
OFFICIAL REPORT

(HANSARD)

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NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 24 June 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MATTERS OF THE DAY

Murder in Londonderry

Mr Speaker: Mr Campbell has sought leave to make a statement on a matter that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 23A. I shall call Mr Campbell to speak for up to three minutes on the subject. I shall then call a Member from each of the other political parties, as agreed with the Whips; those Members will have up to three minutes to speak. There will be no opportunity for interventions, questions or for a vote on the matter. I shall not take any points of order until the item of business is concluded. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mr Campbell: I raise the very serious matter of a murder that has been committed in Londonderry in the early hours of this morning. I trust that everyone in the House will offer their sympathies and condolences to the family of the young man who was the victim of the attack. Murder, in any circumstances, is wrong. It cannot be justified, defended or condoned.

Although it has only been a few hours since the attack, there has been universal condemnation across the political divide — it is quite right and proper that that should be so. More is required than simple condemnation of such an attack — information is essential, and evidence is required in order to bring the perpetrators to justice.

It is hoped that the Assembly — speaking as it does for the entire community across Northern Ireland — will send out a signal to the community of the Creggan estate in Londonderry to do whatever it can to give whatever information it has to the police in order to bring the perpetrators — the murderers — to justice.

Murder was wrong 30 years ago. It could not be defended, condoned or justified then; nor can it today. I hope that we can play a small part in bringing to justice those who carried out that heinous act.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am grateful to Gregory Campbell for bringing the matter so swiftly to the notice of the Assembly. My colleagues Martina Anderson and Raymond McCartney have been active in dealing with the local response. Our community is shattered and shocked at what happened. The deceased is my near neighbour — I know the family particularly well. I support all that Members have said. The situation demands a community response, and any information that can assist the PSNI in bringing the perpetrators to justice should urgently be made available to it.

If the Assembly stands for anything, it stands for resolution of our many differences through dialogue and discussion. There is no longer any scope for the gun in our society. I join Gregory Campbell in offering condolences to the family and earnestly expressing the hope that the perpetrators will be brought to justice swiftly.

Mr McClarty: I first heard reports of the incident on a news bulletin while travelling here this morning. Like everyone in the House, I am filled with shock and horror. I extend my deepest sympathy to the victim's family circle.

However, I note with concern the emergence of increasing intelligence that republican terrorist groups throughout the Province are stepping up their activities. We need to know as soon as possible who carried out the attack. In the light of this tragic death and the increase in such activities, the usual description of the perpetrators as “dissidents” is no longer acceptable. As soon as possible, the police must inform the public explicitly who was responsible for that cold-blooded murder. Locally, there has been some criticism of the police's response to the incident; but I have heard the police's explanation and am content with it. In the light of recent attacks in Castleterragh and Rosslea, it is perfectly understandable and correct for the police to have been cautious. Any injury or further loss of life would have been another tragedy.

I call on anyone who has the merest snippet of information about that dastardly murder to pass it on to the PSNI.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank my colleague Gregory Campbell for seeking leave to make a statement, because we need to pass on our sympathy and prayers to the family. I spoke with family members this morning, and they are shocked and anguished. The father is choked with emotion. However, they will appreciate and acknowledge the comments from all the Members and parties represented in the Chamber.

The feeling in the city is that the hurt, grief and turmoil are widely shared. In any circumstance, at any time, it is difficult to answer a knock on the door and be told that a member of one's family has been killed,

but to be told that a relative has been executed in his own city is not nice.

People in the Creggan community are appalled and grieving at the loss of a young man's life. The family also want it put on record that anyone with information that leads to the arrest of those who perpetrated that awful deed in Derry should come forward. I accept Gregory's point that no community should have to face or accept that type of violence under the new dispensation. There is hope, and, outside the House, people wish for the murder and mayhem of the past to remain in the past.

It is a sad reflection of society that such violence continues. As a result, a young man of 22 years of age has lost his life, leaving a grieving family. It is important that communities, irrespective of whether they are in Derry, Belfast or elsewhere, marginalise and give no comfort to those in the community who, for whatever logic or reason, carry out violence of any description. Such people should be marginalised and be given no comfort whatever. They carried out such acts in the past for ideological reasons, but should not now be conducting a campaign that leads to violence.

I repeat what other Members said: people must come forward with information. It is grand to express sympathy to the family of the victim, but in order to deter further similar acts of violence, intelligence and evidence must be produced that can put those who are responsible for such awfulness behind bars.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to Mr Campbell for bringing the matter to the attention of the House. I join with the other party spokespersons and express the sympathy of the Alliance Party to the family concerned.

The murder was extremely brutal and appalling. It is a tragedy, not just for the family, but for the entire community in Derry. The most poignant comment that can be made is that a young child who will be born in the next few days will grow up without a father. Those who are responsible for this brutal attack should reflect on that.

We should be at a stage in society where the justification — or the lack of — for murder is not discussed. There can be no justification, in any circumstances, for murder. We should not need to qualify that point. Murder is the most heinous crime, and there is no place for it in this or in any other society in the world, given that it constitutes a major threat to the rule of law.

There is speculation as to whether this murder was carried out by dissident republicans or by organised criminals. I agree that there is an urgent need for the police to clarify who was responsible as soon as possible. That said, I have confidence in the ability of our Police Service to respond robustly and effectively to this and to other serious crimes that occur in Northern Ireland. I endorse calls for the community to work closely with the police to bring those who are responsible for this heinous crime to justice as soon as possible.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I ask that the Speaker considers making a ruling on a matter on which the 'Northern Ireland Assembly Companion' is silent. Given that silence, I checked Erskine May on the matter on which I think that you should make a ruling. Page 74 of Erskine May reports a resolution that was made by the Public Service Committee of the House of Commons. *Inter alia*, that resolution states that:

"it is of paramount importance that ministers give accurate... information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity."

If that is the standard that is expected of Ministers in giving information to the House of Commons, should the same standards not apply here? Indeed, should that apply not just to Ministers, but to the Assembly Commission and to the Speaker?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has exhausted that particular subject. I know where he is going, given that he has raised the same subject twice in the House. I have already told the Member — and the entire House — that I will not take any further points of order on that issue.

The Member knows that if he wants to ask either a question for oral answer or a question for written answer on issues that relate to the Commission, he can do so quite freely. That is the avenue that he should pursue; he should not raise further points of order on this matter.

Mr Attwood: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, I am not asking for a particular comment from you on any matter reported to this House; I am asking you to make a ruling on whether the Speaker is obliged, in the event that there has been inadvertence —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is coming very, very close to challenging the authority of the Speaker, and I warn him very, very closely on that issue. It is not an appropriate point of order for this House.

10.45 am

Mr Attwood: Further to the point of order. I will explore all other avenues in order to ensure that a standard is set for this House that all who report to it must attain.

Mr Speaker: I am happy for the Member to come and talk to me on the subject that he has raised, and to which he has referred in the House on two previous occasions.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT**North/South Ministerial Council —
Education Sectoral Meeting**

Mr Speaker: Order. I have received notice from the Minister of Education that she wishes —

Mr I McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The cover-page of a statement that Members have received from the Minister this morning is totally in Irish. When I picked up the document outside the Chamber, I was unsure about the content of what I was lifting. Will you rule as to whether that statement's front page should be in English, so that Members know what they are picking up?

Mr Speaker: What the Minister has done is quite correct. The statement is in both Irish and English.

Mr I McCrea: Further to the point of order, Mr Speaker. I am not disputing that it is in Irish. I want the front page translated into English to enable Members to know what they are picking up.

Mr Speaker: That is not a matter on which the Speaker can rule. It is an issue on which the Minister may consider Members' points of view. I call the Minister of Education to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC).

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat. First of all, the statement is in English and Irish to enable Members to choose which they prefer to read.

Le do chead, a Cheann Comhairle, ba mhaith liom ráiteas a dhéanamh ar chruinniú den Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas i bhformáid rannach oideachais. Tionóladh an cruinniú seo in Ardscoil De La Salle, Dún Pádraig ar 28 Bealtaine 2008.

Roimh an chruinniú d'óstáil mé fáiltiú do phríomhoidí ó gach earnáil scoile sa cheantar áitiúil. D'ionadaigh mé an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin mar Aire Oideachais, in éineacht le Edwin Poots CTR, an tAire Cultúir, Ealaíon agus Fóillíochta.

That translates as: with your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement regarding a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in its education sectoral format. The meeting was held at De La Salle High School in Downpatrick, County Down, on 28 May 2008.

Before the formal meeting convened, I hosted a reception for school principals from all school sectors in the area. I represented the Executive as Minister of Education. The then Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Edwin Poots, also attended. The Irish Government was represented by Batt O'Keeffe, TD and Minister for Education and Science, whom I welcomed

to his first NSMC meeting. I look forward to meeting him again at the next meeting, which will be in the South of Ireland. My statement has been agreed with Edwin Poots and is made on behalf of us both.

The main points that emerged from the meeting range across all the agreed areas of educational co-operation, and I will summarize them as follows: on the issue of education, underachievement, joint presentations were given on best practice in Travellers' education and on the role of school leadership in tackling underachievement for all children.

The presentation on best practice for school leadership was led by Dr Tom Hesketh, director of the regional training unit. It also involved Adeline Dinsmore, principal of Ashfield Girls' High School in Belfast; Patrick McAleavey, principal of St Patrick's High School, Keady, County Armagh; Barry Sharvin, principal of De La Salle High School, Downpatrick; and Paddy Flood, the national co-ordinator of leadership development for schools.

The NSMC welcomed continuing practical co-operation to address educational underachievement, particularly in literacy and numeracy, and considered proposals for enhancing joint working, such as holding a joint conference for education professionals on the subject of numeracy in primary schools. That conference will be part of a joint approach to sharing best practice and identifying common research needs.

The NSMC agreed to convene a joint working group on educational underachievement that will initially consider the approach adopted in each jurisdiction towards raising overall levels of achievement and to tackling underachievement, particularly among more disadvantaged groups such as lower-income families, Travellers and young people from ethnic minorities.

The working group will report progress to the next NSMC meeting in education sectoral format.

We welcomed the proposal to organise a conference on best practice in the education of children from the Traveller community, and we look forward to receiving the published report, which will contribute to the development of specific objectives and targets in that area.

D'fháiltigh an Chomhairle fosta roimh bhunú coiste um oideachas pháistí Lucht Taistil ag mo Roinn, agus tá mo Roinn ag dréim le bheith ag comhoibriú leis an Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta sa todhchaí.

The Council also welcomed my Department's establishment of a committee for the education of Traveller children and look forward to its future collaborative work with the Department of Education and Science.

The Council discussed steps to help to train teachers to achieve the Irish-language qualification required for

teaching in schools in the South of Ireland, thereby improving cross-border mobility. We noted that teachers pursuing the Irish-language qualification can avail themselves of training programmes that exist in several areas. In addition, information seminars on the primary-school curriculum are provided by the primary curriculum support programme in the Monaghan Education Centre to assist teachers seeking employment in Southern schools.

The Council welcomed the ongoing co-operation between the respective inspectorates of the Department of Education (DE) and the Department of Education and Science, including the agreement of a protocol for exchanges.

Chuir an Chomhairle fáilte roimh an chomhoibriú leanúnach idir cigireachtaí na Ranna Oideachais faoi seach, lena n-áirítear comhaontú ar phrótacal ar mhalartuithe.

We welcomed the standing conference on teacher education, North and South, including that on citizenship education and special educational needs, and we look forward to the outcome of its work on school leadership policy and practice. We noted that the regional training unit and the programme on leadership development for schools continue to work on a collaborative basis on leadership development issues and have agreed to develop a joint research project that will concentrate on how best to attract and develop new school leaders.

We also noted the progress that has been made by the working group that is considering the transfer of pension rights. The group is gathering evidence on the difficulties experienced by teachers as a result of the inability to transfer pension entitlements between both jurisdictions. It will report back to a future North/South Ministerial Council meeting.

The Council welcomed the significant progress that has been made on the development of the Centre of Excellence for Autism at Middletown in County Armagh and the fact that the centre has begun to deliver training courses. The autism research and information service is being developed and will begin delivery after the current recruitment exercise. The education assessment service and the learning support service will come on stream at a later date, because the new building must be completed in order to facilitate those two functions. The Council welcomed the progress that has been made by the centre in its consultations with parents, professionals and others to inform how the proposed services will be delivered, and we look forward to a formal report on the outcomes.

Thug muid faoi deara an rath a bhí ar an stocáireamh ar uathachas a rinne an Roinn Oideachais agus an Chigireacht Oideachais agus Oiliúna ar 10 agus 11 Márta 2008. Bainfear úsáid as an stocáireamh seo le

plean straitéiseach ar an uathachas a ullmhú don Roinn Oideachais chomh maith le comhsmaointeoireacht straitéiseach a cheapadh ar an uathachas. Thug an Chomhairle faoi deara fosta an rath a bhí ar an chomhdháil ar neamhoird speictrim uathaigh a tionóladh ar 15 Aibreán i bPáirc an Chrócaigh i mBaile Átha Cliath.

We noted the success of the autism stocktake by the Department of Education and the Education and Training Inspectorate on 10 and 11 March 2008. That will inform the development of an autism strategic plan for the Department of Education, as well as establishing common strategic thinking about autism. The Council also noted the success of the conference on autistic spectrum disorder that was held on 15 April 2008 at Croke Park in Dublin.

We noted the successful outcomes of the cross-border school and parent community partnership programme, which include the development of teaching and learning aids for autism, speech and language.

The Council was updated on educational exchanges and noted the ongoing co-operation between Departments. In 2008, 20 school- and youth-based exchange programmes will be undertaken.

The Council noted that a review of educational exchanges and supporting mechanisms has recently been completed. We are considering the recommendations and the appropriate joint processes and approaches that will be required to manage and co-ordinate educational exchanges in the future. The Council asked officials to report back on the progress on gaining agreement on a joint approach for the future management and funding of educational exchanges.

We agreed that the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format should take place in autumn 2008.

Ar deireadh, shocraigh muid go dtionólfá an chéad chruinniú eile den Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas i bhformáid rannach oideachais i bhfómhar na bliana 2008. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): The Minister mentioned the significant progress in the development of a centre of excellence for autism in Middletown. She also said that the centre has begun to deliver training courses, which is one of its four functions. The Committee for Education recently received a briefing paper on autism from a key organisation in the sector. We plan to question representatives from the centre at Middletown in early September.

However, many parents are concerned about the significant delay in delivering the centre of excellence, given that it was first announced in 2002. The project

to develop a centre of excellence has received considerable public funding — in the region of several million pounds.

What is the total amount of funding — broken down into capital and revenue — that the Department has allocated to the Middletown centre for autism since 2002? How does that represent value for money and, most importantly, service delivery for those people to whose futures the centre of excellence is essential?

The Minister of Education: I welcome the Member's interest in the Middletown centre for autism, which is a wonderful project. The deputy First Minister and I visited the centre, and it is doing tremendous work. At the conference in Croke Park, representatives from the centre delivered a compelling presentation on their work.

The centre has been operational since December 2007, when training delivery began. The research and information service will begin after further staff recruitment. The educational assessment service and learning support service will come on stream when building work is completed, which is expected to be in autumn 2009. The senior management team is meeting education providers, North and South, to ascertain requirements. It is working on several areas, including staff recruitment, the development of the referral mechanisms, the development of a training prospectus and training delivery.

The board of directors of the Middletown centre for autism has met regularly since March 2007. The chief executive and the three heads of division are all in post. A further recruitment exercise is under way for training, research and administrative staff. Since December 2007, several training courses have been held in the newly refurbished accommodation on site. The centre commissioned an extensive consultation exercise with all relevant stakeholders involved with children and young people with autism in venues across Ireland — north, south, east and west — in December 2007 and January 2008. The purpose of that consultation was to inform and invite comments on how the centre will deliver the proposed services.

Funding for the purchase and cost of the Middletown centre is divided equally between the Department of Education and the Department of Education and Science in the South. At its education sectoral meeting on 11 April 2002, the North/South Ministerial Council jointly endorsed the decision to establish the Middletown centre for autism.

There were delays, but I am not going to take responsibility for direct rule delays. I assure Members that we are proceeding at full speed with the further development of the Middletown centre of excellence for autism. I have also met parents and representatives

of organisations who work for children with autism, and I welcome the work that has been conducted to date.

11.00 am

The Member enquired about the cost of the centre. The Department of Education spent £1.5 million on the purchase of the property. The annual running costs of the centre are estimated at approximately £3 million per annum and will be shared equally between the Department of Education in the North and the Department of Education and Science in the South. The building and refurbishment costs were estimated at approximately £3.5 million in total. However, in line with general increases in building costs, some of those estimates have risen, and officials are currently working through the detail.

I am sure that all Members will agree on the benefits and importance of the initiative, as well as the many other initiatives that have been undertaken about autism.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My question is also about the Middletown centre of excellence for autism. An increasing number of children have autistic spectrum disorders; therefore, I welcome the significant progress that the Minister reported today.

The centre in Middletown has four main functions, including the educational assessment service and the learning support service, which will cater for children with autism who cannot be catered for in the standard educational setting. Another key function of the centre will be the research and information service, which will benefit all children with autism as more research is conducted about their specific needs. Will the Minister comment on the benefits for all children with autism?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin agus as an ráiteas sin. The Member rightly talked about the important services that the Middletown Centre for Autism will provide. The centre will be dedicated to improving the education opportunities for children and young people with autistic spectrum disorders. It is planned that the centre will provide an educational assessment service; a learning support service; a training and advisory service for parents, teachers and other professionals; and, as the Member said, a research and information service.

Provision will be made for the comprehensive educational assessment of children with a view to provide enhanced individual education plans. That may include a two-day to three-day multidisciplinary education assessment, and/or a five-week residential multidisciplinary education and learning support assessment that involves pre- and post-placement visits to parents, schools and other professionals who are involved with the children.

The centre will be multidisciplinary and will work in collaboration with local services. It will not replace or prevent the development of local provision, but will seek to enhance or support existing services through collaborative working arrangements.

The centre will work in co-ordination with all the other strategies that are being implemented in the Department of Education. One of the major benefits is that professionals in the field are currently learning from one another and sharing best practices. The conference that I attended in Croke Park was a wonderful example of that. All the people I talked to said that it was a good conference and that more such initiatives and events should be undertaken.

An autism stocktake was also conducted this year with a forum of administrators, special-needs professionals and education inspectors from Scotland, Wales and the North and South of Ireland, at which autism provision across the education sector was considered. The administrators exchanged examples of good practice, including research in children's early years. The event was organised by the Department of Education. I met all the people at the conference, which was a preparatory step in the development of the autism strategy in the North.

Officials and inspectors will develop a plan that they will present to me to map out a draft strategy for the provision of effective and consistent autism services for children across the North.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister address the issue of the location of the centre of excellence for autism? I have heard some suggestions that it should be located beside hospitals with high research capabilities. The fact that it is not appears to be a bit of a problem. Was the issue raised during the consultation that the Minister conducted? Furthermore, will she explain to the Assembly why the vast majority of stakeholders who were consulted are against the location of the centre in Middletown?

Does she agree that, if there is one issue that should not be politicised, it is dealing with services for those on the autistic spectrum? Will she give an undertaking to lead the charge to ensure that — for the sake of those children — the issue is not politicised?

The Minister of Education: First, the centre is ideally located; it is a North/South centre. Children will travel to it from all corners of the island. I absolutely agree that the issue should not be politicised. Equally, I throw that right back and ask every party not to politicise the issue, because we are dealing with some of the most vulnerable children in society who need the most professional help.

I am sure that Mr McCrea's colleague the Minister of Health would be concerned at any suggestion, which I am sure that the Member is not making, that

health provision in the Armagh area is not what it should be. Health provision is provided across the North; it is essential that there be no regional disparity in the provision of those services.

The centre's site is wonderful. It is important that people visit to see that for themselves. I do not accept that a vast majority of consultees raised concerns about the site. The site is ideally located for children across the island. We must get our shoulders to the wheel to support that innovative project. It is one of many of projects right across the North; we have projects in Belfast, Derry and Armagh which deal with a range of educational issues and cater for the North and South.

I thank the Member for saying that the issue should not be politicised. I hope that that will not happen.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Maidir leis an cháilíocht Gaeilge do mhúinteoirí a luaigh an tAire ina ráiteas, an dtig liom a fhiafraí di cén fáth, cad chuige nó cad ina thaobh nach mbeidh na cláracha teagaisc ar fáil i gceachtar den dá choláiste oiliúna anseo i dTuaisceart Éireann mar chuid de oiliúint múinteoirí nó mar chúrsa iarchéime inseirbhíse? An bhféachfaidh an tAire chuige san am atá romhainn go mbeidh na cúrsaí sin ar fáil i gceann de na coláistí anseo i mBéal Feirste? Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Poots: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is very clear in Assembly rules that speeches must be translated into English. We are not going to allow this to happen.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for that point of order. Members on all sides of the House know by now that when they choose to speak in another language they must also provide an English translation.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I apologise, Mr Speaker. I got carried away with the passion of my question; it was not an attempt to insult the House.

Why is the Irish language qualification for teachers not available in the two teacher-training colleges in Northern Ireland, either as a part of the teaching degree or as an in-service course? Will the Minister do all in her power to ensure that that course is made available in one of the two teacher-training colleges in Belfast?

I hope that I provided an accurate translation, Mr Speaker; from memory, it comes close. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat. First, I welcome the decision — taken at the North/South Ministerial Council education sectoral meeting at De La Salle High School, in Downpatrick — that steps will be taken to facilitate graduating teachers in achieving the necessary Irish language qualification for teaching in the South of Ireland. The proposal to

share the detail of that, including the means by which the necessary qualification can be achieved, at an early stage with student teachers and their lecturers will help to facilitate mobility for those interested in pursuing some part of their teaching career in the South.

Together with Reg Empey's Department and our colleagues in the South, I am currently working on the detail, and I expect that that proposal will become a reality very soon. In relation to the Member's question, I am also in discussion with Reg Empey about teacher training and courses. We have come to an arrangement regarding St Mary's and Stranmillis that I very much welcome. We are also exploring further many different issues.

Dr Farry: The Minister knows that my party and I are not hostile to the Irish language, but I will follow up on the last area of questioning. The Minister talked about trying to facilitate our citizens in gaining qualifications in Irish so that they are able to teach in the South of Ireland. However, is there not a stronger case for making representations to the Government of the Republic of Ireland to relax or remove that restriction?

It is not necessary to know Irish to teach maths, physics, science, history or geography. It is a restrictive practice. Bearing in mind that Southern citizens do not need that qualification to teach in Northern Ireland, it would be fair to lift that criterion and encourage the use of Irish through other methods. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat. Maith thú. I do not think that I need to translate that for the Member.

I accept that the requirement of the South's education system in relation to Irish language competency presents challenges for some of our student and graduate teachers. However, it is the national language of Ireland, so I do not think that that is an unreasonable requirement.

That said, in any education system — our own included — there is an expectation that teachers should be able to teach across the full curriculum. The primary curriculum in the South has a very clear and integral Irish-language component that runs throughout it, including the fields of maths, science, history and language. Those responsible for education policy and delivery deemed that it is necessary for teachers to have the ability to deliver that aspect of the curriculum, which I fully understand and respect.

I have, however, been in discussions about this issue, and I welcome the steps that were taken in recent years to review the requirement. It applies now only in the primary sector. In the post-primary sector, it applies only for the teaching of Irish and teaching through the medium of Irish. Teachers now have much more time in which to study and gain the qualification, even for the primary sector. The practice of differential rates of pay has also changed.

I also welcome from Southern colleagues the offer of information seminars designed to explain exactly what the requirement is for both students and academic staff in our teacher-education colleges who may be interested in applying for posts in the South. That is a very practical and helpful offer of support.

A different but related issue is that of what can be done to ensure that teachers are not discouraged from moving to live and work on either side of the border. It is possible that the absence of any facility to transfer pension entitlements could impact on that. The issue was raised at one of the North/South Ministerial Council meetings. The obstacles to pension rights were considered — not just in education, but right across the board. A working group was set up to address that issue, and we wait for officials to report back with its findings.

Mr McCausland: In her statement on cross-border co-operation, the Minister referred to school exchanges and youth exchanges; a review of educational exchanges; consideration of recommendations; and proposed joint processes, management and co-ordination.

As we sit here in Stormont, I remind the Minister that we are closer to Galloway than we are to Galway; we are as close to Dumfries as we are to Dublin; and the North Channel is a very narrow sea. Will she, therefore, tell us what plans she has to develop and support direct east-west exchanges, so that they are supported equally with North/South exchanges and that there is no differential or disparity?

Will she tell us whether she has discussed that with the Scottish Education Minister? What progress has been made in that area? For many children in Northern Ireland, their cultural connections are much more identifiable with Scotland than they are with the Irish Republic.

11.15 am

The Minister of Education: County Louth is near Newry. There is a road network between both parts of the island, and it is essential that we learn from each other and share best practice. Equally, it is important that we learn from our colleagues in England, Scotland and Wales. When speaking earlier about autism, I said that we had autism professionals from England, Scotland, Wales and the North and South of Ireland. It is important to develop exchanges at different levels across the island, and between England, Scotland and Wales and the island, and I look forward to continuing that.

I discussed the close links between Scotland and Ireland, and I am interested in examining Gaelic education in Scotland. A lot of work can be done and we can learn much from that system. I had a good meeting with the Scottish Minister for Schools and Skills, when the issue of underachievement was among the issues discussed, and I have since received

information from her on how Scotland tackles underachievement. We will examine that issue with our colleagues in the South and in Scotland.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. Is maith an rud é go bhfuil an dul chun cinn suntasach déanta ar ábhair éagsúla i gcúrsaí oideachais ar fud na tíre.

Will the Minister give more detail on initiatives aimed at increasing and improving mobility between teachers, North and South? Is the significant surplus — or over-provision — of teachers in the North comparable to the deficit of teachers in the South?

Secondly, I will welcome additional detail on the significance of the autism stocktake and how it was carried out.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. It is important that all obstacles to mobility across the island are removed, and work has been carried out to identify options to resolve that problem. A teacher superannuation group was set up as part of the North/South Ministerial Council education work programme. That group identified a range of options for effecting transfer arrangements, as well as other complex issues to be addressed, including the implications for other public-sector schemes — particularly those with a high degree of movement of members — and the differential treatment of state pension arrangements. Given the cross-sectoral implications of any change in the existing pension arrangements, the North/South Ministerial Council meeting — led by the esteemed Member opposite, Ian Paisley Snr, and Martin McGuinness — agreed that a broad-based approach was preferred. The joint secretariat subsequently convened a working group of officials from relevant Departments — including Finance Departments — to consider the transfer of pension rights, in general, on a cross-border basis. The Member will agree that I have already answered the question on the Irish-medium sector, to ensure that we can have maximum exchanges.

As I said earlier, prior to the conference in Croke Park, the autism inspectors from Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales met to prepare for the autism strategy. A wonderful amount of work on special needs and autism is going on, North and South. I thank the Member for his interest in the matter.

Mr Poots: Minister Ruane will recall that, at that North/South Ministerial Council meeting, I raised the issue of transient children, as opposed to Traveller children. It was agreed that that issue would not be dealt with under the North/South regime, but by the Minister herself. What subsequent steps has she taken to end the discriminatory practices against Army children that were introduced by her predecessor in the previous devolved Administration? Those changed the

rules, which now work against children from the migrant community?

The Minister of Education: As the Member will know, that is not a North/South issue, because there are no British forces in the South of Ireland. As I said, I wrote to the then Minister about those issues, as they are not within the remit of the North/South Ministerial Council. There is a forum that deals with the issue of transient children. I absolutely refute the suggestion that there is any discrimination. In fact, transient children have a higher weighting than other children, apart from socially disadvantaged children, like those from the Travelling community and ethnic-minority groups. I absolutely refute the suggestion that there is discrimination; there is none. The Department is represented on a forum in relation to that issue.

The additional funding for children of army personnel is 0.2 of the basic age-weighted pupil unit — a cash value per pupil in 2008-09 of £393.23. That is intended to support schools in inducting those children during their transition to a new school and new curricular environment, and in designing learning programmes to bring them to the same stage as other pupils already in the school. There are 613 such pupils in the primary sector, and that costs £241,050; in the secondary sector there are 158, with a cost of £62,131; and in the grammar sector there are 93, with a cost of £36,571. That comes to a total of £339,702. I do not know how anyone can say that there is discrimination in that regard.

The Member will also be aware that, in the recommendations for review, Local Management of Schools (LMS) members have called for the weighting of the children of service personnel to be raised from the current level of 0.2. That issue was not progressed at the time it was raised, pending further assessment of the needs and additional costs associated with children in that group. The issue is kept under review, including as part of the review of special educational needs and the review of formula funding arrangements.

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

Mr K Robinson: Given the Minister's fixation with post-primary education, and her constant reference to the tail of underachievement in literacy and numeracy, will she now expand on what kind of practical co-operation the North/South Ministerial Council can bring to bear on that crucial area, in order to make a measurable difference? That deep-seated problem, which precedes the age of 11, was flagged up by the Department in 2002, when it told the Public Accounts Committee that:

“it was indefensible that around 20% of children left school unable to master the basics of reading and writing.”

