

Official Report (Hansard)

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 19 October 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: I want to say something about last Tuesday's proceedings, but, unfortunately, Mr Bell is not in the Chamber to be dealt with this morning.

Mr Bell is now in the Chamber. I raised a number of issues yesterday concerning the type of debate that took place in the Chamber and the type of debate that should take place in the Chamber, and I must say that the debate that I read in last Tuesday's Hansard report fell far short of what I expect from debates in the Chamber. As I said yesterday, I understand that debates can raise emotions in the House, and, on occasions, Members may say things that they should not say. However, on occasions, Members know exactly what they are going to say, and they end up insulting other Members. I would like Mr Bell to address that issue here this morning.

I often tell Members that the Speaker has a difficult enough job, but I must keep discipline in the House to protect its integrity, and I intend to do that while I sit here as Speaker.

Mr Bell: Mr Speaker, in the spirit of equality, I think that we had a genuinely rambunctious debate, and we had Dolores Kelly calling for the Minister of the Environment to be locked up. I am happy enough to withdraw any remarks that I made that could be perceived as offensive, and, in that spirit of equality, I ask for Dolores Kelly to withdraw her remark that the Minister of the Environment should be locked up.

Mr Speaker: Let me clarify the first issue first: Mr Bell, you are withdrawing whatever remarks that you made in the House.

As regards Dolores Kelly's remark, I spoke yesterday to Mr Poots, who came to see me. Certainly, he is very strong on the issue. My position is clear: I can deal only with what is

in the Official Report. Members know that. I have no doubt whatsoever that other Members may have heard Mrs Kelly's comment. However, it was certainly neither heard by the person who was in the Chair, nor was it recorded by Hansard. As I said to Mr Poots yesterday when he came to see me, had he raised the matter at the time, I have no doubt whatsoever that the comment would have been recorded.

I say to the House, as I do continually, that it gives me no pleasure to have to deal with such issues. I have to say that: it gives me no pleasure whatsoever. At the end of the day, I must deal with the issues as I see them, irrespective of other concerns. I hope that that serves as a warning to the whole House. Let us have some dignity in the House. Let us not end up insulting other Members. That is not what the House is about.

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I, on behalf of the DUP, fully accept your rulings in the cases of both Mr Bell and Mrs Kelly. Therefore, the party does not seek that you take any further action on those matters. However, it believes that Mrs Kelly should reflect on what she does from now on.

Mr Speaker: I hear what the Member is saying. I hope that all Members reflect on what they say in the House. Sometimes, a Member makes a comment from a sedentary position and believes that it is neither recorded nor caught by the person who is in the Chair. I assure Members that, when I am in the Chair, if I catch any comment that a Member has made from a sedentary position, I will deal with it there and then. If any Member feels that something has been said that should not have been, they should rise to their feet immediately and point it out to the person who is in the Chair. That is how we deal with issues. Now, let us move on.

Private Members' Business

Enforcement of EU Animal Welfare Legislation

Mr Speaker: The first item of business is the motion on the enforcement of EU animal welfare legislation. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Elliott: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern that EU animal welfare legislation, introducing a ban on the use of conventional cages for laying hens from 1 January 2012, may not be enforced equally across all EU member states; further notes that there is a danger that this will place Northern Ireland producers, who meet the highest EU agreed welfare standards, at a competitive disadvantage; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make representations to her counterparts in Westminster and Brussels in relation to this issue.

Mr Speaker, I am sure that the motion will not create all those internal emotions that you just referred to. Hopefully, you will not have to draw anybody's attention, either today or at a later stage, to the remarks that they make in the debate. Nonetheless, the motion is hugely important. It is vital to the poultry producers of Northern Ireland, and I am pleased to bring it forward on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. It was tabled in support of the local egg industry in the hope that a collective voice can be brought forth from the House today.

The poultry sector makes a hugely important contribution to the Northern Ireland economy and, indeed, to that across the United Kingdom. It is estimated that the industry generates more than £400 million in revenue each year and provides work for 4,500 people. The House should not overlook that. The growth of Northern Ireland's egg industry is a success story, with local processors pursuing new markets locally and in other parts of the UK, Ireland and throughout Europe. The Assembly must do

everything possible to ensure that the sector's steady growth continues.

In just over one year's time, it is intended that changes that were announced 10 years ago, which seek to introduce a ban on the use of conventional cages for laying hens and became domestic legislation in 2003, will come into force in the European Union. I, like many others in the industry, am concerned that the ban will not be enforced equally throughout all European Union member states. As a result, there is a very real danger that the ban will place local producers at a competitive disadvantage. It is vital that we speak up now to afford the greatest protection to local producers and processors.

As Members know, there is an EU requirement on all egg producers to use alternative or enriched cage production systems by 1 January 2012. I am aware that British egg producers have invested heavily in the infrastructure that is needed to comply with the ban. I am encouraged that many have already made the necessary changes, and I pay tribute to our local producers for leading the way in complying with the ban. Denmark, Holland and Germany, as well as the rest of the United Kingdom, have led the charge in spending significant sums to upgrade their production systems. It would be counterproductive if the Commission were to grant a derogation to some countries in the European Union to extend the deadline and so allow member states that have failed to comply with the legislation more time to do so. That would put many member state producers who have complied at a competitive disadvantage.

My party colleague Jim Nicholson MEP has been campaigning for some time to ensure that the ban takes place in a uniform manner across the European Union and that it does not allow any extensions. He recently warned the European Commission that it must stick to its word and ensure a level playing field for the entire egg industry. Jim Nicholson also recently highlighted that the three main culprits could be Spain, Portugal and Poland. In fact, the Polish Government tried to extend their deadline to comply with the new regulations until January 2017. The Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, John Dalli, recently wrote to Jim Nicholson assuring him that he would resist pressure from those member states that are not sufficiently prepared for the ban and which will likely push for a derogation to the January 2012 deadline. However, it is critical that we back

up the assurance that we have received with a strong voice to ensure that there is no rollback in that position.

In recent times, it has been unfortunate that the Agriculture Minister has not shown sufficient leadership in her Department when handling matters emanating from Europe. I hope that the Department will alter its course and engage more effectively on this issue with Europe. I hope also that the Minister will raise the matter with her counterparts throughout the rest of the United Kingdom so that we best serve our local producers and processors.

I will speak to the amendment. I am aware that poultry producers in the Republic of Ireland have received €16 million towards the cost of conversion, and that will help to offset the cost of complying with the directive. Many producers across Northern Ireland will look with envy at what the Irish Government have done in providing the egg industry in the Republic of Ireland with extra funding under the Irish rural development programme to make the required changes to enriched cages. Egg producers in Northern Ireland naturally fear that government grants for their counterparts across the border in the Irish Republic could put them at a disadvantage, not to mention the disadvantage that they will face if derogation is permitted for member states that have not sufficiently pursued conversion.

However, the Republic of Ireland has been able to do that because of the solid rural development deal that the Irish Government successfully negotiated in 2005. Sadly, in contrast, farmers across the United Kingdom, and specifically in Northern Ireland, have been left high and dry by the corresponding deal that Tony Blair negotiated for the UK. Although I appreciate that there may be funding pressures as a result of that, I call upon the Minister to make money available from her Department to assist poultry farmers to upgrade their systems in advance of the deadline.

We are supposed to be creating a level playing field across the European Union, with a concerted effort to safeguard animal welfare. It appears that producers in Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom may experience disadvantage as they have not received state aid to follow through with conversion and instead have met costs out of their own pockets and finances.

The Ulster Unionist Party is committed to positive engagement with the European institutions. Without a doubt, Northern Ireland, as a newly devolved region in Europe, needs to take an increased interest in, and a smarter approach to, the laws and policies that emanate from the European institutions.

10.45 am

The motion intends that we attend to policies and engage with Europe early to ensure the best policy outcome for all the people of Northern Ireland. We need a more vigorous and strategic approach to developing policy at European level. The Assembly requires better early-warning systems for the European policy/legislative development process to anticipate the effects of EU directives and regulations on Northern Ireland and its citizens. All Northern Ireland's elected representatives must provide the strongest voice in Europe.

I look forward to hearing Minister Gildernew's remarks on the debate, and I am sure that other parties in the House have similarly spoken with representatives from the egg industry. The Ulster Unionist Party is keen to publicise the matter in the Assembly and with other representatives to ensure that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development makes representations to her counterparts in Westminster and Brussels.

Mr Moutray: I beg to move the following amendment: At end insert

“; and further calls on the Minister to make money available from her Department through the Farm Modernisation Scheme or another programme to assist poultry farmers to upgrade their systems in advance of the deadline.”

The egg industry in Northern Ireland, and, indeed, the UK, is a major strand of commerce that we do not want to see diminished in any way. Across the board, the concern is that banning conventional cages for laying hens might not be enforced equally across EU member states from 1 January 2010. That would disadvantage our egg industry, which has already incurred significant costs in meeting previous directives. Our amendment calls on the Minister and her Department to act.

The DUP has major concerns about the costs of the ban on conventional cages from 1 January 2010 and the fact that it will place a further financial burden on local producers. We do

not want producers priced out of the market. Therefore, it is imperative that the Minister make money available from her Department through the farm modernisation scheme or any other programme to assist the industry and the many who have still to upgrade their systems.

The capital cost of a new enriched colony unit is between £20 and £24 per bird, which could lead to a major capital spend for producers at a time when money is tight. In addition to the capital cost of establishing a new enriched colony unit, there is also an 8% increase in the cost of producing eggs in enriched cages compared to conventional cages. Those figures are alarming for the industry and for us as elected representatives who endeavour to support the industry and be its voice in the House. It goes without saying that, at this time of economic hardship, when many in the industry are struggling for survival, it is time that the Department take proactive action and make such funding available.

It is estimated that the poultry industry generates more than £400 million in revenue each year and provides work for some 4,500 people. There is no doubt that the poultry industry makes a huge contribution to the rural economy. Therefore it is vital that the Department do all in its power to assist in the implementation of the directive. As Mr Elliott has said, we need only look to our Irish counterparts who made funding available for their conversion. The Department here needs to send out a clear, unequivocal message to the industry to show clearly that the Government recognise the high cost of converting and the benefits of a modern, efficient, high-welfare industry.

Should the Department fail to make grants available, producers may not convert on time or may withdraw from the market, thereby forcing retailers, processors and wholesalers to source from abroad. The sector would struggle to recover from that, and it would force many out of the industry.

I challenge the Minister on a written answer that she gave seven months ago, on 12 March 2010, to Mr Elliott on her assessment of the impact of the 2012 welfare for laying hens directive on the poultry industry and what assistance her Department is offering those businesses that will be significantly affected by that directive.

The Minister's response was:

"I have looked widely at all options that would be available under the Rural Development Programme to support modernisation in the poultry sector. I would draw your attention to the funding that will be available to poultry producers under the Farm Modernisation Programme (FMP) Tranche 2. In order that Tranche 2 will provide a good funding opportunity for poultry producers, I have asked that the list of eligible items be enhanced so that it includes a range of items that together will create a system that will meet the needs of poultry producers. The items will include plant, machinery and equipment; and other items that could contribute to modernising production systems for poultry producers."

The fact is that most poultry houses are on low-lying land, and given the land classification that the Minister insisted on using in that tranche of funding, those low-lying farmers are discriminated against.

In addition to the funding issue, we have to highlight and explore the fact that we could be facing fines to the tune of £100 million for non-compliance with regulations, yet a number of European countries have blatantly indicated that they will not comply with this regulation. It will be interesting to see whether they, too, will be penalised in such a way. The directive will cause great distress to egg producers, because non-compliance by other EU states will enable them to produce eggs much more cheaply, thereby leading to our prices being undercut.

There is potential for the UK to be flooded with eggs from EU member states with lower welfare standards. Ultimately, we would be powerless to stop eggs from being imported from countries that had not adhered to this EU directive. That it will not be enforced across EU member states means that eggs will be produced more cheaply due to lower welfare standards. Ultimately, that will threaten the competitiveness and viability of UK poultry farmers, who have worked hard to implement the new regulations.

I, therefore, leave the amendment before you: assistance through such funding will go some way to help our local producers and to ensure that they can comply.

Mr P J Bradley: I support the motion and the amendment. The proposers of each are rightly concerned that the regulatory requirements of Council directive 1999/74/EC may not be enforced equally across all member states.

The motion goes on to express the fear that non-compliance elsewhere will place Northern Ireland egg producers at a competitive disadvantage.

The request in the motion for our Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make representations to her counterparts in Westminster and Brussels is a natural road to go down, as London is the headquarters of the member state and Brussels is where the major decisions are made.

Mr Elliott and Mr Moutray have highlighted the acute difficulty facing the Northern Ireland egg industry. They did so in the almost certain belief that not all EU member states will demonstrate a 100% level of commitment to the new regulations. It is easy to understand why they should feel so concerned. Our experience shows that some member states, particularly France, Spain and Portugal, abide with only those farming regulations, or elements of regulations, that best suit their needs.

I do not differ from the proposers' concerns about competitive disadvantage. Indeed, I want to elaborate on a point raised by both Mr Elliott and Mr Moutray. In June, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (DAFF) in the Republic introduced a poultry welfare scheme designed to facilitate egg producers in that jurisdiction and to allow them to comply with the new EU animal welfare standards, in particular the protection of laying hens.

The scheme in the South of Ireland will provide grant aid to the tune of 40% — let me repeat, 40% — to egg producers for the construction of new laying units, where the proposed investment will maintain the production capacity of any one holding. The grant aid payable will be reduced if the new unit proposals vary in any way from current production levels. Therefore, increasing or reducing capacity will have the effect of reducing the level of grant aid payable. The amount of grant aid on offer in the Republic will be determined by the level of investment.

The minimum amount of investment that is eligible for grant aid under the scheme is €10,000 for each holding. There is also a ceiling on expenditure, with the maximum amount of investment eligible for grant aid per holding under the scheme not exceeding €32 for each laying hen.

The threat presented by non-compliance in parts of Europe and the offer of 40% grant aid to egg producers down the road to assist them in modernising their poultry units so that they comply with Council directive 1999/74/EC is bound to create anxiety among egg producers in the Six Counties. I have no doubt that the Minister is fully au fait with the different schemes in the Republic that come under the headings of the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme (TAMS) and the poultry welfare scheme, to which I referred.

I look forward to the Minister's reply to the debate and to her telling us what she expects her agriculture counterparts in Westminster and Brussels to do. I also want to hear what she expects our three MEPs to do to assist our beleaguered egg producers. Can our 13 active MPs — or, for that matter, the five stay-at-home non-active MPs — assist in any way? What is the Minister prepared to do to meet her obligations to the poultry farmers of Northern Ireland? That is of key importance.

Finally, above all else, I want the Minister to tell us about her plans to counteract the monetary advantage given to the poultry farmers in the Republic by their Minister for Agriculture, Food and Fisheries, Mr Brendan Smith TD. Let me put Minister Smith's encouraging offer in more parochial terms: what kind of reaction does the Minister expect from the egg producers of County Armagh, County Tyrone and County Fermanagh when they look despondently across the hedge into County Monaghan at new 40% grant aid funded poultry units being built on neighbouring farms?

Mr Lunn: I support the motion and hope that the Minister will take on board the fears that the farming community has expressed on the matter and convey its concerns to her counterparts in Brussels.

I intend to support the amendment, but I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to it. She might be able to explain from where the money might come. I do not know enough about the farm modernisation programme to comment on it. I am not from a farming background, although I have a little experience of egg laying and broiler houses from my previous work in the insurance industry. Having seen the conditions in which laying hens have been kept over the years, I welcome, from an animal welfare perspective, the new regulations that

have been introduced by Europe. If such an intensive operation is necessary — in this day and age, it is — we should do all that we can, within reason, to ensure that our hens are kept in humane conditions. The new cage sizes and the option of non-cage systems are, therefore, a welcome advance. It is good to see that Northern Ireland and GB farmers are embracing the change and are doing their very best to comply in time for the deadline.

The motion states the concern that the regulation might not be enforced equally across EU member states, and that could place our producers at a disadvantage in the market. If other countries are given a concession and are allowed to continue to produce and sell eggs from unenriched cage conditions, that is exactly what will happen. Frankly, in European terms, it would not be for the first time.

The noises that are coming from Europe are not helpful. The Belgian Minister with responsibility for agriculture is openly making the case for states that have “tried hard” — whatever that means — to implement the directive to be given a concession and allowed more time without being penalised. Poland has made a formal application for an extension of five years, which has at least been rejected for now. Given the progress made by the Poles to date — they have managed to get 100 units compliant out of around 600 — I wonder as to the extent of concession that they would need. It does not sound as though five years would be enough. Surely the important thing is that Europe hold the line on such matters and not give way to the demands of individual countries, unless those demands are absolutely justified.

In this case, the directive originally dates from July 1999 and became effective in 2003, with a final compliance deadline of 2012. Little as I know about farming matters, I would have thought a nine-year lead-in period probably to be sufficient.

11.00 am

I am not involved in agricultural matters, as I have said, but it seems that Europe's record in these matters is not good and that the concerns expressed in the motion are well-founded. My impression is that EU authorities have a track record of giving in to pressure from continental farmers. Mr Elliott mentioned that the Spanish and Portuguese, along with the Poles, may pose problems in this case, but no one has

mentioned the French. At the moment, they are rioting over their pension age. I wonder whether we will see chicken riots in the Avenue des Champs-Élysées. I have a vision of 1 million chickens being let loose. We will see.

It is not reasonable that our farmers, who will comply, should be placed at a disadvantage to those who do not. Europe has been quick enough in the past to threaten the UK and to fine us in matters of farm-field mapping, and threats have been made recently over the nitrates directive. I hope that it will be equally diligent in its dealings with other EU countries for once. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

The Alliance Party supports the motion and the amendment.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Simpson Gibson, I remind the House that maiden speeches are heard in silence and without interruption.

Mr Gibson: The last time that I spoke in this Chamber was 25 years ago. On that occasion, I was to the left of the Minister, at least as regards the position of my seat; I am not sure about the politics.

The egg industry is worth some £400 million, and it employs some 2,500 people. Therefore, it is timely that the matter is brought to the attention of the Assembly, and it is important that the Assembly express itself on the issue.

From my contact with farmers involved in the egg industry, I know that the sector is currently enduring great uncertainty. As a result of that, farmers are very nervous about their future. Historically, most farms in the Province engaged in a mixed enterprise. In a way, that protected them from the vagaries of the marketplace. If one commodity was down in value, another was up, and, therefore, the situation tended to even itself out. However, in recent decades, there has been a trend towards specialisation, which brought with it benefits but also greater vulnerability to market forces. That is the position that the egg industry and other parts of intensive agriculture find themselves in today.

The intensive sector, which includes broiler and pig production, is an important part of our agricultural industry. One of the reasons for its importance is that many of those farms are small in acreage and do not have the opportunity for grass-based or arable agriculture. Their

viability depends on the intensive sector. If that sector goes down, those farms will go down with it. It is, therefore, vitally important.

