of at the moment. However, I am keen to have a discussion around the Executive table to try to take matters forward, not only in west Belfast but, as the Member for East

Londonderry Mr Campbell indicated, in other areas where there is great deprivation.

Banking: Businesses

5. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline any discussions her Department has had with local banks in relation to the problems faced by the business sector in the current economic downturn. (AQO 228/11)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Last year, I initiated a series of meetings with the main local banks to discuss their contribution to helping Northern Ireland companies weather the recession and, in particular, how greater use could be made of the UK Government's enterprise finance guarantee scheme. Since then, my officials and I, in liaison with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and his officials, have maintained regular contact with the banks and ensured that specific problems raised by businesses and, indeed, their political representatives have been brought to the banks' attention. I intend to hold further meetings with the banks this autumn.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Minister for her answer and for her ongoing efforts. Has she read the damning critique of local banks by our Church leaders, who have spoken collectively of the despair faced by small business owners at this time of economic downturn? How can we bring maximum pressure to bear on local banks so that they adopt a more flexible and caring approach to the business sector at this time?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am certainly aware of the very real issues that were raised. I welcome the fact that Church leaders were given an opportunity to raise those issues before a Committee and make known the sorts of pressures that they are dealing with among their parishioners and flocks.

Having spoken to me about individual businesses, the Member knows that we have very few tools with which to make the banks deal with businesses in a certain way. I have said in the House many times that, when we go to them, the banks tell us that they are lending, open for business and want to do business. However, people come to our constituency offices, across Northern Ireland, to tell us that they are coming under pressure because of overdraft limits and

renewal fees, and because the banks will not support them with their bills for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and other agencies. Therefore, there is a disconnect, and that is something that we will continue to try to deal with. I have already indicated to officials that, following my recent discussions with people from the social economy sector, I want to speak to the banks again. There is a need to renew those contacts.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the Minister's commitment to keeping the pressure on the banks as much as she can during this difficult time. Another major part of the problem is how jobs are dealt with. Will the Minister detail the work that Invest NI has been doing to try to safeguard and create jobs?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: It is important that businesses have knowledge of what is available to them. At the beginning of the recession, I asked Invest NI to be more forward-facing with clients, as well as with non-clients. We produced on the website nibusinessinfo.co.uk a table of the support that is available to small and medium-sized businesses and we have worked with councils and local chambers of commerce. We also had the short-term aid scheme, which we launched to allow companies to retain specific skills so that, when the upturn comes, those skills will be ready and available.

We also provided the accelerated support fund, which allowed businesses to avail themselves of free diagnostics of their difficulties, and we established that fund to try to work with those businesses. Therefore, I hope that Members acknowledge that Invest Northern Ireland has been working alongside businesses during the recession and has been trying to assist them in whatever way it can.

Mr Savage: Does the Minister support the Treasury document 'Financing a private sector recovery'? Is she satisfied that the Irish banks operating in Northern Ireland can compete with other banks that are under separate control?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I have often said that part of our difficulty in Northern Ireland is that we do not have our own banks. Two of the banks are Irish owned. The Ulster Bank is really a subsidiary of the Royal Bank of Scotland, and the Northern Bank has Danish headquarters. Part of the difficulty, therefore, is that we are not the

masters of our destiny when it comes to our local banks. The Republic of Ireland's economy is facing huge difficulties at this point in time, and I said recently that we do not live in a vacuum and that we in Northern Ireland will feel the cold wind of those difficulties. Part of that will probably be connected to the two Irish banks.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle; thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister mentioned what seems to be the two planes of reality that exist: first, what we are being told in our constituency offices about overdraft and renewal fees, and secondly, what the banks seem to be saying about those fees. I think that it is a misnomer to call them local banks, because that is the last thing that they are. They may be situated locally, but they mainly have overseas owners. Therefore, at the Minister's next meeting with the banks, will she add one other item to that list and ask them to ease up a wee bit on lending to first-time buyers? That is a major issue and obstacle, and it must be addressed to help to regenerate and support the construction industry at this time.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: Part of the difficulty is that, five years ago, people were able to access mortgages for somewhere in the region of 120% of the value of their house. That is because the pendulum had swung so far in one direction. That was a hugely dangerous way to go. When I was a conveyancing solicitor, I remember wondering why people would not buy a house if they were getting a 120% mortgage. We are now in a situation where young people and, indeed, first-time buyers of every age, are finding it hugely difficult to get any sort of a mortgage. I absolutely sympathise with them. However, that is a consequence of and a direct reaction to what happened before. Nevertheless, I am certainly happy to raise that issue with the banks.

