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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 13 November 2007

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

**Mr Speaker:** Before we deal with the business on today's Order Paper, I must inform the Assembly that I have been approached by Members from all sides of the House about the tragedy that occurred in Omagh last night. Our thoughts and prayers are with the immediate family circle.

Members have also approached me about the attempted murders of two police officers — one last night in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency, and one last week in the Foyle constituency in County Londonderry. I know that the prayers of the whole House are with those two police officers and their families.

**Mr P Robinson:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. My attention is drawn to a point of order that was made during yesterday's proceedings by the Member for Strangford Mr McNarry. His intervention appears to represent an attempt to make an ex-post-facto point of order in respect of a matter that occurred the previous week. Mr Speaker, I do not expect an immediate ruling from you on this matter, but I would appreciate your giving it further consideration.

Mr Speaker, when the event to which the Member referred occurred, you were in the Chair, and any Member could have raised a point of order at the conclusion of Question Time that day. None chose to do so. I wonder to what extent Members can have their researchers trawl through the records of proceedings of this House and, at some later date, ask you to rule on issues.

**Mr O'Loan:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr P Robinson:** I am making a point of order.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The Member must take his seat. Mr Robinson has the Floor.

**Mr P Robinson:** Mr Speaker, if it is permissible, it will give you a volume of work that will, perhaps, be unwelcome. In particular, everyone knows that the Member who raised the point of order is one of the worst-behaved Members. I could find a massive number

of his breaches of Standing Orders. We must know whether these matters can be dealt with ex post facto, or whether they must be dealt with promptly and at the time, as is suggested in Erskine May.

**Mr Speaker:** This point of order was raised yesterday, and I said to all sides of the House that I would deal with the issue at a later date. Furthermore, I told Members that they should not prejudge my decision on the matter.

I will take points of order from Mr McNarry and from Mr Wilson.

**Mr McNarry:** My choosing today was not to raise the matter; I have left it to your good offices to respond to the House. I understand that a particular problem is that you cannot refer the matter to the House until the Member who was mentioned yesterday is present. I mentioned that yesterday, and I understand that you are reflecting on it.

If I could say to the Member who has just spoken —

**Some Members:** No, you cannot.

**Mr McNarry:** If I may be allowed to finish, I say through you, Mr Speaker, that it ill becomes this House when —

**Mr Speaker:** Order, order. I ask the Member to take his seat. Yesterday, I told all sides of the House that I would deal with the issue, and I will deal with it. I do not intend to say any more about it in the Chamber this morning.

**Mr S Wilson:** On a point of order, we need a ruling on how long after an event in the House a point of order can be raised. That was the context of this morning's original point of order. Is the timescale a day, a week, or is it a month?

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Member to take his seat. I have already said that I will deal with the issue. I will not deal with it this morning, and I have said that to all sides of the House.

**Mr O'Loan:** I ask you to consider whether the first point of order raised today was valid. Regarding the reference of the person who raised it, since he was —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Let us allow the House to move on. I have already dealt with the issue. I will take a different point of order.

**Dr W McCrea:** On a point of order, the matter to which you referred yesterday is completely different to the matter referred to by my Rt Hon friend today. His point has not been raised before; therefore, it is a pertinent point of order on which you have not reflected, and my Rt Hon friend has asked you to do so.

**Mr Speaker:** I assure the Member that all points of order will be reflected upon — very much so.

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### Local Government — Review of Public Administration

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has allowed up to two hours for the debate. The Minister will propose the motion, and all other speakers will have five minutes. One amendment has been received and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment —

**Mr B McCrea:** On a point of order —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member will please take his seat.

The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for the winding-up speech.

I will take the Member's point of order.

**Mr B McCrea:** I was too quick, Mr Speaker, and I apologise.

**Mr Speaker:** As this motion relates to local government, I am sure that many Members will want to declare an interest before speaking in the debate, which is important. I am conscious that quite a number of Members are still involved in local authorities in Northern Ireland. It is important that they declare an interest in what might be discussed here this morning.

**The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster):** I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the emerging findings of the review of the Review of Public Administration decisions, as they relate to local government, and the initial proposals for the future of local government.

I do not have to declare an interest as I have now left local government.

Before I move to the substantive matter before the House, I want to refer to two other matters. First, I abhor absolutely the attempted murder of a police officer in my constituency last night. I spoke to the district commander then and again this morning, and he told me that he is content with the co-operation that he is receiving from the community. I am pleased about that. However, we must ensure, as leaders in our constituencies, that we are unequivocal in what we say about those issues and that we ensure that the people responsible are brought to justice. As someone who has been the victim of terrorism in the past, I empathise with the officer and his loved ones, and I assure them of my prayers.

Secondly, I turn to the very distressing news from Omagh this morning. It is distressing to listen to the reports, never mind to look at what happened last night. The nightmarish scenes are almost too difficult to take in. All that I and others can say is how much

we sympathise with the family circle. I pray for them at this very difficult and painful time.

I welcome the opportunity for the Assembly to debate local government. When I launched the review of the previous Administration's review of public administration (RPA) decisions in relation to local government, I gave a commitment to engage with stakeholders as the review proceeded. The Assembly has a clear interest in the outcome of the review and the Executive's proposals for the way ahead.

Now that the emerging findings of the review, which represent the Executive's initial — and I stress the word "initial" — proposals for the future shape of local government have been published, it is timely for Members to be given an opportunity to express their views. That is particularly relevant as the Executive subcommittee that I chair looks forward to receiving and considering carefully and fully the views of stakeholders as the three strands of the review are drawn together and the final recommendations are considered.

The review of public administration was set up by the Northern Ireland Executive in 2002 to deliver wide-ranging and comprehensive modernisation and reform to the public sector. The full range of RPA decisions was included in two announcements in November 2005 and in March 2006. The decisions of the previous Administration in relation to local government can be summarised as: the creation of seven councils; the transfer of a significant range of functions to the new councils from central Government and other bodies; the development of a new council-led statutory community-planning process; and the power of well-being.

The local government task force, led by the former Minister with responsibility for the Department of the Environment and with representatives from the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and from the five main political parties in the Assembly, was established to lead the implementation of the RPA decisions. It also led a parallel and integrated process of modernisation within local government, addressing issues such as governance, finance, estates, shared services, the relationship between central Government and local government, performance management and capacity building.

The task force also produced some very good work, particularly in relation to the modernisation of local government. However, it must be said that four out of the five political parties represented on the task force participated on the basis that they remained fundamentally opposed to the seven-council model that had been agreed by the previous Administration and that their participation was without prejudice to that firmly held position.

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

10.45 am

In addition, although NILGA and the political parties were committed to the development of strong and effective local government, to varying degrees, they expressed concerns about several of the functions that the previous Administration agreed should transfer to local government once seven new councils had been created. They also questioned the adequacy of the economic appraisal that underpinned the previous Administration's decision.

The Transitional Assembly echoed and confirmed that debate, both in the Chamber and in the work of the Programme for Government Committee. That Committee's work on the matter culminated in the publication on 23 January 2007 of its 'Report on Review of Public Administration and Rural Planning'.

Following restoration of devolved Government on 8 May, the Executive reviewed the progress that had been made in implementing the RPA. They considered the strategic direction of the implementation programme, and, in that context, it was agreed that I would implement a review of the previous Administration's decisions on local government. The Executive agreed detailed terms of reference for that review, which was launched on 6 July 2007.

Given the number of councils and functions that we believe will be required, the review is considering what we expect local government to deliver in the context of a fully functioning devolved Assembly and Executive and in the context of the strategic direction of the review of public administration. I remind the House that there are three strands to the review: first, developing a shared vision for local government; secondly, revisiting decisions that were made on the number of councils, while limiting that figure to the three original RPA options of seven, 11 or 15; and thirdly, considering the functions that will transfer to local government — again limiting that to those that were identified for transfer in the final RPA announcements of the previous Administration. We are also considering the previous Administration's decision on the development of a council-led community-planning process and on the complementary power of well-being.

Over the summer months, consultants undertook desk research to establish the characteristics of local government in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, including the other United Kingdom jurisdictions, the Republic of Ireland and further afield. The consultants also facilitated several stakeholder interviews and events to test the findings of that research. In parallel, the Executive Committee's subcommittee, which I chair, met three times. That subcommittee comprises me and my ministerial colleagues from the Department

of Finance and Personnel (DFP), the Department for Regional Development (DRD), the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). In addition, I also held several bilateral meetings with other Executive colleagues.

That work has culminated in the emerging findings report that I published on 18 October 2007. I will not rehearse the details of that paper, but I assume that Members will raise some of its findings with me. However, I will discuss some of its key points. Our vision is to create local government that will improve quality of life and create communities that are sustainable, vibrant, healthy, prosperous, stable and, above all, people centred. Discussions are continuing on the number and configuration of councils that can best deliver our vision.

However, the issues are complex. A considerable volume of material and commissioned research informs those discussions. Although there is a need for, and benefits to be drawn from, the reduction of some of the existing diversity that lies between councils, there is also a need to balance that reduction by creating local councils that are of a size that allows communities to identify and interact with them.

Proposals for an initial package of functions that should transfer to local government are presented for discussion in the emerging findings report. I know that local government representatives — and others — have expressed concern and disappointment about the scale and nature of the functions that are to be transferred. I understand the reason for that concern.

The process of further stakeholder engagement is not yet complete, and my ministerial colleagues and I will want to hear and consider fully all stakeholders' views on the initial package before we finalise our decisions. We arranged several stakeholders' meetings, and although the meeting in Cookstown was well attended and some forthright views were expressed, I must say that I am disappointed that 15 officials but few councillors attended yesterday's meeting in Armagh. I hope that that situation is not replicated in the meetings that take place later this week.

I stress that the proposals outlined in the emerging findings report mark the beginning of a process of reform and modernisation of local government. Achieving strong, effective and efficient local government is a long-term process that will require sustained effort over a considerable number of years. Based on experience elsewhere in the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and beyond, the delivery of the vision for local government will not be achieved through a single set of reform proposals, no matter how well devised those proposals may be. We must continue to develop the role of local government, as well as the

relationship among the Assembly, the Executive and local government, for many years to come. We cannot, and will not, allow previous direct rule Administrations' wanton neglect of local government to continue.

As I said earlier, the Executive subcommittee, and the Executive as a whole, will wish to consider fully and carefully all stakeholders' views, including those of MLAs, members of the Committee for the Environment and the public, before final decisions are taken on the future shape of local government. I shall discuss those views as they emerge with my colleagues on the Executive subcommittee, with other Executive Ministers through bilateral meetings, and with my colleagues on the Local Government Task Force's strategic leadership board before final recommendations are put to the Executive Committee for discussion and agreement.

It is important to take time to consider all the issues before final recommendations are put to the Executive. It is also important to ensure that we conclude the review process quickly, in order that we can bring an end to the current frustration and uncertainty that exists over local government. Both councillors and staff, for whom I have a great deal of sympathy, are affected by that uncertainty, as is the wider community. I aim to conclude the review and report to the Executive before the end of January 2008 and to make a statement to the Assembly as early as possible in February.

Before I conclude, I should say something about what happens after the review process is completed. We will want to implement an agreed reform and modernisation package as quickly as possible. Our aim will be to implement that agreed package by 2011. I recognise that to do so will require sustained effort and genuine engagement between central Government and local government to ensure that the agreed package is implemented professionally and with care. I want to ensure the smoothest possible transition from our current structures and arrangements to those that we believe will provide stronger, more effective local government for all Northern Ireland's citizens. I look forward to working with my Executive colleagues, the Assembly, the Committee for the Environment and, importantly, colleagues in local government — through the strategic leadership board and other Local Government Task Force elements — in a true spirit of partnership and shared endeavour in order to achieve that transition.

Since I came to office, my engagement with local government has been very positive — at least, I think that it has been. I have very much enjoyed the time that I have been able to share with local government colleagues.

I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity for the House to consider the motion. I look forward to

hearing Members' views, and I will, I assure you, listen most carefully to what they have to say.

**Mr B McCrea:** I beg to move the following amendment: At end, insert

“; and calls on the Executive to transfer meaningful and significant functions to local government.”

At the outset, I wish to declare two interests, which are already noted in the Register of Members' Interests. I am a member of Lisburn City Council and, because I wish to say a few words on yesterday's events in Dungannon, I should declare that I am a member of the Policing Board.

We tabled the amendment because we were very disappointed about the information that has been provided to date. When the Minister launched the review on 6 July 2007, she promised that its purpose was to ensure that:

“we can deliver the change which will achieve the strong, effective and efficient local government that we all want.”

Therefore, something obviously needs to be done. However, that is not what we have. What we have instead, and I can almost hear Sir Humphrey's Civil Servicespeak, is a mask. A complete U-turn — an about-face — has been performed on what was promised before the Assembly was restored. The review amounts not to a tweak, but to a fundamental review that is taking us nowhere. That is one of the main reasons why we on these Benches are bringing the matter to the Minister's attention.

The Minister also said at the review's launch that she was:

“committed to working in partnership with a range of stakeholders to win consensus”.

If that is the case, we have not got off to a very good start. The Northern Ireland Local Government Association, on which many Members sit, has expressed the utmost dismay about the emerging findings. I will quote from the key findings following the robust meeting in Cookstown, which the Minister mentioned. It states that the feeling:

“was one of disappointment, frustration, concern and, in some cases, anger.”

That does not sound like much of a move towards consensus. One of the major problems emerging at that meeting, which was summarised by PricewaterhouseCoopers, was that there was an:

“implied lack of respect for local government's capacity to deliver.”

That is a slap in the face to all those who work hard in local government.

Linked to that was the suggestion from members of NILGA that there is no point in having a review of public administration if no powers are to be transferred. If 5% of work is already being carried out by

local government, and only 1·5% more work is going to be transferred, why should we bother with the review of public administration? There will be cost inefficiencies should we decide to proceed on that basis. Unless we are going to make a step change, the review is a complete waste of time and an expensive waste of money.

Other items arising at the meeting were that councils were concerned about their lack of clout and that there is definitely an imbalance between local government and central government. How can people be expected to do their work when their views are not taken into account?

The summary also discussed other issues that we were promised would be looked at, such as double-jobbing, and how someone could be in two places at the same time. Is there any conflict of interest involved when people sit in this House and make decisions on matters that impact on councils? The Assembly must deal with that issue, which is a more serious problem than people think. The people of Northern Ireland have a fundamental expectation that politicians should do something — to date, they have done very little, and that leads to statements such as the one I heard last night from one of the political commentators who said that, although there are some problems, the Assembly is fundamentally stable. I beg to differ.

The sinister events in Dungannon last night, and those that occurred previously in Londonderry, threaten to undermine the democratic process in which we are now engaged. It is important that society does not return to the old ways, and to ensure that that does not happen, people need to see action: they need to see us doing something.

I have been here for six months and I have seen nothing but people talking.

**Lord Morrow:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr B McCrea:** Yes, I will give way: make it your best shot.

**Lord Morrow:** You can bet your life on that.

The Member has mentioned dual mandates. Will he tell the House, as a relative newcomer to the Assembly and to local government, how he is able to be in two places at once, because I suspect that he is no more superhuman than anyone else in the House? Will he also recognise that in the previous Assembly, when his party was the leading party, the Members on the Benches opposite were allowed to sit in Government while their army was fully armed? His party had no problems in sitting with them in Government on three occasions.

**Mr B McCrea:** Thank you for that short, sharp intervention. I am at a complete loss to understand why the Member has not addressed the issue of treble-jobbing, given that he is a Member in another place. What gives him the right to criticise me?

The point is that we must address such issues. Five years ago, we were promised a review of public administration. So far, all that has been decided is that we should go back to the drawing board and start again. What kind of progress is that? People look to their councillors to make local decisions; they think that councils have more powers than they actually have.

**Mr Weir:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr B McCrea:** No, I will not give way. Lord Morrow has already spoken. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker, is it — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Mr B McCrea:** It is apparent that the dogs of war are straining at their leashes; although perhaps they are the poodles of peace.

11.00 am

This is a serious issue. We need to find a way to engage with local people on local issues. Where better to do that than at council level? We must give them not only the power but the responsibility to make a difference. That is what we are supposed to be doing, what we said we would do, and precisely what we are not doing. That is why my party has brought this amendment to the House.

There is also the issue of how to get other sections of the community involved. That is what this is all about. It is not enough to say that we have the same people in the same place. There are people who have provided sterling service for a long time, but it is also true that we need to find a way of bringing new people — people from different genders and different races — into our democratic process. One of the easier ways to do that would be to bring them in through the councils.

The Minister said that there was not such a good turnout in Armagh — I wonder why. If there is no power, there is no interest. The councillors saw in Cookstown that this was a complete and utter farce and a complete waste of time. Unless we are going to be serious about this, how can we expect people to give their time to go and do things?

We hear these sweet words: the Civil Service is brilliant at bringing them out. However, where is the real vision? Where can we actually get things done?

**Mrs Foster:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I take great exception to the Member saying that the words I spoke this morning were Civil Service words. They were my words. I take great exception to that, and ask him to withdraw.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** That is not a point of order. *[Interruption.]*

Order.

**Mr B McCrea:** It is interesting that those who argued long and hard at the start of this sitting about points of order now appear not to understand the rules.

We are here to debate the issue. The Minister said that she wanted to hear from all of us, but now that we are telling her what we have to say, she does not want to hear any more. These messages are coming loud and clear, not just from these Benches but from NILGA and other interested parties, and she should take them on board.

Where are we now? Dead slow and stop. The people of Northern Ireland will ask what we are for. What is it that we are going to do? You have grabbed control — *[Interruption.]*

It is good to see that there is still a bit of life there. For a minute, I thought that they had gone to sleep.

The key point is that there are people in this House who talk about equality. What we are really talking about is empowerment. We have to empower local representatives to serve the people, do their best for Northern Ireland and make sure that we all go forward in a positive future. That is what this is about, that is what this policy wants to do, and that is why this party has put forward this amendment, which I commend to the House.

**Mr Weir:** I start by declaring an interest, like Mr McCrea, as a local councillor. I suspect that, given the plethora of declarations of interest that we are going to have, this will resemble the start of an AA meeting more than the Northern Ireland Assembly. I also declare an interest as a vice-president of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, which Mr McCrea has referred to, and I welcome my colleagues from NILGA who are here today.

In looking at this issue, we have to ask why we are here in the first place. Mr McCrea has castigated the Executive for starting again. Perhaps he has forgotten one of the principal reasons why we have started again, which is that, under direct rule, a seven-council model was to be imposed. My understanding is that the Ulster Unionist Party was opposed to that model. Perhaps the Member for Lagan Valley has had some sort of Damascene conversion and actually wants to simply put that in place. We made it very clear that we were not prepared to accept that model.

Indeed there are deficiencies in the emerging findings document, which I will address later. My party does not have a problem with the amendment but does have a problem with the UUP, Pontius Pilate-like, washing its hands of the emerging findings. They emanated from an Executive subcommittee, and an Executive, on which all four parties that are in Government are represented, including the party of the proposers of the amendment. When Members castigate the lack of powers being given to local government, they should

remember that the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, for example, which comes under the remit of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, is controlled by an Ulster Unionist Minister. We should at least acknowledge the fact that there are deficiencies in the emerging findings.

**Mr S Wilson:** For clarity's sake, will the Member enlighten the House as to who represented the Ulster Unionist Party so effectively on the Executive subcommittee? That person has quite singularly failed to satisfy the Member for Lagan Valley, and Members need to be aware of the identities of the guilty people on this issue.

**Mr Weir:** My understanding is that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety represented the Ulster Unionist Party. He also seems to have a problem in agreeing a Budget and subsequently not agreeing it.

I now move on to the substance of the report. Under the emerging findings, you are left —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order, order. Mr Weir, please address your remarks through the Chair.

**Mr Weir:** Mr Deputy Speaker, I am happy to address my remarks through the Chair.

The emerging findings are something of a curate's egg, with some good parts and some bad parts. Some findings have already been welcomed in NILGA's report. I welcome the fact that local councillors will have direct control over the vast bulk of planning issues and local development, which have been a source of major frustration. Community planning powers will allow councillors a greater say in shaping their local areas, and although finance and personnel issues have not been fulfilled, it shows that not all powers are linked to those facets. That will make a difference. The Committee for the Environment has been told that vesting powers will be given to local councils, and there has been a begrudging admission that regeneration powers will also be given. I welcome that fact that councils will have increased economic development and tourism powers.

However, the report falls short in several areas, in that Ministers have been overcautious. The failure to give councils some control over local roads must be re-examined. Roads Service should retain control of strategic direction, but there are advantages to villages, towns and cities having some control over local roads. If local economic development powers are to be increased, perhaps some of Invest NI's land bank might be better used if it were handed over to councils. Control of the Youth Service would fit neatly within local community development powers, as would local libraries, even if they were in some form of unitary structure. Local government could also handle certain public health and housing issues.

When local government seeks control of further areas, it is not simply in order to get its hands on power; rather it is because certain issues are best decided at a local level. The key issue is what is of most benefit to local people. To that end, there is much to welcome in the emerging findings, but they have also been too cautious.

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

**Mr A Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First and foremost, I thank the Minister for tabling the take-note motion. As regards the theatrical introduction of Basil McCrea's amendment, I remind Basil, as other Members have done, that his own party colleague is a member of the Executive subcommittee that produced the emerging findings report.

Sinn Féin shares the sentiment behind the amendment about transferring meaningful power to local government. By the same token, I remind Basil and the other parties that, from day one, Sinn Féin has strenuously argued that it would not support any additional functions being transferred to local government unless firm, statutory equality protections were built into their running and governance.

Throughout the work of the task force, subgroups and so on, Basil's party has steadfastly refused to sign up to meaningful and acceptable governance arrangements. Although that section of the task force's work has never yet been completed, if parties ask Sinn Féin to support the transfer of additional functions — or any changes to local government, because the emerging findings paper does not set anything in stone; it is a work in progress — they must bear in mind that Sinn Féin will not support such changes unless firm, guaranteed equality and protective measures are built into the running and governance of local government. That is the baseline from which Sinn Féin will judge any future discussions on the RPA.

Except for the number of councils, Sinn Féin and the other parties agreed with the previous — albeit direct rule — Administration's findings. All parties were involved in the task force, the nine subgroups and the discussions with other stakeholders, including trade unions, local-government officials and many other sectors with a stake in local government. Although some of those deliberations have yet to be completed, all the parties signed up for that package at that time, except for the number of councils. Therefore, if those parties now prefer change, they must understand that there are consequences. From the outset, Sinn Féin did not advocate a review of the review of public administration. It was prepared to build on the previous discussions in order to finish the task and to complete implementation of the RPA.

Although Sinn Féin was the only political party to support the seven-council model, the only opposition to

the idea came from the other political parties. Of course, that is important; however, every other stakeholder wanted the smallest possible number of councils. During those deliberations, it was easy to attack Sinn Féin and to argue about cantonisation and the polarisation of local government, but not so easy to face the reality that going from a smaller to a larger number of councils would logically mean that Ministers and Departments, not wanting their services fragmented further, would resist. Not only the Ministers and Departments but every other sector in society argued equally forcefully against having a greater number of councils, on the basis that services would be further fragmented, harder to deliver and cost more money — valid reasons that still pertain today.

Other parties that are asking for change might get what they wish for, but not what they want. They should bear in mind that if their choice is for more than seven councils, which they are entitled to argue for and might get, the price to be paid will inevitably be that fewer functions will be transferred to local government.

In the past week, other parties, people involved in NILGA and others have approached Sinn Féin to ask what it will do about this matter. We are saying —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Time.

**Mr Gallagher:** I want to stress the importance of statutory safeguards, about which there is no detail in the Minister's paper. Without those safeguards and protections, the SDLP will not sign up to any changes to local government. When the details have been agreed, they should be subjected to a cross-community vote in the Assembly. That is the only real protection that there can be in order to arrive at equitable arrangements.

*11.15 am*

The subtitle of the review of local government aspects of the review of public administration report is "emerging findings". That is a misnomer and a contradiction, because very little emerges from the report. That is disappointing, but it is more disappointing that the review team conducted no meaningful engagement with stakeholders, particularly with elected members of councils, who have been kept very much in the dark.

As we have heard from the Minister, the report says nothing specific about council numbers. What does that mean? Does it mean that, despite all the opposition to the seven-council model, the people who are working on the RPA still want to impose an English model of local government that will be totally inappropriate here? Do they think that they will get away with the wholesale closure of council offices west of the Bann and the stripping of more jobs from areas of high deprivation?

Could it be that they are being so guarded about council numbers because they believe that people in rural communities, especially in the west, will accept

civic councils that feed into the deliberations of larger councils?

If that is the hidden agenda, I wish to send out a clear message: ratepayers in rural areas, particularly in the west, will not be conned. They will not accept any second-rate, lower-level arrangements that will leave them powerless and voiceless. People who live in the west have suffered enough of the deprivation and marginalisation that has resulted in poor roads and little investment.

As some Members will know, people in urban as well as rural areas are already worried about increases in their rate bills, not to mention the further burden of water charges.

**Mr Storey:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Gallagher:** I will not give way.

Whatever the final number of councils may be, an equal spread of the wealth across all councils and a fair distribution of the rates burden is the very least to which the public are entitled. That requirement is paramount to the SDLP.

For all the supposed commitment to strengthening local government, to improving efficiency and to subsidiarity, it appears from the review paper that, apart from some functions of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and the Department for Social Development, few functions will transfer from central Government. The Departments appear to want to continue to hold on to as much power as possible at the centre.

At least the SDLP Minister, Margaret Ritchie, has made it clear that her Department will transfer urban-regeneration and community-development delivery functions, for which there are significant budgets, to local councils.

The Department of Education, which does not deal well with school transport, among other issues, wants to keep everything. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which certainly does not provide emergency cover very well, wants to hold on to everything. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which does not appear to be dealing at all with trying to achieve a shared future, wants to hold on to everything.

The Department for Regional Development, which had been expected to transfer responsibility for roads back to councils, has failed to invest in road improvement in the west yet wants to retain that power at the centre. DRD has failed to maintain rural roads and provide winter gritting programmes. That is unacceptable. If councils are to play a meaningful role in local economic development, they must have responsibility for local roads.

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

**Mr Neeson:** I declare an interest: I have been an elected member of Carrickfergus Borough Council for 30 years. In fact, I am the longest-serving member on that council, and I am very proud of the achievements of local government.

