
OFFICIAL REPORT

(HANSARD)

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NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 6 October 2008

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I know that you are careful not to set precedents, even for points of order. However, on behalf of the Executive and the Assembly, I express my sincere sympathy and condolences to the deputy First Minister on the death of his mother earlier this morning. Anybody who has spoken to the deputy First Minister over the past weeks and months about his mother's illness will know just how close they were.

The passing of a mother is a difficult time for anyone; many of us have already passed through that shadow. Although politics may be considered a rough trade, all Members know that we must set aside any political issues and recognise the difficulties that the family are facing at this time. This is a time of deep mourning for the family. They will have many happy memories; however, they are passing through a time of great difficulty.

On behalf of my party, as well as the Executive and the Assembly, I express my sympathy to the whole family circle to make it clear that we will remember them in our thoughts and our prayers.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, I thank the First Minister for his comments, and I join him in expressing sympathy to the deputy First Minister on the loss of his mother, Peggy McGuinness, whom I knew personally. She will be sadly missed in the Derry area and, indeed, further afield. She was a very well-known and respected woman. Her sense of humour, as well as her political prowess for a woman in her eighties, will be very much missed. On behalf of my party, I express my condolences to the wider family circle. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr A Maginness: Further to the First Minister's point of order, I express sympathy to the deputy First Minister on behalf of the SDLP. To lose one's mother is a great blow to anyone, at any age, and it is deeply regrettable.

Mr Kennedy: I join with others in extending sympathy on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party to the

McGuinness family on the death of their mother. We are not made of stone, and we realise that the passing of one of the main figures in any family will cause obvious distress. We extend our thoughts and prayers to the deputy First Minister and his family at this time.

Mrs Long: I add the condolences of the Alliance Party to those already expressed in the Chamber. We send our thoughts and prayers to the McGuinness family at this time. We were aware that Martin's mother had been ill, and that it has been a difficult period for him, both politically and personally. We recognise that and want to extend our sympathy to him and to the wider family circle.

Mr Speaker: We all sympathise with the McGuinness family at this time.

Before we proceed this morning, I wish to comment on remarks that were made during the sitting of the Assembly on Tuesday 30 September 2008. On studying the Official Report of proceedings, I noted with concern comments made in relation to Mr Alex Maskey by the Minister for Social Development, when she was responding to the debate on a private Member's motion. My concerns about the Minister's comments were shared by other Members who approached me during the hours and days following the debate.

My concerns arose from two issues. First, although there were no unparliamentarily expressions used, the remarks did not, in my view, come up to the standards of good temper and moderation that should be expected from debates in this House. Secondly, and perhaps to compound the issue, the remarks in question bore no relevance whatsoever to either the subject of the motion being debated or to comments made by any Member during the debate. For both those reasons, I find the Minister's remarks to have fallen short of the requirements of Standing Orders and the standards of the House.

The point of order made by Mr A Maskey provided him with an adequate opportunity to reply to the comments, and I encourage the Minister to reflect on the reply and on my comments this morning. I remind Members that these standards of which I have spoken — good temper and moderation in debate — apply to all.

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you explain why you have not referred to good temper and moderation in other cases? There have been numerous examples of bad temper and lack of moderation in many speeches up until this point. Why are you making this ruling on this particular incident?

Mr Speaker: On at least four occasions in the House, I have spoken to Members and Ministers about going outside the debate, whatever the subject. Secondly, on a number of occasions, I have encouraged Members to be of good temperament and to show moderation

when they are speaking in the House. This is not the first occasion; and anyone who reads the Hansard report will see that it clearly shows that the Minister went totally outside the subject of the debate on three occasions.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Draft Fixed-Term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I beg to move

That the draft Fixed-Term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

The draft regulations are subject to the affirmative procedure as laid down in the parent legislation, the Employment Act 2002. The regulations were laid in draft on 19 August 2008 and, subject to the approval of the Assembly, it is intended that they will come into operation on 22 October 2008 in line with amendments to the equivalent legislation in Great Britain. The regulations will amend the Fixed-Term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002. The 2002 regulations implement a European directive, which sought to give fixed-term employees the right, in principle, not to be treated less favourably than permanent employees of the same employer doing comparable work, including in relation to statutory sick pay (SSP).

Employers have a statutory liability to pay SSP for up to 28 weeks to any employee who is incapable of work for four or more consecutive days and who satisfies the qualifying conditions. Prior to the introduction of the 2002 regulations, SSP was not payable where contracts of service were for three months or fewer. The 2002 regulations removed that exclusion. However, when considering the GB version of those 2002 regulations, the English Court of Appeal ruled that the removal of that exclusion did not apply to temporary agency workers. That decision clarified the law: agency workers in GB, and, therefore, in Northern Ireland, with contracts of three months or fewer, are not entitled to SSP. That is against the policy intention of the 2002 regulations.

Members will be aware that the principle of the statutory payments legislation is to treat all workers who are liable to pay National Insurance contributions on their income in the same way, regardless of their length of contract. That court ruling means that agency workers with contracts of three months or fewer are the only group of workers excluded from entitlement to statutory sick pay, despite their qualifying for other statutory payments such as statutory maternity, paternity and adoption pay. These amending regulations, which are minor and technical in nature, correct that anomaly and restore the initial policy intention of offering further protection to agency workers on short contracts.

I am grateful to the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Examiner of Statutory Rules for their

detailed scrutiny of the policy proposals and the draft regulations. At its meeting on 17 September, the Committee recommended that the draft regulations be approved by the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As Chairperson of the Employment and Learning Committee, I support the motion. The regulations have been laid in draft and are subject to affirmative resolution. On 2 July, the Committee first examined the Department's proposal with regard to these regulations, and on 17 September, it examined the proposed statutory rule. On both occasions, the Committee was content with the policy proposal.

The Minister has explained the purpose of the rule and the technicalities involved. The rule will allow agency workers the same rights as their permanent colleagues, and that is to be welcomed. It is a significant step forward in the recognition of all workers as being equal. It is a major boost for the high proportion of women who undertake agency work to allow them greater flexibility to manage homes, families, and their many other commitments. No longer will such workers be treated and regarded as second class.

With that in mind, I am pleased to give the Committee's support to this motion.

12.15 pm

Mr Newton: I welcome the motion. As the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning said, there was considerable debate in the Committee on the matter, which will bring into full rights many who were excluded. There has been a tendency in recent years to use agency workers — I do not want to use the term "abuse" — in the knowledge that there were rights from which they were excluded. Therefore, I welcome the amended regulations.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am grateful to those Members who contributed. Although the provisions of the regulations are, as I said, minor and technical in nature, and are required in order to restore the original intention of the 2002 regulations, they will benefit many agency workers.

The House has, on several occasions over the past 12 months, I believe, debated issues pertaining to agency workers, to their rights and to people with unscrupulous employers who might abuse those rights. This amendment closes one loophole, and I welcome the support of the Committee and those Members who contributed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Fixed-Term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Diseases of Animals Bill

Extension of Committee Stage

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 17 February 2009, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Diseases of Animals Bill (NIA Bill 22/07).

I seek the approval of the House to extend the Committee Stage of the Bill to what might seem to be a very generous deadline, especially as the Department's consultation process resulted in only five responses. However, the Committee gave the matter consideration and considerable thought before arriving at the date of 17 February 2009, which, we believe, represents a realistic target.

Obviously, if the Committee can complete its formal scrutiny of the proposed Bill any sooner, it most certainly will. The Committee office and officials from the Department have met in order to discuss the logistics of progressing the Bill, and that contact will continue throughout the process. As the Committee is not in a position to return to the House to ask for a second extension, it is essential that we get the Bill right in the first instance, and I believe that we are doing so.

The current legislation, the Diseases of Animals (Northern Ireland) Order 1981, is more than 25 years old. When the Second Stage of the Diseases of Animals Bill was introduced on 15 September 2008, I spoke of the risks posed to the industry and the Northern Ireland economy by continual threats from established diseases, such as TB and brucellosis, and new diseases, such as bluetongue.

Since the 1981 Order, we have seen the devastation that was caused by BSE and foot-and-mouth disease. The proposed Bill recognises correctly the threats of those and other animal diseases and the valuable lessons to be learned from the way in which the Government, the Department and the industry reacted to those threats.

It is imperative that those lessons are included in the legislation, and the Committee intends to take extensive evidence from the Department and the industry to ensure that the Bill affords the utmost protection to the Northern Ireland economy. In introducing the Bill, the Minister acknowledged that the Committee had received three presentations on it. That is a mark of how important the Bill is and why the Committee must take an appropriate period to scrutinise it.

During the debate on the Second Stage of the Bill, several Members referred to the Ruddock Report. That

report was published as a result of an inquiry into the Department's handling of the alpha-nortestosterone debacle, and it particularly considered the Department's power of entry. Lessons have also been learned from that event, and those lessons do not necessarily afford protection to the industry per se. Rather, they offer protection to the people who work in the industry. It is also imperative that appropriate consideration be taken to ensure that the Bill provides that protection.

I have outlined several logistical considerations to a Bill at Committee Stage. As the Department must do, the Committee must consult on the matter, and the public notice for that consultation was placed the day after the Bill passed to the Committee. Unlike the Department, the Committee must consider any written responses, decide on which witnesses to call for evidence, take that evidence and examine the Bill on a clause-by-clause bases before producing a draft report, which the Committee intends to issue to the Department for consideration. Following that, the report must be printed, laid in the Business Office and considered by the House.

Given the importance of the Bill, the Committee is of the view that that cannot be done within the period that is defined by Standing Order 33(2), particularly as the Assembly will be in recess for part of that period. The period to which we seek to extend also includes the Christmas recess, but it is a realistic period, given the depths of consideration that are required.

The Committee takes the matter of protecting against animal diseases seriously, and it is certainly not our intention to delay the Bill any longer than the 18 months that it has taken the Department to bring it to the House. It is an extremely important piece of legislation, and the Department was right to take that time to ensure that it had, in its mind, got it right. Equally, it is important that the Committee is not rushed in its deliberations of the Bill and that it is afforded the opportunity to hear from the Department and the industry so that it can consider the impact of each and every clause on the industry and the wider Northern Ireland economy.

I hope that the Committee will, in conjunction with the Department, get the opportunity to get it right. We cannot afford any other result.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 17 February 2009, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Diseases of Animals Bill (NIA Bill 22/07).

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Strategy for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration

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

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

Mrs Hanna: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the delayed publication of a strategy for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration; calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to publish their strategy without further delay and to detail how this strategy will promote reconciliation, the ideal of a truly shared future and how it will help the Executive's commitment to eradicate poverty.

I apologise on behalf of my co-proposer Dolores Kelly for her inability to be present today due to a long-standing family commitment.

The SDLP accepts the Alliance Party's amendment, but with some reservation, because it calls for the production of:

"an action plan, led by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, to tackle segregation in schools, housing and leisure facilities."

The nub of the motion is the SDLP's frustration at the incompetence and fumbling by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) in relation to the publication of a strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration. I hope that the Alliance Party will acknowledge that the Minister for Social Development has made progress on housing, and I will deal with that matter in more detail later.

Without desegregating housing, integrated education will not work. Through their inability to publish the cohesion strategy, the political masters at OFMDFM have failed to display even minimal competence. Time and time again, the Assembly has been fobbed off with a series of evasive and waffly answers from OFMDFM. Over a period of six months, in answer to Members' questions about the cohesion strategy, there have been increasingly incoherent answers on when that strategy will be published. On 1 April 2008, April Fool's Day, OFMDFM stated:

"We are now at an advanced stage of development of the detailed proposals".

On 22 May 2008, some seven weeks later, OFMDFM again stated:

"We are now at an advanced stage of development of the detailed proposals".

On 28 May 2008, in response to a further question OFMDFM repeated the phrase:

"at an advanced stage".

However, on that occasion the word "strategy" was substituted by "programme".

On 28 May 2008, in answer to a question from a Sinn Féin Member, OFMDFM again promised that it was "finalising detailed proposals" and was:

"committed to tackling racism, sectarianism, and intolerance in any of their manifestations."

Members should note that the order of the words relegates sectarianism to second place behind racism. Sectarianism, racism and intolerance are inextricably linked; they are all facets of one prism. No one abhors racism more than I, as a representative of South Belfast, which is the most ethnically diverse constituency in the North. However, sectarianism is the primary cause of division here. It is hundreds of years old, whereas racism is a relatively recent offshoot and manifestation of that original cancer.

On 10 June 2008, my colleague John Dallat asked for an assurance that the amalgamation of the separate strategies into a single cohesion strategy will not involve a reduction in the level of funding that is available. OFMDFM gave an answer to a question about racial equality that had not been asked. That seemed to be another diversionary tactic, an impression that was reinforced in an answer to a question from a Sinn Féin Member.

On 10 June 2008, OFMDFM stated its:

"intention to publish the Programme of Cohesion, Sharing and Integration as soon as possible."

OFMDFM is, undoubtedly, playing the Assembly for a fool in the matter of the strategy's publication. The DUP and Sinn Féin appear to be conniving and employing diversionary tactics to shift the focus from their obligation to produce a cohesive strategy towards a watered down programmatic approach on sectarianism that has been further diluted to a racial equality programme. I recognise that racism is a serious problem in society, but it should not be cynically used and abused to divert attention from the core issue of sectarianism.

The publication of the strategy has been caught up in the perpetual rowing behind closed doors in OFMDFM. Much as the DUP and Sinn Féin may despise each other and fight like cats and dogs, they are united in their lust for power, domination and division, and they are determined to hold on to power. Given how the two parties act, it is perhaps naive to hope or expect that they will do anything to dismantle sectarianism.

The Executive have not met for more than three months, but neither the First Minister nor the deputy

First Minister has missed any photo opportunities during that period. However, as far as the community is concerned, it has been a case of all picture, no sound and certainly no substance.

12.30 pm

I want to end on a note of hope. One of the Executive's successes has been Minister for Social Development Margaret Ritchie's performance in office. She has used her ministerial powers to tackle the growing housing crisis and effect positive social change in pursuit of reconciliation and a truly shared future. Over the next three years, the Department for Social Development (DSD) will develop at least 30 shared future housing neighbourhoods in existing Northern Ireland Housing Executive estates. Those neighbourhoods will allow existing tenants to live in an area where diversity is welcomed and encouraged.

Radical social change is necessary in order to banish the issues that divide us and enable us to work together to overcome global challenges. We cannot expect to heal our divisions if we continue to reinforce them by maintaining segregation. For too long, people have grown up, played and lived in separate neighbourhoods, been taught in separate schools, followed different sports and been slow to share the workplace — those are the most regrettable legacies of the Troubles. That segregation fuelled the conflict, and, because of that physical and mental entrenchment, communities grew further apart. Furthermore, they were unwilling and unable to recognise that segregation was the cause of their insecurity, not the solution to it.

A proactive, progressive public policy can help to achieve reconciliation, and housing is the obvious starting point. Margaret Ritchie has ensured that the concept of a shared future will be a central theme in all housing policy development. We know that 80% of people, given the choice, want to live in a mixed neighbourhood. I was fortunate enough to be brought up in a small Housing Trust development in Warrenpoint, where people from all backgrounds lived side by side peacefully. Both our neighbours were policemen, and we were all good neighbours. Today, individuals who are waiting for shared social housing have little or no choice in that regard and, usually, end up in single-identity estates because there is no alternative. They must tolerate flags and bunting outside their house regardless of their feelings on the matter.

A considerable amount of community involvement is required in those shared future developments to ensure that tenants are ready to commit to sharing and to abandon the trappings of a single-identity enclave. It is not sufficient to focus attention on new developments, because the majority of social housing neighbourhoods remain single-identity estates. Five neighbourhoods have already — with community support — signed up

for the programme, such as the Ballynafeigh neighbourhood in south Belfast.

A shared future means a better future; however, that is not enough. A shared future in housing is, at present, only possible in areas that already have some cross-community integration. Much more work is required to counter the mentality that exists in staunch single-identity communities. Moreover, our system of allocating houses according to objective need reinforces the status quo. The existing housing segregation leads to segregated waiting lists, and, therefore, in the majority of instances, housing will be allocated to people from the same community background as the previous tenant. That perpetuates the segregation.

Minister Ritchie announced her intention to regard shared future housing as an entitlement for those who want it. It is a radical proposition that replicates existing provision in the education sector. Many parents choose integrated education because they want their children to be educated in a mixed and shared environment. The state, rightly, strives to meet that demand. Why does the housing sector not offer such provision? If parents want to raise their children in a mixed and shared community, the state has a duty to meet that demand.

Mrs Long: I beg to move the following amendment:
At end insert

“; and calls on the Executive to meet immediately to commit to producing an action plan, led by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, to tackle segregation in schools, housing and leisure facilities.”

I thank the Members for proposing the motion and accepting the amendment.

Our amendment does not seek to change the thrust of the motion. Instead, it presses the need for action as well as strategy. Unfortunately, this devolved Administration has been rather poor at addressing those issues. In fairness to the current First Minister and deputy First Minister, it is not solely their problem, because very little progress was made when previous Executives dealt with that aspect of policy. In fact, it is to our shame that most progress in relation to a shared future and a racial equality strategy was achieved during direct rule, when triennial action plans were developed and annual action plans were formulated.

We need to get to grips with that, because it is probably one of the biggest challenges that faces the Assembly. It is not an easy issue to wrangle with, because it cuts to the very heart of the divisions in society. It also cuts through almost every aspect of life. Many reports have cited the extent to which sectarianism, division, racism, bigotry and hatred influence people's choices about where to go to school or where to live; where they feel safe going to work or to receive training; about their access to jobs and services; or about all of those. It cuts

right across the board, and it is something that must be tackled if people are to be given the opportunity to reach their full potential and to participate fully in their community.

This matter will not be easy to address, but the fact that it is difficult is not an excuse to delay the process. The divisions go to the core of our community. Fear, prejudice, bigotry and a lack of trust hamper political progress in the institutions, and hamper the ability of communities to fulfil their potential. Furthermore, they hamper the ability of individuals to make their own choices, free from any pressure.

I am honest and open, and do not claim that the shared future strategy and racial equality strategy are perfect documents. The Alliance Party broadly welcomed them, as did the people who implemented and delivered them. They were a good place to start. When the Executive and OFMDFM announced at the start of this Assembly that they wanted to review the strategy, the Alliance Party made it very clear that it was not averse to that, and that is on record.

It appears that almost every direct rule document has to be unpicked and rebuilt from scratch, and we expressed our concern about that. One needs a wheel to get from A to B, but one does not need to reinvent it. Any policy that has the thumbprint of the direct rule Administration on it tends to be jettisoned, regardless of its worth. That must be overcome.

We recognised that the strategy would have much more power in communities if the imprimatur of a locally devolved Administration supported it. We had no difficulty with the current Administration, the Executive and OFMDFM wishing to review it. We would have preferred to see aspects of the strategy expanded to cover other groups that are not currently mentioned in the racial equality or the shared future strategies. Although dealing with their exclusion from society may be implicit in the strategy, it would be good if it were explicit. From that perspective, we did not have particular difficulties with the notion of a review.

We hope that, with the Executive and OFMDFM imprimatur, they will take ownership of the strategy and pursue it enthusiastically. That is something that we would welcome. However, there has been little enthusiasm, even to complete the review and submit a proposal to the Committee so that progress can be made. The time taken on this process has been excessive. It would be hard to say otherwise because — as Carmel Hanna rightly said — we have been told that the strategy has been at an advanced stage of development since the start of the year.

On several occasions, the Committee has been told that the submission of the strategy is imminent, yet we still do not have the document. The Committee was assured that its members would see it before the Halloween

recess, and I am sure that the Junior Minister will refer to that in his response. I welcome that assurance, but I will believe it when I see it, because we were also promised it before the summer recess. It was also hinted that we might even have seen it before the Easter recess. We are, therefore, dealing with a moveable feast. It concerns me that those deadlines are put back and that we see no progress.

I hope that the junior Minister will not be overly insulted if I say that OFMDFM has become something of an abyss into which things disappear. After entering that chasm, only the most dogged of documents escape and see the light of day again.

A few weeks ago, one of my colleagues quipped that the strategy — CSI — is well named because, at this point, we would need crime scene investigators to locate it.

Progress must be made to produce something substantive, which brings me to the amendment. Far from indicating that the Alliance Party is dissatisfied with individual Ministers — which appears to be what Members have taken from it — the amendment attempts to focus on the fact that the policy is not just about strategic thinking at Executive level, or about platitudes; it is about producing detailed action plans that can then be supported on the ground, where they will make the most difference.

We have had to wait a long time for the strategy, and the last time we had a shared future strategy, we had an equally long wait for the resultant action plans. I am pressing for an action plan now because, given that the Executive have had so long to work on the matter, I want them to produce a strategy and an action plan, so that we can get started on making changes.

The experience with the previous strategy was not that it was wrong, but that its vision could have been expanded. For example, the direct feedback on the racial equality strategy indicated that robust actions were necessary. In some ways, reviewing and beefing up action plans — in response to comments from those who were charged with delivering the shared future strategy and the racial equality strategy — is more important than rewriting the strategic document.

The amendment focuses on a couple of areas in which central Government have a role, because the feedback that the Alliance Party has received — whether through the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister or through questions in the House — indicates a focus on the impact of local government and a bottom-up approach.

Given my position as chairperson of the good relations partnership in Belfast City Council — so I declare that interest — I recognise the important role that local government must play in connecting with the public and in being able to facilitate local community groups

progressing at their own pace; however, there is a much wider aspect to segregation in our society that requires the Assembly's support and action.

The shared future strategy will impact on employment matters — the Minister for Employment and Learning spoke earlier — because people's choices about where they work, live or access training are restricted because of divisions in society. People have mind maps that delineate where they feel safe to go, and unless we recognise and deal with such divisions when producing policies in all areas of governance, we will not be able to offer people the support that they require to make choices.

Shared housing has already been mentioned, and I do not wish to criticise anything being done by the housing Minister to create more of it, but we must recognise that, with regard to public housing, it is a drop in the ocean. For example, we must consider the people who live outside such designated developments, and the protection and support that they receive when they are under pressure and facing difficulties from intimidation. Unfortunately, the policy still appears to be to move those who are threatened and intimidated, rather than those who threaten and intimidate. Therefore, although shared-housing projects are useful as a template for the future, we must consider other matters — such as the right to live in a single-identity area — which do not just affect people who make the choices, but also everyone around them. In essence, the first person of a different identity to move into a single-identity area breaches someone else's express wish. So there are issues that must be addressed.

The Alliance Party wants the Executive's document to be produced swiftly; a detailed action plan to be prepared and to go to public consultation; and for Members to reach the point at which we were when elected, when we were in the process of actually delivering a shared future, rather than talking about it.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion and the amendment.