Northern Ireland Tourist Board

6. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of whether the Northern Ireland Tourist Board is the most efficient body to promote tourism. (AQO 229/11)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: The draft tourism strategy, which I will be taking to the Executive shortly, sets out my vision for the tourism sector up to 2020. It includes some ambitious targets for

visitor numbers and spend. The strategy sets out clear roles and responsibilities for the organisations and bodies that are involved in delivering for tourism so that fragmentation across the sector can be addressed and efficiency, therefore, increased.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board will have a critical role to play in the delivery of the strategy. It will build on the recent success of its award-winning marketing campaign to attract visitors from the Republic of Ireland, and it will build on the work that it is doing to deliver the five signature projects.

Mr Givan: At a time when we are facing austere measures, does the Minister agree that the Executive should be looking fundamentally at all quangos and non-departmental public bodies, including the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, that could be amalgamated or brought back into the Department if that were a step that could deliver efficiency while still driving forward delivery? Does she agree that that measure should be given serious consideration?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: Every Minister should be looking seriously at all the matters that the Member raised. Some of the boards in question are quite heavily populated and have 12 to 15 members. Therefore, we need to ask ourselves whether those boards are fit for purpose and whether we need such big boards. I know that the coalition Government have indicated that they are looking at a long list of quangos.

Indeed, there has been press speculation about VisitBritain, which is the equivalent of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. The issue is being looked at nationally, and it would be remiss of us not to do the same here in Northern Ireland.

3.30 pm

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Brontë Homeland Interpretive Centre

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately six minutes.

Mr McCallister: I hope that that is not a sign that everybody is leaving the Chamber. It is good to see colleagues from the South Down constituency here. Margaret Ritchie and P J Bradley are at a function in Dublin and apologise for their absence. I declare an interest as I live in the Brontë homeland area. Various sites around the original Brontë homestead are on the tourist trail and close to where I live. Those include Glascar church, where Patrick Brontë taught school and Alice McClory's cottage, where Patrick Brontë's mother lived. It is a beautiful part of the south Down countryside.

The Brontë homeland is an undervalued part of Northern Ireland's rich cultural heritage. Sometimes, we are defined here by our cultural and historical divisions. In fact, our part of south Down and the history of the Brontë homelands have made a huge contribution to English literature, and the whole family background has had a massive cultural impact throughout these islands and across the English-speaking world.

There are several things that we need to do to promote the area. We need to find out whether we can attract more visitors to the area to make businesses there more viable. We must also ensure that we promote the Brontë homeland area, so that when tourists come to Northern Ireland they do not stay in Belfast. Tours should be organised to bring people to the area, not only to the Brontë homeland but to the other attractions in south Down and beyond, whether that is retail at the Outlet in Banbridge, the history of the linen trail at the Irish Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum or the Mourne Mountains and Newcastle. The Tourist Board must think along those lines and ensure that we build on

the numbers who travel beyond Belfast to visit the area and enjoy that type of heritage.

The facilities are in place, and, with modest investment, we could build on what we have and ensure that people know about the connection with the Brontë heritage. We must also look at how we link in with Brontë country in Yorkshire. I am interested to hear what the Minister has to say about whether we can do anything on an east-west basis to promote those links and ensure that people know where the Brontë story began. Most Members will agree that we have not always been brilliant at promotion. We were not always great at ensuring that people knew, for example, that the Titanic was built in Northern Ireland. We must do better with Brontë country, and the best way to promote that is on an east-west basis.