However, there is great uncertainty about the future of local government in Northern Ireland, and if reform is to be meaningful, local government must have meaningful powers. The Minister is well aware of recent criticisms about what appears to be a future reduction in the powers of local councils, and greater clarity on that matter is required.

Members are aware of the need for the reform of local government in Northern Ireland — 26 councils are far too many for Northern Ireland. However, it is unfortunate that the reform of local government is taking place in isolation from a review of central government, and I have always been critical of that. Eleven Departments are far too many for Northern Ireland, and Members know that they were created artificially in order to appoint 11 Ministers. That issue needs to be considered also.

The 'Review of Local Government Aspects of the Review of Public Administration: Emerging Findings' report contains interim plans for consultation, and I hope that that consultation is meaningful. The report, which was produced by an Executive subcommittee comprising four Ministers, outlines how they intend to proceed with the review of public administration as it relates to local government. NILGA has responded critically to the report, and the Alliance Party supports NILGA's stance. NILGA's paper must be considered seriously as part of the consultation process.

The Alliance Party supports the rationalisation of health boards; a single education authority with a special duty to promote integrated education, and, believe it or not, a reduction in the number of quangos. We also support the transfer of urban regeneration, minor roads powers and local planning functions to local government. Consideration should be given to the options of having either 11 or 15 councils. Furthermore, we support the Community Relations Council's challenge function regarding decisions made at local level on community investment funds; shared civic offices; weighted-majority voting for key decisions, and a new local government watchdog.

The Alliance Party has three broad concerns about the emerging findings report. First, there is a lack of attention to good corporate governance and how that may be improved through local government reform. Secondly, there is no reference to financing: it makes little sense for councils to have expanded powers and no means of expanding their incomes. Thirdly, there is no clarity about what has been learned from good

practice elsewhere. For example, there has been a dramatic reduction in the number of local councils in Denmark; and there have been significant reforms in the Republic of Ireland and across Great Britain. However, there is scant evidence that any account has been taken of those examples.

Regarding economic responsibilities, I am pleased that my own council — Carrickfergus Borough Council — has taken a proactive approach on economic development. If local councils are to have real powers, issues such as the vesting of land must be considered.

Councils throughout Northern Ireland have been proactive in promoting local tourism to great effect. The main priority of the Programme for Government is growing the economy. However, if the economy is to grow, local councils must have the necessary powers.

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

**Mr S Wilson:** Given the number of contradictions that there have been during this debate, the Minister will have difficulty in responding to the issues raised. Mr Neeson talked about the Alliance Party's desire to do away with quangos. Members know that, when Alliance Party members get together, their favourite game is not 'Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?', but rather "Who wants a quango chair?".

They have had plenty of them; it is their own job-creation scheme that has been scuppered by Mr Neeson.

The SDLP talks about devolving more powers to local councils, yet its Minister is the one who is holding on, as tightly as she can, to such functions as urban regeneration, housing responsibilities and so on. The Ulster Unionist Party has complained about the delay, but it was the party which rightly said, along with the DUP, that the proposed number of councils was unsuitable and that there should be more time to reconsider that issue, along with a whole range of other matters.

So there have been contradictions in the debate —

**Mr McNarry:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Where a Member has a number of mandates — more than a dual mandate — is it correct that he should declare his interests?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** At the beginning of the debate, the Speaker said that Members should declare their interests.

**Mr S Wilson:** I apologise for not declaring my interests. *[Laughter.]*

My interests are declared in the Register of Members' Interests, and, therefore, they were declared before the debate began.

I will make three points in relation to the debate. First of all, time. Some Members have alleged that we are delaying matters further, but this will be a once-in-a-lifetime change for local government. We have

inherited some of this from a direct rule Administration that viewed the RPA through direct rule eyes. Following devolution, certain things need to be looked at in a different way — I will refer to some of those in a moment. Time should be taken over the process, and if that means that we must delay it a little, it is far better to shape it correctly than to rush in and do something on the basis of what the direct rule Ministers said. There is also the issue of building capacity at local government level. That requires work, and it will take time.

Secondly, there needs to be commitment from Ministers to devolve certain functions. I have already mentioned DSD. I could also mention the DUP Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: he should look again at the library function, which, I believe, fits much better at local government level. The Minister of Education should consider whether youth services might be devolved to local councils. Some of the things predicted in our Programme for Government may have to be reconsidered.

Lastly, some imagination is required. Some functions are to be devolved to local government, but that may not mean that they are simply handed down. Earlier in the debate, a Sinn Féin Member said that if there were more units of local government, fewer powers would be devolved to them. That does not necessarily follow. Whereas there might not be the same economies of scale with 11 councils as opposed to seven, there is the option of grouping councils for certain functions, which could provide those economies of scale.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Does the Member agree that, with respect to the clustering of councils, the LEADER groups that delivered rural development funding were a key example of local councils working together to deliver for the people, unlike the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), which this year had to return millions of pounds to the European Union?

**Mr S Wilson:** There are already models that show how grouping of councils can work. In some rural areas, the building control function is grouped, and it works well. Let us not run away with the idea that if we step back from the seven-council model, fewer powers will be devolved to local government. There are ways of doing it: it requires a bit of imagination. In some cases, it may be a matter of directly devolving issues, such as the Youth Service or library services.

One model that might be tried is that councils might be given money for roads, for example, but would buy in services from Roads Service. That would avoid the breaking up of responsibility for roads and the loss of economies of scale there. In other cases, councils might liaise with other bodies. In education, they might liaise with the education and skills authority, the Department,

or whatever body emerges from the RPA, to ensure that services delivered locally are delivered properly.

There are many imaginative ways to do it. Let us not simply criticise Ministers: my concern is that local government has not engaged properly. Local government, the Assembly and Ministers must engage equally. If that takes time, we should ignore the bluster of the Member for Lagan Valley Basil McCrea, get down to work, and do the job properly. I would add one word of caution in that the process cannot be delayed interminably because people are worrying about the future; for example, those who are waiting to be recruited into local government. We must ensure that that capacity is not lost.

11.30 am

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá faoin rún. I would like to say a few words on this matter.

I declare an interest as a member of one of the best councils in the North — Armagh City and District Council. I apologise to the Minister that I could not make it to the meeting yesterday.

This is work in progress. Sinn Féin did not ask for this review. However we are prepared to work with, and develop, what was originally proposed, and we expect debate and negotiation between parties to begin in a serious way. Sinn Féin has no interest in giving enhanced powers to councils unless those powers are accompanied by robust checks and balances in order to avoid the discriminatory practices that still exist in many councils. Economies of scale mean that the number of councils proposed must be the optimum number for delivery, and not be cumbersome, unwieldy and impractical. Having more councils means a greater service fragmentation and poorer services for the public.

The key issues emerging from the review of public administration are about governance and equality, which must be delivered. The emerging findings report is disappointing as regards the number of functions to be transferred to local government, and my council is using words such as minimalist. It would appear that some Ministers are intent on watering down the powers to be transferred in order to hold on to those powers themselves. I ask them to explain their position not only to their party colleagues, but to bodies such as NILGA and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE).

The emerging findings leave a lot to be desired, and we welcome the opportunity to have meaningful debate. At the heart of that debate, Sinn Féin believes that community planning will deliver fair and strong local Government. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Hamilton:** I welcome the debate as it brings the review of public administration, which has been a cause

of concern for some time, back into focus. Not least, I welcome it because the emerging findings report is one stage in the process of undoing the damage that was outlined in previous review of public administration conclusions. Due to that, I am surprised at the response of the Ulster Unionist Party in the House today. I thought that, like the DUP, they would be opposed to many of the earlier findings of the review of public administration. Their fingerprints are all over this report — their Ministers contributed to it, and signed off on it, so it is surprising to hear their criticisms.

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Hamilton:** No, I will not give way, because I am going to make a point. I will give way in a moment.

However, as is customary, UUP Members have forgotten their past, and the fact that their fingerprints were also all over the beginning of the review of public administration process. In 2000, Minister Sam Foster initiated the fundamentally flawed process, and what one Minister Foster cocked up, another Minister Foster must correct.

Today's debate is a staging post in getting the review of public administration correct. As my colleague Sammy Wilson said, this is a one-off opportunity to get it right, and such opportunities do not come along frequently.

**Mr Campbell:** I declare an interest as a member of the city council of Londonderry.

The Member has mentioned disturbing trends that have emerged in the debate. Does he agree that another disturbing trend is that several nationalist Members have talked about the importance of governance arrangements, which should be a paramount consideration for all parties, because the many unionist minorities who have suffered at the hands of nationalist majorities also want to see good governance arrangements in the new RPA?

**Mr Hamilton:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I have noticed that there have been contributions on governance arrangements from the Benches opposite. I must declare an interest as a member of Ards Borough Council, which I omitted to do at the start of my contribution. In the east of the Province, unionists have large majorities on councils. However, we are mindful that unionists in the west of the Province need protection from nationalist and republican domination. Therefore, I take the Member's point on board.

Much of the discussion has centred on functions that should be transferred to local government. The emerging findings report criticises to some extent the initial RPA decisions. There is scope to examine the prospect of additional powers being transferred to local government. I am glad that the public-realm aspects of local roads have been included in the report. However, other local roads issues remain to be examined.

Youth services would fit neatly with local government, particularly given the amount of work that already takes place between local government and youth services; for example, through community-safety partnerships. That would have a knock-on effect for libraries and youth services, where there would also be a neat fit. Although I do not want to disagree with the process that has been initiated by my colleague the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, a body beneath the single library authority could have input at local government level.

Urban regeneration is an increasingly important area of local government. That is why I, and many others, were disappointed — quite annoyed, in fact — that, although she deemed that she would transfer urban-regeneration powers to local government, Minister Ritchie has done so begrudgingly, criticising what she has called a “narrow skills base” at local government level and saying that those powers would be devolved over time and through a phased approach. It is rich for SDLP Members opposite to complain about how few functions are to be transferred, when their own Minister has held on for grim death to some of her Department’s functions.

**Mr O’Loan:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Hamilton:** No, I will not give way, because my time is almost up and I have already given way. Minister Ritchie has held on to her powers. She has actually insulted many local government representatives and officials, particularly in places such as Belfast and Londonderry, which have a rich experience of involvement in urban regeneration.

In conclusion, I remind the Minister of the Environment to maintain a focus on efficiency. Although the delivery of strong local government is important, the need to achieve efficiency is equally so. The Assembly must not lose sight of that fact. If that efficiency is not achieved, there is little point in proceeding with the process.

**Mr Armstrong:** At the outset, I acknowledge the great debt that is owed to local government and to those councillors who served during the darkest days of the Troubles, often at great personal risk. The pattern of the 26 local councils that were established in the early 1970s was intended to operate in tandem with the Administration at Stormont. Sadly, that proved not to be the case.

The review of public administration was originally welcomed. It offered the prospect of a new beginning and had the potential to deliver strong and effective local government, which Northern Ireland has been denied for too long. It was seen as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, because it could determine the pattern of local government for the next 20 or 30 years. Therefore, we cannot afford to get it wrong.

Hopes were high that the review would transfer real powers to local authorities — powers that would bring

them more into line with their counterparts in Great Britain. It was hoped that the review would utilise modern thinking to improve service delivery and provide a template for local government in Northern Ireland in the early twenty-first century. Sadly, because the review took place amid the background of direct rule, many of those hopes were dashed.

Unfortunately, the reviews have too often been run by unaccountable civil servants, or former civil servants, who have usually paid scant attention to the wishes of locally elected politicians — hence the absurd proposal for seven councils, which was supported by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Sinn Féin. That is the very definition of an unholy alliance.

The restoration of a devolved Administration provided us with the hope that the situation would be rescued. However, the RPA emerging findings report received a less than enthusiastic welcome from significant quarters, including the Northern Ireland Local Government Association.

I am particularly concerned that the proposals do not go far enough in transferring powers to local government. Rather than letting local government get on with the business of delivering local services — and allowing the Assembly to busy itself with Province-wide strategic and infrastructure projects — I fear that we are in danger of weakening local government by denying it real powers. The Assembly and the Executive are trying to micromanage functions that simply do not need to be the responsibility of central Government. Those fears have been articulated by Alderman Hatch — one of my Ulster Unionist colleagues — who is currently the president of NILGA.

For local government to remain relevant, it must have real powers to affect the lives of citizens. Certain Ministers must resist their natural instincts and temptations to retain as much centralised control as possible, and must trust local government. Among the additional services that NILGA has called for the Executive transfer to local government are planning; community planning; regeneration; local roads; libraries; and youth services.

I respect the vast experience that resides in NILGA, and I have no hesitation in supporting its call for the Executive to consider the proposals contained in the emerging findings report and to return with a set of proposals that will transfer meaningful and significant functions to local government.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I welcome the Minister’s contribution. She made some good points about a shared vision and, in particular, about reviewing the number of councils, which are most welcome. Does the Minister also accept that there is a lack of morale and motivation in all local authorities in Northern Ireland due to uncertainty about

their future? We must have clarity about the future and the terms of the proposals.

As for the transfer of functions, I accept that the youth service is an example of a model that should be transferred to local government, bearing in mind the range of joint provisions between the community sector and the youth sector. The social-education programmes that the youth service brings to the table are exemplary, considering the current levels of antisocial behaviour and ill discipline.

The SDLP is disappointed by the limited list of functions that are proposed for transfer. However, more importantly, it is unacceptable that such important issues have been addressed without meaningful engagement with political parties and councils on the detail of functions for transfer, budgets, staff and options for cluster working by councils.

In addition to concerns about the nature of the functions to be transferred, the SDLP remains concerned about the process and implications of transfer. We raised concerns about assets and debts of existing councils, which are still to be addressed. Concerns related to equity arise across a range of issues, an example of which is the redevelopment of local areas. Some towns have benefited from central funding for redevelopment. If powers are transferred, will other towns have access to adequate funding to meet the same standards?

A note has been passed to me to remind me to declare my interest as a member of Derry City Council.

Considering the Department of the Environment's connections with the origins of the conflict, the SDLP is concerned about planning policy. My party wants to see greater influence on local planning by councils, but as part of an overhaul of the planning system, and in the context of effective statutory power-sharing safeguards for new councils. As for the comments of the Member for East Derry Gregory Campbell — who is not in the Chamber, at present — it is a fact that, in nationalist-controlled councils in Northern Ireland, a power-sharing system is in place.

I am sorry that the Member is not in the Chamber, because I want it noted that unionists have 20% of the seats on Derry City Council but hold 30% of committee positions. That is more than would be the case under d'Hondt and power-sharing arrangements.

11.45 am

**Mr Hamilton:** Will the Member inform his colleagues on Down District Council of that arrangement? The DUP has never held any senior civic position in that council throughout its entire existence, despite maintaining three seats on it.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I cannot comment on Down District Council. However, I can assure the Member that in

Derry City Council, the SDLP has given up the position of mayor and two deputy mayors as allocated under d'Hondt to ensure that there is shared responsibility and that the unionist position is represented in the two top posts.

The SDLP has called for a full-scale review of the planning system in order to make decision-making more transparent and accountable, and to shorten the planning process. The party believes that stronger planning policies are required, and there should be greater clarity about interpretation. The Planning Appeals Commission is not considered an adequate vehicle through which to hold the system to account. There is also a need for greater connectivity between planning decisions and their impact on other services, which underscores the need for community planning.

Clarity is also required about area plans and new local plans. With an 11-council model, area plans could be difficult to distinguish from local plans. There must be flexibility and responsiveness at a genuinely local level.

The SDLP welcomes the emerging findings, but they are quite vague about the number of councils, with little indication of which of the three options is favoured. That is disappointing, given that there are plans to put a paper to the Executive by December. As set out in the SDLP's responses to earlier phases of consultation, the party is totally opposed to a seven-council model on the basis that it is inadequate to meet the needs of our dispersed rural population. The party believes that it will lead to Balkanisation in Northern Ireland, making power sharing more difficult to establish. It will also lead to reduced democratic accountability and fundamentally undermine the character of local government. Furthermore, it will contribute to centralisation at a time when we should be trying to reverse that trend to ensure that the west of the Province is being supported, as Tommy Gallagher mentioned. We should support the rural economy and rural communities, promote balanced regional development and tackle rural and western disadvantage.

**Mr Molloy:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I declare an interest as a member of Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council, which is the lead council on this issue. I wish to express my concern about some of the emerging findings. In general, many people, particularly local government representatives, expected that more power would be transferred to local government. I am concerned that a gap is developing between local government and central Government. For years, local government feared that when the Assembly got up and running, Ministers would claw back the powers that they had previously talked about devolving. We need to devolve powers to local government that will make it very powerful and allow it to deliver for communities in the future.

The power of general competency has been talked about again and again, and there has also been a focus on the power of general well-being. However, local government must follow the needs of the area. The present local government structure means that, far too often, local government and councils cannot follow those needs or deliver for the communities that they serve. They have no responsibility for roads or footpaths or for the general well-being of the area. Unfortunately, responsibility for such matters falls between several different stools — local government, Roads Service, the Housing Executive, and so on. That power of general competency is needed to ensure that local government can deliver for its communities.

In the past, local government has been on the edge of involvement in European funding and its delivery, but it has never had any responsibility for it. I welcome the fact that, under the new structures, local government will have a greater role in delivering those funds. That will bring the statutory agencies together, thus ensuring that they deliver on their responsibilities. It will also bring together various community groups that often have good ideas but no particular strategy to facilitate or bring them all together. If local government were to have a more powerful role, we could look forward to the delivery of those strategies.

The role of the Assembly is to legislate for the empowerment of local government and to allow it to deliver on the ground. The local agencies are aware of the needs of communities and can deliver at ground level. It is important that we separate the two situations so that we do not have everybody doing everybody else's job. That will build a better relationship between central Government and local government in the future. Each must carry out its role to the best of its ability, and have the relevant powers to deliver for communities. At the end of the day, that is what we want.

It has been proposed that local government elections be delayed for two years. That is dangerous, because it would render councils dead for two years, and neither staff nor councillors would know what is happening. People would be hanging on, instead of being empowered. An election gives people power to carry on, which is important. It is possible to complete the current strategy within the time left to councils, instead of delaying. Otherwise councils will lose a lot of valuable staff due to the uncertainty, and will have no power to plan for the future because no one will know what their role is going to be.

**Mr T Clarke:** At what stage will the Member address the number of councils? Is he still of the opinion, shared by the unionist Benches, that seven is not the preferred number?

**Mr Molloy:** My party has made it clear all along that, whatever about the number of councils or the

powers devolved to them, the issue is that they are meant to deliver fairness and equality and ensure that people are accountable for their actions. Unfortunately, that is where a number of councils currently fall short. There are unionist-controlled councils that could do better in delivering for the communities that they serve, and in ensuring that there is equality, fairness and good governance. Now is the time to show that goodwill. People can take things in good faith and can put legislation in place, but now is the time for unionist-controlled councils to ensure that they can deliver.

We must ensure that we have powerful local government that can deliver for the community. Unfortunately, the council on which I sit has gone down in history as the council that brought local government down because of past discrimination. That led to the civil rights movement and a 40-year campaign to bring about equality and justice. That is where we are today, and it is important to concentrate on how we deliver local government, regardless of the number of councils.

**Mr Beggs:** I declare an interest as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council.

I support the amendment. Prior to devolution, all parties expressed their support for the transfer of additional responsibilities to local government. However, there now appears to be some considerable backtracking. Is this the outworking of the control freakery of some Stalinist, centrally controlled parties? We must have faith in the elected representatives on the councils and give them the responsibility. Decisions must not always be taken centrally; that is not what democracy is about.

I shall focus largely on planning, because it is hugely significant for local communities and would give greater responsibilities to councils and councillors and enable them to have a much greater impact on their areas. Planning is a key issue for local government, and there has been a significant proposal to backtrack by removing responsibility for area plans from local authorities. Local authorities in the rest of the United Kingdom have that responsibility: why should it not be the case in Northern Ireland? Why is it OK in England, Scotland and Wales, and why should it not happen in Northern Ireland? Is the planning Minister reluctant to lose significant powers from her Department? The responsibility for planning must be devolved to councils.

**Mr Weir:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Beggs:** I may give way later on, but I wish to pursue this issue.

Area plans are not developed in isolation. They must adhere to the regional development strategy; there is an outline that must be followed locally. Local plans are not developed independently, but must follow on from other regionally developed policies. The scale of the current plans will not be hugely different from that which is being proposed.

I know that there is a huge Belfast metropolitan area plan, but that plan could possibly develop through amalgamated plans, which may well be in the interests of council areas that are being developed. However, in the northern part of my constituency of East Antrim, an area plan covering Larne, Antrim and Ballymena is under consideration. I suspect that that would not be much different in area than those of the new councils that are likely to emerge, whether there be 11 or 15 of them. I reiterate my opposition to having seven councils.

**Mr Weir:** I acknowledge what the Member has said, and I agree that as much planning as possible should go into local government if we are to mirror the arrangements that are in place in other parts of the UK. However, there are no area plans in England, Scotland and Wales.

**Mr Beggs:** The issue is that decisions should be taken locally by councillors. It is better that councils develop and follow plans for the purposes of transparency. However, decisions should be taken locally by councillors. The proposal will add a third level of bureaucracy, giving councils a third planning level. I suspect that that would lead to increased costs and not reduced costs. Why not give councils full responsibility?

Plans developed at local government level would be subject to an appeals process, public inquiries and scrutiny from the legal system, so there would be protection. Ultimately, the electorate would determine whether it believes that inappropriate decisions are made by local representatives, but I hope that that would never be the case.

I will illustrate further why that is important. There has been much talk about community planning. To give community planning real teeth, councils must be allowed to incorporate it in their area plans. What is the point of giving councils responsibility for community planning without the full teeth to demand that the issues flowing from that responsibility are built into an area plan? Councils will not necessarily be able to do that under the current proposals.

There are significant failings in the existing process. Area plans are determined remotely from councils, and council views are often filtered and eventually lost. In Carrickfergus, for example, a proposal emerged that new houses could be built under high-voltage cables. The council specifically said that that should not happen, but the area in question has now been earmarked for possible housing.

In addition, rather than using additional housing to ensure that spine roads are completed and are developed, gaps are being left. Local councillors would have been aware of the issues and would have driven the process through to completion. The current process is failing, and mistakes are happening. It is important to have faith in local representatives, give them responsi-

bility and allow them to be held accountable to the electorate.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I declare an interest as a local government councillor for Craigavon. I also mention my membership of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, and I endorse the earlier comments that were made by the Minister about the two PSNI officers who were shot recently in brutal attempts to take their lives. I express the SDLP's sympathy and our hopes for their recovery. We also endorse the comments that were made to the Minister about the horrific events in Omagh.

Many SDLP Members are missing from the Chamber as former Member Mr John Fee is being buried today. Our party sends its sympathies to his wife and family, and the wider family circle.

In her statement, the Minister said that she wanted to listen. We hope that she will take action on many of the concerns that have been raised, understandably, by Members across the Chamber. I have not heard great dissent this morning, once the arguments over the strength of powers that local government should have are distilled.

At the early stages, the SDLP set out its vision of strong and accountable local government, which would encourage and promote participative democracy. The Minister referred to the number of meetings that are being held across the North, and she expressed disappointment at the turnout at some of those meetings. However, I ask the Minister to reflect on her many years as a local councillor. She will acknowledge that, during the early stages of the RPA, local councillors were not allowed to engage in the process. They now feel that they are being consulted at the end, rather than at the outset, of the process. That goes some way towards explaining why councillors believe that they have been excluded.

*12.00 noon*

The SDLP's major concerns centre on the lack of meaningful engagement with stakeholders, particularly parties and councillors, on the detail of the transfer of functions. That lack of engagement persisted throughout the period of direct rule, and the limited progress achieved in eventually securing policy-development panels on RPA has now been rolled back because those panels have been suspended. During the present exercise, only the most superficial level of detail has been shared.

I am sure that the Minister will acknowledge — as other Members have — the concerns of local government staff about morale, motivation and uncertainty about their futures. The emerging findings paper sets out no detail on where local government headquarters will be located when agreement is finally reached. Many people are concerned about council-owned buildings

and where the centre of authority will be located. Some Members highlighted how councils have come together and delivered well for the people, particularly in areas where they received EU funding, but, disappointingly, no departmental funding.

Community-safety planning and the local strategy partnerships were intended to be vehicles for greater engagement with other stakeholders. When I was a member of a local strategy partnership, from the outset, senior staff from various agencies and Departments attended meetings. However, as time went on, ever more people who attended meetings represented their agency, but had little power to make decisions. Decision-makers must be at the table and if they are to deliver, they must bring a substantial budget with them.

The SDLP strongly supports the principle of retaining the community-planning initiatives that were set out as a vision for local government. That is the best way to address the concerns of, and deliver for, the people. Many Western democracies are experiencing less engagement by voters at the ballot box. Voters feel that they have no stake, because they are not part of the decision-making process. Community planning is one way in which it is hoped to stem the tide of a lack in engagement by members of the public.

Many Members have explained the positions of the various Departments. There is great concern that many Departments have yet to hand over any power, or indicate that they will do so. No information has come from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on how they envisage power being devolved. I am sure that all parties acknowledge the concerns about community relations. Local councils can achieve results in that area.

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

**Ms Lo:** The RPA is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to deliver a world-class system of local government for the people of Northern Ireland. I am dismayed that the Executive's current plans, as presented in the emerging findings paper, fall well short of the necessary mark. The Executive subcommittee is engaged in a blatant attempt to pass only small amounts of responsibility from each Department to local government. That is the wrong way round: it should be a matter of identifying what local government can and should deliver and, subsequently, how central Government needs to be reformed to take account of that.

Most importantly, local representatives must hold prime responsibility for local community planning. They must have a direct say on all its elements, including economic development, emergency services and transport. Local representatives are closest to local communities, and they offer the most direct accountability to local people. Therefore, they must take the leading role in community planning. Currently, they face

severe restrictions in doing so, because they cannot vest land for economic development, and, in most cases, have no direct say on local emergency services.

Furthermore, local representatives play merely a minor consultative role in dealing with local roads and public transport. In practice, local community planning functions are severely restricted by the fact that responsibility for many functions rests with Departments, agencies and quangos. Therefore, ultimately, although most of the blame is often assigned to local councils, most of the power rests with central Government. It is disappointing that the plans in the emerging findings report pay mere lip service to addressing that matter.