12.45 pm

I wish to clarify my party's position. When I first heard that we were to debate CSI, I, too, thought that the motion was about 'CSI: Crime Scene Investigation', which is one of my favourite television programmes. However, as has been said, the motion is much more important than that — it is about producing a strategy for our Province.

As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I am aware of how much hard work has been done to produce the strategy. Undoubtedly, the strategy must be produced. However, the strategy that is published must be the correct strategy, and that is what we are trying to achieve.

It must answer all the needs that pertain to fairness and equality that exist in the Province, and, for that to be achieved, a great deal of thought must be put into the proposals and recommendations that are made.

I agree that it is vital to have a strategy in place and to adhere to its recommendations. Although I would prefer it if the strategy were being implemented already, it is most important that the right strategy be released, so that it can play a part in changing the situation in Northern Ireland. The strategy is important to all Committee members. It has not been forgotten about or pushed aside in any shape or form. I am aware of my own drive and that of the Committee to eradicate poverty. The implementation of the strategy is one of the Committee's commitments and remains of the utmost importance.

I am also aware that, with the so-called credit crunch looming, it is even more vital that we propose and follow the correct approach, in order to ensure that those who are already struggling to keep their heads above water do not sink to the bottom as a result of the extra financial burden. The concepts of a shared future and the eradication of poverty are linked in the sense that we in Northern Ireland are working together to cross all the existing boundaries. We can achieve a great deal as a Province when we have people from all ethnic groups, all religious persuasions and all political backgrounds working together.

On Saturday morning, I hosted a coffee morning in Newtownards town hall to raise money for the families of soldiers, sailors and members of the Royal Air Force. I was heartened to receive donations, both big and small, from all sectors of the Ards community. Ladies had baked big cakes and small cakes for the occasion, and I even met a woman who came just to do her bit in the kitchen. Those people came together as a result of a common bond, which is that they have loved ones working in the armed forces. Therefore, they wanted to do their bit to help. In those few hours, we were able to raise more than £1,000 to help those in need. I would love to see that happen on a larger scale right across the Province; that is, people working together to do good and to achieve a result. That can happen, and, for it to happen, the strategy is integral.

I ask the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to publish the strategy only after the Committee has considered it and made its recommendations. That request is made in the knowledge that they are already working hard on getting it right. I must make it clear to colleagues — because it seems to be unclear at present — that the strategy is, and will remain, an urgent matter; therefore, it will not be put on the back-burner. I have every reason to expect that the strategy will be released as soon as it is ready and correct.

There is no doubt that some of the old division lines still exist in the Province. Moreover, some new ones have developed — as the number of migrant workers has increased, new prejudices have come to the fore. However, it is also clear that much work is already being done in the Province to combat growing prejudices. I congratulate those community leaders who have worked so hard to ensure that all members of the community are included in their schemes and who, in some places, have gone so far as to arrange cookery lessons with the help of translators to enable migrant workers to cook efficiently and economically.

Such work is happening already and is being sponsored through different initiatives. Although more funding may become available when the strategy is completed and the Committee has made its recommendations, I want to make it clear that work is being done with communities to promote cohesion, sharing and integration. Previously, the junior Ministers have indicated that £1 million is available to fund 23 different ethnic organisations. That shows that work is being done at different levels.

The work that is being undertaken now does not rely completely on OFMDFM's releasing a paper, although that will enhance that work. I have every confidence that when the strategy is released — it is a matter of urgency, so it will be published soon — it will complement what is already in place. Members are aware of the £21 million that OFMDFM has set aside for good relations over the next three years. A further £7.5 million, again over the next three years, has been allocated to improve relationships and to deal with challenges. Again, that shows OFMDFM's commitment.

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

Mr Shannon: We must support the motion. We must also do our bit to contribute to the strategy, and we must have faith in our community workers.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat. I echo the views of all Members in wanting to see the publication of a cohesion, sharing and integration strategy as soon as possible. Therefore, I was pleased when the First and deputy First Minister confirmed to the OFMDFM Committee last week that that strategy would be with the Committee before the Halloween recess. Nevertheless, I welcome the opportunity to discuss the issue.

It is important to have a strategy that promotes substantive equality through the eradication of inequality and exclusion; factors that have sustained racism and sectarianism. Only when that is attained, will we have established the ground on which we can build a shared and better future. I hope that the strategy will act as a road map towards the building of the kind of shared and better future that we all want to see — one that is based on solid building blocks that tackle exclusion and inequality.

The deputy First Minister has signalled a financial investment of around £29 million to roll out the programme. We have agreed the building blocks of laws and practices that set the context for the resource allocation for building a shared and better future. I look forward to hearing the details of the proposals.

There can be no hierarchy of equality. Any good-relations strategy that is based on having due regard to promote equality of opportunity and does not include actions to address relationships between section 75 vulnerable groups in wider society is not only doomed to failure, but ignores the legal and policy base that gives it legitimacy in the expenditure of public resources.

The funding programme must enable excluded groups to identify what we must do to change our behaviour and our implementation of public policy. If that is not done, we are in danger of labelling them as victims who need support rather than groups and people who need resources to change the patterns and behaviours that have caused their exclusion.

I am aware that some politicians would prefer some minority groups to stay silent, or see a good psychiatrist. However, Sinn Féin is determined to deliver genuine equality and good relations for all in this society.

Recent unwise and unsafe commentary by some politicians — one of whom may be forgiven because, as she has acknowledged, she is not the brightest light in the candelabra — makes it all the more necessary for the House to affirm that equality for all is at the heart of building a shared and better future. I reassure all who experience disadvantage and exclusion that that is Sinn Féin's central position; a position that agrees with the Equality Commission's guidelines, which state:

“social cohesion requires equality to be reinforced by good community relations”.

Sinn Féin's view of a shared and better future is premised on a belief that community relations that are built on inequality are community relations that are built on sand. No matter how close the contact that different groups may have, unless that contact is underpinned by equality, it is absolutely meaningless.

Men and women share houses and have good relations. However, that does not mean that gender inequality is not a crucial problem in our society.

Social need is closely interrelated to cohesion, sharing and integration. Both the St Andrews Agreement and the Programme for Government set the context for tackling poverty through the criteria of objective need. Therefore, I hope that Ministers such as Margaret Ritchie ensure that people in north Belfast are allocated houses based on their need. Currently, more than 80% of those on housing waiting lists in north Belfast are of a Catholic and nationalist background. However, their

needs are being undermined by the pursuit of a flawed, shared future agenda.

Hopefully, it is not the case that the proposers of the motion want to talk about how much they want a shared and better future while wishing to maintain the same structures, patterns and outcomes of deprivation that make people's lives a misery. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: I broadly support the motion and the amendment. This Assembly is founded on the principle of a shared community.

Intrinsic to that concept, and its realisation, is the recognition of our diversity and the determination to make mutual respect and recognition the basis for a Northern Ireland that is at ease with itself and that is characterised by a more pluralist society.

The Ulster Unionist Party accepts that existing patterns of division are likely to remain for some time, and we have expressed our misgivings about certain policy aspects of the 'A Shared Future' document. Too much of that document is intent on undermining — rather than on being more positive towards — pluralism.

Building a shared community that best reflects the values of the modern United Kingdom is at the heart of my party's vision for Northern Ireland. That vision of a shared community is an essential part of the entire political project that is represented by the Assembly, and any foot dragging in that regard has the potential to destabilise the institutions and their effective operation. The strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration — and the delay in its publication by the OFMDFM — therefore, matter.

Many people outside the Assembly have understandable fears that OFMDFM is paying lip service to the concept of a shared future; they fear that OFMDFM is talking the talk, but not walking the walk. Many suspect that OFMDFM is locked in a bear hug of mutual veto and that that sterile situation has led to the paralysis in Northern Ireland's Government at the Executive level.

On 30 May of this year, the junior Ministers, Mr Donaldson and Mr Kelly, emphasised the importance of working towards a society in which there is respect for each other's traditions when they opened the conference, 'Cohesion, Sharing and Integration — our role in a better future'. On that occasion, junior Minister Donaldson said:

“We have now entered a new and hopeful period in our shared history. We have an unprecedented opportunity to build a shared and better future for all.”

However, a mere four months later, the Executive is in cold storage, having failed to meet since June. Where is the vision of 30 May? What has happened to that unprecedented opportunity? Is a shared and better future for all no longer a priority?

The danger that lies at the heart of a failure to work on the basis of mutual respect, and to give proper weighting to cohesion and a shared future, is that it helps to create a political vacuum, which nurtures the attitudes that contributed to the painful, bitter experience of the Troubles.

Society is observing the Executive's pathetic inability to function in any meaningful manner. We must ask how, after the past three months of inaction and paralysis afflicting OFMDFM, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister can speak with authority on the issue of cohesion, sharing and integration. That is why the Ulster Unionist Party will support the motion.

Cohesion, mutual respect and working together are not optional add-ons to the institutions; they should be at the core of what we are doing here and what we are trying to build. Action to provide for the most vulnerable can be achieved only by strong legislation and leadership, which, in turn, are dependent on a mutually agreed programme. Recently, the Executive signed up to the UK-wide goal of eradicating child poverty by 2020. How can that goal be delivered when the Executive cannot even meet? They cannot meet even in the context of a global economic crisis.

The strength of the Assembly is based on mutual recognition and on mutual respect, and we achieve that by recognising our diversity — not by pretending that division does not exist. We cannot build cohesion, sharing and integration through trite slogans or by denying social realities that have emerged over generations.

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

Mr Kennedy: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has a profound responsibility to end the present sterile stand-off.

1.00 pm

Mr McCausland: The creation of a shared and better future for Northern Ireland is an important point and clearly requires a strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration. Equality, diversity and interdependence are important principles for the future of Northern Ireland and this part of the United Kingdom.

Carmel Hanna's speech sounded more like a party political broadcast than a speech about cohesion, sharing and integration. It seems that the only party doing anything in this regard — in her perspective — is the SDLP. I suggest that that is rather wide of the mark, and that there are issues that her party should examine.

She talked about shared housing — and her colleague Alban Maginness is here today. When the community that used to live in the Torrens estate in north Belfast were forced out of their homes by republican intimidation, Mr Maginness subsequently said that that

was fine, because the land could be used for nationalists. He said that it was a windfall site. A windfall is where someone receives good fortune unexpectedly. The description of what happened in the Torrens area as a windfall — or good fortune — was a sad reflection on how Alban views the housing situation in that part —

Mr A Maginness: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. First, I reject entirely what the Member has said. Secondly, I remind him that the decline of the Torrens estate was due to several factors. Certainly, there was some intimidation. However, the people who left the Torrens estate did so in an organised fashion and to an agreed programme, and were rehoused immediately. The Torrens area was a windfall site in the context of providing additional housing, as it had become a sink estate. There was an opportunity for it to be rehabilitated and rebuilt. That was done and, therefore, it was a windfall site for housing in north Belfast.

Mr Speaker: In relation to the point of order, perhaps the Member was interpreting what the Member had said. However, he may wish to clarify his position.

Mr McCausland: I am grateful to Mr Maginness for confirming that he described that site as a windfall. It was a shameful and sectarian viewpoint, and it is still the same today.

As regards shared housing, when plans were put forward for the Summerville site in north Belfast, another member of the SDLP Alex Attwood opposed progress on that site and demanded that a very high wall be built around it so that there would be a clear division between it and the neighbouring Mountainview estate. It is interesting to see that there are issues not just for one or two parties, but for all political parties, including the SDLP.

It is not just an issue of shared housing. There are also issues of how people view others and view the past. I reiterate what I said in the Chamber on 29 September — the comments made by Gerry Kelly on the television programme about the Maze Prison breakout have set back community relations in Northern Ireland by several years. There was no sense of remorse for the actions of that day; no sense of deep regret for what happened. That absence of any sense of remorse has been damaging for community relations and for the creation of a shared and better future.

Naomi Long said that most progress was made under direct rule. She referred to the creation of the shared future strategy and the triennial action plan. Progress, or at least developments, took place under direct rule. However, it was done with very little political input and very little sense of ownership, and the resultant document was a poor one.

It is a crucial issue, and we should take our time to get it right.

Dr Farry: I appreciate that the strategy did not have a huge input from political parties. However, does the Member acknowledge that the consultation on 'A Shared Future' received an unprecedented level of response — over 10,000 responses — from across the community?

Mr McCausland: Irrespective of the number of letters that are manufactured and sent in, the process is flawed if politicians, who are the elected voice of the entire community, do not have a share in it. Indeed, even Naomi Long acknowledged that the document is flawed. The issue of a shared future is fundamental; therefore, we must set about the process properly and get it right.

Several of this morning's newspapers refer to the creation of a shared future in the world of sport. The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure has made a number of significant references in recent weeks to the need for the Gaelic Athletic Association to make changes to its ethos to create a better shared future for the world of sport. Unionists from across the unionist family have acknowledged that the GAA has made some changes but have highlighted the need for further change. The problem is that both Sinn Féin and the SDLP have failed to support that call. Those parties have failed to promote the need for change towards a shared future in the realm of sport.

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

Mr McCausland: This matter is crucial, and it must be dealt with properly.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo thacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

I support the motion. The deputy First Minister is committed to good relations based on equality. Indeed, Martin McGuinness has stated that OFMDFM:

"will introduce a programme of cohesion, sharing and integration to tackle sectarianism and racism, which will refresh the previous Administration's separate but associated policies on good relations and good race relations." — [*Official Report, Vol 30, No 1, p26, col 1*].

As Martina Anderson said, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was reminded last Wednesday that the strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration will be presented to the Committee before the Halloween recess; that is a welcome development. It is the role of the Department — in which the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and their colleagues operate — to preside over the delivery of a clear, shared vision of the type of society that we want to live in.

Contrary to the First Minister's recent arrogance, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are effectively joint Ministers. I hope that Peter Robinson will respect that fact in the time ahead.

The strategy refers to the role of local government. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister must support delivery at local level, and district councils are key in this matter. Statutory mechanisms are required to institute power sharing wherever it is resisted or refused, often by unionist-dominated councils east of the River Bann.

The situation is different west of the Bann. One of the d'Hondt systems of proportionality has been practised in the four Tyrone councils and in places such as Fermanagh, south Derry —

Mr McCausland: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: The Member will not give way.

The d'Hondt system has also ensured that unionists are treated equally on Derry City Council — [*Interruption.*]

The Speaker: Order. The Member has the floor.

Mr McElduff: Unionists are treated equally on Derry City Council regarding the allocation of senior posts. Similarly, in 2007-08, Bert Wilson of the Ulster Unionist Party was chairman and Clive McFarland of the DUP was vice chairman of Omagh District Council. I am a member of that council, on which nationalists predominate in numbers.

For 2008-09, Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council has a DUP mayor and a DUP deputy mayor, and, again, the majority of the council's representatives are nationalists.

Mr A Maginness: The Member praises, and properly supports, the use of d'Hondt in local councils. Does he also support the use of d'Hondt for the appointment of a Minister for justice?

Mr Speaker: The Member can have one extra minute of speaking time.

Mr McElduff: Thank you very much for the extra minute, Mr Speaker — I will need it.

Those unionist Members who are listening to, and participating in, the debate today could do cohesion and integration a favour by spreading the message —

Mr McCausland: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: No, the Member will not give way.

They could spread the message to places such as Limavady, Larne and Lisburn. Individual Ministers have a major role to play in fostering tolerance, equality and good relations in the North — and Nelson McCausland mentioned that himself.

I am speaking as an individual MLA, not in my capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. The Minister who is perhaps most in default is Gregory Campbell. His public utterances and conduct since assuming office have been, at best,

ungracious and begrudging towards organisations that have a Gaelic Ireland outlook, and, at worst, insulting and offensive.

Mr McCausland: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: The Member will not give way.

On Friday 26 September, the 'Belfast Telegraph' — which is hardly a Sinn Féin propaganda sheet — featured a piece from the columnist Lawrence White. He said of Gregory Campbell:

"If he finds mixing with GAA types or Irish language groups offensive, then he should simply resign from his post."

An article in 'The Irish News' on Tuesday 30 September stated:

"It's impossible to connect Campbell's two weeks of anti-GAA rhetoric to the incident in Down",

where a GAA club was burned down. It went on to say:

"However, Campbell must ask himself if his recent comments helped to foster a greater sense of understanding and respect towards the GAA."

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure must face increased scrutiny. He constantly insults the largest sporting and cultural organisation in Ireland — including in the Six Counties. If he is unfit for office and incapable of showing respect to other people's traditions, and if he wants to remain in the trenches, he should consider his position as Minister with responsibility for culture and sport.

Mr Elliott: Who better to follow in this debate than Mr McElduff from West Tyrone. He was very quick to tell us about some council areas in the west of the Province. I sit on one of those councils, and I suggest that some of Mr McElduff's d'Hondt proposals are really just window dressing and do not get to the crux of matter — sharing with unionist counterparts in those councils.

He mentioned Fermanagh earlier, so let us consider Fermanagh. Many symbols and memorabilia were removed from the offices and chamber of Fermanagh District Council. They stopped the flying of the Union flag — the flag of this Province — on council buildings. Therefore, do not tell me that nationalists and republicans from west of the Bann support equality.

Mr McCausland touched on the GAA. Let us be blunt, folks: if we are to promote cohesion and the sharing of responsibilities in the Province, people must get real about some of the hurts that have been caused in communities — and that applies to both sides of the community. Let us consider the GAA for a moment. I happened to be in Lisnaskea yesterday, where car loads of GAA supporters drove up and down Main Street at 6.00 pm, blaring horns, waving flags and sitting on the doors of cars.

If nothing else, doing that presented a danger to the people involved and to the public. The local Protestant unionist community was intimidated by those people's actions.

1.15 pm

People must gauge such incidents in that community for what they are. I am happy for people to celebrate their culture, and I want to respect that culture, but they must do it in such a way that will allow us to respect it. However, I have yet to see evidence of that. Those people can drive about with the flags of their GAA team flying from their cars, and that is fine, provided that they realise the hurt and intimidation that they are causing to some people in the minority community in that area. They must respect that community.

Mr McElduff: Will the Member give way?

Mr Elliott: I am into cohesion and sharing, so yes.

Mr McElduff: Will the Member accept that he contributed to negative community relations in County Fermanagh? When the whole county was in a euphoric mood about the progress of its Gaelic football team, he made a public statement saying that he hoped that Fermanagh's Gaelic football team would be beaten. That set back community relations and caused shock and dismay in the county.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for his interjection, because it allows me to clarify my position. If Mr McElduff had read the report accurately, he would realise that I did not say that I hoped that the Fermanagh team would lose. I said that some constituents, who are members of my community, told me that they were sick, sore and tired of listening to nothing but GAA at work. They had had enough of it, and, for once, they were saying that they wanted the team to lose. They were so fed up that they did not want it to continue for another three weeks. Those people experienced serious intimidation from their work colleagues, in an area where, in an office of about 10 people, only two might come from the Protestant unionist community. Ordinarily, those people would have joined in such discussions, but, because of the intimidation factor — something that Mr McElduff and his colleagues must get into their heads — those people did not feel included.

As a member of the Orange Institution, I have debated on public platforms with members of the GAA, and I am happy to do so. However, those people will not be able to move on unless they start to respect our tradition. It does not help matters when IRA or republican commemorations take place at GAA grounds. The organisers of those events need to be careful, as do the owners of the grounds at which those events take place.

Mr McElduff mentioned a statement that Mr Campbell made about a GAA club that was burned down. I totally condemn that act and hope that Members on the

other side of the Chamber will condemn the acts of people who have burnt down Orange Halls throughout the Province over the years.

Mr Durkan: I begin by expressing my personal condolences to the deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, on the death of his mother, Peggy. She was a very kind, charming woman, who was loved not only by her family but by her many neighbours and the wider community across the city. I offer condolences to Martin McGuinness and to the wider McGuinness family.

The fact that we have power-sharing arrangements here is a great example of progress for our society, but politicians sharing the corridors of power cannot be the end of the journey. We must ensure that we have a society in which we truly share the streets where we live and in which we share the terraces of sports grounds and all the playgrounds, including school playgrounds. Therefore, we need determined policies, programmes and strategies to ensure that we build a community that is ever more united on the basis of being ever more equal. We must work on the basis of respect and of being respected, and on the basis of identifying, reversing and removing inequality, injustice and hardship. That should be our common commitment. That is why we must have a strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration.

The OFMDFM Ministers are not always present when the Assembly debates the work of that Department, so I welcome the fact that junior Minister Kelly is here today. I hope that he will use his time to reassure us that when OFMDFM Ministers talk about introducing a programme — as opposed to a strategy — it will not mean a lesser commitment than we might expect from a strategy. Words are often used in different ways in order to mean less than that which is required or intended. I hope that Mr Kelly will be able to spell out the commitment that is envisaged when the OFMDFM Ministers use the word “programme” rather than “strategy”.

All equality should be equal. That is why such a strategy must address a range of issues, including racism and other prejudices that people suffer in our society, whether they are being attacked for their sexuality or for other factors. We must be clear that we cannot have a strategy that is so comprehensive that it does not specifically confront sectarianism, or is uncomfortable in doing so. There must be a full-frontal assault on sectarianism in all its forms. Some of us have concerns about some of the language that is being bandied about — the way in which some matters are being rebranded — because that might lead to a lessening of the focus on sectarianism itself.

Mention was made of the lack of progress during the previous period of devolution. I am on public record as saying that I felt somewhat embarrassed that, when

I was Deputy First Minister, we could not publish ‘A Shared Future’. That was partly because the then First Minister felt that even in a consultation document, a question about the idea of a shared society could be dangerous. He felt that the unionist community would react very badly even to the notion of a shared society. He based that view on experiences that people had had as a result of employment legislation and the idea that a shared workplace meant a neutral workplace — that there was a dimmer switch for Britishness while the volume was being pumped up on Irishness.

For my part, I thought that if those were the issues and concerns that people had, we really needed a debate and nationalists needed to hear the unionist view and experience if we were to truly understand the issues and move forward. Regrettably, it was left to the direct rule Administration to publish a document that progressed some of the good work that had been commissioned from Jeremy Harbison and others during the previous period of devolution and which asked some very challenging questions. We can ask each other challenging questions in this Chamber, but, as others have said, we must all ask ourselves challenging questions. I hope that the strategy, when it appears, will challenge us all.

The Executive can do much good, as can Members in the Chamber. Were a Civic Forum to be put in place, it could achieve a great deal on social inclusion and the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy.

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

Mr Durkan: I hope that we can use a revived Civic Forum to formulate some policy-outriding work on those areas.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We are discussing a very important document, so it is crucial that we get it right. We must also remember that the OFMDFM Ministers have told us that the document will be presented to the OFMDFM Committee before the Halloween recess.