Given the east-west links, I am somewhat sceptical as to whether Tourism Ireland provides the best mechanism for robustly promoting the Brontë trail. However, I would like much more to be done to promote the two areas and to ensure that people know about the links with Northern Ireland. We need the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland to campaign to bring visitors to the area and to tell them that it is here that the Brontë story began. We need them to point out the sites of interest and the places that people would like to visit. Think of the impact that the Brontë sisters' writing has had across the world; there is huge interest in them. We must tap into that if we are serious about promoting our tourism sector.

On numerous occasions in the House, the Minister has spoken about the importance of tourism and how it is a key growth area for our economy. We have signature tourism projects here, among which are the Mournes and St Patrick projects. Brontë country is very close to the areas covered by those projects, and I want to see how they can work together to increase the number of visitors.

With modest investment, we could make a real difference. For example, we could promote tours from Belfast to Brontë country to let people experience the culture, heritage and background of this extraordinary family story and see where it began. That is something that we must do to promote the area. It is such an undervalued asset. One of the biggest criticisms of us, as a society, is that we are not good at blowing our own trumpet about the marvellous tourist

facilities, history and scenery that we have. We must do that much better if we are to promote tourism here. We have only to look at the number of people who visit Northern Ireland to see that.

We need to sell Brontë country in the various parts of our domestic market throughout the United Kingdom and across English-speaking areas of the world, such as the USA and Canada. We need to promote the area as a must-see for visitors who want to enjoy the rich cultural background and literary genius of the three Brontë sisters. That is why I was so keen to secure the debate today. I am passionate about the Brontë homeland not just because I live there, get to see it every day and know the beauty of the countryside and the richness of the heritage but because I want to ensure that the Brontë homeland is promoted and shouted about so that others hear about it, visit it and enjoy what we have to offer in that part of south Down.

I am grateful to other colleagues from the South Down constituency for attending the debate. I also thank Mrs Kelly, who is a Member for Upper Bann, for filling in for her party colleagues. Some of Brontë country is close to the Upper Bann constituency, and some Brontë stuff is in the FE McWilliam Centre on the edge of Banbridge. There are connections between the two constituencies, and the history of linen in the area could also be tied in. Those are the things that we need to build on.

I look forward to the Minister's response to see how we can improve the number of visitors to the site and how we can make it more viable. The more visitors we can attract to the Brontë country, the more viable we make it for small rural businesses in the area, whether craft shops or cafes, to tap into that market. Those small businesses cannot survive without people visiting the area, enjoying their experience and spending some of their hard-earned money when they are there. We need to encourage that.

We have an excellent resource, so let us build on it and promote it. We need to steadily build up the number of visitors to help the economy of that part of south Down and help everyone enjoy the rich experience of our heritage and our beautiful landscape.

Mr Wells: I support the Member for South Down Mr McCallister in his comments about the Brontë homeland drive. I am glad that he has managed to attract no fewer than eight MLAs to the debate, including you, Mr Deputy

Speaker. I have the unenviable record of having attracted the smallest number to any debate at Stormont ever. Present in the Chamber on the late evening of my last Adjournment debate on the Ballynahinch bypass were the Speaker, the Minister, who was Mr Robinson —

Mr McCallister: I hope that this debate is rather more successful than the one on the Ballynahinch bypass. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wells: Yes, indeed.

Present were the Minister, the Speaker, P J Bradley and me. I had to write a press release for the 'Down Recorder' and the 'Mourne Observer' but, as only four people had been present, I did not know what I was going to write. I then thought up what I thought was a very good headline: Mr Wells speaking to a hushed Assembly. That reflected the tiny numbers that were present.

Mr McCallister is absolutely right: the world does not end at Carryduff. We in south Down and parts further away from the centre of Northern Ireland's population face the problem mentality that, once you get past Carryduff and head towards Ballynahinch, things change and all civilisation ends. That is not the case. The Brontë homeland drive is one of the hidden gems of Northern Ireland's tourist potential. We are fortunate that a parish church became vacant. It has been sympathetically converted into the Brontë interpretive centre, where people can go to enjoy and read about the great contribution that the three sisters made to the literary heritage of Britain and the United Kingdom.