The industry in the Province is not complaining about upgrading its facilities or measures to improve the welfare of its stock. Indeed, farmers have an old maxim: if you are good to stock, stock will be good to you. That is not the problem. The industry is worried about the evolution of a situation in Europe that will create an uneven playing field. That is exactly what will happen after January 2012, if a derogation is offered to several of the European countries that are lagging behind in upgrading their facilities. If that happens, and I fear that it will, farmers who have invested in the new enriched cages will be at an immediate disadvantage because, obviously, the costings that they work on will be considerably different.

That would be a travesty of justice for those who have made the effort and invested, not just in the new cages, but in new housing. Those who have made that investment are entitled to reap the rewards of it. It may be that the only way to bring that about is to brand or code the eggs, if possible, in order to market them in a way that will attract a premium price in the marketplace. Alongside that, a ban on the trading of eggs between member states could be considered, although I suspect that the law underpinning the common market may rule that out.

This is an important industry, especially for those whose agricultural business is based on smallholdings.

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

Mr Gibson: Let the message go out loud and clear that these producers have the full support of the Assembly.

Mr Armstrong: I support the motion and the amendment. One weakness of European legislation is that, although it is often passed with the best intentions, it can have unintentional and unfair consequences. It only works when common laws and standards are properly and consistently enforced throughout the area in which they are supposed to apply.

Some time ago, I was approached by representatives of egg producers in Northern Ireland who were concerned that the standards of food safety and animal welfare being adhered

to in the United Kingdom were in advance of those being enforced in the rest of the EU. In particular, there was concern that, although all British Lion egg producers have committed themselves to moving their caged hens from conventional cages to the more welfare-friendly enriched egg cages from 1 January 2012, it is well known that some other EU member states are highly unlikely to be able to meet the deadline. Some are actively seeking extensions to it.

It is absolutely outrageous that egg producers in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, Denmark, Holland and Germany, who have obeyed the rules and spent a great deal of money to comply with the EU regulations, should be disadvantaged by having their profitability weakened and jobs put at risk. This is exactly the sort of case that creates criticism and ill-feeling towards Europe and EU regulations. It is particularly galling that we are asking our Agriculture Minister to intervene and demand that the EU enforces its directives at a time when Northern Ireland is facing massive fines from the European Commission over farm payments because of inaccurate maps.

All we are asking for is consistency of approach. Regulations should apply and be enforced across the entire EU. If a blind eye is to be turned to some other country's inability to meet standards over egg production, farmers in Northern Ireland will quite rightly ask why the same cannot apply to the mapping problems. In this particular instance, we have time to make representation to Europe in order to ensure that the laws and regulations that they have introduced are properly enforced. I urge our Minister to do just that.

Mr Bell: This should be a very exciting day for Northern Ireland. We are all looking to the United States of America to see what jobs and investment could come. However, when we look towards extra jobs, we should also look towards how we can secure and enhance the jobs that we already have, particularly in the poultry industry. If someone was to come along and announce that they had something new for Northern Ireland that would bring £400 million of investment and 4,500 jobs, we would, rightly, fall over ourselves, not only to get it, but to protect it. We have that here in Northern Ireland with our poultry industry, as the Chairman of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development so ably proposed.

It is worthwhile considering the depth and content of what my colleague from Strangford Simpson Gibson said; I pay tribute to his excellent maiden speech. He is known throughout Strangford as a gentleman of the foremost Christian integrity. We are delighted to have him here and delighted that he made such a robust contribution about an industry that he knows like the back of his hand.

The first issue with which we have to deal is that of a level playing field. I have been very sceptical of the European Union; its history in creating a level playing field is ignominious, right back to the days of lamb and France and everything else. We do not need to go over its history piecemeal. If derogations are given, it will appear, to paraphrase Orwell, that all farmers are equal, but some farmers in Europe in the poultry industry are more equal than our farmers. That is simply not fair.

The third issue is gold-plating. Some of us raised that in a meeting with Sir Kim Darroch in Brussels because several MEPs said that although 14 pages were added to the European directive when it went to London, only four pages were added when it went to Paris or Madrid or wherever else. Gold-plating is recognised as a problem. It was brought directly to the attention — I did it myself — of Sir Kim Darroch, and it is understood. We are told that getting our additional pages to the regulation right will prevent further fines down the line, but any examination of the evidence shows that that has not always been the case.

We all want to defend our poultry industry, and I welcome the number of Members here, although some Members who were on the radio this morning calling for extra hours in the Assembly are not here to defend the poultry industry. Is it fair for our poultry industry to take an increase of 8% if that is not applied equally across the field? Some small holdings and family units in which sons and daughters work are completely reliant on the regulation. If we misfire on this one and derogations are given, those small holdings will become unviable, and not just for today or tomorrow, because we will never regain the industry that we have now. That is why it is vital to bring to this debate full and unequivocal support for the poultry industry, as is evidenced through the amendment.

I know that it is difficult in any financial circumstances for the Minister to see what can

be done; however, we want a response to assist the poultry industry and a solution to what is an obvious problem.

Mr Savage: I am delighted to speak in today's debate and to support the egg industry here in Northern Ireland. Flowing from the debate, it is imperative that we provide one voice in full and absolute support of an industry that employs many thousands of people.

The debate is as timely as it is important. There remains time to influence the European Commission, alongside colleagues from England, Scotland and Wales, to ensure that derogation is not permitted. My understanding is that the UK, along with Germany and Denmark, has adhered to the letter of the law in a timely fashion.

11.15 am

We appear more than ready for the ban on keeping laying hens in conventional cages. It is regrettable that the approach of other countries such as Poland and Spain has been slack and that, apparently, they will not meet the 2012 deadline. I put my dissatisfaction with that position on the record. Those countries have had the opportunities to come into line and to adhere to the 2012 ban. To allow an uneven playing field to exist because some countries have not adopted as proactive an approach as they should have is not how the European Union should operate. We can be sure that a Northern Ireland farmer who was slow to implement a European directive would have the book thrown at him from every direction and would have points deducted from his single farm payment. That is why we in Northern Ireland must have a level playing field.

Our egg industry is a growing sector, and, in this time of economic hardship, we must act to support it and to secure, as I said, a level playing field for the sale of the industry's produce. It is crucial that the House unite in support of the local egg industry. We have the highest standards of food quality in Europe, far exceeding any of the regulations set down by Brussels. We must ensure that eggs imported from continental Europe adhere to the same high standards to which our local poultry sector adheres. We need to act now to support our local industry.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments and to her guaranteeing that she

will work with her colleagues in Westminster, Brussels and further afield in lobbying against the introduction of any derogation. Mr Speaker, everybody in the House must support the motion. We have an industry of which we are proud. It is one that has withstood every test presented by European legislation. It is an important industry, and to allow other countries to bring produce into Northern Ireland without meeting the regulations that our farmers have to adhere to would be very disheartening. I know that our Minister will do all in her power to protect the industry in Northern Ireland.

To have a hen produce eggs in a completely healthy environment is effective for both sides involved in the industry. The farmer achieves productivity and the industry meets all the legislation laid down. Our farmers have nothing to hide. However, the one thing that we come up against from time to time is Europe's red tape. If we get a level playing field, we can compete with any country in the world. We urge the Minister to ensure that we have that level playing field.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I was late arriving because I was in Committee, and it is hard to be in two places at once. I speak in support of the motion and the amendment. There are huge concerns that, when 2012 comes around, there may not be a level playing field in dealing with all the issues; that other EU countries will not be ready to implement the resolutions; and that that will militate against egg production here at home.

My dialogue with the Minister and Committee members assures me that the Department is very conscious of the issues and the potential disadvantage to the industry here, and will undertake to lobby Westminster and Brussels to ensure that our industry is not adversely affected. However, the difficulty caused by EU legislation being implemented by some states and delayed by others means that we very much depend on the good work and the goodwill of the Department in standing up for the industry here at home.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank Tom Elliott, Billy Armstrong, George Savage and John McCallister for tabling the motion, which raises the important issue of the ban on the use of conventional cages for laying hens from 1 January 2012, and I welcome the opportunity

to debate the issue in the Chamber. I also thank William Irwin and Stephen Moutray for tabling the amendment, which I will come to later.

I shall begin by explaining the background to the EU-wide ban on conventional battery cages for laying hens. Council Directive 1999/74/EC, which was made in 1999, lays down standards for the welfare of laying hens. The directive bans the keeping of hens in unenriched — that is, conventional or, as they are usually known, battery cages — from 1 January 2012. Furthermore, the directive made it illegal to bring such cages into use from January 2003, and, as far back as 2002, the legislation was transposed into domestic legislation with the Welfare of Farmed Animals (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2002.

The ban on conventional cages was introduced as a result of scientific evidence that the welfare of hens kept in conventional battery cages is inadequate, and the subsequent Commission report, which was adopted in January 2008, concluded:

“There is substantial evidence that banning the use of conventional battery cages for laying hens could considerably improve the health and welfare of these birds.”

Therefore, it upheld the reasons for the ban.

In 2008, the Commission made it clear that the deadline for the ban would remain and that producers should start to phase out the use of conventional battery cages as soon as possible in order to meet it. In separate legislation, the EC Egg Marketing Standards Regulations, the marketing of class A eggs produced in conventional battery cages in the EU is effectively prohibited from 1 January 2012. Although the egg industry across the EU has been aware of the directive for many years, concerns were raised recently that egg producers in a number of member states will not be in a position to convert to enriched or alternative systems by the deadline. Strict enforcement of the directive could, therefore, lead to a shortage of eggs, which has led many to believe that the directive will not be universally adhered to from January 2012.

On 30 August 2010, the poultry and egg industry presented a report to the European Parliament's Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development that included an estimate from the representative body in the EU for egg packers,

traders and processors that 30% of the EU layer flock will still be in the traditional cage system by 1 January 2012. As we heard, most of the non-compliant producers are expected to be from a range of countries, including Spain, Italy, Poland and Hungary. The report also stated that a number of member states, including Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden, are already fully compliant.

I welcome the fact that some egg producers here have already taken the step to invest in alternative or enriched cage systems and are, therefore, compliant with the directive's requirements post-January 2012. Some 79% of producers here have fully or partly adopted alternative or enriched cage systems. Therefore, it is vital that the egg producers who have invested in alternative or enriched cage systems are protected from cheap, illegally produced eggs imported from other member states. I am conscious of growing pressure from consumers for a move to free-range and other alternative egg production systems, and, indeed, I am aware that some major British retailers do not stock eggs or egg products that are produced in cages. Therefore, I recognise the important steps that the local industry has taken in recent years to develop alternative systems, such as free-range, organic and barn, which now account for almost 40% of our current laying capacity.

The Commission has consistently stated its position that the directive's requirements will be law and that member states must comply with it. The Commission has reiterated that, in the event of non-compliance, it will be down to individual member states to ensure that compliance and infraction proceedings are undertaken. Therefore, I have been clear that producers must comply with the conventional cage ban from 1 January 2012. Under the Council directive, my Department is required to begin inspection and enforcement action, and it will pursue the normal enforcement process, beginning with education and informing producers, proceeding to warnings and, where necessary, prosecutions.

Those in the industry who are already, or expect to be, compliant are pressing DARD to ensure that implementation of the ban is effective. It is also important to note that action must also be taken under the egg marketing regulations to prevent the sale of eggs produced in conventional cages.

I am also pressing the EU Commission to ensure that our local producers who comply are not disadvantaged; that has been the tenor of this debate. When Croatia proposed its entry into the EU, it was suggested that that country may require derogation to comply with the 2012 cage ban. At the EU Commission's special committee on agriculture in April 2010, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) supported the French stance to oppose that request as it was unfair to other member states.

I am also aware that, as several Members mentioned, Poland made a plea to delay the enforcement of its ban for five years until 2017. However, the EU Commission rejected that request, having advised that it would be a major step backwards and would undermine EU law. At present, it is clear that the EU Commission is not contemplating extending the deadline of 1 January 2012. I have been lobbying hard to ensure that that is the case. On 8 March this year, I wrote to Jim Fitzpatrick MP, the then Minister of State for Food, Farming and Environment, to press DEFRA to work closely with the EU Commission on the issue. In that letter I said that I did not support the Polish proposal. The issue was then raised by Hilary Benn, the then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, when he held an introductory bilateral meeting in March with the EU Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, John Dalli. My officials have continued to press that issue with DEFRA.

The new DEFRA Minister of State, Jim Paice, wrote to EU Commissioner Dacian Cioloş on 16 September about concerns relating to possible non-compliance with the EU-wide ban on the keeping of laying hens in conventional cages from January 2012. In his letter to the commissioner, Minister Paice confirmed the commitment to comply with the deadline to have phased out the use of conventional cages as set out in the directive. He advised that the industry said that lion code subscribers will be ready for 1 January 2012 and that no conventional, cage-produced, eggs will be marketed as "lion" from that date. He recommended that additional measures be put in place to prevent market disturbance and urged the EU Commission to begin work on seeking a practical enforcement to manage the transition across Europe.

Minister Paice also recommended that further consideration be given to protecting those EU producers who are compliant and achieve the desired welfare improvements by the deadline. Proposals included a time-limited inter-community trade ban on eggs and egg products produced by hens housed in conventional cages so that those eggs and egg products can only be marketed in the member state of production; and an amendment to the EU egg marketing regulations to make traceability easier and to distinguish between eggs produced in enriched systems and those produced in conventional cages.

It is vital that if no extension is provided to the conventional cage ban, we protect our industry from potential competition from cheaper eggs imported from non-compliant member states. I continue to press DEFRA to secure action from the EU Commission and other member states on that issue, and I am confident that ministerial colleagues in the South and in England, Scotland and Wales support that approach. I will raise the issue with the EU Commission at the earliest opportunity to ensure that local egg producers are not disadvantaged by imports of illegally produced eggs from other member states. In addition, I will write to other member states to urge them to support effective measures to protect producers who have complied with the conventional cage ban.

In light of the amendment, I will now talk about funding to assist poultry farmers. I appreciate the difficulties facing the egg-laying sector and the poultry sector generally at this time. I am aware of the cost of converting to new systems of egg production, having had useful and constructive discussions with producers, industry representatives and MLAs in October 2009. Therefore I have looked widely at all the options available under the rural development programme (RDP) to support modernisation in the poultry sector.

I have examined whether it would be possible to provide funding under specific measures such as the EU meeting standards measures to help egg producers to invest in the conversion to enriched cages. However, the maximum funding permitted under the meeting standards measures would be no more than 3% of the total investment needed. As that would be such a small proportion of the total investment, it would not be possible to get a business case to succeed.

Furthermore, one of the main problems in attempting to provide funding is that it would not be possible to provide it retrospectively to those egg producers who have already made the necessary changes. That would be unfair to those who have already secured finance and are therefore carrying additional overheads that might place them at a competitive and commercial disadvantage.

However, I have ensured that funding will be available to poultry producers under tranche two of the FMP, and, last week, I announced the reopening of the programme. Tranche two of the farm modernisation programme will provide an opportunity for poultry producers to secure funding up to a maximum payment of £4,000 per applicant. The list of eligible items has been extended to include a range of items that could contribute to modernising production systems for poultry producers, including egg packers, egg-tray stackers, ventilation fans and vermin-proof bulk feed bins.

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

11.30 am

Funding in the region of £1 million was made available to the egg industry here through the processing and marketing grant scheme, and two local egg packers benefited from that scheme. The farm nutrient management scheme also assisted poultry farmers by providing funding to help them to comply with the nitrates directive. As we are all aware, resources are extremely limited at this time, and the focusing of funding on one sector will restrict the resources that are available to other sectors.

As many Members pointed out, I am aware that DAFF provides funding of €16 million to its egg-layer sector. That funding came from ending its installation aid scheme and early retirement scheme. The additional funding was announced as part of a package that arose from the CAP health check agreement, which included additional funding for the South through increased compulsory modulation rates. I would have loved to have been able to provide support of that nature, but that option was not open to me because similar additional funding is not available to the North or to Britain. Scotland, England and Wales do not provide funding to their poultry sector for conversion to enriched cages, and, unfortunately, I am in the same position. That is probably down to the poor deal that Britain negotiated for the rural development

programme in comparison with that in the South. Tom Elliott said that he looks with envy across the hedge; there is a wee reality check in that statement.

I am aware that some egg producers have concerns about the availability of bank lending to support investment for the conversion to enriched cages. I met local banks last year to discuss the impact of the credit crunch on rural businesses and farming and asked them to look sympathetically at proposals where business plans are viable and where Government support has been agreed. I also encouraged farmers to discuss financial concerns with their bankers at the earliest opportunity and to explore all available options.

My Veterinary Service officials provided egg producers with information about the detail of the laying hens directive, and it is essential that egg producers here are fully aware of the requirements of the European directive at this time, as, over the coming months, producers will decide whether to convert their cage systems. I understand that the Commission has announced that it will hold a multi-stakeholder meeting to discuss the state of play on implementation and the tools that are available to ensure the smooth phasing-out of conventional cages by the deadline. That meeting is expected to take place in January 2011 in Brussels. Representatives from our local industry will be invited to attend, and I encourage them to become involved to ensure that local voices are heard.

I am also aware that some producers are considering whether to convert their cage systems and that some are in the process of planning for conversion. I advise producers who still use conventional or battery cage systems that they need to decide soon whether to convert or replace their existing systems. The longer that producers delay their decision, the shorter the time frame for them to plan and to make the necessary changes. My officials are available to provide egg producers here with information about the directive and how it might affect their business as they decide whether to convert to enriched systems.

I hope that the points that I covered in my response give Members some assurance about the positive steps that I took within the available options. I assure the House that, since coming into office, I have been active in helping

Brussels to understand the challenges to our industry here. A full-time member of DARD staff is located in Brussels on a permanent basis; mine is the only Department that has such a position. We keep a close eye on all areas of agriculture and fish policy development. I have requested proposals from my permanent secretary about how the Department's operation in Brussels could be further improved, and we work closely with the South, which has made an art form of engagement with Brussels, and look at what it has done.

I am very keen that our industry should not be disadvantaged in any way, that there should be no competitive disadvantage and that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, your time is up.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Gabh mo leithscéal. I also support the amendment, and I am sorry that I was not able to allude to it in my remarks.

Mr Irwin: This is an important issue for egg producers across Northern Ireland, many of whom have invested heavily in recent times in light of the impending ban on conventional cages. A number of Members, including Mr Elliott, Mr Gibson and Mr Moutray, pointed out that the industry generates £400 million a year for the economy and employs some 4,500 people.

Once again, with its ever-growing reach and ever-meddling hand, Europe is interfering in our production methods when no such interference is required. Food production in the United Kingdom is of the highest standard across all sectors, yet EU law after EU law appears only to want to put a brake on any progress that has been made in the marketplace. At the same time, through EU mismanagement, it appears that such laws aim to reward countries with poorer production standards. We have seen that in many sectors, and, at this time, egg producers are the focus of attention. Indeed, Mr Moutray pointed out that the cost of production under the enriched cage system will add an extra 8% to the production cost.

Figures that were released recently show that, when the ban comes into force in 2012, around 83 million eggs that are produced across Europe will be deemed illegal as they will not have been laid in conditions that are satisfactory under the 2012 legislation. It is an indictment on the EU's planning for the ban that although the directive has been in

the pipeline for some 10 years, over a third of producers across the EU will not have complied. That is where I have a massive problem with EU directives and compliance across the EU. Those EU member states that plan ahead, such as, in this instance, the UK, are then punished and penalised by those that drag their heels. As a result, they have an unfair production-cost advantage.