The new strategy should emphasise that equality will be recognised, and not used simply as a smokescreen or as a form of tokenism. Good relations must be defined in accordance with the 1998 Act, which clearly identified that good relations are based on:

“due regard to the need to promote equality”.

The NIO’s purpose behind A Shared Future was simply to ignore inequalities, deprivation and patterns of exclusion and to create a smokescreen behind which it could say that it was building good community relations, but that people should ignore and set aside their aspirations for the future.

Dr Farry: On the subject of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and its good-relations provisions — which

the Member's colleague Martina Anderson mentioned earlier — does Mr Molloy agree with me that there is a case for amending that Act so that the good-relations provisions apply not just to race and religion, but to all the section 75 categories, including, most notably, sexual orientation?

Mr Molloy: I thank the Member for his intervention. Section 75 represents the primary legislation that deals with those matters and is, therefore, what we should primarily be concerned with. Obviously, that can be discussed in meetings of the OFMDFM Committee.

We must recognise that 'A Shared Future' is simply a smokescreen, and that there is a need for a new strategy to deal with equality. Forty years ago, the civil rights campaign was batoned off the streets of Derry because it dared to raise the issues of equality and justice, at that time in respect of Catholics and Protestants. Now, we live in a multicultural society that includes many nationalities, and it must be recognised that racism has become a major issue. Racism, coupled with sectarianism, leaves us with a major problem on our hands. It must be recognised that the recently formed communities here must be consulted and must be involved in the production of any policy documentation in the future. Such documents must not simply involve a tokenistic inclusion of those communities, and must not ignore their needs.

It is important to recognise that, during debates such as this, every party seems to be in agreement on the issues of sharing, cohesion and integration, and yet, during other debates — when discussing the need for an Irish language Act, for example — that does not appear to be the case; integration falls to one side. When discussing Gaelic games, integration falls to one side — in fact, the debate becomes very aggressive. When discussing the rights of Travellers, again we find that integration is not an issue that society wants to recognise.

Mr McCausland: When driving through Dungiven the other day, I noticed that the hurling club there — for which there is a large sign on the main street — is named the Kevin Lynch Hurling Club. Does the Member believe that naming a hurling club after a convicted terrorist contributes to the creation of a shared and better future?

Mr McElduff: Nelson declined to mention that Kevin Lynch, who is highly respected in the Dungiven area of County Derry, was the captain of Dungiven's under-16 hurling team when they won an all-Ireland title, and that he also lined out for Derry.

Mr McCausland: Will the Member tell us what rank that individual also held in a terrorist organisation?

Mr Molloy: I am the Member who gave way, and although I thank my colleague for his co-operation, I will attempt to get back on course. It is important to remember that Kevin Lynch was a freedom fighter and

a hunger striker. He was held in very high esteem by the local community, and the Gaelic team for which he played was named after him. If one looks through the history of any society or organisation, one will find that many have been named after various people, at various times, for various reasons. That does not mean that they should not be integrated, or that the Gaelic Athletic Association should be isolated, and deprived of funding and resources by the Assembly.

There are other issues that concern groups of people who are not allowed to be integrated — the victims of the past, for example. Some parties hold to the interpretation that there are different classes of victims. That issue must be dealt with.

Some Members have spoken very strongly against the reintegration of ex-prisoners into society, and their need to be able to adapt to all aspects of society in their normal working routine. If we are really talking about integration, we must be genuine about it.

Jim Shannon made the point that, in meetings of the OFMDFM Committee, there is a very open discussion of the issues of integration and victims, and the other issues with which we are dealing. If we are to have a genuine discussion on those matters, it is important that we take into account the factors that affect all sides of the community, that we start to deal with those in a realistic way, and do not simply create a smokescreen. The proposed amendment to the motion creates a smokescreen. It is very important that we discuss the document and give it due consideration.

1.30 pm

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am pleased to have an opportunity to speak to the motion.

The motion and the amendment ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister to: publish the strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration immediately; detail how the strategy will promote reconciliation; explain how the strategy will help the Executive's commitment to the eradication of poverty; and produce an action plan to tackle segregation in schools, housing and leisure facilities. I will address each of those issues, but I also want to reassure people in the Assembly, and those outside the Chamber who may catch snatches of the debate on TV or in the newspapers, that we are fully committed to tackling division.

As outlined in legislation and policy, the Executive are committed to equality for all sections of our community. All Ministers in OFMDFM support the building of constructive cross-community work, which is now part of everyday life. All Ministers in OFMDFM are wholeheartedly working to eliminate sectarianism, racism, division, polarisation and prejudice. The

Executive have fully supported those commitments and objectives in the strategic priorities and cross-cutting themes of the Programme for Government. All Members here are wholly committed to a shared and better future for all. Despite the disagreements, every Member who spoke in the debate spoke up for that cause.

Before I address the specific issues that the motion raises, I want people in communities to hear a united and shared message from the Chamber that building our new future is a unified and unifying task. The rough and tumble of political debate in the Assembly must not discourage those dedicated people who take serious personal risks to bridge deeply felt division. I am sure that I speak for all Members by saying that our society requires everyone to work together to secure the new relationships that are growing in so many places. We want that work to continue and be built on to create a shared and better future for all. We will not shy away from tackling head-on the difficult and challenging issues that face us.

The question about publishing the strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration, and the involvement of the OFMDFM Committee in that, is straightforward for me to answer. During Question Time on 29 September 2008, the deputy First Minister confirmed that the draft strategy will be submitted to the OFMDFM Committee before the Halloween recess. That was reiterated when the First Minister and deputy First Minister appeared before that Committee on 1 October 2008. To reassure other Members, the strategy will be presented to the Assembly, and the programme proposals will be subject to full consultation and an equality impact assessment.

I emphasise that, considerable work has been done on the strategy over the past 12 months, in line with all inherited policies. We made a joint decision to fundamentally examine the strategy to establish whether it was fit for purpose for the new dispensation. We want to make the strategy as effective, ambitious and comprehensive as possible, and we are moving strongly in the right direction. Several Members mentioned that everything that was done before is being abandoned. That is a myth. We are trying to refresh and rebuild existing strategies.

There are some preliminary comments to make before I address how the strategy will promote reconciliation. First, the strategy must be seen in the context of the legislation and policies that promote equality across all sections of our community. The strategy will also sit alongside existing policies on tackling and ending hate crime and promoting respect for diversity. We will not consign to the dustbin the work that people have done and the successes that they have achieved. The exercise is about consolidating, building on and resourcing tried and tested good practice. We must be innovative to ensure that the

strategy is targeted at the changing face of communities and society.

Secondly, I want to address the myth that we have shelved the promotion of community relations — nothing could be further from the truth. Over the past 18 months, all the OFMDFM Ministers and their departmental officials have actively led and supported work on the ground, and I know that many Members have done so too. However, from a ministerial and departmental perspective, I am pleased to highlight the increased funding of £7 million for good relations and good race relations that was secured in the 2007 spending review as an example of our commitment.

That increase has already been provided during the current year — for example, to minority ethnic groups, which now receive funding of approximately £1 million. The involvement of junior Minister Donaldson and me, during the summer, with the working group that focuses on issues in north Belfast has brought about a £100,000 increase for youth-intervention schemes. Thanks to that support for people who work at interfaces, improvement has continued throughout the summer months.

As I turn to the focus of the new strategy, I do not want to go too far ahead of our discussions with the Committee. However, I will explain some of our priorities: to tackle the visible manifestations of sectarianism, racism and intolerance; to dismantle peace walls, with communities' support; to work with communities who live in interface areas to eliminate sectarian attacks, youth rioting and civil disorder; to tackle the incidence of, and reasons for, racial attacks; to provide and expand safe and shared spaces and public services; and to support local people, with the participation of minority-ethnic groups, to deal with local issues through local solutions.

I have included that list in order to give a flavour of the practical objectives that the strategy seeks to achieve. By promoting reconciliation in a practical way, we seek to challenge and support communities to become places where any person, regardless of race, colour, religion, political opinion or sexual orientation can live, work, rest and socialise in an environment of tolerance, respect, safety and freedom from hate and violence.

Central Government believe that strong political leadership is essential for the success of the strategy. The establishment of a new Minister-led good-relations panel will drive and oversee the work throughout Government, in local government, and with key stakeholders to tackle the type of issues that I have mentioned. A strategic action plan and locally delivered action plans will be developed and implemented, and will skilfully take account of all good relations and race-relations issues through complementary bottom-

up, top-down approaches. Those are ambitious and comprehensive objectives. It is not only necessary, but essential, for everyone to accept them. I firmly believe that they are achievable and that they reflect people's aspirations.

How will the strategy help to eradicate poverty? As Members are aware, the economy is a key aspect of the Executive's Programme for Government. Wealth creation and job creation must and will impact on all areas of social and physical development. Just as we want to share in the peace bonus, so, too, must economic regeneration benefit everyone in society. Successful economic development must include all sectors — Government, business, education, and the community and voluntary sector. A stable society is needed in which children can play together, people can work together and families can live happily side by side, regardless of their community, ethnic background or beliefs. That mutual acceptance and respect are the determining factors that will foster a stable, prosperous and growing economy.

During the past several years, a Cheann Comhairle, there has been economic growth and job creation. However, there are concerns that not all sections of the community have participated nor, indeed, benefited from that growth. People who live at interface areas must be able to see and feel on the ground the impact of the good-relations policy. It is not sufficient to say that the policy works: that must be seen and felt by people on the front line.

The anti-poverty strategy will be based on the life-cycle approach in order to tailor solutions to each group's particular needs. We are committed to actively target and deal with social need. We want that work to be taken forward by a new ministerial anti-poverty subcommittee. The core principal was made explicit by the Programme for Government's (PFG) commitment:

“to develop new and innovative measures that will address existing patterns of socio-economic disadvantage and target resources and efforts towards those in greatest objective need.”

The application of the principle of a shared and better future for all has a cross-cutting theme. The programme will ensure that Departments direct efforts and resources towards areas, groups and individuals in greatest objective need, including disabled people, children, families and older people who live in poverty.

The Executive already has a broad range of programmes that are aimed directly at targeting social need and patterns of disadvantage, for example, Sure Start, winter fuel payments and measures to tackle rural poverty. However, the concept of a better and shared future for all applies equally to high-level strategies, such as the investment strategy.

The Executive, in agreeing the PFG, have set challenging targets on poverty, and on child poverty in

particular. They are committed to eradicating child poverty by 2020 and halving the numbers of children in poverty by 2010. From an early stage, the Executive have sought to ensure that the concepts of equality and good relations are firmly embedded in the approach to developing the PFG and investment strategy. They wanted to ensure that, in the growth of the economy and creation of the shared and better future, no group would be left behind. That is a key aim; and it underpins the entire PFG. It is reflected in the priority they give to promotion of tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being. In line with that, The Executive have set a range of ambitious targets to address the causes and consequences of inequality, intolerance and division, and to break the cycle of poverty, disadvantage and marginalisation.

The Executive are determined to support the most vulnerable and to ensure that everyone lives in a strong vibrant and sustainable way that enhances the quality of life and encourages everyone to realise his or her potential. That is why we will focus on building shared communities, regenerating communities, removing barriers to employment, removing physical barriers that divide communities and addressing significant inequalities in health and education outcomes.

I hope that I have addressed most of the issues raised by Members. In her party political broadcast, Carmel Hanna referred to separate and segregated housing. We recognise people's aspirations to live in unsegregated housing; we support the work of the Housing Executive, which is substantially funded by the International Fund for Ireland, and we are conscious of the primacy of need. We will work with the Housing Executive to balance need with the shared aspiration to build communities in all areas. It is also important that we work closely with the communities themselves.

Naomi Long spoke of the detailed action plans among other things. As I said already, the Executive's strategy emphasises that actions must be locally based, take account of local needs and identify local solutions. We agree that physical action is important, but it is also important that we do not impose plans on communities. Involving communities is vital.

Jim Shannon said that OFMDFM should publish the strategy only after consultation with the Committee: I have already addressed that point.

Martina Anderson said — not for the first time — that there should be no hierarchy of equality. We agree that equality and good relations are joint priorities and that they are mutually reinforcing. Contacts must result in substantial changes in attitudes and behaviours. We want to see the policy make a real difference to people's lives.

Danny Kennedy said that delay in publishing the strategy is destabilising the institutions and suggested that it is paying lip-service to the concept of a shared and better future. I have addressed those issues. Mr Kennedy's concern, that a shared and better future is no longer a priority, is misplaced. We need to focus on what we are doing. The rough and tumble of debate should not ignore the real action that is being taken: otherwise, we run the risk that those we support, and who work so diligently and effectively, may be discouraged.

Barry McElduff, Naomi Long and Tom Elliott mentioned the role of local government. We must recognise that many useful projects are being supported by all district councils. Difficult issues are being worked through by people in both communities, and it is important that we, the elected political representatives, lead by example.

Mark Durkan asked whether the introduction of a "programme", as opposed to a "strategy", signified a lesser commitment; Carmel Hanna also spoke about that. I assure both Members that that is not the Executive's view. The change of a word does not signal a reduction in priority. The response I gave earlier to Carmel Hanna's point should assure everyone that the housing issue is being dealt with in that manner.

Another issue was raised by Nelson McCausland. Every Member who spoke —

Mr Speaker: The junior Minister's time is almost up.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister)(Mr G Kelly): I will be brief. I welcome Nelson McCausland's statement that equality, diversity and interdependence are crucial.

I shall step out of my role as junior Minister to speak as a private Member for a moment. History is history — I was involved in the Maze escape, and I make no apologies for that. Mr McCausland's consistent verbal attacks on the GAA are not helping community relations either. Go raibh maith agat.

1.45 pm

Dr Farry: At the outset, I declare an interest as a member of the Community Relations Council. I thank the Members who tabled the motion for accepting our amendment.

Looking back, 'A Shared Future' was a good start, but it was not a perfect document, particularly because there was a lack of political buy-in. However, much progress was made, and an action plan flowed from 'A Shared Future'. In the same light, the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy, whenever it is published, is unlikely to be perfect. However, we must make a start. Like the Minister, I do not want to go into detail anticipating what may be in that document.

The community has a number of concerns. First, it is concerned that good community-relations issues will go back into the silo of OFMDFM. When that issue was part of 'A Shared Future', emphasis was placed on a cross-departmental strategy. Some people fear that we may lose that overarching framework.

Secondly, although the Minister said that a shared and better future is an underlying theme in the Programme for Government, the public service agreements (PSAs) associated with that document exhibit little joined-up action on community-relations issues. It is feared that local action will be overemphasised, at the expense of an overarching regional strategy.

Thirdly, there is concern about the lack of a concrete action plan and the lack of accountable bodies, be they Departments or agencies, to develop the proposals. Our amendment tries to emphasise those points.

Those visions cut across all public policy in Northern Ireland and affect all strands of society. When one talks about economics, one must look at the impact on labour mobility and the way in which investment is deterred. Frankly, we cannot prioritise economic development in the Assembly and the Executive if we do not acknowledge the impact of division. The Alliance Party has raised the issue of finance on many occasions.

Some Members, including Jim Shannon, spoke about the social aspects of a divided society and how those are linked to deprivation. Members are aware of the human aspect, in that, whenever people are not contact with one another, they lose the ability to develop to their full potential, and, as a consequence, society loses out.

Environmentally, it is now clear that divided societies have larger carbon footprints. That point may go over the head of the Minister of the Environment.

Those points illustrate the need for joined-up action among Departments and stress the importance of having a coherent action plan.

I want to comment on some Members' contributions. It was a largely productive debate, with the exception of those Members whose contributions went down a few blind alleys.

Carmel Hanna raised the issue of housing. I acknowledge Margaret Ritchie's work on shared housing. She has been proactive, yet much more must be done.

Although we welcome the fact that the Department now talks about people's right to live in mixed areas, the other side of the coin is the right of people to live in a segregated neighbourhood — a single-identity area. In the strange world of Northern Ireland, it may seem perfectly reasonable, based on religious identity,

to live in a single-identity area. However, if a society were to introduce a policy whereby people had the right to live in single-identity areas based on race, there would be international outrage. We must look carefully at the real implications of our statements on the current housing policy.

Jim Shannon and Martina Anderson mentioned resources and that new funds are to go to OFMDFM. That the money is going to OFMDFM more or less makes my point for me. We must see what other Departments are spending on their good-relations strategies. Education is one area in which huge opportunities exist for sharing and, in the long run, saving resources.

Some Members mentioned the issue of equality and the good-relations function. In my intervention, I was trying to make the point that there is a distinction between the breadth of groups listed under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and those listed under the good-relations function, which applies to race and religion only. That must be broadened if there is to be a genuine, robust system of equality and good relations.

Danny Kennedy spoke of pluralism as the way forward. That is fine, but not if it means entrenching divisions in Northern Ireland. Pluralism, in a positive sense, must be about more than two communities, and must value diversity. I urge support for the amendment and the motion.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Alliance Party for its support for the motion, and I commend all Members who have supported it.

If rhetoric were the measure of commitment to good relations and reconciliation in the community, we would have no problems. Every Member who has spoken has mentioned the necessity of the promotion of good relations and of reconciliation, as well as the need for the creation of a more equal society in Northern Ireland.

That is to be welcomed. However, a real commitment to that process is required on the part of the Executive. The unpardonable delay in the production of a document — whether it be a strategy or a programme — is deeply regrettable. The House has been assured by the junior Minister that the document will be produced by Halloween. He did not say which Halloween.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly): This Halloween.

Mr A Maginness: He has clarified the position, Mr Speaker. We look forward to the production of that document by Halloween, because there have been many false dawns in reaching that stage.

The Assembly, the Executive and the other institutions of the Good Friday Agreement have one central purpose — to reconcile all our people, to create partnership, and, through that partnership, to bring about a sustainable peace here for future generations. The Assembly must realise that this is a conflict resolution process, not a conflict substitution process. Unfortunately, some Members adhere to the latter.

It is clear that there is general goodwill towards moving in the right direction. I commend those who have spoken in those terms today. However, there is a problem in respect of equality in this society. One cannot exclude equality and have good community relations — both go together. Neither can economic opportunity be excluded; we must have that. That is why it is important that the document also tackles poverty in our society. My party and I recommend that the Executive take on board statutory targets to try to eliminate poverty.

The Executive and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister purport to be dedicated to the elimination of poverty, particularly among children, and yet the Executive fund that was set up to tackle that very problem has been abolished. That is to be deeply regretted. That fund was pioneered by the first Executive, and it was of great value and importance.

Some of the remarks that were made by Tom Elliott about the system of local government and about the d'Hondt system, in particular, are regrettable. D'Hondt is a very important mechanism for bringing about power sharing in local councils — it is not superficial; it is a real sharing of power at local government level.

Mr Elliott: I wish to clarify my position. I did not criticise the method or the use of d'Hondt in the western council areas. I indicated that there is still an underlying sectarianism and division that must be tackled.

Mr A Maginness: I am glad that the Member clarified his point. D'Hondt is not the only mechanism — we can have others, we can improve on d'Hondt and we can improve on the sharing of power and the building of partnerships. I agree with the Member that there is an underlying sectarianism in all councils and throughout our society. Our central role must be —

Mr McElduff: During the course of my remarks, Mr Maginness asked me to clarify matters pertaining to the use of d'Hondt. With his legal background, he will know that the Act is paramount in this matter. When a new Department is established, which might necessitate the dissolution of an existing Department, section 17 of the 1998 Act takes effect. Subsection 4 of the Act states that:

“The number of Ministerial offices shall not exceed 10 or such greater number as the Secretary of State may by order provide.”

Subsection 5 states that:

“A determination under subsection (1) shall not have effect unless it is approved by a resolution of the Assembly passed with cross-community support.”

The SDLP mantra that d'Hondt simply has to be triggered so that it can get its hands on the ministerial post for policing and justice is illegal under that 1998 Act, and I will arrange for a copy of it to be left in the Member's pigeonhole.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Member for belatedly replying to my point; it must have taken quite some time for the Sinn Féin office to work out that strategy, which he has very carefully read. Of course it is not illegal; d'Hondt is the proper system for the appointment of Ministers, and departing from that is to depart from a central aspect of the Good Friday Agreement. Unfortunately, that is what Sinn Féin has done — it has weakened the d'Hondt system. It is sad that the Member has to stand up and justify that instead of supporting the right of an SDLP member to be appointed as Minister for justice.

Mr Durkan: Mr McElduff addressed the issue of what happens regarding the first devolved justice Minister. However, the letter from Martin McGuinness and Peter Robinson of 29 July states that at all times the Minister of justice is to be appointed by cross-community support — a complete departure from the agreement. We are talking about a veto that will be used not just against the SDLP now, but against Sinn Féin in the future. That is the significance of the mistakes that Sinn Féin is making.

Mr A Maginness: I will move on —

Mr McElduff: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No, I think that you have made your point. If the Assembly has any task it is to tackle sectarianism, individually and collectively. It is important to say that publicly and to do that through our actions; that has always been my policy as a politician. I strongly reject any criticism, implied or explicit, made against me today. The SDLP remains committed to the promotion of good relations, to the ending of sectarianism and to the creation of reconciliation in our society, and that should be the task for us all. If this debate has done any good, it has been to highlight the importance of that commitment. That commitment should bring about agreement amongst those in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and that office should expedite a process whereby we can achieve that.

Good spirit was shown this morning through the condolences expressed by the First Minister to the deputy First Minister. That human touch was very moving and something to be genuinely welcomed.

2.00 pm

If Members could translate that into daily actions in the Assembly, it would act as a model and an example to the community for people, collectively and individually, to tackle the problem of sectarianism, whether in sport, the workplace, housing, education, or elsewhere. That would be a marvellous contribution to peace.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the delayed publication of the Strategy for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration; calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to publish their strategy without further delay and to detail how this strategy will promote reconciliation, the ideal of a truly shared future and how it will help the Executive's commitment to eradicate poverty; and calls on the Executive to meet immediately to commit to producing an action plan, led by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, to tackle segregation in schools, housing and leisure facilities.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Comber Greenway

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

Ms Purvis: I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges the health benefits that outdoor exercise offers children and adults, including positive mental well-being; recognises that safe walking and cycling routes contribute greatly to this and are in short supply in urban areas; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to preserve safe pedestrian and cyclist access on the Comber Greenway.

I am delighted that the motion has been selected. At a time when we are facing a difficult financial situation, there are important quality-of-life issues that need our attention, and we must keep in mind the whole picture with regard to quality of life. It is critical that we produce real solutions in order to keep homes warm this winter and to help to keep people in their homes in difficult times.

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

Today, we also have an opportunity to examine the quality of life and the health of the environment that we are offering to the people of Northern Ireland when they step outside their homes. At a time when the Executive are failing to meet the needs of the people of Northern Ireland, I am glad to have the chance to raise an important issue that affects the everyday lives of the citizens of East Belfast and all those who visit the area in order to use the Comber Greenway.