There is an interesting parallel here. If you asked most people on the streets of London where the Titanic was built, they would say Southampton, and they would be totally wrong. If you asked most people where the Brontë sisters' literary inspiration came from, they would say Yorkshire, and they would be wrong. In fact, the sisters grew up and learnt so much of their writing skills in the middle of County Down. We need to sell that asset. Literally millions of people throughout the world are connoisseurs of Brontë literature, but we seem to do so little to market that wonderful potential.

There is also a clear and direct link between the Brontë homeland drive and the Mourne signature project. More could be done to market Brontë through the Mourne signature project. Members who know the geography of south Down will know that the two are linked. Some

of the large amount of resources that are quite rightly poured into the Mourne should spill over into Brontë. We could have a wonderful combination of the rugged scenery of the Mourne and the gentler, undulating drumlin country of the Brontë homeland drive and try to encourage people to go to both.

There is still so much to be done to propagate the east-west link. Far too much of the talk about tourism on the island of Ireland is "North/Southern". I note, for instance, that several SDLP Members are abroad in Dublin today and cannot be here to contribute to the debate. We need to reinforce the east-west links, because there is far more that links us, as a community, with our compatriots in Scotland, Wales and, particularly, northern England than with the more remote parts of the Irish Republic. I would like to see money put into some form of joint project. Why can the Minister not get together with our colleagues in Yorkshire and have some joint thing and encourage the thousands, if not millions, of people who regularly visit Brontë country in Yorkshire to move the few miles across the Channel to County Down, where they will be made extremely welcome?

People do not get the complete picture of what stimulated the Brontë family to become the leading authors that they were until they understand both the Yorkshire link and the Rathfriland link. Those folk are missing out, so the potential is absolutely enormous. Tourism is the world's largest industry. It is heavily dependent on manpower and requires a large number of employees. Tourism offers us a chance to get out of the recession through the increased employment opportunities that it brings. Therefore, why not take the Brontë country, which is one of our hidden gems, and market it to the hilt? We could be very pleasantly surprised by the way in which we could tap into the huge interest in the wonderful works of three incredible sisters who did so much to promote English literature.

3.45 pm

Ms Ruane: Bhuel, go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Mar Chomhalta Tionóil do thoghcheantar Dhún Theas, cuirim fáilte roimh an deis seo le plé a dhéanamh ar chur chun cinn Ionad Léirithe Cheantar Bronte. As an Assembly Member for South Down, I welcome the opportunity to discuss the promotion of the Brontë Homeland Interpretive Centre, and I

thank the Member for bringing the issue to the Floor today.

County Down is a beautiful part of Ireland. It is steeped in culture and history. The towns and villages of the Mourne are exciting destinations in their own right and are good bases for discovering the beautiful mountains of Mourne and our spectacular coastline. County Down is synonymous with music, poetry, dance and literature. Patrick Brontë, the father of Charlotte, Emily and Anne, was born into a County Down farming family on St Patrick's Day, 1777. Ireland is renowned all over the world for our literary talent and literary figures, such as Joyce, Beckett, Seamus Heaney, John McGahern and Maire McEntee, and the island of Ireland is also known for the Brontë sisters. I agree with the Members who said that we need to celebrate our literary giants.

It is fitting that we celebrate those amazing, strong women. It is good to see that there were so many women writers during that time. I would hazard a guess that they were quite feminist women and very creative. I also agree with the Members on the development of tourism, and I agree with Jim Wells that things do not stop at Carryduff. They do not, and, unfortunately, in the past, there was insufficient investment in south Down and in other areas outside Belfast. However, thankfully, we are starting to redress that imbalance.