The Westminster Public Accounts Committee, in a report dated 27 November 2006, also expressed its concern on the matter.

The Minister of Education: I thank the Member for his question, and for his interest in underachievement; he will know that I share that interest. I absolutely refute his statement that I am obsessed with transfer from primary to post-primary schools. In fact, this morning I have been speaking about special needs, Travellers, and underachievement. I am clear that I am here to work for the benefit of all children. One of the reasons why I put educational underachievement on the agenda of the North/South Ministerial Council is that I care deeply about all of our children. I am particularly concerned about the children who are failed by our system. That cannot continue to happen.

My Department has established a working group on educational underachievement. I strongly insisted that we listened to the leaders of schools that have done the business. They are the people who know what needs to be done. That is why we spent the majority of the meeting listening to those school leaders; to the regional training unit; to its counterpart in Dublin; to Adeline Dinsmore from Ashfield Girls' High; to Pat McAleavey; and to the key points in dealing with underachievement. I am sure that Edwin Poots will agree that that was a very useful part of the meeting.

A working group has been set up, which the relevant senior policy leaders in both Departments jointly chair. It will report to the next North/South Ministerial Council education sectoral meeting, which will be held in autumn 2008. During the summer, officials in my Department will liaise closely with counterparts in Dublin on those arrangements and on membership of the group. We will provide details of that as soon as possible.

The working group will also co-ordinate the work of existing joint working groups on literacy and numeracy and on attendance and retention in order to ensure that the current work of those groups is linked at strategic level with wider efforts to tackle underachievement. It will also be charged with identifying the scope for additional joint working in other areas of mutual benefit, such as joint research and joint dissemination of research findings. It will liaise with the existing joint working group on teacher qualifications and teachers' superannuation in order to ensure that work on school leadership and teachers' development is linked more closely with efforts to tackle educational underachievement. School leadership is a key element of that. It has been identified as a critical success factor for driving up standards in schools for all children. It is important that the steps that are taken to share learning and to promote best practice in that area are fully integrated into the agenda for the working group on educational underachievement.

Members will be aware that I issued a consultation document yesterday on tackling underachievement. I am aware that right before the summer is probably not the best time to launch such a document, but I was not

prepared to sit on the matter. I did not want to waste any time. However, I have extended the consultation period. I welcome everyone's contributions, because I understand that every Member shares my concerns about the underachievement of many of our young people. Therefore, we can learn much from one other. My Department will work closely with the Department of Education and Science in the South on the matter.

Mrs M Bradley: My question also relates to the Middletown centre. However, I have no criticism to make; indeed, I absolutely welcome the centre. The children who will attend the autism centre must remain there for five weeks. I am concerned about the duration of that five-week stay, because autistic children rely on familiar surroundings and people at all times. I wonder whether that lengthy five-week stay was negotiated with parents. Can the Minister assure the House that parents are content about it?

The Minister of Education: I welcome the Member's words of support for the Middletown centre. As she does, I believe that the centre is extremely important. As I have said, provision will be made for comprehensive educational assessments of the children to be carried out with a view to providing enhanced individual education plans. The point is that those plans must be individual; they cannot be "one size fits all". Every child, and his or her personal circumstances, is different. Some children will live near the centre, while others may be from as far away as Cork, Mayo, Galway, Ballymena or Derry. Therefore, every child will be considered individually.

Obviously, arrangements will be made for the children. A multidisciplinary educational and learning-support assessment will be carried out that involves pre- and post-placement visits to parents, schools and other professionals. There will be close working with children and parents. I am not sure whether the Member has visited the Middletown centre, but it is well worth a visit. It is a wonderful site, which has been specifically adapted and is perfect for the children. It is a centre of which we can be proud.

Mr Ross: It is interesting that Mr McElduff referred to a surplus of teacher-training places, yet the Minister wants to create extra places at St Mary's University College.

The Minister will be aware that, for many young people who live in deprived areas, education offers a way out — it can lead to social mobility and an escape from poverty. Does the Minister recognise that her proposals for the future of education in Northern Ireland will deny many people that chance to escape from deprivation? Furthermore, will the Minister indicate to the House what discussion she has had with her counterpart in the Irish Republic about the fact that, particularly in Dublin, parents who have lots of

money are able to buy houses that are within the catchment areas of the best schools?

The Minister of Education: I welcome the Member's concerns about socially disadvantaged children. I respectfully suggest, however, that he reads the research and examines the percentages of free school meals that are taken up in grammar schools. Therein lies the answer to the Member's question, so I do not agree with his point.

11.30 am

My proposals will give every child a fair chance. The present system is deeply unfair and deeply unjust. The proposals will change that system. At present, we are failing 12,000 young people; 47% of young people leave school without GCSEs in English and maths. I am sure that Members would not want their children to leave school without passing GCSE English and maths.

A fair system for all children must be created. I have already stated the admissions criteria. I look forward to a public welcome from the DUP; we will consider introducing social justice criteria to ensure that children are not disadvantaged. I am liaising with my counterparts in the South on educational underachievement. We will ensure that there is no postcode lottery, which currently exists. Certain children are advantaged, and a huge number of children are disadvantaged.

My proposals will bring about a fundamental overhaul of the education system in the North. For the first time, all children — not just some — will be helped to realise their full potential. In doing so, academic excellence must be kept in the system while ensuring that different pathways are kept open for all children at every possible point. I am sure that all Members will agree that the testing of children at the age of 11 to decide life pathways on the basis of the result of two one-hour tests is not the way to go. The examples of Finland and other Scandinavian countries, which do not operate a selective system, show that there is a better way to do things. We must move forward to bring about the necessary changes for all children.

In addition, there are 50,000 empty desks. Last week, I met a Member from the opposite Benches, who came to me with representatives from secondary schools who were crying out for change. As we heard last week, change is necessary because the secondary sector is bearing the brunt of demographic decline, and that is deeply and utterly unfair. I look forward to working with all parties in the coming weeks and months, but make no mistake: we will change the system and bring about an end to academic selection, which has been unfair to children.

Mr Beggs: The Minister advised that discussions took place on educational underachievement, particularly for disadvantaged groups. Has any discussion taken place on the adverse educational

effect on areas of need arising from her decision to reduce extended schools funding and not to fund breakfast clubs and after-school clubs? Do the Government in the Irish Republic, for example, provide educational assistance in that area? Were there any discussions about how breakfast clubs and after-school clubs can give additional educational and family support and, therefore, assist those who have been underachieving in schools?

The Minister of Education: I presume that the Member is referring to projects that were previously funded by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety rather than by the Department of Education. I am delighted that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has resolved that issue by deciding to continue to fund those projects.

In previous debates, I have been clear on the issue of extended schools. I wrote to the Minister of Finance and Personnel on many occasions as soon as I took up office; the number of times that I did that is on the record. I raised my concerns with the then Minister of Finance and Personnel about the cuts to the extended schools programme. I informed him that I would be unable to mainstream the £38 million that was given to extended schools activities, which was part of an overall package in which four Departments were involved. I have been clear about that.

To date, I have been disappointed by the former Minister of Finance's response, and I am waiting for the new Minister of Finance to respond to my request concerning extended schools. I have explained to him that the cuts have had a detrimental impact, and that I have managed to mainstream £16 million of funding. However, the argument that all of it should have been mainstreamed is totally wrong.

Every Member has been writing to me about the extended schools programme, and rightly so. Consequently, I urge Members to inform the Minister of Finance that I have raised the matter. I have requested further funding, and I am waiting for confirmation of that funding. Cutting the extended schools programme is not the way to proceed, and I look forward to receiving the money that is required for that programme as soon as possible.

The problem is that schools are planning activities as we speak, and they need to know how their personnel will be paid for. Some will be organising summer activities, and I note that schools in Newry are getting together under the extended schools programme to organise summer activities such as breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, homework clubs, sports and drama. If we are to make a difference, it is important to receive — and I look forward to receiving — the funding necessary for the extended schools programme.

Mr Attwood: I note the Minister's reply about the need for change in education, and nobody is disputing that. Borrowing a phrase that is doing the rounds in America — the problem is whether it is change in which we can believe, and the Minister should reflect on that.

Nevertheless, I welcome the statement. I refer the Minister to yesterday's debate about teacher training in Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College. Given the comprehensive nature of education work North and South, will the Minister urgently place on the NSMCs agenda ways in which students and teachers in the South, where there is a lack of teacher-training capacity, could train at Stranmillis University College or St Mary's University College? Such measures should apply to first-teacher-training requirements and in-service requirements. Given that the future viability of the colleges is under threat, the Minister of Education and the Minister for Employment and Learning should be working together to maximise teacher-training opportunities in the North.

The Minister of Education: First, as to whether people can believe in change: as we speak, change is happening, and people should be under no illusion that it will continue — not changing is not an option. I look forward to working with everyone in order to bring about that change.

Secondly, I answered a question about teacher-training colleges earlier. I met Reg Empey, and we have agreed numbers for St Mary's University College, Stranmillis University College and other colleges, and, in due course, I will bring those forward. On a couple of occasions, I met with people from St Mary's, and I will have further discussions with them and with those in Stranmillis University College about making progress. Having visited both institutions on several occasions, I envisage them playing an important role in teacher training and in other areas. I also welcome the fact that Reg Empey has had discussions with both colleges, and I welcome his comments yesterday. Therefore, talking about threats to viability is not relevant to the issue.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council — Health and Food Safety Sectoral Meeting

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that he wishes make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council health and food safety sectoral meeting.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I will make a statement on the seventh North/South Ministerial Council meeting in the health and food safety sectoral format, which took place at Queen's University Belfast on Wednesday 28 May 2008. The Executive were represented by myself as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and Michelle Gildernew, MP, MLA, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. This statement has been endorsed by Minister Gildernew. The Irish Government were represented by Mary Harney TD, Minister for Health and Children, and Mary Wallace TD, the Minister of State responsible for health promotion and food safety.

I chaired the meeting, which opened with a progress report on a number of areas of co-operation in the health sector. Those areas included: the initial findings of the pilot studies into cross-border co-operation on GP out-of-hours provision; the continuing work on paediatric and congenital cardiac services; the second major cross-border emergency-planning exercise, which was held in April; the formal cross-border arrangement whereby fire-and-rescue appliances now respond jointly to incidents on the new road link between Newry and Dundalk; developments regarding the location of a satellite radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin Hospital; and developments on cancer research.

Following the reorganisation and reform programmes for health and social services in both jurisdictions, Ministers noted and welcomed the update on the joint feasibility study, which will consider options and opportunities for greater co-operation in the sphere of health and social care. We look forward to examining the report in detail when it is completed.

Ministers received a presentation from Dr Jane Wilde, the chief executive of the Institute of Public Health in Ireland. We congratulated the institute on its achievements over the past decade, which complement and inform public health in both jurisdictions. Furthermore, we noted its plans to focus on research on estimates and forecasts for common chronic conditions, on a review of policy and practice approaches to young men, and on health inequalities. The council also welcomed the broad range of co-operation and health promotion currently under way. It

requested that officials bring to a future North/South Ministerial Council meeting a planned programme for mutually beneficial joint activities to promote public health and to tackle health inequalities, with input, as appropriate, from other health-promotion and public-health organisations.

Ministers welcomed the broad range of co-operation on suicide prevention and endorsed proposals for planned future co-operation in areas such as the all-island evaluation of the applied suicide intervention skills training (ASIST), the development of performance indicators relating to the all-island action plan, the production of an annual report on the all-island plan to be tabled annually at the NSMC; and the development of phase three of the all-island Promoting Mental Health public-awareness campaign.

We noted and welcomed the establishment of a co-ordinating group, led by senior officials in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Department of Health and Children (DOHC), and the development of a work programme to intensify co-operation on child protection, in accordance with the NSMC plenary decision of 7 February 2008.

Ministers welcomed plans to develop a cross-border awareness-raising campaign to address problems associated with the internet and social networking, and the production of generic cross-border information on issues such as the reporting of abuse, safe parenting and good employment practice, while recognising the separate legislative and structural arrangements. The council also welcomed the ongoing co-operation on cross-border monitoring and management of sex offenders.

Ministers discussed the legislative measures being introduced in the UK to improve further the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults. I advised Minister Harney that there would be a significant strengthening of those arrangements if similar legislative arrangements could be introduced in the Republic of Ireland. Since the NSMC meeting, my officials have met their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland and have agreed a number of actions, including the establishment of a subgroup that will focus specifically on cross-border issues around vetting and barring.

Ministers welcomed the appointment of the new advisory board for Safefood, including the chairperson, Mr John Dardis, who attended the meeting with Martin Higgins, the chief executive.

11.45 am

We received a report updating the Council on the activities that Safefood has undertaken since the previous meeting, including the appointment of experts to advise on Safefood's proposals for an enteric reference library. We also noted the ongoing scientific and promotional

activities of Safefood, including: preliminary discussions with the Food Standards Agency in London with regard to sharing scientific information; the launch of new research projects, including those on infectious intestinal disease in the community and the completion of the gastroenteritis research project; the extension of the allergy awareness programme; the food hygiene awareness campaign; and the ongoing partnership work with other bodies and agencies that was highlighted in particular by the award of "best in show" stand at this year's Balmoral Show.

Ministers welcomed the establishment for three years of the all-island obesity action forum, noted the development of a range of communications initiatives in selected settings, including the workplace and educational settings, and noted work to build a new evidence base from a range of sources, including academia, research and action, and surveillance.

The Council agreed to hold its next meeting in the health and food safety sectoral format in October/November 2008.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill):

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement, and I note that one of the areas to which he referred was suicide prevention. A recommendation in the Committee's recent inquiry called on the Minister to establish a designated suicide-prevention directorate that is along similar lines to that which exists in the South of Ireland. The Committee believed that such a team would provide a direct, central contact point for all stakeholders.

If the Minister were serious about acting on that particular recommendation, he would have talked about it at the meeting under discussion. Will the Minister say whether he discussed the issue? If not, why not? Furthermore, if he did not raise it at the previous meeting, will he consider raising it at the next?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

I am not clear at which meeting I was expected to discuss the matter. I went to the Health Committee, but the Member is aware that I got the report very late and did not have an opportunity to prepare a definitive response. I have, however, taken further steps in regard to the Health Committee's report on suicide prevention. I called a meeting of the joint ministerial group on suicide prevention yesterday, and it has agreed its response to the Committee's report. That response will now go to the Executive. In doing that, I have done what the Committee asked me to do.

In addition, at my previous meeting with the Committee I indicated that the establishment of a suicide-prevention directorate is a sensible idea. I am familiar with such organisations, given that something

similar was established in the Irish Republic as part of the work that was done there on suicide prevention. Indeed, that recommendation is in the inter-ministerial group's joint report that will go to the Executive.

Mr Buchanan: The Minister referred to a joint feasibility study to consider options and opportunities in the spheres of health and social care, with a completed report due in the future. What is the total cost of that study, when is the final report due, and how much is it costing the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Minister for his statement. I note that the issue of legislative measures for child protection was discussed, and I welcome the Minister's commitment to strengthen arrangements in that area. Will the Minister continue to press Minister Harney and her colleagues in the Irish Government to address the issue immediately so that there is no disparity between both jurisdictions on such an important matter?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults is an important matter. In the UK, new legislative arrangements are being introduced, which will greatly strengthen measures for safeguarding children and vulnerable adults. Furthermore, a subgroup will be established in Northern Ireland to focus on safeguarding and vetting procedures. It will be a shared regime for the entire UK — that is, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, we have a land border, and families routinely move across it. Therefore, it would be helpful if the Irish Republic were prepared to share its intelligence on individuals who pose a risk to children and vulnerable adults. I made that point at the previous sectoral meeting, and we have now established a group to progress work on vetting and barring procedures. However, the provision of mirrored legislation in the Irish Republic is a matter for the Irish Republic's Government, but it will require a constitutional amendment.

Mr Dallat: I also welcome the Minister's statement and acknowledge his sincerity. However, I wonder whether we are making significant progress to address serious health issues that impact on people as a direct result of partition. Does the Minister agree that, after 10 years, we should be well beyond discussions, pilot and feasibility studies, as well as reports that have yet to be published? Is the Minister concerned that no date has been set for the next sectoral meeting, and that it may not take place until October or November?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The sector meets biannually, and, diaries permitting, the next sectoral meeting will be held in October or November. I cannot give the precise date, but two meetings a year is acceptable.

Each new project or action point routinely requires a feasibility study to evaluate what we are doing. That is sensible government, and it ensures value for money. The overriding principle is mutual benefit. My responsibility is to the people of Northern Ireland, and Mary Harney's responsibility is to the people of the Irish Republic. However, we both consider areas where joint actions would provide mutual benefit.

Progress has been made, considering that the bodies did not sit and did not work, because the House did not sit and did not work. During the past 10 years, the bodies met for two and a half years, which was followed by a long hiatus. However, we have been up and running for one year now, and progress has been made and will continue to be made. I am considering how we measure that progress.

Mr McCarthy: I also welcome the Minister's statement. We should all welcome and congratulate Dr Jane Wilde for her health promotion work throughout Ireland. However, the joint communiqué states that the Institute of Public Health plans to review policy and practice approaches to young men and alcohol and health inequalities. Have young women been deliberately left out of that review, because, as I understand it, the problem is as prevalent among young women?

In relation to common chronic conditions, was any mention made about the further promotion of easy access to tobacco products in the South of Ireland, as we are currently considering putting tobacco products out of the sight of young people so that they do not start to smoke in the first place?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I share Mr McCarthy's views about Jane Wilde's work. The Institute of Public Health in Ireland carries out a great deal of research that informs jurisdictions North and South. The institute has focused on young men and alcohol, which is a major problem with a range of impacts in areas such as physical health and suicide. However, that does not mean that we are ignoring, or excluding, young women — far from it.

We are also examining common chronic conditions. Members will be aware that I launched the cardiovascular framework last week and announced my strategy to enhance stroke services the week before. We are working constantly on those issues in Belfast, and the same applies in Dublin. I have had discussions about those matters with the Dublin Government to determine areas of mutual benefit, just as I do in regular meetings with Government officials in London, Edinburgh and Cardiff.

Tobacco is an important issue because of the incidence of cancer. After cardiovascular disease, strokes and heart attacks, cancer is the big killer in

Northern Ireland, and tobacco plays a large part in that. Combating the use of tobacco is one of the key features of our strategies to tackle cancer, and the same applies in the Republic of Ireland.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): I apologise for missing the beginning of the Minister's statement, which I welcome.

The Committee's inquiry on suicide and self-harm highlighted the model used in the Republic of Ireland, which is now funded by the Irish Government; namely, Pieta House, which is a community home that is open to all persons suffering issues around suicidal tendencies and self-harm. Did the Minister have an opportunity to talk to his counterpart Mary Harney about setting up a similar project in Northern Ireland?

The Committee is keen to see that type of model introduced in Northern Ireland. The lack of provision for those young people who present themselves at accident and emergency departments means that they sometimes go away having received little or no help. That is not a criticism of the hospitals; they do not have the resources to deal with such issues. Will the Minister tease out those matters for us?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The idea of a community house for the prevention of suicide and self-harm offers promise, and I am aware that the Committee highlighted that in its report. The Committee also made proposals about a safe room in accident and emergency departments and a visiting card system, which is an excellent idea. As I said in my answer to Michelle O'Neill, the joint ministerial group yesterday agreed a joined-up approach for the Executive on the Committee's recommendations. That will be my next step. Following that, my Department will put appropriate measures in place, such as the ones that we have discussed.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he inform the House whether he raised the issue of the job imbalance in the Food Safety Promotion Board (FSPB)? The vast majority of jobs in that agency are based in the Republic of Ireland, and Northern Ireland does not have its fair share. Did he also raise the issue of any efficiency savings that he intends to make from the FSPB?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The budget for the FSPB is £2 million per annum. As the Member is aware, I am required to make efficiency savings across all areas of my budget, and I will look to do that.

12.00 noon

As for job imbalance, we inherited the existing arrangement of the cross-border bodies, such as the FSPB having its headquarters in Cork. However, there

are swings and roundabouts when one considers the overall spread of jobs across Departments. I agree with the Member that the FSPB is concentrated in Cork and Dublin. However, the Food Standards Agency is based in Belfast. That Government body, which is independent of the Department of Health, does a similar job to that of the FSPB, so there are issues about overlap. Food safety is not ignored in Northern Ireland.

Given that cross-border bodies exist for mutual benefit, it is worth pointing out that the FSPB has offices in Cork and Dublin — although I have yet to visit either of them — but none in Belfast. However, that is not a priority right now.

Mr Attwood: I concur with Mr Dallat. Although good work is being done in the food safety and health sector of the North/South Ministerial Council, there is a need for a gear shift. The Minister referred to:

“the joint feasibility study, which will consider options and opportunities for greater co-operation in the sphere of health and social care”.

That crucial work should be measured over the coming decades, not only over the next few years.

When will that crucial feasibility report be available, and when will its recommendations be put into action? Can the Minister assure the House that that work, in which he is involved and which is so crucial to the welfare of the citizens of this island, will not be held up — even by one day — by the St Andrews-concocted review of North/South bodies, the content of which is not yet known?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I anticipate having that report in my hands this summer. I will examine it carefully, because, as I said, it is a piece of work that I inherited.

The St Andrews Agreement made provision for a review of existing North/South bodies and possible areas of future co-operation. The work on the feasibility report has carried on, and no obstacles have been put in its way. The overriding principle is one of mutual benefit. My responsibility is to the people of Northern Ireland, but, if there are areas in which the two jurisdictions can co-operate for mutual benefit, I will subscribe to doing so. No obstacles will be placed in the way as far as that is concerned.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister provide an update about cross-border co-operation on GP out-of-hours provision in Strabane and Lifford? There are concerns about what is happening in Strabane. Has he had any specific discussions about those areas? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are two pilot cross-border out-of-hours GP schemes. One serves Londonderry and Donegal and the other serves Keady and

Castleblayney. Those services are operating, and we await the outcome of their evaluation by the Centre for Cross Border Studies. We will examine that evaluation, and it will inform any decision that my Department will make about the future organisation of such services. However, the information that I have suggests that the uptake of those services was very low.

Mrs Hanna: I welcome the Minister's statement, especially his reference to the Republic of Ireland's policy on young people and alcohol.

Is there an opportunity for the two Administrations to build co-operation against the common enemy of alcohol abuse? We must examine our attitudes to alcohol and the example that we set for our children. We must also support and welcome the strong statement made by the Chief Medical Officer yesterday.

Substantive measures have been introduced to tackle smoking. Therefore, alcohol abuse is now the biggest public-health challenge that we face. I hope that there will be an opportunity for the Minister — perhaps at the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council — to put the matter high on his agenda.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I entirely agree with the sentiments expressed by Mrs Hanna. Alcohol abuse among young people is the major challenge facing our society, as it is in the Irish Republic, Scotland, Wales and England. I am examining the attendant mental- and physical-health problems and antisocial behaviour. We have a new strategic policy on drug and alcohol abuse and a policy to tackle binge drinking. In September 2008, I hope to outline other steps that can be taken. Scotland offers a good model for us and the Irish Republic to follow. The matter concerns both me and my Dublin counterpart. It is a common problem and shared solutions can provide the greatest benefit.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on the ministerial statement.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

June Monitoring Outcome

Mr Deputy Speaker: Notice has been received from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement regarding the June monitoring outcome.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): With permission, I will make a statement regarding the Executive's decisions on the June monitoring round. This is the first monitoring round of the 2008-09 financial year. Members will be aware by now that the role and purpose of the in-year process is to help the Executive make the most of the resources at our disposal by reviewing departmental expenditure plans in light of the most recent information and emerging pressures.

In recent months, a substantial and unprecedented pressure has come in the form of the Civil Service equal-pay claim, which was initially brought to the Assembly's attention by the then Minister of Finance and Personnel, Peter Robinson. At its meeting on 19 June 2008, the Executive agreed their approach to dealing with that pressure. In particular, Departments raised a number of spending pressures. The scale of the potential equal-pay liability and the potential impact on the delivery of public services means that the matter must be resolved before any significant allocations can be made to Departments. I will say more shortly on how we are seeking to deal with the issue.

I will now provide some context to the opening financial position for the 2008-09 in-year monitoring process, reflecting the decisions taken unanimously by the Executive in the course of the recent Budget for 2008-09 to 2010-11, which were subsequently agreed by the Assembly in January of this year.

In recent years, as Members will be aware, spending plans for public services here included an approach of overcommitting — that is, allocating more than is available — in recognition that the normal level of year underspend will ensure that total spending is contained within the Treasury control totals. However, unlike the previous direct rule Administration, the Executive firmly believe that there must be a sense of balance to that approach. Thus, the starting position for current expenditure this year, as set out in the recent Budget, is an overcommitment of £100 million, with further reductions to £80 million and £60 million planned in the next two years. That compares with the figure of over £150 million inherited by the Executive in May 2007. That approach was designed to strike a much better balance between maximising allocation in the Budget process and retaining a sufficient degree of flexibility in the course of the in-year process.

In addition, the Budget included specific dispensation for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety so that it would not be required to declare reduced requirements as part of in-year monitoring, as well as having a prior call on the first £20 million of available resources throughout the year.

The Budget also pre-allocated £102 million of the £125 million in access to our current expenditure end-year flexibility stock for 2008-09, although £100 million of capital end-year flexibility stock is available to the Executive for allocation in the 2008-09 in-year process.

Those decisions, based on the information that was available at that time, provided a robust basis for the management of the financial position, and the associated delivery of public services, in this financial year.

At the first stage of each monitoring round for the 2008-09 in-year process, Departments identify resources that were allocated in previous Budget processes, which, for a variety of reasons, will not be spent in this financial year. Reduced requirements that Departments declared in this monitoring round amounted to £15.2 million of current expenditure and £21.3 million of capital investment. A further £5.9 million in room-to-manoeuvre for current expenditure is available to the Executive, most of which arose from the Barnett consequentials for Northern Ireland as a result of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's 2008 Budget.

The level of reduced requirements is similar to that declared in last June's monitoring round, after which Departments declared significant amounts of reduced requirements later in the year, when, unfortunately, it was too late to redeploy the funding to other services.

During the legislative stages of the Budget (No. 2) Bill, many Members mentioned areas for which they sought additional funding, and I suspect that that will be the case again today.

Departments have also identified more than £140 million in current expenditure pressures in their June monitoring returns. That includes a bid from the Minister of Education for the extended schools programme. Although there is scope for the Minister of Education to reprioritise the considerable resources that are already available to her, the invaluable services that are provided to children and their families from the extended schools programme are too important for the Executive not to act. I, therefore, assure Members that every effort will be made to provide additional funding for that programme at the next monitoring round.

However, allocations cannot be made to tackle pressures if Departments do not declare reduced requirements early enough in the year. Details of the reduced requirements that Departments declared are set out in my statement.

The Civil Service equal-pay claim, which has a potential one-off cost of well over £100 million — with further costs, depending on the approach that the Executive adopt — will have to be resolved. The liability relates to junior members of staff who work in general service grades in the Civil Service, whose work was evaluated as being broadly equivalent to a number of technical grades but whose salaries were lower.

The pressure has arisen as a consequence of the handling of pay issues for the relevant staff over the past 10 years. Hence, the national Government have responsibility for the situation, and that should be reflected in how the pressure is dealt with. In that context, my officials have been engaged with their Treasury counterparts on the matter, and I have written to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to seek an urgent meeting with her to find an equitable solution to the problem.

Pending the outcome of those discussions with the Treasury, the Executive agreed that it would be imprudent to make any significant reallocations now. However, minor issues that were identified in the Budget process required specific in-year consideration. Although most of the 2008-09 access to the Executive's current expenditure end-year flexibility was allocated as part of the Budget process, £23 million remained for allocation to Departments. In the light of the constrained position on access to end-year flexibility, and reflecting the circumstances that applied to the funding of schools through the local management of schools mechanism, the Executive agreed that £16 million be allocated to the Department of Education. Furthermore, £7.7 million in current expenditure and £12.7 million in capital investment is required to cover previous commitments to projects funded from the integrated development fund.

As I said earlier, the Budget included provision for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to have a prior call on resources that become available during the year, once the overcommitment position has been addressed. The equal-pay pressure and low level of reduced requirements means that insufficient resources are available for any funding from the first call to be allocated. However, in recognition of the importance of implementing developments in the Health Service, the Executive have agreed to make an allocation of £5 million.

Northern Ireland Departments have plans in place for £1.8 billion of capital investment this year, of which £550 million is to be derived from capital receipts.

Although the majority of those receipts were expected to come from the disposal of surplus assets, Members will be aware of the downturn in the local property market reflecting the trend across the United Kingdom. Although those softer market conditions should reduce the cost of delivering the Executive's

investment programme, the impact on capital receipts needs to be fully considered.

12.15 pm

Estimates provided by Departments for the current financial year suggest that there may be a shortfall of £140 million in the level of capital receipts originally planned for. Departments have identified bids to address pressures and improve services to the value of £109 million. However, in light of the shortfall in capital receipts and the potential for capital expenditure to provide some solution to the equal pay issue, the Executive have agreed to defer action on capital reallocations until the engagement with the Treasury has run its course. In the meantime Departments will continue to maximise the level of receipt from planned asset disposals as well as identify alternative disposal options.