I acknowledge the important work that is being done by the Department for Regional Development and the sustainable transportation charity, Sustrans, in developing the Comber Greenway. Those organisations have created a remarkable resource and a vast improvement in the quality of life for those living along, and using, the Comber Greenway.

For Members who have not had the delightful opportunity of travelling along the path, the Comber Greenway is a seven-mile traffic-free stretch along the old Belfast to Comber railway line, which is being developed as part of the national cycle network. The greenway runs from the heart of East Belfast to Comber, with views along the route of Stormont and Scrabo Tower.

The completed trail will be opened formally in November, but stretches of the path have been made accessible to the public as they were being upgraded over the past five years. The walking and cycling route

provides a tranquil, traffic-free environment for leisure walking and cycling, and offers a safe, direct route to and from Belfast city centre for those commuting by bicycle or on foot.

The Comber Greenway is an oasis in what is otherwise a largely urban setting. It is the type of outdoor resource that urban planners everywhere dream of creating — an easily accessible, safe, attractive space for exercise, leisure, pushing a pram, outdoor exploration and adventures for children, chats among friends or teaching a child how to ride a bike.

Users are surrounded by green and are occasionally met by local wildlife, including birds and badgers. Since the first stretches of the improved greenway were opened, it has become hugely popular. User levels have shot up exponentially each year and grow consistently as new stretches of the path are opened. The Member for Strangford Mrs Iris Robinson has referred to the Comber Greenway as the jewel in the crown of East Belfast. That shows how badly residents needed and wanted such a facility — and why not?

The benefits of having and using such a resource are so significant that the people of Northern Ireland are constantly hearing from elected officials and Departments about how they should get out and use such facilities more often. People are told to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day, to limit the time that children spend in front of the computer and television and to exercise for at least 30 minutes a day.

However, mixed messages are being sent. After spending in excess of £900,000 on the conversion of the greenway into a traffic-free haven, the Department for Regional Development now proposes to use five miles of the greenway from the Holywood Arches to Dundonald as part of a bus rapid-transit network, which will cost £147 million. The Minister for Regional Development has said that the new network will also preserve some form of path for pedestrians and cyclists, but how could it? What could the quality of that experience possibly be? How pleasant, safe and healthy could it possibly be to walk, play or cycle along a path next to a massive vehicle travelling at 60 miles an hour?

Undoubtedly, physical movement produces physical and mental-health benefits. The quality of the environment in which exercise takes place has a profound impact on wellness and on whether people feel motivated to take exercise. Physical activity reduces the risk of many major and chronic illnesses, including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, colon cancer and obesity. Unequivocally, exercise and exposure to fresh air create benefits to the body.

Everyone has stories about when they were young, and when I was a child, being in the house was the exception. We played outside most of the time. Any

time that we did mope about the house, my granny was quick to point out how good the air was for us. However, recent research documents worrying trends about the overall health of society and, most importantly, children. The UK Fit Futures report identified the greater use of cars; parental reluctance to let children play outdoors due to concerns about traffic and stranger danger; and the popularity of, and increased access to, television, computers and other sedentary pastimes as threats to children's overall activity levels.

That report and similar Government reports refer to obesity as a health time bomb and a national epidemic. According to the Fit Futures report, obesity reduces life expectancy by approximately nine years. It is a killer, and it increases the risk of Northern Ireland's biggest killer diseases — coronary heart disease and cancer. Obesity is identified as a risk marker in the young for cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes. The financial implications that come with obesity are staggering. The estimated economic cost of treating obesity and its related effects is several billion pounds a year.

Children and young people from lower-income families are more likely to eat a poor diet and less likely to participate in sport. Part of the reason for that is their environment. Such families are less likely to live in areas in which facilities for physical activity are safe and easily accessible. The priorities that are set out in the Department of Health's fit futures strategy propose to address the conflicting policies that are sometimes promoted by Departments. The strategy proposes to address the disjointed approach to the promotion of physical activity and to ensure that opportunities for active play are available and accessible.

The Comber Greenway provides those facilities for residents of Tullycarnet, Beersbridge, Bloomfield, Orangefield and many other areas. Accessibility is a real consideration in encouraging children and young people to engage in physical activities and active play. The Comber Greenway provides an ideal solution for many families and local residents. It is safe, clean, inviting, accessible and free, and people do not have to get into a car to enjoy it.

Obesity can impact on the emotional and psychological well-being of young people, and exercise and physical activity not only reduce the risk of obesity but offer benefits for mental health. There are clear indications that exercise reduces the risk of suicide and self-harm and that it boosts psychological well-being and cognitive functioning as it improves self esteem. Suicide and self-harm rates are higher in economically deprived areas, which also tend to be the areas that lack accessible, tranquil, ample green space.

At a time when official targets have been set for a reduction in the incidence of suicide and self-harm,

Members must see the whole picture and ensure that all the necessary resources are in place to meet them. That includes creating facilities and amenities, such as the Comber Greenway, that enhance psychological well-being and are accessible to everyone.

The removal of more cars from the roads is a great idea. Improved public transport, which the Department for Regional Development identified as a strategic goal, would have the undeniable benefits of reduced congestion, an improvement in air quality and increased safety for pedestrians, cyclists and cars. I would support objectives to provide more affordable, accessible and sustainable forms of public transport.

However, many residents of east Belfast, particularly those living in the estates and densely populated pockets of the city, already use buses and other public transport. Car ownership in those areas is well below the UK average. Those are not the people who must switch to public transport, because they already hop on a bus to do their daily messages, take their children to school or get to work. They are being penalised to accommodate those who have not switched to public transport. The paving of the Comber Greenway means that they will lose the little green space that they have.

The report by Atkins and KPMG, commissioned by the Department to examine options for a rapid-transit system, stated that an average of only 22% of passengers on the new bus system will have switched from using their cars. The remaining 78% will comprise existing users of public transport who will simply switch from one form of public transport to another.

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

Ms Purvis: I will.

It is important to mention that the same report provides options for the construction of a road. What good is a road when attempting to create sustainable public transport? The Comber Greenway should remain a safe, healthy and tranquil green space.

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

Ms Purvis: I ask my colleagues to support the motion and join me in preventing the Comber Greenway from becoming the Comber "Greyway".

Lord Browne: I am in broad agreement with the objectives expressed in the motion; walking and cycling are major contributors to a healthy lifestyle. However, I also recognise the importance of a good public transport system in Belfast, particularly in East Belfast.

As all Members know, the Comber Greenway was previously a railway line that ran from Belfast to Comber. I remember as a boy — a very young boy, I might add — standing at Barnett's Bridge and watching the steam trains go past on their way to Downpatrick and Newcastle. Indeed, I could claim to be one of the original railway children. Unfortunately, previous Administrations made the rather short-sighted decision that a railway was not economically viable.

In today's climate of rising fuel prices and concern for the environment, it is essential to get people out of their cars and on to public transport by providing an efficient, reliable and low-cost public transport system.

Mrs Long: The Member drew attention to the need for reliable public transport in East Belfast. Perhaps the Member will take on board that when the new service is available, many of those who use it will simply be transferring from the existing bus service. The Department stated that it could not conceive that the 4A service will disappear, but neither could it commit to retaining the current format whereby buses run every 10 minutes. Perhaps the Minister will provide Members with more information on that today.

Lord Browne: I thank the Member for that information. I have faith in the consultants who are producing the report, and I am sure that the Minister will be able to address the problems that the Member raised.

The route provides a great opportunity to develop an efficient transport link in the form of a rapid-bus network or light railway system. Such a system would not necessarily impinge on the existing amenities for walking and cycling.

2.15 pm

In 1986, I suggested to Northern Ireland Railways that a light tramway be provided on that route. Since then, car ownership has increased dramatically, and the consequent rise in pollution levels has vindicated my original argument.

On 3 June 2008, the Minister provided a useful synopsis on the history of the amenity. He said:

“In 2003, work was undertaken to build a new sewer along parts of the old railway line. That presented my Department with an opportunity to create a walking and cycling route along the corridor while plans for rapid transit were being progressed. That work was undertaken in the full knowledge that the line would be used for rapid transit in the future”. — [*Official Report, Vol 31, No 3, p159, col 1*].

Furthermore, he explained that many people had expressed concern about the future of the Comber Greenway for walking and cycling. As a representative for East Belfast, I have received numerous letters and emails from constituents — and individuals from further afield — expressing similar concerns. On 3 June 2008, the Minister said:

“I am conscious of the needs of walkers and cyclists and I am keen to support both. I intend to retain a walking and cycling amenity on that route. However, I will further consider the issues that have been raised”. — [*Official Report, Vol 31, No 3, p159, col 1*].

In his summing-up speech, he expressed confidence that the proposed rapid-transit system would:

“not push cyclists and walkers off the route.” — [*Official Report, Vol 31, No 3, p169, col 1*].

What further consideration has the Minister given to health and safety? In particular, how can the existing environmentally friendly amenity for cyclists and walkers be preserved? In conclusion, I would welcome an assurance from the Minister that, when a rapid-transport system is developed, he will ensure that the valuable amenity that the Comber Greenway provides for cyclists and walkers is not damaged. I support the motion.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat. I hope that the Minister will not propose that I cycle to work from the border. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion, and I thank the Members who proposed it. Sinn Féin understands the importance of public health and the need to reduce the number of cars on the roads and to promote the use of public transport.

The motion asks the House to acknowledge the benefits of a healthy lifestyle. Exercise — such as walking and cycling in a safe environment — is a significant and positive aspect of such a lifestyle. Sinn Féin supports that concept, and I hope that all Members will welcome that common-sense approach.

As a member of the Committee for Regional Development, I am aware of public concerns about the Comber Greenway. When the Committee took evidence from those who support the retention of the Comber Greenway, it was conscious that people support its preservation. Moreover, it was conscious that the Comber Greenway — which is situated along the old Comber railway line — has been, for a long time, earmarked as a rapid-transit route into and out of East Belfast.

Sinn Féin believes that any proposed plans for a rapid-transport system should cater for a safe pedestrian and cyclist route that enables people to partake in exercise. Furthermore, we support the use of green open space for shared recreational, environmentally friendly purposes. The matter can be resolved through the retention of the cycle and walkway facility, which will provide future economic, social and environmental benefits for Belfast. Sinn Féin supports the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Sir Reg Empey: This issue poses a dilemma for the Minister. He has a responsibility to ensure high-quality public transport. However, there is a clash between two worthy aims. I declare an interest as a local resident

who uses the Comber Greenway regularly. The popularity of that walkway is immense and increasing.

Lord Browne referred to the period in 2003 when the route was dug up to lay a sewer. People in the area were concerned, as they wondered whether it would be restored to its previous state. In the event, it was even better after being restored and it grew substantially.

Along with the health issues to which other Members referred, there are wildlife and amenity issues that need to be considered. It must be remembered that the impact of what happens to that stretch of railway line is not confined to East Belfast. It is a potential transport route that affects how Comber and Newtownards could be involved in a rapid-transit system.

Some concerns have been drawn to my attention. In broad terms, people are aware of the Minister's intention to retain a cycling and walking facility on the route. Many people do not see how those amenities could be retained while having a rapid-transit system in parallel because the site is narrow in places. That is something that the Minister could address in his remarks.

Another issue concerns displacement. Will people simply be moved from the Newtownards Road onto the railway route? What are the economic consequences if that happens? For commercial reasons, areas such as Ballyhackamore very often depend on people travelling by bus. Will those areas be severely disadvantaged? Another question that has not been satisfactorily answered is what happens when the rapid-transit vehicles reach the end of the walkway at what used to be the Holywood Arches. Do they simply join the line of traffic? How will that be addressed in a satisfactory manner?

In her opening speech, Dawn Purvis quoted figures from the KPMG report concerning the number of people who are likely to be new users of the facility. It seemed like a very low figure for such an investment. It is planned that approximately 3,000 dwellings will be built at the Comber end of the route, but if that sort of money will be invested, I expected that it was envisaged that a very substantial number of transfers and new customers would use the route. I do not see where those people will come from.

Ms Purvis: There has been an extrapolation of the figures from the KPMG report, and it might help the debate. Many of the cars come into Belfast from Dundonald. I am told that the rapid-transit system will reduce the number of cars per minute from 66 to 62 at peak times. The system will effectively take only four cars per minute off the road.

Sir Reg Empey: I am indebted to the Member for that information. It illustrates the point that although we understand that that has been a long-term transport link, the fact is that it has become a very significant amenity for local people. There is not much green

space in this city. The Comber Greenway has become very popular for all the reasons that Members mentioned. When the Minister addresses the major policy issues concerning this matter, I hope that he takes that fact into account.

Where is the evidence of a real paradigm shift, with people leaving their vehicles and using public transport? I do not see where that will come from, and yet we could lose a type of amenity that is in very short supply in the Belfast area. If there are major housing developments in Dundonald, what evidence is there that people who occupy those dwellings would use that amenity? Those are the sorts of issues that need to be addressed —

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Sir Reg Empey: My time is almost up.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute as he has already given way.

Sir Reg Empey: OK.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for giving way. I am sure that he agrees that any developers should make a financial contribution if they were to benefit from the introduction of a rapid-transit system.

Sir Reg Empey: I do not object to that, because planning gain is something for which we are all pushing. I certainly hope that that would be the case. I still do not understand how a wildlife-friendly leisure facility could be compatible with a major transport link. I do not see how those go together.

I have a major concern about displacement. What will happen when one reaches the bottom of the walkway? How will the proposed rapid-transit system link with the existing transport system? Those matters are of grave concern to the local community.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I propose that Members take their ease until that time. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the first Member called to speak will be Dr Alasdair McDonnell.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 1 has been withdrawn.

Cheap Alcohol

2. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when he next intends to meet with representatives of the main supermarkets about the availability of cheap alcohol. (AQO 482/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Over the summer, I met representatives of all the main supermarkets — including Tesco, Asda and Sainsbury's — and I am encouraged by the work that they are undertaking on the issues relating to alcohol misuse and underage drinking. However, more remains to be done. I am keen to meet key representatives from the alcohol and drinks industry again, in the near future, to see what further actions the industry can take to deal with those issues, particularly in relation to access, availability and price.

Mr K Robinson: I commend the Minister on his two recent, positive announcements; namely, the abolition of prescription charges and the modernisation of the ambulance fleet. Perhaps the Minister would now like to get his hat-trick by tackling the issue of alcohol abuse. Will the Minister join me in welcoming the pilot scheme that Sainsbury's has — in response to the Minister's direct engagement — introduced today, which I believe is being rolled out across Northern Ireland? Will the Minister consider the issue of supermarkets and price controls in particular? That situation is completely unacceptable at the moment, because a tin of beer costs 24p in some areas, while a bottle of water can cost more than £1.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I welcome the Sainsbury's initiative, which is a step in the right direction. During the summer, I met with Justin King, the chief executive of Sainsbury's, as part of my engagement with supermarkets on what I consider to be the three key issues — availability, access and, in particular, price.

As a result of the new initiative, Sainsbury's now label alcohol products to show, for example, the

number of units of alcohol in each drink. The label also provides other information that people understand, such as the daily recommended unit intake. Therefore, when people buy or consume alcohol, they will know exactly how much of it they will be able to take. As Members know, one of the problems that exist here is that three quarters of the adult population consume alcohol, and an alarming number of those people binge drink; that is, drink unsafely. It is important that when people choose their tittle — whatever it may be — they understand its alcoholic strength and can, therefore, compute the damage that it will do.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his comments and his response. Challenge 25 is one initiative that some companies have introduced — Asda, for example. According to that scheme, someone buying alcohol must appear to be, or be able to prove that he or she is, 25 years of age or more. Many people consider that to be a worthwhile scheme because it prevents anyone who looks younger than 25 from buying alcohol. It is especially important in the light of the fact that it is possible to buy four tins of beer for £1 in some stores. That price indicates how easy alcohol is to obtain and that, therefore, some kind of scheme is needed. Given that, will the Minister state his opinion of Challenge 25?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I agree with the Member's point, although I assume that he is talking about Challenge 21.

Mr Shannon: The Asda scheme is Challenge 25.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Member's point is important. The issue is about age at point of sale and ensuring that alcohol does not reach people who it should not — that is, the younger generation — although the fact is that they appear to be able to access alcohol routinely. Ken Robinson raised an important point about the price of alcohol. The fact is that most children who receive pocket money can afford to consume alcohol, even to the point where they are falling down.

A couple of weeks ago, I was out with the Ambulance Service and I have, therefore, personally experienced the situation that exists in the university area and at the Odyssey Arena. Anyone who saw the UTV and BBC news reports will know that pictures do not tell lies and that those reports showed many empty bottles scattered around the Odyssey Arena, coupled with many young people milling around at approximately 2.30 am.

I personally witnessed a number of fights when I was at the Odyssey complex. Furthermore, on that same night, a drunken young person leaving Queen's University students' union walked out in front of a car.

Those are graphic examples witnessed by me on just one night. Those types of incidents are routinely faced

by Health Service and accident and emergency staff in ambulances and in hospitals. However, that is only part of the problem of alcohol. The other part is the long-term physical and mental damage being done to our population.

Dr Farry: There is a sense of market failure when people seem to be more readily able to go out drinking than indulging in other leisure activities. Can the Minister tell the House what representations his Department has made to the Treasury with respect to a UK-wide strategy to address the pricing of alcohol? Furthermore, what discussions has the Minister had with other Departments — for example, the Department for Social Development — in relation to licensing policy in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department for Social Development (DSD) is currently undertaking a review of licensing policy. That Department is responsible for how licences are awarded, licensing hours et cetera. My Department has a drugs and alcohol strategy, on which all Departments have been consulted. Furthermore, I am currently developing a young people's drinking action plan that will be released shortly. Again, there has been consultation on that.

The pricing of alcohol is a Treasury matter. Arguments have been made time and again on that issue. However, the big supermarkets do not generally sell alcohol to persons under 18. Indeed, there have only been three or four prosecutions made against the supermarkets in the UK in recent years. They are very successful in policing their customers.

However, they do sell alcohol at very low prices that the average publican in Northern Ireland cannot afford to match. That highlights the issue of young people drinking in the home before they go out to enjoy a night out.

That is one issue. There is also the issue of young people being able to access alcohol, and there is the issue of availability. Those are all issues that Margaret Ritchie can examine and they are all issues that result from our present licensing laws, which, in my view, are far too liberal.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 3 and 4 have been withdrawn.

Heart Disease/Poor Dental Care

5. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department is investigating links between heart disease and poor dental care. (AQO 475/09)

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

Services and Public Safety does not undertake research. However, the Department has, through the research and development office, recently funded research into the link between periodontal gum disease and coronary heart disease and strokes. The research is being undertaken by Professor Gerry Linden at the Queen's University school of dentistry.

That research project will take five years to complete and its results will not be known until 2011. At present, there is no strong evidence to suggest that gum disease causes heart disease.

Mr O'Dowd: The Minister will be aware that there is a correlation between poor dental health and deprivation, and between deprivation and general ill health and, indeed, heart disease. As the report will take five years to complete — I assume to allow the researchers to monitor health across that period — will there be an interim reporting measure? That would mean that if a correlation between gum disease and heart disease is discovered earlier than 2011, a mechanism will be in place to report back to the Department.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can arrange for that to be in place and I will ensure that it happens. However, there is a distinction between gum disease and oral health, which refers to dental health. Northern Ireland has poor dental health, but our record on gum disease is no worse than any other part of the UK.

Furthermore, there is no cause and effect between gum disease and heart disease and strokes. There is an association, and we are trying to determine whether that association can be proved as a cause and effect. For example, one of the primary contributory factors to heart disease is smoking, and that is also the case with gum disease. Ergo, can we say that smoking causes poor gum disease or that gum disease causes heart disease? That is the step that we are not in a position to take at the moment.

There are other common risk factors, and they will be determined by the research. I am happy to report to the Assembly as we proceed.

Mr Gardiner: Given the high level of heart disease and poor dental care in Northern Ireland, does the Minister agree that the role of the new public health agency will be to tackle those and other important health issues? Is it not, therefore, critical that a stand-alone public health agency is established? Furthermore, does he agree that any attempt to dilute the role of public health in the new structures will be seen as defeatist and narrow-minded?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I agree with the sentiments behind the Member's comments. The strategy for health states that we must have investment, be efficient, and engage

the local population in their own health. That, uniquely, is where the public health agency will be instrumental. It will address such areas as alcohol — that I mentioned previously — and its associated risks, such as poor mental and physical health and teenage pregnancies. The public health agency will also address the need to get messages and support into the areas of disadvantage where one is more likely to die younger than one's counterparts who live in more affluent areas. In carrying out those roles, the public health agency will work closely with local government — one of the key deliverers in the process. It is for that reason that I received unanimous support from the Executive at one of their, what are now rare, meetings for the proposed public health agency model.

Acute Hospital: South-West

6. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the new acute hospital for the South West. (AQO 485/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Recently, I announced the Northern Ireland Health Group as the successful tenderer for the development of the new acute hospital in the south-west. The project will be the first Health Service development of its size to be procured through the private-finance initiative, and it represents the best value for money for the taxpayer.

The major investment will provide the people of the south-west with a modern, state-of-the-art healthcare facility that will be fit for the twenty-first century. Delivery of the new hospital is on schedule for 2012.

Mr Elliott: I commend the Minister on the recent announcement that a successful tenderer has been appointed for the acute services hospital in the south-west. Does the Minister agree that now is the time for everyone to get behind the projects in the south-west? Furthermore, does he agree that now is the time for Omagh District Council to join the liaison group to ensure that the building of the new enhanced hospital in Omagh can proceed?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I agree with that, and I commend the unanimous — and expected — support afforded to the investment from Fermanagh District Council. The investment of some £260 million in Enniskillen, at a time of recession and when the construction industry is in poor shape and reporting major redundancies, is important.

Unfortunately, I cannot report the same tale about Omagh, where the proposal is in the teeth of unstinting opposition from Omagh District Council. It is a matter for Omagh district councillors to determine whether the town wants the investment to be made. I have

serious decisions to make around capital priorities, and, in light of Omagh District Council's adamant and steadfast refusal to support the project, it is difficult for me to proceed. I have set up a steering group that will permit all bodies — including Omagh District Council — to get involved, determine the services that will go into the local enhanced hospital and that will allow the building to commence.

The issue is becoming extremely urgent because of the capital priorities and the review that I have conducted into them and, not least, the time frames under which we operate.

Mr Buchanan: I do not turn a blind eye to investment in the west; I welcome any investment that comes there. Is the Minister aware of the growing concern among senior medical staff and consultants at Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh and at Erne Hospital in Enniskillen that the new flagship project will become — in their words — a white elephant?