Where I disagree with Jim Wells is that it is not just men who are involved in the tourist industry. There are many women in it as well. Tourism is very important for men and women. The tourist industry can be a key driver of job creation throughout south Down, in the Mourne and along our beautiful coastline. We need to maximise those outstanding assets, particularly in areas that have traditionally been neglected and ignored. We need to develop our accommodation sector. Anyone who works in the tourism sector understands the importance of spend, and the biggest part of spend is overnight spend. There is no point in just bussing tourists into south Down for the day to have a bite of lunch and then leave. That is no good. We need to ensure that they have overnight stays. For that to happen, we need to develop a proper tourism infrastructure, including B&Bs, hostels and hotel accommodation. When Newry and other parts of the North of Ireland got new hotels, it was the making of them.

The Brontë homeland is one of a number of unique assets that we have, and, if properly promoted, it can attract new visitors to the area. That requires a more coherent marketing strategy, integrated with other local attractions and events, which is properly resourced and funded by the Tourist Board and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Iarraim ar an Aire Fiontar, Trádála agus Infheistíochta straitéis aonair margaíochta turasóireachta a fhorbairt le ceantar dheisceart an Dúin agus na contaetha atá in aice leis ar an dá thaobh den teorainn a chur chun cinn. Ba choir go mbeadh ceantar Bronte, chomh maith leis na háiteanna eile mórspéise, ina ngnéithe tábhachtacha den straitéis seo.

I urge the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to develop a single tourism marketing strategy for the promotion of south Down and neighbouring counties north and south of the border. It is important that we develop our natural hinterlands, which are south of the border. There is a huge market for us south of the border, and it is a bit worrying when representatives from my constituency say that they do not want to develop the North/South aspect. We need to develop the North/South aspect and the British-Irish aspect. We want visitors from all parts of this island and from England, Scotland, Wales and further afield. What we need to do is to develop trails. Every year, thousands of people from all over the world come to Newgrange, and we need to ensure that their buses do not turn around at Newgrange and go back to hotels in Dublin. The Assembly must ensure that the Mourne area is opened up from Newgrange onwards by developing the cultural tourism potential of Newcastle, Ballynahinch and all the coastal towns such as Ardglass, Killough and Ballyhornan, in a way that befits the area's beautiful coastline. I urge the Minister to support that very good initiative. I thank the Member who brought the topic to the Assembly.

Mrs D Kelly: I am sure that the Minister, who is a Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, will be concerned to learn that the world ends at Carryduff. If South Down is in difficulties, God knows what will happen to Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

I am grateful to the Member for bringing the topic to the Chamber. Upper Bann has an interest in the establishment and promotion of the tourism trade connected to the Brontë homeland. I want

to place on record our gratitude to Banbridge District Council and, indeed, to Newry and Mourne District Council. They have taken the initiative and invested heavily over the years to establish the interpretive trail and to promote the Brontë homeland when there was absence of investment from elsewhere.

Few young girls and, I am sure, few young men who are students of English literature do not know the stories of 'Jane Eyre' and 'Wuthering Heights', among others. Those stories have had considerable impact on many of us who have gone on to enjoy reading. There is merit in making the story of the Brontës and, indeed, their novels more alive through linking up with the Minister of Education to promote visits to the interpretive centre and other locations through the curriculum.

The Member for South Down Ms Ruane is right to say that the Brontës were ahead of their time. In fact, I am beginning to think that she stole some of my lines about feminism. They were leaders in that regard. We are aware of other female authors who had to write under men's names because it was not the done thing for women to write, just as it is more difficult for women in many aspects of life today, such as politics. It is refreshing that the Minister is present for the debate, representing women in as a difficult a field as writing was many years ago.

Many Members have made valid points about tourism potential. That has been well articulated. I am sure that the Minister is au fait with all of that. There are examples of good practice elsewhere. Ms Ruane referred to James Joyce in particular. We are all aware of people who follow in the footsteps of Joyce's characters, hold celebratory dinners and even an American club that celebrates Joyce on a particular night of the year. Of course, if one looks east-west, one sees how Rabbin Burns's legacy is promoted in Scotland. Therefore, Northern Ireland could adopt lessons from elsewhere. Of course, love of literature could be promoted as a career option in creative industries, as well as for its tourism potential. That could be done through the school curriculum.