For local community planning to become a reality, that will mean not only the transfer of key functions, such as vesting of land for economic development or libraries, but a new type of local government, with partnership-working on areas such as fire and rescue, local roads and bus services. Local representatives need to be given a meaningful say, and new and fairer financial arrangements must be put in place. Estates management should be transferred to local councils so that they can take the lead in the placement of essential education, emergency and health services, even where those are managed by central Government.

Local community planning will also mean a new approach to good relations. Councils must be bound by best practice in community and race relations, and they must take the lead in ensuring improvements in those areas. However, that is not an excuse for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and other Departments to shirk their responsibilities. Good relations in this society must be the cornerstone of government at all levels.

Reform of local government to the extent that we want will also mean reform of central Government. That is no bad thing. Devolution of justice powers will require a review of Departments in any case. Therefore, in order to deliver more accountable and efficient government, the opportunity should be taken to reform Departments and quangos. Local government cannot be reformed without reforming the whole structure; therefore, we want to see plans from the Executive for reform of all structures of government.

Our message to the Executive is simple: try again. We want to see local government in charge of local functions, using local finance. Most importantly, that will mean real responsibility and accountability for community planning, and a meaningful say for all its associated functions. Moreover, it will mean reform, not only of local government, but of central Government. This is an opportunity to create a world-class system, and the Executive must not throw away that opportunity. I support the amendment.

**Mr Elliott:** I declare an interest as a local councillor on Fermanagh District Council. I express my condolences to the family of the victims of the fire in Omagh this morning. The family who died came from my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I also express my sympathy to the family of the police officer in Dungannon on whose life a murder attempt was made. I spent over three hours at the scene last night, and I must say that it was a dastardly act.

I thank the Minister for tabling the motion. Although some of the issues raised may have been controversial at times, I hope that they will prove helpful in developing the process. In the absence of devolved government, local councils were the only show in town for almost three decades. Councils were the only forums in which people had an opportunity to display their political views and to make local politics work in the Province. I reiterate my party's call for as much power as is reasonably possible to be given to councils throughout Northern Ireland, as is the policy employed in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The publication of the emerging findings paper was disappointing and aggravating for those who support more power being devolved to local councils. After the release of the paper, NILGA moved quickly to state that the content of the publication was unsatisfactory in many ways. I agree with that interpretation.

As the majority of Members are aware, over 120 elected representatives and officers from local government expressed their feelings about the emerging findings paper at an event in Cookstown on 24 October 2007. Among the arguments expressed at that meeting, and in subsequent publications by NILGA, was the fear that the proposals will not deliver the previously agreed vision and that they will not support the radical transformation of service delivery or provide the opportunity to reinvigorate local democracy. Those were just a few of the concerns that were expressed — there are, of course, many more.

The need for regional democracy to be supported by the Assembly is of major importance. The joy felt by the majority of people in Northern Ireland after the return of the Assembly earlier this year is not in doubt. However, that does not mean that all local government powers can be held within the Executive or the Assembly. Councillors across Northern Ireland are elected by local people on a localised platform. Those of us who support democracy will agree that those elections afford a reasonable level of accountability to local councils, which brings them closer to the communities that they represent.

Accountability provides the basis for an increased mandate at local council level. I have just read through the emerging findings paper; local councils will be overjoyed to hear that in the transfer of the public-

realm aspects of local road functions, they are regaining control of grass cutting, weed spraying, gully emptying, street lighting, off-street car parking and pedestrian permits. All those issues are sensitive and important for local people. However, they do not go far enough in increasing local accountability.

The vision in the paper states that there should be:

“greater clarity between the roles of central and local government”.

It also states that:

“the interests of the citizen should be at the centre of not only the vision for local government but also all decisions relating to the new arrangements”.

For a number of reasons, that is just not the case.

The paper does not provide any clarity on the number of councils or on the proposed functions for transfer to local government.

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

**Mr McFarland:** I begin by making the rare declaration that I am not — and never have been — a councillor. The Assembly has heard accusations of rowing back, and I will speak briefly on the issue of dual mandates. When the RPA was first announced, I was greatly encouraged that the issue of Members trying to do two or three jobs at the same time, or be in two or three places at the same time, would be addressed. That was going well; last summer, the Preparation for Government Committee met, with the five member parties agreeing to abolish dual mandates.

I am slightly concerned that in meetings of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee — of which I am a member — DUP representatives, supported by their Sinn Féin counterparts, have begun to say that the new councils will need experience. That ignores the substantial number of councillors who are not MLAs or MPs, and who will presumably continue to sit on those councils. The argument that those Members make is that the new councils are so important that sitting MLAs in their parties are required to continue as councillors after 2011. That is crazy stuff. The House must face the issue of dual mandates early and be honest. People do not expect Members to be on councils, in Westminster or in the House of Lords and still perform their duties here.

I ask the Minister to urge her colleague Jeffrey Donaldson, who chairs the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, to address the issue of dual mandates — and to do so quickly.

12.15 pm

**Mr Cree:** I remind the House that I am a member of North Down Borough Council and have been so for more years than I care to remember. I thank the Minister for tabling the motion. It is timely and its purpose is to enable Members to discuss the emerging findings of

the RPA review and, hopefully, have changes made to them. It is an important debate, and, as other Members have done, I must mention the poor quality of the initial engagement with the RPA team. Despite that, we hope to have a good outcome.

The debate has been good, although there has been a lot of bluster and blether. Mr Weir dwelt on the pluses of the review, but he admitted that it had shortcomings. He highlighted the economic aspect of the review and said that the land bank from INI should be considered for transfer to the councils, which could do a better job with it. He also commented on the transfer of libraries — which was supported by other Members — and housing, among other things.

Mr Maskey referred to the seven-council model, and he appeared to link the number of councils to the amount of power that they will have. That is an interesting situation. Mr Boylan admitted that the review appeared minimalistic, and Mr Molloy — along with other Members — referred to the clawback by Departments.

Mr Gallagher referred to taking the power back to the centre, and Dolores Kelly made a good point about the poor turnouts at local elections, which she linked to the limited powers that councils have. That is worthy of note, and I think that she was the only Member to mention it. Mr Neeson mentioned the Alliance Party's intention to support the NILGA paper, which many of us do. Sammy Wilson referred to the grouping system, which was one of the success stories of the last revision of local government, and that should be considered again.

The Ulster Unionist Party is disappointed at the limited proposals that form the basis of the emerging findings paper. The review of public administration, as it impacts on local government, has the potential to significantly improve the delivery of services to the public by offering effective, efficient, focused and relevant services at the time and place that they are required. The Ulster Unionist Party does not support change for change's sake, but strongly advocates the transfer of those services where the public can experience a significant improvement to their lives and communities. Most people accept that the transfer of a comprehensive range of services would result in a transformation of service delivery, impacting upon — and improving the quality of life of — everyone in the communities in which they serve.

It is clear that the retraction of key services from the original proposals is at odds with the vision outlined in paragraphs 6 to 10 of the emerging findings paper. The proposal to transfer only 1.2% of the public-sector budget and 0.45% of public-sector jobs is a small change. Many believe that that de minimis approach would jeopardise community planning and call into question the value of reorganising councils, given the significant cost of the change process. The limited

proposal before the House could be carried out by the existing councils without any further cost or disruption. The Ulster Unionist Party supports that assessment, but would go further and suggest that the proposed review of Departments has resulted in a circling of the wagons by Ministers and senior departmental staff.

The lack of a strategic vision — and a desire to keep control of the minutiae of Government — undermines the commitment and resources expended by local government over the past five years in preparing for the reform. We appear to have been given a masterclass in U-turning.

The Ulster Unionist Party is committed to local government that is accountable to local communities. That is why we support the 15 local authorities for Northern Ireland model; it would have the power to deliver a comprehensive and responsive service to the people. I ask the House to support the amendment.

**Mrs Foster:** This has been a very useful debate, and I genuinely mean that, although there was one notable exception, and it is unfortunate that the Member was the first contributor to the debate, because he could have spoiled it for everyone else. Thankfully, he did not, and we have had a very useful exchange about functions, numbers and the vision for local government.

Mr McCrea, who moved the amendment, stated his dismay and frustration, and he wanted to know the purpose of the review of public administration. Not once did he mention what he wants to see for local government. His outburst in the House today was more about a leadership challenge in the Ulster Unionist Party than it was about the review of public administration.

**Dr W McCrea:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs Foster:** Yes, I will.

**Dr W McCrea:** I ask the Minister to be careful when using the name Mr McCrea, because I think she means Basil McCrea, and not the other two honourable gentlemen of that name. *[Laughter.]* I can understand the mistake, because he is a new child on the block, and is, therefore, totally inexperienced.

**Mrs Foster:** I am very happy to clarify that I am referring to the mover of the amendment. I was never referring to my honourable friend on those issues.

As regards the transfer of functions in the emerging findings paper — and they are emerging findings, and I make no apology for that — I said that I would bring the emerging findings to the House so that we could have the sort of engagement that we are having today. Perhaps some Members would rather that I had waited until I was finished before coming to them.

Emerging findings show that there is an increase to net local government expenditure of 21% — an increase from £455 million to £558 million. Members

have indicated that they do not think that that is enough, so I will have to take that matter back to the subcommittee, which will be meeting very soon.

Basil McCrea also said that he did not want a review of the review of public administration. That obviously means that he wants seven councils, which would be another broken UUP manifesto promise, but then consistency has never been a strong point of the Ulster Unionist Party.

Initially, the Executive subcommittee, and then the Executive, which includes two Ulster Unionist Members, approved the issue of the emerging findings paper for consultation. The Member should remember that point, when he talks about a complete and utter farce, because he is talking about the leader of his own party.

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs Foster:** No, I will not give way. I have taken quite a bit from you this morning.

When the Member talks about complete and utter farce, he is talking about the leader of his own party, who gave the go ahead to put the emerging findings paper out for consultation.

**Mr Weir:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs Foster:** Yes, I will give way to my colleague. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Weir:** Surely, there must be something with Mr McCrea criticising his leader.

**Dr W McCrea:** You mean Basil McCrea.

**Mr Weir:** Sorry, I mean Basil McCrea criticising his own leader. What possible purpose could he have for doing that?

**Mrs Foster:** I could not possibly comment.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Mrs Foster:** Now —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. Take your seat.

Would Members please stick to the motion, instead of political point scoring? *[Laughter.]*

**Mrs Foster:** I find that very interesting. I will be raising issues with the Speaker concerning comments made by Mr McCrea. Obviously, I have some more issues to raise.

Moving on to the content of the motion; Mr Weir welcomed issues on planning, community-planning powers, vesting powers — which Mr Neeson mentioned and will be given to councils — regeneration powers, economic development and tourism. He expressed his disappointment about local roads, the land bank and Invest NI.

He also expressed disappointment in respect of youth services and libraries.

Mr Maskey said that the review of local government was a work in progress, and referred to governance issues. He will know that governance is referred to in paragraph 49 of the emerging findings paper, and that that is very much a live issue, which we will be addressing. He also talked about the consequence of the move to seven councils, and about finding ways of dealing with shared services, which is an issue that the subcommittee is actively examining with respect to economies of scale.

Mr Gallagher also spoke about governance, and I refer him to paragraph 49 of the emerging findings paper. He said that there was very little in the paper, and that stakeholders did not know what was going on. I take issue with that. We are presently engaged with groups of councillors and other interested parties right across Northern Ireland. Mr Gallagher spoke of his concern about stripping jobs out of the west. It will come as no surprise to him that I will not be stripping any jobs out of the west, if I can help it. I assure him that the paper has no hidden agenda, and that is one of the reasons why I brought it to the Floor of the House.

Mr Gallagher said that the only good Departments were the Department for Social Development and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure — and I am sure that my ministerial colleagues will be delighted about that. Obviously, he missed the reference to planning in the paper. Mr Gallagher also said that he was disappointed about the local roads issue.

Mr Neeson spoke of the need for councils to have more meaningful power. He, in common with Ms Lo, said that we should not be looking at RPA in isolation from the current review. That is why, in my opening comments, I referred to the evolution of local government. We should have cognisance of what is going on, but I cannot wait for the institutional review report. We must move ahead with the review of local government.

Mr Neeson said that he wanted me to take NILGA's paper seriously. I certainly will. NILGA has been an invaluable partner in this process, and that will continue. He also referred to reform in health and education. Again, as with institutional review, we must be aware of the reform that is ongoing in other areas. There is a real need to link local government reform to reforms in health and education, for example. I am engaged in talks with the two relevant Ministers to see how that can work in practice.

Sammy Wilson spoke about a once-in-a-lifetime change in local government, as did other Members. I reiterate that very important decisions lie ahead, but this is also a process of evolution and looking to the future. Mr Wilson talked about the need to build up the capacity of local councillors, and said that we should reconsider library functions and youth services. He implored me, and other Ministers, to be imaginative in

considering shared services, and he referred to sectors where that had worked well previously. We are actively considering that matter. He also referred to the purchasing power of local councils in respect of roads, and I am also looking at that issue.

Mr Boylan apologised for not being in Armagh, and I accept his apology. He also talked about equality in governance, and I have already addressed that matter. He said that he was disappointed with the functions package, and referred to the importance of community planning.

Mr Hamilton talked about governance issues from a unionist point of view. I am disappointed that some Members across the Floor thought that it was funny when we were talking about unionists in the west, but did not think that it was so funny when we were talking about nationalists and republicans in the east. Equality in governance is for everyone in Northern Ireland, and it should not be seen as a threat. Mr Hamilton also referred to youth services and libraries.

Mr Molloy said that local government needed more powers and hoped that a gap would not develop between central and local government. I do not want to see a gap; I want to see a more joined-up relationship between central and local government, with the appropriate body delivering the appropriate service. Even if there is not full devolution to local government, that should not mean that councils cannot deliver services in particular areas. However, we are looking at ways of teeing that up.

Mr Molloy said that he was disappointed at the talk of a delay of elections until 2011. It is legislatively impossible to have the provisions of the review of public administration through the House before 2009. Therefore, we must either delay the election or simply hold another election to the 26 existing councils. That issue must be resolved.

12.30 pm

Mr Beggs mainly addressed planning matters and the need for area-planning powers. Some 85% of what is currently contained in the area plans will be delegated to local councils. I am disappointed that the Member did not pick up on that fact. There are no area plans in England, Scotland and Wales. All that the Department will retain centrally is the remaining 15% of the content of the area plans, which is required for strategic reasons and to deal with European law. I am sure that Mr Beggs is aware of the judicial review that is under way in respect of the northern area plan. Mr Beggs said that councils must have the power to draw up plans for their areas. That is precisely what we are trying to achieve through local plans. He should also be aware that a planning review is ongoing. We are trying to ensure that the planning process is fit for purpose when those functions are devolved to local councils.

Mrs Kelly said that she hoped that I would listen to the points that Members made from the Floor of the House. I hope that, by now, she realises that I have listened very carefully to what has been said; that is why I brought this matter to the Floor of the House. I accept her comments about the earlier consultations and the lack of engagement. I also accept her comments on the concerns about local government staff and estates. I acknowledge Mrs Kelly's support for community-planning initiatives. Ms Lo also said that community planning was important.

I thank Councillor Elliott for his helpful comments. That is you finished, Tom. *[Laughter.]* I thank him for his comments about Fermanagh District Council and the role that it could play, the need for clarity in respect of relationships between central and local government, and the importance of sorting out the number of councils in the near future.

I firmly acknowledge the work that local councillors have done over the past 35 years, when there was no devolved elected Chamber to take the flak. Local councils were often the only place in which the views of the community could be expressed. I wish to place that on record.

Alan McFarland, who was quite glad to acknowledge the fact that he is not a councillor, said that matters related to the institutional review and dual mandates need to be sorted out. I am happy to pass those comments on to my Rt Hon friend the Chairman of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Leslie Cree made the winding-up speech on the amendment and gave the somewhat surprising indication that he believed that 26 councils could deliver on future arrangements. I hope that the Ulster Unionist position is not that we stick to 26 councils but that we move to the appropriate number, with the appropriate level of service.

Our shared goal is the delivery of a vision for local government, to improve the quality of life for all our people and to create communities that are sustainable, vibrant, healthy, prosperous, stable and people centred.

I look forward — believe it or not — to coming back to the House with the final recommendations of the review. There is much interest in those recommendations, not only among local councillors, but in 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 the emerging findings of the review of the Review of Public Administration decisions, as they relate to local government, and the initial proposals for the future shape of

local government; and calls on the Executive to transfer meaningful and significant functions to local government.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has arranged to meet as soon as the Assembly suspends for lunch. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

*The sitting was suspended at 12.34 pm.*

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

2.00 pm

## MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

### North/South Ministerial Council — Institutional Format

#### **The deputy First Minister (Mr McGuinness):**

With your permission, go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I wish to say how saddened I am by this morning's devastating news of the tragic death of a family in Omagh. My sympathy goes out to their friends, relatives and neighbours who are, no doubt, heartbroken by their terrible loss.

I wish to express my deepest appreciation to everyone in our emergency services who had to deal with that awful situation. The work in which the emergency services are currently engaged in Omagh contrasts markedly with the actions of those who, in recent days, shot two policemen. That micro-group is totally detached from reality, and has no popular support in the community. I condemn, in the strongest possible terms, the actions of its members and I call on them to stop such actions immediately.

In compliance with Section 52(6)(b) of the NI Act 1998, we wish to make a statement on the second meeting, in institutional format, of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), which was held at the Ballymascanlon Hotel, Dundalk, on Tuesday 30 October 2007. All of the Ministers who attended the meeting have approved the following report, and we make it on their behalf.

The Executive were represented by the First Minister, junior Minister Paisley, the Minister of Education and myself. The Irish Government were represented by Dermot Ahern TD, Minister for Foreign Affairs, who chaired the meeting.

Ministers expressed regret at the decision of Seagate Technology to close its plant at Limavady. We recognised that, because Seagate's workforce comes from a wide, cross-border area, that decision will have serious implications for both the Executive and the Irish Government. We agreed to co-operate closely in the coming weeks in our efforts to address that situation, and we welcomed the announcement of 300 new jobs at Norbrook Laboratories Ltd in Newry.

The Council noted that the terms of office of the boards of the North/South implementation bodies and of Tourism Ireland Ltd will expire in December 2007, and asked that work be taken forward to ensure that the NSMC can put new boards in place by November

2007. The Council expressed its appreciation of the work and the commitment of the outgoing chairpersons, vice-chairpersons and board members of the North/South implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd.

The Council welcomed the opportunity to consider the EU dimension of its work, and agreed to consider that matter further at its next plenary meeting.

The Council noted progress on the implementation of the recommendations contained in 'Study of Obstacles to Mobility', which was commissioned by the NSMC, including progress on a mutual recognition of qualifications in the areas of education and health, the introduction of single tariffs by some mobile phone operators, and the greater availability of public-service information for people who wish to cross the border to live, work and study. The Council launched a cross-border mobility website, which provides a central access point for information on a range of issues for such people. The Council requested that its secretariat keep the website's operation, development, marketing and management under review, examine options for its future funding — including possible EU funding — and report back to a future NSMC meeting.

The Council agreed that the NSMC secretariat should convene two working groups: one to explore options for going forward on the transfer of pension rights on a cross-border basis; and the second to examine cross-border banking issues, including that of transaction charges. Both groups will report back to a future NSMC meeting.

The Council noted the progress to date in acquiring permanent accommodation for the NSMC joint secretariat in Armagh. The Council agreed that, once evaluation of the shortlisted bidders is completed, subject to the appropriate internal processes in each Administration, officials should enter into contractual negotiations with the preferred bidder to provide lease accommodation and report progress to a future NSMC meeting.

The Council discussed a number of issues of human resources in respect of the North/South implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd, including pay issues and the regrading of posts, which were raised in a paper that was prepared by the chief executive officers of those bodies.

The Council agreed that officials from the Department of Finance and Personnel and from the Department of Finance would advise their Ministers on the issues and consider the chief executive officers' pay paper together with additional information provided by the bodies in the context of relevant national pay policies. Conclusions will be reported to a future NSMC meeting.

The Council agreed a framework for approving the regrading of certain posts in the North/South implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd. It agreed that, provided the principles set out in the framework are

adhered to, NSMC approval of such regradings can be deemed to have been given.

The Council noted that progress on all the matters discussed at the institutional meeting will be reported to the next NSMC plenary meeting and agreed that the Council will meet again in institutional format, as appropriate, in 2008.

**The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley):** I wish to associate myself with everything that the deputy First Minister has said, especially about the terrible tragedy in Omagh. I am sure that our hearts are sore as we think of the sadness over that family and over the town at this time. They can be assured that all right-thinking people feel as we do about the matter.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. I want to question him on a specific point. Will he outline to the House the process by which appointments to the North/South implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd will take place? I assume that that will happen over the forthcoming weeks or months. In addition, are there any plans to establish a board for Waterways Ireland?

**The deputy First Minister:** Under the agreement that set up the implementation bodies in March 1998, the North/South Ministerial Council appoints the management boards to the trade and business development body — InterTradeIreland; to the North/South language body, which includes Foras na Gaeilge and Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch; to the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission; and an advisory board to the Food Safety Promotion Board. Overall, there are 60 members on the boards of those bodies. The Special EU Programmes Body and Waterways Ireland do not have boards.

The terms of office of the current board members, including the chairs and vice-chairs, end in December 2007, and since most of those people have served two terms, they cannot be reappointed. Many of the chairs, vice-chairs and members have served on the boards for almost seven years. The current boards have made a sustained commitment to the work of the bodies, and the Executive and the Irish Government are currently considering appointments to the new boards to be made on a 50:50 basis. The process of securing nominations is under way. Appointments to the boards will require approval at an appropriate NSMC meeting in November to ensure that the new boards are in place by mid-December.

If a Waterways Ireland board were to be established, that would require legislation. As Members will know, the St Andrews review is an opportunity to consider that.

**Ms Anderson:** Go raibh maith agat. I was going to ask when the appointments would be made, but the deputy First Minister has already answered that question.

**Mr O’Loan:** I wish to be associated with the deputy First Minister’s expression of sympathy in relation to the Omagh tragedy. I also welcome his remarks about, and echo his strong condemnation of, the attempted murders of two police officers.

I appreciate the appropriate reference to the job losses at Seagate Technology in Limavady. It was good that the meeting was able to welcome 300 new jobs at Norbrook Laboratories Ltd in Newry. What contribution can the North/South Ministerial Council make to economic development, North and South, including co-operation between INI and IDA Ireland?

**The deputy First Minister:** We are all conscious that we are still in the early stages of this Administration; the institutions have been up and running for six months, effectively. Considerable work is taking place in the different institutional formats. In the course of the past week, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Michelle Gildernew were involved in one of the sectoral meetings.

All issues that are connected to the economy are obviously of huge importance to this Administration and to the Assembly, as it moves forward.

We work with people in the Irish Government who recognise the importance of liaising on matters in which it is clear that benefit can be achieved for Dublin and for ourselves. In the context of the work that is taking place on what I consider to be the most important economic investment conference ever to take place on the North, as time moves on, we look forward to working, through the NSMC, with the Irish Government and others to ensure that we take best advantage of the opportunities that are available for our workforce and community.

**Mr Ford:** I too thank the Minister for his statement, and I associate my group both with his expressions of sympathy to the family that has been devastated by the Omagh tragedy and with his condemnation of the attacks on the two police officers.

When the Minister mentioned the cross-border mobility website, I was surprised to learn that the ambition behind it appears to be merely to provide information. Does the Minister not agree that strong benefits would be brought to this society, North and South, if the cross-border movement of young people into further and higher education were encouraged? Given that he is examining websites, perhaps he might also consider whether he could spare time to publish on the OFMDFM website the report on research into the financial cost of the Northern Ireland divide. Bearing in mind the issues that apply to society here, both North and South, perhaps he could discuss a shared future at the next NSMC meeting.

**The deputy First Minister:** I shall give a brief history of the report to which the Member has referred.

In September 2000, the North/South Ministerial Council commissioned a study on obstacles to mobility in order to identify the impediments that make it difficult for people who wish to move across the border — in either direction — to work, study or live. That study was published in February 2002 and contained 50 recommendations that covered several key areas. Twelve recommendations, relating to the transfer of pensions, bank charges and the provision of information, remain to be implemented. Some progress has been made to implement those remaining recommendations, including: work on the mutual recognition of qualifications, resulting in the freer cross-border movement of workers in areas such as the education and health sectors; the introduction of single tariffs by some mobile-phone operators; and greater availability of public-service information for people who wish to cross the border to live, work and study. The new cross-border mobility information website has been launched, and the NSMC joint secretariat will keep the operation, marketing and management of that website under review. The secretariat will examine options for the website’s future funding, including possible EU funding, and it will report on that to future NSMC meetings. The Council agreed that the secretariat should convene two working groups. The first group will explore options for implementing a mechanism to transfer pension rights on a cross-border basis, and the other will examine cross-border banking issues, such as transaction charges. Those groups will also report back to a future NSMC meeting.

The Member also mentioned a shared future, about which there is a great deal of debate. The work that the First Minister and I — and, indeed, all the parties in the Assembly — are doing to lead by example is the best illustration of the progress that we are making. We are showing that a huge job of work needs to be done in order to bring about a situation that will obviously create massive savings for us in our budgetary considerations, especially if we have a very sound basis on which to integrate our community more sensibly.

A live and current debate on a shared future is ongoing, but I am not sure that it is an issue for the NSMC. In the final analysis, the matter will have to be settled to the satisfaction of everyone. Everyone in the Assembly has contributed to the work that has been done on it thus far; more people than just the First Minister and I have been involved. The existence of the Assembly, the fact that the institutions are up and working, and the fact that we are making important agreements on budgetary issues, investment strategies, and programmes for Government, are clear indicators to the public about how we intend to move forward. As the First Minister — correctly — said after the NSMC meeting in Armagh, the important point is to end all the old hatreds and divisions.

2.15 pm

**Mr Moutray:** Will the deputy First Minister assure Members that the review body will critically examine the management of the North/South implementation bodies and ensure that they do not remain the shambles that many of them currently are?

**The deputy First Minister:** The review will examine objectively the efficiency and value for money of existing implementation bodies and consider the case for additional bodies and areas of co-operation in the NSMC that might deliver mutual benefits.