Producers whom I have spoken to know only too well what will happen if the countries where little or no preparation has been made are allowed an extension. They will have an unfair advantage over UK producers and will undercut them severely. That is wrong in the extreme.

The cold fact is that, when people come to buy to eggs in supermarkets, I doubt that, when they hunt up and down the aisles for the box of eggs that is on their shopping list, they are looking for eggs that have come from a hen that has had more room to move around than one that has been cramped. That is the reality of the situation, and it presents a huge problem for our sector. It will be impossible to tell an egg that has been laid in an enriched environment from a conventionally laid one unless the EU permits a marking system to tell them apart.

I am also aware of those in the industry here who have still to finalise their changeover from producing conventional eggs. That has, of course, been a challenge of great expense. Therefore, I appeal to the Minister to permit the use of funds to help producers to meet those requirements. A number of Members, including Mr Gibson, Mr Bell and Mr Doherty, expressed concerns about there not being a level playing field, and that is a concern for many of us.

At a meeting last year with industry representatives, the Minister referred to the processing and marketing grant scheme as a way of accessing funds. However, it remains questionable whether that scheme was specific enough to allow significant assistance. Earlier, the Minister said that the farm modernisation scheme made funding available to egg producers. As a farmer, I doubt that, under the new rules for the application process, many of those producers will be able to avail themselves of any funding. Indeed, those producers have no option but to convert their cages, but I have little doubt that they stand little chance of receiving funding from anyone here. Therefore, I disagree with the Minister on that point.

It boils down to the fact that the egg industry needs to be supported more substantially through this transitional period. I urge the Minister to devise a scheme that is easily accessible to the industry in the shorter term to help to meet the 2012 deadline.

I also urge the Minister, along with her colleagues in DEFRA and our MEPs, to redouble her efforts in order to ensure that our producers are not left at a serious disadvantage in the marketplace, given that there will be an 8% increase in the cost of production under the enriched scheme.

I support the amendment.

Mr Kinahan: I am delighted at the level of engagement in the House on the issue. The Assembly must support the local industry and farmers, especially since they are leading the way on so many matters. We must ensure that they are not penalised; rather, they should be rewarded for their efforts. Producers and processors who have made large investments need a high degree of certainty that there will be a level playing field for them to be able to compete in Europe. We heard many Members say that today. The farming industries in Northern Ireland, across the UK and in other member states should not be penalised for pushing ahead with implementing the changes required by the directive when others have not done so.

Animal welfare is a core value for consumers and farmers alike. A growing market for animal welfare-friendly products clearly exists. The poultry sector makes an important contribution to the local rural economy in Northern Ireland and, more widely, across the United Kingdom. Indeed, the poultry sector, along with the wider agricultural industry, is an industry of public good, serving rural dwellers and those living in more urban areas. The spirit of the motion is to support local producers and processors and to encourage the Assembly to engage on European matters in a timelier manner than perhaps has been the case to date. As my colleague alluded to earlier, the Department's most recent calamity regarding the disallowance of single farm payments has not showered it in glory.

I am pleased that an amendment has been tabled to the motion. I now turn to the points raised by various Members. The main starting point for Tom Elliott, my colleague and party leader, was that we should have a collective

voice and speak in support of today's motion and amendment. Mr Elliott praised the industry for investing heavily and leading the way throughout Europe. He called on the Minister to show leadership with her counterparts in the UK and to ensure that we are not left struggling in Northern Ireland. He also wants her to engage with Europe — we heard that she is doing that — and to keep up the representations in Brussels.

Stephen Moutray, who moved the amendment, called on the Minister to be proactive in ensuring that funding is in place for our farmers, especially since Ireland has funding of a different type. Mr Moutray raised the fear that many farmers may withdraw from that market if it becomes too difficult for them.

P J Bradley supported the motion and the amendment. He pointed out that the Republic has a poultry welfare scheme, which gives it a greater strength over us. He also said that he was looking forward to hearing about what the Minister is doing, which I will go into later.

Trevor Lunn welcomed the welfare rules on humane conditions. However, he raised concerns over the fact that various European countries are not up to date in what they are trying to do and said that Europe must hold the line. He also said that the record in Europe was not good.

I congratulate Simpson Gibson on his maiden speech. It was clear and loud, and many of us could learn from that. I am always intrigued by those Members who can see their notes well enough when they are standing to be able to read them. I was, therefore, going to say that his view was a good, long-sighted one.

Mr McNarry: He is wearing glasses.

Mr Kinahan: I need glasses.

Mr Gibson mentioned that what is going on at the moment means that there may be an uneven playing field and that we must ensure that that is not the case.

My colleague Billy Armstrong said that we must ensure that those who have spent money are not disadvantaged, and he, too, raised concerns over the consistency of the EU's approach.

11.45 am

Jonathan Bell said that we must secure and enhance jobs, and he also referred to keeping

the playing field level. He showed concern that smallholdings would become unviable.

My colleague George Savage said that we had made ourselves more than ready here but that, in times of economic hardship, we must make sure that we support egg farmers. He acknowledged that the Minister was doing all that she could but said that we must make sure that the playing field is level. He also mentioned the mass of red tape that is thrown at us.

Pat Doherty also raised the matter of keeping the playing field level.

The Minister gave us useful details on the background to the rules and talked about how we must move towards enriched cage systems. She said that there was a move in the market towards free-range, organic and barn production. However, she said that, in 2012, 30% of producers would still be using the old cage system. The Minister outlined much of her efforts, in the UK and with her European counterparts, and where she is keeping the pressure on. For that, we are extremely grateful. She also outlined the difficulty with funding, highlighting and, sadly, criticising the deal that the British Government achieved, which is poor in relation to how the Irish had done. However, we welcome the various types of funding that she outlined. I hope that what William Irwin said will not be true and that some farmers will be able to get funding, whether that is from the farm management programme or the many other programmes that the Minister listed.

William Irwin spoke to the amendment and talked about the meddling hand of the EU. He said that he is concerned that what the legislation is really doing is adding 8% to costs and, possibly, making some 83 million eggs illegal. He raised concerns throughout about whether local egg producers would be able to get funding and called on the Minister to devise a scheme that would help them.

The Ulster Unionist Party stands by its motion and supports the amendment. We must make sure that egg producers here are treated equally and fairly. I leave the motion with the House.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern that EU animal welfare legislation, introducing a ban on the use of conventional cages for laying hens from 1 January 2012, may not be enforced equally across all EU member states; further notes that there is a danger that this will place Northern Ireland producers, who meet the highest EU agreed welfare standards, at a competitive disadvantage; calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make representations to her counterparts in Westminster and Brussels in relation to this issue; and further calls on the Minister to make money available from her Department through the farm modernisation scheme or another programme to assist poultry farmers to upgrade their systems in advance of the deadline.

Knife Crime

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we begin, I remind Members that they have a general duty to behave responsibly to ensure that nothing that they say may prejudice any future proceedings that may be taken in relation to these matters.

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

Mr Easton: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Justice to introduce tougher sentences for persons convicted of knife crime; and further calls on the Minister to bring forward a strategy to take knives off our streets in the wake of recent attacks and violence involving knives.

The motion addresses the growing problem of knife crime in our society. The most up-to-date statistics, for 2009-2010, show that knives and sharp instruments were used in 938 incidents in Northern Ireland, compared with the previous year, 2008-09, in which 908 serious incidents in Northern Ireland involved knives or sharp objects. That represents an increase of 30 incidents following the introduction of a series of measures in the wake of the horrific murder of Thomas Devlin off the Somerton Road in north Belfast in 2005.

The 15-year-old was stabbed to death a short distance from his home, and his parents campaigned for an increase in the punishment for knife crime, which led to a series of measures, including a knife amnesty in 2006, during which almost 900 knives were handed over to the authorities.

Following a consultation exercise by the Northern Ireland Office in 2006, tougher measures were introduced under the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008, which extended the maximum penalty for a range of offences relating to knives and weapons, including possession of, manufacturing and selling knives or offensive weapons. Under the Order, penalties were increased for offences relating to crossbows; the possession of a knife in a public place; the possession of a knife on school premises; the possession of an offensive weapon; the manufacture, sale and unlawful marketing of certain knives; and the sale of knives to persons

under 18 years of age. Prior to the legislation, 16-year-olds were permitted to purchase knives. Imprisonment for the possession of an illegal knife had carried a maximum sentence of six months, which was increased to 12 months under the 2008 Order. I believe that that should be increased further to 24 months.

Questions may be asked about what is and is not deemed to be an offensive or illegal weapon. A Swiss army knife, where the blade folds in, is legal, providing that the blade does not exceed 3 inches in length. However, when a Swiss army knife is used in an offensive or threatening manner, it is deemed an offensive weapon and is subject to a penalty.

Mr Bell: I thank the Member for North Down for giving way. Is it not vital to know and understand exactly which knives are illegal so that young people who go out for a night's entertainment and who carry a knife know the exact consequences of what they are doing? The illegality of each weapon should be clearly defined.

Mr Easton: I thank my colleague for his intervention. It is imperative for some sort of education to be introduced so that our young people, especially those of school age, know exactly which knives are illegal and which are not. The following knives are illegal: a flick knife, where the blade is hidden inside the handle and shoots out when a button is pressed; a butterfly knife, where the blade is hidden inside a handle that splits in two around it; and a disguised knife, where the blade is hidden inside something, such as a belt buckle or a fake mobile phone.

An offensive weapon is described in law as:

"any article made or adapted for use for causing injury to the person, or intended by the person having it with him for such use by him or by some other person."

The police have a range of stop and search powers for people whom they suspect of carrying knives or offensive weapons. They can stop and search a person or vehicle where they have reasonable grounds for suspecting that they will find any items relating to the offence of having an article with a blade or sharp point in a public place, including school premises.

It is an offence to sell a knife, axe or any other bladed or sharply pointed article to a person under the age of 18, and the offence carries a

maximum penalty of up to 12 months' imprisonment and/or a fine. It is illegal to market a knife in a way that indicates or suggests that it is suitable for combat or is otherwise likely to stimulate or encourage violent behaviour. Naming, describing, packaging or advertising a knife as suitable for combat is prohibited, and the maximum penalty for such an offence is up to six months' imprisonment and/or a fine of £5,000 on summary conviction, or four years' imprisonment on conviction or indictment.

Education and awareness is a policy of the Department of Justice and, to an extent, the Department of Education. When I was a young boy in first form, which was a long time ago, the police came in once a week to deliver an hour-long course on police studies. Such courses should be reintroduced into our schools, as they can lead to children respecting the police and understanding our laws. That would be a positive way forward, and the Minister might look at that in conjunction with the Department of Education.

Mr Spratt: Does the honourable Member agree that many knife crimes today take place in a domestic situation and that some of the most serious incidents, including murder, have taken place in a domestic situation? Such situations are very difficult for the PSNI to deal with, given that all our homes have domestic knives that are available to be used in such incidents.

Mr Easton: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree totally with what he said about those incidences of domestic violence that have involved knives. Regardless of whether knife crime takes the form of domestic violence or a young person carrying a knife on the street, we need sufficiently strong deterrents to stop it, if possible.

On the same date that the amnesty was announced four years ago, a public information campaign sponsored by the PSNI, the Northern Ireland Policing Board, the Department of Education and the Northern Ireland Office commenced. That campaign was aimed primarily at young people, and it challenged the culture of knife carrying. To get the message across, the campaign was used in the cinema, on the radio and in the outdoor media. I am sure that many of us remember the cartoon-type TV advert in which a group of young people are out at night, get into a confrontation with other youths and one of them ends up getting killed. An

educational package to tackle knife crime was also introduced in our schools, and it highlighted the dangers of carrying knives.

Although conviction rates for the offence of carrying an offensive weapon on school premises are low — there were only three such convictions between 2004 and 2006 — the victims of knife crime are usually young people, and they are the group that is most likely to carry offensive weapons. During the same period, four people were convicted for possessing, on school premises, an article with a blade or point. Such activity may be due to fashion trends or to the image of feeling safe, and we must tackle that.

Legislation is similar across the UK, and Northern Ireland has largely matched what has been done in England. However, the Metropolitan Police in London have been active in tackling knife crime through carrying out test-purchasing operations to identify retailers who sell knives to those under the legal age and by undertaking high-profile deterrent campaigns involving metal detectors and X-ray machines at bus stations, rail stations and other public places. Head teachers have the power to search a pupil if there are reasonable grounds for suspecting that the pupil has a knife or offensive weapon.

The Government in Scotland doubled the penalty for possession of a bladed article in a public place or school premises by raising the maximum imprisonment from six months to 12 months and the penalty for indictment from two years to four years. Anyone who is caught with an offensive weapon in Scotland will be arrested and kept in custody pending a court appearance. Prosecutors will oppose bail if a person has had one or more previous convictions involving an offensive weapon.

The Internet has opened doors in allowing people to get their hands on offensive weapons. Offensive weapons can be purchased with ease in many countries around the world. People gain access to those weapons while on holiday or via the post, and the UK Border Agency is responsible for intercepting and seizing a wide range of restricted goods.

Given that knife crime and convictions for the possession of a knife or offensive weapon are rising, and given that we are seeing no reduction in that figure, we must move to increase sentencing as a deterrent and run an

ongoing campaign that is dedicated to tackling knife crime. Our approach should involve another knife amnesty that is similar to that of 2006, as well as a series of TV adverts and school programmes. We should also perhaps look to the measures that were introduced in the crackdown in London. That involves metal detectors and X-ray machines. It may seem serious and a little over the top, but we must do everything that is in our power to take these weapons off our streets.

Knives pose a greater threat to society than guns. It is illegal to possess a gun without a licence, and it is legal to use a gun only in specific circumstances, namely within the confines of a registered club. Knives can kill and seriously injure. I appreciate that they are easy to get hold of, given that they have domestic use, but we must stamp down on the possession of knives, take them off our streets and thereby reduce their usage. I want a ban on replica knives, an increase in sentencing, a new knife-amnesty period, better education and awareness in our schools —

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

Mr Easton: — and a better counselling service for victims of knife crime. I urge Members to support the motion, and I look forward to the debate.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will speak in favour of the motion. Indeed, I have to say that I broadly agree with much of what the previous Member to speak outlined. We can all refer to particular examples of horrific knife attacks or stabbings in our own constituencies, and, unfortunately, as the statistics point out, such attacks are on the increase.

Any strategy that aims to take knives off the streets must look not only at strengthening legal deterrents but at the attitudes and subcultures that drive people, especially young people, to carry a knife in public.

Of course, as has already been said, knives are easily accessible. A person can get a kitchen knife from a drawer or go into a garage to get a Stanley knife from a toolbox. Such knives are easy to access and are deadly. Although less intimidating than combat knives and the like, they are equally lethal.

12.00 noon

The concealed knives that are being designed are another cause for concern, and we have seen pictures of them and heard stories about them through our work with the Policing Board. Some have been concealed in mobile phones, while others have been concealed in the top of boots. Such knives are designed to be lethal. It is equally important that we get those types of knives completely out of the community.

Some hold the view that carrying and using knives gives them some sort of status. The carrying of knives for protection is not something that we, as a society, can tolerate. The carrying of knives in schools has become a major problem in some countries. It is not a major problem here; nonetheless, it is important that we prevent such a culture from developing. I welcome the fact that the Minister of Justice is looking into that matter.

As Mr Easton said, the knives amnesty was a success. We certainly welcome that initiative, which took 1,500 knives off the streets of the North, and we would welcome a similar initiative. There are also other types of initiatives. For example, the gardaí, in conjunction with the Minister for Justice and Law Reform in Dublin, carried out a public information campaign, How Big Do You Feel? The campaign was targeted at children, and it involved workshops with schoolchildren, online initiatives through social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and so on, and community meetings. Those things should be looked at.

PSNI figures show that there has been an increase in the total number of knife-related incidents. In 2009-2010, there were 227 robberies involving a knife or a sharp instrument; seven homicides; 31 attempted murders; 104 threats to kill; 562 ABH and GBH incidents; and seven rapes and sexual assaults. There were 938 incidents in total, which is an increase of 30, as Mr Easton already said, and that was despite the introduction of tougher measures. That is an indication that we need a multifaceted approach. Not only do we need tougher legislation and sentences but we must recognise that education is vital: it is vital to ensuring that young people do not start to carry knives because of a misguided view that they need them for protection or because they want to impress their peers.

We have all heard horror stories from other countries of children being stabbed by youths over the most trivial of issues, particularly in

London and in England in general but also closer to home. We must ensure that such a culture does not develop here by building on the work that the Department of Education, the PSNI, the Youth Justice Agency and others have done to educate young people about the dangers of carrying knives.

I support the motion, and I thank the Members who tabled it. I look forward to hearing the Justice Minister outline not only what he will do in his Department but how he will work with other Departments to ensure that best practice in other jurisdictions is adopted here.

Mr K Robinson: I am pleased to support the motion. Those who have been Members for a long time may recall that I first raised the issue in 2002. Unfortunately, in those days, I was somewhat of a lone voice and, indeed, could have been forgiven for thinking that those in the agencies charged with protecting the public from knife crime were not unduly exercised by the signs that it was a growing problem in Northern Ireland.

There is no doubt that knife crime is a complex issue and that a comprehensive set of initiatives will be required to address it. Fortunately, we have some excellent examples on which to base our proposals. Our colleagues in the Scottish Parliament were equally concerned about the impact of knife crime on society there, especially about its prevalence in, and impact on, the western portion of the industrial belt in that jurisdiction. I suggest that many of the social traits that manifest themselves in industrial society in Scotland are also present in the make-up of sections of society here in Northern Ireland. The abuse of alcohol, fierce territorial loyalties, the hard man image, and an imagined and ingrained sense of community loyalties perceive the law with less than admiration, whether it is in the form of the policeman on the beat or the judiciary behind the bench. If we are to attempt to break the cycle of knife-related crimes, we must understand the factors that give it credibility in parts of our society.

We must introduce imaginative educational packages to our schools at an early stage. Drama has been a hard-hitting approach that has been used successfully in Scotland. It highlights for pupils in a practical way the dangers of carrying a weapon. Young people, as has already been said, will often respond to the question "why are you carrying a knife?" with the answer "to protect myself". Education must show them that carrying a knife actually increases their dangers.

It can lead, in an instant, to someone dying and to the other person spending a long term behind prison bars.

The Scots also addressed the issue of people who sell horrific ranges of knives, from flick knives and combat knives through to samurai swords and worse. The sellers had to be registered; they had to record the ages, names and addresses of people who purchased knives from them; and any flouting of that system had dire consequences for the retailers.

As I said in 2002, tackling knife crime is not just about harsher sentencing. It is also about educating young people away from the gang culture that often accompanies such activity. The citizens of London have already been mentioned. They, in particular, have witnessed barbaric behaviour from groups of young people who divide their streets up into territories and then fight over them or travel some distances to inflict injury on rival gang members. We have witnessed on our television screens an endless stream of senseless slayings as a result of that activity.