Is he also aware that they have requested an urgent meeting with the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety to highlight those concerns and their growing anxiety at the declining service delivery in the area? What action does the Minister propose to take to ensure that those concerns are addressed and that acute services will continue to be delivered in Omagh and Enniskillen? Will he give a guarantee to the House that that flagship project will be sustainable?

2.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, pick any question or all of them.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can do no more than reiterate what I have just said. The hospital at Enniskillen is going ahead with the full support of the medical and nursing profession, trade unions and — not least and most importantly — the local community as represented by the local council.

I cannot say the same for Omagh. As far as I can see, Omagh District Council has put every obstacle in the way. I have been in post for 18 months and during that time the Department has taken several steps to reassure people in Omagh. Nevertheless, there has been a campaign of downright opposition — no matter what I do. Mr Buchanan talks about acute services in Omagh when he knows that the new acute hospital is going to Enniskillen. He is fighting an old battle. If Mr Buchanan does not want the hospital, that is fine. I know of other areas that require the investment. An investment of £190 million would be the biggest that Omagh has ever seen. However, I am getting absolute opposition from Omagh District Council. Frankly, that is not sustainable. If the project is getting that sort of

opposition before it is started, where will we be if and when we go ahead?

Mr Gallagher: I welcome the good news, and I assure the Minister that people in Fermanagh are encouraged to hear about the hospital. People from the Omagh area are also encouraged about it.

Will the Minister confirm that the model Developing Better Services is being used for delivering services at the new hospitals? Has his Department any means of monitoring what is going on in the Western Health and Social Care Trust so that when the new hospitals are in place the services will be available and that nothing that has been planned to be delivered at Omagh or Enniskillen will be whittled away in favour of Altnagelvin Hospital?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I confirm that the Department is working to the model Delivering Better Services, which determines, to a large extent, what services will be in the new hospitals. For example, Enniskillen will have a full range of hospital services including 24/7 accident and emergency; inpatient services, including medicine surgery, paediatrics, obstetrics, gynaecology and critical care; day-case surgery; diagnostics; and a comprehensive range of outpatient services — the full range to be expected in an acute hospital.

An enhanced local hospital has been planned for Omagh — which Omagh District Council does not need. Mr Gallagher said that people in Omagh are encouraged: they need to tell their councillors that, so that the councillors can tell me that they are encouraged. Nevertheless, a full range of services has been planned for Omagh, including a 24/7 urgent care and treatment centre; outpatient services; diagnostics; day procedures; day-case surgery; ambulatory-care services; an acute inpatient mental-health facility; a new health and care centre; and full renal services. The hospital will provide between 70% and 80% of all of the Omagh population's hospital needs — and I am being told not to build it.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I had hoped that the Minister would strike a more reconciliatory tone about the community in Omagh, which is standing up for its rights for a proper health service. Will the Minister respond positively to my invitation as an MLA for West Tyrone — and I hope that I will have the support of other MLAs, including Mr Buchanan — to come to Omagh in October as a matter of urgency and put his money where his mouth is and meet local MLAs, the hospital campaign steering executive in Omagh and representatives from Omagh District Council?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have been to Omagh on more than

one occasion and done all that Mr McElduff has asked me to do.

Ambulances in the North-West

7. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the incident where an ambulance has broken down, while on an emergency call, for the second time in two weeks in the North West region. (AQO 494/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have received the Northern Ireland Ambulance Services Trust's full report on the matter. The causes of the two breakdowns were unrelated. The ambulance that broke down has been serviced regularly, and its last routine service was carried out in February 2008. The Northern Ireland Ambulance Services Trust confirmed that there was no impact on the safety of the patients or crew on either occasion. Both times, a replacement ambulance was on the scene quickly to transport the patients that were involved to their destinations.

Last week, I announced a major investment package for the Ambulance Service totalling almost £100 million over the next 10 years, including £17.4 million over the current comprehensive spending review (CSR) period. That significant investment will allow the service to modernise its estate and replace its fleet and equipment on a regular basis.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Fáiltím cinnte roimh an infheistíocht a d'fhógair an tAire an tseachtain seo caite sa tseirbhís otharchairr.

I welcome the investment in the Ambulance Service that the Minister announced last week. However, given that the fleet is ageing and there are new shift proposals, what will happen in the interim? For example, in my constituency of Newry and Armagh, Newry will lose three eight-hour shifts on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, and there will be similar losses in the Armagh City and District Council area. The matter is literally one of life and death and has huge repercussions for many communities.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. This is Question Time, Mr Bradley. We do not need a statement after the question. I ask you to put your question to the Minister so that other Members have an opportunity to ask their questions.

Mr D Bradley: I am in the process of asking my question. You allowed other Members much more latitude when they were asking questions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Your asking a question has been an elongated process, and I ask you to shorten it.

Mr D Bradley: I will take my lead from the time that was allowed for other Members. *[Laughter.]*

As I was saying, the matter is too serious for Members to be laughing.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the Minister to respond to the question.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The investment that I announced last week — £100 million over the next 10 years including £17.4 million over the three-year CSR period — will facilitate full capital replacement in the Ambulance Service. The investment will allow me to replace the entire ambulance fleet over the next five years, and that will happen regularly.

Parts of the ambulance fleet that I inherited have aged considerably. Those ambulances continue to do the job that they are required to do, their servicing is second to none, and they are extremely well looked after. Everyone will remember the incidence of two breakdowns because they are such rare events. The investment in running costs is far above the level of inflation, and investment in capital will also increase. The needs of the Ambulance Service will be in good stead in the foreseeable future because of that investment.

Indeed, the number of planned hours of ambulance cover in Northern Ireland will rise considerably over the next three years — from the current 538,000 hours per annum to 600,000 hours per annum. The investment in resources will rise from £46.6 million to £57 million. We will buy 60 accident-and-emergency ambulances, 60 patient-care vehicles and 26 rapid-response vehicles, in addition to the satellite-navigation systems, geographic-information systems and digital-mapping systems that I have mentioned previously. All of that will make the Ambulance Service more efficient.

I do not anticipate any reduction in staff numbers: there are currently 1,076 staff, and there will be 1,076 staff three years from now.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Minister for his answer. I warmly commend and congratulate him on yet another positive announcement — the second in one week. Such announcements clearly demonstrate yet again that, whatever the other parties in the House might be at, the Ulster Unionist Party is delivering for the people of Northern Ireland, and it will continue to do so.

What steps has the Minister taken to improve ambulance response times across Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I thank Mr Kennedy for those remarks. As far as ambulance response times are concerned, 70% of all life-threatening calls must be responded to

within eight minutes, and we are on target in that respect. From April 2009, that figure will increase to 75% of all calls. We must bear in mind that, each year, the Ambulance Service receives a total of 125,000 emergency calls, and 253,000 non-emergency calls — that gives some idea of the sheer volume of business with which the organisation deals.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome last week's announcement about the investment in new ambulances. Does the Minister agree that the majority of ambulances that are currently being used are probably clapped out and in need of urgent repair? It is only for the grace of God, and the skill of the Ambulance Service's maintenance department, that there have not been more incidents like those that occurred last week.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I do not agree that the ambulances are clapped out. They are very well maintained and looked after, and, as I said, we all remember the two breakdowns because they are rare events. However, I agree that the fleet is too old, which is why I have invested money in changing the entire fleet over the next five years.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind all Members that Question Time is an opportunity for Members to ask questions — not to make statements.

Middletown Centre for Autism

8. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many meetings have taken place between the Southern Health and Social Care Trust and the management of the Middletown Centre for Autism. (AQO 480/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Senior Southern Health and Social Care Trust staff met individual staff at the Middletown Centre for Autism on two occasions: 26 November 2007 and 21 February 2008. Both meetings were held at the request of the centre. Those were informal meetings during which staff talked about the way in which the centre was likely to operate. No further discussions have taken place on the specific health and social care services that the Middletown centre expects the health trust to provide.

Mr McCallister: I, too, congratulate the Minister on his announcements about the Ambulance Service and prescription charges — both are good news for patients.

The Minister will be aware of my concerns — and, indeed, the concerns of many — about the plans for the autism centre at Middletown. Does he share my disbelief that the Minister of Education has ploughed ahead with those plans despite the fact that

Middletown is miles from the nearest acute setting? Is it not a disgrace that the Minister is attempting to play politics with the issue? I know that the Minister has concerns about the project, so will he raise the matter urgently with the Minister of Education?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As Mr McCallister pointed out, the Middletown centre is entirely a matter for the Department of Education, and it would not be proper for me to give my opinion on it. However, I can say that I commissioned a report on autism, and that the independent review team that was established has produced an action plan, which has now been put out for consultation. The key issues are: earlier detection and recognition; assessment and diagnosis; appropriate and timely intervention; and support for individuals and families.

I have also allocated an extra £2.02 million, on top of the Budget allocation, specifically for autism because it has not had the serious attention that it deserves. As far as Middletown Centre for Autism is concerned, my Department has never been involved in discussions on details of medical provision.

3.00 pm

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Organic Farming

1. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide a breakdown of the funding available to the different land types for organic farming in the rural development programme.

(AQO 455/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Organic farming is funded under two different schemes in the rural development programme.

The organic farming scheme (OFS) is available to farmers who are in the process of converting their land to organic production. Payments are made over five years, totalling £470 per hectare for improved and semi-improved grassland; £570 per hectare for arable land; and £670 per hectare for horticultural land. Under EU rules, payment can be made only to compensate for income foregone or losses incurred in converting to organic production. Most unimproved land, such as heather moorland, does not receive significant input to fertiliser or pesticide applications, so converting that land to organic management incurs no additional cost or income reduction when compared

with conventional approaches. For that reason, no payment is made for unimproved land in the OFS.

Funding is also available to organic farmers entering the new countryside management scheme who fully converted organic land under agreement. Improved and semi-improved land in the scheme will receive a payment of £30 per hectare per year.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat. What is the role of the organic action plan group, and will it be restructured?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The organic action plan group, which is made up of a wide range of representatives from the organic sector, was consulted in relation to the design of the organic farming scheme. The group provided guidance to my Department, inclusive of all aspects of the organic sector. The current group's term ends in December 2008, and my Department will consider how future development of the sector should be progressed.

Mr Savage: What assessments or research have been carried out on farms to establish a fair payment for different land types? How many organic farmers who farm land that is categorised as unimproved serve on Northern Ireland's organic action plan group?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I do not have the information on the second part of the Member's question, but I will provide it to him in writing. However, the organic action plan group was involved, and there was a wide range of consultation on the organic farming scheme.

Mr P J Bradley: I thought that question 1 might have been withdrawn, in view of the fact that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development was told last week that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) had withdrawn finances from farmers who are working on unimproved land. In view of the Minister's support for organic production, will she now reinstate that money to those farmers?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The difficulty about that issue is that an EU regulation was introduced that governed grants under the previous scheme. That was replaced in 2005 by a new regulation, the terms of which were considerably stricter. Under the previous regulation, member states were allowed to include small incentives to encourage organic farming. However, the new regulation does not allow any incentive element in the payment calculation. No economic data were available to justify any payment for unimproved land on the only basis available — that is, additional costs incurred or income foregone. If new evidence shows significant income foregone or costs incurred in converting unimproved land from conventional to organic

management, the Department will review the scheme's payment structures at the 2010 mid-term review of the rural development programme.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Bluetongue

3. **Mr Bresland** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to prevent the spread of bluetongue. (AQO 415/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Bluetongue emerged in northern Europe in August 2006 and in England in September 2007. This year, the disease has re-emerged in much of northern Europe. In view of the risk to our livestock industry, all susceptible animals imported from outside this island continue to be isolated, housed and restricted on the farm of destination. The animals are post-import tested twice, and restrictions are lifted only when the Department is satisfied that they do not present a bluetongue risk. In recent weeks, at least seven separate consignments of imports from the Continent to England and Wales have contained bluetongue-infected animals.

As a result, I re-emphasised my message to the industry that it must consider carefully the risks before importing. Everyone involved must consider the possible cost to their own businesses and to the wider industry of importing bluetongue.

My officials have been working with Merial, the vaccine manufacturer, to supply almost two million doses of vaccine as part of our contingency plan. That vaccine will be available shortly. However, under EU rules, vaccine can only be used in an area that is part of a protection zone. I reiterate that it is essential that farmers do not become complacent. The best preventive measure is to not purchase animals that may have been exposed to the bluetongue virus. I am pleased that, to date, the industry has heeded my appeals not to import livestock from high-risk areas.

Mr Bresland: I thank the Minister for her response. Will she outline her policy in the event of an outbreak of bluetongue in the Republic of Ireland, and will she confirm that in the event of such an outbreak she will adopt a fortress-Northern Ireland strategy?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The disease is borne by midges, which do not have any respect for borders, so it would depend on where the outbreak occurs. If an outbreak occurred in Cork, for example, and the protection zone was limited so that it effectively cut the island in half, we might either decide to remain a free area or consider a means to extend that protection zone to

cover the North and allow us to vaccinate. That would require an assessment of the relative risks and benefits.

In the event of an outbreak in which the protection zone extends to the border, we might very well decide to extend the protection zone into the North to allow us to vaccinate. However, no decisions can be taken prior to the facts of an outbreak being known. Furthermore, factors such as the time of year will have an impact on the veterinary risk assessment and the Department's decision. Obviously, we have a contingency plan for that scenario.

Mr McElduff: What information has the Department provided to farmers and the farming unions NIAPA (Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association) and the Ulster Farmers' Union?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: For more than a year, my Department has been working in partnership with the key stakeholders, including both farmers' unions, through the bluetongue working group. That group has discussed preparedness to deal with the threat of bluetongue and will continue to do so. In conjunction with key stakeholders, the Department has also provided advice to the industry about bluetongue, including information about clinical signs. Leaflets are available, and the information is also on the DARD website. The Department has also issued advice to local importers, highlighting the potential risks of importing susceptible animals from bluetongue-infected areas, and the measures that those importers must take if they move livestock to shows in Britain.

I have stressed repeatedly to the industry here that the best preventive measure is not to purchase animals from high-risk areas. There is absolutely no room for complacency. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCallister: I wish the Minister well with her imminent new delivery. I hope that it is not too imminent. *[Laughter.]*

How much has the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development spent on the bluetongue vaccine to date?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department has submitted a bid for 1.9 million doses of vaccine. I do not have the figures to hand, but I will be happy to forward information about the cost of the vaccines to the Member. We had to make a managed risk assessment on whether to buy vaccine in advance or to stockpile it. However, the vaccine has a limited shelf life, as I have previously explained in the House. We have purchased a number of doses of vaccine, but we have not yet received them; they will not be available until late October or November. The contingency plan was put in place so that we are prepared for anything.

I thank the Member for his comments. If it happens today, it is good to know that the Member will be on hand to give me a wee shove out. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member will be on his own. *[Laughter.]*

Question 4 has been withdrawn.

DARD Direct

5. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what consideration her Department has given to the siting of a new DARD Direct office in the Ards/North Down area.
(AQO 397/09)

DARD Connect

9. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on office closures under the DARD Connect scheme.
(AQO 450/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 9 together.

DARD Direct is a new service delivery method aimed at improving the quality of service that the Department provides to its customers. A pilot of DARD Direct was set up in Enniskillen House in Enniskillen; an independent evaluation of the pilot was positive, and customer feedback was very good. Based on that positive feedback, I have agreed that the model should be rolled out across the North.

The proposed roll-out of DARD Direct is undergoing an equality impact assessment (EQIA). Officials from my Department carried out the public consultation phase during the summer. The key issues arising from that were accessibility of offices, for both staff and customers; quality and flexibility of service; and disruption to staff and customers. We are in the process of preparing a final EQIA report, which includes the findings of that consultation exercise and appropriate recommendations for mitigating actions for the emerging issues. The final EQIA report is scheduled to be discussed by the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development in the first week of December.

No decisions on the final number and locations of DARD Direct offices will be taken until after that report has been fully considered. Given that situation, I cannot provide any specific information in relation to the siting of a new office in the Ards or north Down area at present.

Mr Hamilton: I welcome the Minister's confirmation that no final decision has been taken in respect of

siting. However, given that north Down and Ards are significant agricultural areas, and that the area in particular around Comber and Newtownards is known as the "market garden of Ulster", does she agree with me that it would be unforgivable and unacceptable not to site a DARD office in that area, particularly given that it is well-served by DARD offices in Newtownards?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I do not want to pre-empt the outcome of that report; it would be more unforgivable of me to make a recommendation or decision when I do not have all the information available to me. I will carefully scrutinise all the reports that are received. Comments have been very positive, and I want to take cognisance of everything before I make a final decision.

Mr McCarthy: In view of the Minister's response to last week's announcement about the relocation of Civil Service jobs — when she supported the location of jobs in the rural community — would it not be a bit contradictory if, at the end of the consultation process, the Minister were to agree to relocate away from Ards, which is in a rural constituency?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Professor Bain's report recommends that public-sector jobs should be located where they can best enhance the sustainable economic and social development of the North. That review was commissioned by the Executive, so any recommendations will have to be examined carefully before Ministers make any decision on how best to proceed. However, enhanced service delivery and improved access for customers and stakeholders are key outcomes of the proposed approach. That is exactly what I hope to achieve with the roll-out of DARD Direct, and my officials will take into consideration the decisions made on the Bain Review when they are known.

Mr McKay: Will the Minister indicate some of the main issues that arose from the consultation on this matter?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The consensus from those responding was very supportive of the concept of DARD Direct, and a number of main issues arose. The issue of accessibility for both customers and staff was mentioned, although, from a customer perspective, the number of offices is less important than the provision of good coverage and a more joined-up approach to delivery, with competent, knowledgeable and professional front-line staff. There is also a need for adequate accessible customer parking, and for the offices to be at a reasonable travelling distance. The office design must be customer-friendly, staff-friendly, disabled-friendly and child-friendly, and public transport links should be considered when identifying locations.

Also mentioned was flexibility of service delivery. Flexible service provision in relation to opening hours was requested by customer groups, and although nine-to-five opening is welcome, the need for out-of-hours opening should be assessed at each location. Alternative channels of service delivery must be well-promoted, and appropriate training could increase the uptake of online services. There is also the issue of the quality of service delivery; it is very important to maintain good relationships between customers and staff and high levels of customer service.

The issue of disruption to staff was also mentioned, particularly the potential impact of relocating staff to new offices. It is important to note that that would have a greater effect on administration grades, and that female staff make up the greater percentage of non-mobile administrative assistants, administrative officers and part-time staff, and are also likely to have dependants and caring responsibilities. All of that will be taken into consideration when making a final decision.

Mr Gallagher: I want to ask the Minister about accessibility, which is a very important issue. Does she understand that the accessibility criteria are Northern Ireland-wide, and if they are applied, there will be considerable areas of north and south Fermanagh that will fall outside those criteria? It is, therefore, very important for her Department to carefully consider Fermanagh.

Will the Minister put her plans to move many of her Department's offices to Omagh on hold while the Bain Report is being considered?

3.15 pm

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: No final decision on the Department's location has been made, so the reference to Omagh is very premature. Also, Inniskeen House, which was the initial pilot project that opened about three years ago, has been hugely successful. We are working closely with the focus group in Fermanagh on how they feel about the project, and those who live closer to Omagh are travelling to Fermanagh because there is a wider range of services at Inniskeen House.

We have examined accessibility issues carefully, and I am all too aware of them, particularly in south and west Fermanagh. Good decisions must be made that reflect where people live and how they do business. However, the comments about Inniskeen House, in general, are hugely supportive and very encouraging, and I am happy with how that project is progressing.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Countryside Management Scheme

7. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development the time frame for new applicants to be approved into the Countryside Management Scheme and to allow associated work to commence on-farm. (AQO 435/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The new countryside management scheme agreements for successful applicants between 30 June and 29 August will commence on 1 January 2009. Farmers can commence works in the scheme once their agreement has received approval. It is important to note that no one should commence any works under a countryside management scheme unless he or she has received, signed and returned the agreements and received confirmation that they have been approved. During the application period, 4,430 eligible applications were received.

Mr Gardiner: Due to the payment rates differential, has the Minister made any plans to review the payment rates for those farmers who are engaged in work from previous countryside management schemes. Also, will she review payments in the scheme in future years?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The issue of payment rates is something that we have had to consider. We accept that there is a different ratio this time and that farmers who enter the new countryside management scheme will be asked to deliver more environmental benefits. Therefore, many farmers who are in the old scheme are content to stay at that level of compliance and are not interested with more involvement. However, we must also manage the situation; there have been over 4,000 applications, and we want to see the best possible environmental impact, so we will have to manage how we roll those out over a period of time. Although we have thought about it, it is not practical for us to review payment rates mid way, and we want to get more people into the scheme as soon as possible. Therefore, the issue is management of human and financial resources in the Department.

Dr W McCrea: How many of the 4,430 applications are successful, because it has been acknowledged that not all who have applied will be admitted to the scheme? Why do we have to wait until 1 January 2009 before successful countryside management scheme agreements for this application period will commence?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Due to EU regulations, all claims for payment in the new scheme must be made using the integrated administrations and control system (IACS) single application form, which must normally be submitted by May each year. Following validation and eligibility checks, payments will be issued on or around completion of the scheme year, which runs

from 1 January until 31 December. Due to the high level of interest, and to maximise environmental benefit, we must also give priority to farmers who have land in special areas of conservation, special protection areas, areas of special scientific interest, Ramsar areas, geopark areas and environmentally sensitive areas. We will try to manage admissions to the scheme as best we can to ensure that we get a good outcome from the countryside management scheme.

Mr Doherty: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will all the applicants receive a farm visit and be offered an agreement?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Unfortunately, not all farmers will receive a visit — certainly, not during the first round. Applicants will be visited according to environmental priorities and budgetary constraints that have been identified for the new countryside management scheme.

The Department anticipates that it will carry out 1,300 farm visits to enable successful applicants to commence their agreements for the claim year from 1 January to 31 December 2009. As I said, those visits will concentrate on applicants whose sites have been designated as having special environmental importance. The Department's target in 2008 is to reach approximately 1,000 agreements, with approximately 2,000 entering the scheme in the subsequent years of the rural development programme's duration.

Mr McNarry: I am sure that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The question number will suffice, Mr McNarry.

Better Regulation and Simplification Review

8. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made on the Better Regulation and Simplification Review.

(AQO 438/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Go raibh míle maith agat. In November 2007, the former Environment Minister, Arlene Foster, and I launched the better regulation and simplification review. Since then, work has progressed under the direction of an independent panel, chaired by Mr Michael Dowling. The panel has been active. It has met representatives from the industry and environmental groups on various occasions to consider evidence from previous reviews and studies. It has visited the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to learn from its experience of better regulation.