The review group's first meeting took place on 31 October 2007. In addition to senior officials from the Executive and the Irish Government, the review group also includes an advisory panel comprised of four experts — two nominated by the Executive and two by the Irish Government. The two Executive-nominated experts are Peter King and Sean Oliver. Eoin O'Shea and John Hynes were nominated by the Irish Government. Eoin O'Shea is the chief executive of the Institute of Directors in Ireland, and John Hynes is the former secretary general of the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

It is anticipated that intensive work will be undertaken by the review group during November and December and that a final report will be made available to the first NSMC plenary meeting in 2008. To ensure that review costs are kept to a minimum, the NSMC decided that the review group would draw on the existing resources and expertise of Departments in the North and in Dublin in order to implement its terms of reference. The NSMC secretariat will provide full administrative and secretarial support to the review group, and the work of the existing North/South bodies will be unaffected during the review.

Therefore, I have no doubt that in the course of that work, which is under way, we will see people facing up to the past criticisms of those bodies in order to improve them in the future.

**Mr McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to associate my party with the First Minister's and the deputy First Minister's comments about the tragedy in Omagh and the despicable attacks in Derry and Dungannon.

In his statement, the deputy First Minister referred to the North/South Ministerial Council's study on cross-border mobility, which Sinn Féin welcomes. The report, published in February 2002, contains 50 recommendations. Will the deputy First Minister indicate what progress has been made to implement any outstanding recommendations, particularly those relating to workers' pension rights? Will he also indicate whether the study group's report will be presented to the next council meeting and when that might be?

**The deputy First Minister:** The outcome of that will be reported to the next NSMC meeting. At this stage, it is difficult to say what progress has been made because we have only just ratified the review. Like everyone else, I await the outcome with considerable interest, particularly in relation to pension transfers and bank charges. Both of those matters are being determinedly focused on by the group.

**Mr Shannon:** In the report, the deputy First Minister mentioned Tourism Ireland Ltd. Has a strategy been agreed that will benefit the whole Province? I ask in the light of the loss of 100 jobs in my area last week, and I am conscious that tourism is a growth area and has the potential to turn things around. In addition, is there any indication when single tariffs for mobile phones will be introduced?

**The deputy First Minister:** As I indicated earlier, there was a sectoral meeting last week, on which Nigel Dodds, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, will report.

On phone charges, things seem to be moving at a far quicker speed than we have previously seen. We are hopeful that there will be action in the shorter term.

Tourism is vital to our economy, and I was heartened by the recent news that, last year, there was a 75% increase in the number of North American tourists visiting the North.

Those are spectacular figures by our standards, and they show clearly that an open market exists for us in the United States in particular. We are conscious that, because of the state of world affairs, instability and the unpopularity of American foreign policy in other countries, many Americans are reluctant to travel widely. The fact that large numbers of them are coming to Ireland is something that we should take advantage of. The 75% increase in the number of American tourists travelling to the North will boost our tourism industry in the future.

Mr Shannon comes from a particularly beautiful part of our country, and I have no doubt whatsoever that the entrepreneurs in his area will be able to capitalise on the numbers of tourists to the benefit of the local community.

**Mr McClarty:** My party and I would like to be associated with the expressions of sympathy for those who so tragically lost their lives in Omagh this morning. We also wish the two wounded police officers very speedy recoveries.

I was extremely interested to read that the horrendous economic news that emanated from my constituency regarding the impending loss of 930 jobs at Seagate was discussed at the NSMC meeting. Can the deputy First Minister tell the House what progress,

if any, has been made in drawing up an action plan to address that situation?

**The deputy First Minister:** Essentially, the Seagate facility at Limavady produces substrates — component parts for data-storage systems in computers — which are common across all computer hard-drive systems and which are now manufactured predominantly in Asia. As a consequence of that, and of recent expansion in global capacity, the Limavady facility is, according to Seagate, no longer cost-competitive, particularly as regards labour costs.

How can we provide assistance to keep the plant here, or address what is a serious situation involving the loss of so many jobs? Invest NI has been working closely with the company over the last 18 months in an effort to improve efficiencies and flexibility at the plant. Despite the significant success achieved by the workers at Limavady, the movement in global capacity and prices means that the cost differential, which is approximately £15 million per annum, is too great to be bridged.

It was clear in the course of the meeting that we had with Dermot Ahern that he was keen to see the Administrations of the North and South working together to address the issue. In the coming period, we will try to see how we can take advantage of the combined wisdom of those agencies that are under our combined stewardship to see whether we can deal with the horrific difficulties in Limavady.

The north-west gateway initiative, which was set up during the period of suspension, depended on Departments working with local councils. All of that requires a joined-up approach and an integrated strategy. I look forward to seeing the outcome of the combined wisdom of people who have been through such experiences, particularly in the South.

Dermot Ahern talked about the situation in Clonmel, which suffered equally horrendous job losses. However, the people there did not lie down under it; they got up off their backsides, shook themselves down and recovered — Clonmel is now booming. We hope to do that with Limavady in the coming period. It will not be easy; it will be difficult. However, given the scale of the job losses, there is no doubt whatsoever that we must prioritise Limavady as an area in need of assistance.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I too would like to be associated with the deputy First Minister's condemnation of the attempted murders of the two policemen and the awful loss of the family in Omagh last night.

In his recent speech to a Chamber of Commerce meeting, the Taoiseach referred to the north-west gateway initiative. He discussed how that initiative is a joint approach to building greater capacity and a better quality of life for all in the north-west region, which, as we know, includes Donegal, Limavady, Strabane and Derry.

The Taoiseach identified challenges that the initiative addresses, including workforce development, higher education, innovation and science. Will those areas be prioritised, especially in light of David McClarty's point about the economic setbacks that recent job losses have created?

Sir Reg Empey has often talked about investment coming from America. However, those investors are no longer interested in capital investment; they are more interested in a trained and skilled workforce. What efforts are the Executive making to ensure that we are creating a better workforce that has the capacity to attract investment?

**The deputy First Minister:** The Member and I, among others, were present when the Taoiseach visited the north-west a number of weeks ago. The Taoiseach spoke about the importance of the north-west gateway initiative, which is hugely important to everyone who lives in that area.

Since taking up the post of Minister for Employment and Learning, Sir Reg Empey has consistently reiterated the importance of skilling our workforce so that it meets the needs of a changing world. That is a huge priority for him. We have been to the United States on several occasions, and he and I were on a delegation together during the Smithsonian Festival. In all the engagements that we were involved in, it was clear that he considers developing skills a priority on which his Department needed to major.

It is still early days. However, the economic investment conference will take place in May, and many business groups from the United States will probably come to the North before that. In our attempts to attract more inward investment, we hope to interest many of those groups in the situation in the north-west, especially as the recent devastating news in Limavady has created an issue that must be addressed.

Other good work has been done on roads in the north-west. Roads are key to infrastructure, and they encourage people to visit particular areas. The universities in that area have been working to attract more people to their institutions.

Sir Reg Empey was involved in a sectoral meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in Dublin in recent weeks, and he majored on the issue of a skills strategy, which is rightly a priority.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire fosta. The deputy First Minister's statement referred to the next plenary meeting of the NSMC. Will the Minister please announce the date of that meeting?

**The deputy First Minister:** The date of the next NSMC plenary meeting has not yet been finalised. However, it is anticipated that it will take place early in

the new year. Given that it is the intention to host the North/South Ministerial Council meetings on an alternate basis, the next plenary meeting will be held in Dundalk in the South.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the deputy First Minister state when he envisages that the new accommodation for the North/South Ministerial Council secretariat in Armagh city will be ready? Go raibh maith agat.

**The deputy First Minister:** A business case and an economic appraisal that were completed in 2006 confirmed that the North/South Ministerial Council joint secretariat accommodation does not meet operational requirements. It was therefore recommended that suitable alternative accommodation in the Armagh area should be identified. I have been to the current accommodation several times, and I have seen the far-from-satisfactory conditions in which the civil servants are working.

2.30 pm

It is recommended that the secretariat should lease suitable accommodation in the Armagh area from a third party, which will either provide an appropriate building, or design and build one to specification. Earlier this year, expressions of interest were sought from those willing to provide accommodation for the secretariat. A number of tenders were received and have been evaluated against agreed criteria to provide a shortlist of four bidders. Those four have been invited to respond to a second, more rigorous selection process using a more detailed specification. At its meeting on 30 October, the Council agreed that, once evaluation of the shortlisted bids is complete — subject to the appropriate internal processes in each Administration — officials should enter into contract negotiations with the preferred bidder to provide leased accommodation, and report progress to a future NSMC meeting. Following the award of a contract, construction and fit-out will take approximately two years, and the new accommodation could be available in late 2009.

**Mr McFarland:** I thank the Ministers for their statement. Has the deputy First Minister been driven to distraction by the complaints of the First Minister and junior Minister Paisley about what a waste of time and money the North/South Ministerial Council represents, or have they changed their views on this issue since the first Assembly?

In his discussions with Tourism Ireland on human resources, which I see is on the menu here, have the deputy First Minister and his colleagues worked out how the marked community imbalance in the staff of that body is to be rectified?

**The deputy First Minister:** With respect to the Member's second question, all those matters are

consistently under review. Where there are difficulties, measures will be taken to correct them.

As to whether I am driven to distraction by the First Minister, I have been working with him for the last six months and he has not driven me to distraction yet.

**Dr Farry:** No doubt the House takes great comfort from the working relationship between the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. However, we would like to see more delivery and better results.

With reference to the deputy First Minister's statement and his focus on economic development after Seagate, is there not a limit on how far co-operation between the two jurisdictions can go? They operate in different frameworks: the South works on the basis of a differential rate of corporation tax; in Northern Ireland, we have to operate on the basis of selective financial assistance through the award of grants.

Have the Executive sought the assistance of the Irish Government in making representations to the British Government on the Varney Review? How will the Southern Government encourage investors who are considering investment in the island of Ireland to invest in the North as opposed to the South, notwithstanding the more competitive framework in the South of Ireland?

**The deputy First Minister:** The Member raises obvious practical difficulties: the fact that we are working with two separate jurisdictions and two completely different systems of government. The issue of corporation tax has exercised the Executive and the Assembly many times in the last six months.

During the course of his review, Varney went to Dublin and met different interest groups there. No doubt he learnt the views of both the Irish Government, who are supportive of everything that we have said in relation to that issue, and business interests in the South.

There is always a level of competition, as different regions of the country constantly angle for more jobs and more prosperity. For us, the question is whether — in the course of our deliberations with the Irish Government on a wide range of matters under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council — we are working with people willing to assist in economic investment and development in the North. It is clear to us that there is good heart for the North in Irish Government circles and that, in spite of all the practical difficulties, people are willing to be imaginative as to how we go forward and improve the economic prospects for people in the North, who have been so detrimentally affected by decades of conflict.

Our society is emerging from that conflict, and those with whom we work are prepared to assist as much as possible. For example, there is no doubt that our efforts to encourage investment from the United States receive support from the Irish Government. As it approaches, I

am becoming excited about the economic investment conference's prospects. The new US special envoy to the North, Paula Dobriansky, has been here on a number of occasions and has worked very hard to attract key American companies to the investment conference. She has not simply issued fine words or aspirational statements but has stressed the need for delivery, which is the kind of language that I like to hear when I talk to people about economic investment.

The Irish Government are therefore encouraging all of that to which I have referred. Practical difficulties remain, but it is a matter of being imaginative, of which we are capable.

2.45 pm

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Sports Strategy

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes for a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been received and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for a winding-up speech.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the importance of sport in the physical, social and economic well-being of society; expresses concern that National Lottery funding is being diverted to the 2012 London Olympics and will have a negative impact on community sport; and believes that the proposed draft budget is not sufficient to meet the standards and priorities of the proposed sports strategy recently announced by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

I am aware that two of my colleagues on the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure have tabled an amendment to the motion. We are working well in Committee, so I do not want there to be a Division, particularly on sport. However, we shall see how the debate goes.

Sport and exercise are extremely important to the well-being of society: it is not an accident that socially progressive Governments invest heavily in sport and exercise facilities. Sport and exercise have a direct impact on our health, social lives and education, and they contribute to a country's international standing and economic well-being. There is great concern across the community and in sporting sectors at the inadequate funding for sport in the draft Budget. Given wider spending commitments, the ambitious targets that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure has set will not be met.

Serious shortfalls in sports funding have occurred as a result of the siphoning-off of £4.5 million of lottery funding for the London Olympics. When the London bid was announced, no mention was made of the fact that money intended for good causes would be used to subvert the infrastructure in London. As a result, we now see the failure of our Executive to provide adequate funding to offset funding reductions in the draft Budget.

Sport gives society a powerful return on investment. It makes us fitter and healthier, and it improves self-esteem and communities. Where there is world-class participation, sport provides an international platform for the entire region.

Consider the money that sport saves the Health Service. For example, in my Foyle constituency, there is a regeneration project known as the TRIAX community sport programme. The programme involves people from the Fountain, the Bogside and the Brandywell. TRIAX runs a health and fitness club for women, of which one of my constituents — let us call her Mary — is a member. Mary was badly overweight, her physical health was deteriorating, and she was lonely and depressed. After she joined the health and fitness club, she made friends and lost over three stone. She now has her life back. Mary's story is replicated in homes and communities across the North, and, as the Minister will know, that example highlights the input that sport makes to health and well-being in communities.

Sport is worth investing in because the returns for health, education and society are so substantial. There was deep disappointment across the sport and community sectors when the draft Budget was announced.

The sports sector delivers well above its weight due to so much voluntary contribution; it probably has more voluntary contribution than any other sector. It is an indictment that any Government should expect such work to continue to be carried out on the cheap.

As a result of the comprehensive spending review (CSR) decisions announced by the Minister of Finance and Personnel last week, there are concerns for sport in Northern Ireland. I will talk about three specific issues: the impact on the draft strategy for sport, the Olympic centres of excellence, and the stadia safety programme.

In October 2007, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure launched the 'Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2007-2017'. That document identified anticipated investments and associated targets for sport's contribution to society in Northern Ireland during the next 10 years. Proposals in the CSR provide only a minute revenue contribution towards the spending that will be necessary to achieve the strategy's targets and outcomes. However, the CSR document lifts many targets directly from the strategy. It is totally unrealistic to expect the level of investment announced for the first three years to make any significant contribution to the targets proposed in the strategy. As a result, the strategy document identifies the need to spend £90 million in developing sports venues in Northern Ireland. Without such development, the targets cannot be achieved.

The draft Budget provides virtually no funding for sports facilities at community level. I will reiterate: no money will be available in the Budget for any community sports infrastructure in Northern Ireland. That, combined with the loss of lottery income to the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, means that Sport Northern Ireland will have no opportunity to make capital

investment in community-sports facilities during the next three years.

The historic level of investment by Sport Northern Ireland — £70 million during the past 10 years to local clubs, councils and community organisations — will cease completely. Sport will receive no capital from Government or from lottery funding.

Peter Hain announced the elite facilities programme, and he confirmed that a budget of £53 million to fund programmes would ensure that Northern Ireland would benefit from the legacy of the Olympic Games. Many public- and private-sector organisations have spent time and resources in applying for funds under the funding programme of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Many of the bids were superb and promised to provide outstanding centre-of-excellence facilities across Northern Ireland. Indeed, many of them were promised additional investment. It is disappointing, therefore, that the recent announcement reduces that Budget commitment to £35 million.

Fifteen million pounds has already been set aside for a fifty-metre swimming pool in Bangor, but there are £102 million worth of applications for other Olympic-related facilities outstanding. I understand that Sport Northern Ireland and the applicants had anticipated that there would be a pot of more than £30 million to fund the winners of the competition. The CSR announcement has reduced that pot to just £20 million. If that situation is not remedied, the Executive will fail to deliver on the former Secretary of State's promise of £53 million. Resources have been wasted on making applications when a large part of the budget has now disappeared. Northern Ireland will fail to benefit from any legacy opportunities from the 2012 Olympic Games.

During the past seven years, the stadia safety programme has delivered health and safety improvements to major sports grounds in Northern Ireland. The draft Budget makes no provision for any continued investment in major sports grounds. In 1997, the Scott Report identified that investment of £30 million was required to bring Northern Ireland's sports grounds up to proper health and safety standards. Inflation and increased standards have now taken the required amount to well over the £6.3 million that has been invested by Sport Northern Ireland. There has been failure to deliver on obligations to improve health and safety for spectators and players at major sports grounds, and members of the public will be exposed to unreasonable risk when they attend those grounds.

Northern Ireland will fail to attract significant events because our sports grounds may not be up to the required standard; indeed, some of them may even be closed because they are not fit for purpose. Sporting infrastructure in Northern Ireland is falling further behind that of the Republic of Ireland, Britain, and the rest of the world.

Grounds will fail to meet the standards imposed by The Safety of Sports Grounds (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and the associated 'Guide to Safety at Sports Grounds', commonly known as the "green guide". Grounds will be closed or their capacity greatly reduced.

The big problem is the lack of capital funds. The Olympic budget has been cut by £18 million, and there is no funding for safe sports grounds. Sport Northern Ireland has made a commitment of £8.5 million to a safety programme. That money can come only from the Olympic facilities budget, reducing it to around £11 million — plus the cost of the swimming pool. That constitutes a drop of £27 million from the original budget of £53 million — that is a lot of money.

Even if Sport Northern Ireland received an additional £8.5 million to provide for safe sport grounds, the sad reality is that there is no capital funding for sports infrastructure across Northern Ireland. I say that in the context that there are groups that are currently receiving funding for modernisation processes, which are carrying out excellent work.

Ulster Rugby and the Ulster Council of the GAA have secured funding until March 2008. If additional funding is not added to that budget, we shall face major redundancies in those two organisations, which even the Minister would concede are carrying out excellent work in their own communities in promoting health and well-being, and reducing social crime and vandalism. As I understand it, 15 jobs will be lost from the GAA and Ulster Rugby unless additional money is provided.

At a time when we are trying to create a positive environment in which sports clubs have the capacity to deliver on health and well-being, and when they are doing the work that the Government expects them to do, we are shutting up shop.

**Mr Shannon:** I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after the second "sport" and insert

"; welcomes the proposed sports strategy recently announced by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure; recognises that funding of the strategy should be considered in the context of the findings of the Vernon assets group; and calls on all stakeholders to work together to maximise the opportunities that exist in the sports strategy."

I consider it almost impossible to underestimate the impact of sport in supporting and sustaining the social and economic framework of our society. I shall comment on the motion and the amendment, consecutively. The effects of active participation in sport on the long-term health of our society are overwhelmingly positive. I believe, as Mr Ramsey does, that we must analyse the benefits of sports activity on the human body and, increase our understanding of why inclusive community-based sport is so essential and why it requires sufficient resources. This matter was discussed by the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure in the context of the Minister's statement, but

not in respect of how we should address the issue. That is why the motion is a little premature.

Recent research indicates that exercise triggers the release of naturally produced chemicals that protect the brain cells and keeps them performing at top speed — a goal that we are always aiming for. Exercise can protect an ageing brain from dementia, and even from Alzheimer's disease. Perhaps some Members should take note of that.

Participation in sport boosts concentration by assisting us in gaining a restful night's sleep. It also boosts energy levels. Therefore, the impact of participation in sport is very real. Active sports participation reduces the risk of high blood pressure, helps to maintain normal blood-glucose levels, and helps in the prevention and management of type-2 diabetes. Recently, there was a presentation by Diabetes UK in the Long Gallery, at which its representatives said that one of the most common forms of diabetes is type 2. That is the type that affects people who were, perhaps, not born with diabetes, but acquire it later in life.

Moreover, sports participation assists in the development of strong bones and can be exceptionally beneficial for women, who may be prone to osteoporosis.

We all now understand the clear benefits of sport for one's heart in respect of cholesterol and blood flow, which are critical risk factors in coronary heart disease and strokes. We should also consider the negative impact of inactivity, namely the increased risks of colon cancer and breast cancer. It should be noted that inactivity has been linked to cancers of the womb, lungs and prostate. There is a high incidence of prostate cancer in men. High blood pressure — or hypertension — can speed up the progress of kidney disease.

We are only too aware of the rise in obesity rates, particularly in childhood obesity, and the National Health Service is trying to address that problem directly. For all of those reasons, it is critical that our community-based sports services and development of that sector are actively resourced and promoted.

Let it also be noted that I strongly welcome the decision to award the 2012 Olympic Games to the great city of London. The positive repercussions of that decision will be strongly felt in Northern Ireland. Indeed, along with many others, we campaigned at local government level for the London bid. I was delighted that the London 2012 roadshow visited Northern Ireland, and I hope that it inspires the people of this Province to engage in sport and unearth their own talents.

I broadly welcome the comments of the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in encouraging everyone in Northern Ireland to get involved in all aspects of the Olympic games, whether it be sports participation, volunteering or coaching, so that we can leave a lasting legacy for generations to come in Northern Ireland.

However, if funds are diverted, I am concerned about the impact on local sports clubs and community sports development. I witness daily the positive impact that funding has had in allowing community-based sports teams to offer an inclusive sports service to hundreds and thousands of my constituents. That is replicated in other constituencies across the whole of the Province. It is therefore imperative that the development of that work is not stunted by inadequate resource allocation or diversion of resources to other areas.

**Mr P Ramsey:** The amendment refers to the Vernon assets group. Is there a time frame for looking at DCAL and public bodies to determine what surplus lands there are? Some of the groups can ill afford for that review to take place in two years' time. An immediate effect is needed.

**Mr Shannon:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I was about to come to that point.

Just last week, the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee received a letter indicating that approximately £43 million of lottery funding and contributions that would have gone to the arts, sport and culture was being given directly to the Olympic Games. We have tried to explain our position in the amendment. That shortfall of £43 million — indeed, some Members have said that it may be as much as £70 million — means that good major projects are being put on hold. Capital projects could be shelved, and many other good sporting projects could be put on the back burner for some time. Where is the legacy for sport in the Province that the 2012 Olympic Games is supposed to leave us? It is not right that some 80-plus projects and schemes are being brushed aside for an Olympic programme. We all welcome that programme, but we want to see what the lasting benefits will be for us. That is why we have put forward this amendment.

For everyone's information, I want to explain the idea behind the amendment. At about half past ten this morning, I spoke to the Minister about my comments so that I could make them publicly in the Chamber. The assets realisation group is headed by Ed Vernon. His job is to source surplus resources in the areas that fall within the remit of the Northern Ireland Assembly and to ensure that those moneys are then ploughed back into projects that will perhaps not go ahead because of the re-allocation of money to the Olympic Games. With respect to Pat, his motion outlines how we all feel, but it does not outline how we will address this matter. However, the amendment does just that; it tells us how we can address the shortfall.

I asked the Minister about that matter this morning, and it is important that the point is made. I was told this morning that that review of surplus resources will be made available and will, I understand, be in the Budget year beginning 1 April 2008. We are looking

for extra resources, and they will be found as a result of the assets review. It is important that all stakeholders work together to maximise the many opportunities of the sports strategy.

It is important that that statement is made, and I thank the Member for making his intervention in relation to it. The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure must discuss with the Minister how the issue will be addressed: only then can we move on.

I strongly share the Minister's concerns that participation rates in sport are among the lowest in the UK, and falling. I want to see those rates improve through the combined action of Sport Northern Ireland, councils and resources in our education sector. I want to see a win-win situation, in which we maximise the potential of the 2012 Olympic Games in London and other significant events such as the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow in 2014, alongside the adequate resourcing of a community-based sporting infrastructure.

We have a tremendous opportunity, not only to be part of the greatest show on Earth, the Olympic Games — and the next greatest show, the Commonwealth Games — but to have a legacy for the people of the Province and the children who come after us. That will help us to meet the 24 targets set out in the draft strategy; it will assist in improving public health; and it will contribute to our children's academic performance and self-esteem. It will go some way to addressing the under-representation in our sporting programmes of women, people with a disability and people on low incomes. I urge Members to support the amendment.

**Mr Brolly:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I approve of the broad thrust of the motion. However, my party will support the amendment as an enhancement of it. The second part of the motion would tend to tie our hands before the Budget consultation process takes place and before, as Mr Shannon suggested, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure has an opportunity to talk to the Minister about the matter.

It is disappointing that money is being taken from the poor to feed the rich. Our local sporting community is already — and has ever been — significantly underfunded. More than £40 million of Lotto funding has been taken away from our hopelessly insufficient budget by the English. Some things never change. We are told that there will be some spin-off for us from the Olympics — a sort of “live horse, and you will get oats” assurance. There may be some training or games at the new Long Kesh stadium, and maybe some other crumbs. However, between 2009 and 2012, our sporting organisations, and small clubs, such as boxing clubs, in more needy areas in particular, will not develop as they had hoped, and many may not survive. I pay tribute to my own boxing club — St Canice's in Dungiven —

which has produced one of Ireland's best current professional boxers, Paul "Dudey" McCloskey. I wish him, along with John Duddy from the city, and all our boxers, every success in the future.

We should not rule out the possibility that a further tranche of Lotto money will be taken from us, considering the almost monthly announcements of upward adjustments of the estimates for the London Games. The estimated cost of building the Olympic stadium, for example, has doubled since 2004. During the inevitably lean years from 2009 to 2012, we should seek enhanced investment from the South, considering that all sports, except soccer, are organised on an all-Ireland basis, and not unmindful of the likelihood that many of our local soccer stars will opt to play for the South.

We can be encouraged by the record of our sporting community, with help from generous sponsors, local and otherwise, over the generations, who have dedicated themselves to our young people, giving their time freely and offering their expertise selflessly. However, we must keep struggling to get them the proper tools so that they can do the job as well as they know how. Go raibh míle maith agat.

3.00 pm

**Mr K Robinson:** The motion specifically mentions the negative impact that a reduction in funding will have on community sport. It then proceeds to highlight the potential impact that an inadequate level of funding would have on the delivery of the proposed strategy that was announced recently by the Minister. It is widely recognised that, compared with GB, historically, sport in Northern Ireland is already underfunded. That was before the double whammy, represented by the withdrawal of £4.1 million from Sport Northern Ireland, appeared on the horizon. Although there have been assurances that, post 2012, there will be a financial redress, a crucial interim period remains when sporting activities may be severely curtailed.