Other Members have referred to how well poets, authors, writers and artists in general have lit up difficult times and enriched ordinary people's lives. They include the poets of the enlightenment, such as AE Russell, who was born in Lurgan; the Brontës; the many Great

War poets, who wrote eloquently about the non-glamorous side of war and conflict; and our poet laureate Seamus Heaney. Therefore, there is much to be commended about seeking a career that will enable someone to fulfil their life's ambitions and to make some money while enriching other people's lives, which, at times, are difficult.

We hear much about doom and gloom and about many families' concerns about how they will pay their bills at the end of each week. They wonder what 20 October will bring with regard to cuts. It is right and proper that we not only invest in our literary talent but use it as a model for fulfilment across a wide range of industries and education. I join other Members in urging the Minister and the Tourist Board to step up a gear in relation to the promotion of the Brontë interpretative trail.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful for the opportunity to say a few words on this important subject. Much has already been said, so I will not repeat it. I thank John McCallister for securing the debate and bringing it to the Floor. Anything that advances the good things that come from any part of County Down, whether it is South Down, North Down or Strangford, will have my 100% support.

I must confess that I have not had the pleasure of visiting the Brontë interpretative centre, but I have no doubt that it is a first-class facility with the potential to contribute significantly to the economic development of that area in County Down. Northern Ireland has an abundance of interesting people and places, and today we acknowledge the contribution to society of the Brontë family. I am grateful to Library staff for presenting me with two or three pages of history on the family. I did not have that knowledge before, but I am equipped with it now.

It is only right and proper that our generation should promote the Brontë sisters and their family from the fair county of Down. I pay tribute to the local authorities. I understand that Banbridge District Council had the foresight to put the talents of the Brontë family on public display. As I understand it, the Brontë sisters were born in Yorkshire, but I could be wrong. They may have spent some time in County Down; I am not sure whether they did, but that can be clarified. I understand that their parents came from the tiny village of Drumballyrone. Let me get my head around that one, because, as

Members will know, I am an ardent supporter of the promotion and preservation of townland names. Drumballyroney is a new one to me. It is a beautiful name, and I am sure that there is, in fact, history connected to it, its meaning and its origin. The name of the homeland is interesting in itself.

Patrick Brontë was born in the townland of Drumballyroney, as was his mother before him. Their ancient homes and haunts are part of the homeland tour, which nestles in the foot of the Mournes. The Brontë homeland trust has done a wonderful job on the upkeep of the sites. I commend everyone involved in the Brontë promotion and wish them every success.

The Minister is not a County Down woman; she is a Fermanagh woman. I will promote County Down from one end to the other. There are excellent facilities from Bangor, through Ards to south Down and, I must say, Mr Wells, beyond Carryduff. County Down is a wonderful county with many attractions. One that springs to mind is the Betsy Gray story, which should be told. It starts halfway between Bangor and Newtownards. It is a wonderful story that is connected to the rebellion of 1978, I think it was, and all that went on there. Some people say that it is only a story, but it is worth pursuing. In my role as an Ards borough councillor, I have tried on numerous occasions to join with North Down Borough Council to get that story on to the map, but it is not there yet. I plug that to the Minister in her role as Minister for tourism. Perhaps, somewhere along the line, it will come across her desk. It must be a joint initiative by the councils. Mr deputy mayor, I look forward, I hope, to visiting the Brontë homeland in the not too distant future.

Mr Deputy Speaker: This deputy mayor is not aware of any rebellion in 1978.

4.00 pm

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I congratulate the Member who secured the Adjournment debate. It is good that the Ulster Unionist Party is promoting strong feminist women, and they have done that today with the Brontë sisters. Of course, the tragedy of the Brontë sisters is that none of them lived past their mid-40s, all dying relatively young, but they left a huge mark on the literary scene in the British Isles. It is right that we mark the fact that their father came from this area.