The level of planned overcommitment for current expenditure sits at £85.1 million, as a consequence of the level of reduced requirements and the outstanding issues from the Budget, and we have unallocated resources of £105.9 million for capital investment.

Without doubt, public service provision in Northern Ireland is facing the most challenging in-year position ever. The circumstances mean that we face a potentially difficult engagement with the Treasury followed by hard choices later in the financial year.

To ensure that we do not act precipitously and that all recommendations on the way forward reflect the position reached with the Treasury, the Executive have agreed that we adopt a two-stage approach. That approach will involve the resolution of minor issues left over from the budget process and the more substantive matter of handling the full implications of the equal pay claim — which will be considered after discussions with the Treasury have been concluded.

However, I emphasise to Members that the position set out today represents the best-case outcome. Should discussions with the Treasury deliver a resolution on the equal pay claim then there will be no further changes to the in-year position until the September monitoring round. In the event that we do not make the progress that we hope for, we will then face significant and difficult choices.

The implications for public services regarding negotiations with the unions on the way forward in respect of the equal pay claim are fundamental. We all agree that there should be an equitable treatment for staff, and the Executive recognises the obligation on the trade unions to ensure that legal entitlements are met. However, the trade union movement needs to recognise the potentially devastating impact that the resolution of the equal pay claim could have on the provision of public services and on those public-sector workers that the unions have sought to defend in the past.

Within the context of the fixed budget that is available to the Executive, there is a necessary trade-off between cost and volume: to put it starkly; increased pay costs inevitably place significant constraints on staffing levels and pay rises across the public sector — that is a situation that we would all wish to avoid.

In conclusion, I recognise that the equal pay legacy that we have inherited from direct rule Ministers provides an unwelcome backdrop to the in-year monitoring process, particularly when Departments are facing real pressures in the delivery of services. However, the true test of any Government is not how they operate when times are good but how they respond in times of adversity. With the continued support of all parties in the Executive and the Assembly I have no doubt that this Government will pass that test; I commend the June monitoring position to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement and his realistic and objective assessment of the external and internal pressures that are emerging. Although the external pressures are beyond the direct control of the Executive, some pressures do pose questions as to how the Departments will deal with them. Given the potential implication on the Executive's resources from the inherited equal pay claim — which the Minister has addressed — what is the timeline for concluding discussions with the Treasury and finding a resolution to that issue?

The Minister referred to the fact that the level of reduced requirements is similar to that which was declared in the June monitoring round last year: that indicates a lack of performance in financial management.

The provisional out-turn for 2007-08 shows that there has been an underspend of £177 million in current expenditure and £76 million in capital. Again, we are seeing the usual rush as Departments try to spend their money in one month at the end of the year.

Does the Minister see a risk of a similar pattern developing in 2008-09, with Departments not declaring reduced requirements early enough in the year to enable sensible reallocation to other priorities and front-line services, and what measures is he taking to rectify the situation?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel for his comments and for his recognition of the circumstances surrounding the in-year monitoring process. All parties in the Executive, and no doubt in the House, recognise the circumstances that I have outlined — particularly those concerning the equal pay claim. That is not only a legal obligation; it must be

addressed as an issue of fairness and equality. That obligation must be met.

As regards the timeline for engagement with the Treasury, I wrote to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 17 June, asking her for an urgent meeting to draw her attention to the issues and to highlight the potential impact on the delivery of public services. My officials have been working with Treasury counterparts for a number of weeks on the technical options for addressing the equal pay issue. There will be further engagement at ministerial and official level over the next month or so to try to secure a satisfactory outcome for Northern Ireland. No stone will be left unturned in our efforts to ensure Treasury recognition of the inherited legacy that we have to grapple with on equal pay.

The Chairperson also highlighted an important point about reduced requirements. A relatively low amount of reduced requirements are being declared at this stage in the financial year, as I have said in my statement. The later in the year that reduced requirements are declared, and money handed back to the Department of Finance and Personnel, the more difficult our position becomes in reallocating that money. As a result, and inevitably, public services across Northern Ireland will not get the maximum output from the resources available. Some Departments declare very significant underspends at the end of the financial year, which then go into the end-year flexibility process, and they are sums for which we have to bid from the Treasury. Wherever possible, Departments should be looking rigorously at expenditure plans. Potential underspends must be avoided, and money must be declared as early as possible for reallocation to the same Department or to other Departments in due course over the financial year.

The Assembly must bear down on underspends strongly, and Members of Committees have a significant role to play. During Question Time yesterday, the role of the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) in working with Departments to realise the maximum output and use of resources was discussed. The issue is one that Members all have a responsibility to take very seriously and monitor very carefully.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Hamilton): I welcome the Minister's statement. During the Budget process, the Committee sought assurances about funding for various Civil Service reform projects the Department of Finance and Personnel is taking forward. The Committee sought assurance that funding for those projects would be met out of this year's monitoring rounds. We have seen bids by DFP for that. Will the Minister assure us that those schemes will not be delayed in any way, given the efficiencies that they will deliver for all of the Civil Service? Will he advise Members about the level of access end-year flexibility

stock, which he referred to as being more constrained now than previously?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am grateful to the Deputy Chairman of the Committee for his questions. He made the point that investment in the reform programme can release many resources for front-line services. That programme is therefore important, if the Executive and Assembly are to make progress.

In my statement I made the case that, apart from the first instalment of £20 million to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, we are not in a position to make further allocations at this stage. There is nothing new about that: in last June's monitoring round, no allocations were made. However, we do not anticipate that there will be significant delays in the implementation of that programme, and I will keep it under review. As I said, when we have engaged with the Treasury, our position will be much clearer and we will be able to return to those issues — not least the reform programme to which the Deputy Chairman refers.

As to end-year flexibility, the Member knows that all available end-year flexibility has now been allocated to the Northern Ireland Executive up to 2007-08. As a result of the underspend by Northern Ireland Departments in 2007-08, our end-year flexibility stock has been increased by £200 million of current expenditure. As I have said, I will shortly open negotiations with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in an effort to secure access to those moneys.

Mr O'Loan: This report is worrying. The Minister's Budget is now in serious difficulty. The two key issues are the equal pay issue, which is a one-off cost of £100 million, and a possible writing-down of capital receipts by £140 million.

I have already placed a question for written answer to the Minister on the equal pay issue. I now ask him what level of preparation was made for this when the Budget was written. The issue cannot have come out of the blue; what plan was made to deal with it? The equal pay issue will bear differently upon different Departments, which have varying proportions of female workers. It will be good if the Treasury comes through with a solution. If there is a significant impact on the money available to Departments, will the Minister assure us that he will fully protect Departments against the differential effect?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: We recognise that some Departments are affected more directly by equal pay than others — for instance, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), the Department for Social Development (DSD) and others. It makes no sense to insist that those Departments deal with the issue in isolation. This matter is for the Executive and the Assembly as a whole.

This is a legacy, or an inherited issue. What brings it to a head is the possibility of legal action on this front, which arises this year. My officials will work to clarify the precise level of liability in relation to the equal pay claim. Work that has been done suggests that the liability may amount to a figure in excess of £100 million as a minimum. However, we will not know conclusively until payments are calculated for each individual member of staff. We will engage extensively with the Treasury on this matter, because it has come to the Executive very late in the day. It has arisen as a result of matters not being addressed during direct rule. It is only right that we draw the entire position to the Assembly's attention. I am sure that the Member will join with his party colleague in the Executive, and other colleagues, in ensuring that we all put the best possible case to the Treasury to address this issue, so that public services in Northern Ireland are not significantly affected.

Dr Farry: I take this, my first opportunity, to congratulate the Minister on his appointment and welcome him to his post. I look forward to crossing swords with him.

12.30 pm

Regarding the commitment to grant the Health Service the first £20 million of any moneys released, does the Minister share my concern that providing that through monitoring rounds, rather than through the Budget, runs the risk of distorting the monitoring process? That is true in relation to a range of services, not least to how the equal pay issue is handled.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his welcome and I look forward to "crossing swords", as he puts it. However, I am sure that there will be nothing to worry about in that respect.

The commitment for the first call of the £20 million in in-year monitoring was made in the last Budget and was agreed unanimously by the Executive and by this Assembly. As a result, the Department is committed to that process. I do not believe that it will not have the major distorting effect envisaged by the Member, as there is recognition in the Executive and the Assembly of the priority afforded to the Health Service. Flexibility will remain in the addressing of the other pressures as they emerge, following the outcome of our discussions with the Treasury.

Mr Beggs: The Minister has indicated that departmental officials have engaged with Treasury officials regarding the £100 million plus Civil Service equal pay claim. He also indicated that he has written to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

Given the scale of the funding required for that pay claim and the other financial pressures — such as the reduced receipts from the sale of assets — will the Minister advise when DFP became aware of the scale

of that matter, as it cannot just have appeared from nowhere? Furthermore, why has no meeting occurred between Ministers of this Assembly and the Treasury to address the gravity of the issue?

Does the Minister agree that that issue needs to be resolved quickly, allowing better organisation of our own expenditure and better value for money, through the potential release of funds in-year.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Much of what the Member has asked has been covered in my statement, and the answers that he requires are obvious to everyone. However, on the question of the engagement, I have been in contact with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and my officials have been in contact with Treasury officials. Therefore, my Department and I are well aware of the gravity of the situation. I wrote to the Treasury on 17 June, and that communication will be followed up urgently.

The Member will know that the pay claim issue arose following a statement from the previous Minister of Finance and Personnel. It was agreed by everyone that there was a legal and moral obligation to those civil servants who had been underpaid for so long. It is an inherited, legacy issue; however, it falls to the Assembly to deal with it this year. We will strongly press the Treasury to provide the flexibility required to address the pay claim without having any adverse impact on public services.

Mr McQuillan: Given the track record of the Northern Ireland Departments with respect to under-spends, have the Executive considered an increase in the over-commitment to meet the pressures now?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member again draws attention to a point made by the Chairperson of the Committee, and one that I made in my statement — the significant level of underspend still occurring each year in Northern Ireland Departments.

There are various reasons for those underspends, but the pressure must be maintained to declare any reduced requirements early enough to ensure that those resources can be properly utilised in-year. As far as over-commitment is concerned, we will keep that under review. However, I am confident that the level of over-commitment outlined as a target for this and future years is broadly correct.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, congratulate the Member on his promotion to Minister of Finance and Personnel.

In order to enable Members to track the internal movements of finance, will the Minister provide a detailed breakdown of reallocations in each Department?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: That can be provided. Those figures are available as part of the statement because, as part of the process, Departments

announce their reduced requirements and the Department of Finance and Personnel announces in-year reallocations. There are also, as the Member said, many internal reallocations made in each Department.

If those figures are not already with the statement, they will be made available to Members as soon as possible. However, Departments have considerable flexibility to reprioritise in their budgets. Members may note that this year's monitoring exercise reflects a significant amount of reallocation in some Departments.

It is good that that is happening early, because it means that the money can be put to its best use by those Departments this year.

Mr I McCrea: I, too, take my first opportunity in the House to congratulate my colleague on his appointment as Minister of Finance and Personnel.

I welcome what the Minister said in his statement about the extended schools programme. It is disappointing, however, that the Education Minister did not reprioritise her budget in order to provide the money needed for the extended schools programme.

Will the Minister reassure the House that he sees the matter as an education priority and that he will take part in any discussions with the Department of Education that are necessary to ensure that the finance is allocated?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his best wishes and for his question.

I highlighted in my statement the fact that the extended schools programme provides a broad range of valuable services to communities, which was mentioned earlier in the House. I explained why it would have been imprudent for the Executive to allocate additional funding to any programme until the broader financial context was clarified.

However, I indicated in my statement the priority that I attach and will afford to that programme. The funding position is primarily a matter for the Education Minister. In a budget of £1.8 billion, the bid of £5 million that has been lodged is relatively small. In the context of last year's underspend of £50 million in revenue and £36 million in capital, there seems to be very little risk of that being carried forward in the Department of Education.

I have listened carefully to the debate and to what Members have said, and I will deal with the matter, because I know from my experience and knowledge that extended schools is a very valuable programme. That is why I indicated the priority that I will attach to it.

I am absolutely content that there are sufficient resources available to the Department of Education to allow the extended schools programme to continue

until the funding has been confirmed; and I wish to emphasise that.

Mr Attwood: I, too, congratulate the Minister on his appointment. I welcome the commitment that he reiterated in respect of extended schools, and I am mindful of his comments about how the Department of Education manages the programme.

The Minister's statement is very stark and honest; particularly his comment that this is the most challenging in-year position ever to face the public service and that there could be hard choices later in the financial year. Against that backdrop and the general turbulence in the markets, is the Minister likely to return to the House later in the year with a supplementary Budget in relation to overall public expenditure in the North or might he direct Departments to increase their savings because of the strain on public funds?

Alternatively, is it possible that, given the strain on public funds, the Minister may direct Departments to increase savings later in the year?

On a different matter, what position is the Department of Finance and Personnel taking on the acquisition of Ministry of Defence sites at Forkhill, Shackleton and Lisanelly?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am grateful to the Member for his comments not only about my new job but the extended schools programme. I hope that Members have taken my words on board and are reassured by them.

It is absolutely right that we are open, transparent and honest about the issue of the equal pay claim. It is a serious issue that must be dealt with, and we will do so very forcefully with the Treasury in the coming weeks. When that engagement with the Treasury is complete, I will report back to the Executive and the Assembly. At this stage, I do not want to speculate about what might happen thereafter. Our negotiations with the Treasury will proceed urgently, and, with goodwill on all sides, we should be able to come to an equitable arrangement.

The fact that this situation has arisen during the current financial year is beyond our control; it was not planned, nor would we have wished to have to deal with it in this way. Nevertheless, the issue must be dealt with, and that will be a test for all of us.

I will consider the issue of the Ministry of Defence sites and will get back to the Member.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement on the June monitoring round. He has informed the House of the reduced requirements of various Departments. Given the concerns that the Committee raised about regional investment disparities, particularly in areas

west of the Bann, the north-west, his constituency of North Belfast, and in West Belfast, will he explain why Invest NI has reduced inward investment by approximately £6 million?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am happy to provide the Member with information on that issue, although his first port of call should be the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which will, undoubtedly, be able to provide him with detailed information.

The only reason that any Department would announce a reduction in its requirement is if it felt that it would be unable to spend the money allocated to a particular project or programme during the current financial year. That is not to say that, in the course of the year, circumstances will not change; Departments may reallocate resources and make funding bids.

I commend the Departments for recognising reduced requirements early and making it clear that that money is available to the centre for other needy projects and programmes. However, the Member should contact the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an explanation for particular cases of reduced requirements.

Mr Weir: The Minister has highlighted the significance of the equal pay issue and the potential impact that it will have. In his statement and in his answers to a range of questions, he has also given a strong indication of the level of engagement with the Treasury. During the Minister's discussions with the Treasury, will he take advantage of the opportunity to raise the impact of cost-of-living issues, particularly the detrimental impact that fuel prices are having in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his question, which raises an important issue. Currently, many of our constituents are concerned about the rising cost of living — particularly, the rise in fuel prices.

As I said yesterday in the House, a fuel poverty task force has been meeting through the Executive to address that issue. It has confirmed that it will make representations to the Chancellor for an increase in the winter fuel allowance, which I fully support, and will make other representations as appropriate.

12.45 pm

Fuel prices affect all parts of the country and, indeed, all countries. Interestingly, recent AA reports show that the price of petrol has increased by 16.8% in Northern Ireland in the past year compared with 17.4% in the UK as a whole. Similarly, the 27.3% increase in the price of diesel in Northern Ireland over the past year is slightly less than the average UK increase of 28.3%. However, those are still substantial rises for

consumers and motorists. Rises in the cost of fuel affect us all and have a knock-on effect on, for example, the cost of heating where both people's homes and departmental budgets are concerned. Those issues will also be subject to in-year monitoring. We will push HM Treasury on an individual and ministerial level on a range of issues that affect the well-being and quality of life of all our citizens.

Mr G Robinson: I congratulate the Minister on his appointment.

Why can the £180 million underspend for 2007-08 not be used to address the equal pay pressures? Given that over £100 million is available for allocation, why was it not possible to address any of the pressures that were identified by Departments on capital projects?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his best wishes and for his questions.

The underspend is added to the end-year flexibility stock. As part of the financial package, we negotiated access to end-year flexibility stock. Under HM Treasury rules, all UK Departments must negotiate access to end-year flexibility stock in light of the UK fiscal position. Enhanced access to end-year flexibility will be one of the options that is considered as part of our discussions with HM Treasury.

In my statement, I said that we had unallocated resources on the capital side, but that, given the reduction in receipts, it was wise not to make any decisions on allocation at this stage, because the amount of capital money that is available may also be relevant to the settlement of the equal pay claim.

It is important that those matters are advanced, and Departments are still responsible for addressing the shortfall in capital receipts by identifying other surplus assets for disposal or by making adjustments to their capital investment plans. However, once the equal pay claim is resolved, some form of support will be considered for those Departments that have taken every possible action to address the shortfall.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In answer to a previous question, the Minister said that we are part of a global economy, which is experiencing a downturn. In addition, we have no control over our economic destiny, and that situation does not assist our position either.

I welcome two of the commitments that were given in the June monitoring round: first, the additional money that is being invested in health; and secondly, the Minister's commitment to extended schools. Although I do not agree with all that the Minister said about extended schools, I will not delay Members' lunches by debating his remarks further.

The Minister said that he is engaging closely with the Treasury and its officials on the equal pay claim.

Does he agree that close and intense engagement is also required with the trade union movement, which is — correctly — looking after its members, who have severely restricted budgets?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his points. I welcome the fact that he recognises that, in light of the constrained position in which we find ourselves this year, the allocation to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the commitment that I made to extended schools are measures that he can support.

I have already talked about engagement with the Treasury. Furthermore, of course there must be close engagement with the trade unions. That has begun, and officials in my Department will continue to work with union representatives to address the issue of back pay and how it can be progressed. That will be important in resolving the matter. There will be an ongoing year-on-year impact on pay, and that will depend on how the Executive decide to address it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Finance and Personnel on his statement on the June monitoring outcome.

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Members have raised this issue in recent months. I ask you and your colleagues in the Office of the Speaker to consider, during the summer recess, how to address the continuing problem of Ministers' failure to answer questions in the House. Although the Minister of Education is not the only offender, she has been the worst offender. I asked her a question today that was not only not fully nor partially answered but was not answered at all.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. How a Minister responds to a question is not the Office of the Speaker's responsibility.

Mr Attwood: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, if the Speaker or Deputy Speakers can direct Members to ask questions of the Minister, is it not time to introduce a provision that allows you to direct Ministers to answer those questions?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a matter for the Office of the Speaker; it is a matter for the Minister. I will take no more points of order on that issue.

The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately on the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.52 pm.

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

2.00 pm

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Budget (No. 2) Bill

Final Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I beg to move

That the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 18/07] do now pass.

As we reach the Final Stage of the Bill, I thank my colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for so ably introducing and moving the Second Stage of the Bill on 9 June and 10 June.

I thank again the Committee for Finance and Personnel for agreeing to the accelerated passage of the Bill. Although accelerated passage for any Bill is not the Assembly's preferred route, in this case, it is a necessity for logistical reasons. It is imperative that the Bill is passed, given that Departments are spending cash and using resources based on the Vote on Account for 2008-09, which the Assembly passed in February 2008. It is imperative that the Budget (No. 2) Bill progresses through the Assembly — and receives Royal Assent — before the summer recess, otherwise Departments may run out of cash and resources before the Assembly sits again in the autumn. I know that the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the House fully appreciate the consequences involved. The Bill will ensure that Departments have money to spend in the coming months.

Debates have been interesting and constructive, and I thank Members for their contributions. There are few more important duties in the Assembly than authorising public expenditure by the Northern Ireland Departments. Therefore, I am delighted at the level of interest in the debates on the Supply Resolutions and the Second Stage of the Bill a couple of weeks ago.

I commend the Bill to the House, and I hope that it will receive the support of Members.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As the Minister acknowledged, the Committee was heavily involved in the Budget process, which is encapsulated in the Bill. It is fully aware of the consequences for departmental spending and the potential effect on front-line services should the Bill not progress through the Assembly before summer recess. The Committee was content

that it had been adequately consulted and that the Bill could proceed by accelerated passage.

The Committee is also aware that, from this autumn, the Executive intend to put in place a new Budget process for future years. It has, therefore, agreed to undertake an inquiry into the Budget process and scrutiny to inform the Executive's deliberations.

On behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I support the motion.

Mr O'Loan: Members of the House will remember that the SDLP expressed serious concerns about, and opposition to, the Budget. We voted against the Budget and the Programme for Government when those were debated. At that time, we were dismissed by some as if it were a political stunt; they might think otherwise today. Many of the fears that we expressed have proven to be valid; they have become a reality sooner than, perhaps, even we had expected.

I want to refer to a number of issues, the first of which is children and young people and the funding for services related to those groups. My party regretted the removal of Executive programme funds and, in particular, a cross-cutting fund for children and young people. Others said that the money should go to the Departments where it would be better used, and thereby reduce underspend. We asked how that joined-up approach would be achieved and how several Departments would contribute funding to a single project or a concerted approach. We were told not to worry about that. We were told that the public service agreements would define the objective, state which Departments would be involved, and specify a lead Department. We were assured that all the energies and resources of those Departments would be harnessed together to produce the desired outcome.

We were told that all would be well, but the outcome was very different.

I will refer to three strands of activity in relation to children and young people. First, the Youth Service — which is an important and difficult area of social provision that was debated deeply here — experienced significant budget cuts. It was not adequately funded.

I stress how important such social spending is — investment in our young people pays real dividends. We would have fewer social problems if money was put into education or into social provision for young people. In addition, those young people will make a much greater contribution as they enter into adulthood.

Secondly, there has been a crisis in the much-needed programme of extended schools. It seems that the Minister concerned did not give that issue sufficient priority and did not provide the necessary funding. This morning, in his statement on the June monitoring outcome, the Minister of Finance and Personnel made

it clear that, due to the importance of the extended schools programme, the Executive would have to provide a rescue plan. I welcome the proposed rescue plan because it is clear that it is needed.

Thirdly, a huge crisis emerged with school-age childcare, much of which is provided by the community and voluntary sectors. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety provided a temporary rescue by putting funding into that area — but that will last only until December 2008. An attempt has now been made to fix that situation; I think that that is led by the Health Minister, although I am not certain. It is a cross-departmental attempt at a remedy by bringing together the resources of several Departments. Essentially, we are establishing a cross-departmental fund — something that we were told was not needed in the first place.

Another aspect of education is the reorganisation of secondary schools. Everyone in the House is aware of the shocking lack of clarity concerning our direction of travel on that matter. I talk to educators and I can report — as other Members can — that they have deep concerns about the future nature of our secondary school system. Not only are we unaware of the direction of travel and what the outcome will be; the system is not budgeted for. The Minister did not put the money in place to deliver that radical restructuring and change.

In his statement this morning, the Finance Minister spoke at length about equal pay; it was one of the biggest elements of his statement. As a one-off requirement, the Minister told us that it could cost £100 million, which he described as a legacy from direct rule; however, it cannot have come as a bolt from the blue. At the time of the discussions, one hopes that the then Minister, the present Minister and their colleagues were well informed that that issue was coming down the line.

I asked the Minister a question about that issue this morning and told him that I had submitted a question for written answer. With respect to the Minister, he did not give me an answer this morning, so I repeat the question: what preparation was made for that issue as the Budget was being drafted? What knowledge did the Department have about the issue and what preparation was made? The House is entitled to know.

A big element of the Budget depends on property sales, to which the Minister referred this morning. He revealed that, even in this financial year, there may be a reduction of £140 million in the anticipated gains from property sales. Although I try to follow these matters closely, I find myself confused, so I urge the Minister to provide more facts. I read the capital realisation task force document and saw a reference to potential gains of £295 million over three years. The Minister informed me that gains could be reduced to £140 million in this year.

I would like clarity on that from the Minister: if he can give it today, well and good; if not, I ask him to write to me. If he is not prepared to do either, will he please let me know so that I can ask him a question for written answer? I want to know the anticipated needs to meet this year's Budget as it was written; how much is anticipated over the three-year period; and the re-estimates of those figures.

As part of the property sales discussion, I refer to Workplace 2010 — which is a big element of property sales. Several question marks appear over Workplace 2010, but we also know that there is a major new issue with it that the House should be aware of. There are two residual bidders for the Workplace 2010 tender process — Land Securities Trillium, and Telereal. We know that Land Securities Trillium is minded to divest itself of the Trillium element of its business, and we know that one of the bidders for that element is Telereal. The clear link between those two companies could remove the necessary competitive tension as the tender is decided. I have no doubt that the Minister is aware of the issue and that his officials are taking it seriously. However, the potential to wreck the entire process exists and we must be aware that it is a significant risk to the delivery of the Budget.

If we add the two headline figures that the Minister quoted this morning — the equal pay figure of £100 million, and £140 million of potential losses in this year on property sales and a potential reduction in gains — we have a potential £240 million hole in this year's Budget. Such an amount of money could make a serious difference to departmental budgets.

I am all for efficiency savings when they are related to the reallocation of resources in Departments to better ends. However, it does not always work out as it should. There is evidence in certain sections — and health is included, although it is not unique to health — where the mechanism for achieving those savings is to have a no-replacement-of-staff policy. A no-replacement-of-staff policy means cuts in a section. If a member of staff leaves and they are not replaced, that service cannot be provided to the public. Cuts are happening as a result of efficiency savings.

I have presented a considerable list of concerns. I will not be at all surprised if the Minister brings a revised Budget to the House at some stage this year. Everything that I have said indicates that a considerably different Budget ought to have been proposed at the outset, because risks were visible then. I express my concerns, and the SDLP will oppose the Bill.

Dr Farry: Today's debate is the end of a long process in determining the Budget for the current financial year. The Alliance Party has, on many occasions, recorded its opposition to what is a flawed Budget. However, we are not minded to divide the House today, although I

appreciate that others may do so. The Alliance Party has placed on record its concerns and sought to divide the House to make its point, so we do not need to repeat the exercise and detain the Minister any further. However, we will see what happens.

Today is an opportunity to look forward. The Budget Bill will be passed, based on the voting system in the Chamber. However, it has lukewarm support — with the exception of the DUP, which has controlled the process from day one. The other parties in the Executive, to varying degrees, seem to express reservations. Even some Back Bench Members from the DUP have expressed reservations on occasion.

2.15 pm

A number of issues need to be flagged up for consideration in future budgetary processes, and I want to highlight several structural issues, which carry direct economic and financial costs to Northern Ireland. They also carry major opportunity costs due our not being able to spend money on the things that we wanted to do. We also need to appreciate that the savings will allow us to invest in new policies, practices and services and reflect new investments that are being made not just in other parts of these islands but elsewhere in the world.

I would disappoint Mr Hamilton, in particular, if I did not mention the cost of division. That must be central in handling public expenditure in Northern Ireland in the future. My party is committed to providing DFP with a paper on the issue before the beginning of the summer recess. However, rather than rehearsing the direct financial implications, I stress that the issue is wider than the direct financing of services in Northern Ireland. It has to be about the appreciation of how divisions distort the way in which people live, learn, work and play in Northern Ireland, and, as a consequence, the way in which public services respond to the sad realities on the ground.

I will highlight three potential issues. The first is labour mobility, the second is foreign and domestic decisions on investment, and the third is spatial planning. There are many more issues, but I will deal with those three today.

I echo Mr O'Loan's point about efficiency savings. I have no difficulty with efficiency savings, and I accept the departmental target of 3%. If anything, I recognise that 3% is perhaps the minimum, and that more ambitious targets may be possible as Northern Ireland public expenditure is restructured. Savings greater than 3% are routinely required from managers in the private sector. Therefore, they are possible.

However, there is an extremely fine line between genuine efficiency savings and cuts. The message coming back from the community, and in particular the health sector, as it wrestles with efficiency savings, is

that the savings are in fact cuts. Efficiency savings should be about shifting resources from old practices and policies that have become redundant as time has moved on or results have been achieved. Those resources should be freed up and reinvested to meet other priorities.

There are also major structural issues in relation to education, which is one sector that I want to highlight, in which a disproportionate amount of the budget is spent on school buildings, at the expense of genuine investment in pupils. In Northern Ireland, there is the bizarre situation in which there is one of the highest levels of spending per capita on education as a whole and a relatively low amount being spent on pupils.

Integrated education is the most sustainable way forward, but it is not being actively encouraged by the Executive at the moment. It must be seen as a preferred option, within a range of approaches towards shared schools that are also of merit and should be considered. The issue should not be about investment in new buildings, it can also be about transformation.

The health budget is barely sufficient for the Department to maintain basic service provision. In Northern Ireland, spending on health is falling behind that in the rest of the United Kingdom despite the record levels of investment referred to by the Finance Minister's predecessor on a regular basis. Sadly, in Northern Ireland, there is a much higher level of need than elsewhere. By 2011, spending on health will be about £200 million short of the level that it needs to be. Members can talk about efficiency savings in the health sector, but that is not about trying to do the same with less.