Some people will ask "so what?" and say that sport is unimportant in the scheme of things. However, the sports strategy for Northern Ireland noted correctly that 2,000 deaths a year are attributable to physical inactivity. The increasing levels of obesity among our children are directly linked to a decrease in the opportunities that they have for sporting activity. Coronary heart disease, type 2 diabetes —some people in the Public Gallery attended a conference today on that topic — and cancer risks have all increased significantly as a consequence of inactivity. The National Health Service currently spends £886 per head of population to address health issues, but only £1 per head is spent on physical activity, which could prevent many of those illnesses.

Mental-health issues could also be eased through greater physical activity and sport. If levels of participation are reduced, stand back and watch the levels of stress

and anxiety increase. Activity in sport bolsters confidence and allows young people to experience a sense of achievement. A reduction in that physical activity can undermine a fragile sense of worth and lead to young people turning to alternative stimulation in the form of alcohol and drug abuse.

The importance of participation in sport and physical activity provides not only a socially acceptable safety valve for young people, thereby reducing the risk of antisocial activity, but it widens their horizons. It introduces them to situations where they must work as a team and beyond the safety net of their own community. Such transferable social skills lead to an understanding of a wider society and its many disparate sectors. That is a valuable experience for all, but it is especially important for people who are locked into communities where one class and one culture prevail.

The sports strategy is a suitable vehicle to deliver individual and group benefits in the field of health and community cohesion. It is also a valuable vehicle for economic expansion. Sport in Northern Ireland contributes more than £300 million to the local economy. It is also calculated to provide employment to around 13,000 people in the sport and recreation industry. That industry must fear that without adequate funding, the sporting economy will face a serious decline.

On 10 September 2007, at Question Time in the House, I asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he was taking to offset the reduction in lottery funding. The Minister replied that he was making bids for funding to support the development of sport and the arts. Perhaps he will indicate how successful he has been so far in convincing the Minister of Finance and Personnel of that.

Eric Saunders, the chairman of Sport Northern Ireland, has warned of the effects of cuts on participation and performance, and on the provision of new facilities and the upgrading of older ones. He has also warned of the impact on sports development officers, who are attached to local councils, and on the much-vaunted programme for the talented athletes in the Province to develop their skills. Those warnings must not be ignored if the valuable sports strategy is to achieve its aspirations and turn them into reality.

On the matter of the amendment, Mr Shannon has pointed out the benefits that the assets group may bring to addressing some of the problems that have been mentioned today. I hope that his touching faith in Peter Robinson will be rewarded. However, I remain to be convinced that Mr Robinson can fulfil the role of Santa Claus, even in the approach to the festive season.

**Mr McCarthy:** When I first heard that London had been awarded the 2012 Olympic Games, I thought that the knock-on effect might mean a bonus for Northern Ireland. Athletes will not have to travel halfway around

the world, so many more local people could be trained and sent to compete, after which they might return with some gold medals.

However, the recent news that some of Northern Ireland's lottery funding for sport is to be redirected to the London Olympics has made me question my initial enthusiasm. It is good news that the Olympics will be held nearby, as many of our constituents will be able to travel easily to watch them. However, if that means that London's hosting the Olympics will be to the detriment of sport here in general, it is not such good news.

Sport in Northern Ireland is at an all-time high. Almost all Northern Ireland teams, and many individuals, are achieving success. Some of those successes were expected, but others were not. If funding for sport in Northern Ireland is cut, it will be extremely difficult to maintain that level of success, which is due mostly to sporting activity at grass-roots and community level, where as many people as possible benefit. I do not agree that the money should be redirected to benefit the select few elite athletes from other areas. At a time when fitness and health are high on the agenda, the decision to redirect sports funding away from Northern Ireland was ill thought out.

I wonder whether those in charge of finance for the London Olympics knew all along that lottery funding would need to be redirected from different areas throughout the UK. I am glad to see that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure is in the Chamber today. Will he confirm that the budget of £53 million, which was awarded to elite facilities for 2012, is secure and will be honoured? That most important question requires an answer.

Sport can have a massive impact on community relations, as it often provides the only opportunity for children and young people from different communities to come together to interact. Often, children go through primary and secondary school without ever getting involved with kids from the other side. Therefore, sport has an important role to play as Northern Ireland moves into a new era. A cut in funding will, undoubtedly, hinder that progress.

The cut in lottery funding notwithstanding, I voice my concern for all Northern Irish sport, because it was not even mentioned in the recently announced investment strategy for Northern Ireland. People can benefit so much from partaking in a wide range of activities, so I had hoped that sport would feature strongly in the investment strategy. However, I should have realised that my hopes that the Executive would make the right decision were just daydreams, because, so far, they have failed to deliver on almost every issue. I express my disappointment with the Executive. I thought that they would do the right thing for the whole community.

All sporting activities must be supported. I pay tribute to Sport Northern Ireland for its vision and ideals. However, that organisation must be properly funded.

**Lord Browne:** I support the amendment. I congratulate the city of Glasgow on its successful bid to host the 2014 Commonwealth Games, which, in addition to the 2012 London Olympic Games, will present Northern Ireland with economic, social and sporting opportunities. I hope that Northern Ireland, particularly Belfast, will host some events associated with both the Olympics and the Commonwealth Games. I agree that the Assembly should recognise the importance of sport to the physical, social and economic well-being of society. However, I would be equally concerned about any diversion of funds having an impact on community sport in Northern Ireland.

The 2012 Olympic Games in London will be the greatest sporting event held in the United Kingdom for over 40 years. It will have a dramatic, positive impact on sport generally and on community sport, in particular. However, the Assembly must be mindful of budgetary caution and prudence. I am sure that all Members could cite — and some already have — projects and areas of special sporting interest that could benefit from an increase in the proposed draft Budget. Nevertheless, rather than stating that the draft Budget is insufficient to meet the standards and priorities of the proposed sports strategy, which was announced recently by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, I propose that every effort should be made to investigate other means to compensate for any National Lottery funding that may be diverted to the 2012 Olympic Games.

As well as recognising that funding of the strategy should be considered in the context of the findings of the assets realisation group, whose report will be published in early January 2008, other means should be explored to try to make up the shortfall. Camelot is endeavouring to persuade the Treasury to move the National Lottery to a gross profit tax, which would generate additional good-causes revenue of approximately £398 million between 2008-09 and 2018-19. Some of that money could be used to compensate for the moneys being diverted from the National Lottery for the Olympics.

Another means of obtaining funding for sport and for arts could be through the Strategic Investment Board's investment strategy for Northern Ireland. The board's 'Building a Better Future: Draft Investment Strategy 2008-2018' states that we can look forward to developing a culture and sporting infrastructure over the next 10 years that will bring great benefits to all the people of Northern Ireland. It also states that a fulfilled and healthy society needs a rich, creative and vibrant artistic and sporting base.

Sport England is another example of an organisation compensating for the diversion of lottery funding. It is seeking ways in which it can raise £50 million through

working with the private sector to increase investment in community-sport facilities. As well as encouraging the private sector to offer its skills and expertise to local sports clubs in the communities that it serves, Sport England is working with the Football Association and the Football Foundation to create sports hubs involving community and commercial activities. I urge Sport Northern Ireland to initiate similar schemes here to compensate for the diversion of lottery funding.

Members of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure believe passionately in sport. The Assembly must do everything in its power to encourage, involve and support as many people as possible in sporting activities. That is why community sport is so important. However, we must look beyond our doors in seeking financial support. Therefore, I support the amendment.

**Ms Anderson:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don leasú. I support the motion. It should be a cause of concern to the Assembly that the British Government are diverting Big Lottery moneys to prop up development projects financially for the London Olympic Games. That money should come directly from the coffers of the British Government. Surely the British Prime Minister, Mr Brown, having spent many years as Chancellor of the Exchequer, could come up with the money from elsewhere, rather than taking it from the poor and most marginalised communities.

While the British Government spend billions of pounds of taxpayers' money to prosecute their wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, community groups that provide essential services are being hit as lottery funds are diverted to fill the subsequent financial void. As Members of an elected Assembly with no real power to raise tax or revenue, no one should be surprised that we have a limited budget to meet legitimate demands for first-class public services and infrastructure — in sports and leisure, or any other sector. Therefore, there is a need for greater all-Ireland economic co-operation, particularly because — as Francie Brolly said — many of our major sports operate on an all-Ireland basis. That illustrates the need for the Assembly's existing powers to be strengthened, enhanced and augmented. Perhaps we could then levy in support of a sports-development budget that addresses future demands and the expectations of our people.

3.15 pm

As a Member for Foyle, I have additional concerns that the limited funds for the sports strategy should be allocated on the basis of spatial equality and the need for balanced regional development. In 2003, the DSD urban design strategy concluded that job-creation opportunities in local leisure activities would equal knowledge-based job-creation opportunities over the next 15 years. Therefore, local leisure activity is a

strategic area for employment growth in places such as Derry, on foot of the Stand Up for Derry campaign. Tá mé ag iarraidh níos mó jabanna agus tuillleadh infheistíochta i nDoire. I call for more jobs and investment in Derry. That campaign is set against the backdrop of more than 10,000 redundancies in the Derry city area between 1998 and 2004.

If sport has the potential to grow as an area of employment, politicians must take the necessary steps to ensure that cities such as Derry realise their full potential. In addition to facilitating greater employment and enhancing local and regional services, sport can play a key role in assisting the delivery of neighbourhood renewal. That is an important consideration in a city where over half the population live in neighbourhood-renewal areas. A recent study into the role of sport in deprived areas concluded that sport can be used to attract individuals who are reluctant to engage in education or training through traditional routes, and to motivate people to learn new skills. As Jim Shannon said, involvement in sport can help to tackle the growing problem of obesity and contribute to healthier lifestyles.

A clear and dedicated funding stream that is linked to local sports-development plans is required, which includes key stakeholders and — where applicable — neighbourhood renewal priorities. Derry is the largest municipal area west of the Bann; it is the capital of the north-west and the second-largest city in the North. From a regional perspective, Derry has the need, the economic case and the critical mass of population for investment in large sporting infrastructure projects to be successful. The political will of the Minister is required to make that happen. That political will should have been realised in his budgetary bids, and would have been were those bids subject to a full equality impact assessment. I support the amendment, and I am sure that Jim Shannon, Pat Ramsey and Barry McElduff will address in my concerns in the Committee. Go raibh míle maith agat.

**Mr Simpson:** I declare an interest as a member of a subcommittee of Craigavon Borough Council that is involved in applying for an Olympic Games flagship project. I support the amendment tabled by my colleagues Jim Shannon and Lord Browne.

I suppose that Members will look at my physique and wonder at my talking about the Olympics and sport.

**Mr Shannon:** He is a wrestler.

**Mr Simpson:** Yes, a wrestler. I looked across the Chamber at the proposer of the motion, Pat Ramsey, and then I looked behind me at Lord Browne who was the second Member to speak to the amendment, and I thought that there is hope for me yet.

**A Member:** There is a heavyweight section.

**Mr Simpson:** Yes, there is a heavyweight section, and I understand that an observers' category will be introduced, so perhaps we will fit into that category.

Northern Ireland ought to have a sports strategy, and I welcome the Minister's recent announcement to that effect. We have heard other Members say how beneficial such a strategy will be for the younger generations and, perhaps, for some of the older generation. My colleague Mr Shannon mentioned the release of some form of juices within the body to stimulate the brain. We will not get too excited about that, but if that happened, it would benefit us all, and I would welcome it. Had there been a sports strategy in the past, I am sure that all Members would say that they would have been a lot fitter and that things would have been different when they attended school or university.

The amendment sits comfortably with long-established DUP policy. For several years, the DUP stood almost alone in saying that savings could and should be made in the public purse if the size of the public sector were addressed and its efficiency questioned. I hope that the capital-realisation task force, headed by the Vernon assets group, will identify where money can be saved. In sectors where savings are identified, additional investment should be made. I am pleased to hear that my colleague Mr Shannon has spoken to the Minister and that more funding will be available from 1 April 2008. That is encouraging news, despite Ken Robinson's comments about doubting whether the Finance Minister could fulfil the role of Father Christmas. I hope on this occasion that he acts like him and that we will see the benefits of that in due course.

All Members will realise that all projects will not be realised: some will be knocked out in each round. However, some innovative projects are in the pipeline, and I trust that those will be successful. As I said earlier, I am involved in a flagship project in Craigavon to provide a new rowing lake and white water rafting facilities. It is a unique provision that will be beneficial to tourism, and it meets the standards and sustainability requirements as laid down in the Olympic criteria. It will bring thousands of people to my constituency, and all MLAs in the area support the project and are keen to push it forward, given that it will benefit everyone. It is my hope that hugely beneficial projects, such as that in Craigavon and others across the Province, will be realised so that Northern Ireland can punch above its weight in the future.

**Mr McNarry:** As a committed devolutionist, no one welcomed the removal of the direct ruler more than me. However, one matter that the then Secretary of State addressed positively was the confirmation of a budget of up to £53 million to fund the elite-facilities programme. That funding was intended to ensure that Northern Ireland would benefit from, and contribute to, the legacy of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games in London.

It is regrettable that the enthusiasm of the Minister responsible for sport is clearly not shared by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who enjoys the sport of "control freakery". Although he would undoubtedly strike for gold, thankfully his skills are not recognised by the International Olympic Committee or any other proper sporting body, and I fail to understand how they are recognised in the House sometimes too.

On 28 October, Mr Peter Robinson, despite the efforts of many in the public and private sectors who spent time and resources in making bids to the elite facilities programme, announced a reduction of £18 million in the fund, reducing it to only £35 million. It was a savage cut, and was without care, consideration or interest in Olympic sports, or in sports in general. It means that Northern Ireland will fail to benefit from the legacy opportunities; the Government will fail to deliver on its promise of £53 million for Olympic-related facilities; resources will have been wasted in making applications when a large part of the Budget has now disappeared, and the reputation and credibility of Government in Northern Ireland is now at stake.

Over the past seven years, the stadia safety programme has delivered health and safety improvements at major sports grounds in Northern Ireland. The draft Budget makes no provision whatsoever for a continued programme of investment in them. The Scott Report of 1997 identified £30 million worth of investment required to bring our sports grounds up to standard. Inflation and increased standards have now overtaken that figure, but, to date, the Government have invested only £6.3 million in sport in Northern Ireland.

Government will fail to deliver on their obligation to improve health and safety for spectators and players at our major sports grounds; and members of the public may be exposed to unreasonable risks when they attend them. Northern Ireland will fail to attract significant numbers of events as a result of the poor condition of those grounds, and the sporting infrastructure will fall further behind that in Ireland, the rest of the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe. Sports grounds here will fail to meet the standards imposed by the new safety of sports grounds legislation.

I will talk about building economic structures on another day, but we need to do more than talk. We can only build economic structures when we have also addressed the building of a local social fabric in tandem.

In one way, I have no problem with the amendment, but I must point out a patently obvious question to Members. Why is the DUP running away from the key component of the motion, which focuses attention on the draft Budget? Is it because that party has been bound up in the "control freakery" that it would appear the Executive have been subjected to on the draft Budget?

Sport is an essential part of Northern Ireland's shared, natural story; from the triumphs of years gone by, to more recent achievements. Now is the time to build on that. The draft Budget allows for no building bricks to be put in place, and that is most regrettable.

**Mr P Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend Pat Ramsey for moving the motion, as it concerns a subject that the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure has debated in recent months.

The Assembly should recognise the importance of sport in the physical, social and economic well-being of all in our society. The crux of the matter is that when London submitted the Olympic bid, the costs put forward were not a true reflection of the final cost of running the games.

3.30 pm

Francie Broly and others stated that over £42 million of lottery money is being diverted from here to the Olympic Games in London, and yet we still do not know what the benefits for us will be. No events or training facilities have been promised; nothing that the North will get has yet been put forward or confirmed in stone. I urge the Minister to do all that he can to ensure that that is done.

The cost to us is immense, and all that can be done must be done to make sure that we get the maximum return for the money spent. The loss of that money will have a detrimental effect on many community sports in the North. People will lose jobs and sporting societies will not be allowed to develop as financial restrictions are imposed on them due to the incompetence of the original costing submitted for the London bid. Some initiatives in areas of social need have already been halted because of the fund being skewed to London. My colleague Sue Ramsey has written to the Minister stating her concerns about the issues in west Belfast. Many organisations that will lose funding will come from areas of need, and many people in poverty and social exclusion will be affected — so there is nothing new there.

Members of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure have raised all those points in the Committee, and will continue to do so. We will also raise those issues with the Minister; argue vigorously about the issues in the draft strategy that we do not like; and urge him to make the relevant changes.

The Committee will scrutinise the draft Budget and advise the Minister on how to improve it. The Committee has already discussed the means for other stakeholders to promote sport in our society. Other Departments must step up to the mark. There will be a knock-on effect on the health and well-being of many of our citizens, and the educational needs and social development of our communities will be affected.

Local communities and councils have a duty to assist our communities. For too long, some local councils have flirted with the important issue of sport. For example, Belfast City Council does not have enough pitches to cater for sporting teams. It has a few rugby pitches, but not enough; it has many soccer pitches, but not enough for the many teams in Belfast. There are some Gaelic pitches, but clearly not enough for the vast number of clubs in Belfast; and there is not one suitable camogie pitch, even though there are many camogie clubs in Belfast.

The amendment to the motion calls on other stakeholders to become involved in sport in the North. It is not good enough to allow councils such as Belfast City Council, and Departments, off the hook while we search for better sports facilities for everyone in our community. Sinn Féin will support Jim Shannon's amendment —

**Mr McNarry:** Shame.

**Mr P Maskey:** Call shame if you like, David, but that is what we are doing.

Mr McNarry is the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, and the Committee will discuss the draft Budget this Thursday. Members of the Committee want to put their stamp on it to ensure that the Minister delivers for sport in the North of Ireland. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Ross:** I too welcome today's motion. I support the amendment moved by my colleagues Mr Shannon and Lord Browne. As the original text of the motion recognises, sport has the ability not only to inspire individuals, but to have a positive impact on their physical and mental health and their social lives. It also has a positive economic impact on a nation.

We have heard today about the many millions of pounds that good causes in Northern Ireland will lose, and a considerable amount of that will be from grass-roots sport. That is of great concern to us all, particularly with regard to those community projects that, over the years, have benefited from lottery money to fund new AstroTurf pitches and tennis courts, or to provide additional equipment for sports clubs.

Clearly, such a dramatic impact on sports funding is not in the best interests of those of us in Northern Ireland who love sport. Anything that has a negative impact on community sport is not to be welcomed. However, let us not be so pessimistic. Some Members seem to be content to seek problems rather than solutions.

I strongly welcome the draft sports strategy that was announced in the House by the Minister. The hosting of the Olympic Games in the United Kingdom represents a massive opportunity that does not often come around for local sport. Northern Ireland could greatly benefit

from the London 2012 Olympic Games, and it is up to us to ensure that we reap that benefit.

The DUP amendment calls on all stakeholders to work together to maximise the benefits of the proposed sports strategy and to wait to see what additional funding might come as a result of the findings of the Vernon assets group, which should go some way towards addressing the shortfall that Members have heard about today.

As other Members have pointed out, the motion is premature because the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure has not yet addressed this matter or considered further potential funding outlets. Mr Ramsey raised those concerns and, having enjoyed playing sport from an early age, I share his concerns.

Ken Robinson talked about participation in sport. However, as a result of London's hosting of the 2012 Olympic Games, huge opportunities exist for participation in local sport. I remember the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games when the Great Britain men's hockey team beat West Germany in the final to win the gold medal. Two local players were on that team — Stephen Martin and Jimmy Kirkwood — who, as the Minister knows well, are now associated with my hockey club. The performance in the 1988 Olympic final of those two men and their team did more to encourage young people to play hockey — a relatively small sport that does not receive masses of funding or media exposure — than any other initiative.

The impact of local heroes participating in the Olympics is an inspiration for thousands of youngsters. Last Thursday, in the Long Gallery, I listened to Lord Coe speaking about the young athletes who took up running after watching Kelly Holmes in the last Olympics. It is important that the 2012 Olympics are successful and that team GB bring home as many medals as possible, and that will cost vast sums of money.

With the Olympics on our doorstep, Northern Ireland will be able to attract many teams here to train, and I am optimistic that we will also be able to host a few events. I listened to Lord Coe addressing Mr Ramsey's concern about funding, and he spoke of the important role that major Olympic sponsors will play in developing and getting involved in local sport. I hope that that happens and that local communities see the benefits. We must be vigilant and ensure that those sponsors put money into local community sports.

I share Members' concerns about how much money is being diverted from community-level sports in order to fund the Olympics. However, I hope that Members also recognise that the Olympic Games can inspire a new generation of sports stars to participate in sport at all levels. Let us embrace this opportunity and work together to ensure that funding from other sources is available and that grassroots sport in Northern Ireland

benefits rather than suffers as a result of the Olympics. I support the amendment.

**The Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poets):** I am grateful for this further opportunity to address the Assembly on the subject of sport. Members will recall that, on 9 October, I specifically requested such an opportunity. At that time, I announced the publication of the draft Northern Ireland strategy for sport and physical recreation 2007-17 for a three-month consultation period.

In my statement, I drew attention to Northern Ireland's rich sporting heritage and highlighted the importance of sport in its own right and in its potential to deliver other significant benefits such as improved public health and academic performance in children and young people, community development, and neighbourhood renewal. Therefore, I welcome that fact that sport's physical, economic and social importance is also recognised in the motion and in the amendment.

I also stressed that that did not represent the whole picture. Northern Ireland sport faces major challenges and difficulties: its participation rates are among the lowest in the United Kingdom — and falling. There is evidence that some people in our community — notably women, people on low incomes and those with a disability — remain seriously under-represented in sport. Our sports and recreation infrastructure requires substantial modernisation and, additionally, Northern Ireland has a declining record of achievement in major competitions.

In order to address those issues, I call for a new long-term vision for sport in Northern Ireland that will enable it to be developed on a sounder basis for the future and will deliver all the benefits, including social and economic benefits, that are potentially available.

The draft strategy for sport and physical recreation that has been developed by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in consultation with Sport Northern Ireland and is currently out for public consultation, suggests such a vision. It also suggests that Government should commit to taking action to help to develop sport in Northern Ireland. Those commitments, if accepted, would involve recognition of the value of sport by Government, including its community benefits: the importance of success and of implementing a suitable strategy in partnership with other stakeholders.

The draft strategy proposes a series of 24 targets to be achieved over the next 10 years. The targets are designed to address concerns about participation in sport, infrastructure deficiencies and the performance of Northern Ireland's athletes and teams in major competitions. However, it is recognised that change on such a scale comes at a price. It is estimated that the full implementation would require an investment of some £200 million over 10 years.

The draft strategy further emphasises that no organisation will have the capacity to meet single-handedly the cost of delivery and that a genuine partnership approach to resourcing will be required. That will involve all stakeholders, including Government, Sport Northern Ireland, local authorities and the voluntary and private sectors. Moreover, I have repeatedly stressed, as does the draft strategy, that the levels of public funding are subject to the normal budgetary processes, including consideration of other competing priorities and the ability of stakeholders to contribute.

The Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2012 will help to address some of the issues in the draft strategy, particularly those relating to Northern Ireland's sporting contribution to 2012. However, the transfer of funds from the National Lottery's distribution fund to the 2012 Olympics does not appear to have taken due account of the needs of community and grass-roots sports. To that end, the matter was raised with Lord Coe last week when he was in Northern Ireland. I also informed him that DCAL had made a bid directly to the Treasury for £53 million for elite facilities and asked for his support on that issue.

As the National Lottery is a reserved matter, responsibility for the transfer of funds lies not with my Department but with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Since it decided to support London's Olympic bid, DCMS has consistently said that lottery proceeds would form a key part of the public funding package.

Having said that, I believe that the reduction of funding from the lottery will be about £2.5 million from 2008 to 2011, although it will go on until 2013. The money that we will gain for sport over the three years from 2008 to 2011 will be £11.5 million in our block Budget.

Today, some Members, including Mr Shannon, talked about the importance of sport in keeping the mind's juices flowing and helping people to think better. I was tempted to make some Members do 50 press-ups and 20 laps of the grounds, because everyone seemed to focus on bad news, implying that there was no good news and that sport was all doom and gloom. In fact, the money that we will lose as a result of DCMS taking £2.5 million from us over the next three years, and a further £2 million over the following two years, has been more than made up for by the £11.5 million that will be raised through our normal budgetary processes.

Mr Ken Robinson suggested that we should not put our trust in a Robinson; it was up to him to make such a statement. However, the Minister of Finance and Personnel has not been unreasonable when it comes to sport.

**Mr P Ramsey:** When Lord Coe was in Parliament Buildings, I asked him whether the clawback of lottery

money for the London Olympics would commence only in 2009. Will the Minister answer that question?

**Mr Poots:** The clawback of lottery money to fund the Olympics will start in 2008 and will continue until 2013.

When the Olympics is finished, there is to be a clawback, and there is supposed to be the sale of some £675 million worth of assets, which we will undoubtedly be bidding for. There is also a legacy trust, which we will be going after as well.

3.45 pm

Mr Broolly said that the English were robbing us, and that this was historic. I notice that he is wearing a nice, bright orange tie today that would do many Orangemen proud. There is a chance that we will get something back from the English after the Olympics.

**Rev Dr Ian Paisley:** He is also wearing a blue shirt.

**Mr Poots:** Yes, he is a true orange and blue today.

It is important to recognise that today is not all doom and gloom. We will continue to support the Olympic Games. I fully recognise the potential for adverse effects, and, together with the other devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales, I have lobbied the DCMS to ensure that the contribution from the National Lottery be kept as low as possible. We have also sought assurances that, should the costs for the Olympic Games increase, DCMS will not approach the National Lottery again to seek further funds, as that would be damaging to the regions.

DCMS has stated that the latest budget for the Olympics is based on a thorough assessment of costs, includes substantial contingency amounts that are based on analysis of risk, and is a robust budget that will last until 2012. Furthermore, land values in the Olympic park are expected to increase considerably. That should help with the windfall that I referred to earlier.

Therefore, the benefits of the Olympics to Northern Ireland should not be overlooked. The opportunity, through the elite facilities, to prepare for host preparation plans will be hugely beneficial. The opportunity to host preliminary rounds of the soccer tournament will also be beneficial. My Department wants to maximise the amount of time that the Olympic torch relay will spend in Northern Ireland, and to ensure that the opportunities for business as a result of 2012 are fully exploited.