Officials who work with the panel have analysed current DARD and Department of the Environment

(DOE) regulations to identify where the most significant burdens exist. A consultative exercise with stakeholders, which aims to agree baseline estimates of the administrative burden and to generate simplification proposals, is well advanced. The panel provided the Environment Minister and me with an interim report at the end of May 2008. It also presented the report to the Assembly's Agriculture and Rural Development Committee and Environment Committee. It briefed both Committees on the review's progress in June 2008.

In its interim report, the panel asked for more time to complete its work because the exercise is more complex than had been anticipated. The original expectation that estimates of administrative burden and simplification proposals for England would provide most of the information that was required proved not to be the case. As a result, officials who support the panel have had to scrutinise legislation, identify the administrative burden that it creates, estimate the time and cost of compliance for business, and agree those estimates with stakeholders. The detailed information generated by those baseline exercises has then been used to identify the most burdensome regulations and activities, and is a starting point for discussion of simplification proposals.

Agribusiness and environmental stakeholders were consulted on the need to extend the project. They agreed that the additional time required was fully justified by the importance of the exercise to the long-term delivery of the better-regulation agenda. The review is now expected to be completed by the end of 2008.

Mr McNarry: I am grateful to the Minister for her detailed answer. I am sure that she is reassured, as, indeed, all Members were — you included, Mr Deputy Speaker — by the Health Minister's assurances on ambulances. I thought that we might have needed to call one for the Minister had her answer been any longer.

How will the review's final results be measured to ensure that overall reduction of 25% in the cost of regulation will be achieved? Can the Minister confirm that she has cut through red tape on that issue?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Obviously, the Department must await the panel's recommendations. However, as the panel carries out its work, the Department has done its best to improve simplification and to cut bureaucracy.

For example, the countryside management scheme was discussed, and applications for that scheme could be made by phone call. The Department strives to make such processes much easier, and it wants to ensure that whatever it introduces during the interim will have gone through the prism to cut red tape and bureaucracy and to make matters easier for farmers.

Furthermore, the Department is also rolling out a pilot scheme in which farmers can notify officials by phone of animals' births and movements. Therefore, people who, traditionally, would have had to send that information in writing to the Department can now provide it over the phone. The Department is keen to be as accessible and customer-friendly as possible to the farming community.

Mr Irwin: Does the Minister believe that the review's terms of reference are wide enough to allow the panel to make any recommendations that will significantly reduce red tape and bureaucracy?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The terms of reference are certainly wide enough. The fact that the panel has asked for additional time means that it, too, has accepted that the terms are wide enough. It is a complex and complicated process. The right people are in place to examine all those issues. They have been given additional time. It is hoped, therefore, that they will produce solid recommendations.

It has been difficult and a challenge. However, that will not deter us from striving to achieve the targets that we have set.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 9 was grouped with question 5 and has already been answered.

Farm Diversification

10. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many farmers have diversified from farming in the past three years.
(AQO 406/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: It is important to note that diversification is not always about farmers moving out of farming, but rather about providing the farmer and farm-family members with additional incomes that can help to make the overall farm business more sustainable.

Not every farmer who wants to diversify necessarily approaches my Department, but we encourage farmers and farm-family members to engage with us. To help them, we have implemented several methods of helping farm families to diversify and supported them with capital grants under various funding programmes.

From April 2003 to March this year, 1,223 people have completed the diversification challenge programme run by the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE). Some 295 of them are known to have started a diversified farm business. Under the LEADER+ programme, 26 farm diversification projects were able to draw down £400,000 of EU funds. Axis 1 of the regional development programme has farm-family options built into it, including

reskilling, which will help farm families to decide on an option for diversifying — and what reskilling support they need — and provide them with mentoring throughout the process.

Under axis 3, we have included a specific farm-diversification measure, with £20 million ring-fenced for farmers and members of farm families who wish to diversify on-farm. They will also be eligible to apply for funds under the micro-business creation and support measure for off-farm diversification.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for her answer. What is the Minister's Department doing to encourage diversification in the farming community, especially in East Londonderry?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: My Department encourages farmers to diversify and to try to find ways to supplement their farm income. We have a wide range of schemes. Axis 3 of the rural development programme will be widely publicised, and we will ensure that not just the farmer, but members of the farm family, know that that money is available to them.

A tender process is under way to find a delivery agent for axis 1. Over the next few months, Farm Family Options, including reskilling, will open for calls. Work is progressing well on axis 3, and I hope that we will be able to complete the strategies and enter into contracts for the initial allocations of funding that have been previously announced, including the farm-diversification measure. We are working hard to publicise the fact that the programme is open and available and to encourage take-up.

When I am out and about, meeting people, I am encouraged to see the wide range of diversification projects that have been set up across the North. Some people have taken the skills that they have learned on the farm and put them to use in innovative businesses. We have very creative and entrepreneurial people in the rural community, and they are well placed to take advantage of those grants.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. When will this funding be available to farmers?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I covered many aspects of that in my answer to the previous question. It will all come on board over the next few months. I look forward to that funding being rolled out across the North.

Mr Elliott: I am sure that, when the Minister is off for a few weeks of well-earned rest, she will not miss her attendance at meetings of the Executive.

Does the Minister accept that diversification should not just be about diversification from farming, but

should take place in conjunction with ongoing farming activities?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Farm diversification is about providing the farmer and farm-family members with additional incomes that will help to make the overall farming business more sustainable and will, I hope, keep them in farming. Diversification is not about alternatives to farming and getting people off the land. Rather, it is a way of supplementing and enhancing the farm business and ensuring that the farmer and farm-family members have a better quality of life as a result.

Mr Deputy Speaker: No one is more relieved than me that we got through that half hour without incident, and without an increase of one in Sinn Féin's membership in the Chamber.

3.30 pm

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Voluntary and Community Sector: Development

1. **Mr Bresland** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline her strategy for the future development of the voluntary and community sector. (AQO 429/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): First, I wish to offer my condolences and sympathy to the deputy First Minister on the death, earlier today, of his mother.

I have the highest regard for the work carried out by the voluntary and community sector throughout Northern Ireland. My Department is implementing a number of key strategies in support of the future development of the voluntary and community sector. Those measures are as follows: I have introduced the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008, which represents a major change for the charities sector in Northern Ireland; for the first time, charities will be regulated by the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland; and the appointment of the new charity commissioners is under way.

Last year, I published 'Opening Doors', a strategy for the delivery of voluntary advice services to the community. Later this autumn, I intend to launch a public consultation on the location of voluntary advice services to identify where services are best located and how provision of services might be better regularised.

The Department is also developing a support-services strategy to help to ensure that voluntary and

community organisations have access to support services to make their work more effective. It is likely that the strategy will place a new emphasis on the commissioning of services under contract. Ahead of full consultation later this year, I will introduce a new volunteering strategy, the objective of which is to increase awareness and levels of volunteering. That strategy will shortly go before the Committee for Social Development.

The 'Positive Steps' strategy, which is also cross-departmental, is aimed at implementing a series of commitments arising from the report of the task force on resourcing the sector. Good progress has been made on the majority of actions, and my officials are working with the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Northern Ireland Audit Office to examine the more complex actions that remain outstanding.

Finally, my Department published the Partners for Change 2006-08 strategy, which is aimed at supporting the voluntary and community sector. That strategy has now run its course, and I have asked my officials to examine options for future strategic support and development of the sector, including a review of the compact.

Mr Bresland: I thank the Minister for her response. Will she confirm what role the local community fund will have within her Department's community development strategy?

The Minister for Social Development: As the Member will be aware, the local community fund operates directly in many areas throughout Northern Ireland. This year and last year, I was happy to launch and to support extensions to the local community fund in areas where there are levels of disadvantage.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In her support for the voluntary and community sector, will the Minister explain why she has requested to individually sign off on each neighbourhood renewal project in Belfast? Does she accept that such political interference has the potential to put jobs and services at risk in areas of multiple deprivation?

The Minister for Social Development: The Member's point about political interference is absolute rubbish, and I refute it.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister for Social Development: Given the pressure on funds across the Department, I want to be sure that best use is being made of available resources. Therefore, I have asked for some headline information on current neighbourhood renewal applications, including the nature of project proposals, the neighbourhood renewal area, and the funding requirements in the context of budgetary resources.

I shall be absolutely clear: officials will make decisions about funding individual projects and groups based on preset criteria. I again emphasise that, as Minister, I will set the budget and the policy but — to avoid any suggestion of political interference — I will take no part in individual decisions. That constitutes political vetting and to do that would be a contravention of the ministerial Pledge of Office, which I do not countenance.

I note that the Member has tabled a series of questions to various Ministers on the role of neighbourhood renewal, stating that there must be buy-in. I welcome those types of questions, because they show that the Member is seeking information from other Departments, which clearly emphasises that she recognises that other Departments and other Ministers have a clear role in delivering neighbourhood renewal.

Mr Armstrong: How much consultation has the Minister had with the Minister for the Third Sector in Westminster?

The Minister for Social Development: I have corresponded with the Minister for the Third Sector over the last year, but, as Members will appreciate, responsibility for the voluntary and community sector within the Department for Social Development lies with the Minister and the devolved institutions. I am happy to conduct further discussions if I think that they are appropriate. Naturally, if the Member wishes me to investigate a particular area, I will be happy to do so.

Housing Association Purchases

2. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the benefits of Housing Associations purchasing units directly from developers outside of pre-planned schemes.

(AQO 398/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My aim, first and foremost, is to deliver 5,250 new social houses over the three-year period 2008-11. Plans have been put in place to ensure that that will happen. The new housing agenda calls for innovative ways in which to achieve best value for money. Where appropriate, the purchase of units directly from developers at lower prices than in recent times allows me to maximise the resources available to the social housing development programme.

Traditionally, building new houses has been the most cost-effective way of delivering social housing. However, due to the recent change in the market, many houses that were previously beyond the financial reach of housing associations have become available for purchase. If those properties are in areas of greatest need, represent good value for money and are design

compliant, they can be included in the social-housing development programme. However, establishing that there is a housing need in an area is a prerequisite before approval can be given to any housing association to buy houses directly from developers.

The purchase of such units remains only a small percentage of the overall programme. To further emphasise my commitment, I have already embarked on several innovative partnerships that bring developers, lenders and housing associations together in a unique way in order to help people to get onto the first rung of the property ladder.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive reply. Having listened to what she has said, I wonder whether she has any concerns about that procedure. I want to emphasise that I do not think that it is totally incorrect, but I certainly have concerns about that procedure. It could be construed that those houses are being purchased purely because they cannot be sold on the open market, and maybe the Housing Executive and housing associations are good agencies to go to go to get rid of them. Does the Minister have any concerns about that happening?

The Minister for Social Development: I understand the concerns outlined by the Member, but I emphasise again that buying off the shelf can happen only in areas where there is highest housing need, where the Housing Executive does not have locally available land, where it represents good value for money, and where the properties are design compliant. There are several conditions that have to be adhered to before purchase takes place.

Mr K Robinson: In the light of increasing demand for social housing, has the Minister made further representations to the Minister of Finance and Personnel for increased funding? If so, what level of funding is she seeking?

The Minister for Social Development: I assure the Member that I have already done so. I made a submission in the June monitoring round, and the Member will be aware that very little money came out of that. I replicated the request through the September monitoring round, which is currently being finalised by the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I will be furnishing him with a further response later today.

Naturally, that paper is due for discussion by the Executive when they meet. With all due courtesy to my colleagues in the Executive, I should discuss the details of that paper with them before I bring it to the Chamber. I do not wish to be discourteous to anybody.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Minister commit to purchasing further off-the-shelf houses for social housing and in so doing help local builders who are so hard pressed at the moment?

The Minister for Social Development: I am prepared to consider all offers that come forward. There will be a requirement for off-the-shelf purchases in every year of the five year social housing development programme provided — and again I emphasise the point — that they are in areas of highest need where the Housing Executive does not have available land, represent good value for money, and are design compliant. My priority is always to meet housing need at the right cost, and if that helps builders at the same time, then it is a win-win situation.

I sympathise with the plumbers, joiners, electricians, bricklayers, and other construction workers whose employment is at risk in the current downturn. However, it is worth remembering that although private-sector house building has declined sharply, I am increasing public-sector house building significantly. Hopefully, that will help builders all over Northern Ireland. I have met with representatives of the construction industry on many occasions. Coincidentally, a few weeks ago, other MLAs and I met with representatives of the construction property group: they know that I am sympathetic to their situation.

Fuel Poverty: Social Housing

3. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister for Social Development when she will bring forward proposals to assist people living in social housing who are most vulnerable to fuel poverty. (AQO 528/09)

Fuel Poverty Task Force

4. **Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the work of the fuel poverty task force. (AQO 513/09)

Fuel Poverty

5. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister for Social Development what actions she is taking to alleviate fuel poverty. (AQO 527/09)

The Minister for Social Development: With the Deputy Speaker's permission, given the similarity of questions 3, 4 and 5, I will respond to them together. Fuel poverty is a cross-departmental issue. Earlier this year, I anticipated the looming fuel-poverty crisis, and in May 2008 I established the fuel poverty task force, which brought together representatives from Government and the wider energy sector. The task force was asked to identify measures to tackle fuel poverty and, in particular, to identify short-term recommendations that could be developed to assist people who will be in need this winter.

I developed a set of practical proposals from the task force's report, which were circulated to Ministers as a draft Executive paper aimed at the meeting scheduled for 18 September. Unfortunately, that meeting did not take place. Between that time and the next scheduled meeting of the Executive, I received responses from a number of Ministers and had discussions with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Minister of Health. Those Ministers recognised the importance of the proposals as regards resource requirements, the general implications for health, and the need to progress the work urgently. When the Executive failed to meet yet again, I revised the paper, taking into account other Ministers' views, and produced a final Executive paper, which I have sought clearance for via the urgent procedure route.

I need clearance for the package, because although the benefits of the proposals may not reach people until January 2009, the work — including possible legislation — needs to start immediately. Obviously, the package includes direct help for those most vulnerable to fuel poverty, but it also includes a series of other actions aimed at bringing more resources to bear on the problem. However, the issue merits a full response from the Executive as a whole.

Mr Neeson: Like the majority of Members, I share the Minister's frustration. It is an absolute disgrace that decisions are not being taken because the Executive will not meet. *[Interruption.]* Does the Minister agree that because of the fuel hike thousands of people across Northern Ireland are also suffering from frustration as a result of an Executive that will not meet? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Minister for Social Development: I fully agree with Mr Neeson's comments: people will ask why that is the case.

It is absolutely time-critical that an Executive meeting takes place in order that the urgent proposals to alleviate fuel poverty can be discussed. Owing to the fact that an Executive meeting could not take place, not to mention the matter's urgency — there is a compelling need to keep people warm this winter — I immediately resubmitted my paper for urgent procedure.

3.45 pm

Mrs Hanna: All Members share the Minister's concern. Is there anything in the Minister's fuel-poverty package to help the working poor, who miss out because they are just above benefits level?

The Minister for Social Development: The full measures have yet to be discussed with my Executive colleagues, so, with due courtesy to them, suffice it to say that measures are contained in that package that would assist the working poor. However, I emphasise

again to Mrs Hanna that the matter is now time-critical, and I hope that it can be approved through use of urgent procedure.

Notwithstanding all that, all my ministerial colleagues should, and must, discuss the issues in that paper, because they have an impact on various Departments. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has responsibility for tackling poverty; the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has responsibility for energy prices and social tariffs; my Department has responsibility for energy efficiency in the home; the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has responsibility for the health and well-being of all our citizens, and that includes those who are above the benefits level — the working poor.

I want to get on with the work, and I hope that the aspiration of everyone in the House is to ensure that people stay warm this winter.

Mrs Long: Bearing in mind that recent increases in energy costs have led to expectations that up to 43% of people in Northern Ireland could be vulnerable to fuel poverty, does the Minister agree that tackling that issue could be top of the agenda at any future Executive meeting, given that setting an agenda seems to be difficult? That would allow the Executive to respond to this crisis with more than hot air and heated comments.

The Minister for Social Development: I could not agree more with Mrs Long. I say yet again that this is a time-critical issue, because the most important consideration is delivering for people and ensuring that all the people of Northern Ireland are kept warm this winter at a time when fuel prices have witnessed their highest increases for many years.

Mr I McCrea: Does the Minister feel that the emergency procedure is an adequate way in which to deal with the issue? Will she advise the House as to who is to blame for the hold-up? Some of my constituents have asked me whether consideration has been given to installing Watchman electronic oil-tank gauges in order to help the elderly and vulnerable?

The Minister for Social Development: Mr McCrea's questions raise several issues. Due to the time-critical nature of the matter, and because Executive meetings did not take place, I revised the paper to reflect comments that I had received from Ministers across the four parties, and I submitted that revised version to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on Thursday evening.

I also had a discussion with the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who recognises that substantial resources are required. I say, in order to be helpful, that the final Executive paper does not impose a specific amount of money, although the scheme that I have in mind will bring significant assistance to many

thousands of people. Delivering for people in order that they can keep warm is paramount, because I am sure that the major issue raised in all constituency offices is fuel poverty — how we work collectively to alleviate it and how we deal with the issues that affect people daily.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given that the more than 11,000 Housing Executive tenants who use the Economy 7 electric heating system will be sorely hit by the rise in electricity prices, when will the Department for Social Development replace those systems with other heating systems?

The Minister for Social Development: I am aware of the concern that many people throughout Northern Ireland have with Economy 7. I will investigate that issue directly with the Housing Executive, and I will come back to Ms McCann in writing.

My officials are currently finalising changes to the warm homes scheme, which is specifically dedicated to insulation measures. Those changes will take account of the recent Northern Ireland Audit Office recommendations, and a consultation paper will be published later this month. The warm homes scheme has been a huge success, and it has benefited approximately 65,000 households in Northern Ireland to date. However, it has perhaps now captured most of the quick wins, and it must be refocused so that the maximum energy efficiency gains can be achieved and that the people who are most in need of help get that help.

I am sure that some of Ms McCann's constituents who have Economy 7 heating might benefit from the revised warm homes scheme. After the revised scheme comes out for consultation, I hope that those people will benefit from the implementation of the new scheme.

Ms Purvis: I know that the Minister is reviewing the criteria for the warm homes scheme. However, the current criteria for the warm homes scheme excludes working single-person households and other working households on low income that do not qualify for passport benefits. Those households are the least-energy-efficient homes, and 70% of them use oil as their only means of heating. What measures does the Minister propose to alleviate fuel poverty for the working fuel poor?

The Minister for Social Development: That issue was also raised by Mrs Hanna. The purpose of refocusing the warm homes scheme is to ensure that the people who are most in need, particularly the working poor, will have their requirements and needs tackled. I ask Members to bide with me for a little longer. The consultation paper will be published later this month. Members and their constituents will have the opportunity to comment on that consultation paper, and I hope that the combined comments will better

inform the final production. The final outcome is to keep people warm, and that is a longer-term measure than keeping people warm this winter.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 4 and 5 were grouped with question 3. Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Laganside Community Activity Grants

7. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Social Development how many groups have applied for Laganside community activity grants since 1 April 2007. (AQO 421/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The aim of the Laganside community activity grant is to support activities that are directly related to the Laganside area and that address the needs of, and provide benefit to, the Laganside local community from the rejuvenated river front. Since 1 April 2007, 44 groups have applied for Laganside community activity grants.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for her reply. I also congratulate her for her answers to questions 3, 4 and 5; her tenacity was inspirational.

What potential do the grants offer for the capacity of local communities to build entrepreneurialism? What businesses have been involved with events that are linked with the Laganside community activity grant?

The Minister for Social Development: Perhaps further background information will be helpful: the total amount of grants expended in 2007-08 was £11,638; and in this financial year the figure is £1,430 to date, with an estimated total for the year of £17,700. Last year, 19 groups applied for grants, and 25 groups have applied so far in this financial year. The total number of applications is 48, because several of the 44 groups made multiple applications for various community activities.

The Member asked about the different types of application. Much potential exists for the local community in the Laganside area to benefit. The activity grants provide the community with opportunities to express itself, undertake activities that can help to regenerate the area and engage in joined-up working, which I particularly welcome. Community activity also acts as a fillip for tourism by attracting visitors to the Laganside area. As the Member knows, my Department inherited responsibility for regeneration in the area when it took over from the Laganside Development Corporation in April 2007.

Dr McDonnell: What further larger-scale regeneration around the river Lagan is being considered? I am not alone in regretting the demise of the Laganside Development Corporation that did tremendous work on resuscitating activity along the

Lagan; many share my view. I am keen for the same type of regeneration to continue.

The Minister for Social Development: Laganside has, undoubtedly, been a great success story. More than £1 billion has been invested in the area, and, by 2007, some 15,000 jobs, 231,000 sq m of office space and 803 homes had been created. I am delighted to add that my Department will oversee a further £500 million of investment between now and 2012. That investment is part of the Laganside legacy; developments such as the landmark Obel building, The Boat, Lanyon Towers, the Soloist, the Four Corners and St Anne's Square will bring further prosperity and jobs to Northern Ireland.

Recently, I announced two new regeneration initiatives for the riverfront. I commissioned a study to make recommendations on the redevelopment of the Lagan Lookout and the riverside area around the Lagan Weir towards Lanyon Place. Potential improvements include the transformation of the Lagan Lookout into a multi-use visitors' centre and the provision of a mini marina at the weir to encourage small craft to moor alongside it.

I commissioned a second study to recommend how to improve pedestrian and bicycle access across the river from the east bank to the city centre. Previous studies highlighted the potential for new footbridges from Donegall Quay to Queen's Quay or from the Gasworks to Ormeau Park, and for an enhancement of the existing footbridge at the Lagan Weir. Within the next six months, I hope to announce the results of the studies and reveal how and when the riverside projects will proceed.

Eco Homes Good Rating Standards

8. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for Social Development what plans are in place to build more social housing that conforms to the Eco Homes 'good' rating standards. (AQO 425/09)

The Minister for Social Development: When I launched the new housing agenda earlier this year, I announced that all new social housing built from 1 April 2008 would conform to level 3 of the new code on sustainable housing. Social housing will, therefore, be built to a higher standard than the eco-home rating of good. The new code requires houses to be 25% more energy efficient than ever before. At a time of significant increases in energy prices, not only will those new homes benefit the environment, but their tenants will have greater protection against struggling to meet their future energy costs.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Comber Greenway

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly acknowledges the health benefits that outdoor exercise offers children and adults, including positive mental well-being; recognises that safe walking and cycling routes contribute greatly to this and are in short supply in urban areas; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to preserve safe pedestrian and cyclist access on the Comber Greenway. — [*Ms Purvis.*]

Dr McDonnell: When I first examined the motion, I considered it sensible. However, after further assessment, I am worried that it might exclude the full and proper use of the old Comber railway line for the development of a rapid-transit line. Although I favour a light-rail line, some form of rapid transit is essential to allow people from the south and east of the city quick, easy access to Belfast.

Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair)

The investment strategy for Northern Ireland recognised the important role that a rapid-transit system would play in providing a step change in public transportation. A commitment was made to start work on the first rapid-transit line before 2011. That commitment must be honoured, and regardless of whatever may happen to the old Comber railway line, rapid transit must be the priority. I hope that pedestrian and cyclist access can be integrated. However, the policy context for the development of a rapid-transit network is well defined, and there is widespread recognition — in all Departments — that a good rapid-transit system is a key element in the economic and infrastructural regeneration of Belfast and the greater Belfast metropolitan area.

I cannot overstate the importance of a comprehensive, cross-departmental approach to urban regeneration and infrastructural development. The development of a rapid-transit system must not be addressed as a single issue; it should, rather, be considered in the wider context of economic growth, regeneration and future prosperity — that should not be sacrificed easily. Therefore, I am protective of the opportunity provided by the Comber Greenway. However, I will not elaborate. A report produced by Atkins — which the House debated on 3 June — assessed several options. However, at least two of the options outlined therein — options 2 and 3 — would have required the use of the space afforded by the Comber railway line.

Belfast needs space to breathe and to enable people to enter and exit the city easily and quickly. Belfast is reinventing itself as one of Europe's most vibrant and progressive business locations, and the recent establishment of the Victoria Square complex dramatically increased retail capacity. Furthermore,

Belfast has become one of the 10 largest retail centres in the United Kingdom. The regeneration of the Cathedral Quarter, the Titanic Quarter and various other ambitious projects will contribute to that revitalisation. However, the downside is the increasing congestion on our roads, the serious access problems in Belfast and the difficulty of finding available car-parking spaces. Much of the present congestion is a direct result of dependence on an inadequate car- and bus-based public transport system.

Belfast has, historically, been at the cutting edge of technological advances. One hundred years ago, the world's largest ship was built in Belfast. Furthermore, the City Hall was built in Belfast, and it introduced one of the earliest street-lighting systems. From 1905, Belfast had an extensive electric tram system, which succeeded the horse-drawn tram system. In 1908, a significant expansion of the system incorporated Queen's Island, which is not far from the Comber railway line under discussion today. That system existed until 1953 and, at its peak, stretched for more than 40 miles of track. In 1936, electrically driven trolleybuses were introduced, and the tram system was abandoned in 1954.

We must preserve the space that is required to build an adequate rapid-transport system. My preference is for a light-rail system. In time, we can prove that that is the better system, and the old Comber railway line's disused track is vital to that project. I support the broad thrust of the motion, but —

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

Dr McDonnell: It would be better if a rapid-transit system could safely operate alongside access for pedestrians and walkers, but the rapid-transit system should be the priority.

Mr McCarthy: I thank Assembly colleagues for bringing the motion to the House. As the Alliance Party's health spokesperson, I fully support every effort to promote a good, healthy, fresh outdoor life, and the Comber Greenway provides just that. Every effort must be made to ensure that the Comber Greenway is preserved and expanded, because it is an excellent provision for everyone.

Congratulations go to all the agencies that supported the creation of the Comber Greenway. It is a perfect example of joined-up thinking. It was not too long ago that I walked along part of that old railway track near Comber. It was simply a pathway then, with soil, weeds, grass and, unfortunately, some dog foul, which I avoided. Even so, many walkers, cyclists and others were using it.

The peacefulness of that entire area is truly magnificent, unparalleled and unspoilt. One can see wildlife, birds and wild flowers, and take in basic fresh

air. One could describe the area as a bit of heaven on earth, and it must be retained as such. It would be a total shame if the Comber Greenway were to be compromised.

Money was spent on upgrading that excellent facility, and that initiative was very much welcomed and supported by everyone in the locality and by people further afield. If there is any chance that the Comber Greenway will be interfered with — as has been suggested — a full consultation exercise must be undertaken so that everyone in our community is provided with an opportunity to contribute to the debate. At the end of that consultation, everything will have been investigated and the right decision will be made for the right reasons.

I sincerely hope that the present wonderful environment that is the Comber Greenway will remain and will continue to be enjoyed by everyone. I support the motion.

Mr Newton: I also support the motion. Although I welcome the debate, I find it difficult to understand how this motion was accepted as private Members' business. Many Members see it as a more suitable topic for an Adjournment debate. Mr Deputy Speaker, must I declare an interest as a regular user of the walkway?

Mr Deputy Speaker: You have done so by mentioning that fact.

Mr Newton: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. As a regular user of the Comber Greenway to walk my dogs, I do not see the massive number of people that some Members would have us believe make use of the route. Like many other Members, I fully appreciate the route and the pleasant environment that has been created. I also welcome the £32 million Connswater Community Greenway project that will be developed in close proximity, and will provide other recreation and walking areas for the people of east Belfast and beyond.

Other Members referred to the previous debate about this issue that took place on 3 June 2008. At that time, the Minister gave assurances that the Comber Greenway would be retained as a walking and cycling facility alongside the creation of the rapid-transport system. One of the proposers of today's motion did not participate in that debate, and having listened to her speech, I am not sure whether Ms Purvis is in favour of the rapid-transport project or is opposed to it.

In 2003, essential work started along parts of the old Comber railway line to lay a new sewer, and that resulted in the emergence of health and recreation opportunities for people of the area and, indeed, further afield. A walking and cycling route was created along what was always intended to be a route for a rapid-transit system.

The facility was completed in the full knowledge that the route would be used for a rapid-transit system in the foreseeable future, and the development of such a route was debated, and supported, in Castlereagh Borough Council by councillors from all the political parties that were represented.

In a previous debate on the matter, the Minister for Regional Development told the Assembly:

"I am confident that proposals can be developed that will not push cyclists and walkers off the route." — [*Official Report, Vol 31, No 3, p169, col 1*].

In the Department for Regional Development's 'Corporate Plan 2008-2011: Business Plan 2008-2009', on targeting specific audiences, the section on transport infrastructure, confirms:

"These will include the promotion of walking, cycling, public transport, car sharing, personal travel planning as well as Park & Ride and Park & Share facilities."

I am confident that the Committee for Regional Development will hold the Department to those objectives.

I only wanted to make a few points about the matter, and I shall finish with the following. The rapid-transport project is important not only to the east of the city but, holistically, to the Belfast economy. A healthy environment is also important. Furthermore, as the project is developed, communication with the public — especially with those who live in close proximity to the project — will be vital. The benefits to the economy are obvious; however, they must be clearly explained and conveyed to the wider public. The system's specification must be to a high level; private-sector investment should be encouraged; and in order to attract people off current public transport and out of their cars, passenger service should be of the highest quality.

Mr McCallister: This matter is relevant to both of the Committees of which I am a member. The benefits of safe walking and cycling routes cannot be overestimated to individuals, Government and society at large. The health benefits of outdoor exercise are manifold. Exercise helps individuals and families to live more healthy and contented lives, from reducing the risk of developing heart disease to reducing the likelihood of depression, which affects health and social services by reducing the number of patients in the NHS. Walking and cycling also help to reduce congestion on the roads, reducing carbon emissions and, in turn, helping us to meet our carbon-reduction targets. Therefore, it is regrettable that Northern Ireland has a limited number of dedicated walking and cycling routes in urban and rural areas. I urge the Minister to further develop such routes, as well as developing more cycle paths on the road network.

The Committee for Regional Development has received representations from residents who are concerned that the proposed E-way route from Belfast city centre to Dundonald — included in the 'Strategic Outline Case for Rapid Transit in Belfast' — will damage the existing facility that the Department has helped to develop along the old Belfast to Dundonald rail line. In addition, campaigners to save the greenway have made strong representations to the Committee for Regional Development, outlining their concerns that the route will be degraded or threatened.

Nevertheless, the Ulster Unionist Party has expressed its support, in principle, for developing the rapid-transit system in Belfast, which it believes will bring positive environmental, social and economic benefits. The Department has stated that both the rapid-transit system and the cycle way can be accommodated on the relevant section of the route that is planned to run along the old Belfast to Comber rail line, which I and the Committee have inspected.

4.15 pm

My Committee colleagues and I have received a further technical report, undertaken for the Department by independent consultants, on the potential use of the Upper Newtownards Road as an alternative route. We require time to consider that and to compare the costs and benefits of the routes. Although I recognise the benefits of walking and cycling and of the development of the rapid-transit system in Belfast, I urge the Minister to continue his engagement with stakeholders and user groups to ensure that the views of current greenway users are utilised to secure the best possible walking and cycling route. We support the motion.

Mr Hamilton: I support the general thrust of the motion, although I do not support all the comments that have been made in support of it. I want to concentrate — as have most Members — on the latter part of the motion that concentrates on the greenway, rather than the “motherhood and apple pie” bit at the start of it that no one in their right mind would disagree with. I welcome all the references to Comber, my home town — probably more than have been made in any debate in the House — and I am sure that they will be well received by the people of that area.

I have always been a strong supporter of having a cycle path and dedicated walkway between Belfast and Comber for many obvious reasons, including the potential that they would have for developing tourism and providing that area with a unique selling point. They have been successful in that regard and beyond. As all Members who have spoken in the debate have said, I want to see the retention of safe pedestrian and cyclist access to the greenway. However, I do not want that comment or my support for the motion to be misconstrued as my being opposed to a rapid-transit

scheme being developed along the line, or as my being opposed to the E-way.

If anything, I have two regrets about the E-way proposals. The first is that the E-way does not extend as far as Comber. The second is that it is to be a guided-bus system and not a light-rail system; however, I hope that, as Belfast develops, that kind of system will be introduced.

I understand some of the concerns that have been expressed by members of the public who live along the Comber Greenway; however, the tone of the campaign opposing the E-way has been regrettable at times. Some misleading language was used in a poster that I saw in a shop in Comber — it seemed to suggest that the entire greenway would be used for the E-way. As I said, I regret that that is not the case. However, I believe that, unfortunately, that misleading language was an attempt to inflame the situation. When I brought that to the attention of the campaigners, they accepted that they had made a mistake.

Also doing the rounds currently is a flyer with a depiction of four power-plant cooling towers alongside what I suppose is a picture of the Comber Greenway — I do not know what the former image has to do with the situation. That sort of outright rejection of the E-way along the Comber Greenway line, as manifested in the language and imagery that is used in the publicity, is aimed at inflaming the situation and is unhelpful to the debate.

As I said, I understand some of the concerns about the future of the greenway. It has been an immensely successful line, but, as others have pointed out, it was always designated as a rapid-transit route — indeed, it has widespread support among the political parties in the Chamber. Therefore, it was always known that the E-way would be developed along that line at some stage, and it was always going to be the case that the E-way route would have to be accommodated alongside the cycle path and walkway.

One of the arguments that has been used as outright opposition to the establishment of the E-way rapid-transit route is the environmental impact that it will have on the Comber Greenway. In response, I ask people to consider the environmental impact of continuing with the current level of commuting to Belfast that occurs on a daily basis and its impact in the production of pollution, emissions and traffic congestion on the Newtownards Road, the Comber Road, the Kings Road, and other roads leading into Belfast from that direction. I have no doubt that the E-way will contribute to cutting the emissions, congestion and pollution along that route.

I accept that a cycle path and walking route alongside the E-way from Belfast to Dundonald is the second-best option at best, and that it will change the

existing amenity. However, a rapid-transit system in conjunction with a dedicated and safe cycle path could provide the best of both worlds for everyone in that part of Belfast and beyond.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion.

A hae gat a clatter o' screeds fae consairned constituents about the Comber Greenway an' A was sarious gled when the chanst cum ap fer me tae shaire thon wi' the members o' this 'Sammelie. The Comber Greenway bes a waakin an' bicycle route at rins fae Comber tae aist Bilfawst. Lately a clatter o catter was spent oan thon airt wi' the hope o' heftin' mair fowk tae waak an' bicycle an thon was successful.

I have received many letters from concerned constituents about the Comber Greenway, and so I was pleased when the opportunity arose for me to share them with the Assembly. The Comber Greenway is a walking and cycling route, extending from Comber to east Belfast. Recently, a large amount of money was spent in the area in the hope of encouraging more people to walk and cycle; an enterprise that has been successful.

I recently received a communication from Sustrans, telling me that the Comber Greenway is already popular. Based on its research of similar routes, it estimated that usage will increase steadily on completion of the linear route in November 2008.

The development of the greenway has been a successful partnership, uniting the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Roads Service, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and Sustrans. It has also united Belfast City Council, Castlereagh Borough Council and Ards Borough Council, which is a feat in itself

The greenway is much more than a transport corridor. It provides a wide range of community facilities, such as exercise, play and social interaction, with an estimated 20% of its users being under 16. Indeed, not that far from the greenway — towards the playing fields in Dundonald and the Ballyrainey Road — I used to shoot pigeons and magpies. However, that was a long time ago.

The greenway offers a very good cost benefit for walking and cycling, particularly for health and well-being. Therefore, I agree with the proposal made by Sustrans for a public consultation, led by the Department for Regional Development, with local communities along the route of the Comber Greenway.

However, a rapid-transport system is also an important part of the vision for that area. It will provide relief from congested roads, allowing people to avoid the long queues. It is more than possible — it is desirable — that a rapid-transport system co-exist

with the Comber Greenway. It can and should be done. The financial and environmental savings will be great, and keeping the greenway intact will also ensure that people retain the option to walk, cycle or use the bus — all the things that we are trying to promote.

As I said, many of my constituents have written to me on this issue, and I would like to provide the House with some examples of what they have told me. One constituent — a car commuter from Newtownards to Belfast — would welcome a quality park-and-ride scheme that reduced traffic on the Upper Newtownards Road and that provided him and other users with a swift and convenient bus ride into Belfast. They said that traffic queues from the Ards area are horrific at present, and any Members who travel on that road regularly can vouch for that.

I received a letter from a motorcyclist who told me that he would welcome a new bus lane, with motorcycle access into Belfast, providing a safer route, away from larger vehicles. That constituent also felt that it would be absurd to destroy the old railway, as it has received so much Government money recently. Therefore, they would welcome something to add to the existing facilities offered by the greenway

The Comber Greenway, which is part of national cycle route 99, is a fantastic and unique facility providing a safe, traffic-free route for sustainable transport, both cycling and walking. My colleague Robin Newton told the House that he walks it regularly; he is not the only person to do so. Many people use the facility to walk their dogs, to go for a stroll or to keep fit. Many children also use it as an area in which to play.

It is the only dedicated cycle route into Ards from Belfast — the main point of tourist entry into Northern Ireland. Therefore, it has tremendous potential as a tourist attraction, drawing low-impact, high-spending cyclists into the area.

Last summer, I was delighted to be able to show off the route to some visiting Belgian cyclists. They enjoyed the wonderful route — and they know a thing or two about quality cycling routes.

The constituents in the area — and the DUP — have made clear that they want to see the rapid-transport system in operation. I believe that that system can coexist with the Comber Greenway. The funding to enhance this beautiful section of Ards and east Belfast should be made available alongside the incorporation of the rapid-transport system into the area.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Dawn Purvis and Naomi Long for tabling the motion, and I thank the Members who contributed to the debate. Despite some differences of emphasis, it has been a constructive debate. Support

for the motion has been expressed on all sides of the Chamber, which is encouraging.

I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. I will try to pick up on as many Members' comments as possible, but I have also asked my officials to take note of the Hansard report so that I can write to Members after the debate with a response to anything that I might miss.

The motion proposes that the Assembly acknowledges the benefits to all of providing safe pedestrian and cycling routes. The promotion of walking and cycling is a key ingredient of the Department for Regional Development's regional transportation strategy. Cycling, in particular, can play a bigger role in our future transport strategies, and it has the potential to contribute to reversing current trends in traffic congestion and carbon emissions. Importantly, it can also have a positive impact on people's health by giving them the opportunity to exercise regularly.

I am pleased to say that cycle-usage figures published in 2008 show that overall cycle usage has increased by 37% across the North and by 87% in Belfast. However, I accept that the Government must continue to develop and improve sustainable transport modes to meet the challenges ahead. The Department for Regional Development is playing its part in trying to encourage more people to use sustainable modes of transport, such as cycling, walking and public transport. Those forms of transport are healthy, carbon efficient and environmentally friendly.

The various transport plans have proposed cycle facilities for areas in which it is considered that they are most needed and most likely to be used. The provision of continuous cycle networks is considered most beneficial in towns that have significant numbers of existing cyclists or where large student populations and flat cycling conditions suggest greatest potential.

The Belfast metropolitan transport plan was developed to address the long-term transport infrastructure for the city. It included proposals for walking, cycling, bus, rail and rapid transit, and it is the current basis for the development of transport infrastructure in the city. We have made a significant contribution towards the development of the national cycle network in the North. It comprises 983 kms of on-road cycle routes and 162 kms of off-road cycle track. That equates to a total of 1,145 kms — some 716 miles. However, I accept John McCallister's comments, and that is something that the Department wishes to develop, given that it is important to the Department.

One of the Department's key commitments is to contribute to safer roads by using a range of initiatives, such as road safety engineering, traffic calming and

further enhancement of the pedestrian and cycling network. Total spend on cycling facilities during the period 2002-09 will be some £6.6 million.

The cycling forum brings together the major organisations that have an interest in cycling: DRD, Roads Service, Sustrans, Translink, the Health Promotion Agency, district councils and voluntary groups.

The Department for Regional Development, in conjunction with the cycling forum, published a cycling strategy for the North in June 2000. That strategy identified a range of measures to improve conditions for cyclists, with a view to establishing a pro-cycling culture.

I recognise the importance of cycling and to further explore its potential, we will soon organise a conference to focus on how we can get more people on to their bikes and out of their cars.

The Department's Travelwise initiative encourages the use of sustainable transport options, such as walking and cycling. That initiative is delivered in partnership with the Department of Education, DOE's road safety branch, Sustrans, the Health Promotion Agency and Translink. Its aim is to help people to understand the problem and to be aware of how they can be part of the solution. It promotes the use of sustainable transport, which leads to better personal health, and it introduces walking and cycling to schools. It also provides useful safety information.

The Department is working closely with the east Belfast partnership boards, which are developing plans for the Connswater Community Greenway following a successful bid to the Big Lottery Fund. I, therefore, welcome the motion's objective to acknowledge the health benefits that outdoor exercise, through walking and cycling, offers children and adults.

In June this year, I introduced to the House proposals to introduce a rapid-transit network for Belfast. I was encouraged by the constructive nature of the debate on that day and on how Members focused on the benefits that rapid transit would bring. During that debate, I reminded Members that rapid transit for Belfast was not a new concept, but one that had been included in all relevant land-use and transport policies and plans for many years.

I stated that proposals for a rapid-transit system in Belfast had been talked about for many years, but that the time for talking was coming to an end. It is now time to deliver. At that time, several Members highlighted their concerns about the use of the Comber Greenway for a rapid-transit system, which I have visited since then.

4.30 pm

I have received correspondence from members of the public who use the Comber Greenway, and I have

had discussions with elected representatives who are concerned with the proposals for a rapid-transit system. It has been suggested that taxpayers' money has been wasted in developing the route for walking and cycling if it is to be changed in the near future. Indeed, there have been rumours in the community — which Dawn Purvis referred to — that my Department intends to replace the Comber Greenway with a four-lane motorway. I assure the House that that is not the case.

Although I appreciate fully the genuine concerns expressed about the proposed changes to the Comber Greenway, the reality is very different. In 2003, Water Service undertook work to build a new sewer along parts of the former railway line, and that has already been referred to by Members opposite. That work presented my Department with an opportunity to create a cost-effective temporary walking and cycling route along the corridor while plans for a rapid-transit system were being progressed. That was recognised by Sustrans at the time, who suggested that, as and when the rapid-transit plans were developed further, the walking and cycling path could be incorporated alongside the E-way scheme. That pathway would provide a short-term opportunity to encourage walking and cycling on the route before a decision was taken on a rapid-transit system. All those who were developing the route were fully aware of that decision.

It is also important to note that the plans for a rapid-transit system are for only sections of the Comber Greenway — from Dundonald to Belfast, as has already been said. Several campaigners have stated that they were disappointed that the proposals for a rapid-transit system did not undertake an assessment of the use of the Upper Newtownards Road. After listening to the concerns expressed, we asked the consultants to reconsider that option. They found that using the Upper Newtownards Road for a rapid-transit system would not work, as it would mean taking two lanes out of an already busy road, which would also have to be widened. All parking on the road would have to be banned and that would be unpopular with residents, shoppers and shopkeepers. Traffic congestion would increase, leading to rat-running traffic through residential areas. Despite such measures, the consultants forecast lower passenger numbers, due to the fact that the service would be slower.

My vision for the corridor has not changed. It is a vision of a world-class rapid-transit system alongside a high-quality walking and cycling route.

The benefits of a rapid-transit system are in danger of being forgotten in this debate. Belfast is the economic driver of the region, and people need to be able to move about the city quickly for it to operate efficiently. The rapid-transit system will allow for that. It will offer vehicles at five-minute intervals, with

journey times from Dundonald to the city centre of between 16 and 20 minutes. Over 2·1 million people will use the service each year, and over 20% of its rush-hour traffic will come from current car users. That figure has been derided as not sufficiently high to justify interference with the Comber Greenway. However, I assure Members that those are good projection figures for the first few years of a new transport system. If 20% of current car users switched to the rapid-transit system, there would be over 400,000 fewer car trips, and the 750 cars that use the park-and-ride facility at Ballybeen would also be taken off that stretch of road.

The House should be aware that the issues surrounding the use of the Comber Greenway were discussed recently at the draft Belfast metropolitan area plan public inquiry. The draft Belfast metropolitan area plan (BMAP) designates the Comber Greenway as a rapid-transit walking and cycling route.

Reg Empey, who is not in the Chamber, raised issues about the Hollywood Arches. I assure him that those issues were addressed in the report. The preferred route beyond the Hollywood Arches was identified, and consultation is ongoing with residents in that area about the preferred route.

I am fully aware of the sensitivity of developing the Comber Greenway for walking, cycling and rapid transit. The Committee for Regional Development raised that issue following its examination of the strategic outline case. Some Members have questioned whether there is enough room to develop a rapid-transit system alongside the walking and cycling track. I have twice asked the consultants to consider the issue, and they have assured me that there is enough room to develop both systems side by side. I would not for one minute try to mislead the House and say that the current nature of the Comber Greenway will not change — obviously it will change if a rapid-transit system uses it. However, I have asked the consultants to consider carefully the matter, and they have assured me that there is the ability to fit both systems side by side, and to retain cycling and walking along the Comber Greenway.