Efficiency savings must be used to free up resources in order that the delivery of health services in Northern Ireland can be restructured.

In the Chamber, many Members have discussed mental-health issues. However, only 8% of the resources that are available in the health budget will be spent on mental-health issues; the UK average is 12%. The Assembly must wrestle with that major structural challenge. Despite small additional funds being allocated for mental health, they will come nowhere near shifting that balance. Much more must also be done on preventative and public health.

It is ridiculous that cost was given as a reason for not having an independent environmental protection agency, which is a short-sighted approach. The Assembly must acknowledge the much wider financial and economic costs that will arise if the environment is not dealt with properly. I recognise that an independent environmental protection agency is not a panacea to all problems; however, it would provide a much more robust basis on which to move forward than the current set of proposals.

The Budget (No. 2) Bill is not green. At a time when everyone should be conscious of the challenges of sustainability and climate change, the investment strategy proposes to invest some 80% of transport capital on roads and only some 20% on public transport over the next 10 years. Already, Northern Ireland's situation is unsustainable compared with that of its neighbours, and it is set to get worse rather than better. The Assembly has taken a wrong turn in a climate in which sustainability has become pertinent because of the dramatic rise in fuel costs.

I want to stress the economic issues. The Assembly must have many more debates and think creatively beyond conventional wisdom. To be fair and realistic, much of Northern Ireland's economic potential depends on the macroeconomic situation that has been set by the UK Treasury; control does not lie in the hands of Northern Ireland's Ministers and Assembly. That framework works against Northern Ireland, and it is a UK regional policy in name only. The Assembly's major opportunity to effect a step change in the economy was a differential rate of corporation tax. The Executive have gone quiet on that issue, and the suspicion is that they have effectively given up.

Instead, discussion now centres on the parameters that were set by Varney II and on how to do more within the Assembly's existing range of powers. In a sense, Varney II takes existing economic thinking to its absolute extreme. However, the sobering fact is that Sir David Varney, when questioned by DUP members of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, accepted that, based on his recommendations, he did not envisage any meaningful gross value added conversions between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

Therefore, the facts that emerge from the UK Treasury, many independent business organisations and NGOs that have critiqued current documentation is that they do not expect the major economic growth that has been advertised on the basis of the Budget. That should form the basis of a much more serious discussion and a major rethink of the economy by the Assembly as it takes matters forward. I express my party's disappointment that there has not been enough discussion of the economy in the Chamber, given that its importance has been acknowledged by all Assembly parties.

Mr Hamilton: I welcome the Budget (No. 2) Bill. Although, elsewhere, I have welcomed the Minister to his new post, I have not done so formally in the Chamber. I wish, therefore, to do so now. It is fair to say that to be thrown into the midst of a Budget Bill is certainly to be thrown into the deep end of the finance brief. However, I am sure that all Members agree that the Minister has acquitted himself with the aplomb that we would expect. As he gets his head around Main Estimates, Supplementary Estimates, Supply resolutions and various numbered Budget Bills, the Minister will

also start to realise the great sense of déjà vu that other Members and I have experienced during Assembly debates, particularly those on budgetary matters.

I know better, so I will not accuse my colleague on the Committee for Finance and Personnel of something so awful, but I could almost swear that I listened to the same speech at Final Stage that I heard at Second Stage. The Minister will get used to hearing the same issues that we have heard throughout the debate on the Budget (No. 2) Bill, such as the raising of capital receipts, efficiencies, the old chestnut of health spending and, slightly later than normal, the cost of division.

Dr Farry: That was not the same speech, Simon.

Mr Hamilton: It was the same speech, although it was slightly changed.

The Minister will get used to the constant and seemingly insatiable demands on the limited resources that are at his disposal. It is fair to say that no Budget will satisfy everyone. I speak for everyone when I say that there will be areas of any Budget to which people would like more attention given and more resources allocated. However, we must deal with limited resources and, as was outlined by the pressing matter of the equal pay claim that was raised in this morning's statement on the June monitoring round, we operate within a very tight budgetary framework. Such pressures arise from time to time that put additional pressure on those limited resources.

I am sure that no Member will seriously oppose the Budget (No. 2) Bill and certainly not Members from parties that have Ministers in the Executive and who trotted through the Aye Lobby with the rest of us when other elements of the Budget were debated. I am sure that parties would not vote against their Minister because that would effectively give a vote of no confidence in their own Minister's judgement.

If Members were minded to vote against the Bill, it would not be sufficient for them to outline their opposition and their critique, although they are entitled to do that. They must also answer serious questions about what they would propose to do about the Budget. During direct rule, we all played the easy game of saying that we needed more money for x and y, and more resources for z. On the flip side of that, there are harsh and difficult questions. Anyone who may be of a mind to oppose the Final Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill should state in the Chamber how he or she proposes to pay for any additional allocations. If that is not to be done by increased rates, that Member should say, to use Dr Farry's word, what services he or she would "cut" in order to pay for the seemingly insatiable demands.

Mr O'Loan spoke at length about children and young people's funding and the Youth Service, and he specifically mentioned the extended schools programme. During the Second Stage of the Bill, I spoke at length

about the extended schools programme. It is very clear that the Minister of Education has a £1.8 billion budget at her disposal, and that, by the end of this Budget period, she will have had around £400 million a year in additional resources. A programme such as the extended schools programme, which requires less than £5 million, is an important programme that needs a minor amount of money when considered as part of that budget. Ample funds are available in the Department of Education's budget to fund that serious and important programme, if it is a priority for the Minister of Education.

Mr O'Loan also raised the issue of the equal pay claim. We all agree that that is a serious matter, and we are all acutely aware of the serious ramifications. He asked when people became aware of it. People were aware of it, but the sheer scale of the problem has only crystallised recently. We should focus not on how or when that issue arose but on the fact that the Executive appear to be committed to solving the matter.

Much work needs to be done, and I believe that we all want that injustice sorted out. However, that will take time, and I am grateful that time is being dedicated to it and that the focus is there to resolve the matter.

2.30 pm

I was almost moved to tears by Mr O'Loan's contribution, not through emotion — he did not stir me to that point — but because it comprised one lament after another. I know that he takes these matters seriously. There are many challenges ahead of the Assembly and the Executive, and no one thought that devolution would be a cakewalk or that Northern Ireland would be instantly transformed into a land of milk and honey. There were always going to be challenges ahead.

The Budget (No. 2) Bill demonstrates the distinctive mark that devolution, rather than direct rule, can put on a Budget. Such challenges — never mind some of the other problems raised by direct rule — are better addressed by locally accountable Ministers, who are answerable to the Assembly and the electorate, than by direct rule Ministers.

Dr Farry spoke about one of his other hobby horses, health spending. Those arguments have been well rehearsed. The subject has been touched on a number of times, much like the cost-of-division debate. As he said, record expenditure, underpinned by this Budget, has been allocated to health.

Mr O'Loan mentioned an interview with the head of the Health Service Executive in the Irish Republic that appeared a few weeks ago in a Dublin Sunday paper. There was a second interview the week after, and that was a clear-cut demonstration of the debate about resource management and accountability. That is the direction that this debate must take.

The former Finance Minister said that at the end of this Budget period, the public will not be discussing how much money Departments received, but, rather, what they delivered using those resources. The most important matter ahead is the debate about the accountability for, and management of, those resources. I welcome the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill that is before the House, and I hope that it will provide an opportunity to discuss those matters.

Dr Farry mentioned another hobby horse — he has so many that he could stage his own Derby — the call for more fiscal control in the Assembly. He and I differ wildly on that point. This is a time of economic uncertainty — I will not mention the R-word, for fear of adding to the almost inevitable public outcry. Mentioning it would be a self-fulfilling prophecy. If ever there was a time when we would not want fiscal control, it is during a recession. It would be difficult for this Assembly, with its limited financial capabilities, to cope in a time of economic uncertainty.

Dr Farry: Does the Member's party still support Northern Ireland having a differential rate of corporation tax?

Mr Hamilton: The DUP was among the first political parties to call for a differential rate of corporation tax, and we still see merit in having such fiscal incentives for business. When one has banged one's head against a brick wall as many times as we have on that matter, one begins to feel the pain and to realise that one may not get through the wall as easily as one had hoped. The various Varney reports demonstrate that that is not something that the Treasury will grant easily, but we have not given up the fight. We are not quitters, and, given that there is a compelling case for fiscal incentives to encourage business growth in Northern Ireland, we will keep up the call.

It is for its focus on business and the economy that I most welcome the Budget (No. 2) Bill. It focuses full square on growing the economy in Northern Ireland. I understand that, at a time when we are experiencing the social problems that arise from economic uncertainty, some Members may be tempted to switch their focus from economic growth and development to social issues. Of course, we must address those pressing social needs and problems, but it is only by focusing full square on the economy and establishing a good, solid economic foundation that we can overcome them. For that reason, I wholeheartedly support the Bill, and I hope that Members will do likewise.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the Budget (No. 2) Bill. Like Simon, and probably all other Members, I have difficulty with different aspects of the Budget. I know that we must grow the economy to provide a strong economy for the future. However, as we move towards that goal, we

must remember those in society who need to be taken care of in the here and now. We must deal with issues such as housing, fuel poverty, food-price rises, funding social deprivation and cuts for the community sector. It is on those issues that communities will judge us, especially those communities that are in need.

It would be remiss of me to let the Bill go through its Final Stage without mentioning the SDLP's contradictory position. For weeks, senior SDLP figures have lambasted us about the Budget and told us that they would not support it, yet their Minister, Margaret Ritchie, was doing the complete opposite at Executive meetings. They were telling all who would listen that they were taking a stand, but they must have also been planning to ditch the Minister or throw her to the wolves because of her support for the Budget.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: No, I will not give way. The SDLP must explain why its Members walked through one Lobby to vote but its Minister went through another. The SDLP is a sorry spectacle of a party that does not know where it is going. If that is not the case, the SDLP must say what disciplinary action it has taken against Margaret Ritchie for that serious breach of party rules.

Mr O'Loan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In order to have proper order in the Chamber, should some training be offered to Members so that they can have the confidence to depart from their script —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That is not a point of order.

Mr Beggs: I, too, congratulate the Minister of Finance and Personnel on his recent appointment to the post. However, like others, I believe that it is not a very fortunate time to take up office.

This debate is the final outworking of the Budget that was agreed in January. Money will have been advanced in the early stages of the budgetary process, and we are now discussing the final details and the transfer of funding to Departments. The Budget seemed reasonable at the time. If the Bill is not approved, money will stop flowing to our public services. Do Members really want some of our public offices to be shut down? If we do not approve the Budget within the appropriate time frame, that is what will happen.

Where were the proposed amendments at Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage? If Members wanted to propose sensible, constructive changes to the Bill, they should have tabled amendments. Are those Members saying that Government processes should be shut down in Northern Ireland? We must approve the Bill, warts and all.

That said, questions remain. Why were such significant errors made in the budgetary calculations? I am thinking of the sale of Government land at Crossnacreevy. The

land had been valued at £200 million, but it has now been valued at £6 million. We have been told that that revision is down to a planning matter. Anyone who understands the planning process for the Belfast metropolitan area plan will know that the land was either zoned or not zoned. How one can get around that process, I do not know.

In addition, why was no allowance made in the Budget for the Civil Service equal pay claim? I cannot believe that an additional demand of more than £100 million could have appeared so late in the day. There must have been issues that would have made senior staff in Departments, if not Ministers, aware of the cost implications of that process.

I am particularly concerned about children's funding. I am disappointed that so little unspent money was returned that there was insufficient funding in the monitoring round to deal with the in-year funding issues on children's issues.

The Budget process does not deal well with the issue of children's funding. A large number of the funding streams bring benefits to many Departments, and no one Department recognises fully the benefits that occur in others. I am aware that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the junior Ministers — who are responsible for children's issues — are engaged in the matter actively. I hope that it will be addressed in subsequent monitoring rounds and in time for next year's budgetary process, in which we are currently engaged.

I said earlier that Minister Dodds was taking over in his role at an unfortunate time. I wonder whether he feels a bit like Alistair Darling, who, when he took over from Gordon Brown, had to deal with many of his predecessor's decisions coming home to roost. I hope that that is not the case. However, the evidence before us today makes it appear so.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank everyone who has taken part in this short debate. I suspect, however, that anyone who read the Second Stage debate, which I did, or, indeed, last year's Budget debate, would recognise many recurring themes.

In reply to Mr Beggs, I do not feel any difficulty, because any new Finance Minister would get nothing other than the same list of demands, pressures and complaints laid on him. In that respect, there is nothing new under the sun. This is a challenging job, but one in which I reflect the views of a unanimous Executive, despite some comments from some parties in the House. Perhaps if they took more cognisance of some of their colleagues, they would have a slightly different perspective on the issues.

I wish that I could say, as some Members seem to want me to be able to say, that I have a bottomless pit of money. Surprise, surprise, I do not. I know that that will come as a terrible shock to one or two Members,

but those more mature and sensible Members who understand reality will take cognisance of the situation.

I was impressed by the many Members who spoke carefully and realistically in the debate, even if, on occasion, they tended to veer off into a fantasy world. Nevertheless, most of their remarks were meant sincerely.

I will not be able to deal with all the points that were raised. I want, first, to acknowledge the point that was made by the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel about the Committee's intention to examine the logistics of the Budget process. I welcome that, and I look forward to the outcome of those deliberations.

2.45 pm

Some Members raised the issue of equal pay in the Civil Service. I dealt with that issue during this morning's discussions on the in-year monitoring round. Mr O'Loan asked some questions, but then he helpfully stated that he had tabled a question for written answer on the issue. Therefore, I will helpfully respond by saying that I will reply to his question for written answer, and I am sure that he will look forward to receiving that. I thank him for tabling the question and for giving me the opportunity to respond in the way that I suggested.

It is nonsense to say that everyone sat back and knew about the problem but did nothing to address it. The matter crystallized and became an issue only when the previous Finance Minister brought it to the attention of the Executive. We must deal with it in the way that I have suggested — through serious, intense engagement with the Treasury. The issue is not the responsibility of the Executive; it is a legacy issue that was inherited from direct rule Ministers. Therefore, it would be completely invidious if we had to take a stance that would impact on public services.

In other places, I have had the full support of, and best wishes from, other party members. Although some Members have not expressed their best wishes, I am sure that I have them, as we tackle the Treasury on the issue.

Mr O'Loan and others raised the issue of capital receipts, and Mr Beggs referred to Crossnacreevy and to errors in the Budget. However, there were no errors in the Budget. I stated yesterday and today that the £50 million allocated this year for the farm nutrients scheme will proceed.

Crossnacreevy was part of a capital assets realisation project, which was in year three of the current comprehensive spending review period. The information on the project was provided in good faith, on the basis of best information available. The general issue of lower levels of capital receipts means that, in the current economic climate, there will be lower costs for some infrastructure; for instance, for acquiring land. Mr O'Loan looks slightly puzzled, but if property prices have gone down, the price of land has also gone down,

and it costs less to do things with it. It is a case of simple economics.

It is recognised, however, that there is an issue. Furthermore, no one referred to the fact that over £100 million in capital reserves has not been allocated. All those issues will be taken into account when we have met the Treasury to discuss the equal pay issue. Of the £295 million identified by the capital realisation task force, £200 million were included in the Budget.

I will reiterate the assurance that I gave this morning. When the equal pay issue has been resolved, consideration will be given to supporting Departments that have taken all possible steps to address the shortfall in capital receipts.

Mr Beggs, Mr O'Loan and others raised the issue of funding for children and young people. As part of the Budget process, funding from central funds, including the children and young people's funding package, was mainstreamed. That gave Departments the necessary flexibility to manage such issues in the context of their overall position.

In response to concerns from Departments, additional allocations were made as part of the process to ensure that all worthwhile projects could continue during the draft, and revised, Budget process. The main problem is that individual Ministers have not decided to discontinue funding certain projects; rather they have laid the blame elsewhere — notably at the Department of Finance and Personnel. There is nothing new in that — that happens during every monitoring round. Although the Executive will continue to consider the amount of resources available to individual public services, the primary responsibility lies with individual Departments to prioritise resources under their control.

Returning to the subject of underspending, when the sums involved are compared with the levels of departmental underspend last year, it is clear that Departments have the capacity to fund those projects. Recently, my predecessor issued a statement about underspend, and that raises serious issues about the effectiveness of spending and the best outputs for the people we represent.

Mr O'Loan raised the issue of post-primary education. I share his concerns for clarity on those arrangements. I hope that, initially, the Department of Education will meet any additional costs from its existing Budget allocation.

Mr Farry stuck to well-rehearsed and well-known themes as usual. He spoke about support for the Budget; however, I remind him that it was agreed by all members of the Executive in January 2008. Although the nature of the Budget process inevitably means that it is simply not possible to meet all pressures, I still believe that the allocations that have been made strike the right balance.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I ask the Member to give me a moment.

We do not have a bottomless pit: if we did, we could continue to dole out money to everyone's favourite programmes and projects. However, we live in the real world, in which we have to balance all the resources that are available to us against all the pressures and demands on public services. We could go down the Alliance Party's favourite route of increasing taxation and put a greater burden on the hard-pressed working families and others in our community who are already suffering because of the increases in fuel prices and the cost of living. I doubt whether there would be much support for going down that route, particularly on this side of the House. At least the Alliance Party seeks to address how it would raise the money through the Budget process, and does it openly by saying that it would increase taxation.

It is noticeable, as Mr Hamilton said in his speech, that when others criticise the process and demand more money, they are reluctant, indeed absent, when it comes to making suggestions about where to find that money, either through increased revenue streams or by re-allocating it from somewhere else. Mr Beggs drew attention to that when he made the valid point that when the Bill was debated in the Assembly, not one single amendment was tabled. That would have been a real test of the sincerity of those Members who said that they wanted to increase allocations in one area by reducing allocations elsewhere, or by a re-allocation of resources. Not a single proposal was made, nor was a single amendment tabled.

Some Members may wish to make a political point or a token gesture today by voting against the Bill at its Final Stage. Let us be very clear. As another Member pointed out, the only effect of voting against the Budget (No.2) Bill today will be to ensure that Departments run out of money over the summer. All the money for health, education, housing, fuel poverty, the environment, investment and tourism will run out. We will not only be in crisis mode, but people will ask what on earth the Assembly is playing at. If Members want to take such an irresponsible view of such a serious process, so be it.

I will give way to the Member, who appears to wish to go down that route. Perhaps he will clarify his intentions.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister for giving way. I wish to make two points, and it is important that I put my first on record. Will the Minister agree that the Minister for Social Development voted as required by the ministerial code, but that in the Executive's discussions that led up to the Budget, she raised the points of concern that were visible at that time, and which I raised again today?

Secondly, the Minister has spoken about a threat to bring down the financial house and not to have the resources to keep the Government running over the summer. If the Budget (No.2) Bill were to be voted down today, the onus would rest with the Minister to bring a different Budget to the House.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: We have heard it all now, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Members opposite are saying that if the Bill is voted down today, the responsibility will lie with those of us who voted against that proposition. What a piece of perverted logistical thinking that is.

That simply illustrates the lack of logic, common sense or any sort of economic or financial probity on the part of Members who say such things. To say that they will vote it down, and that I must then take the blame, is absolute nonsense.

The Member's other point concerned the role of his party's Minister. The bottom line is that she agreed the Budget in the Executive. The Executive were unanimous, and the Minister voted for the Budget in the Assembly. Those facts are on the record, no matter how awkward or embarrassing they may be for the party opposite.

Several Members, including Dr Farry, talked about efficiency savings. I welcome the acceptance of the need for Departments to examine the ways in which they operate to improve efficiency. As I said this morning and yesterday at Question Time, efficiencies should be about doing things better in order to release more money for front-line services; they are not about cuts. We share a common agenda in that respect. It is important that we pursue efficiencies so that we are not constantly seeking more money. Let us make better use of the money that we have to produce the output and results that we want.

Dr Farry raised the issue of the general economy and lower corporation tax. We continue to press the case for lowering corporation tax, because that is what we want. When I was Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I was responsible for growing the economy, although the Programme for Government gave growing the economy centre stage in all Departments. We absolutely wish to have lower corporation tax, and we have not given up on achieving that. That continues to be our policy, and we will use opportunities to press our case, as and when appropriate.

We must also examine the other policy levers that are at our disposal. It would be foolish in the extreme to think that a lower rate of corporation tax will be a silver bullet that will solve all our problems. The Budget's growth projections are based on existing programmes that must be reviewed by the Executive. However, I welcome Members' calls that the Assembly should have a greater focus on economic matters in general.

Several Members spoke about children and young people's projects. I fully recognise the importance of delivering the best possible services for children and young people. The previous Finance Minister said that he would consider providing additional funding, based on an agreed list of projects from the relevant Departments. Those discussions are ongoing, and the issues will be returned to as part of the September monitoring round, once the equal pay issue is resolved.

I thank everyone who took part in the debate. We must balance available resources against emerging pressures in-year and the demands of all Departments and all the worthy issues that were mentioned.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that, because this is a Budget Bill, the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put,

The Assembly divided: Ayes 61; Noes 11.

AYES

NATIONALIST:

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Doherty, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ruane.

UNIONIST:

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Simpson, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Miss McIlveen and Mr McQuillan.

NOES

NATIONALIST:

Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr O'Loan and Mr P Ramsey

Total votes 72 Total Ayes 61 [84.7%]

Nationalist Votes 34 Nationalist Ayes 23 [67.6%]

Unionist Votes 38 Unionist Ayes 38 [100.0%]

Other Votes 0 Other Ayes 0 [0.00%]

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 18/07] do now pass.

Child Maintenance Bill

Final Stage

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I beg to move

That the Child Maintenance Bill [NIA 17/07] do now pass.

The Child Maintenance Bill is an important piece of legislation that makes tackling child poverty the main priority of the child maintenance system. The Bill ensures that more maintenance is collected and that more of that maintenance goes directly to children.

In Northern Ireland at the moment, one in three non-resident parents fail to pay any money that is owed to their children, leaving 12,600 children without any maintenance and often suffering unnecessary poverty as a result. Measures contained in the Bill — together with the increased disregard of £20 a week by the end of 2008 and £40 a week from April 2010 — will ensure that many more children will benefit from maintenance and that will contribute to reducing child poverty in Northern Ireland.

Parents will be encouraged to make voluntary arrangements where appropriate. Where such arrangements are not appropriate, parents will be supported in making applications to the statutory maintenance service thus avoiding the risk of anyone slipping through the net. The new information and support service will work to meet the needs of parents: that service will support parents in making arrangements that are right for them personally, and offer an improved statutory service to ensure that more children receive the money that is due to them.

The Bill will put in place much needed reforms to deal with the well publicised deficiencies of the current system, which have too often left parents confused and frustrated and made it very difficult for the staff charged with administering that system to offer the service that they wish to provide — a service that parents and children have a right to expect.

The proposals will bring into affect more streamlined and transparent child maintenance arrangements. The Bill makes provisions for the Department to obtain details of non-resident parents' income directly from HM Revenue and Customs.

That will provide the Department with easily accessible and accurate details of earned income, meaning that more money will flow more quickly to more children. That is the express purpose of the Bill — to ensure that money flows to children more expeditiously. Nobody in this House wishes to deny children who are in need the right to receive the money to which they are entitled at the same time as children in GB.

3.15 pm

The use of administrative liability orders will make the process of enforcing arrears considerably quicker, and the power to collect money from bank accounts and other financial resources will mean that the Department can collect the money as quickly as possible. There will be an extension to the type of accounts against which ongoing and lump-sum deduction orders can be made. The Department will be able to apply for an order to freeze a non-resident parent's assets if there is evidence that they are about to dissipate them to avoid paying child maintenance.

The current enforcement and compliance measures are not as effective as they could be, and the process does not facilitate swift enforcement action; therefore the provisions of the Bill place emphasis on stronger and more effective enforcement. I accept that the measures are strong, but the money in these cases is owed to the children. I stress again that the enforcement powers will be used only where non-resident parents will not — as opposed to cannot — pay. It is right and fair that effective measures should be used against parents who deny their children the maintenance that is due to them.

I read with interest the transcript of last Tuesday's debate on the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on its inquiry into child poverty in Northern Ireland. I will study that report very carefully. I wholeheartedly agree with the Committee that the Executive should ensure that government services should respond decisively to the needs of low-income families. I intend to ensure that my Department does so. The provisions in the Child Maintenance Bill will put in place a new framework for the child maintenance system to benefit low-income families in Northern Ireland.

I thank the Chairperson, the outgoing Chairperson, and members of the Committee for Social Development — and indeed Members of the House — for their support in progressing this important Bill.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Simpson): As the House is aware, this important piece of legislation was granted accelerated passage. As a result, the Committee for Social Development did not have a chance to scrutinise it in any great detail as would normally be the case. The Committee will play an important scrutiny role when the legislation has been passed.

During the Second Stage of the Bill, the Deputy Chairperson referred to several areas that were of interest to the Committee, one of which was the use of enforcement provisions. The Minister has assured the Committee — and the House — that only those parents who will not pay as opposed to those who cannot pay will be subject to such measures. I sincerely hope that that will

be the case. The Committee will be considering that issue in the future.

The Committee supports the drive to get parents to make their own arrangements for the payment of child maintenance, which should reduce levels of non-payment. It is of the utmost importance that the Department ensure that parents with care know their rights in the statutory maintenance system, and are not pressurised into entering into a voluntary arrangement. Voluntary arrangements will not suit every couple.

The Bill's most important aim is to get money to children who are entitled to it. If we are to focus on meeting the needs of children and to tackle child poverty effectively, we must ensure that more parents take responsibility for paying for their children and that more children benefit. However, it remains to be seen whether non-resident parents who will not pay under the statutory system will pay under a voluntary one.

The Committee supports the Bill, with those caveats.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. A central tenet of the Bill is to make a difference between those who cannot pay and those who will not pay. However, there are concerns about how the Bill will reduce child poverty; there is little evidence in it of how the Minister proposes to do that. There is concern about the Bill's effect on second families. Will the children of second families be more vulnerable to deprivation as a result of the Bill? Those questions have not been satisfactorily addressed. The Minister has given a commitment that an equality impact assessment (EQIA) will be made simultaneously with the Bill's implementation. I look forward to that.

The Minister has, in effect, broken parity with England, as the Child Support Agency (CSA) will continue to exist there, albeit in a revamped form. Here, the Minister proposes that the Social Security Agency will be responsible for the implementation of child maintenance payments. I question whether the infrastructure is adequate: has the Social Security Agency sufficient resources to implement the Bill or will it be given those resources?

The Minister said that she is more than aware of concerns about the Child Support Agency. I hope that resources will be made available to the Social Security Agency (SSA) so that it can implement the provisions of the Bill. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Members for their contributions. I welcome the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development to his new position, thank him for raising issues, pay him tribute and, as I have not yet had an opportunity to do so on the Floor of the House, wish him well. I expect the Committee to undertake scrutiny of the Bill's implementation, for that is its role.

We need to ensure that money flows as expeditiously as possible to the children who need it. Mr Simpson asked how we ensure that parents are not leant on to enter into voluntary arrangements. The information and support that my Department will provide includes a helpline with web-based support and face-to-face service where appropriate. Tools, such as a standard maintenance form and an on-line calculator to help with estimating the level of child-maintenance-based income, will be provided to enable parents to make informed choices with respect to maintenance agreements.

Mr Brady raised the issue of second families. The Bill provides for fairness between children of first and second families so that second families are not disadvantaged to finance the wellbeing of the first. I assure the House that the maintenance formula introduced in 2003 takes account of children in first and second families and the revised percentages will ensure that that continues.

Mr Brady also raised the subject of child poverty, about which I would like to make the following points. The Bill provides for the removal of the provision whereby the parent with care can lose £24.20 a week if a reduced benefit decision is imposed; enabling parents to keep more of the child maintenance that they receive by increasing the maintenance disregard to £20 a week by the end of 2008 and £40 a week from 2010; and the introduction of administrative liability orders. Those measures will speed up the process and reduce the time taken to enforce the collection of arrears.

It is the combined effect of the measures that will ensure that more children are lifted out of poverty. I hope that all absent parents demonstrate their responsibilities to their children. It is in our interest and in theirs that their children are properly cared for, both socially and financially, particularly at a time when we are all feeling the pinch given the higher cost of fuel, power and food. Indeed, those factors are most affecting those who are in the low-to-medium income groups, who are facing a higher level of inflation and incomes that are not necessarily rising to keep pace with that level of inflation.

Mr Brady is living with a misunderstanding as regards the Child Support Agency and parity. As a result of the Henshaw Review it was decided that, in Britain, the Child Support Agency should be kept at arm's length. I feel that it would be better to bring the agency into the core of the Department, where it could be subject to full scrutiny and where the problems of the past could be properly addressed, resolved and rectified. Furthermore, problems in getting money to children could be resolved in a more expeditious fashion. That is the purpose of the Child Support Agency, and I hope that everyone would be able to live up to their responsibilities in that respect.

I hope that I have responded satisfactorily to the points that have been raised. If I have missed any point, I will write to the Member concerned. During the debates on accelerated passage and Second Stage, I made the point that if Sinn Féin were to abandon its policy of abstentionism, and take its seats at Westminster, its members would have full and ample opportunity to debate the parent legislation. I make the point again today. I suggest to Mickey Brady that if his party's abstentionist policy were abandoned, it would have full opportunity for line-by-line scrutiny of the parent Bill.