What we are trying to do for the Olympics, we need also to try to do for the Paralympics. We should encourage and recognise the role that disabled people have in sport and increase their participation. I will touch on the health aspects later. Some 90% of people with disabilities who are actively engaged in sport are in full-time employment. That is far higher than the general figure for people who have disabilities. That is an indication that people with disabilities who engage

in sport have higher self-esteem, greater confidence and greater motivation. That is one of the positive influences that sport can have on people with disabilities.

The Games will also act as a catalyst for the development of sport in the UK. Northern Ireland intends to capitalise on the Olympics by getting young people involved in sport at domestic and international level; achieving high performance in the Games; creating better facilities on the back of demand; leaving a legacy; and maximising economic and social impact.

The Department made bids for funding for sport under the comprehensive spending review, and we have had funds awarded in the draft Budget. The draft Budget, which was published on 25 October, showed that my Department will receive £33.7 million for resource and £112.3 million for capital.

We are spending somewhere in the region of £8.2 million on capital this year alone. Next year, we will have a 400% increase to £31.2 million, followed by £36.5 million and then £44.6 million in 2010-11 — a 500% increase on this year. I cannot say that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has been overly stingy in granting 400% and 500% increases.

Regarding the current shortfall, I indicated that my Department is bidding directly to Treasury for £53 million for the elite facilities. The Barnett formula — which would normally apply, with the regions receiving a stream of that funding — was not used to establish the Olympic funds. Therefore, we have a strong case to make that bid, and it would be reasonable for us to receive that.

Mr Ken Robinson readily identified that for every pound that central Government spends on sport, some £900 is spent on public health. I could make a much greater contribution to people's health in Northern Ireland by increasing the budget for sport than could be made through the increases that have been given to health. Debate in the Assembly over the past few weeks has centred largely on health issues. Again, Mr Ken Robinson identified rightly that, annually, 2,000 deaths in Northern Ireland could be attributed to people not engaging in enough physical activity. Some 17% of men and 20% of women in Northern Ireland are clinically obese, and by the age of 12, one child in 20 is clinically obese.

Sport and physical recreation have an important role to play. It has been recognised that they can help to combat problems such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer of the colon, anxiety and stress. Through a combination of healthier-eating and sport and physical-recreation programmes, Finland has succeeded in stemming the rise in obesity. In the United Kingdom only 32% of people take the recommended amount of exercise, but in Finland that proportion has reached 70%.

Research that was carried out in recent years in the primary-school sector in Northern Ireland suggests that regular participation in sport and physical recreation contributes to improving a child's academic performance and perceived self-esteem. Short-term and sustained exercise programmes can contribute positively to the cognitive performance of children and young people. In addition, the appeal of sport and sports-related employment can be used in the curriculum to engage disaffected pupils and increase their commitment to continuing in education.

Sport is a social activity by its very nature, and it can be beneficial for those young people who are perhaps on the margins of our society. Yesterday, I mentioned the positive effect that midnight soccer could have on communities in which young people may feel that they are of little importance or have no key role to play. Sport can reach out to young people who are in areas of social deprivation and make a significant change, giving them something worthwhile to do — something that is more appealing to them than taking drugs or engaging in binge drinking. It will help them to look after their bodies and to have healthy bodies and minds. It will also help them to recognise that they have a significant contribution to make to society.

The most recent figures that are available for Northern Ireland show that spending on sport has contributed £293 million per annum to the economy, which is around 2% of the gross domestic product. Tourism is estimated to have contributed around £30 million. Around 12,500 people are in sport-related employment in our economy.

I trust that that helps Members to address some of the issues that they raised. I thank the proposers of both the motion and the amendment for bringing them to the House. I trust that this will lead to further investment in sport.

**Mr McCausland:** In proposing the motion, Pat Ramsey set out clearly the important issues that surround the funding of sport in Northern Ireland. He analysed the financial position so thoroughly that I was impressed by his mathematical ability, and I feared at one point that he had swallowed a calculator. He dealt with the subject at some length and expressed views that all of us share about the importance of sport in society.

Jim Shannon highlighted the relevance of sport again, and he spoke about the review of surplus assets, which is the key to his amendment. The findings of the Vernon assets group, which examines surplus assets and the money that can be raised through them, will be published soon. In January we will know how much money will be made available from that source.

Francie Brolly also emphasised an important point in stressing the role of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, and that topic will be examined on Thursday.

Moreover, he did not disappoint us; he managed to mention Dungiven in his speech.

Ken Robinson highlighted an important issue: the social skills and social benefits that flow from sport, as distinct from the medical and physical benefits. In playing sport — particularly team sports — people develop skills in working with other people.

Kieran McCarthy spoke of the redirection of lottery money from Northern Ireland. Lord Browne congratulated the city of Glasgow on being selected to host the Commonwealth Games in 2014. He took the issue a stage further as regards fund-raising for sport, in that he referred not only the Vernon assets group, but he spoke about other opportunities that exist and that we should seek to increase. He mentioned in particular the Strategic Investment Board.

It is important that we look at other opportunities to raise funds in a creative way for sporting facilities.

Martina Anderson took us on a world tour via Afghanistan and Iraq. On the other hand, David Simpson was appropriately parochial and stuck to the project that he has in mind for Craigavon.

David McNarry told us that he was a staunch devolutionist but proceeded to exude doom and gloom on every quarter. He disappointed us by not mentioning, despite his position as Deputy Chairperson, the role that the Committee of Culture, Arts and Leisure will have in this issue on Thursday.

Paul Maskey referred to the work of the Committee and spoke of the benefits of local events. No doubt the Committee will work with the Minister to see what can be done to bring the most benefit to Northern Ireland through the 2012 Olympics, whether that is through training opportunities for teams or through the events themselves.

Alastair Ross talked about the variety of sports, and in particular the impact that a reduction in funding would have on community sports. He made the pertinent point that certain people prefer looking for problems to finding solutions. The advantage of the amendment is that it highlights the opportunities that there are to find solutions. It also gives the Committee the opportunity to look at the issue thoroughly.

The Minister cited the low participation rates in sport in Northern Ireland, particularly among women and people with disabilities and in areas of social disadvantage. As he said, we need to find a new vision for sport in Northern Ireland. He talked of the benefits that there will be after the Olympics from the sale of associated assets. There will be opportunities then to bring out resources throughout the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland. The Minister, like his party colleague Alastair Ross and others, looked at the issue in a positive way, trying to find solutions rather than

purveying doom and gloom, as was the case with Mr McNarry.

I am happy to support the amendment; it is a good amendment that strengthens the motion. The motion highlights the issue, quite rightly, while the amendment seeks to show a way forward. I hope that others will see the sense in supporting the amendment.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá an-áthas orm achoimriú a dhéanamh ar na hargóintí a rinneadh ar son an rúin. Tuigim féin an tábhacht le cúrsaí spóirt i saol an lae inniu agus sílim gur chóir dúinn an spórt a chothú ar achan bhealach is féidir linn. I value the contribution that sport makes to many aspects of life in Northern Ireland, as has been outlined during the course of the debate. We heard about the importance of sport to health, education, social life and relationships. Members talked about how sport can improve self-esteem, save money for our health system and improve both physical and mental health. My colleague Pat Ramsey told the story of a lady called Mary who got back her good health through sport.

We heard of the disappointment of a range of sporting bodies about the provision for sport in the draft Budget. Mr Ramsey referred to the elite facilities project, the reduction of its budget from the promised £53 million to £35 million, and the outcomes that that might have.

He referred to the Government's failure to deliver on their promise of £53 million and the many resources that have been wasted on making applications when a large part of the budget has now disappeared. That presents a challenge to the reputation and credibility of the Government. Subsequently, Northern Ireland will fail to benefit from many legacy opportunities of the 2012 Olympic Games.

4.00 pm

David McNarry mentioned the Scott Report, which identified that investment of £30 million was required to bring Northern Ireland's sports grounds up to standard. He pointed out that that figure had been reduced to £6.3 million as a result of inflation and increased standards. He also mentioned some of the effects of that; for example, that members of the public will be exposed to unreasonable risk when they attend major sporting events; that Northern Ireland will fail to attract significant events because of the poor condition of its sports grounds; and that Northern Ireland's sporting infrastructure will fall further behind that in the rest of Ireland, the UK and the world. Those were some of the main points that have been made in support of the motion.

The sport and physical recreation strategy, which was launched by the Minister in October 2007, identifies anticipated investment and associated targets for sport's contribution to society during the next 10 years. However, the CSR proposals provide only a small revenue contri-

bution to the spend that is necessary to achieve those targets. The CSR document lifts many targets directly from the strategy. It is totally unrealistic to expect the level of investment that has been announced for the first three years to make any significant contribution to the targets proposed in the strategy. The result will be that the targets will not be realised without a corresponding level of investment.

The strategy identifies a need to expend £90 million to develop sports venues in Northern Ireland, and the associated targets rely totally on creating opportunities for people to participate in sport and physical recreation. Without developing sports venues, the targets cannot be achieved.

The draft Budget, which was announced last week, provides virtually no funding for sports facilities at a community level. Mr Ramsey pointed out that when that is combined with the loss of lottery funding to the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, Sport Northern Ireland will have no opportunity to make capital investments in community sports facilities during the next three years. Historic levels of investment — over £70 million during the past 10 years — by Sport Northern Ireland to local clubs, councils and community organisations will cease completely during the next three years. In future, local sport will receive no capital support whatsoever from Government or the lottery.

Those are the hard facts that have been presented in support of the motion. The motion's aim was to widen the debate beyond the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure and to make other Members, and people further afield, aware of the way in which the sports budget has been slashed. The shortage of resources has been highlighted. Members have heard how sport contributes to people's well-being. It also fulfils some of the responsibilities of several Departments other than the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, including the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; the Department of Education; the Department for Employment and Learning; the Department for Social Development; and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. All parties are agreed that there is a shortage of resources.

Much faith has been put in the capital realisation task force and the resources that it might bring forward. However, there will be many calls for whatever resources the task force realises.

Members of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure — and others who are interested in sport — have no guarantee that sport will be compensated by the capital realisation task force for the amount that it has lost from the Budget. Ken Robinson pointed out that we are being asked by the amendment to put our faith, blindly, in Santa Pedro, who has many presents to deliver to many

people. We are not convinced or assured of the size of the parcel that sport will ultimately receive.

Although the supporters of the amendment state that it seeks to identify funds, and to add to the motion, it fails to do so. We are in no way certain or assured of the amount of resources that will be allocated to sport.

Tá sé ar intinn ag an pháirtí seo cloí leis an rún bunúsach agus gan tacaíocht a thabhairt don leasú atá in ainmeacha Jim Shannon agus Lord Browne.

It is therefore the intention of the SDLP to stick with the motion and not to support the amendment, which promises much, but delivers little. We do not know what resources will come from it, ultimately. I reaffirm my support for the motion.

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

*Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly recognises the importance of sport in the physical, social and economic well-being of society; expresses concern that National Lottery funding is being diverted to the 2012 London Olympics and will have a negative impact on community sport; welcomes the proposed sports strategy recently announced by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure; recognises that funding of the strategy should be considered in the context of the findings of the Vernon assets group; and calls on all stakeholders to work together to maximise the opportunities that exist in the sports strategy.

## Irish-Medium Club Bank

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** A valid petition of concern has been received in respect of the motion.  
[*Interruption.*]

Order. Members must resume their seats.

Having checked the petition, I regard it as fulfilling the requirements of Standing Order 27. However, the presentation of the petition means that a vote on the motion may not be held at the conclusion of the debate. The Business Committee agreed, at its lunchtime meeting, that the vote will take place as the first item of business on Monday 19 November 2007.

Members should also note that the vote on the motion will be conducted on a cross-community basis. Members who wish to inspect the petition of concern may do so in the Business Office. We shall proceed with the debate, for which the Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

**Miss McIlveen:** I beg to move

That this Assembly opposes the introduction of a club-bank arrangement for establishing Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland.

From the outset, I would like to make it clear that the motion does not represent a sectarian attack on the teaching of the Irish language. It seems that there are parties in the Chamber that have such an agenda. The Minister is so belligerent that, in following a narrow sectarian political agenda, she has adopted the safety net of a petition of concern to ensure that she gets her way. Obviously, she is convinced that she will not win the argument. The motion is concerned with the provision of a level playing field whereby education is provided in an even-handed way, without advantage to any sector.

Since the Assembly came into being, much has been said about fairness and equality. The introduction of a club bank arrangement for establishing Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland does nothing for fairness and equality, nor does it promote the concept of a shared future. It is my opinion, and that of my party, that the controlled sector caters for everyone. Having four sectors is not logical, and places too great a financial burden on the Department of Education. Things were bad enough when there were two sectors; next we had the integrated sector; and now we have the promotion of the Irish-medium sector. At present, according to the report of the independent strategic review of education, there are 50,000 empty places in our schools.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

It is estimated that due to the decline in pupil numbers there will be an additional 30,000 surplus places over

the next 10 years. The opening of further Irish-medium schools can only add to that problem.

The sector potentially most at risk from the unfair advantage being given to those schools is the Catholic maintained sector. Given that, due to falling numbers, schools are being amalgamated or closed in order to save costs, it seems amazing that more investment in Irish-medium schools is planned. Despite that, it has been proposed that a club-bank system, similar to that currently in place for the integrated sector, be established for the benefit of the Irish-medium sector. Such club banks have an unfair advantage over the controlled schools and the Catholic maintained schools. As such, I find the concept wholly objectionable.

In order to put that into context, I will briefly explain how the club-bank system works, but, at the same time, try to avoid sending my colleagues into a coma. The Integrated Education Fund was established in 1992 to provide a more co-ordinated approach to the funding issue. The Integrated Education Fund (IEF) and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) made arrangements with three banks; in return for depositing £1 million, the Integrated Education Fund could borrow up to £10 million to finance the capital costs of establishing new integrated schools. If after at least three years the school has been deemed viable, it will, according to the Department of Education, receive recognition for capital grant aid. During the course of assessment for viability, the Department of Education is responsible for any interest due on the loans. The school would then be reimbursed by the Department for any capital expenditure incurred during the period that it is funded by the club bank.

It is not therefore simply a case of £1 million being spent and, all of a sudden, self-sufficient schools appear. Rather, £1 million is spent, and then once the school is set up, the Department must once again open up the coffers. The Department has spent £33 million in the last five years funding similar schemes in the integrated sector.

The viability criteria for Irish-medium schools are based on enrolment figures for two consecutive years, plus estimates for the third year. The Department of Education will currently grant recognition and grant-aid status for 12 pupils in year one. With the best will in the world, it would be difficult to see how a school could not meet those criteria as they are set so low. Once the viability criteria are met, the school is eligible for grant funding. A decision to amalgamate St Joseph's Primary School in Ahoghill with St Patrick's Primary School in Aughtercloney was made when the schools were attracting numbers of 18 and 26 respectively. However, Irish-medium schools are deemed viable and eligible for grant funding with only 24 pupils and an estimated enrolment figure for the third year.

The council for Irish-medium education is to operate the scheme in the same way as NICIE does for grant-maintained integrated schools — or so we are led to believe by the Department of Education. However, details are so thin on the ground as to be virtually non-existent. Last year the then Education Minister, Angela Smith, confirmed that the Department of Education had directed more than £1,300 towards a report into the operation of the club-bank system. Perhaps the Minister will confirm that this report is now available in order that the wider public can be made aware of the system and the conclusions contained in the report. I would be grateful if the Minister would refer to it in her remarks.

For Members' information, the Minister has already requested that the sum of £1 million be allocated in 2008-09 for an Irish-medium building fund club bank. That is before the report on the club-bank system has been made available for consideration, and also before the Minister's review of Irish-medium education has been completed and considered. Does that mean that she is determined to press ahead with her plans, regardless of those outcomes?

In addition to the bid for £1 million, the Minister is also asking for additional financial support for Irish-medium schools: £170,000 in 2008-09 for Irish-medium budgets, rising to £230,000; £215,000 over three years for language enhancement for teachers in the Irish-medium sector; £75,000 over three years to upgrade Irish-language skills for pre-school workers; and £6 million over three years for curriculum support.

With reference to those additional moneys that are required to enhance and upgrade the language skills, it seems incredible that Government money is being spent on teaching teachers what is allegedly their own language. Are similar amounts of money being spent on teachers who teach English in the controlled sector or in the Catholic maintained sector?

In a previous debate, the Minister lambasted Members and told them to read the report of the Independent Strategic Review of Education.

I ask her to do the same, and I specifically draw her attention to chapter 9 of the Bain Report, which is titled "Planning: A Strategic Approach". The report recommends area-based planning, and that the Department of Education should proceed with that until the education and skills authority is established. It also states that:

"future school building projects should be approved only after area-based planning is established".

4.15 pm

That does not seem to fit well with the Minister's bid for £1 million to establish an Irish-medium club bank. Is she continuing to pick and choose the aspects of the Bain Report that suit her agenda? Members are still waiting for the Minister to clarify her position on

the recommendations of the report in its totality. The simple fact is that limited money is available for investment in education. Investment should be made on the basis of area planning, and need must be identified. A club-bank system merely impedes area-based planning by creating a bias through the provision of financial incentives.

To use such a scheme is an attempt to circumvent the system and impose a new set of rules for Irish-medium education and protections that do not apply to mainstream schools in Northern Ireland. That should not surprise us, however, after what we have all seen. At a time of budgetary constraints across all Departments, money could be better spent on school repairs, on existing grant-maintained schools, which cater for the overwhelming majority of pupils, or on the dire need to deal with illiteracy and innumeracy in society.

In the Department of Education's 'A Consultation on Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools', criteria are set out that must be adhered to before opening a school can be considered. One criterion is financial viability. A school with only 50 pupils costs almost 200% more than an average school, which has around 140 pupils. The Department's consultation document points out that that rises to almost 300% more if a school has fewer than 20 pupils. According to the Department, in order to establish viability, an Irish-medium school has only to show an intake of 12 pupils in year 1 and 12 in year 2, and it has only to provide estimates for year 3. If the Minister determines that three schools meet the viability criteria with 24 pupils and an estimate, each school will cost, in the worst-case scenario, 200% more than the average school.

I may be accused of scaremongering when I say that. However, over the summer, the Minister announced the opening of three Irish-medium schools: one in Londonderry; one in Glengormley; and another in Crumlin. According to the Department of Education, the school in Glengormley has only 13 pupils enrolled in year 1. How does that school meet the viability criteria? The school in Londonderry has 15 pupils in year 1, but only seven in year 2 and nine in year 3. Again, how does that school meet the viability criteria? The school in Crumlin had an intake of 12 pupils in year 1, one in year 2, four in year 3 and three in year 4. Will the Minister apply the criteria that she used to award grant funding to those three schools when she uses the club-bank system? If so, I dread to imagine the impact of that far from thriving sector on the meagre resources of the education system.

In proposing area-based planning, the report of the independent strategic review of education — the Bain Report — calls for fairness, equality and cost effectiveness. A club-bank system that will be to the advantage of Irish-medium education will achieve none of those

aims. For those reasons, I ask the Assembly to vote in favour of the motion.

**Mr Butler:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an rún seo atá os comhair an Tionóil. Cé go bhfuil buaireamh orm faoi, sílim ag an am chéanna go dtugann sé deis dúinn an t-ábhar tábhachtach seo a dhíospóireacht.

I welcome the motion on the club-bank scheme. Although I have concerns about the motives behind the tabling of the motion, I welcome a debate on the scheme and its use in the Irish-medium sector. Therefore, I thank Michelle McIlveen and Mervyn Storey for securing the debate.

The motion is dressed up as concern over the club-bank scheme as a means of funding schools, but it is really an attack on the Irish-medium education sector.

It is disappointing that, once again, the DUP is playing politics over the provision of Irish-language schools. Of course, such attacks are not confined to the Irish-medium sector; the DUP has also shown hostility to the Catholic education sector and the integrated sector. Michelle McIlveen, for example, recently called for the abolition of the Catholic, Irish-medium and integrated sectors. One has to question that type of approach, as it insults the parents, children, staff and teachers at those schools. It tells me that the DUP cannot tolerate minorities in society.

Let us consider the facts behind the club-bank scheme in relation to the Irish-medium sector without all of the DUP's alarmist and scaremongering language. There is growing evidence that children in the Irish-medium sector are receiving their education in an environment of substandard buildings and poor facilities. A two-tier system is in place when it comes to the provision of school buildings and accommodation. The club-bank scheme aims to enable children in the Irish-medium sector to receive education in improved accommodation and school buildings, without any risk to the public purse.

This debate also raises an equality issue. The club-bank scheme is a way of helping to ensure that children in the Irish-medium sector are not taught in lower standards of accommodation than other education sectors. It has been said that the integrated sector has been using this kind of scheme since the mid-1990s, when there was recognition that newly established integrated schools would not be included in the capital building programme until they had demonstrated a level of enrolments that would make the school viable. The objective of the club-bank scheme is to minimise the risk to public money of a significant capital loss if a new school were to fail during its initial start-up phase. A few years ago, the Department of Education reviewed the use of the

scheme in the integrated sector and concluded that it should continue.

The Department of Education has undertaken to provide an initial lump sum to allow Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta agus Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta to start a club-bank scheme by drawing loans from their chosen bank. The idea of the club-bank scheme is that it allows the Department of Education to share the risk for schools that have not yet met the threshold for capital support grants. Accommodation in the Irish-medium sector is significantly worse than in any other sector, and that must be addressed. The club-bank scheme is an innovative attempt to get to grips with the accommodation crisis in the sector, and it should be actively encouraged. Irish-medium schools have not been funded by the Department of Education through the club-bank scheme to date, and, if the club-bank scheme is to be taken away, rather than expanded, people here must ask themselves how the Irish-medium and integrated sectors are to be funded.

A growing number of parents are choosing to have their children educated through the medium of the Irish language. That is happening at a time of falling rolls and an increasing number of empty desks in our schools. We have a diverse education system, and many parents wish to have their children educated through the Irish-medium sector. If the Assembly supports the motion, it must tell both the Irish and integrated sectors how they will be funded.

**Mr K Robinson:** My preferred option, with regard to the facilitation of the teaching and learning of Irish in schools, would be to build on the excellent work that is being undertaken in Irish-language units that are attached to maintained schools across Northern Ireland. That meets the crucial criteria that should be of concern to the cash-strapped Executive. It integrates children whose parents wish them to be schooled in Irish with their wider peer group in a district or parish. It is also a more cost-effective approach to the provision of education.

I have concerns over the rapidly escalating costs which, in recent years, have been associated with the expansion of exclusive Irish-medium schools.

There is also the practical matter of the serious shortfall in the number of qualified teachers who are available to teach a range of specialist subjects in Irish. Those subjects are vital if pupils are to pursue examination courses effectively and realise their full potential in life.

In the past seven years, £47 million has been spent on Irish-medium education. I am sure that I am not alone in pondering what impact that sum of money could have made if it had been spent on raising the literacy and numeracy levels in schools located in marginalised communities such as the Falls, the Shankill, the Bogside and the rural communities west of the Bann.

The club-bank mechanism is an intriguing approach to facilitating the wishes of a small number of enthusiasts. As has been mentioned, from the mid-1990s, the lobby for integrated education used the mechanism for many years. The Department of Education facilitated the approach, and the appearance of new schools reflected the obvious attraction of being able to access such a funding stream.

It is small wonder, therefore, that the controlled and maintained sectors, which, after all, represent the overwhelming majority of schoolchildren, looked on in awe. It is understandable that many associated with those two major sectors felt that the club-bank scheme did more than merely facilitate: it created an advantage that they could not hope to emulate.

One cannot blame Irish-medium schools for wanting to hitch their wagon to a similar scheme. The potential danger of widening division that is caused by this mechanism was apparent in the mid-1990s. The model that Members are debating today underlines the danger of that ever-growing division and flies in the face of the clichés of a shared future and a shared vision to which the Assembly is supposed to aspire.

All Irish-medium schools are funded under the common funding formula, as are the controlled and maintained schools. A vesting process is initiated when schools reach the prescribed viability criteria which, as has been mentioned, are normally based on enrolment figures for two consecutive years: currently the figure is 15 for schools in Belfast and Londonderry and 12 for those located elsewhere. Furthermore, there must be evidence of an expected intake in the third year of 20 pupils in Belfast and Londonderry and 15 elsewhere.

The Integrated Education Fund and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education made an arrangement with the agreement of the three banks. That arrangement requires £1 million from the IEF, against which £10 million can be borrowed to finance capital costs. After three years, schools receive recognition for capital grant aid. Vesting is carried out by solicitors for the Department, NICIE and the schools. When the process is complete, any approved capital expenditure is reimbursed.

Presumably, the Irish-medium club bank would seek to make a similar arrangement. The trust fund for Irish-medium education would underwrite a new school's capital costs, and the Council for Irish-Medium Education would operate the scheme in a similar fashion to NICIE.

The central issue is equality for all, and advantage, real or perceived, to none. The fundamental shortage of funds necessary to achieve educational progress is all too obvious to Members. Therefore, it is essential to direct funds to where they are needed — to improve the levels of literacy and numeracy in all schools. That would better enhance the employability prospects of pupils,

and nowhere is that required more than in the urban and rural areas in which the most marginalised young people live. Such investment would improve their quality of life and their future prospects immeasurably.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is almost up.

**Mr K Robinson:** It would also improve the overall social cohesion of the entire community and move us towards the shared future that everyone seeks.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh céad maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá an-áthas orm labhairt ar an rún seo. Ní hé go n-aontaím leis — ní aontaím leis in aon chor. Mar sin féin, fáiltím roimh an deis forbairt na gaelscolaíochta anseo sa Tuaisceart a phlé. Caithfidh mé a dhearbhu ag an tús go bhfuil spéis ar leith agam sa ghnó seo toisc go bhfuil mé i mo bhall de bhord ghobharnóirí gaelscoile in Iúr Cinn Trá agus toisc go raibh baint agam le bunú roinnt naiscoileanna

I cannot say that I agree with the motion. However, I welcome the opportunity to discuss the development of Irish-medium education in Northern Ireland, as did Mr Butler.

I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of an Irish-medium school. I have also been involved in setting up a number of Irish-medium preschools.

4.30 pm

The rapid growth and development of the Irish-medium sector over the past 37 years has been amazing. It is a story of diligence and dedication against great odds to realise a vision that many would have considered impossible. Only five pupils attended the first Irish-medium school, Bunscoil Phobal Feirste, which was founded in 1971. It took 13 years of continuous voluntary work and fund-raising before official recognition was gained for the school from the Department of Education.