How do we address the problem and curb its growth in Northern Ireland? Sadly, we are starting from a catch-up position, since we too have witnessed many young people prepared to use weapons in a variety of ways. Therefore, we must vigorously pursue a programme that will educate our most vulnerable people in ways that will introduce them to the positive alternatives and prevent them from becoming fodder for those gangs. We must support the police in targeted stop-and-search initiatives, which will help to discourage the carrying of knives, or, when the knives are discovered, to remove them from the person. There must be no human rights smokescreen. Carrying a knife is a crime, and it must be treated as such.

Possession of a knife in a public place or in a school is a very serious matter. There cannot be any back doors on that issue. In 2006, the Northern Ireland Office, under pressure, I felt, eventually decided to bring in a half-hearted amnesty. It was not as successful as it could have and should have been. In my council area, the low number of weapons that were handed in was a disgrace. However, when bins are sited in out-of-the-way places and people are expected to travel many miles by public transport to deposit a knife or other offensive weapon, it is not going to work. Therefore, I call for another amnesty, and, this time, let us get the full backing of society behind it.

The Justice Minister and his various agencies do not need a further consultation process to realise that the public are crying out for firm action. He can clearly see from the consultation process that was carried out in Scotland in 2005 that we must increase and make meaningful the sentences that are handed down, so that we deter the hard core of knife carriers and indicate clearly to their hangers-on that society is determined that knife crime will not pay and that anyone who is involved in it and anyone who is a carrier will pay a high price.

For clarification, Mr Deputy Speaker, if you will bear with me, in Scotland —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, but your time is up.

Mr K Robinson: In Scotland, there were some cultural difficulties where people carried knives or sgian dubhs for ceremonial purposes.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up. We must move on.

Mr K Robinson: I ask the Justice Minister in his wisdom to look kindly upon that situation.

Mr McDevitt: It is noticeable that, despite the 2008 legislation, knife crime in our region continues to rise. In 2008-09, we were told that there were 908 incidents across Northern Ireland involving the use of a sharp instrument. That figure went up to 938 in the following year. Members were shocked by the murder of Thomas Devlin. I am sure that all of us were taken aback by the extent to which his mother, Penny Holloway, and his dad, Jim, campaigned responsibly and honourably for knife crime to be taken more seriously, not only by legislators, but by police, educational providers and others. It is a pity that, even after legislation has been introduced, there have not been the improvements that we expected.

Shortly after Thomas's murder, 'The Irish News' revealed, in December 2006, that fewer than 15% of people who had been convicted of possessing an offensive weapon since 2000 received a jail sentence. The paper went on to say that of the more than 750 people who were convicted of possessing knives or bladed articles between 2000 and 2004, more than half escaped with a fine or a community supervision order.

During the first amnesty, to which Mr Robinson referred, only 900 knives were handed over. As colleagues noted, the South is slightly ahead

in that regard. In 2009, it introduced legislation to toughen considerably the sentences for possession of a knife or sharp instrument. It went further and also banned samurai and other ceremonial swords. Mr Robinson made an interesting point about the cultural traditions in Scotland, some of which are also observed in this region. However, we should not let those traditions get in the way of being able to tell the difference between what is a genuinely dangerous and potentially offensive weapon and what is not.

Against that, it is worth noting that, in Scotland, convictions for carrying knives are at their lowest level for a decade. What seems to work in Scotland is a combination of good legislation, strong sentences, proactive policing and good integration of the work being done in schools, by the education services and by the criminal justice system. In fact, in January 2010, we heard news from Glasgow that the number of people who were caught carrying knives had increased because of the number of spontaneous searches that were carried out by the police. When police in Strathclyde carried out a pilot in the Inverclyde area of Glasgow, preliminary figures showed a 50% increase in the number of people who were stopped, yet a 15% decrease in the number of knives that were seized. Therefore, there is a place for proactive, visible policing in areas where there is known to be a problem with knife-carrying and associated knife crime.

Scotland has also pioneered some good work in its school system. I am sure that colleagues will join me in thanking Research Services, as we always should, for the excellent briefing pack that they produced for the debate. That pack includes an Assembly question that Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education earlier in 2010. Notably, her answer was that the collaboration between her Department and the criminal justice system was not as in depth as many of us would wish. Therefore, I hope that the Minister of Justice, who has come to the House to respond to the debate, can point to improved working relationships and stronger collaboration in that area.

I want to mention briefly the sale of knives on the Internet and how to control the access to knives from outside the jurisdiction.

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

Mr McDevitt: I would like the Minister, in his response to the debate, to update the House on

conversations between him and the Republic's authorities, not only on the question of collaborating on control and sentencing, but on any collaboration or conversations on controlling access to illegal weapons.

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

Mr Lunn: I support the motion. Knife crime is a growing problem in society, particularly among young people. However, perhaps we should recognise that in respect of overall crime, it is not quite as big a problem in Northern Ireland as in the rest of the UK. The incidence of crimes that involve knives is lower — perhaps surprisingly so — than in England and Wales. I imagine that our record, when compared with those in some parts of the world, is also reasonably good. That is not to say that we should be complacent or do nothing. Reference has been made by Mr Easton and Mr McDevitt to the murder of Thomas Devlin. I make reference also to the murder in west Belfast a few years ago of Harry Holland. He was stabbed with a screwdriver, but, nonetheless, it was a pointed blade and equally dreadful. There have been other dreadful incidents, but they should not disguise the fact that, overall, our record is not as bad as that in London or in other places.

12.15 pm

People who carry an offensive weapon need to be in no doubt that they are in breach of the law. The Justice Bill, which was introduced yesterday by the Justice Minister, will reinforce the existing offences of having a blade, a pointed article or an offensive weapon in public, particularly around school premises, without good reason. It will also reinforce the other offences about selling a knife to someone under 18 or marketing a knife in a way that is likely to encourage violence. There may be an interpretation problem with some of that when it gets before the courts, but at least the law will be on the statute book. The maximum custodial penalty involved will go up to four years, which is a major improvement.

It is a problem, but most people who carry a knife do so without any offensive intent. For the record, and I do not like to sound as though I am declaring an interest, I carry a knife, and I always have done. Members will be relieved to know that I leave it in the car when I come to Stormont. Carrying a knife has been a habit since childhood, and I still have one. I do not intend to do any damage with it; it is a habit. We used to say that it was a good means of getting

a stone out of a horse's hoof, but those days are gone. It makes the framing of what constitutes an offence difficult. In my youth, everyone had a knife. I think that Mr Easton said that he had one as well. It is part of our culture.

Mr Easton: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I never said in my speech that I carried a knife. I want to make that clear for the Member who said that I did.

Mr McNarry: Do you carry one now?

Mr Easton: No.

Mr Lunn: I beg the Member's pardon; I picked him up wrongly. I thank him for the extra minute.

Unfortunately, times change. The proposed toughening of the law in the Justice Bill is necessary, but the sentencing of offenders is only one side of the equation. We need to encourage a change of attitude among our young men, and they need to be made to realise that it is socially unacceptable to carry a knife. It is not any kind of a status symbol; it is not cool, and it does not impress anybody.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. He rightly identifies the need to change attitudes as much as anything else. I appreciate that he said earlier that his habit of carrying a knife is not meant to be offensive, and I am sure that we would all feel reasonably safe from the Member in that regard. As we talk about changing attitudes, will the Member take this opportunity to set an example and to indicate that, from now on, he will not carry a knife?

Mr Lunn: I certainly will not carry one if I am in breach of the law, but we will wait and see what the law says. It is not a big knife; it normally stays in the car. I am like a lot of people who carry small knives, and in my case it is a Swiss army knife.

We hear about stabbings occurring outside nightclubs; they are the result of drunken brawls. If the knives were not present, damage would still be done, but not serious damage. What used to be a fist fight has become a more serious event with tragic and fatal consequences in some situations. We can reinforce the law, but the education factor is important. We need to make it clear to young people in particular, by persuasion, amnesty or legislative means, that it is not acceptable to carry a blade, particularly an open blade that cannot be folded. We heard Mr Easton give quite a lengthy definition of what constitutes an

offensive blade. I wonder whether there is room in that for the addition of a simple definition about the length of a blade that cannot be folded. Beyond that, I intend to support the motion, and I will probably get rid of my knife before very long.

Mr Frew: I support the motion. I commend my colleagues for bringing it to the House and hope that it receives the support that it deserves. People who carry knives put themselves and others around them at risk of serious injury or even death. People who are caught in possession of a knife in a public place with no reasonable excuse or those who use a knife to commit an offence should expect to be prosecuted and put behind bars.

It is important that the PSNI and the Public Prosecution Service work hand in hand to try to make people aware that that behaviour will not be tolerated. However, it is not just the agencies at the front line of enforcement that need to come on board; it is the Prison Service, the Probation Board, the Youth Justice Agency, Crimestoppers, the educational establishments and society as a whole.

Powers relating to offences involving knives and other offensive weapons have increased, with maximum sentences increased to four years' imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine for having a knife in a public place or on school premises; possessing an offensive weapon; and offences relating to the sale or unlawful marketing of knives, including sales of knives to persons under 18 years of age. That is a doubling of the sentence, from two to four years, which came into effect in 2008.

I supported the first knife amnesty at that time, which resulted in 900 potentially lethal weapons being taken off the streets, and the second knife amnesty, which took around 600 potentially lethal weapons off the streets. Not only did those amnesties take potentially lethal weapons off the streets, they raised awareness of the dangers of illegally carrying knives in public and urged those who do so to stop. It is not so cool nowadays to carry a blade and it is not done for a person's protection; in fact, it could lead to their death. However, many of our young people still think it is acceptable to carry a knife. It is a status symbol that they think makes them look hard or mean.

I commend the Knives Ruin Lives campaign, which is aimed at 12- to 15-year-olds. That was developed by the NIO and is supported

by the PSNI, the Youth Justice Agency and Crimestoppers. Also, the 'Choices' drama is said to be an extremely powerful play, which should be used.

However, we still have a major problem in society, and it seems to be particularly bad in north and west Belfast. In east and south Belfast, the problem is getting worse year on year.

Mr P Maskey: The Member stated that the problem seems to be particularly bad in north and west Belfast. I am wondering where he got those statistics from. If he could share those with the House, I would appreciate it, because I have not seen them myself. I believe that crime, especially knife crime, can be bad all over the place.

Mr Frew: I will be able to get that information for the Member very quickly; I have it to hand.

The problem is not only in Belfast. I do not believe that our cities are any worse than any other cities in the UK; I believe that we are actually better than some cities, particularly Glasgow, London and Manchester. Nevertheless, the statistics are far too high in E district, D district and G district, and there seems to be a link with our other cities. That might be attributed to the build up of population in those districts, but bear in mind that people who live in the countryside and work on farms carry knives all the time, yet they do not seem to have the same problem.

Knife crime is a mindset problem and a society ill that we need to sort out. We should increase the maximum penalty for the offence of having a knife in what can be deemed an inappropriate area or dangerous situation. One does not need a knife in a bus station surrounded by children waiting to get a bus, or at 1.30 am when waiting for a taxi and eating a burger. We should continue to run further amnesties, as over 1,500 knives were voluntarily surrendered on the previous two occasions. Such amnesties raise awareness, and if bins for depositing knives were positioned better, if there were a better PR response, and if the media helped out, an amnesty could be very effective. The Departments of Justice, Education, Employment and Learning, and Health should co-operate more effectively to deal with this scourge.

Of course, it is not just knife crime; there are offences relating to crossbows and samurai swords, baseball bats and hurlies: a plastic spoon in the wrong hands at the wrong time can do terrible harm, as can pencils, lollipop sticks and broken glass.

It is a society ill; it is a mindset that needs to be rectified. We need to protect our young people and to remove and punish those who persist in such behaviour. We need tougher policing, longer sentencing and a collective will by the House and by the Executive to clamp down hard on knife crime.

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

Mr Frew: Thank you.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and commend those who tabled it. I also commend Mr Robinson, who has raised the issue before.

Knife crime here is not as prevalent as, perhaps, in the South of Ireland, and that is to be welcomed; it is important to keep that in mind when discussing the issue, particularly with regard to gang culture. However, reference was made to one high-profile atrocity that happened to Thomas Devlin and to his family's campaign for tougher sentencing.

Although tougher sentencing should form part of our discussion, the mindset of people who carry a knife is important: they take a knife with them as they go down a street, and soon a young person is dead, having been stabbed not once but nine times. Something is wrong. What is the mindset of someone who does that? Why does someone furnish himself with a knife to go out to devastate a family not just for the immediate future but forever?

Although it is to be welcomed that, according to statistics and the opinion of those who know, knife crime here is not at the same level as elsewhere, the 'Irish News' printed an article in July of this year:

"Knife crime in Northern Ireland is on the increase."

It is on the increase since tougher sentencing was introduced, so I come back to my point about mindset, which colleagues opposite mentioned. What do we do? Is it about education? We have to strike a balance, and there are campaigns and strategies. Knife crime is an issue for the Department of Education, and I welcome the fact that Departments are working together on the matter.

12.30 pm

What should we do after this debate? Should we look to Scotland and to what is happening

there? Reference has been made to how the issue is being handled in Scotland. One of the strategies there has been to increase stops and searches. Even though there have been more stops and searches, the number of people who are carrying knives has reduced.

Mr Spratt: I am delighted to hear the Member, who is on the opposite Benches, advocate an increase in stop-and-search powers, despite the fact that some of her colleagues tried to resist the idea in past days.

There has been much talk about education and campaigns. What about encouraging all our communities, as I do from this side of the House, to give information to the Police Service and to allow it to deal with people who carry knives? That would be a very good start for us to make in the House.

Mrs McGill: I thank the Member for his intervention. However, I asked whether we should look to Scotland, where that is happening. I did not get to finish my point, because I gave way to the Member.

Should we look to Scotland? There has been an increase in the use of stop-and-search powers in Scotland, but I think that that has been targeted at a particular area where knife crime and gang culture form much of what happens. As I said at the beginning of my contribution, I am not sure that that is the case here, and I welcome that.

One other point that I want to make, which again concerns Scotland, goes back to the importance of mindset. A point was made in the press that in Scotland, younger people who carry weapons are beginning to see doing so as the act of a loser. We all owe it to young people to not repeatedly talk about weapons as status symbols but to talk instead about carrying them as the act of a loser.

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

Mrs McGill: I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the next Member to speak will be George Robinson.

The sitting was suspended at 12.32 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr G Robinson: Knife crime has become increasingly common in Northern Ireland, and, sadly, its results have become increasingly lethal. It tends to occur among younger people, and, therefore, it is all the more worrying. I say that because there is a greater tendency in some cases for young people to become involved in fights when intoxicated or, in other cases, while carrying a knife as an act of bravery. Other incidents of knife crime occur during domestic disputes, when home knives are used to inflict injury or even death. I do not want young people to be given criminal records, nor do I want to see anyone in an early grave because someone thinks that carrying a knife makes him a big man. I have this message for such people: you are not a big man; you are making yourself a target. To stop the carrying of knives and to make it unacceptable as a show of bravery, the sentences available to the judiciary must be of a level sufficient to act as a deterrent. That may sound draconian, but imposing tougher sentences will be worth it if it helps to save even one life.

Much information has been supplied as to what has happened elsewhere, but I am only interested in what happens in Northern Ireland. By all means, let us look at what works elsewhere, but let us ensure that Northern Ireland makes up its own mind as to how it deals with knife crime. I am confident that our Justice Minister will ensure that knife criminals will face the full rigours of the law. Sentences need to be increased in the case of hardened offenders. If someone convicted of carrying a knife reoffends, he should be dealt with more severely. If that stops one young person carrying a knife, it will be worth it.

We must also look at why people carry knives in the first place. Some say that they feel that they must protect themselves; others do so because they seek an opportunity to use a knife. I hope that the legislation will take account of those reasons and give a wide choice of sentences to the judiciary. Taking personal circumstances into account is fair and sensible.

I also take this opportunity to ask the Minister to work with Executive colleagues who can aid in reducing the carrying of knives, for example, the Minister of Education. Education as to the

consequences of carrying knives may prevent an offence and the heartbreak felt in the homes of the victims of knife crime, among the families of the bereaved and the offender. There are always two homes destroyed in those tragic circumstances. I support the motion.

Mr McNarry: I will not comment on the confessions that I heard other Members make this morning. I have nothing to say on that. It is a good job that we are not discussing gun crime, because that might be very interesting.

The latest figures from the PSNI show that knife crime is endemic in some parts of the Province but not in others. The PSNI's A district, which covers north and west Belfast, had 178 knife-related offences recorded last year. That is more than double the number in my area, C district, which covers Ards, Castlereagh, Down and north Down. However, those of us in those areas cannot be complacent.

I remind Members of a shocking incident that occurred on Christmas Eve 2005, when a young man and his friend were attacked by a group in Meetinghouse Lane in Newtownards. His friend escaped harm, but the young man, Grant Dugan, then aged 19, was stabbed seven times, not with a knife, but with a broken bottle. His father said that it was a miracle that Grant survived and:

"He has done absolutely amazing and I mean amazing",

Grant did regain consciousness, with his parents maintaining a Christmas vigil at his bedside in the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast. At that time, Grant faced an uncertain future, as it was not known for some time whether he would make a full recovery.

His mother, Maud, said at the time that the attack was "thuggery" and that her son faced more operations over the following fortnight but that they were confident that her son would pull through. She said:

"We nearly lost our son who had never, ever hurt anyone,"

Thankfully, Grant recovered from that horrific attack. As I said, it was not a knife attack, but it illustrates that a stabbing by a broken bottle is still a stabbing and is a most serious crime.

The 'Belfast Telegraph' stated:

"After watching his attackers being led from Belfast Crown Court, Mr Dugan said: 'I'm just happy the

three of them have been sent away. I can't remember anything about what happened. All I remember is waking up in hospital on New Year's Eve. What happened has destroyed my family life for the past year and a half because nothing has been the same since it happened, but I'm happy with the sentences the judge gave them.' Branding the attack on Mr Dugan as 'sustained, brutal and vicious', Mr Justice Coghlin said each accused came from 'positive and supportive family backgrounds'. Saying the aggression displayed was 'fuelled by excessive alcohol consumption', the judge said each 'should emphatically have known better.'"

The problem is that they did not.

I look forward to studying the details of the Minister of Justice's proposals to tackle knife crime in the upcoming Justice Bill. The issue of selling weapons must be monitored constantly. Unfortunately, a further unwelcome trend is that more and more young people bring knives into schools. Schools are places in which young people have the right to feel and be safe. Therefore, I welcome the Justice Minister's commitment to increasing the maximum penalty for bringing knives on to school premises. If a school decides that the problem is widespread, it should be entitled to search school bags. In more pressing cases, a school should be equipped with portable hand-held scanners. The possibility of being detected carrying a weapon and removed from school would deter most young people from taking the risk in the first place.

As mentioned during the debate, we must focus not only on the schoolchildren who carry weapons but on the young and not-so-young adults who carry them daily. No one in the House believes that the PSNI launching a major clampdown on those individuals or the Department of Justice suddenly ramping up the maximum sentence would result in a quick solution to the problem. Tempting as it is to put away offenders and to lose the key, solving knife crime is not only about tougher sentences and bigger fines. Rather, we must address not only knife crime in Northern Ireland but the culture of knife crime. Through using community groups and government agencies, we should try to get through to people who regard knives and other sharp objects as some sort of status symbols. The message of what can happen when a person carries a knife must be put across to those people and their parents. The belief that carrying a knife gives a level of protection should also be tackled — it is false. The fact that someone is much more

likely to be assaulted with his or her weapon must penetrate the minds of certain people.