In conclusion, this Bill is a child poverty measure: it removes the reduced-benefit decision and it deals with non-compliant, non-resident parents in a better, more expeditious fashion. The most important feature of the Bill is that it takes the side of children and parents with care. I do not believe that any Member of the House would resile from that viewpoint, as it is the view that was communicated in the Committee and in the House.

Child maintenance makes an important contribution to tackling child poverty, and it can make a significant difference to the lives of families. This Bill is good news, and it is a good news story for children in Northern Ireland. Again, I am grateful to the Chairperson, the outgoing Chairperson, the members of the Committee for Social Development, and Members for their positive contribution during the progress of the Bill, and for the level of consensus that the Bill has enjoyed across the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Child Maintenance Bill [NIA 17/07] do now pass.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Public Enquiry into the Maureen McGinley Case

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 the motion and 10 minutes for the winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern that investigations by the Western Health and Social Care Trust and the Coroner's Service have failed to provide a satisfactory explanation of the circumstances in which the late Mrs Maureen McGinley received a number of fractures following her death; commends the family of Mrs Maureen McGinley for their campaign in highlighting the issue; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to initiate, as a matter of urgency, a full, independent and time-bound public inquiry.

I first extend my deepest sympathy to the late Maureen McGinley's family, some of whom I believe are in the Public Gallery.

Maureen McGinley came from Strabane and died in Altnagelvin Hospital in Londonderry on Wednesday 3 January 2007, aged 78. The doctor would not issue a death certificate because Mrs McGinley had fallen at home a few days earlier, before being admitted to hospital.

3.30 pm

On Friday 5 January 2007, two days after her death, a post-mortem that was carried out at Belfast city mortuary concluded that Mrs McGinley had died from natural causes; namely, pneumonia or a lung infection. Heart disease was listed as a possible contributing factor. Most alarmingly, the autopsy also revealed that Mrs McGinley had suffered 34 fractures to her ribs. The autopsy report states:

"there was only a small amount of bruising associated with two of these fractures, strongly suggesting that the vast majority of them were sustained after death, probably as the body was being moved."

In a letter to the hospital two months later, in March 2007, the deputy state pathologist, who carried out the autopsy, explained:

"post-mortem fractures of ribs and sternum are frequently encountered in cases where cardiopulmonary resuscitation has been attempted. However, I understand that no resuscitation had been attempted on Mary McGinley, and the distribution of rib fractures was not entirely consistent with the effects of resuscitation. Therefore, I concluded that they must have been sustained while the body was being moved after death. Very occasionally one or two post-mortem rib fractures may be identified at autopsy, particularly in the elderly, however a large number of post-mortem fractures is extremely unusual, even in the presence of marked osteoporosis. This would strongly suggest that at some point during the handling or moving of the body some considerable force had been applied to the chest,

however there are no specific features to indicate exactly how they were sustained.”

Investigations by the Western Health and Social Care Trust and by the Coroners Service have signally failed to provide any satisfactory explanation for how those fractures were sustained by Mrs McGinley after her death.

Mrs McGinley’s family have spent 18 months fighting, lobbying and campaigning incessantly for answers. The local community was rightly shocked by what happened and supports the family’s campaign for answers. They started a petition calling for a full, independent and public inquiry, and collected a staggering 18,500 signatures. That reflects an amazing amount of public disquiet.

That petition was brought to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety on 28 February 2008. The Committee passed the petition to the Minister and urged him to launch an inquiry.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety responded:

“events surrounding Mrs McGinley’s death have been subjected to a very comprehensive examination, both internally by the Trust, and by the coroner’s service, who took responsibility for delivering her body to the Belfast City Mortuary for post-mortem. Despite that comprehensive investigation it has not been possible to provide a totally satisfactory explanation for the fractures which Mrs McGinley sustained after her death.”

The Minister concluded that he was:

“of the view that any further review ... is unlikely to shed any further light on how this unfortunate incident occurred.”

That is totally unsatisfactory and unacceptable.

One has to ask how difficult it can be to ascertain from duty rotas who handled the body and to then follow the process through to a satisfactory conclusion.

The death of a mother is a tragic and heartbreaking event in itself, but, in this case, not only had the family to suffer the grief and sadness of losing a loved one, they had the added shock of learning that something dreadful happened to their mother after her death, resulting in her having 34 broken bones. One of the principles of any civilised society is that we treat the dead with dignity and respect. The very least that the family should expect is a thorough investigation that gets to the bottom of what happened between the time of Mrs McGinley’s death on a hospital ward and the start of the post-mortem, two days later. The family cannot begin to grieve for their mother while those questions remain unanswered.

The family has made it clear that they are not interested in recriminations and that they just want answers. They want an explanation and an apology for what happened. We can all identify with the position in which the family find themselves. We just have to think of how we would react if the same thing happened to

any of our own mothers or to a close relative. We would go to any lengths and would leave no stone unturned until we got an explanation of how and why such an event happened.

Following her death on 3 January 2007, Mrs McGinley’s body was moved from the ward to the mortuary at Altnagelvin Hospital, and it remained there until it was collected by the undertaker early on the Friday morning and transported to the Belfast city mortuary in the grounds of Forster Green Hospital. Clearly, something happened to Mrs McGinley’s body during that period, and the family has a right to an explanation. The only way to get answers seems to be to hold a full public inquiry during which anyone who had any dealings with the body from the time of Mrs McGinley’s death in the hospital ward to the beginning of the post-mortem is questioned under oath.

The Minister may claim that he cannot set up an inquiry because the issues fall between two jurisdictions — namely, the Health Service, for which he has responsibility, and the Coroners Service, which is the responsibility of David Hanson MP, Minister of State. This case cries out for justice and for an explanation, and ways must be found to deal with any issues that fall between the two jurisdictions. Until now, the Minister has rejected all calls for an inquiry, saying that there is nothing to be gained from holding one. I ask the Minister to consider how he would react if a close relative of his had suffered such fractures after death. I therefore urge him to show the same compassion and sympathy to the McGinley family that he would expect in such circumstances and to set up an inquiry that will get answers. I urge Members to support the motion.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and all members of that Committee, for bringing the matter before the House.

The motion states that:

“the Western Health and Social Care Trust and the Coroner’s Service have failed to provide a satisfactory explanation of the circumstances”

that surround this case. I have looked at some of the documentation, and although I am neither a medic nor a forensic scientist, my reading of the papers shows inconsistencies and gaps. For example, I could not follow the chronology at all times.

As the Chairperson of the Committee said, as far as the family is concerned, this is not about blame; it is about finding out what happened. I appeal to the Minister to hold an inquiry, because this is about a mother and about a family that does not know what happened. It is also about the Health Service workers and all the other people who may have been around the body who do not know what happened.

For the sake of truth and fairness, a public inquiry will get the desired answers.

The second part of the motion commends the family of Maureen McGinley, and I echo that sentiment. The situation has not been easy for them, and the grieving process has not taken place because the issue remains unresolved. The family is seeking only a public inquiry. I repeat: this is not about blame.

A public inquiry is required in this case because the Assembly Ombudsman, in response to a complaint lodged with him against the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety by Mr Pat Doherty, MP for West Tyrone, said that his powers were limited. The legislative reasons for those limited powers can be discussed another day, but the fact that the Assembly Ombudsman is powerless in this situation is an issue in itself.

I was disappointed with the response from Elaine Way in a letter from the Western Health and Social Care Trust. The McGinley family's situation as regards losing their mother is known, as is the situation regarding what happened after that; however, the tone of the letter, which is dated 21 April 2008, was inappropriate:

“The trust is entirely satisfied that it has acted appropriately and consequently sees no benefit in attending a further meeting at which we could be confirming again the trust's position, which has been fully explained to you.”

I read that letter only recently, and there is coldness in it. That may be how such letters are written, but I return to the point I made at the beginning of my remarks — this issue is about a mother and what happened to her after her death. As the Chairperson of the Committee said; this is not about blame; it is about the people who were involved in the sequence of events between Mrs McGinley's death and the time that the family received the autopsy report. I appeal to the Minister to commission an inquiry, because that would go some way towards getting satisfactory answers.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The circumstances that have led to the motion are extremely sad, and I offer my deepest sympathies and those of my party to the McGinley family.

What happened to Maureen McGinley after her death would have been difficult for a family to come to terms with in any circumstances. However, still not knowing what happened is particularly difficult. I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber to respond to the motion. I also thank him for meeting the McGinley family.

I recognise that the Western Health and Social Care Trust has carried out a comprehensive examination of the circumstances surrounding the case. I also recognise that the Minister believes that the trust acted appropriately. The Western Health and Social Care Trust has given assurances that Mrs McGinley was treated with the

utmost respect and dignity at all times. The Coroners Service for Northern Ireland made no recommendations to the trust about the procedures in place at Altnagelvin Hospital. Although I recognise those statements and have no reason to doubt them, in light of what we know about the case, they do not offer the closure and reassurance that the McGinley family requires and deserves.

I welcome that the McGinley family has employed Professor Christopher Milroy to examine the post-mortem injuries suffered by Maureen McGinley.

I also welcome the fact that the Minister has stated his intention to consider the report if it reaches a different conclusion to that of the investigations that have already been conducted.

3.45 pm

In Northern Ireland, we have a strong history of treating people with dignity, respect and care. The staff in the Health Service and in the Coroners Service are dedicated, professional and caring. I know that they, as much as anyone, want the McGinley family to receive the answers that they deserve.

It is regrettable that the issue had to be brought to the Floor of the House. Although I welcome the meeting earlier today between the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister, it is unfortunate that such a meeting was not requested by the Minister at an earlier date.

Mrs Hanna: I convey my deepest sympathy to the family of the late Maureen McGinley. Her case is sad, and, naturally, the family has been badly affected by it. I have the utmost respect for the McGinley family, who are trying desperately to discover how Mrs McGinley sustained so many fractures. They have shown great courage and strength during a difficult time. It is hard enough to get through the grieving process without this awful issue hanging over them. It has been a long struggle, and, unfortunately, it seems that satisfactory answers have not yet been provided.

When the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety considered Maureen McGinley's case, I tried to imagine how I would feel had it happened to a relative of mine and what I would want to establish and find out. The family wants and deserves answers, to which they are entitled; I would want the same. They want to know what happened to their mother's body that resulted in 34 fractures and how it happened. It is an extraordinary number of fractures, and questions need to be asked and answered.

Minister McGimpsey turned down a request for a full independent inquiry on the grounds that it is unlikely to uncover the cause of the injuries. I appreciate the fact that the Committee has today called on the Minister to initiate a public inquiry.

The family wants an independent public inquiry into the case and have started a petition, and they have picketed outside Altnagelvin Hospital to highlight their demand. I understand that the Western Health and Social Care Trust conducted an investigation and that the Coroners Service also undertook an independent inquiry. Unfortunately, the senior coroner concluded that the service had not been able to establish how Mrs McGinley's ribs came to be fractured. However, it was made clear that Mrs McGinley suffered from osteoporosis, which may have contributed to her ribs being fractured with little force.

Unfortunately, the question about when and how the fractures occurred remains unanswered. Obviously, more information is required to establish how the fractures were sustained. I do not know whether that information can be teased out. The McGinley family have appointed an independent expert — Professor Christopher Milroy — and I am glad that the Coroners Service has offered him full co-operation. I have no doubt that the Minister and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will do the same. The results of Professor Milroy's inquiry will be interesting.

It is important that all avenues are explored to ensure that nothing is overlooked in this case. I hope that the family gets the answers that they so much want and need, and that they can put the issue to rest and get on with their grieving.

Mr Buchanan: I also support the motion fully and unequivocally. I welcome the members of the McGinley family who are present today. I have no doubt that this is another difficult time for them in this stage of their grieving process for their mother. I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for tabling the motion and for outlining the case at the outset of the debate.

I am not an advocate of public inquiries.

However, when we examine this particular case and the failure of the Western Health and Social Care Trust, the Department of Health, and the Minister to provide satisfactory answers to the McGinley family after almost 18 months, it is evident that a full, independent and time-bound inquiry is the only way forward for the family. I must commend the family for their courage in pressing the matter to this stage. Today, I ask the Minister to take note of the public interest in this particular matter and of the petition of some 18,000 signatures. Not only must the Minister take note of that, but he must act upon it.

When a loved one passes away in hospital it is assumed that their remains will be treated with the utmost care, respect and dignity. Yet on the occasion in question, Mrs McGinley's body, from the point of death until the coroner's examination, sustained a staggering total of 34 fractures. That raises the question: what

happened between those two points in time? Of course, the McGinley family is fully justified to seek answers: not only to allow them to bring closure to their mother's death, but to allow them to complete the grieving process.

On previous occasions, the Minister has said, in his responses to Assembly questions and in press statements, that he is satisfied that the trust acted appropriately and in accordance with hospital protocol. However, in light of the incident, I question whether those protocols are appropriate or need to be reviewed. I also note that the coroner Mr John L Leckey informed the McGinley family that their mother's injuries were caused by accident, although they were unable to identify at what stage or under what circumstances they were sustained. However, someone somewhere knows what happened. The McGinley family seeks to get to the bottom of that. What happened to their mother after her death for her to sustain those injuries?

Today, I am not pointing the finger at the nursing or front-line staff, who provide an excellent service for patients, for which we are most grateful. However, I must lay the blame at the door of the managers and the Minister, who have failed to provide appropriate answers for the family.

It is the Minister's responsibility to provide the McGinley family with the answers that they seek. To have a blank sheet is simply not acceptable. We need answers about what happened. The Health Committee has received conflicting reports on whether or not Mrs McGinley's body was washed after her death, which highlights and strengthens the need for an inquiry.

The McGinley family has exercised patience and displayed great courage in their efforts to date to gain results without success. During that time they have been unable to grieve for a mother — as other families can do — due to the lack of closure.

Today, I tender my sympathy to them. I hope that their ordeal will be over soon. The responsibility now lies with the Minister; if he has nothing to hide then he will act upon the Committee's call, through the House today, to initiate — as a matter of urgency — a full, independent and time-bound inquiry to get answers for the McGinley family, which they rightly deserve.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate the Chairperson, Iris Robinson, and the Deputy Chairperson, Michelle O'Neill, and, indeed, all of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for bringing this motion forward.

I also wish to reiterate the Assembly Health Committee's call for Minister Michael McGimpsey to initiate a full, independent public inquiry into the circumstances by which deceased Strabane woman Maureen McGinley was found, upon post-mortem, to have sustained 34 rib fractures following her death at Altnagelvin Hospital on 3 January 2007.

There are many disturbing aspects to that case, which have not only served to cause immense additional trauma, but widespread public concern about the deficiencies in the present arrangements between hospitals and the Coroners Service when a deceased person is sent for post-mortem.

The fact that the McGinley family was not informed about the injuries that their mother sustained until more than 10 weeks after her death is grounds in itself for a public inquiry. Furthermore, the subsequent in-house inquiry that was carried out by Altnagelvin Hospital — its critical incident review report — was basically an exercise in absolving itself and the Coroners Service of any responsibility regarding how those injuries were sustained.

Through unfounded conjecture and assumptions, the Altnagelvin inquiry attempted to place the blame at the door of the undertaker who transported the body of Maureen McGinley from Altnagelvin to the post-mortem in Belfast. If any attempt had been made to ascertain, from the undertaker in question, the methods by which he secures a body to a stretcher, it would have been established that he affixes straps across the shoulders, knees and ankles — a method that could not have caused the fractures to the chest area that were sustained by Maureen McGinley.

Contradictory statements were made about whether the body of Maureen McGinley was washed following her death at Altnagelvin. Those must also be studied. The McGinley family has been courageous in their campaign to secure the truth about what happened to their mother, and have exhausted every possible avenue in pursuit of that cause — only to find their efforts frustrated at every turn.

On 25 February, I accompanied the McGinley family to a meeting with the Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey. At that meeting, he stated that he would rule nothing out, including the possibility of establishing a full, independent public inquiry. The McGinley family left the meeting with the renewed hope that they could, at long last, secure the answers that they deserved and which would enable them to finally bring closure to what has been a devastating ordeal. One can therefore understand their extreme disappointment when Michael McGimpsey, in his written response on 6 March following our meeting, merely regurgitated the arbitrary assumptions that the McGinley family have been fed from day one.

The Minister initially declined the McGinley family's request to meet, and they now feel that the only reason that the Minister finally agreed to meet them on 25 February was because failure to do so would have attracted adverse media attention to the Minister and his Department. It now seems that the Minister merely went through the motions at the meeting, and when the

door closed behind us it was a case of out of sight, out of mind.

More than 18,000 people have signed a petition that calls for a full, independent inquiry into the case of Maureen McGinley. It is clear that the case is a matter of major public concern, as it is directly linked to the issue of healthcare for elderly people in our society.

The fact that the Coroners Service is an agency of the NIO and, as such, remains a reserved matter, should not be used as an excuse to rule out an inquiry. It is essential for an inquiry to be established, not only to secure the truth about what happened in the case of Maureen McGinley, but also to ensure that the confidence in the system that the public have lost as a result of this disturbing case is restored.

Mr Easton: I support the motion.

The good practice and guidance that is usually applied in the NHS to build better pathology services has been well received, because it put patients and bereaved families at the centre of its concerns. When a patient dies, families need to know that the mortuary service will deal with the body of their loved one in a safe, secure and sensitive manner, whether the death has taken place in a hospital or the body has been taken to the hospital mortuary after death.

The public usually has confidence in those who have such an important role in providing that service, and confidence that there is a balance between the need to ensure safety and efficiency, and showing respect and sensitivity at such a critical moment in a family's grief.

The application of eight key principles in the NHS improvement plan has done much to encourage and assure people in the Province that they can be confident that staff are encouraged to develop a standard of excellence in that area.

4.00 pm

The care offered by the NHS in the event of a death is important to a family as they grieve for the loss of a loved one. However, that was not the case for the McGinley family. Mrs McGinley died from pneumonia, but for the family to learn that her body had sustained 34 fractures after her death without receiving a rational explanation was a horrifying experience. Now, a year and a half later, they still have not received a satisfactory explanation. To my mind, that is scandalous.

The statements that the family has received have been couched in official language. The family is entitled to clear and precise answers to their questions, and that has not happened. If the Minister had responded sufficiently in the two letters that he sent to the Health Committee, and if clear answers had been provided to the family, there might have been no need for a debate. The family has my personal sympathy, and that of the

vast majority of Members. I commend the family for their continuing campaign to highlight the issue.

The investigations by the Western Health and Social Care Trust and the Coroners Service have been unable to provide satisfactory answers. Only a full, independent and time-bound inquiry will give the family the closure that they need, and I call on the Minister to provide such an inquiry.

Mr Durkan: I also support the motion. I commend the Committee for the consideration it has shown to the needs of the McGinley family, and I commend the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson for their work in trying to take the matter forward.

It is difficult for the McGinley family to hear their situation debated in the Chamber. We must show sensitivity to the confusion of emotions that that family are feeling. They have had to endure grievance on top of grief, and no family should have to undergo that. The family found out weeks and weeks later that their mother had received multiple fractures after her death. They are asking why and how that happened and why they were not told, but they have not been given any answers. It is not enough for any of us to suggest to the family that it was a mystery event that they will have to get over, or that they at least take comfort from the fact that the injuries happened only after their mother's death, and that that is all the assurance they need. They need to know, and they have a right to ask. We have a duty of consideration and care. If accountability means anything, it means that the McGinley family, and the public representatives who have been working on their behalf, should be looked in the eye and given answers, and people should be available to provide those answers.

We often refer to leaving no stone unturned. If any of us found ourselves in the same situation with a close relative, we would want to believe that no stone would be left unturned in finding out what had happened, and how and why, and to ensure that it would not happen to another family. The McGinley family feel that the system appears to be saying that some stones will be left unturned, because either nothing new will be found or something unwanted might be found. It is incumbent on the Assembly and the Minister to pursue any inquiry or any means of investigation that is needed to provide answers.

We have been told that there is no satisfactory explanation for the fractures. That in itself cannot be a satisfactory outcome — it adds to the sense of frustration, scandal and hurt that is felt by the family. It is not just the family, their friends and neighbours who feel that way; as the petition shows, there is widespread and strong public concern about what has happened. That concern has been compounded by the lack of answers and by the apparent attempt to suggest that it is somehow untoward to pursue answers to those questions through an inquiry.

We have also heard that the trust offered assurances that the body was treated with respect at all times. The Minister is clearly on the record as believing those assurances. I do not know how the rest of us can rely on them: given that we have neither the evidence nor the insight to do so, we cannot commend those assurances to the family, or, indeed, to the wider public, which deserves to have its confidence restored.

People working in the healthcare system and those who work in the hospital concerned want to see that wider confidence restored, because in a sense, there is a cloud over everyone. As Pat Doherty implied, suggestions have been made that different people might be to blame. Veiled references have been made to the role of the undertaker, and questions have been asked about nurses and other hospital staff. None of us wants to see those sorts of questions ricocheting around unanswered, hurting a lot of people as well as grieving the McGinley family. That is the reason that a public inquiry is needed.

Mr G Robinson: I offer my sympathy to the McGinley family, and I congratulate them for their efforts to establish the truth of this case. I also commend the people who carry out daily the difficult work in mortuaries quietly and unassumingly. I speak not to criticise them, but to find the truth of this one case.

All of us wish — and expect — that dignity, care and respect be shown to a family member or friend when they die. That is assumed by us all, and we take that for granted as the norm. In the majority of cases, that is exactly what happens. It is also the aim of the second, sixth and seventh principles of the document 'Care and Respect in Death: Good Practice Guidance for NHS Mortuary Staff'. There are, however, occasions, such as that now under debate, when something goes wrong. In such circumstances, it is only dignified, respectful and professional that the families are told the truth of what has happened. That will perhaps help them to begin their grieving process.

Something went seriously wrong in this case, and I am sure that the Minister knows that. He should be prepared to commit to a public inquiry to identify any potential flaws in the system, but, most importantly, to get to the truth for the McGinley family. A public inquiry would also prevent the same circumstances occurring again.

I will therefore ask the Minister two questions. First, does he dispute the findings of Dr Bentley, who stated that the numerous fractures were caused post mortem? Secondly, does the Minister accept that the Coroners Service told the family that the injuries were caused by accident? If he does accept that, he must accept that the Coroners Service is apparently in the possession of facts that confirm the accidental status of the injuries and their post-mortem cause but that all previous enquiries have apparently been unable to establish, or have

overlooked. A public inquiry is certainly justified in this case, and, in my view, it is a necessity.

The McGinley family are reported by the Press Association on 25 April as saying that they do not want any money because that is not what this matter is about. For that I commend them. What the family, and all of us, want is the truth — not a witch-hunt, not money, just the truth. I say to the Minister that I support them in their search for the truth, and I urge him to launch a public inquiry as soon as possible so that the truth in this case can be established and a similar occurrence in can be prevented. I commend the Chairperson of the Health Committee for bringing the motion to the House. I support the motion.

Mr McCarthy: I support the motion and offer my sympathy, and that of my party, to Mrs McGinley's family. Losing a loved one is hard enough. What the family has had to endure, however, is totally unacceptable. No one should suffer that further blow after a loved one's death.

I thank my United Community group colleague Dr Kieran Deeny for the hard work that he has carried out on this deplorable incident. His efforts are widely appreciated by all who are involved in this terribly sad case. Unfortunately, due to family circumstances, Dr Deeny cannot be present for the debate, although he fully supports the motion.

It is abundantly clear that the family, and other people, do not believe that the Coroners Service has provided a satisfactory explanation for the circumstances of Maureen's injuries; far from it, in fact. I do not wish to attribute blame, but merely to say that I know from what Dr Deeny and others have said that the circumstances have not been fully clarified. As other Members have pointed out, the McGinley family deserve full credit for their campaign. Their endurance must be applauded. Mrs McGinley's case may not be the only one of its kind in the UK or Ireland. Therefore, her family have not only served their own cause, but, perhaps, that of other families.

We must determine what action should be taken on the case. First, clarification is needed on whether the care and respect in death good-practice guidance was adhered to. The guidance contains eight key principles. It is worth seeking evidence on whether those were properly applied. It is highly possible, for example, that the process of moving Maureen's body, or working with it, could have caused fractures. That is why it must be known whether correct procedures were followed. I am aware that the family has been informed that no further action will be taken by the Coroners Service unless further information becomes available. The question is how such information can be made available.

I am aware that 34 rib fractures, without bleeding, were found during a post-mortem of Mrs McGinley's body. Those fractures must have occurred after death. That is frightening. We must establish precisely what happened. We cannot simply wait for information to become available. The explanations that have been put forward so far — that the fractures were caused by restraints that were used by the undertaker, movement of the body from the hospital, and even resuscitation attempts — range from the unlikely to the impossible.

The call for a public inquiry is tempting. My party will not oppose that call. However, the key word in the motion is "independent". An independent inquiry would answer questions on how more information about what happened to the late Maureen McGinley can be made available in a way that delivers clarity — and is seen to do so.

I thank the Chairperson of the Health Committee, who tabled the motion. On behalf of the United Community group, I state our full support for the motion and, specifically, for an independent and time-bound inquiry.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I, like other Members, will begin by expressing my sincere sympathy with the McGinley family. Any family death creates a sad loss. However, the loss of a mother, who is, often, the source of the family's love and support, is extremely difficult. I understand how difficult it must be for the family, not only to lose their mother, but to learn that she sustained injuries after her death. Anyone would be distressed and disturbed to learn that a loved one's body had suffered injury after death.

That is why the McGinley family's desire to know how that happened is understandable. When I met the family in February, it was clear that they were still grieving for their mother and that they were naturally upset and angry that they still did not have a clear explanation about how the fractures were sustained. I understand and appreciate the increasing difficulty that that must continue to pose almost 18 months after Mrs McGinley's death and the impact that such uncertainty must have on immediate family members and on the wider family circle.

4.15 pm

Death is not an uncommon experience for nursing staff. Each year, there are around 15,000 deaths in Northern Ireland, more than half of which occur in hospitals. As a result, healthcare staff are familiar with the processes and procedures that are required to provide appropriate care for the body of a deceased individual. That does not mean that healthcare staff are not affected and distressed by the death of a patient; rather, they take forward their duties in a highly professional manner.

At all times, staff know to treat a body with due respect, care and dignity.

It should be remembered that, along with everyone else, healthcare staff will suffer the loss of a loved one. Throughout their training, they are instilled with the ethos of caring for patients at all times. Today, we are even more aware than we were previously of the dignity and respect that must be afforded to the deceased and their families. Several years ago, the outcome of the human organs inquiry was instrumental in bringing about improved communication and greater consideration of the wishes of the family.

Although we are discussing the unfortunate events that took place after Mrs McGinley's death, it is important to emphasise two matters. First, her death was a result of natural causes and, secondly, there has never been any question about the quality of the medical care that she received while she was in hospital. When I met members of the McGinley family in February, they told me that they were content that their mother had been well cared for in Altnagelvin Hospital during the period of her short illness.

It would be useful to set out the background to the case and to detail the actions of the trust staff up to the time when the coroner directed that a post-mortem was to be carried out. Mrs McGinley was admitted to Altnagelvin Hospital after suffering a fall at home, and she sadly died on the evening of 3 January 2007 in the hospital. Following her death, care of her body was provided by hospital staff in accordance with the trust's guidelines for dealing with death certification and the care that is required immediately following death. Investigations into the matter by Altnagelvin Hospital and the Coroners Office have indicated that the staff involved followed those protocols and treated Mrs McGinley's body with the care and respect that would be expected.

On the morning of 4 January 2007, the hospital reported Mrs McGinley's death to the coroner, who advised that a post-mortem was required. On 5 January 2007, Mrs McGinley's body was taken to Belfast City Mortuary for the post-mortem by undertakers acting for the Coroners Service for Northern Ireland. On 19 March 2007, the results of the post-mortem were notified to the family and the hospital. To clear up the point that Mr Doherty raised, post-mortem reports often take many weeks for completion. The time taken in this case was not unusual, and there is no question of the report being held up for any particular reason.

The deputy state pathologist, Dr Bentley, who carried out the post-mortem, noted the following points in his report to Altnagelvin Hospital: the autopsy revealed a total of 34 fractures, the vast majority of which were sustained after death; the patient had marked osteoporosis; a large number of post-mortem fractures are extremely

unusual, even in the presence of marked osteoporosis; it does not necessarily mean that the body was subjected to rough handling; often undertakers transport a body on a stretcher with the body secured by means of adjustable straps; and it is possible that, if the strap across the chest had been applied tightly, it could cause those injuries.

The trust's chief executive immediately conducted an internal investigation into the handling of Mrs McGinley's body in Altnagelvin Hospital, and that investigation concluded that all handling and transfers of the body were carried out in accordance with hospital protocols. On 23 March 2007, senior officials from Altnagelvin Hospital met members of the McGinley family, their legal representatives and Pat Doherty MP MLA to discuss the findings from the trust's investigation.

In response to the family's continuing concerns, the trust wrote to the coroner to ask whether he would undertake an independent review of practices in the organisations that had responsibility for the body from the time of Mrs McGinley's death until it was returned to the family. The coroner agreed to undertake such an investigation and to report its findings to the trust.