I will briefly set the context for my comments. The new draft tourism strategy sets out our new targets for the tourism industry. At present, the average daily spend per visitor in Northern Ireland is just £37, compared with an average of £62.50 in the Republic of Ireland and £65 in England. Therefore, we need more product for people to spend their money on, which means giving more product of a different nature. Culturally, our products are sometimes lacking, and I welcome additional cultural products being brought forward. However, the tourism industry is not immune from the economic challenges that we face, and we must clearly identify our priorities for tourism. We have done that through the signature projects, which many Members have already mentioned. People become worried when their area of Northern Ireland is not neatly fitted into those signature projects, but south Down is fortunate, because it benefits from the St Patrick signature project and the Mournes signature project. We want to tie the Brontë homeland into those signature projects and the wider scene to maximise it for visitors.

I recognise Mr McCallister's point about the east-west connection. Patrick Brontë left south Down and went to Yorkshire, where he set up home with his family. I want to endorse that east-west link for cultural tourism, because there is potential for a strong arts and cultural link. I want to explore that; indeed, we have been exploring such links with other literary names.

Northern Ireland has produced or has connections with some of the world's greatest authors, playwrights and poets, and those connections give us a real opportunity to create and deliver unique tourism experiences for visitors who are interested in immersing themselves in the landscapes and places that influenced those artists. One of my favourite authors is C.S. Lewis, and the Mournes provided the inspiration for Narnia. We should certainly try to make more of that C.S. Lewis link. It is not simply an east Belfast link; it is also linked to the Mournes.

It was the farmland of County Down that Patrick Brontë — the father of Charlotte, Emily and Anne — left. He was born into a farming family there on 17 March — that is why he was called Patrick — in 1777. When people visit the Brontë homeland, they can follow the story of Patrick Brontë and his family through the buildings that survive, including the little church and school where he taught and preached. Patrick's birthplace at Alice McClory's — his mother's — cottage

at Emdale is still there at Brontë Road, as is Glascar school, where Patrick taught in the 1790s.

The interpretive centre is operated by Banbridge District Council, which promotes the centre through its website and promotional leaflets. The centre is also promoted through the Brontë homeland bus tour. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board promotes the Brontë Homeland Interpretive Centre as part of its 'Great Days Out for Groups' guide, an initiative designed to showcase a variety of days-out experiences available in Northern Ireland for group visits and the group market. That publication contains over 100 themed day-visit itineraries tailored to such groups. There are two such themed days in the brochure. The first is named "Saints and Scholars", which is the stronger of the two, if Members do not mind me saying so. I know that Mr McCallister mentioned the Brontë homeland and the home of discounted designer shopping. There is something not quite right about placing literary giants such as the Brontë sisters with the home of discounted shopping. However, each to its own, as they say.

Mr McCallister: I was trying to facilitate all ladies, not just literary ones but those who like always to look their best.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Thank you very much, Mr McCallister. However, the stronger proposition is the "Saints and Scholars" day, which gives an opportunity to discover connections to famous artists and authors and to learn about St Patrick.

Disappointingly, the Brontë Homeland Interpretive Centre has had only 15 group visits so far this year, resulting in approximately 328 visitors. I would certainly like the Tourist Board to work closely with Banbridge Tourist Information Centre and Banbridge District Council to see whether we can do more to attract visitors. The centre is, of course, listed on websites and in other guides.

I want to mention a forthcoming event, not just because it is in my constituency. As part of a programme in support of our literary heritage, the Tourist Board is in discussions on the development of the Enniskillen international Beckett festival. Samuel Beckett attended school in Enniskillen, and that will be the world's first annual festival devoted to the work of Samuel Beckett and a celebration of his life as a young man. The literary programme at Enniskillen, which starts in July 2012, will

extend into the whole of Northern Ireland. We are thinking of a literary trail starting in Fermanagh with Wilde and Beckett, moving into Down and Brontë and probably up to Londonderry and Seamus Heaney. New and innovative thought is being given to how we can tie all those links together. That is the way to do it, rather than discount designer shopping, although I may be proved wrong. However, we should explore the importance of our literary heritage in delivering a unique tourism experience in Northern Ireland, and the east-west link should be part of that.

Adjourned at 4.08 pm.



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