I support the motion and wish it well. I look forward to hearing the Minister's contribution later today.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about such an important and serious issue. I thank the Members who brought the matter before us today, and I support the motion.

We all know that knife crime brings death and serious injury to many people every year. The families who have been bereaved through knife crime must live with the aftermath of those horrendous crimes every remaining day of their lives. Through campaigns and lobbying decision-makers such as us, some families are moved to help to ensure that young people have a greater awareness of the terrible effects of knife crime and to try to deter them from getting involved. Their suffering has been turned into a positive influence and has, without doubt, saved numerous lives. I think particularly of Penny Holloway and Jim Devlin, the parents of Thomas Devlin, who have done tremendous work in that respect. They deserve our gratitude for their brave efforts in the face of their great grief.

Before we move on to sentencing, it is important to emphasise the need to take all possible preventative measures to deter the carrying and use of knives for violent purposes. Prevention is better for the individual, the police, the criminal justice system and society in general. I mentioned the efforts of some of the bereaved families in that respect.

As Members will know, Northern Ireland had a knife amnesty between 24 May and 14 June 2006, which very successfully removed nearly 900 extremely dangerous knives from circulation. It also raised awareness of the danger of knives to the individual and to the public in general. During that three-week amnesty, knife crime fell by 30%. The removal of those lethal weapons prevented death, injury and destruction. We might reuse the amnesty approach at reasonable intervals.

I have spoken to young people who saw the drama mentioned earlier — 'Choices', which was written by John Kelly and produced by the C21 theatre company from Belfast as part of the Knives Ruin Lives campaign.

That presentation was aimed at post-primary students, namely those in fourth, fifth and sixth form, as well as young adults. Performed in schools and youth centres, the drama brought the message of the danger of knives directly to young people. It was extremely effective. The feedback from it was very positive. Effective preventative approaches such as 'Choices' should not be one-offs but should be offered to every generation of teenagers to ensure that the message is constantly communicated.

New technologies and social media networks, such as Facebook and YouTube, can and are being used to prevent knife crime. In London, there is a text number that young people can use to send the name and location of a knife carrier, whether they are on school premises or outside. The website www.knifecrimes.org was established by Ann Oakes-Odger following the murder of her son Westley on 12th September 2005. The website is tremendous, has many worthwhile resources and is worth visiting.

Prevention through education should be exploited to the full because, at the end of the day, prevention is the best approach for all concerned. The Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning, in particular, have a role to play, along with the police and Youth Justice.

Those who do not heed preventative messages and who engage in knife crime, whether by carrying a knife in public or using one to kill or injure another person, must be deterred by the strongest possible sentences. Knives are lethal weapons. They can be as lethal as guns, and their use must meet the same strength of sentencing. I support the motion.

The Minister of Justice (Mr Ford): I welcome the opportunity to join in the debate, and I congratulate Mr Easton and his colleagues for securing it. At the outset, as Minister, I repeat the point that has been made by so many others: knife crime is utterly unacceptable. That is, clearly, the unified view across the Chamber, and, as Minister, I am committed to addressing knife and other types of crime.

When we hear about some recent, appalling knife-crime attacks, which, in some instances, resulted in fatalities, it is understandable that concerns about knife crime are heightened. They are concerns that we all share. We have also seen a marginal increase in the number of knife crimes in recent years. However, we should

be mindful that, based on the recorded crime rate per 100,000 of the population, the level of crime, generally, in Northern Ireland is 23% lower than in England and Wales. Compared to other parts of these islands, Northern Ireland does not have a knife culture. In 2009-2010, the recorded knife crime rate per 100,000 was 52, whereas in England and Wales it was 62. Although there were minor trends upwards and downwards, we need to be careful not to conclude that there is a serious upsurge in knife crime in this region. However, there is certainly no room for complacency. Members who have referred to individual cases have made that point absolutely clearly.

In response to Mr McNarry in particular, part of the reason why my Department spent £2 million on 19 town centre CCTV schemes, with 87 cameras, was to deter the kind of attacks that he highlighted. Indeed, Mr Dugan and his family helped my predecessor to launch that scheme. I hope that that is some reassurance of the serious way in which the Department of Justice takes, and its predecessor Department took, the issue. We take offences involving knives very seriously, so a range of measures have been and continue to be taken by my Department, in partnership with others, to address knife crime.

2.15 pm

The first part of the motion calls on me:

“to introduce tougher sentences for persons convicted of knife crime”.

Of course, in each case, using their professional judgement and expertise, it is for the judiciary to decide on the appropriate sentence. However, it is for us, as Members, to put into law the parameters within which sentences are handed down. The maximum penalties available to the courts for knife-related offences in Northern Ireland are already very high. As Members will know, life imprisonment is available for murder, and up to five years is available for causing grievous bodily harm, whatever the weapon.

I shall now refer to offences that involve knives explicitly, such as possessing a knife in public without good reason. As to the availability of knives, we all know that they have many legitimate uses in everyday life. However, it is right to take precautions against knives and other potential weapons being too easily available. In 2006, the age at which a person may be sold a knife was raised from 16 to

18. As recently as 2008, the law in Northern Ireland was amended to include a range of offences around the possession of knives and other offensive weapons. The maximum penalties available for those offences have been standardised to include up to 12 months' imprisonment when a case is heard in a Magistrate's Court and up to four years when it is heard in the Crown Court.

Of course, much of the issue around the possession of knives, except, for example, in cases involving flick knives, centres on circumstances rather than on the size of the knife, which is a point that several Members made. The offence of selling a knife to a young person saw the minimum age increase from 16 to 18, with a penalty of up to four years in prison. Likewise, the penalty is up to four years' imprisonment for offences involving the publicising or marketing of combat knives.

The Justice Bill, which was introduced yesterday, completes the knife-crime sentencing package by applying the same maximum sentences to two remaining offences; namely, the possession of a knife on school premises, and being armed with an offensive weapon with intent to commit an indictable offence. The police, in particular, registered the importance of the armed-with-intent offence. Previously, the penalty was only up to three months' imprisonment, as it is a charge that the police are likely to pursue, particularly when, for example, they apprehend someone on private property with a weapon who may be about to burgle a home or a shop. I believe that the maximum penalties will be seen to be tough but fair.

The message to people who carry knives in public without a reasonable excuse is that they face a substantial period in prison. As has been said, carrying knives in the street is not cool or acceptable, and those who attempt to carry knives for what they see as self-defence should be fully aware that it does not, in fact, protect anyone, least of all the carrier, who may end up being the victim.

On that point, when Mr Easton proposed the motion, he suggested that, for a number of offences, the 12-month sentence should be increased to 24 months. In most cases, the jurisdiction of a Magistrate's Court extends, across a range of offences, only up to 12-month sentences. However, if a case is regarded as being more serious, it is possible to transfer it

to the Crown Court, where the maximum penalty is four years. Indeed, for similar offences, the maximum sentence in Northern Ireland is generally twice as long as it is for the equivalent offence in England and Wales. Indeed, for the crime of trespassing with a knife, the maximum sentence here is four years, whereas it is six months in England and Wales. Therefore, given that matters are considered rather more seriously here than they are in the nearest equivalent jurisdiction, I hope that Members are reassured that account has been taken of the concerns expressed.

Knife crime is not a prominent issue in Northern Ireland. However, that certainly does not diminish the impact of any single violent incident perpetrated by the unlawful use of knives, which is totally unacceptable. We heard about a number of families who have suffered in that respect. As Minister, I fully respect the role and responsibility of the Policing Board to set priorities that are appropriate. In that context, I note that reducing violent crime has been identified by the board and the Chief Constable as a priority issue and by the Department as a target in the addendum to the Programme for Government, which the Assembly approved last week. The priority given to violent crime reflects the Chief Constable's strategic objective of addressing issues of serious harm. The Chief Constable has implemented a number of measures to combat violent crime, and he has assigned violent crime lead officers to each district to report on the progress of those initiatives.

As reported earlier, there has been a welcome reduction in overall levels of violent crime. Progress is being made, and the rate of recorded offences is going down. Notably, for example, the homicide figure for 2009-2010 is the lowest since 1970, and there were 15% fewer attempted murders in 2009-2010 than in 2007-08. Therefore, the trends are not all as negative as the individual cases, however nasty, would suggest.

I am concerned that a number of recent knife attacks appear to have occurred in domestic situations, and the indications are that alcohol is frequently a factor. In some cases, hate crime can be a factor. Although it has been possible, through legislation, to place controls on the purchase of knives and on their possession in public places, it must be recognised that knives are in everyday use and are readily available in every household. Legislation on their sale

has had little impact on their use in domestic violence, as we have seen so tragically in recent months. Rather, there is an imperative on us all to seek to better protect victims of domestic violence and to bring perpetrators to account.

Much work has already been done under 'Tackling Violence at Home: A Strategy for Addressing Domestic Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland'. The strategy is very clear that domestic violence is a crime and is not acceptable in any circumstances. It further sets out the Executive's commitment to work in partnership with others in the statutory, voluntary and community sectors to tackle that heinous crime. My Department has joint policy lead with DHSSPS on domestic violence. It is a cross-departmental issue, however, and I work alongside ministerial colleagues on the inter-ministerial group on domestic and sexual violence.

At this point, I do not propose to detail all the initiatives that are being taken forward under the strategy, but key actions include raising awareness of domestic violence, and encouraging victims to break the silence and to come forward to seek help by, for example, using the hotline. It is also imperative to protect those who are most at risk. This year, multi-agency risk assessment conferences, also known as MARACs, were introduced across Northern Ireland. They use a multi-agency approach to help to protect high-risk victims of domestic violence in Northern Ireland. The Tackling Violence at Home strategy is also very clear in its message to perpetrators that they will be held accountable for their behaviour.

I believe that public confidence in the courts is fundamental to an effective criminal justice system. That was recognised in the Agreement at Hillsborough Castle, which proposed that the establishment of a sentencing guidelines council be considered for inclusion in the addendum to the Programme for Government on the Department of Justice. The public consultation paper, which I launched on 12 October, honours that commitment. The consultation examines a range of issues impacting on public confidence in sentencing, and it seeks views on the role that a sentencing guidelines mechanism may have in addressing them. That is a key issue, and Members may choose to address whether public confidence needs to be enhanced by such a measure. It is out for consultation, and I trust that Members will respond to it.

In seeking to reduce offending behaviour, and, again, drawing on the Hillsborough Castle Agreement, I am developing a twin-track approach to orchestrate the efficient and effective management of offenders in the criminal justice system and to identify ways of working across government to interrupt the flow of new recruits to offending. My aim is to promote a joined-up approach in the criminal justice system through the development of a strategic framework to link together and streamline existing strategies and initiatives. I will build new partnerships across Departments to tackle, through targeted early intervention, some of the root causes of future offending.

We need to remember that, for every perpetrator of crime, there is a victim or victims. I wish to ensure that victims of crime, including those who have been victims of knife crime, receive the highest standards of service possible from the justice system. That means giving victims the service that they deserve, the information that they need and the support that helps them with the consequences of their experience. In May, I launched two guides to the criminal justice system: one is for victims and witnesses of crime; and the other is a specific guide for families and friends bereaved through murder and manslaughter.

In July, I announced a dedicated programme of work specifically designed to improve the victims' experience of the justice system. That work includes the development of a new code of practice that will set out the minimum standards of service that the criminal justice agencies will be expected to provide to victims of crime. I will shortly be announcing the consultation on the draft code. Members will know that the Justice Bill, which was introduced yesterday, will include a number of provisions for victims.

I also mentioned that alcohol appears to have been a feature of a number of recent incidents. Studies have suggested that alcohol and drug misuse can contribute to offenders committing violent crime. In recognition of the part that alcohol plays in crime, a number of initiatives have been taken forward under the new strategic direction for alcohol and drugs, which aims to reduce the level of alcohol and drug-related harm in Northern Ireland.

Although we have a duty to ensure that we have in place the legislation to address knife crime, we also have a duty to inform and educate

people about the dangers of carrying knives and the consequences of such behaviour. Indeed, a number of Members made that point.

In recent years, awareness-raising has included the knife crime amnesty of 2006, which resulted in the removal of approximately 1,500 potentially lethal weapons from our streets, a major public information campaign and work in schools by the PSNI and the criminal justice outreach programme. Therefore, I assure Mr Easton in particular that that did not happen only when he was at school; police officers continue that work. At this stage, I have no plans to reinstate the knife amnesty, which was part of a wider UK campaign at the time. However, that can remain under consideration as we look at our needs for the future.

The key issue that we will deal with in the future is the new community safety strategy, which I will publish for consultation shortly. It contains proposals on how to tackle hate crime and other kinds of crime, including domestic violence. As Minister of Justice, I want devolution to make a difference, and a key aspect of that is the development of the community safety strategy to reflect fully Northern Ireland's community safety needs, with a strong emphasis on the work to build a shared future. I have stated that one of my key goals is to lead a debate on what a new community safety strategy should include and to publish an agreed strategy next spring.

I will issue a public consultation paper shortly so that the consultation exercise can take place over the coming months. I am committed to consulting as widely as possible with individuals across Northern Ireland to get their views on how to create a safer shared community. The cross-departmental advisory group includes, as some Members highlighted, the Department of Education. That consultation process will provide an opportunity for Members to comment on knife crime and other issues. We share responsibilities with other jurisdictions, and I assure Members that those issues were raised when I met Kenny MacAskill and Dermot Ahern recently. If lessons can be learned from any neighbouring jurisdictions, we are open to learning them.

In conclusion, assurances can be drawn from the fact that Northern Ireland does not have the knife crime culture that is evident in other parts of the UK. Much has already been done to tackle knife crime in Northern Ireland,

including legislation to increase penalties and practical steps to raise awareness and remove such weapons from our streets. As Members highlighted, prevention, deterrents and education are important parts of a strategy to tackle knife crime. However, more remains to be done, and the community safety strategy provides the opportunity to gather a range of views to inform the strategy to address all forms of crime and antisocial behaviour. I am sure that Members will wish to participate in that consultation by citing some of the examples that we have heard in today's debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when Mr Peter Weir will make a winding-up speech.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Social Development

Benefits

1. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister for Social Development whether he will consider bringing together housing rights experts, the Law Centre and disability and mental health groups to discuss the implications of proposed benefit cuts and how a more sympathetic approach can be developed to protect people in need. (AQO 339/11)

The Minister for Social Development

(Mr Attwood): I thank the Member for the question. He raises an important principle. It would be thoughtless folly if I as a Minister or government alone thought that that they could move forward on the issue of welfare reform and benefit changes without the involvement of the wider community. That is why I agree with the principle, so much so that I have already acted on it in advance of any question being raised. I have done two things. First, I have asked senior officials to meet external experts — namely, Les Allamby from the Law Centre, Eileen Evason, who is well established in the welfare world in Northern Ireland, and Philip McDonagh, an economist — to scope out how we might respond to the emerging situation.

Secondly, on 4 October, the Social Security Agency had an initial session with people from the voluntary and community sector to look at proposals, in a dedicated way, on incapacity benefit reassessment and to discuss the agency's approach to reassessment. In addition, I have tasked my permanent secretary, who commenced the work some time ago, to consider how the Department for Social Development (DSD) can best respond to potential cuts and protect vulnerable and disadvantaged people. In fact, I understand that there will be a meeting of that project team tomorrow. I agree with the principle, and the Member will agree that I have been ahead of the issue in my taking forward of those initiatives.

Mr F McCann: I thank the Minister for his response. Over a period of time, whether on the

Floor of the House or in Committee, there has been a general agreement that there are people outside government structures who could play a good role in advising on the best way forward on the issue. The Committee for Social Development has found other groups that are fairly good. The Housing Rights Service, for example, represents people who are in difficulties with mortgages. Disability Action has experts in its field and can provide additional thinking outside the box while people in the Department might be straitjacketed. I would appreciate it if the Minister were to take that on board.

The Minister for Social Development: I agree with the Member. There is not a group that he mentioned that I have not met or with which my officials or I are not in regular ongoing contact. If we are to go beyond parity without any financial pain, maximise operational flexibilities that are consistent with parity and do things differently from London by slowing down or opting out of some of their proposed changes, we will all need to work together in the Chamber and with those outside the Chamber who are best qualified to maximise the opportunities.

Mr McNarry: I listened with interest to the Minister's responses. Does he have figures on the numbers of people who do not take up benefits, the categories that are involved and the amount of money? Does his budget juggling underwrite the amount as a bonus saving for his Department?

The Minister for Social Development: There are figures and suggestions about people who are not in receipt of benefit and who might be entitled to it. What we do in response to that is more important. Northern Ireland has elaborate mechanisms to attempt to enable people to take up benefit, and that will come up in a later question. In part, that explains the higher benefit take-up in Northern Ireland compared with parts of Britain. I will give one small example. Last week, I was in the jobs and benefits office in Portadown. Twenty people spread across Northern Ireland give dedicated advice to senior citizens. At that office, one of their case workers told me about an 83-year-old woman who recently came into the office. She had lost her payment book, and as a result of that conversation, between attendance allowance and carer's allowance, her benefit take-up was doubled.

That demonstrates that, through the work of the jobs and benefits offices, the benefit take-up campaigns and the various other initiatives in the statutory sector and, as Mr McCann confirmed, in the non-statutory sector, significant efforts are being made to ensure that there is benefit uptake. However, we can do more, and those in London can learn more from what we do. Nevertheless, I think that we are going in the right direction.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister tell us how ministerial priorities for housing will change in light of the very difficult financial environment?

The Minister for Social Development: I hope that the priorities will remain broadly as they were and that the Executive will agree to fund at least 2,000 newbuild starts each year. I am able to do that this year, thereby building on Margaret Ritchie's success in securing over 1,800 newbuilds last year.

I also hope that we will be in a position to continue to fund all the other good work that the Housing Executive does through the warm homes scheme, Egan contracts, maintenance contracts and the range of other services that it provides. As I have said before, the key, essential issue is whether the Executive will put the protection of those in need, stress and disadvantage at the core and heart of their Budget decisions. If that ethic prevails, so will the Department for Social Development's interests and those of the other Departments that offer front line services, including the Health Department and the Department of Education.

Child Benefit

2. **Mr Bresland** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the proposed change to child benefit. (AQO 340/11)

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. I hope that everybody in the Chamber is concerned about what was proposed at the Tory Party conference a number of weeks ago. It appears that the proposal on child benefits was made over the heads of some of the party's Ministers as well as its Liberal Democrat colleagues.

I do not believe that the proposal is a done deal. On the Monday morning when the Chancellor announced what he intended to do, I and many others expressed our concern, if not opposition. However, by Monday evening, when

I and others were at the Tory Party conference in Birmingham, the proposal was beginning to unravel. I believe that the child benefit proposal and other proposals are not over the line and that a lobby in the House of the Commons can still come to fruition and block the proposal if those concerned about it exert the maximum pressure.

A proposal that with one hand removes child benefit from a parent or parents who are earning £45,000 but with the other hand gives child benefit to two parents who are earning less than £45,000 each but as much as £80,000 collectively is self-evidently ludicrous, inconsistent, inequitable, unfair and should not prevail. That is my view on the child benefit proposals.