Under direction from the coroner, PSNI officers conducted the necessary inquiries, and I am advised that all those who came into contact with Mrs McGinley's body were identified and interviewed, and statements were taken from them. I am also advised that, having reviewed that evidence, the coroner concluded that it was not possible to establish how Mrs McGinley's fractures had been sustained. The Coroners Service made no recommendations to the trust about its procedures for handling and moving bodies in the hospital after her death.

In February 2008, when I met the McGinley family, I undertook to establish with the trust the train of events up to and after Mrs McGinley's death. The trust's chief executive supplied me with a detailed account of the care that was provided to Mrs McGinley and, specifically, clarification on the care of her body after death. In response to a key question that Mrs McGinley's family raised, the chief executive confirmed that Mrs McGinley's body had not been washed. However, before being moved to the mortuary until it could be released to the undertakers, the body was checked by a member of the nursing staff to ensure that it was clean. Having received that information, I confirm that I am satisfied that the trust acted appropriately in this case.

It is important that the Assembly understand that the circumstances of the matter extend beyond my Department's remit. The Coroners Service for Northern Ireland operates within the Northern Ireland Court Service, which is the Lord Chancellor's responsibility in Northern

Ireland. The administration of the Coroners Service is not a devolved matter. The coroner, who is an independent judicial officer, is responsible for directing that a body be brought to a suitable place for post-mortem, and for making the necessary arrangements for the body's transportation.

I am advised that the coroner directed Mrs McGinley's body to be held for post-mortem on the morning of 4 January 2007, and I emphasise that, from the point at which the coroner took charge of the body, responsibility for its handling and transport became a matter for the coroner. Therefore, I am not in a position to comment on events that occurred after that. For example, I can comment neither on the body's handling by the undertakers who were acting for the coroner nor on the body's transfer from Altnagelvin to Belfast for post-mortem.

There have been two thorough investigations into this tragic case, and, in both instances, no definitive answer has been found as to how those fractures occurred. Moreover, the coroner's review — conducted at the trusts request — was an independent investigation that police officers conducted, acting under the coroner's direction.

As I said, each member of the hospital staff who came into contact with Mrs McGinley's body was identified and interviewed, and a statement was taken. That investigation's independence should help to provide the necessary assurances that the trust's role has been scrutinised effectively.

The motion calls for a "time-bound public inquiry". Some people who are calling for a public inquiry into this case, and into other cases, assert that such an inquiry can be time bound. That is not possible — no one can put a time limit on justice — and any public inquiry must be free to investigate and examine matters fully and appropriately. It is a well-established principle here and in the rest of the UK that public inquiries should be called only in exceptional circumstances — circumstances in which no other investigatory mechanism would be sufficient.

In that respect, we must consider whether a public inquiry would be justified on the grounds that the matter in question gives rise to a nationwide crisis of confidence or involves the loss of many lives. In my opinion, this matter would not meet those criteria.

If I thought that a public inquiry was appropriate and would help provide the answer as to why Mrs McGinley's body sustained so many fractures following —

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Yes, I will. Allow me to finish this sentence, and I will happily give way.

If I thought that a public inquiry was appropriate and would help to provide the answer as to why Mrs McGinley's body sustained so many fractures following her death, I would not hesitate to hold one.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: First, if the fact that a body sustained 34 fractures to the ribs after death is not of the greatest importance, what circumstance would allow for the holding of a public inquiry? Secondly, how can the Minister accept that what happened was an accident when we appear not to know how the accident happened? On what does he base that comment?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I do not remember talking about an accident; I did not use the word "accident". I follow the guidance on whether a public inquiry should be held, which states that a public inquiry should be held if the matter in question gives rise to a nationwide crisis of confidence and/or involves the loss of many lives. If there is no overwhelming reason to hold the inquiry in public, the next step is to consider whether a departmental review inquiry or an independent private inquiry with a full published report would be appropriate. The coroner effectively conducted an independent inquiry, with a full published report. Therefore, I have followed the guidelines in that respect — *[Interruption.]* A Member is talking at me from a sedentary position. This is a very serious matter. I never mentioned the word "accident". If I could find a way to determine how those injuries occurred, I would take steps to do so.

The family have asked an independent expert, Professor Christopher Milroy, to conduct an inquiry on their behalf. The trust will co-operate fully with the professor, as, I understand, will the coroner. I am aware that the coroner has asked the family to share the outcome of Professor Milroy's investigation with him. If that investigation reaches a different conclusion from that of the coroner, I expect to be advised should any further actions be considered regarding the role of Health Service staff in this matter.

I understand and sympathise fully with the family's situation and their desire to establish the circumstances that led to their mother's body sustaining those fractures. I have been assured that there have been rigorous efforts to investigate the matter fully. I have already set out that there has been a trust investigation and that the coroner has conducted an independent investigation. In addition, I have received a detailed account from the trust of the events surrounding Mrs McGinley's death, following my meeting with the family and Pat Doherty.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: This matter is very serious. Perhaps I have taken the Minister up wrong, but he seems to suggest that if the inquiry that the family members have asked to be conducted on their behalf — as is their prerogative — is successful, there might be a public inquiry. Surely the onus is on the state to investigate, not the individual?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Hear, hear.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Mrs McGinley was, to all intents and purposes, in the care of the state. Surely we cannot say to a family that an inquiry will be held if they can prove that there is a reason to hold one? Surely the time has come for the Government and those responsible to say that allowing that situation to arise sets a very dangerous precedent for others?

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close, because his time is almost up.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I will, Mr Speaker. The Minister should consider the point that I have put to him.

Mr Speaker: I will allow the Minister a quick response.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As I said, none of the investigations found evidence that Health Service staff had acted inappropriately.

4.30 pm

However, I have taken account of the mood of the House, and I have listened to Dr Paisley and others. As I said to Pat Doherty and to the family, I will leave no stone unturned. I will, of course, keep the matter under review and consideration. I am not saying that there will never be a public inquiry or that I am ruling out such an inquiry. The point that Dr Paisley just made is a telling one.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): Go raibh maith agat. I extend my personal condolences to the family of Maureen McGinley and welcome the members of the family who have come today to listen to the debate.

I commend my colleagues on the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for tabling the motion, and I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate. Dr Kieran Deeny, who is a member of the Committee and who has been very supportive of calls for an inquiry, apologises for not being able to take part in the debate.

The Rev Dr Robert Coulter said that it was regrettable that it was necessary to bring the issue before the House in the first place. I fully agree with him. The fact that this lady sustained so many fractures after she died is a matter that cries out for investigation, answers and justice.

If there had been only one or two fractures, there may have been a straightforward explanation as to how they had been sustained. However, such a large number of fractures to a specific part of the body — the ribcage — could not have happened without someone knowing. The pathologist's report states that it is extremely unusual to see so many post-mortem fractures, even in the presence of marked osteoporosis. That would strongly suggest that, at some point during the handling or moving of the body, considerable force was applied to the chest. The family are entitled to an explanation, and I fully support them in their campaign for answers.

The McGinley family have been unable to grieve properly because of a lack of openness and transparency about how their mother received those fractures. There are several serious concerns about the case. Many of those concerns were raised during the debate, and I will draw attention to a number of them.

There is the question of delay. Mrs McGinley died in Altnagelvin Hospital on 3 January 2007. Her post-mortem examination was carried out two days later on 5 January. However, despite the discovery during the autopsy that this lady had suffered 34 unexplained rib fractures after her death, it was more than 10 weeks later before that news was communicated to the family and, apparently, to the hospital. The question must be asked: when was the pathologist's report produced, and to whom was it sent? That delay was highlighted by a number of Members today. We are all very aware of it, and we need answers.

Papers that the family have shared with me indicate that the chief executive of the Western Health and Social Care Trust was made aware of the matter on 19 March 2007. The trust states that there was no record of the post-mortem examination report having been received before that date. A letter from the deputy state pathologist to the hospital, dated 22 March, confirmed the autopsy findings. The delay in starting that investigation could have proved crucial in getting to the bottom of this affair and getting more of the answers that the McGinley family deserve.

As a result, the in-house investigation by the trust began only in March, and subsequent statements by the PSNI were not taken until April and May 2007. Those statements show that many of the people who were interviewed claimed to have only a limited recollection of the events surrounding the aftermath of Mrs McGinley's death.

A number of Members raised the issue of the washing of the body. There is conflicting evidence about whether Mrs McGinley's body was washed before being moved to the mortuary. The critical incident report that was prepared by the hospital shows that at approximately 8.00 pm on 3 January, a nursing auxiliary, among other procedures, washed the body and prepared it for the

mortuary. However, the investigating police officer was subsequently advised that the body was not washed after death. Will the Minister tell the family which version is correct? The Minister said today that checks were made to see whether the body was cleaned. However, there is conflicting evidence that a statement was made saying that the body was cleaned. Which is correct?

Although we are discussing something that happened in less than 48 hours — that is, between the time of Mrs McGinley's death and the beginning of the autopsy — responsibility for the care of her body during that time moved between two different legal entities. In the Chairperson's opening remarks, she drew attention to that fact, as did other Members. At the time of the incident, however, we were under direct rule. As Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Paul Goggins MP was responsible for justice matters, including the Coroners Service, and he was also the Minister with responsibility for health, social services and public safety, so he had responsibility for the body when it was in the charge of the hospital.

That situation changed only with the restoration of devolution. The subsequent split of responsibilities cannot be used as an excuse for refusing to hold an inquiry, and the Committee does not accept it as an excuse.

The devastating news of the unexplained fractures to Mrs McGinley's body shocked the family and caused untold additional trauma to them as they were beginning to come to terms with her death. It also caused widespread public shock and concern, so much so that 18,500 people signed a petition calling for an inquiry to be held to establish the truth.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The fact that 18,500 people signed a petition cannot be ignored. So far, every political party has supported the call for a public inquiry for social justice for the McGinley family. Surely that should be sufficient criteria on which to initiate a time-bound inquiry.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I thank the Member for her intervention, and I could not agree more. The fact that 18,500 people signed a petition speaks for itself. The petition was presented to members of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety in February 2008. As other Members stated, the Minister initially refused to meet the family but subsequently did so on 25 February. At that meeting, the Minister assured the family that he would do everything in his power to establish what happened to their mother. Since then, the family have been deeply disappointed by the Minister's refusal to set up an inquiry. That disappointment is shared by the Committee and by most Members of the House, including Thomas Buchanan, Pat Doherty and others.

Some Members also referred to the fact that the family recently appointed an independent expert — Professor Milroy — to examine the case. I welcome the indication from the Coroners Service that it will co-operate fully with Professor Milroy. Furthermore, I welcome the indication from the Minister that the trust will also co-operate with him.

As Dr Paisley said, it is a poor indictment on everyone involved that the family must wait on the result of Professor Milroy's inquiry before anyone else will take notice of their plight.

The Minister referred to the hospital staff, but the family are not interested in conducting a witch-hunt, and nor do they want any member of staff to feel intimidated. In fact, they have said that the standard of care that their mother received at the hospital was excellent prior to her death. However, the family need answers to the situation that occurred after her death. As Claire McGill stated in her contribution, the healthcare staff also need answers to what happened. They also need the confusion to be cleared up.

It is disappointing that the Minister has come here today and simply reiterated what we already knew. We are all aware of the facts, but we have heard nothing new today. The Minister said that no definitive answers have been found after two thorough examinations. Is that acceptable to the McGinley family? Would any Member here accept that if the same thing were to happen to a member of their family?

The Minister also said that the rules for conducting a public inquiry mean that it is not appropriate in this case. However, the fact that 18,500 people signed a petition makes it clear that this is a cause of widespread public concern, as has been highlighted by many Members today. It is an issue of great public concern and answers must be provided.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Does the Member agree that people will not have confidence in a trust carrying out its own investigation? Policing oneself always raises question marks, which is why an independent inquiry should be conducted.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Absolutely, I could not agree more. The only answer to the situation is to conduct a full public inquiry that is time bound.

In conclusion, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety believes that the matter can be resolved satisfactorily only through a full public inquiry, when everyone who is involved can be questioned under oath. Everyone who spoke during the debate supported the call for an inquiry, and I hope that that has given some support and encouragement to the members of the McGinley family who are in the Public Gallery today.

The reasons offered by the Minister today are not sufficient to refuse a public inquiry. The Committee still firmly believes that an inquiry is the only way that the McGinley family will get the answers that they deserve and that will allow them to get on with grieving for their mother. We will continue to do all that we can to assist the family in their quest for answers. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern that investigations by the Western Health and Social Care Trust and the Coroner's Service have failed to provide a satisfactory explanation of the circumstances in which the late Mrs Maureen McGinley received a number of fractures following her death; commends the family of Mrs Maureen McGinley for their campaign in highlighting the issue; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to initiate, as a matter of urgency, a full, independent and time-bound public inquiry.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Irish-Medium Primary School

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. I wish to inform Members that a valid petition of concern about the motion was presented on Monday 23 June. I therefore remind Members that the effect of the petition is that the vote on the motion will be on a cross-community basis.

Miss McIlveen: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern at the refusal by the Minister of Education to consider proposals for new Controlled, Maintained and Integrated schools, whilst approving a plan for a new Irish Medium Primary School in Derry/Londonderry, despite advice from officials in the Department that there was already adequate capacity in this sector.

Mr Poots: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I notice that the Minister of Education is not in the House for the debate. Is it appropriate for the debate to begin while the Minister is not here to listen to the case being made? Has the Minister given you notice that she was not going to be in the Chamber or given a reason why she was not going to be here?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. I have had no notification that the Minister will be late. Nevertheless, we shall carry on with the debate.

Miss McIlveen: I will begin by expressing my disappointment that the SDLP has signed a petition of concern about the motion. I hope that after hearing the reasoning behind the motion, the Members of that party will reconsider their position and support it. I expect no less of the Sinn Féin Members than to blindly follow the lead of their Minister, even though it is a case of the blind leading the blind.

The first, and largest, Irish-medium school in the city which, in the absence of any talent in Irish, I will call the Shantallow school, initially operated as an Irish-medium unit in the adjoining Steelstown Primary School for 10 years, before moving to its present site in 1993. At its peak, it had 228 pupils enrolled. However, since the second Irish-medium school opened in 1998, which I will refer to as the Brandywell school, enrolments have fallen dramatically. A total of 159 pupils were enrolled in the 2007-08 academic year. The Brandywell school currently has 135 pupils enrolled. There has been a general increase in numbers since 1998, but the school has never reached full capacity. In 2006-07, however, only 14 pupils enrolled in year 1.

According to the Department of Education's own figures in August 2007, the two existing schools had

an estimated 135 surplus places. One hundred and six of those places were in the Shantallow school. In August 2007, the Minister of Education decided to approve a new Irish-language school, situated less than three miles from the other two schools. I will call that third school the Springtown school. That approval overturned the decision of the direct rule Minister who had decided against funding only a year before, claiming that there was:

“significant surplus capacity at the nearest Irish-medium primary school”.

That, of course, was true then, and remains true today.

For the benefit of the Assembly I will read out the Department's policy on Irish-medium education. Its general policy is to support such provision: where it is satisfied that there is significant demand from parents, which means minimum intakes of 15 pupils in an urban area and 12 pupils in a rural area; where there is no suitable alternative provision within reasonable travelling distance; where it would be educationally sound and viable to provide it; where there would be no unreasonable outlay of public funds; where the new school should have no adverse impact on any other existing school in the area; where the new school should be located on a suitable site and in suitable accommodation; and, where there have been no serious objections to the proposal.

I stressed the word “and” because it is an extremely important word in the Department's policy. It means that all the points of the policy must be satisfied. It does not mean that the Minister can pick and choose which points she can follow and which she can choose to ignore.

In her press release of 8 August 2007, when she announced funding for three Irish-medium schools, including the third school in Londonderry, the Minister said:

“In recent years we have seen increasing demand from parents to have their children educated through the medium of Irish. This is significant at a time when we see an overall fall in the numbers of children in our schools.”

Apparently, that fall in numbers included enrolments at the Irish-medium school in Shantallow. In fact, the Department's figures state that there has been a fall of 35% in year-1 enrolments, taking the Shantallow and Brandywell schools together. Even taking into account the 16 year-1 pupils in the Springtown school, there would still be a 20% fall in year-1 enrolments. Yet the Minister persists in telling us that the sector is thriving.

4.45 pm

The Minister has imposed the restriction that 15 pupils must be enrolled in year 1 at the Springtown school. However, she has clearly ignored many of the criteria in her Department's policy. The Shantallow school, with its 106 spare places, is only 2.5 miles from the Springtown site, and the Brandywell school is

only 2.9 miles from it. Two undersubscribed Irish-medium schools within three miles make for suitable alternative provision within reasonable travelling distance. In addition, given the negative impact that the opening of the Brandywell school in 1998 had on the Shantallow school, and the continuing decline since then in that school's enrolments, it is more than reasonable to conclude that either, or both, of those existing schools would be adversely affected by grant-funding the Springtown school.

Those two reasons alone should mean that any outlay of public funds on the project would be unreasonable. However, we must also consider the fact that there were serious objections to the proposal. The Shantallow school and the Holy Family Primary School lodged objections to the proposal to grant-fund the Springtown school. I wish that I had time to read out in full the well-reasoned arguments that were made by the board of governors and staff of the Shantallow school. I suggest that Members read that document, which is dated 5 April 2007.

Not only does the document raise grave concerns about the procedure adopted by the governing body of Irish-medium education in recommending that the third school be opened — in particular, its total failure to consult with the Shantallow school regarding the proposal — it also asks extremely pertinent questions about the total lack of strategic planning for Irish-medium education in Londonderry. The governors and staff point out that there have not been enough significant changes in Irish-medium education in Londonderry since the proposal for the Springtown school was rejected only a year before.

Part of the Minister's decision-making process included the consideration of a planning application for 5,000 homes in the nearby Ballymagroarty area. In her notes on the proposal she stated:

“there will be 5,000 new homes”.

However, at that time, planning permission for the development had not been approved. All we know is that those homes are to be built over the next 10 years. The Minister can have no notion of how many of the residents of those houses would wish to send their children to an Irish-medium school, let alone how many children might move into the area.

The Minister also referred to the pupils at Irish-medium preschools. However, the Department pointed out that not all of those children will go on to attend Irish-medium primary schools. It is also foreseeable that the school population will fall by 23%. Even the most loyal advocates of Irish-medium education must agree that opening a further Irish-medium school in Londonderry is a gross waste of public money.

Furthermore, in March 2008, the Minister decided not to allow Conlig Primary School to adopt integrated

status on the grounds that adequate provision existed in the area. Does she use the guidelines only when it suits her? At that time she said:

“I must consider all the implications for the entire schools’ estate in the area.”

However, she does not seem to have done that in Londonderry.

If we examine the impact on maintained primary schools in the area, there are 842 surplus capacity places, 244 of which are in Holy Family Primary School, which is less than one mile from the Springtown school. It has been recognised that Holy Family Primary School will potentially be affected by the grant-funding of the Springtown school.

The Education and Training Inspectorate did not support the Springtown proposal, as it believed that Irish-medium provision in the city had reached saturation point. The Western Education and Library Board was concerned that a further school was being proposed, given that there were already surplus places at the other two schools, and given the effect of additional costs on a stretched education budget. That board also pointed out that there needed to be a coherent approach to primary-school provision and area-based planning.

I know that the Minister will attempt to claim that the motion is another DUP attack on the Irish-medium sector. It is not. In turning down the proposal, the Minister not only ignored her Department’s criteria on grant funding of Irish-medium schools, but she ignored the recommendation of the head of development and infrastructure in her Department. Not only did she ignore the concise and well thought-out arguments of the governors and staff of the Shantallow school, she ignored the principles of area-based planning.

The situation is another example of the Minister attempting to run her Department as though it were her personal fiefdom. However, she must realise that she is accountable. I urge all Members to join us in condemning her actions. Furthermore, I ask Members to question the rationale of the decisions — or the lack of decisions — that are being made on the schools that are in their respective constituencies.

The motion is not an example of political point-scoring, nor is it an attack on Irish-medium education. It is a recognition by this legislature that the Minister has acted illogically, unreasonably and contrary to her Department’s policy and guidelines.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh míle maith agat. That was an interesting presentation by the lady on the opposite Benches. I am glad that she is not attacking the Irish language.

The name of the Irish-medium school in question, Gaelscoil na Daróige, charms me greatly. Indeed, it is so fitting that, if I were the Minister of Education, I

would approve the school even if it had no pupils at all. “Dair” is the Irish word for an oak tree, which gives its name to the county of Derry, or Doire. “Daróg” is the Irish term for a young oak tree. The school’s name is fitting, and I am very taken by it. Gaelscoil, of course, refers to a school where the Irish language is used.

Any community that wants a school and that can assure the Department that it has 15 primary-1 pupils is entitled to funding for that school. That is education policy — the school does not have to be an Irish-medium, or any other medium, school. Funding has not been granted to Gaelscoil na Daróige, but it has been approved, in principle, as a Gaelscoil. It is hoped that the school will fulfil the relevant criteria. Indeed, demographic information that has been gathered by Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and others who work on behalf of the Irish language indicates clearly that the school will fulfil the relevant criteria eventually.

The school is already operational and has been financed by fundraising and voluntary subscription. The school already exists, so the Minister is not creating it. Furthermore, it is not the Minister who drives the creation of Irish-medium schools. I know that that drive comes from parents and communities. I hope that very soon there will be a new Gaelscoil in Léim an Mhadaidh, which is in my own constituency. We already have a náiscoil and a Gaelscoil in Dungiven, which are both very successful.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta has created a framework for the future development of Irish-medium provision throughout the North. That framework is based on meticulous analysis of the demographics and information from the most recent census. Those statistics prove the viability of the future creation of Irish-medium schools.

The building of more than one Irish-medium primary school in a particular area is aimed at creating a catchment area of Irish-medium pupils who will be fundamental to the creation of an Irish-medium post-primary school in that area.

We are building up from náiscoil to bunscoil and on to post-primary, and it is to be hoped that some day, somewhere, we will have an Irish-medium university.

A third Gaelscoil in Derry is viable and required. It is a big city, and the demographics of areas smaller than Derry suggest that it could accommodate several Irish-medium schools.

Mr Weir: Why does the Member think that a third school is viable, when the two existing primary schools have spare capacity and cannot fill their places?

Mr Brolly: I hope that the Member does not think that I am being too smart when I say that one could say that of almost any school, in any medium, in the North of Ireland. I am sure that the Minister is tired listening

to the statistics about the number of empty desks that there is.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Brolly: Is my time up already, Mr Speaker?

Some Members: He has an extra minute.

Mr Brolly: I have an extra minute. Go raibh míle maith agat. I cannot accept that the Member who proposed the motion is not opposed to the Irish language. We are used to that now, and I wish that the Members opposite would take a more mature look at the beautiful language that is part of all that we have. The lady opposite was reluctant to use the Irish names for places, but she said Shantallow, which means "old land" — just as Shankill means "old church".

Mr B McCrea: I hope that it is not inappropriate for me to say that I always enjoy Mr Brolly's speeches. They remind me of gentler times, when we did not have problems with extended schools, numeracy and literacy, a lack of qualifications, migrant workers and teacher training, as well as 50,000 empty school spaces. Unfortunately, however, we have to deal with those issues and find a way in which to resolve them.

I notice that I have not yet engaged the attention of the Minister who, some time ago, asked me to work with her. I am trying to work with her now.

It is not surprising that the House is compelled to debate another divisive act by the Minister of Education. It is regrettable that, once again, the Minister of Education seems intent on sectarianising the education debate. Once again, she has acted against the advice of her Department and put partisan, sectoral interests above the need for good government.

It is worth noting that of the five petitions of concern that have before the House, three have originated from the Minister of Education's party. Its objective is to shield her from the majority opinion in the Assembly. That demonstrates the Minister's refusal to work with the House and the lack of confidence that the House has in her.

In recent times, I have heard a change in the mood music about reaching consensus. If we are genuine in our desire to reach consensus, people will have to take responsibility for their actions. We will work with people who are genuine in their attempts to achieve good for all.

I thank the honourable Members who tabled the motion. The debate will only emphasise the lack of confidence that exists, and it is to be hoped that it will suggest to the Minister of Education that we must begin to consider what the debate is about. It must be stated that the debate is not about the Irish language. As a unionist who is committed to pluralism and the diversity of the United Kingdom, and one who is

mindful of the protections granted in the Belfast Agreement, I have no hesitation in affirming the freedom of those who wish to use the Irish language to do so. Nor do I hesitate in affirming that Irish-medium units in schools can play a role in a pluralist education system, and I am open to persuasion on the relative merits of exclusively Irish-medium schools.

Mr Speaker, I am even using a green highlighter on my notes. None of that matters for today's debate.

5.00 pm

What is being debated is the specific action taken by the Minister to approve a new Irish-medium school in Londonderry against the advice of her Department's head of development and infrastructure who stated:

"there are already sufficient IM primary school places."

He noted — and I summarise — that the nearest alternative Irish-medium school and the nearest maintained school had expressed concerns about the proposals. He stated that in two Irish-medium schools the numbers of pupils enrolling in year one had fallen by approximately 35% in the past two years.

It should be a matter of concern that the Education Minister so blatantly disregarded the advice of her officials. Although it is the case that a democratically elected representative can — in compelling circumstances — disagree with the advice of officials, let it be remembered that this is the same Education Minister who is forever telling us that there are 50,000 empty desks and that we have to constrain the school estates to manage that process.

The Minister's unnecessary and unco-ordinated actions have led to today's debate as, once again, she has sought the path of confrontation. That is not good and fair government; it is partisan and sectional and does not deliver for the common good of our society. I repeat: this is not a debate about the Irish language and it is not a debate about parents choosing Irish-medium education. As someone who believes firmly in the principles of pluralism, I have no hesitation in accepting the role of both sectors.

However, the Minister's actions have shamefully privileged one section of the education system in Londonderry at the expense of the controlled, maintained and integrated sectors — we cannot support that; that does not represent a shared future. It is nothing less than an Executive Minister refusing to serve the whole community, and I urge her to reconsider. I support the motion.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Fáiltim roimh an deis an t-ábhar iontach tábhachtach seo a phlé inniu, ach caithfidh mé a rá go bhfuil mé glan in éadan an rúin atá os ár gcomhair.

I welcome the opportunity to debate the issue; however, I oppose the motion. Mr Brolly mentioned that Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, the body charged with the develop-

ment of Irish-medium education, has created a framework for its future development throughout the North. That body is made up of highly professional educationalists who know what they are doing. The framework that Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta has developed — and I have examined it — is based on a detailed analysis of future demographic trends and information from the recent census. The purpose of that framework is to co-ordinate with parents and communities and to provide a guide for the development of Irish-medium education.

The framework aims to guide parents by creating new provision in a strategic manner whereby children who have attended Irish-medium primary schools will, in the future, have the realistic option and opportunity of post-primary Irish-medium education. The guidance ensures that access to Irish-medium education is optimised and that new provision does not undermine existing provision — that is a very important point.

The analysis information indicates that there is sufficient demand for Irish-medium education in Derry City and demand for at least a third Gaelscoil. Furthermore, that extra provision is required to broaden access to Irish-medium education throughout all those communities in Derry City in which it does not currently exist. Other smaller areas in the North, as Mr Brolly pointed out, have equal provision.

It is also important to ensure that more than one or two primary schools exist in a region in order to sustain a viable post-primary facility there. It is important to note that funding has not yet been granted to Gaelscoil na Daróige as it has not yet met the Department of Education's funding criteria. Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta has told me that it supports the development of the new pre-school and primary-school provision in Derry on the condition that the school meets those criteria. The development is consistent with the Irish-medium sector framework for development devised by Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta.

The majority of children attending Gaelscoil na Daróige — and those who will attend it in the future — would not otherwise avail themselves of Irish-medium provision because of where they live. The existing Irish-medium schools in Derry will not be adversely affected by the Department's approval for Gaelscoil na Daróige for two reasons: first, the existing schools do not draw large numbers of pupils from that particular area; and secondly, the interested children already attend a non-funded school.

It is important to note that the number of children entering Irish-medium education in Derry has risen since 2000. Currently, 66 pupils are entering Irish-medium provision across the city each year. That figure is expected to continue to grow as the number of children in pre-school provision increases. There are two funded Irish-medium primary schools in the city

— Bunscoil Cholmcille and Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir. Gaelscoil na Daróige is unfunded. There are 303 pupils in Irish-medium primary provision in the three schools, which is an increase of 27 on 2006.

I fully support Gaelscoil na Daróige and reject the motion. If the process of area-based planning centred on the sustainable schools policy were still in place, we would probably not be having this debate today.

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party agrees with the concern expressed in the motion and with the criticism of the Minister's decision to allow the establishment of another Irish-medium primary school in Londonderry. However, we do not think that the wording of the motion, accusing the Minister of refusing to consider proposals for schools in other sectors, is accurate. My party also has concerns about the treatment of Irish-medium applications as opposed to those from the integrated sector. We agree with the broad thrust of the motion.