The efforts of the founders of Bunscoil Phobal Feirste are indicative of the work that parents have been prepared to put in to ensure that their children can avail of Irish-medium education. Further testimony to their commitment is the present state of Irish-medium education, with 46 naiscoileanna — pre-school units — 33 bunscoileanna — primary schools — and three meánscoileanna — post-primary schools. By any measure, that is a remarkable development and it shows beyond a shadow of a doubt why Irish-medium education is considered to be the fastest-growing area of education, even in a situation of declining rolls. Irish-medium education is represented in the controlled, maintained and voluntary sectors.

There is considerable demand for Irish-medium education, and the Department of Education is legally bound to provide for that demand. Irish-medium education provides children with high-quality education in developing pupils spiritually, emotionally, physically,

intellectually and linguistically. Pupils in Irish-medium education gain the added value of competence in two languages.

The Irish-medium education sector recognises current demographics and is willing to co-operate with other sectors, with a view to sharing facilities to maximise valuable resources. Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta — the Council for Irish-Medium Education — has a strategic plan for the development of the sector throughout Northern Ireland. At the moment, a review arising from the Bain Report is under way to decide how the growth of the sector can be best facilitated in the future.

The amazing development of Irish-medium education has meant that estates provision has lagged far behind growth. Almost half of all Irish-medium primary schools are in accommodation that meets health and safety standards but is not fit for purpose. The idea of the club bank is to address that gap in order that newly established schools can access accommodation that is fit for purpose, thus enabling them to meet the threshold for capital recognition.

On the operation of the scheme, the Department of Education will approve the interest rates applicable to the scheme, the staging of interest payments and the agreement with the bank. The risks for the loans are attributed to Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta — the Trust Fund for Irish-Medium Education — and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, not to the Department or the taxpayer. Should the scheme go ahead, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta would provide the Department with all requested documentation monthly. The Department of Education has provided an initial lump sum to allow Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta to start the club bank by drawing loans from a bank that are based on the lump sum acting as collateral. However, the money will be used only as a guarantee to the bank. It will not be spent, and it will eventually be returned to the Department. The scheme is intended to last only —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is almost up.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh míle maith agat.

**Dr Farry:** The Alliance Party opposes the motion. It is regrettable that a petition of concern has to be tabled on what is essentially private Members' business. The motion is the latest in a line of debates on the Irish language and Irish-medium education. Most people looking in from the outside will wonder about the Assembly's sense of priorities.

There are so many issues to discuss and challenges to face, yet the Assembly is still debating the Irish language. There are major challenges in education — for example, the future of post-primary education and sustainable schools. Those are much broader challenges than the one outlined in the motion, but there has been no debate on the fundamental principles that underlie

the future of education. Instead, Members debate the small side issues.

Equally, the Minister must articulate the wider range of problems faced by the education system in Northern Ireland. The Alliance Party has some concerns that the Programme for Government refers only to the Irish-medium sector and not to others — most notably the integrated-education sector. I hope that the Minister will address that when she speaks.

As set out by its proposer, the motion does not add up; it opposes the club-bank approach, but Miss McIlveen tried to set out some practical difficulties and concerns that she had with the scheme. I do not know whether that was a front for her overall opposition to the scheme, or whether those concerns were genuine. Asking for a review, or a more detailed study, of the club-bank approach — to see whether it offers a positive way forward and delivers results — would have been a more constructive approach.

The club-bank system has considerable merits. The Alliance Party is not wedded to any particular method of funding the education system. If innovative approaches can be found, they are worthy of consideration. The club-bank system is a relatively low-cost option for Government to facilitate choice in the education system. Reference has already been made to integrated education, and it is worth highlighting the valuable role of the club-bank approach in the expansion of integrated education in Northern Ireland. I pay particular tribute to the Integrated Education Fund and its work. Often, the Government have had a narrow mindset about defending the status quo in communities and not recognising the demand for an integrated approach to education from parents. Money made available by the IEF has meant that those wishes are respected and enabled integrated schools to come into existence and prove their viability and overall sustainability to communities.

I am aware of the sustainability problems across our education system due to the falling rolls in the school estate, which have resulted in over 50,000 empty school places. In trying to seek a simplistic solution, the proposer of the motion makes a fundamental mistake by saying that those problems would disappear if all schools were controlled. Members must look at the wider context of area planning, collaboration between schools and sharing. The Irish-medium sector can fit into the broader perspective of the way forward for education.

It is important to recognise the demand for Irish-medium education — it is not my preference but I respect that it is for others. A respect for choice and diversity is a fundamental element of a shared future. Integrated education has proven to be the more sustainable option, although I have an open mind about whether Irish-medium schools are sustainable in certain localities

of Northern Ireland. However, they are certainly part of the future provision of education and, as long as they are placed in the firm context of a sustainable schools policy, which the Department has still not produced, are something that we can celebrate as part of our cultural heritage and the future of education in Northern Ireland. The Alliance Party opposes the motion.

**Mr McCausland:** I believe in a shared future. Rather than supporting the segregated system that exists at present, we should seek to break down segregation and create a truly integrated single system of education in Northern Ireland. Dominic Bradley told the story of Irish-medium education, some aspects of which I want to discuss. A voluntary trust fund for Irish-medium education similar to the Integrated Education Fund was mentioned — I understand that it is called *Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta*.

I am indebted to our colleague Dominic Bradley for that pronunciation, because I had no idea how to pronounce it. However, an interesting point about that organisation is that it already receives funding from the Department of Education. I asked who sat on the board of the organisation and, lo and behold, it emerged that its chairperson — who was appointed by the Department of Education — is Seán Maguire. He is also the editor of the 'North Belfast News' and is chairperson — or at least he is one of the leading figures — of Sinn Féin in North Belfast. Therefore, I started to understand why Caitríona Ruane is possibly so enthusiastic and committed to the proposal.

A couple of weeks ago, our colleague Barry McElduff and I were discussing the Irish language on Radio Ulster's 'The Stephen Nolan Show'. The mother of a child in a school in west Belfast — the name of which I will not attempt to pronounce, but it translates as the school of the skylark — phoned in. I said that the skylark was a pseudonym used by Bobby Sands and that the school was holding up Bobby Sands — a convicted terrorist — as a good role model for children. At that point, the lady went apoplectic and would not undertake to translate the name of the school into English. Thankfully, Barry McElduff did translate it into English, but he did not concede the point that it was so named in honour of Bobby Sands.

The next stage of my story takes us down to Newry — an area not unknown to Dominic Bradley — and the recent visit to the Irish-medium school there by Conor Murphy who was presenting Irish-language versions of the life of Bobby Sands to the schoolchildren. Again, Bobby Sands was being held up as a role model for children. Members should begin to get the story that helps to explain why Caitríona Ruane — whom I see has left the Chamber — is so enthusiastic about Irish-medium education.

During a debate on 6 November 2007, my colleague Michelle McIlveen referred to an article in a Rathfriland newspaper — 'The Outlook' — in which a hunger striker Laurence McKeown was commenting on the visit to the Irish-medium school in Newry by Conor Murphy. He said that many teachers in Irish-medium schools — even some principals — are former prisoners. When Michelle McIlveen repeated that in the Chamber, Barry McElduff got upset. He said that she was endangering the lives of those teachers by saying that, but she was merely repeating what Laurence McKeown had said. Instead of dealing with the issue —

**Mr D Bradley:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Would it not be in order for Mr McCausland to address the motion? He has not done that yet, and he has been speaking for three and a half minutes.

**Mr Speaker:** I note the Member's concern. I ask Mr McCausland to carry on; I am sure that he will get to the motion.

**Mr McCausland:** The motion is about Irish-medium education, and I think that I have spoken about that. For instance, when I spoke about the role of Sinn Féin, I was dealing with Irish-medium education, and I will continue to do so. I have commented on the fact that so many teachers and principals in that sector are former prisoners. One of the difficulties that many unionists have with Irish-medium education is that it is a closed sector — unionists do not know much about it. However, the veil drops occasionally.

We are indebted to some unnamed person — who is unknown to me — who contributes to discussions on a local website. He picked up on the thread from someone who seemed to be a dissident republican or supporter of republican Sinn Féin and provided some interesting insights into the Irish-medium sector in Londonderry. He told, in great detail, the story of a maintained school that used to have an Irish-medium unit, and he explained how Sinn Féin was working actively within it. He detailed all the meetings and the names of the people involved.

**Mr O'Dowd:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it appropriate for a Member in the Chamber to quote from an unnamed source on an unnamed website, because the references that he is making cannot be corroborated or referred to by any other Member? *[Interruption.]*

If Mr Storey believes everything that he reads on a website he is in for a bad day. The world will be flat before he leaves the Chamber.

**Mr Speaker:** It would be useful if the Member would clarify exactly what he is saying.

4.45 pm

**Mr McCausland:** I am simply stating what I have become aware of through reading that website. I am

now attempting to ask some questions. I have an answer to one question that I have posed; I will follow up that with more, and then we will be able to illicit the truth. The website makes it clear why Caitríona Ruane is so enthusiastic about Irish-medium schools.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is up. Unlike interventions, no extra time is provided for a point of order.

**Mr Brolly:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mar urlabhraí Shinn Féin ar son na teanga, éirím le cupla focal a rá in éadan an rúin seo. Cuireann sé brón orm amannaí go bhfuil an oiread sin daoine chomh géar, chomh láidir, is chomh nimhneach in éadan na teanga uaisle áilne seo. I declare an interest, a mhacasamhail Dominic anseo, as a founder member of Naíscóil Neachtain in Dungiven, which I am glad to mention again. I am also a trustee of the school.

Yet again, a motion is before the House that reveals a fundamental antipathy to the Irish language, despite the protestations of the proposer. Yet again, as was the case with David McNarry's recent motion, the proposer of the motion is a person with a lovely Gaelic surname: McIlveen. Ironically, one of the great champions of the Irish language in Belfast is a young man of that name, although he uses the original Gaelic spelling — Mac Ghiolla Bhéin — which, translated into English means "the son of the follower", or "the disciple", or "the servant of Ben". Ben was most likely an early Christian Gaelic holy man or, perhaps, a holy woman.

The Irish-medium education sector now comprises 65 schools here, educating up to 5,000 pupils at nursery, primary and secondary level. However, as with the integrated-education movement, instead of being complimented and encouraged for what is positive and laudable in its campaign, it continues to be undermined and discouraged by people who see it only through political eyes. I expect that the integrated-education movement will take some comfort from the fact that the naysayers have now a target in Irish-medium education at which they can launch themselves more warmly and enthusiastically.

The indigenous language of any land is the jewel in its crown. The Irish language pervades our physical environment — our family surnames, towns, townlands, rivers, streams, hills and glens. It is important that we, the Irish people, maintain and develop the cultural and spiritual character that inspired the creation and evolution of that lovely language.

Sinn Féin fully supports the Irish-medium education sector.

**Mr Storey:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Others in the House were much exercised earlier when my colleague Nelson McCausland was accused of not addressing the motion. When does the Member propose

to deal with club banking, instead of talking about Dungiven and giving a host of Irish lessons?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I hope that the Member will address the motion.

**Mr Brolly:** I am simply outlining how important it is that the Irish language be supported by the club-bank system and that the two schools that are currently eligible receive funding from it as soon as possible.

Sinn Féin fully supports the Irish-medium education sector, and wants to see it develop and grow. Sinn Féin also wants to see it develop and grow outside of the Catholic, nationalist community.

Over the centuries, the Irish language has proved itself impervious to political, religious and other malign influences.

**Mr D Bradley:** I thank the Member for giving way. Is he aware that, during the establishment of the national schools in Ireland in the late nineteenth century, Irish-speaking children were made to wear an *bata scoir* — a tally stick — around the neck? Each time a child spoke Irish, a notch was cut in the tally stick, and the child was later punished for each notch. Does the Member agree that the motion is the modern-day tally stick, in so far as it wishes to punish children with substandard facilities just because they are learning through the medium of Irish?

**Mr Brolly:** I thank Mr Bradley for his intervention, which shows that history evolves and changes. We are now in a new cycle, and the Irish language is fighting back.

However, regardless of the intervention, I hope that Irish-medium schools will become eligible for club-bank loans. No one complained about it until now, and it is regrettable that the motion was proposed. I look forward to the day when every facet of our cultural life here can be shared, encouraged and promoted by us all.

I am glad that the Minister acknowledged my small contribution of wearing my orange tie. Out of small acorns great oak trees grow. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr B McCrea:** It is pleasant to welcome the Minister of Education to the Chamber, after being kept informed of her movements by Mr Butler. I am really pleased to see her here and to have a nice chat with her about this important issue.

In no way am I against the Irish language. When I was in the west coast of Scotland for my summer holidays, I came across the McCrea clan, and a lot of the information about the clan was written in Scottish Gaelic or whatever. Neither have I a problem with people speaking in Irish.

It is important to have a real debate. My concern with club banks is that we are putting the cart before the horse. It is fundamentally wrong to push ahead with an

agenda for the Irish language when there is no consensus that that should be done. It is strategically flawed. I am not against the language, but I am absolutely against its being used as a political tool.

Francie Brolly spoke most eloquently about the language and Sinn Féin's support for it, and that is OK. However, instead of being supported, the language has been hijacked. The Irish language has been taken over and the debate is put forward in terms that make it difficult for anybody to support. One does try to keep an open mind on those matters, look forward and determine the benefits of giving preferential treatment to an Irish-language exercise through the club-bank system. Does it prepare our young people for the future, and does it add anything to it?

Even if those arrangements can be made in primary schools, what happens in the post-primary sector? There is a shortage of teachers in that sector, and it would be quite awkward. However, even if that could be sorted out — and I have heard the Minister say that people could be brought from elsewhere — what happens to the tertiary sector? We are keen to get 50% or more of our young people into that. Where will we get the lecturers?

Then what happens after that in R&D? How much of the world's research and development is conducted in English and how much in Irish? At that stage, the question must be asked: does it really stack up? The potential problems of such a move must be considered.

I am committed to a shared future, and it is important that we find a way to work together and respect differences. However, I have a bit of a problem with a language that requires 100% immersion. How does one integrate or work with people who speak a completely different language? That seems to be incompatible. In the South, there has been a direction — although maybe it has changed — that even Irish-medium schools must also teach English from an early age. Even there, it is not 100% immersion.

On a serious, non-political point, our education system is in danger of getting into problems by "salami slicing". For example, and to show that there are a breadth of things going wrong and demonstrate the difficulty of singling out a particular issue, a primary school in Mallusk is threatened with closure because a Brethren school is going to be set up. I understand absolutely that the Brethren have issues of their own, but there is a knock-on effect.

Similarly, I have spoken to Muslims who want to open a school. There are a range of people, such as the Muslims, the Chinese and the Poles, whom one could attempt to deal with, but one cannot deal with them all. Before moving to fund such ideas, Members must properly debate the issues. Respectfully, the UUP supports the motion. However, I am sure that we will

return to the issue at another time, and I look forward to a friendly and frank engagement.

**The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. This debate has been prompted by opposition to plans to introduce a loan arrangement for the provision of accommodation for approved Irish-medium schools. Such an arrangement has existed in the integrated sector for many years. At the outset, I should say that a loan scheme for the Irish-medium sector is still under discussion. It is important that such a scheme be considered carefully — not least because of the planned changes to the future administration of education and improved strategic planning of the estate.

Nevertheless, the focus to which Irish-medium education has been subjected in the Assembly should be of concern. More than 40 questions have been asked by the other side of the House — 6.5% of all education questions — about a sector that accounts for approximately 3,750 children, or 1.1% of the school population. We have had only two petitions of concern in the House. What were they about? Irish-medium education. We have had 0.7% — I repeat, 0.7% —

**Mr Weir:** Will the Minister give way?

**Ms Ruane:** No, I will not give way. We have had 0.7% of the Budget spent on Irish-medium education. What does that say to us? The Irish language is part of our national heritage. It should be celebrated and treasured, not insulted in an attempt to fan the flames of prejudice and hatred.

The Good Friday Agreement included a commitment to:

"take resolute action to promote the language ... seek to remove, where possible, restrictions which would discourage or work against the maintenance or development of the language".

**Mr Weir:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for the Minister to allege that the petition of concern in relation to Mr McNarry's motion on 9 October referred to the Irish-medium sector when it had nothing at all to do with education? Obviously, in relation to the petition of concern, the Minister is giving wrong information to the House.

**Mr Speaker:** A petition of concern has been presented to me, and it has already been dealt with. The Minister should continue.

**Ms Ruane:** Go raibh maith agat. The Good Friday Agreement included a commitment to:

"take resolute action to promote the language ... seek to remove, where possible, restrictions which would discourage or work against the maintenance or development of the language".

The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages contains a commitment to education in Irish where numbers are considered sufficient. There is a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-

medium and integrated education, and I intend to do just that.

5.00 pm

We are in a new era in which people expect to see leadership from their politicians. I visited Mount Vernon this morning to discuss the issues faced by the community there — issues that are faced by communities in other parts of the North. It is important that the Assembly be inclusive and show leadership to those communities to help to improve their lives, step by step. That is a small step but, in a small way, I am trying to show leadership, and I ask Members to join me in that.

It is a shame to hear a young woman, such as Michelle McIlveen, attacking the Irish language and trying to justify her attack by saying at the outset that that is not what she is doing. I would much prefer to see innovative thinking from a young woman in the DUP — or in any party — rather than tired, narrow-minded thinking or obsessions with the Irish language.

We must move forward. My colleague Francie Brolly mentioned the Irish-medium community. I ask Members to consider for one moment the effect that this debate will have on that community and on the children who might be listening to parts of it. It is not fair.

I congratulate the Irish-medium sector for the work that it is doing; I want to distance myself from the attacks on it and to say that I am sorry that there has been such a constant attack on its chosen form of education. I would like to reassure those people —

**Mr McNarry:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In your capacity as Speaker, can you help the House by distinguishing whether this speech is being made by someone acting as a Minister or a Member —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. That is not an appropriate point of order.

**Ms Ruane:** I would like to reassure those people that they can expect fair play, as will everyone in the education sector. I would also like to reassure them that, in my role as Minister, I have been out and about in many communities, and I have visited many schools that are predominately Protestant. The generosity of spirit shown by people there on many issues, including the Irish language, is in stark contrast to that shown by Michelle McIlveen and Nelson McCausland today. Those people are ashamed about such attacks and the type of narrow mindedness that has been shown today, and they want to distance themselves from that.

Beidh Comhaltaí i ndiaidh ráiteas agus tuairimí a chluinstin faoi scéim chlub bainc, agus creidim go mbeadh sé ina chuidiú ag Comhaltaí míniú a fáil ar cad é atá i gceist leis an scéim agus an dóigh a n-oibríonn sí san earnáil imeasctha.

Members will have heard comments and concerns expressed about a club-bank scheme, and it would be useful if I explain briefly what that is and how it operates for the integrated sector. It is referred to as a club bank simply because it is an agreement among three banks, NICIE and the Integrated Education Fund. The agreement allows the integrated sector to place money on deposit against which it can borrow sums to finance the capital cost of new grant-maintained integrated schools. That can be done only for schools for which a statutory development proposal has been published, has been the subject of consultation, and which has been conditionally approved by the Department of Education. It cannot be used for schools that are funded independently.

The publication of a development proposal is required when there is a proposal for a school to be established, be closed or to undergo a significant change that would alter its character or size. The development proposal gives the school recognition for funding. The club bank is a means of delivering accommodation for integrated schools without capital funding from the Department of Education at the outset.

In agreeing to the use of club-bank arrangements in the mid-1990s, the Department's objective was to reduce the risk of loss in providing public funding for a new school during its early years, until it had proven its enrolment viability. Thus, a newly established school that had been approved for funding by the Department would receive recurrent funding only to cover costs such as teachers' salaries, conditional on meeting the intake requirements. That school would be eligible for capital funding if it had met the minimum intake requirements over a longer period of three years.

Those schools have traditionally been constructed with a core building and mobile classrooms, with further mobile classrooms being added over time, subject to the schools increasing in size.

The Department reimburses approved capital costs once the criteria are met. Once the reimbursement of approved capital expenditure is made, the club-bank arrangement does not provide any further funding for that particular school. The school trustees have to meet the costs of any further capital work, then retrospectively claim grant aid from the Department. Therefore, in the early years, the sector, rather than the Department, takes the risk in providing facilities through borrowing from the banks for capital works.

Tá roinnt blianta ó shin, moladh socrú den chineál seo d'earnáil na Gaeilge. Tuigim gurb é an rún a bhí ann ag an am nach mbeadh ach banc amháin i gceist in ionad trí cinn cionnas go rabhthar ag dream le scála níos lú iasachtaí.

A similar arrangement was proposed for the Irish-medium sector several years ago. I understand that, because of the anticipated smaller scale of loans, the

intention was for only one bank to be involved, rather than three. It was envisaged that such a scheme would operate in a similar way to that in the integrated sector: the sector would borrow for the purposes of providing accommodation for a school that had itself been conditionally approved by the Department.

The work of the review of education administration includes the development of an area-based planning approach to the schools estate. In a period of significant changes to pupil numbers, that approach will help to offer a real solution to the issue of over-provision. Furthermore, it should bring greater consistency and equality to planning. It is proposed that the new education and skills authority will have a central role in the planning of the estate, within the policy framework and guidance provided by the Department.

The production of well-developed area-based plans could make club-bank arrangements redundant. In future, all school schemes that are considered necessary to meet expected needs in an area, and are supported through area-based planning, should be able to be considered for funding from the outset. That will require the education and skills authority to have access to robust information on anticipated needs for an area. The use of bank loans for a particular sector will be expected to diminish, and will most likely become unnecessary altogether.

There is an important question around how to address the accommodation needs of existing Irish-medium schools in the period before the education and skills authority is established. The issues are subject to consideration, and the position of individual schools will need to be considered on a case-by-case basis. Equality will be at the forefront in the making of those decisions, and statutory duties will be taken into account.

A club bank, therefore, is simply a means of addressing accommodation needs for recently established schools that have already been recognised for recurrent, but not capital, funding. As I have explained, there is a question over the future role of a club bank.

Although Members have focused on concerns about access to loan arrangements for Irish-medium schools, we have heard little from Members today — except sniggering and bully-boy tactics — as to what funding arrangements should be used instead for recently established approved schools. All children are entitled —

**Mr K Robinson:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for that sort of language to be used in the Chamber? My colleague and I have tried to be constructive during this debate. We have suggested — I do not know whether the Minister was present at that time — that the maintained sector and the Irish units that are contained —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I have allowed the Member some liberty on his point of order. I remind all Members and

the Minister that, in this House, as far as possible, they should temper their language.

**Mr F McCann:** On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. While the Minister is on her feet, some Members in the Chamber are continuously trying to shout down the other Members, which disrupts —

**Mr Speaker:** That is not an appropriate point of order. I understand that, from time to time, there are debates in the House that raise emotions. However, once again, I remind Members that they should be temperate and measured in what they say.

*[Interruption.]*

**Ms Ruane:** Has the Member opposite finished making his point?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The Minister has the Floor.

*[Interruption.]*

I am taking no further points of order. I ask the Member to take his seat, and I am — *[Interruption.]*

I am taking no further points of order on this issue. The Minister may continue.

**Ms Ruane:** I will repeat my last sentence, as I do not know whether Members heard it.

Although Members have focused on concerns about access to loan arrangements for Irish-medium schools, we have heard little today as to what funding arrangements should be used instead for recently established approved schools and, indeed, for schools that are working out of Portakabins, of which there are many in the Irish-medium sector.

All children, regardless of creed, race, religious belief or political opinion, are entitled to learn in facilities that meet modern educational standards. An obvious alternative to borrowing would be to plan for capital funding for new schools from the outset. Is that what Members want to see? Those matters will be considered carefully in deciding how best to proceed, and in anticipation of an area-based planning approach.

I will not tolerate any sector's being treated in a discriminatory or unfair manner. I will continue to take my equality duties as Minister of Education in the North of Ireland — Mar Aire Oideachais i dTuaisceart na hÉireann — very seriously. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Storey:** Sometimes, I hear the comments of Members, and it is clear to me that they forget that they are in a debating Chamber. This is not a stroll down to the dry-cleaners to hear what everyone is saying. This is a debating Chamber, so let us have the debate; let us have the banter, but in a way that is fair. I do not accept the allegations made by the Minister that bully-boy tactics are being used. Those on the other side of the Chamber know well how parts of society operate with respect to bully-boy tactics.

Members know me to be someone who uses temperate language — someone who is always considerate and moderate in what he says. However, Members have made a number of contributions to which I must respond. I dissociate myself from the scurrilous comments that were made by the Minister and others, attacking Michelle McIlveen. I commend Miss McIlveen for stressing that her motion is not a sectarian attack on the Irish-medium sector. The motion simply highlights the problems that will emerge as a result of this policy, should it ever be implemented.

The policy is unfair, and it gives an unfair advantage to the Irish-medium sector. We have the figures: £33 million was given to the Irish-medium sector in the past five years. Obviously, one cannot argue that there has been discrimination. Surely, £33 million —

*[Interruption.]*

I will not give way. I have 10 minutes, and I can assure Members that I will use them to the full.

Having given the Irish-medium sector £33 million, the Minister plans to give it additional moneys and an additional advantage.

My colleague Michelle McIlveen also made reference to area-based planning. It seems as though that concept, along with 'Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools' and the Bain Report are to be torn up. Those matters are referred to; credence is paid to them in lip service, but they are not dealt with in reality.

Paul Butler was next to contribute. I am surprised and somewhat disappointed that he is not sitting in his usual place. Normally, he sits at the Minister's side, like a mini-me of the Minister of Education. However, he has taken a seat at the back of the Chamber. He said that Miss McIlveen's comments were an attack, dressed up. I have disposed of that allegation.

The DUP is not playing politics. The education of all our children, whether they attend an Irish-medium school, a controlled school, a maintained school — or, like my children, a Christian independent school that does not receive one penny from the Department — is too important to be the subject of political games.

If we have entered a new era — I say "if" because recent events have perhaps called that into question — let us see it in reality. Let us have a level playing field for all.