If there is a need to target resources on those most in need, let us go in that direction. If there is a need to remove resources from those on the highest salaries, let us go in that direction. However, let us not have an inconsistent proposal.

Mr Bresland: I thank the Minister for his answer. He has partly answered my supplementary question, so I will put a different slant on it. Does he share my concern that the attack on child benefits might be the thin edge of the wedge and that other benefits, such as winter fuel payments to pensioners, may also come under attack?

The Minister for Social Development: Again, I welcome the Member's comments. I do not want to confirm his worst fears, but there has been speculation, even in the course of today, that the next proposal from the Tory-led Government will be to withdraw child benefit for children between the ages of 16 and 18. That is beginning to circulate today. I see that Mr McQuillan is nodding in agreement. I believe that what we are seeing is benefit cuts being masqueraded as reform. Nobody should be opposed to reform per se, and I am certainly an advocate of bigger and deeper reform in the Northern Ireland context. However, I am sure that the Member agrees that so-called reform that is actually benefit cuts masquerading as something else should be opposed.

Mr McClarty: Does the Minister accept that, when it comes to benefit reform, the most vulnerable in society must be protected?

The Minister for Social Development: As I said in my answer to Ms McCann's question,

unless that ethic is part of our Budget, part of benefit changes and part of front line Budget negotiations with the London Government, we are deluding ourselves and the people of Northern Ireland. My belief is all the more acute because the Tory Government might agree with all the voices from Northern Ireland that we suffer from historical and current levels of deprivation that are similar to those in parts of Scotland and Wales, but that our situation is complicated and compounded by the legacy of conflict and the risk of alienation and instability. This morning, I took part in a joint phone call with Iain Duncan Smith, Lord Freud and Maria Miller, during which we discussed another welfare proposal that might be coming down the tracks. All three Ministers might agree that that is part of the experience and narrative of Northern Ireland. If so, the consequence of their analysis must be that they protect people in Northern Ireland and, in particular, the very people whom the Member mentioned.

Ms Lo: I was pleased by the Minister's response to the confusing and unfair child benefit proposals. The Westminster Government pledged to halve child poverty by 2010 and end it totally by 2020. Does the Minister agree that the child benefit proposals will not make that happen?

The Minister for Social Development: My sense is that those outcomes were not going to arise in any case, because the pledge, although the correct one — some would argue that the proposals should have gone further — was jeopardised by the economic downturn. The pledge to impact on and eradicate child poverty was placed in jeopardy because of the consequences of the downturn on the Budget, the loss of work and the loss of public sector services. The proposals to change child benefit will only compound the situation, as will other similar proposals. That is why, whatever the top line from London, the bottom line in Northern Ireland should be an adherence to values that protect the people whom the Member mentioned.

Benefits

3. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the concept of a universal benefit. (AQO 341/11)

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. I refer him to my previous answers to questions about universal benefits, such as child benefit and winter fuel

payments. I have made clear how I regard the outworking of the concept and practice of universal benefits. If the Member is also asking about universal credits, which are being trialled in Iain Duncan Smith's twenty-first century reform proposal, some of those might work. A tapering system, for example, whereby people would not be penalised when it comes to their benefits, might encourage those who are capable of work to return to the workplace.

However, whatever the situation after tomorrow and over the coming months, when it comes to welfare changes and rates of benefit, the form of the London Government to date does not fill one with confidence that, as the full welfare agenda is worked through, they will do what I, the Member, and everybody else agrees should be done to protect those who are out of work and in receipt of benefits. With the passage of time, we will see whether the proposals measure up in a different way. However, at the moment, I put down a strong marker that we should remain vigilant.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am delighted that, at last, it has dawned on him, as it had on many of us, that cuts masquerading as reform are ludicrous. Will the proposed breach of the universality of child benefit lead to breaches in parity and to a greater rationalisation of how benefits are paid in the North?

The Minister for Social Development: That did not dawn on me only recently. The true nature of some of the Tory-led Administration proposals might have dawned on other Members recently.

2.45 pm

The second speech that I made in the Chamber as Minister related to Labour Party welfare reform, over which I made my concerns crystal clear. I do not think that a day has passed since, and I have certainly not done a media interview since, when I have not put down clear markers about my anxiety over what may be happening. Ever since the emergency Budget in June, which impacted disproportionately on the poor and disadvantaged, it has clearly been happening.

Let us be very clear on the issue of universality and the rationalisation that might arise: I want to scope the issue of parity. My officials are currently conducting an equality impact assessment on to the principle of parity in Northern Ireland. I am not just looking at the

individual changes to child benefit or housing benefit, or any of the other proposals that are coming down the tracks, but am beginning to scope the much more fundamental issue of the principle of parity, and whether the principle of parity, as it currently operates, does or does not have equality implications. That is some blue sky thinking and the broader context in which we should consider those matters.

However, I sound a cautionary note. At present, the net benefit to Northern Ireland of the difference between all tax take going across to the Exchequer and the payments back to us across the Irish Sea, in benefits and in block grant, is billions and billions. It is not measured in tens of thousands, or even in tens of millions, but in tens of billions. Therefore, in order to protect those in need and in disadvantage during a recession, we need to be mindful as we move forward, which I am doing, I hope, positively and innovatively, that we do not throw out the baby with the bath water and lose billions in order to achieve a principle that could come back in the face of too many.

Mr Cree: Does the Minister believe that the Department for Work and Pensions has finalised its proposals, and does he intend to speak to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions again before the spending review?

The Minister for Social Development: I will not be speaking to Iain Duncan Smith between today and tomorrow or today and Thursday. However, I told my officials this morning that we need to meet him again, next week if possible. I flagged that with Maria Miller when I spoke to her this morning about some further ideas that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has about child maintenance. I put down very strong markers in private with Maria Miller about the next phase of what I might consider making people pay for what should be essential public and state services. However, I assure the Member that, in my view, the conversation with the London Government about the outworking of all that will take off only after this week. Members of the Government have spent so much time talking to one other that it will be after this week before they begin talking to others. In that context, I welcome the support from across the Chamber that the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland must be recognised in the overall Budget and in the overall benefits regime.

Mr Givan: Is the Minister aware of the rumour that the winter fuel payment will be abolished tomorrow, or at least significantly reduced by the coalition Government, the sister parties of the Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party in this Chamber? If that is the case, it will have a detrimental impact, particularly on the elderly when they come to face this cold winter.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question?

Mr Givan: Does the Minister agree that that would be a retrograde step?

The Minister for Social Development: I absolutely agree that the apparent proposal to reduce the cold weather payment from £25 to £8.50, its original figure, is a retrograde step. In the fullness of time, I might bring that matter, along with some others, to the attention of the Executive to determine our local response. As the Member said, I understand that there is speculation of reductions in the £250 winter fuel payment and in the higher figure for older people, and I concur with his remarks.

Carer's Allowance

4. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister for Social Development what steps he is taking to improve the uptake of carer's allowance by carers of pension age. (AQO 342/11)

The Minister for Social Development: The Member's question touches on the earlier question that his colleague Mr McNarry answered.

Mr Kennedy: Asked.

The Minister for Social Development: Asked and was not answered, I am sure Mr Kennedy would claim.

If there was anything that I happened to miss — I am sure that there was — I will come back to it.

Carer's allowance is one example where the Department and benefits offices can work in a real, local and individual way to benefit the people whom we represent. A number of steps have been taken to improve the uptake of carer's allowance. Since 2005, the uptake programme has targeted 319,000 people, and £25 million of additional benefit has been paid in arrears. A total of 40,000 pensioners have been targeted specifically for carer's allowance, and 2,500 people will be targeted for carer's allowance during this year's benefit take-up campaign. Therefore, we are trying to push the

limits across the range of initiatives, particularly following the 2008 review that was conducted jointly by DSD and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. As I indicated when I spoke about the case in Portadown, benefits take-up through benefits offices can work effectively to help those, especially the very elderly, who are in need.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for his answer. As we enter a period of fiscal constraint and benefit reform, does the Minister accept that it is vital for all those who are entitled to benefits to receive them? What targets does the Minister intend to set for carers of pensionable age to take up carer's allowance?

The Minister for Social Development: Again, I agree with the sentiment of the question. I welcome the range of questions that I have received, both orally and in writing, on the welfare issue. It has taken some time for the full consequences of the London Administration's proposals to be worked through, and it is very important that there is a shared narrative.

We have a number of models that are ongoing in the area of benefit uptake by pensioners. Those include outreach services through the 20 advisers in benefits offices; local promotional activity; specific publications; the website; and general assistance through the network of local offices. By June 2010, over £25 million of additional annual benefits in arrears were generated for pensioners. I do not know the target figure for the total benefit take-up in this year's campaign, but we are targeting 2,500 pensioners in order to maximise their benefits. We will try to do that if it helps those individuals.

Mr Dallat: The Minister will be aware that a carer's review was carried out jointly by his Department and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Will he give the House some indication of what the findings of that review were? Will he also tell us whether any progress has been made by his Department and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Services in addressing those findings?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for the interruption and the question. He is quite right. A joint review was carried out in 2008, and it made 15 recommendations. The recommendations stated that, given the current context, the principle of parity needed to be protected. That is particularly so because of the risks to the elderly if there was some sort of

unilateral or reckless breach of that. The review also recommended that we should work closely with DWP on those matters. That is what I have been doing as Minister, as my predecessor did, and those relationships will probably have to intensify in the near future.

The review's specific recommendation that the Social Security Agency should include an exercise on carer's allowance in the benefit take-up campaign was actioned last year, and, as I indicated, it is continuing this year. Its recommendation that we should work closely with carers' organisations in examining the future role and scope of carers' benefits touches on Mr McCann's earlier question. We are working inside and outside the Chamber to do whatever is necessary to protect carers, pensioners and all those who are entitled to benefits.

Mr Bell: Does the Minister agree that Citizens Advice does some valuable work in linking carer's allowance to those who desperately need it?

Secondly, given the pressure that citizens advice bureaux are under, particularly in Newtownards, will his Department step up to the plate to ensure that people who are entitled to claim carer's allowance get that information?

The Minister for Social Development: Obviously, I concur with the Member's first point. The broader point is that we must try to protect the community and voluntary sector, whatever the budgetary situation. I have said on the Floor previously that I wrote to all Ministers to ask that funding for the community and voluntary sector not go to the wall, either by design or default. That is the risk, given that 40% of the funding comes from my Department, 20% comes from the Department of Health and the other 40% is spread across Departments. There is a danger that Ministers — more by default; I hope not by design — will target the community and voluntary sector. We need to legislate against that.

I am aware of the situation in Newtownards. We have been trying to support the community and voluntary sector in Newtownards, including through the provision of new accommodation. If there is anything further that I can say in respect of the Newtownards citizens advice bureau, I will contact the Member with that information.

Dungannon Public Realm Scheme

5. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister for Social Development whether Phase 1 of the public

realm scheme for Dungannon town centre is going ahead and if his Department has ring-fenced funding for this scheme. (AQO 343/11)

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. I reassure him that the Dungannon scheme, like a lot of other public realm and town centre schemes, is very important. As a result of Newcastle's public realm scheme, for example, footfall in the main street in Newcastle has increased by 300%. The opportunities for trade and tourism in a public realm scheme are confirmed by the evidence from the Newcastle scheme. I am sure that those opportunities will be confirmed by evidence from other places in the fullness of time — including Armagh, Mr Kennedy.

I am committed to the Dungannon scheme. Indeed, I was so committed to the Dungannon scheme that, in my bid for extra money in the June monitoring round, I put in proposals for £2.1 million for the Dungannon scheme so that it could be on site this year. That is how much I believe in the Dungannon scheme and various other schemes around Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, the Executive decided not to allocate sufficient moneys for the Dungannon scheme and various other urban regeneration projects; I was the lone dissenting voice.

My commitment to the Dungannon scheme and other public realm schemes is clear and certain. There is proof that those schemes work. On a pound-for-pound basis, they are one of the better economic interventions that we have in Northern Ireland. It is unfortunate that, when the opportunity existed to get Dungannon over the line in June, the Executive chose to do otherwise.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for his reply. I am pleased to learn that he still sees the merits of the Dungannon scheme. I am very disappointed to hear that he did not get a voice for the Dungannon scheme in the Executive. Perhaps others will stand up to answer that one when their day comes. I think that the Minister is already on record as saying that the Dungannon scheme is so far advanced that it has to proceed anyway. Does he still hold that opinion?

The Minister for Social Development: Unfortunately, it was not so far advanced that it had to proceed. If there had been a contractual commitment, as I had in respect of a number of other schemes around Northern Ireland, I would have had to fulfil my contractual and

legal obligations one way or the other. However, the Dungannon scheme was not quite at the point of contract. It failed to jump that hurdle, even though it remained a priority commitment that I wished to have honoured and to see in place during the course of this year. Other opportunities have been lost too, but I will try to do something about those in the next number of months. Those opportunities include Strabane footbridge, various public realm works in regional towns of Northern Ireland, urban development grants and the like.

The real issue is this: will we in the Executive have a serious conversation about what economic interventions work best, especially during a time of recession? Is it better or worse for money to go into the accounts of INI on a pound-for-pound and job-for-job basis than it is for it to go into town centre regeneration? I doubt that we will have that conversation; however, if we do, the narrative about why the public realm scheme works so well in Newcastle and why Dungannon could follow will be heard.

3.00 pm

Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 4 and 10 have been withdrawn.

Farm Machinery

1. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what incentives are in place to encourage farmers to improve efficiency by sharing machinery. (AQO 352/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): The sharing of machinery can, in some circumstances, help the efficiency of farm businesses. The market has been responsive in developing formal and informal commercial arrangements, such as machinery rings that facilitate the shared use of farm machinery where it makes business sense to do so. However, the main method by which farmers choose such efficiencies is through the use of specialist private contractors.

I remind those involved in machinery sharing that they have an important responsibility to ensure that disease risk-management strategies

are in place and that appropriate and effective biosecurity procedures are followed in line with Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) guidelines.

There are no initiatives at present specifically aimed at encouraging farmers to share machinery. However, my Department is consulting on a new tranche of the manure efficiency technology sub-programme (METS). The programme provides grant support to help towards the purchase of advanced slurry-spreading machinery and is aimed at improving nutrient efficiency and delivering environmental benefits.

Plans for the new tranche include a proposal to allow collective applications so that farmers can share machinery. Depending on the outcome of the consultation, METS may facilitate the sharing of slurry-spreading machinery such as trailing shoe systems. I am keen to consider including equipment sharing in future schemes, where appropriate. The feasibility and practicalities will be explored when we progress options for tranche 3 of the farm modernisation programme.

Mr Armstrong: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given the significant overhead costs involved in buying farm machinery, does she accept that the Department could increase efficiency in farms if it promoted the sharing of farm machinery? Does she accept that the farm modernisation programme does not sufficiently cover that area?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

The farm modernisation programme provides quite small grants; as the Member will be aware, the maximum amount for which farmers can apply is £4,000. Therefore, the programme is not comparable with a big scheme such as METS, in which the cost of machinery is some £10,000. A farmer would need to have about 400 cows to make the purchase of that machinery beneficial for the farm business; that is why we feel that there is more potential to incentivise farmers to share the cost of buying big, expensive pieces of machinery. The farm modernisation programme would not necessarily work along the same lines as the METS scheme. However, we will look at machinery sharing in tranche 3 of the programme. It is right to incentivise the collective purchase of machinery in these difficult economic times.

Farm Modernisation Programme

2. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline any changes she has made to the original criteria for the farm modernisation programme. (AQO 353/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The main changes to the original farm modernisation programme criteria relate to the selection of projects when a call for applications is oversubscribed. Those changes were introduced as a result of the criticism of the first-come, first-served approach taken in tranche 1 and in response to the European Commission, which asked us to introduce additional selection criteria. The additional criteria are detailed in the explanatory booklet for tranche 2, which, I am pleased to say, is now available since tranche 2 opened for applications yesterday. Marks will be awarded under the four additional selection criteria of land classification, degree of modernisation, succession opportunity and e-communication.

Mr Beggs: The Minister argued that she favours the less-favoured areas under the criteria, as she wishes smaller, less profitable farms to benefit. Does she accept that, by using those criteria, larger farm will be included but that much of the east of the Province will be excluded?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I make no apologies for choosing those criteria. Judging by all the data available to my Department, the challenging environment in severely disadvantaged areas and disadvantaged areas is serious enough to ensure that those farmers need to be incentivised to stay in business and to keep farming where the degree of modernisation is needed most and where the viability of those farms is marginal. In spite of everything that we have done over the years, there are still more farmers going out of business in severely disadvantaged areas. There are fewer opportunities available for them. A lowland farmer's land has better climatic conditions, so he can move to an area of farming that is more favourable in the current market. However, that option is not available to farmers in severely disadvantaged areas. They are in a much weaker position to continue their farming sustainability into the future.

Mr Bell: Could any changes be made to the farm modernisation programme or to any other programme if Europe lets the poultry farmers down and allows a derogation?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As I said earlier, quite a few items are available for poultry farmers under the farm modernisation programme, including anti-vermin meal bins, tray stackers and identification for eggs. Items such as fans were put on the list specifically for poultry farmers so that they could have items that would help them to modernise their businesses, so they would hopefully then apply for tranche 2. As I said this morning, if there is a tranche 3, I will want to look at areas where we can help farmers whose farms are most in need of modernisation.

Mr P J Bradley: What assurance can the Minister give regarding help or guidance that will be forthcoming from DARD if it is discovered that an unintentional error has been made on an application form to the farm modernisation programme?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I worked very hard to ensure that the form and the explanatory booklet that goes with it are as simple and easy to understand as possible. The form is only a couple of pages long, and our stakeholders are very keen that we minimise bureaucracy throughout the delivery of the farm modernisation programme. We worked very hard to do that. A number of errors were identified in tranche 1, and we looked at those on a case-by-case basis and saw how many of them we could sort out.

One of the benefits of tranche 2 is that the scheme is open for six weeks. Therefore, I ask farmers not to rush their forms and not to submit them in a panic, which was what happened the last time. It makes no difference whether their forms go in today or on the last day. We would like farmers to take their time, fill out their forms properly and ensure that all the items are put on their forms to enable us to help them to draw down the money, to help them to modernise their farms.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is important to continue to support farmers in less-favoured areas for the reasons that were given. Farmers with modern, large farms should be able to survive on their own by now, given the amount of money that they have been given. Does the Minister agree that, due to their land type and rainfall, disadvantaged areas are still quite disadvantaged, compared with the better-landed areas of the North?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I agree with the Member. In spite

of less-favoured area compensatory allowances and other support systems, the climatic ground conditions in severely disadvantaged areas mean that farming in those areas is much more challenging, and many of those farmers are on the margins of viability. For people who farm on hills, there are huge environmental consequences for those fields not to be grazed, and difficulties will ensue. Therefore, there is a need to support farmers in severely disadvantaged areas and in disadvantaged areas and to try to keep them in farming.

Farm Family Options Scheme

3. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many applications have been received to date under tranche 2 of the Farm Family Options scheme. (AQO 354/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: There were 331 applications received during tranche 2 of the skills element of the farm family options scheme. Tranche 2 opened on 1 April 2010 and closed on 28 May 2010.