All the arguments that I have heard about the situation in Derry indicate that the decision to allow Gaelscoil na Daróige flies in the face of the Department's guidelines for the establishment of a new school. The general policy — as outlined by Michelle McIlveen — is to support new provision where there is no suitable alternative provision within reasonable travelling distance, and where it would be educationally sound and viable to provide it. Evidence of parental demand and a minimum intake are also factors, as is the fact that there should not be any serious objections to the proposal in general.

The board of governors of Bunscoil Cholmcille have expressed an unequivocal view that the proposal does not represent an effective addition to Irish-medium provision. The statement made by the board of governors, which Miss McIlveen quoted from, states:

"It is neither sustainable nor prudent to propose the establishment of a third Irish Medium primary school at this time whilst current providers have considerable spare capacity and particularly in the light of the fact that the roll number of Bunscoil Cholmcille has been in significant decline since the establishment of a second primary level provider."

The pupil enrolment in that school has fallen 39% since the establishment of the Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir nine years ago.

Has there been a sufficient increase in demand for Irish-language education in Londonderry to make up for the effect of spreading the existing enrolment over three sites instead of two? It does not seem like it. The existing schools have a large number of surplus places, and they are objecting to the proposal.

Is it beneficial or detrimental to the cause of Irish-language provision to have three half-empty schools in

the city? It seems detrimental. I quote a line from the statement by the other school:

“The actual effect of establishing a second provider ... nine years ago has been to distract from the work and development of Irish Medium...”

The Education and Training Inspectorate is also against the proposal; it considers Bunscoil Cholmcille and Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir to be more than adequate for present and foreseeable needs. Therefore, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the reason that the proposal has received ministerial approval is that it is for Irish-medium education and that the Minister has a special affection for that movement. I look forward to her response at the close of the debate.

I reiterate my party's support for both the Irish-medium and integrated sectors — one of which is prioritised in the Programme for Government and the other is not mentioned. I could point to situations — for example, in Ballycastle and the Clogher Valley, where funding for integrated schools was refused, even though, on the face of it, both cases were strong — and compare them to the situation that we are now considering, which appears to fail almost all the tests that the Department has set. I doubt that this school can be viable except at the expense of the existing providers, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's reasons for her decision.

As Members know, the education budget is stretched, and we are having difficulty in finding money for very worthy projects. There is no scope for funding anything that is unnecessary, and a third Irish-medium school appears to be unnecessary. If there is an explanation for this, I look forward to hearing it; for now, however, the Alliance Party supports the motion.

Mr Storey: I like to ensure clarity and that people know exactly where I stand on an issue. I do not now speak as Chairperson of the Education Committee but as a Member for the greatest constituency in the world North Antrim.

I welcome the fact that the Minister is at last in the House. Although if we are to believe media speculation, it may be one of the last debates in which she will occupy the post of Education Minister. I wonder which of her colleagues will finally wield the knife against her. Whoever that may be, we may be sure that that individual will either bin McGuinness's proposals or oversee the employment of academic admissions criteria in defiance of the present Education Minister and with the full backing of the law. Those are the realities; those are the facts.

Regrettably, the Education Minister has come to be known, and rightly so, as the minister of delay and confusion. In recent days, she has tried to change that — with remarkable success: she is now known as the minister for embarrassing climbdowns. We saw the

most recent in today's 'Newsletter'. Under close questioning by my friend and colleague Mr Stephen Moutray, one of her officials conceded that if there is no agreement on a new transfer system:

“The department will be able to issue guidance, but it will not have the force of law. In this situation, schools will be able to set their own admissions criteria, including the use of ability as a criterion...”

Where are the Minister's denials? Where are her threats? They are lying face down in the sand.

Why should I say all that in a debate about Irish-medium schools? This Minister has pursued a narrow, sectarian, ideological approach to the future of our children. In her major policy on post-primary transfer, she has been thwarted and is powerless, as is admitted publicly by her own officials in today's press. What does she do in those circumstances? She tries to advance her sectarianism in smaller, bite-sized chunks in Irish-medium schools: little sectarian niblets for the Minister. That is why she made this decision, which is in defiance of her Department's policy on Irish-medium education.

I commend the opening remarks of my colleague —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: To get an extra minute, I certainly will.

5.15 pm

Mr Bradley: Why does the Member use the word “sectarian” in reference to Irish-medium schools? Is he not aware that Irish-medium schools develop pupils spiritually, emotionally, physically, intellectually and linguistically? In fact, pupils educated in Irish-medium schools have the added value of being competent in two languages. Indeed, members of my family who are not Catholics attend Irish-medium schools, and they do not find them to be sectarian. In fact, they find those schools to be open and welcoming.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Storey: It is sad that I must educate the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education. If he had listened and was interested in the arguments expressed from this side of the Chamber, he would have realised that I was referring to the Minister as being sectarian — not the Irish-medium sector.

Mr McCausland: Will the Member not agree that there are other forms of sectarianism, such as cultural sectarianism and political sectarianism, in addition to religious sectarianism, and that those are the types of sectarianism espoused by the Minister of Education?

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for that, and I agree entirely with what he has said. *[Interruption]*.

Why did the Minister take the decision to provide further Irish-medium places in Londonderry? Did the Minister make the decision based on the best possible information available to her? Did she make the

decision in the best interests of those parents who chose an Irish-medium education for their children? She did not. She made the decision purely to feed her own particular ideology and to feed the ideology of the backwoodsmen in Sinn Féin. Those backwoodsmen need something, because it is clear that they have received little from the process to date, and that they are concerned about the process being undertaken in this House.

Dominic Bradley, in his press release, accused my party of waging war on the Irish language. That is not so. It is the Minister of Education who is seeking to wage war with the Irish language, and, in the process, has ensured that it is more divisive to the unionist community, and more negatively viewed and regarded with a greater aversion by it. Dominic Bradley and the SDLP know that and that is why they know that members of Sinn Féin are, by their behaviour, the biggest enemies to Irish-speaking schools in Northern Ireland. Mr Bradley must realise that he cannot pick and choose when he decides to oppose the Minister of Education —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Storey: I will return to this at a later stage.

Mr Adams: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. There are three reasons for the debate today. The debate is entirely bogus and is part of the ongoing attack by some in this Chamber on the work of the Minister of Education. First of all, this is simply another crude reaction by those who are against the crucial reform of our outdated education system. The concern on the Benches opposite is not for the thousands of mainly working-class children who are failed every year by that system.

Secondly, this motion reflects the degree of irrational hostility that there is amongst some on the Benches opposite to the Irish language, to Irish-language speakers and to children who are taught through the medium of the Irish language.

Thirdly, some Members — and I include the Member for Strangford in this — feel that they need to pretend that they are in charge of those Irish-medium institutions and that they can stop a Sinn Féin Minister from fulfilling her duties. They have chosen the education of our children —

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wonder whether you could rule whether it is appropriate — in the context of the dress code for this House — for the Member to be delivering a speech without wearing a tie. I believe that that is in contravention of the dress code.

Mr Speaker: It is perfectly all right for the Member to do so, and that is not really a point of order.

Mr Adams: It is interesting that Members opposite —

Mr Speaker: The issue of dress code relates to jackets, not so much to ties. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Adams: I did not think that dress codes, men, and the party opposite mixed, but there you go. *[Laughter.]*

They have chosen the education of children as an issue on which to contest this matter and, consequently, they are bringing these institutions into disrepute. They are making, i mo bharúil féin, a huge mistake.

The future of these institutions is based on the ability of all parties to work together for the common good — to make necessary compromises and agreements based on equality and inclusivity. That is the only way these institutions will survive. Therefore, the Members opposite have a choice — march backwards into meltdown and failure, or forwards to deliver for citizens on pressing problems in the areas of health, education, the environment, the economy and planning.

A chairde, this is the fourth debate in a year about the education of a relatively small number of children — 3,000 out of a school population of 350,000. Parents, teachers and others deserve credit for there being so many in what is the fastest-growing sector in our education system.

However, the education of children through Irish is not a threat. The Irish language is not a threat to unionism or to anyone else. Caitriona Ruane is working very hard to ensure that no child is placed at a disadvantage, that no child is abandoned or denied — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, the Member has the floor.

Mr Adams: The Minister is ensuring that no child is denied the education opportunity to meet his or her full potential.

She is effectively defending all sections of the education system, including the controlled, maintained, integrated and Irish-language sectors. She is also bringing forward necessary reforms of the education system.

All of us understand the concerns that exist, particularly among parents who are worried about decisions that they will have to take in an education environment that is undergoing a long-overdue overhaul. Those concerns are being exploited by those who are against education reform and the Irish language, and, in particular, by those who have their own narrow supremacist agenda in this institution.

Mr D Bradley: Does the Member agree that the lack of a sustainable schools policy, as part of area-based planning, means that there is a lack of guidance on the future of the schools estate? Does the absence of such a policy not give others, like the Members

opposite, the opportunity to attack the development of sectors, including the Irish-medium sector?

Mr Adams: Ní aontaím leatsa. I do not agree.

Sinn Féin's commitment is to every child. We are about making every school a good school, and providing the best possible education for every child. The Education Minister is showing great leadership in charting a difficult course towards that objective. Her detractors and the other begrudgers and naysayers would do well to follow her example. They can do that best by putting first the interest of all our children, including those who are being educated through the Irish language. Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Poots: Perhaps Mr Adams is not wearing a tie today because he has got a new job as a runner and he needs to keep the air moving around him.

It is good to take part in this debate. We are debating a subject relating to a Minister who has ignored her Department's advice in reaching a decision. This is a Minister who often talks about equality, but here we see demonstrated once again that equality is not applied when it comes to her office. She clearly puts Irish-language schools first, the maintained and integrated sector next, and controlled schools bottom of the pile. Once and for all, the Education Minister must put her house in order and start to treat all children fairly and equally. Rather than pay lip service to equality, she should actually apply it.

Let us look at the policy on this. It states that there should be no suitable alternative provision within a reasonable travelling distance. Well, there is, because Bunscoil Cholmcille is only 2.5 miles away and has 106 surplus places. The policy states that it should be "educationally sound and viable" to provide funding — it is not — and that there should be "no unreasonable outlay of public funds". There will be an unreasonable outlay of public funds.

It is claimed that the new school should have no adverse impact on any other existing school in the area; however, it will have, because there are already two Irish-medium schools with 135 surplus places. It is also claimed that there should be no serious objections to the proposals, but serious objections have come from schools in the Irish-medium, controlled and maintained sectors. Therefore, the Minister is flying in the face of six of the eight policies.

I was interested to hear Mr Dominic Bradley say that the Irish-language sector is growing in Londonderry and the wider council area. That is strange, because the document that is provided to the Minister does not say that. That document says that, over the past two years, there has been a 35% fall in the intake of the two Irish-medium schools in the area, schools that the Department of Education funds.

I know the consequences of ignoring that type of advice, because, in my constituency, Rowandale Integrated Primary School was opened last year, despite the fact that it had been turned down the previous year and that three brand new schools with a significant capacity had been built in that area. It also faced competition from an integrated school some miles away. This year, it is proposed to close that integrated school because another integrated school is to open a few miles up the road.

We face a situation in which another Irish-language school is to open, which will affect the enrolment figures of the two existing Irish-language schools. The consequence of that will be that those schools will come under further pressure, and more demand will be placed on the Northern Ireland Budget and the Northern Ireland taxpayer to support those schools, because they will not have enough pupils to sustain them.

The Minister must put her house in order and start to make decisions that are based on what is best for children.

Mrs I Robinson: Does the Member agree that the best thing that could be done for the children of Northern Ireland would be to remove the current Minister of Education and replace her with someone who is competent and unbiased? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Poots: That may seem a good idea, but I am sure that the SDLP would strenuously oppose Sinn Féin's removing the most unpopular Minister in the Government and the most unpopular Minister that the party has. Minister Ruane is a vehicle for passing votes from Sinn Féin to the SDLP. If Sinn Féin is content to keep her, that is Sinn Féin's problem. Unfortunately, she brings a bad name to the entire Northern Ireland Government, because of the inequality that she practises when carrying out her job. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Poots: I fully understand the problem that Mr Adams has in replacing the Minister, because of the lack of talent on the Bench opposite. Perhaps that is why he is stuck with Minister Ruane, who has repeatedly failed to deliver in her Department. Ms Ruane must now take decisions that are in the best interests of schools and children, and stop making decisions that are neither based on equality and fairness nor on the wider interests of education.

Mr K Robinson: I will state at the outset, lest we be accused of being bullies or bigots, that neither I nor my colleagues have any wish to deny parents their right to educate their children in the manner that they wish, through the medium that they choose, providing that no other child is disadvantaged as a result, given the finite nature of the education budget. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should not try to debate across the Chamber. Continue, Mr Robinson.

Mr K Robinson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Do I get an extra minute for that interjection?

During the first mandate of the Assembly, the Irish-language lobby group held a meeting in this Building — if I remember correctly, it was held in room 135 — to explain its *raison d'être*. I recall clearly that two members of the Ulster Unionist Party attended that meeting — Mr Alan McFarland and I. We listened carefully, and we outlined how education in the Irish language was viewed by our community.

5.30 pm

Over the past 10 years, much progress has been made in the Irish-medium sector. However, it is regrettable that instead of building on the excellent Irish-speaking units in the schools that are under Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) control, greater emphasis has been given to the establishment of separate schools and a separate sector. Building on the existing units would have brought lasting benefits to the provision of education through the medium of Irish. It would also have reduced the sense of exclusion and separateness and supported the Irish-language units in an existing and vibrant education sector. It would have nullified the widely held perception that the Irish language had been hijacked for political reasons, rather than linguistic and cultural ones, and it would have negated the need to establish another specific sector in the education world, with its associated administrative costs and inevitable bureaucracy.

The emergence of the current Minister of Education, with her pointed use of the Irish language in the House, despite time restraints, and her use of restrictive English terminology, such as “the North”, has simply reinforced the perception here and in wider society that the Irish language has been wrested from those who love and cherish it and has been transformed into the entity that has led to today’s divisive debate. The current situation with the existing 11 Irish-medium units in the Catholic-maintained schools and the emerging 25 Irish-medium schools represents a lost opportunity.

However, if other sectors in the education world are examined, the situation is different. Controlled schools — such as Knockbreda Primary School and Conlig Primary School — that sought to transform to grant-maintained integrated status, at the request of parents, were refused permission.

In my constituency, parents in Island Magee were persuaded to amalgamate three controlled schools in exchange for a new school on a new identified site to cater for the island. However, the Minister has not given that school-building programme the go ahead. Meanwhile, despite the advice of her departmental officials and the concerns of neighbouring maintained

and Irish-medium schools, the Minister sanctioned a new Irish-medium school in Londonderry.

On the one hand, we are lectured about the 50,000 empty desks in our schools and the financial implications of that, and on the other hand, the Minister presses ahead with a new school, despite her advisors and inspectors highlighting the damage that it will cause existing schools. In the absence of any rational argument for her actions, it is little wonder that many in the Chamber, and beyond, question the safety of their children’s education in the Minister’s hands. Due in no small part to her approach, I must support the motion.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member agree that for any group in a four-party mandatory coalition, the key word is not “four” or “mandatory” but “coalition”? Coalitions depend upon building consensus, which is what the Minister of Education should try to achieve.

Mr K Robinson: I agree with my colleague Mr Basil McCrea’s comments.

The Member for West Belfast Mr Gerry Adams lectured Members on this side of the Chamber about lacking concern for children, particularly those from working-class backgrounds. As someone who spent part of his educational life in west and north Belfast, I take grave exception to that comment. One reason for my opposition to the new Irish-medium school in Londonderry is that, despite us having a small education budget and always crying out for more investment in the core educational services, the Minister is going on a crusade of her own.

Mrs M Bradley: As someone who comes from Derry, I would say that the three schools that Michelle McIlveen mentioned when proposing the motion — in Shantallow, Springtown and Brandywell — would not be considered to be beside one another. As people in Derry would say, they would not be “handy”, if you were getting a child to school. In other words, the Member does not know the area. Otherwise, she would not have used it to make a comparison.

It seems that the DUP is planning to table a motion objecting to every new Irish-medium school in the North. Today, on spurious grounds, they are attacking a proposal for a Gaelscoil in Derry. Last month, they tried to block an Irish-medium school in Dungannon.

The DUP motion is not about a concern for local schools in Derry. In fact, no DUP MLAs from the north-west bothered to put their names to the motion. It is part of the same strategy that saw it blocking the Irish language Act, complaining about the Irish Language Broadcast Fund and generally seeking to block the whole equality agenda at every turn.

Were I to make a case for the protection of a local school, I would seek cross-party support. That is not what the DUP motion is about. It is an old-fashioned

sectarian knockabout, and it should be treated with the contempt that it deserves.

The DUP's strategies and motions are purely negative and destructive. That is why I signed the petition of concern, which is an important protection in the Assembly regulations that enables Members to demand a cross-community vote on the issue. If the DUP really wants its motion to be successful, its Members will have to convince at least a few nationalists, which they have failed to do.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I apologise for not being present for the whole debate. I have no doubt that I have heard many similar speeches in the previous four or five debates on the Irish-medium sector, and therefore I doubt that I have missed any original thinking on any of the issues.

The issue is about parents who want their children to be educated in the Irish-medium sector, as was provided for in the Good Friday Agreement. Therefore, they are perfectly and legally entitled to do so.

I have heard DUP and Ulster Unionist Members say that they have no difficulty with anyone learning or speaking Irish. It appears that their difficulty is with young children being educated in the Irish-medium sector. Why is that? No one is being forced to be educated in the Irish-medium sector and no parents are being forced to send their children to Irish-medium schools. Why object to a perfectly legitimate education system?

Mr B McCrea: The Member may not have been present during my speech, but I said that we are open to persuasion on the relative merits of exclusively Irish-medium schools; we are not objecting to that. However, we believe that the situation should be fair to all. Our problem is that the school in question will receive disproportionate amounts of resources compared to schools in the controlled and integrated sectors. That is why we are debating the issue; it is not simply about Irish.

Mr O'Dowd: Perhaps Mr McCrea should have outlined what resources have been spent on the school. It is my understanding that the Department of Education has spent no money on the school and that it has not agreed to fund the school. Therefore, why have the debate? It appears that it is based on misinformation. My understanding is that the only money that is being spent on the school is the money that transfers with the pupils. Therefore, if those pupils were being taught in the controlled or maintained sector, the same amount of money would be spent. The only difference is that the children will receive an Irish-medium education.

During a previous debate about the Irish language — I forget which one — I referred to a recent visit to Wales during which a Welsh Conservative told me that 10 years ago, speaking Welsh at a Welsh Conservative Party conference was frowned upon, but that it is now

encouraged. Given the political allegiances between Welsh conservatism and unionism in this part of the world, perhaps unionists should start to examine the broader concept of native languages.

The Welsh-medium sector is thriving. People who had no involvement with the Welsh language in the past now send their children to Welsh-medium schools, not as a political or any other statement, but because they want them to learn the language.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Member agree with the Department's head of development and infrastructure who said that there are already sufficient Irish-medium primary school places in Derry within reasonable travelling distance of the Branch and Springtown area and that there is no evidence that the potential demand for places is likely to exceed the present level of provision for the foreseeable future?

Mr O'Dowd: That well may be the case. Is there — *[Laughter.]*

Some Members are missing the point about this debate. Taxpayers' money is not being spent on that school.

Mr Storey: Twenty million pounds is being spent.

Mr O'Dowd: Where did the Member get that figure? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr O'Dowd: In a legislative Chamber, let us base debates on facts. No taxpayers' money is being spent on that school, so why is this being debated in the Chamber? Why are Members opposite getting so frustrated? There can be only one reason: the Irish language. Why are they so frightened of it? There is no other reason, because taxpayers' money is not being spent on that school. The Minister — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Dowd: The Minister of Education has said that unless —

Mr Adams: It is strange that no Members from the parties opposite, who say that they are interested in education, took the position of Minister of Education when they had the opportunity.

Mr O'Dowd: At times, it is easier to criticise than to implement. The Members opposite had every opportunity to take the education brief; perhaps they were scared of the mammoth task that lay before them.

The Minister of Education stated that that school falls under the same criteria as any other school; if it does not meet the funding criteria, it will not be funded.

In relation to the last intervention, it does not matter whether departmental officials — who do not run our Departments, we do — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Order.

Mr O'Dowd: I know that former Ministers were concerned about officials running their Departments, but they do not run our Departments; we work together and Ministers make the final decisions.

The departmental official's advice was in relation to numbers —

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

Lord Morrow: Today, we listened to some interesting gobbledegook. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Lord Morrow: I did not interrupt the Members opposite, so they should show me the same courtesy. I listened to various Members. John O'Dowd came out with the usual claptrap, which we get from him now and again on this issue. He said that we, as unionists, are afraid of the Irish language. That is incorrect; I say to Mr O'Dowd and the rest of his colleagues that we are concerned about the wanton waste in the Department of Education. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Lord Morrow: The Minister has set out on a political journey and she has — as best she possibly can — sectarianised the Irish language. Nobody has done more to damage any hope that those of us on this side of the House would have a greater respect for the Irish language than the present Minister. Indeed, she has ensured that such respect will never get off the ground.

The Minister accepts that she will not win the argument. She has no confidence in her argument so she ensures that the blunt instrument — the petition of concern — is brought into play. That is her only refuge; of course, she could not get that without the support of the SDLP, which consistently jumps to her aid to shore her up.

I listened with interest to Mr Bradley, because he frequently speaks in Irish dialect. I suspect by looking at him — and I do not want to belittle him — that there were few Irish-medium schools in existence when he was being educated.

5.45 pm

However, he seems to be quite fluent in that language and can speak it adequately. My point is that whatever provision was in place then, it was sufficient to enable Mr Bradley to achieve what he has in the Irish language.

The point that we are trying to make, and that we have repeated, is that you may try to ram the language down the throats of unionists and people like me, and you may feel that this is a great triumph — because there is a degree of triumphalism in what the Minister is trying to do — but you are not winning hearts and minds. As a matter of fact, you are simply alienating people for whom you claim to have some respect.

The Minister, of course, does not set out to endear herself to anybody, never mind to unionists; indeed, I know that she despises the very ground that we stand on. She does not even set out to endear herself to those who are involved in the Irish language. The Minister was told that the new school would cause damage — whatever that big word means. Perhaps you may be able to understand that big word. That was not written by a unionist; it was in a headline in 'The Irish News'.

Another news story stated that Ruane ignored the warning from the Irish-speaking schools. The Minister does not take anything that anybody says on board, even those who respect the Irish language. She disrespects them and says that she will not listen to them.

Never one to be outpaced on anything, Mr Brolly said that not only are three Irish-speaking schools needed in Londonderry, but that seven could be justified. He then said that we do not even need pupils any more to have schools. Who will be taught — Timothy Timber? That is a wonderful concept — pupils are not needed in order for Irish to be taught; the only thing that is needed is money, because the pupils will pop up all over the place. Indeed, some of the schools are now closing.

The Minister has a responsibility, although I suspect that she does not believe that she does. The big acid test for the Minister is that this proposal will have to be equality tested. Where is all this equality testing happening? The Minister must convince us that there is a need for this school. She cannot do that, and we have only to lift the newspapers to see that it cannot be justified in any way.

Ms Ní Chuilín: On a point of order, a Cheann Comhairle. Is it appropriate for a Member to wave a newspaper about as a prop during a debate? I do not think so.

Mr Speaker: If a Member refers to the paper or document that is in front of them, it is appropriate.

Ms Ní Chuilín: On a point of order, a Cheann Comhairle. It was not clear that the Member was referring to the newspaper; he was just waving papers about.

Mr Speaker: Order. I assure the Member that I was watching the Member in question very carefully to see whether he was quoting from the papers that he had in front of him. My understanding is that he was.

Lord Morrow: I was quoting from the papers. There was one word that I could not make out in the headline, and I asked some Members what it was.

A Member: Was it a big word?

Lord Morrow: Yes, it was a big word.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Was it an Irish word?

Lord Morrow: It must have been something like that, but I have no knowledge —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Lord Morrow: I respect that, Mr Speaker. However, Ms Ruane authorised the funding for the school in Derry — I think that is Londonderry — despite having been given warnings from advisers and inspectors that it would cause damage —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should take his seat.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, I apologise for being late; I was caught up with something.

The motion is based on the false premise that I have not considered proposals for new schools in the controlled, maintained and integrated sectors. The fact is that there have been no proposals for new schools in the controlled or maintained sectors. Since becoming Education Minister, I have had to consider only two proposals for transformation to controlled integrated status and one proposal for a new grant-maintained integrated school.

Beidh a fhios ag Comhaltaí gurb é seo an ceathrú díospóireacht dá cineál le bliain maidir le hoideachas trí mheán na Gaeilge — earnáil nach bhfuil inti ach 3,000 páiste i 23 scoil a fhaigheann deontas agus in 11 Ghaelaonad.

Members should also be aware that this is the fourth debate in a year relating to Irish-medium education, a sector of 3,000 children in 23 grant-aided schools and 11 Irish-medium units. It is perfectly clear that some people from the unionist tradition do not want rights for those in the Irish-medium sector. They ignore the fact that, in a school population that is declining overall, there are a few bright sparks of growth, and the Irish-medium sector is one. Against the odds, many committed parents and advocates for the Irish language have struggled to build an education sector that is strong, dynamic, vibrant and achieving for our children, and that nourishes and supports our language.

It is, therefore, a logical consequence that proposals to support a growing sector will come to me for approval: I will support some proposals, but I may not support others. However, I will always take an objective view of the hard facts before me.

The Assembly — and, indeed, my colleagues from all sides of the House — should already be familiar with the statutory development proposal process required when a school is being newly established, closed or is undergoing a significant change that alters its character or size. Proposals for new schools are initiated by the local education and library board, the trustees, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the Council for Integrated Education, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, an individual school or other interested parties. I do not initiate the development proposals.

The publication of a development proposal initiates a two-month period during which interested parties and individuals may send comments or objections to my Department. As soon as possible after that, officials assemble all the relevant material so that I can decide on the proposals.

Déanaim breithniú cúramach ar gach togra forbartha ar a thuillteanas, agus déantar measúnú ar gach scoil nua i gcoinne critéir inmharthanachta coiteann atá oiriúnach do gach earnáil. Agus deirim arís é — gach earnáil.

I consider all development proposals carefully on their individual merits, and proposals for all new schools are assessed against a common set of viability criteria that are relevant to all sectors. There is no facility in those processes to allow for the deferment of a decision on a proposal, and nor can the Department place a moratorium on educational bodies and others bringing forward new proposals. In short, my responsibility is to make decisions on development proposals that are brought forward by others.

Since I became Minister of Education, I have taken decisions on 37 proposals. None of them were for new controlled or maintained schools. There has been only one such proposal for a new integrated school in the past year — *[Interruption.]* — the establishment of Blackwater Integrated College —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor. Every Member who wanted to speak in the debate has had that opportunity. Please allow the Minister to respond.

The Minister of Education: There has been only one such proposal for a new integrated school in the past year — the establishment of Blackwater Integrated College, which I approved.

I have approved proposals for the closure of 10 schools or units from a variety of educational sectors: one special school; one nursery unit at a controlled primary school; five controlled primary schools; one Irish-medium unit at a maintained primary school; and one maintained secondary school.

Cheadaigh mé freisin moltaí le naí-aonaid a bhunú i scoileanna rialaithe i mBaile na hInse agus i Magh Ratha, i mBunscoil Imeachta na Milaoise agus i Scoil an Droichid.

I have also approved proposals to establish nursery units at controlled schools in Ballynahinch and Moira, at the Millennium Integrated Primary School and at Scoil an Droichid.

I have turned down two proposals for integrated status for controlled schools at Knockbreda and Conlig, and we all know why I did that. I carefully examined the numbers, and I explained to the House the numbers in primary 1 and primary 2 — or the lack of them — and the entire numbers overall in the school.

In examining proposals to transform to integrated status, I need to be confident that a school is sustainable, that it will attract viable intakes from across the community and that transformation is not being pursued simply to avoid rationalisation. That has been the position on transformation proposals for many years. As I explained at the time of the decisions on both those cases, I was not convinced that a transformation would be successful. We have all seen the reports about Balmoral High School. Members have been jumping up and down in the House about decisions being taken and money being wasted, and about how important those matters are, yet here we are having an unnecessary debate. I am very disappointed with what is happening here. We are sending out the wrong message. I want to send out a message — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order. Members should not try to speak from a sedentary position. The Minister has the Floor.

The Minister of Education: I want to send out a message. First, everything that you have said about my not caring about equality or about the children in every one of our sectors —

Dr W McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Minister has just said “everything that you have said”. That is a reference to the Chair. I do not believe that you, Mr Speaker, have made any speech about the Minister.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is clear to both sides of the House that I have not made any speech.

The Minister of Education: For the record, I want to say two things about everything that Members on the opposite Benches have said. First, I care about every child that the Department — *[Interruption.]*. You may laugh, but I am telling you that that is the truth. I respectfully suggest that many of Members' contributions are made in order to hide the fact that you are unwilling to embrace change in education. I will not stand — *[Interruption.]*. The Chairperson of the Committee for Education — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order. Every other Member who asked to speak has been allowed to speak. Allow the Minister to respond to the debate without interruption.