5.15 pm

Paul Butler referred to growing evidence of the existence of substandard buildings in the Irish-medium sector. However, he did not refer to the substandard buildings that exist in the maintained sector, the controlled sector or the other sectors. It is all right for pupils in those schools to be in Portakabins. It is acceptable for schools such as Ballycastle High School, which is in my constituency, not to have had a newbuild since

1964. That is a controlled school, and, as such, it is in one of those sectors that can be ignored when it comes to giving financial and infrastructural assistance. Mr Butler also said that the scheme will educate children in the Irish-medium sector:

"without any risk to the public purse."

One million pounds has been proposed for the scheme, and the breakdown of the additional bid that the Minister has submitted cites £3.5 million for 2008-09, £2.5 million for 2009-10, and another £2.5 million for 2010-11, of which some is for language enhancement for teachers in the Irish-medium schools. Obviously, Long Kesh did not provide enough Irish-language teaching, and that is the reason that their skills need enhancing.

*[Interruption.]*

**Mr Storey:** You probably understand it better.

Moving on, I welcome Ken Robinson's comments, and I always appreciate the wisdom that he brings to education matters, not only in the Chamber, but in the Committee for Education. He referred to the Irish-language units in the maintained sector. We must ask why there is a problem and a division. Why are people making a choice? I welcome his comments about the exclusivity of the Irish-medium sector and the dangers of division. He also referred to a shared future, but I will come back to that in a moment.

Dominic Bradley, who is not in the Chamber, spoke of rapid growth in the Irish-medium sector. I thought that he would say that such growth has taken place over the past five or 10 years, but, lo and behold, he said that it had occurred over the past 37 years. If we wait until the sector's fiftieth birthday, we may have 5,000 children in the Irish-medium sector. Is that rapid growth? The Minister has told us that the Irish-medium sector represents the equivalent of 1.1% of the school population and 0.07% of the Budget. If Dominic Bradley deems that to be rapid growth, I hope that the economy grows faster than the Irish-medium sector, otherwise the Programme for Government will have no chance of surviving.

What can one say about Stephen Farry and the Alliance Party? He dealt with a small side issue. However, the one point that amazed me about his speech was that, probably for the first time in any of his interventions or contributions in the Chamber, he did not refer to the document 'Research into the financial cost of the Northern Ireland divide'. That document is the bedtime reading of all Alliance Party Members. What does that document say about the divisions that exist in the education system in Northern Ireland? I will quote a part that Stephen may have missed last night:

"schools provision — greater collaboration across schools sectors and consolidation within the schools estate could result in savings".

The document goes on to say that between £15·9 million and £79·6 million could be saved. Are we not getting to the heart of the issue for the Irish-medium, maintained and controlled sectors? Members must face up to the reality that our education system will cost an absolute fortune, as that document proves. What does the Minister do? She decides that money is of no consequence and that we can afford to dish out more for new schemes such as the club banks.

I must clarify for Mr Brolly, who needs to be given a lesson in Ulster-Scots — not Irish — history, and assure the House that the McIlveens, one of whom is on this side of Chamber, were Ulster Scots who arrived with the Hamiltons and the Montgomerys when they settled in 1606. That needs to be understood.

I welcome Mr McCausland's comments, which were self-explanatory.

I will now deal with the Minister's remarks and leave Basil McCrea alone for once. During an intervention that she made on another occasion when she addressed the House, the Minister quoted poetry to me. She also said that she was glad that I was not the Education Minister. I want to quote a little bit of poetry to her:

"As I was sitting in my chair, I knew the bottom was not there; nor legs, nor back, but I just sat, ignoring little things like that".

That is what the Minister has done with regard to the financial arrangements for education, classroom assistants, and so on: she has continually ignored the facts. I support the motion.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes the debate on the motion. I remind Members that the Question will be put as the first item of business on Monday 19 November 2007, on a cross-community basis.

*Motion made:*

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

## ADJOURNMENT

### Priory Integrated College, Holywood

**Mr Speaker:** I remind Members that the proposer will have 10 minutes in which to speak and all other Members will have approximately seven or eight minutes in which to speak.

**Dr Farry:** I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss this important issue. This debate is, first and foremost, about the future of Priory Integrated College in Holywood. However, the subject is, in fact, broader because the wider reorganisation of educational provision in Holywood depends on decisions that will be taken on Priory Integrated College in the near future.

At the outset, I want to acknowledge the strong support for the new campus and other educational reforms in Holywood that has come from across the political spectrum in North Down and which will, undoubtedly, be reflected in the comments of my fellow North Down MLAs during the debate.

By coincidence, North Down Borough Council will also be debating a cross-party motion on this subject tonight, which will, no doubt, be passed. I thank the MP for North Down, Lady Sylvia Hermon, who has been vocal on the issue and who has provided critical leadership.

I also thank the Minister of Education for taking the trouble to visit Priory Integrated College in June 2007, just a few weeks after she assumed office. The school was grateful for her visit, during which it was clear that the Minister took a great deal of interest in the children's work. She could not have failed to notice the building's poor state of repair: it is well past its sell-by date and is no longer fit for purpose.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board, in considering the future of education provision in Holywood, has, through an economic appraisal, come to the firm conclusion that the most efficient and effective solution — financially and educationally — is to relocate Priory Integrated College to the Redburn Primary School site; demolish the current building in order to make way for a new primary school that would facilitate the amalgamation of Holywood Primary School and Redburn Primary School; and construct a new nursery unit on the site vacated by Holywood Primary School. It is a significant reorganisation of education provision in the town. However, it places education on a fully sustainable basis. The newbuild

campus for Priory Integrated College must be the first step in that reorganisation.

On 1 March 2006, former Education Minister, Angela Smith, announced funding of £8.7 million for the new building. That was part of an overall investment of £380 million in the schools estate across Northern Ireland. That announcement was made shortly after the Secretary of State had announced the independent strategic review of education, which was subsequently headed by Professor Sir George Bain. Therefore, the announcement was made as the Department was moving to adopt a more strategic approach to the schools estate. However, in January 2007, the Secretary of State indicated that capital projects that had already been approved, such as that of Priory Integrated College, needed to be reviewed in light of the Bain Report's recommendations.

In February 2007, the South Eastern Education and Library Board reaffirmed its support for the project, in the light of the Bain Report. In other words, the board sees the project as being consistent with that report. In March, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State Maria Eagle confirmed that the building work for 84 schools, which had been put on hold, could proceed. She stressed that the remaining assessments could be completed within two months. It is now almost six months since the time in which those assessments should have been concluded. However, Priory Integrated College is still awaiting the go-ahead for its project. Other schools are also awaiting decisions, not least the High School, Ballynahinch, which is in the Minister's constituency. Priory Integrated College has done everything that has been, and could be, asked of the school.

I wish to stress a number of important points about Priory Integrated College. First, it is an integrated college. I firmly believe that integrated schools are the most sustainable form of education, both financially and economically. They offer the most rounded education to students, which is of benefit to wider society. The former Holywood High School took on integrated status 10 years ago, with a new name and a new ethos. It is widely acknowledged to be one of the most successful post-primary integrated schools in Northern Ireland. The Minister is aware of my concern over the approach that the Department takes to viability criteria for integrated schools. However, it is worth noting that, in North Down, fewer than 70% of students are recorded as having a Protestant background.

Priory Integrated College is the only integrated post-primary school in the constituency, and it is fully subscribed. A considerable number of its pupils attends from Bangor and east Belfast. However, the majority of its students comes from the town of Holywood. The neighbouring post-primary integrated schools — namely, Lagan College and Strangford Integrated College — are oversubscribed. Therefore, the school is not only sustain-

able but critical, if every child in North Down and East Belfast is to be offered the opportunity to avail himself or herself of integrated post-primary education.

Priory Integrated College has established partnerships with Oakgrove Integrated College in Derry and an Irish-language school in Cork, the Pobalscoil na Tríonóide. I hope that I have pronounced its name correctly. Moreover, Priory Integrated College is an all-ability school and delivers excellent academic results. It is worth noting that the college is the only non-selective option for people who live in the large town of Holywood. The school and its students make valuable contributions to the community through sports, the arts and community and charity work. The wider community in Holywood, including the Holywood Chamber of Trade, is supportive of the new school.

As an integrated school, its appeal to the entire community is maximised. However, the sustainability argument goes even further. The school has collaborated with a wide range of other local schools, including Glastry College, St Columbanus High School, Strangford Integrated College, South Eastern Regional College and Sullivan Upper School. That collaboration offers students in all those schools the benefits of, and access to, the widest curriculum possible. Holywood's local grammar school, Sullivan Upper, is also supportive of the changes.

I am conscious of the problems facing the schools estate across Northern Ireland. Those problems include falling rolls and 50,000 empty school places, which, in a few years' time, may rise to 80,000. It was in that context that the Bain Report was commissioned. That report places a heavy emphasis on sharing in and between schools, collaboration among schools and area planning. It is clear that Priory Integrated College ticks all those boxes.

Clearly, there must be a rationalisation of the schools estate. That rationalisation will create many problems in many communities. Local representatives will use Adjournment debates to argue for special cases. However, the case of Priory Integrated College is different. Holywood is well ahead of the curve in innovation and rationalisation. The community is hungry to move ahead with the necessary rationalisation, but decisions are not being taken. A ready solution for area planning has been presented on a plate to the Minister. That solution could be a model for other areas.

The reorganisation of the schools estate in Holywood will provide a much more sustainable outcome. Priory Integrated College can provide for long-term enrolment, well in excess of 450 students. The year 8 intake for 2007-08 was 88. Although, the Bain Report recommended a threshold of 500 students for post-primary schools, that threshold was for reviewing the situation in the context of those schools' experiences. A threshold of

500 students is, of course, an arbitrary figure. The realities of how communities exist must be taken into account.

Frankly, a newbuild campus for Priory College could see an expanded school well beyond that threshold figure of 500. The demand is there, and integrated education is extremely popular, not only in Holywood, but throughout North Down. In any event, the amalgamation of the two primary schools on the current site will see a single primary school with an enrolment figure well in excess of 400. That is almost three times the Bain threshold figure for primary schools. The overall package of this reorganisation is, therefore, unambiguously sustainable.

5.30 pm

What further information or evidence does the Minister need from the school in order to make that decision? She may be in a position to make a crucial announcement this evening. However, if not, I ask her to assure the House, particularly the MLAs from North Down, and the entire community in Holywood, that she will be able to take a positive decision in the very near future.

The consequences of delay are pupils and staff continuing to work in conditions recognised by the Minister's own Department as not being fit for purpose; health and safety issues; high levels of anxiety among staff, students and parents; high maintenance costs, which are totally unnecessary; and uncertainty in the feeder primary schools. I urge the Minister to take the necessary decision and to provide a model system for education, not just in Holywood, but right across North Down. I must stress that the will exists in the community to move forward on education and to make the types of changes that are necessary in Northern Ireland. With the support of the Minister and the Department, those changes can be made.

**Mr Weir:** I thank my colleague for North Down Dr Farry for bringing this issue to the Assembly's attention. Moreover, I take this opportunity to welcome some representatives from Priory Integrated College who are in the Public Gallery to listen this very important debate.

As has been said, what has happened with Priory Integrated College goes to the heart of many issues. It goes to the heart of the issue of the Department's integrity. A previous Minister announced that the investment in the college was to go ahead; however, there was a lack of follow-up action — indeed, the Department dragged its feet. Such cases are not unique. Often when announcements are made, the failure to act swiftly on them, and, in some cases, the failure to implement particular decisions, places a question mark over the integrity of the Department.

This issue also goes to the heart of the need for decisive action. Although we can be critical of the Department for failure to move forward on the matter when direct rule Ministers were in charge, there are

some concerns over the length of time that this matter has taken since devolution. Soon after devolution was restored at the beginning of May, I wrote to the Minister about Priory Integrated College — indeed, I am sure that she has received representations from a number of Members. In June, I received a response thanking me for my letter of 24 May. Indications were given that, at that stage, it was not possible to determine when the scheme will be allowed to proceed and when building work on the new school could commence. It is now nearly five months since I received a response to that letter, and nearly six months since the matter was originally raised by Members, yet the pupils, staff and governors of Priory Integrated College are still in a state of suspended animation. They still wait to hear when the college will be given the green light on the newbuild, or, indeed, whether it will be given the green light at all.

Above all, this issue is about the application of pure common sense. As Stephen Farry pointed out, it is clear that the case for a newbuild in Priory Integrated College is unanswerable. In making the case, let me ask four questions. First, is a newbuild necessary? I have had the honour of visiting the school and seeing the conditions there — I am sure that other Members have, too. In the previous debate, reference was made to a school in north Antrim that has remained unchanged since the 1960s. Priory Integrated College has been in existence since 1952, so the building is 55 years old. Unfortunately, anyone visiting the college can clearly see the wear and tear of that building.

It is simply in an unacceptable state for education. The walls are peeling, and there are areas that are unsafe for the children. Indeed, when an education and library board representative visited the school and was asked about refurbishment, he said that the school was not refurbishable, and that it had reached the stage at which any money spent on repairing or improving it would only be throwing good money after bad. It is clear that that is not an answer.

Against that background, the next question is whether the school is successful. Despite the appalling conditions in which teachers have had to work — as the previous contributor said — Priory Integrated College's academic record has been excellent. It is a non-selective school; one might almost say that it is a model for the path that the Minister would like to go down. However, it has achieved excellent results. Sixth-form provision was first made available at Priory Integrated College four years ago, and of the first cohort of A-level students, 93% are at university. The vast majority of that group of pupils would have been unfairly labelled as 11-plus failures, yet they have achieved excellent academic results.

The third question is whether the school is sustainable. There is a clear demand for integrated education and, as Dr Farry said, the nearest schools — Lagan College

and Strangford Integrated College, both of which are some distance away from Priory Integrated College — are oversubscribed. Despite the appalling physical condition of the school, its numbers have increased. At one time, the school roll reached a low of 190; it is now about 420 or 430.

In discussions about the sustainability of the school, a figure of 500 pupils has been mentioned. However, Dr Farry has already pointed out that that is not a proper comparison because it does not compare like with like. Given that the maximum enrolment of Priory Integrated College has, in effect, been capped at about 450 pupils, the opportunity to achieve that target of 500 is nigh on impossible at this time. The school is growing in popularity, and found itself oversubscribed after the most recent intake. It would be difficult for parents to be impressed with the school, given the state of the building, but many parents want their children to go there.

The needs of the area go beyond Priory Integrated College itself. There is a knock-on effect for Holywood Primary School and Redburn Primary School, which intend to amalgamate, and also for nursery provision. The vast majority of pupils aged between three years and 18 years throughout Holywood and parts of Bangor and east Belfast are affected. A new build at Priory Integrated College is clearly going to be sustainable.

The final question is whether best practice is being adopted in relation to sustainability. Co-operation exists between Priory Integrated College, Sullivan Upper School, St Columbanus' College, South Eastern Regional College, which comprises the former North Down and Ards Institute of Further and Higher Education, and also involves Strangford Integrated College and Glastry College. Work is continuing with a school in County Cork — unlike Dr Farry, I am not even going to attempt the Irish pronunciation. The school co-operates with Oakgrove Integrated College and is involved in a cross-generational project with the primary 7 class at Glenraig Integrated Primary School. Priory Integrated College fulfils the Bain Report's collaboration criteria; it is a model school.

The parents and governors of Priory Integrated College are asking the Minister for some implementation, some delivery and, at the very least, some certainty in the process, so that they can have a date for a newbuild. It is an unanswerable case. Let us see something being done for all the people of Holywood.

**Mr Cree:** I support my colleagues on this issue. Dr Farry has set out the history of the matter. Prior to the debate, I dug out some of the many oral and written questions that have been put to the Minister.

I am amazed by the number of questions that there have been, although the replies have been much the same. In March 2007, we were told that six schools would be put on hold and one of those would be Priory

Integrated College. On 15 June, in response to a question for written answer, the Minister said:

“The Department expects to be able to provide confirmation of the position shortly.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, pWA105, col 2*].

The enrolment level was capped at a maximum of 450 pupils, and the Department of Education was concerned at projected enrolment trends and the sustainability of those projected trends. On 17 September 2007, the Minister said in the House:

“Pupil numbers are clearly an important factor in assessing the future viability of schools, but they should not be the sole factor.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 23, No 7, p323, col 1*].

The Minister confirmed that other factors to be taken into consideration included:

“the educational experience of the children, the financial position of the school, leadership and management at the school, accessibility, and links with the community.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 23, No 7, p323, col 1*].

I contend, and I do not think that there is any dissension from the point of view, that Priory Integrated College scores in all those areas. The enrolment figure of 450 could easily be reached, and one of the problems is that the lack of action on the Priory Integrated College site delays the two primary schools in Holywood, but also the ones in Bangor and in Conlig that have applied for integrated status. There is now a queue of schools awaiting decisions, while other decisions have been taken. For example, the Minister decided to close the school in Conlig, even though its application for integrated status is still being considered. A nonsensical situation is developing in North Down.

We want to have the best education system possible for North Down, and we cannot be faulted for that. Therefore, we must be told sharply when a decision will be made by either the Department of Education or the South Eastern Education and Library Board, whichever one is holding up the issue.

I mentioned the nightmare situation that has developed: the numbers of pupils who attend, or are about to attend, integrated primary schools are diminishing overall because of the lack of progress at Priory Integrated College. I have been surprised to learn that, in considering the future of schools, the powers that be tend to look at the numbers on the ground and give little thought to the projected numbers. For example, it seems that there is no liaison between the projected enrolment of a school and the building of houses in that area.

In Conlig, where the primary school wishes to be an integrated primary school, 1,600 new houses are being built in the area. By any stretch of the imagination, that is an essential criterion to be taken into account when deciding the future of that school and the future of education for integrated-status applications throughout the borough of North Down. If they were given integrated

status, those primary schools would be feeder schools to Priory Integrated College. I appeal to the Minister to make a decision about Priory Integrated College so that the issue may be resolved and people can plan for the future education of their children.

**Mr Easton:** I am delighted to support Dr Farry in raising this matter in the Adjournment debate.

Children, teachers and residents from Holywood and the surrounding area have waited patiently for an effective reorganisation of the school system in Holywood. They have grown resentful that, year after year, their hopes of a new school being built have been dashed with delays and inaction. Dr Farry and I, along with other Members in the Chamber today, are colleagues on North Down Borough Council. Along with every member of that council, we are disappointed by the Minister's failure to act responsibly and decisively to provide a suitable educational infrastructure to serve the children of Holywood.

Much is made at times of the area's reputation as the County Down gold coast, but North Down Borough Council, like many other councils, serves a diverse community, and all its children, especially those from disadvantaged areas, are entitled to have their education in a positive and supportive environment.

5.45 pm

The people of Holywood pay high rates and taxes, and they reasonably expect proper educational provision for all their children in return. The Minister should be keen to advance the proposals for a new school in the area, because education in the town is characterised by the willingness of many parents to send their children to schools that accept pupils without considering their religious affiliation.

The proposal to build a new school for Priory Integrated College in Holywood has been on the table for several years, and the patience of the community is wearing thin. The proposed newbuild will have numerous social, educational and economic advantages, and it will benefit the pupils of both primary schools in the area when they amalgamate. The Minister's failure to act is causing problems and has led to considerable frustration for parents, teachers and children at both primary and secondary schools. It is also having a major impact on the plans for the local primary schools in the area, because they too are in limbo as they await a decision.

Local political representatives have been inundated with requests from constituents for information, action and support. They are entitled to an answer, and I hope that the Minister will provide one today. The implementation of the plan would ensure that Holywood has an excellent educational infrastructure that is appropriate to the needs of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, the community would understand that devolved Government works for all areas of the Province. The plans for Priory

Integrated College must be implemented immediately, because it is vital for the well-being of the children in the town.

In the last debate on education, the Minister spoke about how many schools she had visited. I stand to be corrected, but she has not visited any schools in North Down. I challenge her to visit Priory Integrated College to observe the result of academic selection, the viability of the project, the support of the community and the state of the building. I hope that she will come to North Down and show a bit of interest in the people there for a change.

**Mr McFarland:** I thank Stephen Farry for introducing today's debate. I also thank the Minister for being present, and I hope that she has her listening ears on.

Priory Integrated College is a successful and popular integrated school. As Members have heard, an exciting plan had been agreed to amalgamate the two primary schools into one new school on the existing college site and move the college to a new building on the Redburn Primary School site. Why has that plan been halted? It appears that it is because the number of pupils enrolled does not meet the departmental threshold of 500 that is required for a newbuild. I understand that the college has a cap of 450 pupils, which was determined by the South Eastern Education and Library Board. Therefore, the college has to turn away a number of pupils each year, which prevents it reaching an enrolment of 500.

The situation is ridiculous. I visited the school with fellow Members earlier this year, and I wrote to the Minister outlining the daft position. The Minister even visited the school, for which I thank her. I understand that she arrived shortly after my visit. However, despite a mound of supporting evidence, she still refuses to approve the newbuild. Will she please explain why, in the face of so much evidence that the plan meets the requirements, does she still refuse to back it? Priory Integrated College is everything that an integrated school should be, but the board and the Department are discriminating against it.

My colleague Lady Sylvia Hermon MP is a strong supporter of the project, and all MLAs and local councillors are in favour of the newbuild. I ask the Minister to sort out the confusion and to process the proposals now.

**Mr B Wilson:** I am increasingly concerned about the delay in starting the building of the new college. I congratulate Dr Farry for introducing the debate today. The debate is a result of growing frustration, because Members have questioned, and written to, the Minister but have had little response.

My interest stems from the fact that my eldest son is a former student of Holywood High School, which he attended when it was in the process of applying for integrated status. I was involved in the ballot before the application that successfully transformed it into

Priory Integrated College. Since then, I have taken a great interest in the development and expansion of the college because, at that time, it was not in a good state. I supported the school's application for integrated status because I recognised that there was an increasing demand for integrated education in North Down. It has been highlighted that the neighbouring integrated post-primary schools of Strangford Integrated College and Lagan College are oversubscribed, and, in fact, Priory Integrated College is also oversubscribed this year. Therefore, there is great demand for integrated schooling. More parents are choosing to send their children to integrated schools, and that is reflected by the increase in enrolment at Priory Integrated College. That is likely to continue, particularly with the provision of a new school.

The excellent examination results and the fact that the college now provides A-level courses have contributed to the increase in enrolment. The college's GCSE results are well above average for a non-selective school, and all A-level students obtained three A-level passes at grade A to D, which is exceptional, given that all the students were deemed 11-plus failures.

Priory Integrated College's progressive policies are also highlighted by the fact that the college is at the forefront of adopting the principles set out in the Bain Report. It is working with Sullivan Upper, the South Eastern Regional College and St Columbanus High School on various courses. Priory Integrated College is doing all the right things for the future of education, and it is making considerable progress. The only problem is that the school buildings are deteriorating; they are grotty and are no longer capable of meeting the demands of modern education. A recent survey of the school showed that repairs totalling more than £1 million were necessary to bring the college to a fit state, but that would be simply throwing good money after bad. Priory Integrated College needs a new campus.

The fact that the college was oversubscribed this year highlights its popularity. In some cases, the conditions under which students and teachers are expected to work are appalling. A new school is necessary to allow the college to develop its full potential.

An early decision is essential, as a delay affects not only the students of Priory Integrated College, but virtually every other child in the Holywood area. Work on Holywood Primary School and on Holywood Nursery School cannot commence until the Priory Integrated College site is vacated. The delay is unacceptable, as it creates uncertainty throughout all levels of education in Holywood.

In March, the then Minister with responsibility for education, Maria Eagle, stated that a decision would be made in two months. However, eight months later, we still await that decision. It is time to remove that uncertainty

and to make a firm commitment to Priory Integrated College. That would release the land for the development of the new primary and nursery schools in Holywood.

**The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Department of Education considers demand for all forms of education within a framework set out in legislation whereby, in so far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable expenditure, pupils shall be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents. The Department also has a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium and integrated education. The Good Friday Agreement states that an essential element of the reconciliation process is the promotion of a culture of tolerance at every level of society, including initiatives to encourage and facilitate integrated education.

Members have said that the capital scheme for Priory Integrated College was put on hold by direct rule Minister Maria Eagle, following a review of capital planning schemes to assess their consistency with the direction set out in the Bain Report.

The Bain Report recommended a schools estate comprising fewer larger schools, with greater collaboration and integration within, and across, school sectors to address the needs of local areas.

In assessing the need for building projects, it is important that the particular circumstances are examined carefully. We must look at preferences, within and between sectors, and take account of the impact of declining rolls on long-term sustainability in the post-primary sector. There are added difficulties involving the availability of places and effects on enrolment patterns.

Following the Bain Report, six projects — including Priory Integrated College — were put on hold because of uncertainties surrounding them. Priory Integrated College has an enrolment of 368 pupils in years eight to 12; 41 pupils at post-16, and 17 pupils with statements. The projected long-term enrolment is for 400 pupils in years eight to 12.

The Bain Report did not state that schools that are below that level must be rationalised automatically; and I have not agreed with the report's recommendations in their entirety. There are issues relating to the Irish-medium and integrated sectors that the Department must examine — and there is currently a review of Irish-medium education.

The Bain Report recommended that schools below the 500-pupil level were to be reviewed to ensure that they were continuing to provide a high standard of education. All schools must be judged on their merits, with a particular focus on the duty to promote and encourage.

In response to Alex Easton, I visited Priory Integrated College on 30 May 2007 and was impressed by the good work of the principal and the staff, as well as the evident commitment to the delivery of high quality education. Priory Integrated College has well established links with other providers across all sectors, and enjoys strong leadership and management. There is no doubt that the school has developed strong links with the community. The key issue is to determine the provision needed for the local area, which takes account of local enrolment trends and anticipated demand in the future. Bhí an Roinn i dteagmháil le bord an oirdheiscirt maidir le riachtanais ionchasacha an cheantair le gur féidir cinneadh a dhéanamh a luaithe is féidir.

The Department has liaised with the South Eastern Education and Library Board on its position regarding anticipated needs in the area. I have no development proposal in front of me, but I want a decision on the future of the project as soon as possible. I understand and share the frustration of the school. I note the support of all the parties present — the Alliance Party, the DUP and the UUP — and I will make sure that the board and my officials get a copy of the debate.

**Dr Farry:** Will the Minister give way?

**Ms Ruane:** I will finish first. I do not believe in uncertainty or that it is fair for schools to operate in an uncertain environment. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Speaker:** Dr Farry, the Minister has finished so the debate is over.

*Adjourned at 5.58 pm.*