Mrs M Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given the many hobbies that can develop into sources of supplementary income, particularly for family farms, can the Minister explain why hobbies with potential for development were not considered for support under the farm family option scheme?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Unfortunately, the Member has not given me a great deal of detail. Without knowing what those hobbies are, it is difficult for me to answer her question. Presumably, someone is not going to go into full-time jigsaw making. If the Member wants to come back to me with further details, I will be happy to look at that on a case-by-case basis.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat. How many applications were received under tranche 1?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Department received 942 applications under tranche 1, which opened on 19 November 2009 and closed on 31 March 2010.

Mr Savage: What measures has the Minister taken to make funding available to people who are most in need of it? Can she give details

of measures that she has taken to increase awareness of the farm family option scheme throughout Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I believe strongly that the farm family option scheme is a good thing to do. The Department has tried to ensure that as many farm family members as possible get over the line with the scheme. We can learn lessons from previous tranches and publicise the scheme better; there is no question about that. The farm family options are available for farmers, someone who has a relevant business identification number, farmers' spouses — their husbands or wives — and their children. There is the ability to ensure that someone who has an idea and requires training and, perhaps, has barriers to accessing that training can do so. The farm family option scheme includes a childcare element. It is a progressive training model for farm families. I hope that as many people as possible take up the offer under the scheme and enable a better income to come into the family pot. If a farmer's son or daughter decides to set up business in or around the farm, training is available to help him or her to do that and to increase the economic well-being of the farm family.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Sheep

5. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline progress on the electronic identification of sheep. (AQO 356/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The introduction of electronic identification of sheep is an EU obligation. It requires the individual identity of sheep to be recorded when they are moved. My officials worked with a wide range of operators and stakeholders here and with their counterparts in Britain and the South to ensure that we introduced a system that implements EU legislation with minimum cost and burden to keepers while allowing the important sheep trade to the South to continue.

From 1 June 2010, all sheep moving off farms must be tagged with an electronic tag set. Markets, meat plants, export assembly centres and slaughter collection centres have had the

option of acting as central points of recording. That means that they use electronic readers to read tags and provide sheep keepers with a list of tag numbers in each consignment of sheep. The uptake of that role has been very good, and that has significantly reduced the impact of electronic tagging on keepers here, as they do not have to buy or use electronic readers for most sheep movements.

Overall, the implementation of electronic tagging of sheep has been highly successful. I am encouraged by the level of compliance in markets and meat plants. I am also encouraged by the level of uptake by keepers. By the end of September 2010, more than 8,300 keepers here had ordered electronic tags. That represents the vast majority of those who keep sheep.

Miss McIlveen: It is my understanding that there has been a number of problems, which have even been raised at EU level by a number of member states and, indeed, by Northern Ireland's MEPs. Given that problems exist, can the Minister assure the House that those that occur during the early stages of implementation and involve technology will not affect farmers' single farm payments?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I am keen to take measures that do not impact negatively on farmers' single farm payments. I recognise that there are always difficulties in rolling out a new system, particularly when we have not initiated it and it has come from an EU directive.

I am clear on the need to protect our farmers from the burden of not only not being able to get their tags read but not being able to get tags readily. To date, there are about 18 different electronic tags available for use, and we have brought in our stakeholders. We worked closely with our sheep keepers and organisations. We worked not only with the UFU and NIAPA but with the National Sheep Association. We want to have tags readily available, ensure that they are read properly at central points of recording at plants, and so on, and try to minimise the problems.

3.15 pm

I accept that it is never easy to move to a new system. That is why in January 2009, when England, Scotland and Wales moved to double-tagging, I spoke to the Commission and tried to iron out any difficulties. I did not want to ask our

industry to go through three different systems in the space of 18 months and put it through the additional burden that flock keepers in England, Scotland and Wales had to go through. I am pleased that that has worked out and that it has not caused any problems. We accept that there have been some teething problems but not as many as might have been expected, and we are working with the industry to ensure that those are ironed out.

Mr Kinahan: Has the Minister made representations to DEFRA and, thus, to Europe to insist that all imported lamb into the UK has the same high level of traceability so that our local sheep farmers are not placed at a disadvantage when it comes to the additional cost burden?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As was the case in the subject being debated this morning, different member states have differing views on electronic identification. As far as I am aware, the traceability element was the reason for bringing in e-ID, especially given the impact of the movement of sheep during 2001, when foot-and-mouth disease was prevalent. Britain's policy on sheep movements caused the Commission to go down that route with sheep e-ID. I am keen that our flock keepers are not disadvantaged in any way. I have discussed the issue with colleagues in DEFRA and have taken the issue directly to the EU Commission to ensure that our flock keepers are not at any disadvantage.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Brucellosis

7. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the brucellosis outbreak in Lislea and Keady and the action being taken to eradicate the disease. (AQO 358/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: We have reduced the herd incidence for brucellosis from 1.01% in October 2008 to 0.33% in August 2010, but the clusters of disease in Lislea and Keady are holding up the drive towards the complete eradication of the disease. Of the 24 confirmed breakdowns in the North in 2010, 17 were in the Keady and Lislea areas. Since January 2010, the Armagh divisional veterinary office has had 11 confirmed

brucellosis breakdowns, 10 of which have been in Keady or in the Keady area, and additional control movements are being employed in that area. A number of herds are being investigated for non-compliance with legislation or the conditions of official notices and, so far, have not received any compensation payments.

Since December 2009, the Newry divisional veterinary office has had 12 confirmed brucellosis breakdowns, seven of which were in Lislea. After the dumped foetus incident in late 2009, brucellosis infection was found in six further herds in the Lislea area in the early part of this year. Lislea has also been subject to the additional controls as described for Keady.

A large number of stored and recently taken samples have been analysed and compared with the DNA from the dumped foetus. As yet, no match has been found, but the Veterinary Service is continuing its investigations in liaising with the PSNI.

I recently met the Justice Minister and the PSNI Chief Constable to discuss what more can be done to deal with brucellosis-related fraudulent and criminal activity, which is having a severe impact on many innocent hard-working farm families in those areas. I am pleased that further PSNI assistance will be given, as those fraudulent activities are preventing the eradication of this disease, which could benefit all farmers from reduced levels of testing.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for her answer. I know that she is aware of the distress that the incidence of the disease has caused in the Lislea and Keady areas. She has answered the question to some degree. Does she agree that more robust measures and sanctions should be taken against those who are found to have deliberately infected herds?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Yes. That is why I have been having meetings, not just with David Ford, the Justice Minister, but with Matt Baggott in the PSNI. Deliberate infection through fraudulent or criminal activity results in a great deal of inconvenience for innocent farmers in that area. That is why I am determined to do all that I can to eradicate brucellosis and will take any measures necessary to help me to do that.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Minister for her responses; I particularly welcome the emphasis on the co-operation and assistance

of the PSNI in dealing with the issue. Will the Minister detail what resources, if any, have been made available to farmers in the locality to improve their biosecurity?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: One of the most important things that we have done in those areas is to set up farmers' liaison groups some years ago. They have been very helpful and have come up with some excellent suggestions; for example, some farmers have double-fenced to protect their herds' biosecurity. Three groups were set up: one in south Armagh, one in north Armagh and one in Fermanagh. I am grateful to all those who co-operated in those groups; without their support and suggestions, we would not have been so successful in getting the figure down to 0.33%.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister inform the House whether she or her officials have given the names of suspects in the Keady and Lislea cases to the PSNI?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Veterinary Service officials in the divisional veterinary offices in Newry and in Armagh are working closely with members of the PSNI in those areas, and there has been full co-operation between my officials and the PSNI on whatever information we have.

DARD: Access to Benefits

8. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made in relation to the maximising access to benefits scheme initiated by her Department. (AQO 359/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Great progress has been made already through bringing together an effective partnership, including Departments, agencies and the community and voluntary sector, to work and drive the project forward. Lead organisations have been appointed to cover each of the 13 target zones, and they have trained 222 enablers to undertake the target of 4,200 household visits; to date, 4,272 letters have been issued to households, and 1,663 household visits have been completed.

It is a live project, with 200 to 300 visits taking place a week. However, I am pleased to inform the House that in three of the first 10 households visited, benefit entitlements have

already been identified and that enablers will work with households and agencies to ensure that those are realised. If that level of success is replicated across the 4,200 households, it will have a significant impact on our rural households suffering poverty and exclusion.

Mr Doherty: I thank the Minister for her detailed and comprehensive answer, which included many statistics. Will the Minister provide more detail on the three households that she mentioned?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As I said, the project is at an early stage in relation to outcomes, but I am assured that, following a benefit-entitlement check on the three households, the projected figures are as follows: client one is projected to benefit from an additional weekly amount of £145 of income support; client two is projected to be entitled to an additional £120 full-rate DLA; and client three is a farmer who was projected to be entitled to £50 per week for working tax credit. That is fantastic news for those individuals and households.

The uniqueness of the project is that it is not just a signposting service; enablers will work with the various agencies to ensure that entitlements and benefits are realised. Moreover, numerous households have expressed an interest in being referred for Smartpasses, rural community transport membership, home-safety checks, dentists, computer classes and arts and crafts classes. All those have had a positive impact on addressing not only poverty but social exclusion and health issues.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for her replies thus far. What role can the community network play, and has it played, to encourage those who qualify for benefits to take up that entitlement?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I give full credit to the community network for that project, because it was initiated out of a pilot project in Fermanagh, led by the Fermanagh rural community network. In that project, for every pound invested in the scheme, £6 was drawn down in benefits and grants for vulnerable people who really needed the support.

This is a case of working in partnership with the community sector, an example of the creativity and generating of ideas in that sector, and of government using that depth of knowledge, experience and expertise for us to make a real

difference. Although people in Fermanagh and Tyrone benefited from that pilot, people from right across the Six Counties will benefit from the project, and those 4,200 households will be in all our constituencies.

Not only will those people benefit from additional resources into their homes, local businesses and the local economy will benefit from the increase in money going into rural areas. I am delighted with the project. It has been of huge benefit, and I am pleased to have had the co-operation of the Health Minister in rolling it out. He was there when we launched it at Loughguile earlier this year.

Cycling

9. **Mr B Wilson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps her Department is taking, or plans to take, to encourage cycling in forests. (AQO 360/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: My Department's Forest Service already makes provision for cycling at a number of forests. That includes mountain bike, family cycling and Sustrans trails. In addition, my officials are working with a number of partners to develop a mountain bike project in the Mourne. If the various funding, legal and operational issues can be finalised, that will represent a significant new cycling resource in the North. My officials are also working with other partners, including councils and the National Trust, to explore other cycling opportunities.

Mr B Wilson: I thank the Minister very much for her response. There is promising development there, but we do not develop our forests to their full potential, particularly for recreation and tourism. I notice that quite a lot of money is going into the Forestry Commission in England and Scotland to develop cycling in forests. Does the Minister agree that that could be developed in our forests?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I certainly agree that we do not utilise our forestry resource enough. That is why I committed Forest Service to come up with a strategy for recreational and social use, so that we would commit Forest Service to develop business partnerships with suitable public and private providers to secure a more diverse range of facilities and attractions for visitors to our forests.

The Global Geopark in County Fermanagh is a great example of what can be achieved through partnership agreements. We worked closely with Fermanagh District Council to establish management agreements to improve recreation and education facilities. Other partnership opportunities are being explored with organisations such as the Tourist Board, the National Trust, the RSPB and local councils.

However, we could certainly do a lot more, and I want to work with other Departments and see what other funding can be used. We have the land, but not necessarily the money. If we work in partnership, we can bring maximum benefit to not only rural areas, but to visitors going to those areas.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's detailed answer. A main element of the Programme for Government is greater access to and participation in sport. Is there full liability insurance to protect from injury those using the public areas and forestry?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Obviously, insurance is a big issue, and we work with our partners to ensure that we have proper insurance cover in place. I also take this opportunity to remind Members and people listening out there that we still have the ongoing situation with P. ramorum. If an area is blocked off or taped off, we ask people not to infringe on those taped-off areas and not to be spreading the disease further.

We have insurance for the activities that are in our forests. If we were trying, for example, to develop a cycling route with Sustrans, obviously the proper and full level of insurance cover for that activity would need to be in place before we could open the route to the public.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 10 has been withdrawn. The questioners for questions 11 and 12 are not in their place.

3.30 pm

Dairy Industry

13. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what initiatives are in place to assist the dairy industry in achieving greater supply chain co-operation.
(AQO 364/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I thank George for helping to get me into double figures; I am very pleased.

Most dairy farmers in the North of Ireland are members of producer co-operatives and already have close links with their supply chain partners, as those co-operatives own processing facilities and have strong relationships with retailers.

The supply chain development programme, which is funded under axis 1, is available to assist farmers in the creation and strengthening of their supply chains through greater co-operation and collaboration. To date, one group of dairy farmers has applied to the programme. That application has been approved. New and existing groups of farmers with partners that are further along their respective supply chains in the agrifood, horticulture, forestry and renewable energy sectors are also eligible to apply. Groups must comprise two or more farmers.

Private Members' Business

Knife Crime

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Justice to introduce tougher sentences for persons convicted of knife crime; and further calls on the Minister to bring forward a strategy to take knives off our streets in the wake of recent attacks and violence involving knives. — [Mr Easton.]

Mr Weir: The debate has been extensive. I am the twelfth Member to speak in it and not the thirteenth, so perhaps I should take comfort from that.

We have had a very mature discussion about knife crime, and there has been wide consensus around the Chamber. If someone in the Public Gallery had been blindfolded during the debate and not told who was speaking, he or she would have found it difficult to discern which party the Member was from, because the message from all sides of the Chamber was pretty consistent.

We need not reinvent the wheel. The issue is ensuring that we have best practice, appropriate sentencing and collaboration, and that we learn from examples elsewhere to deal with the scourge of knife crime.

The proposer of the motion, my colleague Alex Easton, highlighted that there is a growing problem: there were 938 incidents in 2009-10, which was a rise on the number recorded for the previous year. A number of Members said that knife crime in Northern Ireland is not as widespread as it is in other parts of the United Kingdom or even the Republic of Ireland.

However, we have a growing problem and we must ensure that we are not complacent. I come from north Down, which Mr McNarry highlighted, and although it has one of the lower levels of knife crime, even one knife crime is one too many. Dominic Bradley said that when someone is killed or injured in a stabbing the impact on the family of the victim and the tragedy is enormous. Any action that we can take to reduce that is something that we must look at.

In his speech, Alex Easton highlighted the successful use of the knife amnesty. Several Members referred to that, and it is something that must be borne in mind for the future.

As the proposer said, we must also ensure that, whatever sentences are put in place, there are sufficient deterrents, because, as Members said, prevention is better than cure. We must ensure that people do not carry knives in the first place. The fear of suffering at the hands of the law may lead people to leave knives at home.

On a number of occasions in the debate, the point was made that people who carry knives increase their chances of being a victim of knife crime instead of increasing their chances of defending themselves. The proposer of the motion also raised the issue of the retailer side and looking at measures such as test purchasing to highlight where there are breaches of the law. That is something that we need to push harder on.

A number of Members echoed the proposer's remarks. We do not have to reinvent the wheel. There are good initiatives elsewhere, particularly in Scotland, where similar conditions have led to a large increase in sentencing. That is something that we need to learn from.

Daithí McKay talked about the problems of accessibility and the fact that knives can be got fairly easily in a kitchen environment. That is something that makes the problem difficult to address. He also spoke of preventing a culture from developing. We already have a situation where many young people go out with knives thinking that they need them to protect themselves. Tackling the culture that makes that acceptable and the norm must be looked at.

Ken Robinson said that he had been raising the issue since 2002. At that stage, he was a lone voice. I am reminded of the old adage about a prophet being without honour in his own land. Ken is to be commended for his long-term interest in this issue. He also highlighted the issue of Scotland; there are examples elsewhere. He stressed that we need to tackle the source of the problem. He talked, as a number of Members did, of the need for education. This is not something that lies only within the ambit of the Justice Department, but is a wider problem and its genesis lies in the schools. It is something that the proposer raised, and he gave the example from his own youth of when police would come into the classroom. It was a good example of the action that can be taken. Ken Robinson also highlighted the need to bear down on retailers who abuse the situation and break the law.

Conall McDevitt dealt with a number of the issues and referred to the rise in the scale of the problem. He also spoke of the situation in Scotland the need for a joined-up approach and collaboration between the justice system, the police, the courts and the education system. It has got to be a joined-up approach to deal with this.

Trevor Lunn reminded us of a number of cases that had happened locally and the need for changes of culture and attitude. With a high level of honesty, he outed himself as one of these knife-wielding thugs. I know that there has been reference. Just before the Speaker goes mad at this point, let me say that we had a situation where the Finance Minister was recently described as "Slasher Sammy". I am sure that we do not want to see "Slasher Trevor". I am sure that he will take the very mature step of getting rid of his knife to set a clear-cut example and run the risk of horses with stones in their hooves limping around the countryside. I am an animal lover, but that is a small price to pay for Mr Lunn's putting away his knife.

Paul Frew dealt with the expectations of prosecution and imprisonment. There must be a joined-up approach and collaboration among a range of agencies. He said that carrying a knife puts one at much greater risk. We have to get away from the image of the hard man or the mean-looking person, and take a much more mature look at this. Mr Frew also highlighted the value of a knife amnesty.

Claire McGill accurately highlighted the impact on families. We tend to think of the numbers of incidents and victims, but for every direct victim, there is a wide range of people in families who suffer as a result of knife crime. Again, it is a question of changing mindsets.

George Robinson highlighted the issue of education, and said that for hardened or repeat offenders we must look where we can raise sentences.

David McNarry said that we were not as bad as other bits. He gave a number of local examples, said that we should not be complacent and stressed the advantages of deterrence. I said to Mr McNarry that I could make further remarks about his speech, but he threatened that if I did, he would set Trevor Lunn on me. That is enough to make me draw my remarks on David McNarry's speech to a close.

Dominic Bradley highlighted positive action by bereaved families and the very courageous steps taken by those who have suffered directly from it. Being proactive in this is something that everyone will commend. He gave a range of specific examples and went into some of the detail as to the particular education programmes that could be used.

The Minister indicated the degree of commitment that there is to address this issue. He said that there is no room for complacency and highlighted a wide range of things that the Department had already done.

He also highlighted the particular linkages with the issues of domestic violence and alcohol. He said that sentencing guideline mechanisms were out for consultation. We need to look at those to ensure that we get them right. In addition, he highlighted the work with the education sector. Although I would have liked him to have gone further and announced a knife amnesty, I welcome the fact that he at least kept the door open to that in future.

Although the figures in Northern Ireland are lower, we cannot be complacent. We need to send out a clear message by way of collaboration and multi-agency work to ensure that sentences are fit for the crime so that another family, in whatever part of Northern Ireland, is not subjected to the great tragedy of knife crime. I am glad that the House seems to have united behind this serious issue and spoken with a clear and united voice.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Justice to introduce tougher sentences for persons convicted of knife crime; and further calls on the Minister to bring forward a strategy to take knives off our streets in the wake of recent attacks and violence involving knives.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Foyle: Speech and Language Therapy

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have up to 10 minutes.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Business Committee for allowing this debate to take place today. I have brought the debate to the Chamber because of specific problems for adults with learning difficulties who need speech and language services for communication difficulties. For many parents, it is an emotive and sensitive subject matter. I acknowledge and welcome the Minister's attendance at today's debate.