The Minister of Education: The Chairperson of the Committee for Education said that change will not happen. Change will happen. I am not prepared to stand idly by and watch as our children — because they are all our children — are failed. The education system fails 47% of our children — 12,000. I will not stand by and watch that happen. Nor will I stand by and watch people criticise a sector, and treat a sector in the way in which the Irish-medium sector has been treated. The message that I wish to send to the Irish-medium and integrated sectors is that they should not listen to many of the comments that have been made. I

understand that many children and parents in those sectors will view today's debate with bewilderment, but my message to them is that they should keep up the good work. They are doing tremendous work.

It is not the case to contend that I have refused to consider proposals for new controlled, maintained and integrated schools. Indeed, it is to be expected that, in a period of demographic decline, proposals for new schools will generally come from the integrated and Irish-medium sectors, which are relatively new and growing. More and more children are seeking the benefits of an Irish-medium education. The Irish-medium sector is the fastest growing education sector, and the number of children receiving an Irish-medium education has increased by more than 10% in the past three years.

An tseachtain seo caite, rinne mé an oscarlta oifigiúil d'fhoirgneamh nua Bhunscoil an Traonaigh i Lios na Sceiche; is í an t-aon Ghael-bhunscoil i gContae Fhear Manach í, agus tá mé cinnte nach mbeidh sí ar an cheann deireannach.

6.00 pm

Just last week, I performed the official opening of the new premises of Bunscoil an Traonaigh in Lisnaskea, the only Irish-medium school in County Fermanagh. The previous week, I officiated at the opening of two Irish-medium schools, where people set aside their political and religious differences to celebrate the important role that the Irish language can play in education. At Gaelscoil Éanna in Glengormley, I was joined by the newly elected DUP major. The opening of Gaelscoil Ghleann Darach in Crumlin was attended by local clergy, including a Presbyterian minister, who presented the school with the New Testament as Gaeilge — in Irish. The minister also highlighted the important contribution that Presbyterians have made throughout the years to:

“advance, preserve and even revive the Irish language.”

I have been to many different schools, including some in the controlled sector, and have been welcomed with words of Irish. Those gestures were generous in more ways than one, and could act as an example to other people.

In May, I presented schools with awards in recognition of their outstanding commitment to spoken Irish, both inside and outside the classroom. The GLEO awards are organised annually by Foras na Gaeilge, one of the North/South implementation bodies, to recognise the work that is done in English-medium schools to support and develop spoken Irish. A total of 21 schools received awards, and four of those are in the North: Holy Cross Boys' Primary School, Ardoyne; Edmund Rice Primary School, Glengormley; St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt; and Abbey Christian Brothers' Grammar School, Newry. It was a joy to share in the enthusiasm of those young people.

The increase in the number of parents who want their children to be educated through the medium of Irish is a sign of the pent-up demand of recent years that can now be satisfied as the community settles down to enjoy political stability, celebration of diversity and a new confidence in people's choice to express their national identity.

In 2008, I introduced a new programme in primary schools to expose children to a second language. Schools can opt their children into the programme to receive lessons in Irish or Spanish. A second language is a valuable skill for children to develop when they are young. When that language is the child's native tongue, all the better.

As regards my decision in 2007 to approve a proposal to establish Gaelscoil na Daróige as a grant-aided Irish-medium primary school, I remind Members that, due to a commitment in the Good Friday Agreement, there is a statutory duty on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium education. Furthermore, the British Government has signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which came into force in July 2001. The charter includes a commitment to education in the Irish language where numbers are considered sufficient. I intend to ensure that both of those obligations are fulfilled.

Mr Poots: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: People who are in public office —

Mr Poots: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should not persist.

The Minister of Education: People who are in public office, at every level, must be aware of their responsibilities to ensure that there is equality of respect and treatment for all sectors in society. Language must be tempered to ensure that it is not offensive to other people, whose legitimate demands should have our full support.

I also draw the Assembly's attention to the fact that the Department of Education considers demands for all forms of education, including Irish-medium and integrated education, under the general framework that is set out in the Education and Libraries Order (NI) 1986, which states that:

“so far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure, pupils shall be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents”.

In the particular case of Gaelscoil na Daróige, I was impressed by the arguments of parents of children who attend Náiscoil Mhaol Íosa. Furthermore, I was impressed by, and listened carefully to, what Comhairle Na Gaelscolaíochta had to say. I thank Dominic Bradley for his comments on Comhairle Na Gaelscolaíochta and the strategic approach that it takes on Irish-medium

education, for which it was established. I always listen carefully to what that body says. I congratulate it for its work.

Of course, I considered all of the advice on the proposal that was provided by my officials.

Mr Speaker: The Minister must draw her remarks to a close.

The Minister of Education: I also considered the objections, but, as Minister, I have to weigh up all the arguments for and against a proposal before making a decision. I made the decision.

Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCausland: The debate started with the presentation by Miss McIlveen, who expressed her disappointment at the fact that the SDLP supported the petition of concern. She set out the facts and the figures clearly about the situation regarding the school and Irish-medium education in Londonderry. She pointed out that the proposal clearly breaches the Department of Education's policy in several ways and that the Minister seems to totally ignore her Department's policies.

Miss McIlveen also indicated the lack of strategic planning and raised questions about the governance of the Irish-medium sector. She pointed out the need for a coherent approach, that the Education and Training Inspectorate did not support the proposal, and that the Western Education and Library Board had expressed concerns about it. She also explained that the motion was not an attack on the Irish-medium sector, but on bad governance and the fact that the Minister acted in an illogical and unreasonable manner.

That was followed by a speech from Francie Brolly, which can best be described as vague and vacuous because there was nothing much in it. He said that the criteria may eventually be fulfilled, and that it is hoped that they will be met. In this case, it is probably more likely that there will be no hope and Bob Hope. Mr Brolly kept on saying what a good thing the Irish-medium sector was, but he totally ignored the core issue, which is that the Minister consistently ignores policies and procedures in her Department. He also said that he was tired listening to statistics. Statistics are at the heart of good government, but perhaps Francie Brolly has not yet learned that fact.

Basil McCrea spoke about the problems with the extended schools programme and all the other issues in education. He said that the Minister was ignoring real problems and was acting in a way that was divisive; that she was sectarianising education, was acting against advice, and was being partisan. He said that the debate is not about the Irish language, and he noted that nearby schools in Londonderry had real concerns and that the Minister was acting against the advice of officials. The Minister said that there were 50,000

empty places, but she seems to be intent on creating more. Mr McCrea also said that the Irish language was being given shamefully preferential treatment, and that that is not the way to have a shared future.

Dominic Bradley reminded us of the value of Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta — and that is the best pronunciation that I will manage of that. I was interested in that contribution because I want to comment on that organisation shortly, particularly on its record in the city of Londonderry. Trevor Lunn asked whether there was enough demand to spread across three schools the number of children that there are in two schools. That is the key question.

Mervyn Storey reminded us that the Minister is now known as the Minister of delay and confusion and the Minister for embarrassing climbdowns and that she follows a narrow and sectarian approach. Dominic Bradley objected to the word “sectarian”, and he was reminded that it is possible to be culturally sectarian and politically sectarian as well as religiously sectarian. In this context, the cultural sectarianism of Sinn Féin in relation to the Irish language is the real problem.

Gerry Adams, minus his tie, said that the DUP was opposed to reform, that we have an irrational hostility to Irish and that there is a need to work together. He told us that there was a need for equality. That is the very point — the Minister does not deliver equality: she delivers discrimination and preferential treatment in favour of the Irish sector and against others. The fact that she does not deliver equality is the real problem.

Gerry Adams said that the Irish language is not a threat to anyone, which reminded me of the visit that Conor Murphy made to an Irish-medium school somewhere in County Down. He handed the children a copy of the biography of the IRA terrorist Bobby Sands. Is there not a problem with a sector in which a convicted terrorist is held up as a role model for children?

I thought that we should have been making progress, not, as the Irish-medium sector is doing, setting up such people as role models. That happened in places other than County Down, including a school in West Belfast that is named in honour of Bobby Sands, who is now held up to children as a role model. Is the Irish language a threat? Yes, indeed; if that is the information that is being provided, it is a threat to the good education of children.

Edwin Poots reminded us that the Minister ignored her Department's advice and that the Irish-medium sector gets special, preferential treatment. He said that intakes to Irish-medium schools in Londonderry have fallen. At that point, Mrs Robinson suggested that the removal of the Minister due to incompetence and ineptitude might be the best course of action — a view that many of us would support.

Ken Robinson reminded Members that the Minister's use — and, I might say, abuse — of Irish simply reinforces unionists' perceptions that she does more damage to the Irish language every time she speaks than almost anyone else. He said that, rather than the separate, or separatist, approach, he was in favour of Irish-medium units in CCMS schools.

That reminded me of the situation in Londonderry in which three individuals — Gearóid Ó hÉara, Donncha Mac Niallais and Réamaí Mathers, all republicans of various vintages — appeared to be working together to kill off the Irish-medium unit in a maintained school in order to get their own, separate Irish-medium school. I note that the republican — and he was a republican — who reported that used the headline:

“Derry Provos campaign to control Irish medium schools”.

It is interesting that, on the website in which that article appeared, some members of the SDLP in Londonderry posted comments that are worthy of consideration, because they may not be fully in line with what Dominic Bradley said.

Actions such as handing out books about IRA terrorists to children and the Derry Provos seeking to take control of Irish-medium schools are a cause for concern. The article about the Derry Provos contains details of the steps involved in their campaign, and it includes many questions that people from the republican community were asking. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr McCausland: Sometimes it is helpful to read from such documents.

Members also heard from Mary Bradley, who pointed out that none of the Londonderry DUP MLAs had signed the motion. Of course, one of the Members for that area is the Speaker, who is unable to sign a motion, and the other is Gregory Campbell, who is a Minister and therefore does not sign motions. Consequently, there is no significance to that point. The Members who signed the motion are the DUP members of the Committee for Education at the time.

John O'Dowd spoke about the thriving nature of the Welsh language. Possibly, that is because it has not been politicised in the same way that Sinn Féin has politicised Irish. In an intervention, Ken Robinson said that there are already enough places, and John O'Dowd replied that that may well be the case. Therefore, he agreed —

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCausland: No, I have little time left, and we are coming to the best bits.

Lord Morrow told us that there has been wanton waste, and, quoting from ‘The Irish News’ to support

his additional points, he said that the Minister had sectarianised the Irish language.

In the Minister's contribution, she told us that this was the fourth debate on Irish-medium education and the Irish language. Clearly, she had not listened to what anyone said, because she told us that we do not want equality — and there is that point again — but we do. She is the Minister of discrimination and of preferential treatment for the Irish-language sector. She is the one who is guilty of discrimination against others, and, in such circumstances, she and others would do well to take note of that fact. We are the people who believe in equality and fairness — not the sort of discrimination of which the Minister has been guilty. For that reason, I fully support the motion — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor. He is making the winding-up speech; allow him to do so.

For that reason, I am most happy to support the motion that my colleague Michelle McIlveen proposed. Francie Brolly began by commending Michelle's speech. I thought that that was remarkable — perhaps he also did not understand what she was saying. *[Interruption.]* We have had very good contributions today, and I am confident that we have demonstrated that the Minister is giving the Irish-medium sector preferential treatment, and that she is indeed the Minister for discrimination and inequality. *[Interruption.]*

6.15 pm

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind Members that the vote on the motion will be on a cross-community basis.

Question put,

The Assembly divided: Ayes 37; Noes 33.

AYES

UNIONIST:

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

OTHER:

Dr Farry, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Neeson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Miss McIlveen and Mr Storey.

NOES

NATIONALIST:

Mr Adams, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Doherty, Mr Gallagher, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr D Bradley and Ms S Ramsey.

Total votes 70 Total Ayes 37[52.9%]

Nationalist Votes 33 Nationalist Ayes 0 [0.0%]

Unionist Votes 33 Unionist Ayes 33[100.0%]

Other Votes 4 Other Ayes 4 [100.0%]

Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Funding for School-Age Childcare Services in Lurgan

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

Order. I ask Members to leave the Chamber in an orderly fashion.

Mr Savage: I wish to speak on behalf of Drumellan Community Association and Zero-8-Teen, which is based in the Brownlow area of Craigavon. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor. For the second time, I ask Members to leave the Chamber in an orderly fashion.

Mr Savage: The group does an excellent job in the community, and I pay tribute to its staff for the vital work that they do every day. In January 2008, I received correspondence from the group when its funding crisis first came to light, and I have been working with the group ever since to help it to secure yearly funding to allow it to continue to provide flexible, quality, affordable and accessible services for parents, especially at a time when the cost of living seems to be rising almost daily.

We are here today because of the inability of the Minister of Education, who, yet again, has failed to discharge her duties properly and to provide for those who not only need but deserve support from her Department.

I will take this opportunity to thank the junior Minister for filling the void this evening to respond to the debate. We appreciate the fact that he has given up his time to do so. I trust that the junior Minister will be able to provide reasons why the Minister of Education ran away from the debate. On behalf of community groups throughout the length and breadth of the Province, I thank the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Michael McGimpsey, for showing excellent leadership and stepping into the gap and making funding available to allow after-school groups to continue their good work.

Drumellan Community Association and Zero-8-Teen are not asking for huge sums of money every year. Sadly, their management spend their time applying for funding rather than investing their time

and efforts in supporting their staff and buildings. That cannot be allowed to continue.

Drumellan Community Association needs approximately £20,000 a year to continue to provide services at its current levels. That £20,000 pays for 20,000 childcare hours in the TSN designated area of Brownlow. All sections of the community live in that area, and they attend many different Churches. In a recent answer to an Assembly question, I found out that the Minister of Education will imminently be employing an Irish-language official in her Department. Surely resources could be better spent in areas such as Brownlow rather than on employing an Irish-language official.

I ask the junior Minister to comment on that matter, and to comment on whether he and his Department believe that it is appropriate for the Department of Education to spend taxpayers' money employing an Irish-language official while childcare services across Northern Ireland are in dire straits. Here is a simple fact for the Minister of Education: responsibility for early-years services transferred to the Department of Education from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on 1 November 2006.

Those responsibilities included the policy areas and practical support for private day care, home childminding and youth services. It is clear that the responsibility for school-age childcare services lies with the Department of Education.

6.30 pm

A letter dated 8 November 2006 to the chief executives of the health and social services policy boards from Department of Education officials about the transfer of funding for early-years development and Sure Start said:

“You will be aware that it has been decided to transfer Early Years policy responsibility from the Department of Health to the Department of Education. The rationale of undertaking the transfer is to ensure that early years policy is more coherent, provides better outcomes for children and is more cost effective.

It had originally been planned that this would take place in April of next year; however, Minister Eagle has expressed a strong desire to have this transfer completed sooner and as such the transfer took place on 1 November 2006.

The associated Early Years funding has been agreed between the two Departments and transferred to the Department of Education with effect from 1st November 2006. This will mean that the Department of Education will become the accountable department for Early Years activities and your funding arrangements have been transferred to it.”

The issue will not go away. The leadership and foresight shown by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will, fortunately, resolve the short-term difficulties that several groups were facing. However, it is now time for the Minister of Education to stop hiding behind issues of language and equality. Practical action is required to get to grips with

the issues and provide outcomes that will more than satisfactorily meet the needs of parents and children from all parts of our community who need those facilities daily.

On 4 February 2008, junior Minister Kelly told the House that:

“it is for individual Ministers to determine spending priorities now that the Budget allocations have been finalised.” — [*Official Report, Vol 27, No 3, p178, col 1*].

It is abundantly clear that the Minister of Education has not given this issue the priority that it deserves. Drumellan Community Association’s aims are identical to those of Peter Hain, the then Secretary of State, who launched the children and young people’s funding package, the aim of which was:

“to reduce underachievement and improve the life chances of children and young people by enhancing their educational development and fostering their health, well-being and social inclusion”.

Judging by her actions, we must assume that the Minister of Education is not interested in improving the life chances and educational development of children in this Province.

Long-term sustainable and mainstreamed funding should be made available. In-year monitoring may work, but it is only a short-term solution. Core funding must be sought in order to allow groups to plan their activities based on guaranteed year-on-year funding. In the meantime, will the junior Minister comment on whether his Department or the Department of Education will use the in-year monitoring rounds to obtain more funding for critical and valued services such as those provided by Drumellan Community Association?

School-age childcare schemes, which are targeted at areas of social deprivation in order to help parents to get off benefits and back into work, provide a vital service that adds value to the local service economy every year. Parents pay for the services provided by the Drumellan Community Association, but in that TSN area it is not viable — nor is it fair — that parents should pick up the entire bill for childcare, especially when the cost of living, food and fuel is rising daily. Without funding from the Department of Education, the Drumellan project and many like it are at serious risk. If long-term funding is not secured, children may have to be left at home alone over the summer or their parents may be forced to give up work. Neither of those options is acceptable.

We ought to be working to support families in our communities and to enhance their quality of life, rather than adopting the head-in-the-sand approach that has been taken by some of the people who are in a position to make a difference. We must make decisions that better respond to the needs of our communities.

Mr O’Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It is unfortunate that Mr Savage has used a

worthwhile debate to indulge in a swipe at the Education Minister and avoid talking about the actual issue, which is worthy of debate. He has adopted the premise of not letting the facts get in the way of a good argument.

The transfer of powers between the Departments of Health and Education took place in 2006, during a period of direct rule. However, the memorandum of understanding between the Departments does not include the provision for which Mr Savage seeks funding today, and that is the difficulty.

The Department of Education does not have funding responsibility for school-age childcare. Sinn Féin is not negating its responsibility to ensure that funding is found for projects, such as the Drumellan project to which Mr Savage referred. The Health Minister continued to fund projects that he was already funding, but for only six months. We, as politicians, must get together and ensure that funding is secured to make certain that such services can continue.

The debate must extend beyond health and education. Mr Savage said that some parents might have to give up their jobs to ensure that their children are looked after. Therefore, let us examine the roles of DEL or DETI in ensuring that people can access affordable childcare to enable them to go to work.

Drumellan Community Association is long established, and it is one of the most successful in the Brownlow area. It secured a future for its estate, while other estates fell prey to the social problems that affected the Brownlow area at that time. In that sense, it is a success story. It has several funding streams, including DSD, which has responsibility for funding the community and voluntary sector, and Craigavon Borough Council, which gives it a limited amount of money.

I support Mr Savage’s call for funding. However, I regret the fact that he has used the debate to sideswipe the Education Minister because he thinks that it is a handy way to grab headlines. A dig at the Education Minister is bound to get a headline somewhere.

I also regret the fact that he brought the Irish language into the debate, because I too know the Drumellan Community Association and the wider Drumellan community, and no one there would seek to discriminate against any sector in order to secure funding. That community is seeking funding by right, and it deserves it by right.

Let us not seek other sections of society to discriminate against in order to secure funding for Drumellan. Let us ensure that, in the short time that we have, we introduce a funding formula that will secure the future of Drumellan Community Association and other community groups in Craigavon, Lurgan, Portadown and elsewhere in the North, because such groups are a valuable resource for the broader community.

I support the broad thrust of this debate, and I hope that we can find a solution in the coming months.

Mr Moutray: I welcome the opportunity to take part in the Adjournment debate this evening, and I appreciate the fact that my colleague Mr George Savage proposed the topic. I also welcome the attendance of junior Minister Donaldson.

This debate can raise awareness of the current shortfall in funding for school-age childcare services, particularly in the Lurgan area. That is an important issue that has affected many people and will continue to affect countless people for many years to come. I concur with the Members who have spoken already, and I welcome the opportunity to raise an issue that is paramount to many parents and children in Lurgan. As an elected representative, I feel strongly about the issue. The problem requires a strategic, coherent long-term solution.

The Northern Ireland Childminding Association says:

“Childminding provides care and learning for children ages between 0-14 years.”

It is well known that — along with rich learning environments such as the home and the local community — childminding supports children’s effective learning by providing opportunities for individual attention. That demonstrates the importance of the provision of childcare services. Childminding advocates note that such services not only benefit children by improving their life skills and social skills, but generate economic benefits by supporting parents in moving into work, education and training.

That would certainly be the case in Lurgan. For many years, Lurgan has been economically deprived, and it has often been polarised with regard to economic growth and innovation. An improvement in childcare funding would improve Lurgan’s economy, because it would encourage parents back into employment and learning.

Childcare, whether it takes the form of childminders, nannies, out-of-school clubs, day nurseries, playschools, preschools, toddler groups or crèches, is an essential part of today’s society. Childcare services are needed to ensure that parents have an opportunity to enhance their skills and continue in a working capacity.

The Government continue to promote lifelong learning and endeavour to reduce unemployment rates. Therefore, a high standard of local childcare facilities is essential. The Employers for Childcare charity has said that no single Department is accountable for the provision of funding. That reinforces the need for the Executive to adopt a multifaceted approach to the matter.

Employers for Childcare — which is a reputable organisation — also raised a valid point about the lack of childcare information services in Northern Ireland.

It is the only organisation that provides such information, and it attempts to serve the whole of Northern Ireland. Since the implementation of the Childcare Act 2006, many local authorities in England have set up childcare information service points, which are well-manned and serve their communities well. That system would benefit Northern Ireland, and I ask the Minister to consider its introduction.

From experience, I realise that childminders are an important part of any family unit, particularly for people who are intent on working. Childminders are often classified as being as important as family and teachers in a child’s life. A child sees their childminder as a mirror; the childminder’s response will determine the self-image that that young person forms.

Adequate funding is essential to ensure that high-quality childcare facilities are available in Lurgan and, indeed, throughout Northern Ireland. I welcome the Department of Health’s assistance in securing six months’ further funding for 54 school-age projects that were at risk of closure this month. That has ensured that those projects remain open and that they are readily available to parents across Northern Ireland. Those projects provide an important service for local communities at a time when the various costs facing working families continue to rise. It is of the utmost importance that such school-age projects continue to operate.

I call on the Executive to take an all-encompassing approach in an all-inclusive advancement that will, in principle, secure a long-term strategy for school-age childcare funding in Lurgan and across Northern Ireland. Over the past months, many good childcare-funding schemes in Lurgan have been left in limbo regarding their existence and feasibility. That situation must not be allowed to continue. I call on the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health to take the relevant issues on board and to address them in the short term.

Mrs D Kelly: I, too, congratulate my colleague Mr Savage for raising this important subject in the Chamber this evening. In the last few days, we have seen the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister’s inquiry into child poverty. All the people who gave evidence in that process referred time and time again to the importance of play, not only in the development of children and young people but in assisting their parents in climbing out of poverty by providing childcare that allowed them to look for employment or take further training.

6.45 pm

Members who have spoken referred to the departmental responsibilities of the Health and Education Ministers. However, it is the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, within which the junior Ministers are the designated champions of children, that has a

particular responsibility in ensuring that funding is set aside for children and young people. It is for that reason that the Administration removed the ring-fencing of funding for children and young people in their Programme for Government and Budget and transferred it across different Departments.

The downturn in today's market, and the consequential devaluation of land and property, means that Ministers who had to rely heavily on income from those sources now have to look to their departmental budgets to fund some of their core activities and responsibilities. There is, therefore, little confidence that children and play will be among the main priorities of the Departments.

In the previous Administration, the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party ring-fenced funding for children and young people, and we still believe that that was the right way to go. That was one reason why the SDLP did not support the Programme for Government and the Budget. We knew that childcare services would not be the only sector that would suffer; this is only the start of the cry from the community and voluntary sector.

Mr Savage highlighted the importance of the Drumellan Community Association and its work in the Zero-8-Teen project. I recall the establishment of that project in the 1990s for which the association was able to draw on European funding. The project has been sustained by European funding over the years, but Members will be aware that there are challenges ahead in respect of Peace III funding. That stream of funding will no longer be available. The people who established the group believed that the funding would be mainstreamed by now.

As many Members will know — and as Mr O'Dowd said — the area in which Drumellan is situated turned itself around from a region that suffered from high deprivation and a lot of criminal activity. I am sure that Mr Donaldson is no stranger to the challenges that face the Brownlow area in particular.

Although Mr Savage singled out the Drumellan Community Association, the debate is also about the wider Lurgan area. I ask the junior Minister to look at the population statistics for the Craigavon area, because Lurgan has more children under the age of 16 than most other council areas across the North. Therefore there should be a particular onus on Ministers to skew some of the funding to children and young people in that area. A number of wards in the Craigavon Borough Council area, including the Court ward and the Brownlow sector area in Drumgask, remain high on the Noble indicators of deprivation levels.

I support the motion and ask those with the relevant responsibility to champion the cause of children and young people. Too often, we hear the glib words "children are our future", but that is true: children are our future, and greater emphasis must be put on their

needs, and more support is required for their parents. Such requirements are all too vital in today's society, where parents face many challenges in bringing up their children and trying to give them a steer in the right direction.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Donaldson): I commend the Member for Upper Bann George Savage for securing the Adjournment debate and highlighting the relevant issues. I am sure that the groups that he is representing will appreciate that. I also thank Mr O'Dowd, my colleague Mr Moutray and Mrs Kelly for their contributions to the debate.

I commend the work of the Drumellan Community Association — as mentioned by Mr Savage at the beginning of the debate and commented on by other Members subsequently — for its Zero-8-Teen childcare initiative, which is a valued project in the Brownlow area. I want to put on record our appreciation of the work in which the Drumellan Community Association is engaged in Brownlow, particularly the childcare services that it has provided thus far.

I am thankful for the opportunity to respond to today's Adjournment debate.

The issue affects not only the Lurgan area but all areas across Northern Ireland.

The Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister has received considerable correspondence in support of similar after-schools schemes; that demonstrates the important role that such schemes have and the high regard in which they are held by those whom they benefit most.

I want to make it clear from the outset that although junior Minister Kelly and I have particular responsibility for the co-ordination of policy and the promotion of children and young people's rights and needs, we do not have responsibility for funding those schemes or policy responsibility for childcare. Our role is to drive forward the 10-year cross-departmental strategy for children and young people. We want to ensure that issues concerning children and young people are central to Government policy making and are not forgotten. We have been working hard over the past 12 months to ensure that those issues are given the priority that they deserve in every Department, including the Departments mentioned by Members.

Undoubtedly, today's debate has shown that we are all united in the view that there needs to be clarification as to which Department holds the policy responsibility for childcare and which has responsibility for funding childcare projects. Junior Minister Kelly and I have been working on clarifying that issue and will continue to do so as a matter of urgency. We were involved in the decision of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to fund projects for a further six

months; that will give us extra time in which to identify alternative funding streams.

We recognised the need to create a space within which departmental responsibility can be clarified and resolved. We will then consider the long-term funding of projects — and we want long-term solutions and not quick fixes. A long-term perspective will ensure longevity for the valuable services — and communities are in desperate need of those services — that are provided by the Drumellan Community Association and by community groups up and down the country.

Although the provision of school-age childcare is not a specific area of responsibility for the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, we recognise that it can benefit children, young people and their families, and that a lack of affordable childcare can be a significant barrier to employment. After-schools schemes are essential to many families. I was aware of the concern around funding for school-age childcare before today's debate and I have been liaising with my ministerial colleagues on that topic.

I want to pick up on Mrs Kelly's comments about the high levels of deprivation in the Brownlow area. We are trying to identify areas where there is a particular need for after-schools childcare and this afternoon we had a meeting with Barnardo's on that subject. If any MLAs would like to write to us and contribute more detailed information to that discussion, we will consider their representations.

Families were mentioned in the debate, and I would like to draw attention to two things. First, it is important that parents have information on the availability of childcare in their area and that is the responsibility of the health and social care trusts. If there is a deficit in that information being made available to families, we would like to know about it so that we can rectify the situation. I am sure that the Southern Health and Social Care Trust is being proactive in ensuring that that information is available.

Secondly, there is a need to encourage parents to access working tax credit, which can be a valuable resource in helping families to pay for up to 80% of their childcare costs. Families must be made aware of their entitlements, and DSD is the lead Department on the issue. If Members have concerns about the availability of the credit, require any information, or wish to know about the availability of information, please let us know, and we will follow that up.

I appreciate the opportunity to participate in the debate, and careful note will be taken of what my four colleagues have said about the Lurgan area — in particular about the Zero-8-Teen project and Drumellan community association. That problem is replicated in many other parts of Northern Ireland, including my own constituency. I have encountered the same problem

among groups that are worried about future provision. I am thinking, in particular, about the work of the Cloona Oasis Centre in west Belfast, which borders the Lagan Valley constituency. Some excellent work is being done there and there are concerns about the longevity of funding.

Those issues must be addressed, and we have a little time to do that. We can bring clarity about policy and funding and look at the long term implications of identifying alternative funding streams to keep those valuable and valued services going.

Families throughout Northern Ireland who rely on schemes do not care which Department is responsible for policy or funding: they care about the continued existence and delivery of the schemes. I hope that the Member for Upper Bann Mr Savage will take the message back to Drumellan and to the community workers, parents, families and children who benefit from that very important scheme that we are trying to bring a satisfactory resolution to the matter.

I assure the Member — and the Assembly — that junior Minister Kelly and I will continue to work hard on the issue to bring solutions that deliver continuity of services. I appreciate the opportunity to participate in the debate, and look forward to working with colleagues to deliver favourable outcomes.

Adjourned at 6.57 pm.

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