Good changes have been made in recent years in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area. I have been involved in the issue of speech and language therapy problems in Derry since about 2005. At that time, it was acknowledged that there was a £1 million deficit in services in Derry compared with what other children received across Northern Ireland, particularly in Belfast. Although there has been an improvement in access to speech and language therapy for children, we still, unfortunately, have a postcode lottery across Northern Ireland.

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

Last week, I attended a Barnardo's event in the Stormont Hotel, as all parties did. In Northern Ireland, we have to protect services for vulnerable children in particular. Early years provision is so important for them. Unfortunately, the statistics in Northern Ireland are not good: £80 a child is spent on early years; in Britain, the figure is about £600. That is a huge difference. I will speak particularly about adults with learning difficulties. As we all know, we are entering a crisis in public expenditure. The very least that we should do, as elected representatives, is champion and advocate those services. We should absolutely ensure that services for vulnerable children are protected. One thing in

life that we should be doing is looking after the needs of those special children.

I now turn specifically to the issue of speech and language therapy for adults with a learning disability. A few weeks ago, I was contacted by a parent of an adult with learning difficulties. She told me that her adult daughter had been assessed by speech and language therapy services. The assessment was that she required speech and language services for communication difficulties, but she had to wait two years for that assessment. That is unacceptable. She has now been informed that no communication services whatsoever are available for adults with learning difficulties in the Western Trust area. Services are available for people with dysphagia, which is a swallowing problem.

Only two speech and language therapists are assigned to people with learning difficulties in the Western Trust area, which stretches from north of Limavady to south of Enniskillen. Between them, they deal with 170 referrals a year. Roughly 130 of those are for people with dysphagia, that is, eating and swallowing difficulties. Those people are, quite rightly in the circumstances, prioritised for treatment.

3.45 pm

Around 40 people a year are referred as a result of having direct communication difficulties. I say to the Minister that no service is available for those people. I have checked with other trusts, and I understand that they provide speech and language therapy services that are specifically related to communication difficulties. One can only conclude that needs-based services are provided on a postcode lottery basis across Northern Ireland. I am sure that the Minister agrees that that is not acceptable in this day and age. It is not acceptable where equality, access and giving some heart and comfort to the parents of those with learning disabilities are concerned.

I checked the distribution of speech and language therapists across Northern Ireland. Belfast is best served in the speech therapist: population ratio, in that it has 18% of the North's population and 27% of speech therapy positions. The Western Trust area has 15% of Northern Ireland's population and 15% of speech therapists. That seems reasonable. However, the Department's figures show that the need for services in my Derry constituency is extremely high. In fact, more primary school

children are registered as requiring speech and language therapy in the Western Education and Library Board area than in any other board area in Northern Ireland. The logic of that is that the board requires, and the west requires, a higher than average number of speech therapists to deal with the area's needs, which is what we are talking about.

There is the additional issue of geography to consider. It takes two hours to travel from one end of the Western Trust area to the other. That is a further stretch on resources for parents who are already badly in need and under pressure. Therefore, I ask the Minister to outline what special considerations are given to the geography, population distribution and registered needs of a trust area when financial resources for particular services are being allocated.

I wrote to the Western Health and Social Care Trust. I have a letter with me in which it acknowledges that, at present and given current resources, it is unable to accommodate the needs of the people to whom I referred, that is, adults with learning difficulties. From its reply, I understand that the trust intends to ask for additional resources from the commissioning body.

Will the Minister make a commitment to help adults with learning difficulties? They are among the most vulnerable people in our society. Their main carers, often their parents, are under severe lifelong financial pressures and emotional and physical stress. We know that, because we see them every day of the week. Mary Bradley, Martina Anderson and Raymond McCartney see them. Those who represent the constituency have seen, on the coalface, the distress, discomfort and disadvantage faced by such parents, who hang on a thread and hope against hope that some level of service will enable their child with learning difficulties to communicate with them, even in a small way. They hope that their children will be enabled to express an opinion or an emotion. Expressing emotion is where the difficulty is, so the parents involved should be given peace of mind.

I will not speak for my 15 minutes, Mr Deputy Speaker. We need to protect those in our community who are in stress and disadvantage. We in the Chamber must send out a clear and strong message that we need to protect services for vulnerable people, including children and adults with special needs. I know

that the Minister will support me when I say that, if we do nothing else, we should ensure that such people are the most important in our community. We need to stand behind them.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuil mé iontach sásta bheith ag caint inniu. I am very satisfied to be speaking in the debate, which I thank Pat Ramsey for securing.

This is an issue in which, over the past number of years, he has invested a great deal of time and effort, and that should be acknowledged. Indeed, the people of Derry do acknowledge it. I also acknowledge the fine job done by speech and language therapists who work across the various health trust areas, and I stress that any difficulties in the service are not down to them. In my experience, they are hugely dedicated and professional people, who, in the Health Service, provide an essential service for children and adults. The therapists have not failed anyone; they have been failed by a lack of investment, which has led to an inadequate service.

Sinn Féin has long supported demands for adequate provision and facilities for speech and language therapists across the North and, specifically, in Derry and the north-west. We have raised the matter consistently with the Western Health and Social Care Trust and with social services, and our people have had conversations with the Minister in Committee. In particular, I lobbied the Minister about the need to establish a multi-disciplinary team, of which speech and language therapists were to be an integral part, in order to diagnose children with autism at the earliest possible age. Thankfully, those teams have now been established, which I appreciate. We should acknowledge positive moves where they have occurred, particularly in recent years.

Nevertheless, a lack of provision is evident across the North, and the standard and level of provision varies greatly between areas. Pat referred to a postcode lottery, and that should be taken account of. We have to ask ourselves how far we have come since 2006, when the Children's Commissioner reported that more than half of children who required assessment or speech therapy in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area could not access the service. The commissioner also found that speech and language therapy services are allocated on exactly the basis that Pat Ramsey described — by

postcode lottery, meaning that the area in which one lives has a huge bearing on one's expectation of receiving services and on the wait for assessment and treatment. In response, since 2006, we have not gone far enough.

In my constituency, as Pat Ramsey, Raymond McCartney, Mary Bradley and I have said, we have had to deal with many parents of children who face long and agonising waits to be assessed by speech and language therapists and to receive the necessary therapy. Indeed, yesterday, I dealt with parents who were concerned about services at Lakeview Hospital, in Derry, being removed from their child. So, even when people have them, they cannot even say to themselves that they are now in place to be utilised in the hope of some improvement. They have to battle constantly with the health authorities, in the first instance, to get the assessment and treatment that their child needs, and then, once they are receiving it, to retain it. Remember, any delay in putting in place the required speech and language provision can have long-term consequences. Early intervention is vital to successful treatment.

There are historical reasons, which have now been addressed, for the difficulties in training and retaining speech and language therapists in the north-west, the main one being that therapists in Derry were paid less than those anywhere else. Thankfully, that kind of inequality has been redressed, but the fact remains that, as well as insufficient funding for speech and language therapy as a whole, there is still a lack of provision in Derry. That must be addressed, and proper resources must be directed into that vital service, because, unfortunately, without proper access to speech and language therapy, many children are condemned to a life of poor educational achievement, resulting in poor employment prospects, the poor development of social skills, low self-esteem and emotional and behavioural problems. Early intervention by speech and language therapists can help to prevent those problems and more, and can increase the life chances of many children. In the long term, that would undoubtedly be cost-effective.

I am aware that the Minister is consulting on an action plan to improve services for children and young people with speech and language and communication needs, and I urge as many people as possible to respond to the consultation. I sincerely hope that the plan will provide the impetus necessary to make

the improvements that are so badly needed in speech and language provision here. Then, perhaps, we can put in place the assessment and treatment services that our young people should have as of right.

Mr McCartney: Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom mo chuid buíochais a ghabháil le Pat Ramsey le haghaidh an díospóireacht seo a thabhairt os comhair an Tionóil inniu; is ábhar tábhachtach é. Tá mé an-sásta go bhfuil an tAire anseo freisin.

I thank Pat Ramsey for securing the debate; he thanked the Business Committee for allocating the time. Pat has been a long-time advocate of speech and language therapy provision, and those of us who live in the city are well aware of the number of times that he has raised this issue. He and the Minister will appreciate that all six MLAs from the city have always weighed in behind the need for such provision.

I welcome the fact that the Minister is here for the debate. He will accept that there was a lack of speech and language therapists in the trust that services Derry city and the Foyle constituency, and he has taken steps to change that situation. Martina Anderson pointed out that the trust's therapists have done sterling work, and, indeed, stretched themselves over many years. We all commend the great work that has been done.

Pat Ramsey detailed the statistics, of which the Minister is aware. Down the years, a number of factors contributed to the lack of provision, one of which was the fact that speech therapists who worked in the north-west received lower rates of pay than their counterparts in other parts of the North. I welcome the fact that the Minister has addressed that situation; that is the type of action that we like to see.

As was mentioned, the Minister is consulting on an action plan. When he addresses the relevant issues at Question Time or during debates, the problem often comes down to one of resources. However, the action plan could allow for innovative thinking on ways to fill the gaps in provision. I am not trying to minimise the resource problems, but there may be other ways in which the Minister feels that the issue can be addressed. I hope that he is in a position today to give us a sense of how he envisages the action plan rolling out.

Perhaps the Minister could raise another aspect of the issue with his Executive colleagues. The

previous contributors to the debate pointed out that the lack of provision and care at a particular time in individuals' lives has a knock-on effect, as reflected in their lower educational attainment and low self-esteem. Employability becomes an issue and has a further knock-on effect.

Perhaps, as part of an innovative process, the Minister will seek to speak to some of his Executive colleagues about the ways in which other Departments could assist. The obvious spin-off from getting the proper resources in place at the right time is that the resources required for people later in life can be reduced through taking such positive actions early on.

The Minister's presence is welcome; it shows that he has knowledge of the issue, and we look forward to hearing what he has to say. Whatever action plan he takes forward, we hope that it will address the fundamental issues that face the constituency that we represent. I am sure that I speak for all Foyle MLAs, and they will say so themselves, when I say that we will support him in whatever he takes forward. We will do so in the hope and desire that, somehow, we can tackle what has been a long-term issue.

Over the years, in fairness, the trust has tried to address many of the problems, but sometimes it is a matter of resources. There are times that we look enviously at other areas, and, perhaps, it appears as though we come to the Chamber simply to criticise.

There is a lack of provision, yet there seems to be adequate provision in other areas. Therefore, in many ways, we see this as an issue of natural justice and want a sense of equality. I hope that the Minister can give us a view of how he will deal with the issue.

4.00 pm

Mrs M Bradley: I am delighted that the Minister is here today to listen to the debate, and I congratulate my colleague Pat Ramsey for bringing the Adjournment topic to the House.

The provision of speech and language therapy in the Foyle area is, and always has been, poor enough, to say the least. As a member of the Committee for Education, I am more than familiar with the difficulties that schools experience when they attempt to secure timely and appropriate assistance when a child requires additional help. That has been no mean feat for educators and parents alike.

In preparation for today's Adjournment debate, I sampled experiences of the provision of speech and language therapy in mainstream and special schools. The consensus is that initial assessment is sometimes fairly quick and sometimes not, and, in some cases, if someone is lucky enough, he or she might get an assessment within three to six weeks. However, the problems arise when it comes to referral for practical therapy. That can take months, may be spread over two or three school years and is given only in short blocks. That is not helpful and, in fact, is even more frustrating, as the child then has to join the queue again for additional therapy. Therein lie the problems.

Speech and language therapy is a serious issue in Foyle. For example, I found that in one nursery class in a primary school, 13 children have been referred for assistance. That is an awful lot of children from one class. If those children do not get help soon, it will be difficult for them to go through their studies without feeling embarrassed. Children feel embarrassed and catch on at an early age that they are different to other children. We should not allow them to go through education like that. We always talk about educating our children in their early years, and that is the right time to start. However, really and truly, so much self-confidence is lost, and issues of isolation arise. Indeed, many children become the victims of bullying. That is not acceptable in this day and age.

I could lay this debate at more than one Minister's door. The responsibility lies not only with the Health Minister, but perhaps with the Education Minister and, in some ways, the Employment and Learning Minister. It is imperative that the Minister for Employment and Learning consider the content of the debate and moves to assist Magee campus to develop further and to include speech and language therapy in its prospectus to encourage local students to take up the subject. The proposed increase in student fees will make it more difficult for students to leave home to study. Therefore, Magee must do all that it can to encourage our local students to study there.

The Minister of Education should also take note of the debate and consider whether opportunities exist for interdepartmental working to improve the situation. Given that the main difficulties are first discovered when a child enters full-time education, it surely becomes a problem for the Education Minister's

attention. I hope that the Ministers concerned will take note of the debate, and I look forward to some proactive suggestions at their earliest convenience.

For some reason, those of us who live in the west tend to suffer more than people in other board areas. Some people tell us that that is not the case, but we know for a fact that it is. The other Members present know that as well. Extra resources are badly needed in the west. If we get those extra resources, the families and educators of the children will be very grateful for that assistance, and those children, in later life, will be very glad of it. I urge the Minister to do whatever he can to help with the situation.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I am fully aware that the ability to communicate effectively is very important in today's modern, busy society. It is integral to and makes a very important contribution to people's lives at home, in school or in the social environment. Adults and children have speech, language and communication needs that range from specific language problems, such as a stammer, to the difficulties that are associated with specific conditions, such as an autistic spectrum disorder, hearing impairments, acquired brain injury and others.

Speech, language and communication needs can include difficulty understanding what people say, difficulty speaking or forming words and sounds, and difficulty in using language in appropriate social contexts. Most speech, language and communication needs are identified in childhood, but they may be acquired later in life. For example, they may be acquired after a stroke or a brain injury.

The House will be aware of my commitment to people with speech, language and communication needs in Northern Ireland. Over the past number of years, my Department has provided considerable extra investment, including £1 million for the provision of speech and language therapists and assistants and £4 million to develop and establish multidisciplinary teams, which include a speech and language therapist as a key element. In addition, £200,000 in recurrent funding was provided for service development.

Such investment has helped to ensure that my target to reduce waiting times to nine weeks by March 2010 for allied health professionals, including for speech and language therapy,

was met by all trusts. That is a considerable achievement when compared with average waiting times of 28 weeks in 2008. However, it may be the case that, owing to recent constraints on expenditure, difficulties are being experienced locally in maintaining that standard.

Mr Ramsey talked about a two-year wait, while Mrs Bradley talked about a one-year wait. That is news to me, and I am not aware of that. If those Members write to me to provide me with the details, I will undertake to investigate the matter further, because that is not the information that I have. Children in schools have to see an educational psychologist, who will refer them on. I wonder whether there has been a breakdown in that process and where that process lies. Educational psychologists are provided by education services, and speech and language services come through the health trusts.

There is no room for complacency, and that is particularly true of the standardisation of access criteria across the service in Northern Ireland. Earlier this year, my Department commissioned an exercise to help bring about improvements to the commissioning and planning of services through a service redesign.

Members will recall that, in September of this year, I launched for public consultation a speech, language and communication therapy action plan for children and young people. Although it specifically deals with children and young adults, it will impact positively on the further development and provision of speech and language services for everyone, and I remain steadfast in my commitment to drive forward service reform in that area. When the action plan is finalised, accountability for its implementation will be led by the Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency, and I anticipate the launch of the final document in January 2011. I am confident that the action plan will help to provide the strategic direction for the further development of speech and language services over the next two years.

My Department funds 30 places annually on the speech and language therapy course at the University of Ulster at Jordanstown to attract new people to the profession. I hear what Mrs Bradley says about Magee College, but Members will be pleased to know that there is good demand for those courses. My Department is also developing a draft physical and sensory disability strategy, which will be subject to

public consultation in the near future. As part of its aim, the strategy will seek to co-ordinate services regionally, including speech and language therapy, and to provide person-centred services based on clinical need.

The Western Health and Social Care trust, which covers the Foyle constituency, employs around 50 staff, working across the different specialities in speech and language therapy. Referrals for speech and language services can come from a range of professionals, including GPs, health visitors and school nurses. Treatment can be provided in healthcare facilities, but, increasingly, those services are provided on an outreach basis; for example, to children in schools. As of 14 October, there were 2,056 clients known to speech and language therapy services throughout the Western Trust. Of those, 54 make up adult learning disability caseloads. The trust's speech and language therapy service for adults with a learning disability is provided by two speech and language therapy staff.

The service receives between 160 and 170 referrals a year. Seventy-seven per cent of its clients have dysphasia, which relates to feeding and swallowing difficulties, and the other 23% have speech and language difficulties. Like other trusts in Northern Ireland, the Western Trust faces a difficult challenge in aligning supply with the demand for services because of its finite resources, but it must prioritise referrals in that client group to ensure that the risks associated with the potentially life-threatening implications of dysphasia are mitigated.

I must stress that the Western Trust is fully aware of the potential adverse, knock-on effect of that prioritisation on clients who do not have dysphasia but who present with speech and language communication difficulties. However, the trust fully understands the importance and significance of the need to provide an accessible, timely and first-rate service for all clients. It will bid with the local commissioning group, which is the process that I have in place now, and with the Health and Social Care Board, which is responsible for commissioning services, to resource the required moneys for service provision.

Regionally, trusts are generally meeting the waiting time target of nine weeks for speech and language clients. Although I acknowledge that some people are waiting longer than that, I am

not aware, as I say, of one- or two-year waits. In fact, my information is that the longest that any of the Western Trust's 291 clients had to wait for speech and language therapy services was 21 weeks. Therefore, to ensure that my information is accurate, I am keen to hear if people had to wait longer than that.

The Western Trust's waiting times and targets for speech and language therapy services have been good. However, over the past number of weeks, that situation has changed and deteriorated, and people are waiting longer. We all agree that people in the Foyle constituency deserve better. Unfortunately, they are not the only ones who have been affected by imposed Budget cuts. The demand for those services in that area has increased, but the resources to meet the necessary increase in staff numbers simply are not there. I do not have to remind anyone in the House about the very severe financial difficulties that we are facing and about the fact that waiting lists and waiting times for a range of services continue to rise while demand increases and funding reduces. Patients often have to wait longer than they expect for essential treatment and care. Adequate resourcing is clearly essential.

Considerable effort has been made to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of speech and language therapy provision, as demonstrated by the huge improvement in waiting times that I referred to, but those improvements are now under threat. In fact, the entire health and social care service is under great stress, because of a lack of funding. As I said before — this fact is based on Treasury figures that were published in July — Northern Ireland now has the worst funded Health Service in the whole of the UK. We are behind England, Scotland and Wales. Historically, we were behind Wales and Scotland, but we have also fallen behind England, where there are huge areas of prosperity and wealth. That is not something that we should be proud of. There is no substitute for a properly funded Health Service that can save and transform lives for the better. Without the right amount of funding, people will be left in pain and distress. I, therefore, ask the House to support me in ensuring that that does not happen.

Adjourned at 4.16 pm.



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