As our plans develop, my officials will continue to meet a range of key stakeholders including representatives of the greenway to Stay group, Sustrans, Mersey Street residents' association and the East Belfast Partnership.

I assure Members that we have already secured developer contributions for the rapid-transit system, and we will continue to seek other developer contributions when the possibility arises. I am establishing a dedicated rapid-transit delivery team. Following Executive approval, I intend to proceed to

the detailed design of the network, which will allow us to examine its full particulars.

I will work with a range of individuals, including local communities, during the design of the network, and I hope to convince people who are sceptical about the plans. I will not try to mislead the House by saying that the Comber Greenway will remain unaltered. However, throughout the design process and our consultation with elected representatives and the local community, I hope that we can convince people that the plans can work and that the Comber Greenway can be retained.

After representations were made to me about the nature of the greenway, I took the opportunity to walk along parts of it and, indeed, it is a very nice and popular facility. I intend to preserve safe pedestrian and cyclist access on the Comber Greenway, both before and after the introduction of the rapid-transit system.

Mrs Long: I am glad that we have had the opportunity to discuss the proposals for the Comber Greenway this afternoon. Robin Newton asked why the debate was not an Adjournment debate. The motion was forwarded to the Business Committee as an Adjournment debate, but the Business Committee rejected it in that format on the basis that the issue is part of the Executive's Programme for Government and concerns more than one constituency. Indeed, it is more appropriate for the matter to be discussed as Private Members' Business, as it has given the Minister an opportunity to give a detailed response and allowed Members from outside East Belfast to participate.

It is very important for the future of the city and the entire region that we achieve a modal shift and increase the use of public transport. Irrespective of swiftness, the key factor that determines whether people use public transport is its frequency and cost.

The Comber Greenway has been a huge success, and the Department for Regional Development (DRD) must be commended for that. Indeed, the difficulty has arisen because the success of the greenway has been far beyond what could have been anticipated when it was put in place as a temporary walkway. Prior to the works that were undertaken by DRD after the pipeline project, the walkway had largely fallen into disrepair. That situation was great for the wildlife, but it did not encourage the widespread usage of the facility that we had hoped for. However, the greenway has become incredibly successful among people who commute by bicycle and those who use it for leisure walking and cycling.

The local community has bought into the greenway massively. In addition to using it as a cycle path, the local community's sense of ownership has been hugely important. Local people have worked with statutory

agencies and the council to maintain and develop the area. For example, a campaign was driven by the public for the police to open land at Brookland and enable the development of the greenway's last section. The level of public enthusiasm for the greenway makes the proposals more contentious than they would otherwise have been.

Dawn Purvis outlined the health and well-being benefits of what is a quiet and safe oasis in the densely urban fabric of East Belfast. People in the city have the right to enjoy the outdoors safely. Although I accept what the Minister said about the Connswater Greenway, that was a different prospect in a different locality. The Connswater Greenway was seen as an additional project rather than as a replacement for the Comber Greenway.

There are competing tensions between the significant number of commuters who wish to move quickly to the city centre and the people who wish to access East Belfast's shops, schools, and healthcare facilities. If anyone needs proof of the huge amount of traffic generated by the latter group, they should try to travel through East Belfast during the school holidays.

I am not convinced that the proposals will address the traffic concerns of the people who access those facilities in East Belfast. Indeed, in my intervention during Lord Browne's speech, I expressed concern that the 4A bus service — which operates along the Upper Newtownards Road — will be undermined or diminished. Lord Browne may be happy to leave that matter to departmental consultants, but I am concerned about that — other constituents of mine in Tullycarnet, Braniel and Cregagh have lost bus services as a result of consultants' reports. Ultimately, whether the service can wash its own face is a financial decision. We must be cautious about the impact that such an approach could have on those shops and schools on main arterial routes that are public transport currently accesses.

Cathal Boylan and other Members said that the Comber Greenway has been earmarked for rapid transit for a long time. We all acknowledge that that is true. It was also previously earmarked for a four-lane highway. Thankfully, that was one hare-brained scheme that did not come to fruition, something for which we are all grateful. The combination of repeated delay and inactivity lulled people into a false sense of security. More importantly, the quality of the new provision and its popularity has meant that it is much more valued than it was previously.

Reg Empey asked what is to happen at the end of the walkway, and there still seems to be a question mark over that. I understand that the preferred route is now to head towards the Titanic Quarter, which represents a change in direction. Robin Newton said that he rarely sees large numbers of people on the

Comber Greenway. I can only suggest that that is because they know that he is coming, because most of us see many people using it — Robin knows that I am only joking.

I accept that a rapid-transit system may remove cars from the main arterial route. However, my concern is that the effect would be temporary — when people see traffic flowing more freely on the Upper Newtownards Road, they will, as they have done in the past, simply revert to using their cars. They may choose to use their cars to access many of the facilities along those main arterial routes, so I have my doubts about how successful that approach would be. I accept that the rapid-transit system, in and of itself, may be successful in bringing people to the city centre, but those who have used the walkway for its amenity and for leisure will be less attracted to it than those who use the walkway to commute, cycle or walk. Those who use the walkway with their families, and so on, may find their experience to be quite different.

Simon Hamilton talked about how a rapid-transit system would benefit the environment. I accept that that is a balanced argument. However, when people talk about the degradation of the environment, they are not talking about the global environment; rather, they are talking about the local environment and its amenity. That valid concern has been expressed. To be fair, the Minister has been open and honest in saying that the proposals may degrade the quality of that particular environment.

I am at least assured that if a rapid-transit system is introduced, Jim Shannon will not be out taking potshots at some of the wildlife. I imagine that that would be a public hazard, so, if nothing else, we can be thankful for that.

I appreciate the Minister's presence and his participation in all the debates on the matter. He has constructively addressed the issues that have been raised. The BMAP process identified the route, but it is an incredibly unwieldy process. Everyone would concede that it is not a process in which most members of the public feel they can actively and fully participate. It creates quite an intimidating environment in which to make representations. The specific proposal for the Comber Greenway really requires a separate consultation process in which the public can engage.

I remain concerned about the plans for the Comber Greenway, but I welcome the Minister's ongoing commitment to engage with local representatives and residents. Many may be disappointed that it appears that plans for a rapid-transit system will proceed regardless of their concerns. However, I hope that through discussions with Sustrans, residents and others,

it will be possible to find some way in which to maintain the environment to as high a standard as possible.

I return to the key point — the Comber Greenway is a valued piece of ground for the people who use it. Use of the greenway has increased, and it has increased cycling levels by more than it is anticipated use of public-transport will increase, so it is more successful in those terms. The greenway has made a huge difference to people's health and well-being. I hope that we can continue negotiation and discussion on the future of the greenway in order to ensure that the amenity of the greenway, as well as its environmental impact, is fully protected.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges the health benefits that outdoor exercise offers children and adults, including positive mental well-being; recognises that safe walking and cycling routes contribute greatly to this and are in short supply in urban areas; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to preserve safe pedestrian and cyclist access on the Comber Greenway.

4.45 pm

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Primary School Education in South Belfast

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the opportunity to debate this issue, and I thank the Minister for attending today. We could all achieve positive outcomes as a result of debates such as this.

In recent months, I have been engaged in a specific outreach programme with all primary schools across South Belfast; I visited most of the schools and had lengthy and frank discussions with principals, teachers and support staff. I witnessed at first hand the deep passion that principals, teachers and support staff have for the job in hand and also their unswerving dedication and commitment to their profession and to the pupils whom they teach.

I brought the issue to the House today, because many teachers are being put under increasingly tremendous pressure; however, I do not blame anyone in particular for that. Some of that pressure is historic, and I am not for one moment accusing the Minister, lest it appear that way, as she has been in position for only a year or 15 months. I am merely bringing those issues to her attention. Much of the pressure is historic and has been around for years as a result of inadequate support from us, as public representatives, from education and library boards and from the Department. Nevertheless, staff in many primary schools are being forced to work under very difficult and trying circumstances.

I thank the principals of Botanic Primary School, St Bernard's Primary School and Rosetta Primary School for taking the time to be with us to listen to the debate. I apologise if I have missed anyone out.

Every school has specific issues, which I do not intend to go into in any great detail today; however, there are common issues of concern that unite many primary schools across south Belfast. I will follow up on the details of those issues with the Minister in due course, but I do not wish to enter into undue discussion on them today.

It is no secret that each principal, teacher and parent to whom I have spoken is deeply anxious about the lack of certainty around the transfer procedure, but I do not want to get into that debate at any length. However, I wish to raise the biggest issue — underfunding. Time and again, people have raised with me the issue of the age-weighted pupil unit. Pupils in primary schools in Britain have a much better funding ratio compared with secondary schools, which places many principals under considerable pressure. We discussed the matter in the Assembly before the summer recess, and we will come back to it, but I urge the Minister to relieve some of that tight financial pressure if possible. The demands placed on principals and teachers are ever growing, yet the funding, resources and support levels seem to be shrinking. The reality — and I have seen it for myself — is that an increasing number of primary schools have been forced to rely on private fundraising efforts by parents to ensure their survival and to ensure that they can maintain the standards that they have built up over many years.

Rocketing energy costs are a big issue, and schools are being placed in a frightful position. Electricity bills have more than doubled in the past year, and oil and gas prices have risen dramatically. Some primary schools are paying up to £1,000 on heating bills alone. I know that the Minister has made a bid to the Department of Finance and Personnel, but we must find a mechanism to get money released to pay those fuel bills. School principals have had to divert money away from staff and other much-needed resources just to meet their fuel bills, and they need that financial support now.

There is a lack of resources to help the growing number of children with special needs. That increase in numbers is happening in every school in South Belfast. Early intervention is best practice worldwide, yet the heightened criteria for reading units means that some children have to wait years for admission.

The statementing process is another cause for concern. According to the Department's figures, statementing costs £3,000 a child. I urge the Minister to simplify the overly bureaucratic and costly statementing process. It is not beyond the wit of man to come up with a simpler — yet every bit as effective — process that could achieve the same ends.

The increasing number of immigrant children is a big issue for many schools in South Belfast, and presents massive challenges to school principals. In Botanic Primary School, for example, 29 different mother tongues are spoken. In other words, there are children from 29 different countries across the world in that school. Children from 25 or 26 different countries attend Fane Street Primary School. Without extra support for teaching English, that is a difficult situation

for teachers to operate in and meet their vocational commitment to teaching and supporting those children.

Child protection is also an important issue. We must have a cohesive cross-departmental strategy between the areas of education and health in order to assist schools such as Botanic Primary School and Fane Street Primary School. In many respects, they hit a brick wall when it comes to obtaining help and support. The principal of Botanic Primary School told me that children were arriving at the school — some of whom were 11 years of age — who had never been to school before. That causes massive disruption. The teachers are compelled to try to meet the needs of those children. How can they meet the needs of an 11-year-old Romanian child who has never been to school and balance that with the needs of the other 11-year-olds?

There are other challenges that concern me. Many children across South Belfast are sitting in schools that are not fit for purpose. Building and redeveloping schools, providing new schools and amalgamating others are serious issues. Taughmonagh Primary School, St Anne's Primary School, St Bride's Primary School and St Bernard's Primary School are all eagerly awaiting promised newbuilds, but they still have no idea when the building will start because of an excruciatingly slow decision-making process.

I am aware that there are staff and skills shortages in the Department's development and infrastructure division, but we must find ways, through private finance or other means, to provide those newbuild projects. It is not acceptable for children to sit in substandard schools that are long past their sell-by date. We must do whatever is necessary to procure decent accommodation that is fit for purpose — that children can be taught in. We must put the required procurement arrangements in place.

Not only are the newbuild projects that have been committed for several schools not going ahead, basic levels of repair and maintenance are not being sustained. I could give Belvoir Park Primary School as an example. The annual maintenance budgets that are allocated to the Belfast Education and Library Board and the South Eastern Education and Library Board — both of which bite into South Belfast — lag so far behind the level of need and demand that the schools that are covered by those boards are never reached. Given that the amount of money that is available never matches need, schools can wait for years before basic maintenance and repairs are carried out. In many cases, those schools are unhealthy, unsafe and unfit for human habitation.

In light of the current economic climate, now would be a good time to perhaps make some cost-effective investments in the schools estate and to release funding in order to break open and initiate some of the projects

that have been planned. We have a dramatic opportunity to consider amalgamations. Without wishing to be prescriptive, I know that there is a need for some kind of amalgamation in the catchment areas of Rosetta, Newtownbreda and Knockbreda Primary Schools. I know that the primary schools in Sandy Row, Donegall Road and Fane Street are crying out for a single new school that would cover all three existing schools. As well as giving a much-needed boost to the education system, such a move would help the construction industry and open up opportunities for that industry at this very difficult time.

Education, I admit, is difficult and challenging at the best of times. The current debate and crisis on selection adds to the problems, but that issue will have to be dealt with in due course. I therefore urge the Minister to do what she can as soon as possible to get that sorted out. However, many of the other problems that I have discussed could be eased with some repairs, amalgamations and new building as well as support for immigrant children and for those with special needs. Action is also necessary. As I said earlier, although I do not blame the Minister for the dysfunctional Department that she has inherited, there is a need to ensure that that Department has a mechanism to approve the building of a school. I have been involved in the redevelopment of Taughmonagh Primary School, resources for which were promised some two or three years ago and on which no progress has been made.

On this occasion, if the Minister can get things moving to ensure that the schools are built, we should be rallying around her and supporting her. I am sure that the issues that I have mentioned in relation to South Belfast apply to constituencies and schools right across the country. It breaks my heart to see schools that are not fit for purpose, with toilets that are dysfunctional and that are a health and safety risk. The issue must be tackled, and it must be tackled soon.

I am delighted that the Health Minister is also present, as certain issues are cross-cutting and within the remit of both Departments. I plead with both Ministers to ensure that the education system is made a priority both in the Chamber and by the Executive. It must be made a priority because my heart bleeds when I see the circumstances in which some children have to survive.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Given that several Members have indicated that they wish to speak, I ask Members to limit their contributions to eight minutes.

Mr Spratt: I thank Dr McDonnell for securing the debate. The education of our children is a matter that every parent takes very seriously, and it is only right for the parents in South Belfast that the education of their children is at centre stage today. When I saw the Adjournment debate scheduled for today, I thought that the topic covered a broad area. Many issues that face

specific schools could be raised, a few of which I have decided to discuss. Indeed, Dr McDonnell has raised already some of the issues that affect the South Belfast area in particular.

In recent visits that I have made to schools in South Belfast, I have been struck by the ethnic diversity of the constituency. Our primary-school sector must rise to the challenge of embracing and educating many children from many different backgrounds. On a recent visit to Fane Street Primary School off the Lisburn Road, the principal, Mr Orr, pointed out a display on the wall of a corridor to me, which highlighted the many different nationalities across the pupil profile. It struck me how challenging that must be for the principal and the teachers because of pupils' varying standards of English and their cultural differences, all of which must be dealt with in the classroom.

5.00 pm

Some children from ethnic minority backgrounds receive specialist support from tutors from the inclusion and diversity service, which is based at the Antrim Board Centre and provides advice on pastoral and language requirements as well as assessing children's progress. It is important that children are welcomed to our schools and that they receive every assistance in adapting not only to the school but to their new environment. Support must also be given to teachers and principals in that area.

We must also examine the schools estate in South Belfast and recognise that, although great work has been done, much investment is required to bring our schools up to the necessary standard required for twenty-first-century education. Newbuilds, such as the one that is planned for Taughmonagh Primary School, are welcome, and the sooner they happen the better, for teachers and pupils. A new primary-school facility to serve the Donegall Road area must also be brought to fruition to meet the requirements of local children. We want greater educational attainment in such areas, and a pupil-friendly school building is important in achieving that.

Mr Storey: I commend the honourable Member for South Belfast for securing the debate. Alasdair McDonnell referred to the problem of the transfer procedure, but a plethora of policies is also being introduced, such as a proposal to revamp the governance arrangements for schools. Does the Member agree that too much is going on and that no priority is being given, at any stage, to phase in any of those proposals, which is adding to the pressure and problems in our education system? The education system is in meltdown.

Mr Spratt: I agree with my honourable friend's comments. As I listen to boards of governors, particularly of primary schools, I think that there is no

doubt that the transfer procedure, the education policies and the governance are putting additional pressure on teachers and head teachers. A way must be found to phase in those policies gradually.

Dr McDonnell mentioned some areas of concern — the “pressures” — such as underfunding, which is a major issue for schools across Northern Ireland. I am a member of a board of governors of a primary school outside Belfast. At one recent meeting that I attended, parents were painting the doors of the classrooms. That primary school is well run, but that incident tells its own story. Through their amazing fund-raising efforts, parent-teacher associations are picking up the slack in many areas by supplying equipment that education and library boards should be supplying to schools for out-of-school activities, and so forth.

The particular school to which I referred had damp spots, and the parent-teacher association supplied replacement tiles for ceilings in two or three classrooms because the board was not providing them.

In Fane Street Primary School, which I visited recently, window frames are being allowed to rot simply because they have not been given a lick of paint. It is a tragedy that boards are allowing such things to happen. Instead of painting the frames, boards are going to the expense of replacing windows or fascia boards in schools at great cost when simple repairs could have been undertaken for a small amount of money as part of routine maintenance. That probably affects every school in South Belfast. The Minister must examine that.

Academic selection was also covered. I have learnt the depth of feeling that exists on the issue from surveys that I have carried out in the Finaghy and Saintfield Road areas and beyond. Of the responses I received, 96% indicated support for academic selection. When asked what issue MLAs should be prioritising, 84% of responses stated that transfer must be sorted out as matter of urgency. If the Assembly is debating primary education in South Belfast, it cannot ignore what is, undoubtedly, the biggest issue at present. The Minister must listen to the 96% of respondents in my area — and I have no doubt that similar surveys have been carried out in other areas — who want academic selection to remain. Why is the Minister trying to advance a programme of change, as she puts it, when the people of Northern Ireland have clearly rejected her notions of change? I could discuss that subject for a long time.

Greater funding is needed for extended-schools programmes, particularly for special-needs provision. Members are aware of the problems that exist in that area. Provision is, certainly, being drastically underfunded by some boards, and that is causing schools, particularly primary schools, major concern. I

ask the Minister to take all of those issues into account and to deal with them as soon as possible.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I join with Jimmy Spratt in thanking Alasdair McDonnell for raising the issue of primary school education in South Belfast in the Assembly. It is an important issue. Dr McDonnell has covered a range of points, with which I do not believe anyone would disagree, in considerable detail. In particular, the tone and manner with which he has raised the topic and made his contribution are welcome and helpful.

It was worthwhile and helpful that Dr McDonnell undertook an outreach programme and visited schools. I am sure that those schools appreciated that particular outreach exercise, which allowed them to voice their views at first hand. I, therefore, commend Dr McDonnell for that. However, I want to say at the outset of my remarks that I have heard nothing in the debate that the Minister has not already dealt with in forthright terms during her time as Minister and, indeed, has often done before that in other capacities. For example, the need to ensure that all children are treated equally, properly and fairly has been to the forefront of the Minister's mind in her work, certainly during all of the years that I have known her as a political activist.

The Member, justifiably, brings to the Assembly's attention the substantial financial pressures that are being brought to bear on schools. The Minister has addressed that issue repeatedly. The condition of the school estate is another issue that many Members have raised during the past several years. I want to put on record my appreciation, and that of my colleagues, for schools' staff, teachers, parents and all of the people who are involved and who often work in difficult circumstances to make schools viable and sustainable in children's interests.

The topic for debate makes no reference to academic selection. That subject has been mentioned, but I do not wish to take the debate in that negative direction. However, I support the push for fundamental change throughout the school system. We do not have the perfect school system, as some would have us believe. I passed the 11-plus far too many years ago to remember. I do not want a system that tells most of our children that they are failures at 11 years of age; rather, I support radical change throughout the school system. In the fullness of time, people involved in the education sector, and primarily parents and children, will welcome the benefits which will and should accrue to the system as we make the necessary changes.

Those changes have to be underpinned with the necessary and appropriate level of resources; of that I have no doubt. As many Members have already said, it is unacceptable that children are educated in schools

that are not up to standard or fit for purpose and which should be condemned. We all want to ensure that children are given the best opportunities and taught in schools that are warm, dry and in a good state of repair. In those conditions, the teaching staff can get on with their job of delivering a proper education.

Alasdair has made the point that we must rally round the Minister to ensure that she gets the necessary support, including considerable additional funding, to ensure that schools are of a proper standard and that all our children are given the best opportunities.

Will the Minister tell us how the funding will impact on the area under discussion, South Belfast? The proposed education and skills authority will have a central role in modernising the schools estate. I am keen to know how that will be done in South Belfast. What of the additional finance that is proposed for, or may have been allocated to, delivery of the revised curriculum? What of the money to be made available to principals of small primary schools, to enable them to get out of full-time teaching and devote themselves to leadership and management? Those are important issues that we cannot lose sight of.

I concur with virtually all the remarks made by Members about the need to provide adequate support for schools. Many Members have lobbied previous Ministers of Education and their officials for financial support for, to take an example, English as an additional language. One of the most positive developments in recent years has been the arrival in schools of newcomers who contribute to diversity. In the fullness of time, we will all recognise that. However, it has brought new challenges, some of which, I am glad to say, have been met, while much more needs to be done. We need to provide a welcoming environment. I know, from first hand, that many schools do so: however, they need the appropriate level of support from the Department and relevant boards to carry out that work.

I thank the Member who raised this topic for discussion. I endorse most of the remarks made in the debate and commend all those involved in the delivery of education to our children for their tremendous work.

5.15 pm

Mr McGimpsey: I speak in the debate as a Member for South Belfast, not as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I also declare an interest as a governor of Stranmillis Primary School. I am grateful to Dr McDonnell for proposing this topic for debate on an issue that goes right to the heart of many families in South Belfast.

I will begin by talking about some of the challenges that we face. Mr Spratt and Dr McDonnell mentioned Taughmonagh Primary School. For some years, I had campaigned for the school's replacement. However, in

June 2007, I was disappointed to discover that the new Taughmonagh Primary School was not on the procurement list. I lobbied the Minister and her office on the issue, and I was delighted that, within a matter of weeks, Taughmonagh Primary School found its rightful place on the procurement list, around this time last year. I am grateful to the Minister for her intervention.

The procurement process for Taughmonagh Primary School is under way, and I anticipate that builders will be on site in approximately 12 months' time. As a result, the families and the parents of pupils who attend the school, as well as people living in Taughmonagh estate, which is a severely disadvantaged area in South Belfast, have had their confidence boosted.

Another issue that goes right to the heart of the matter is the situation in three inner South Belfast primary schools — Blythefield, Donegall Road and Fane Street — which are long past their sell-by date. Dr McDonnell's remarks about pupils being taught in seriously substandard accommodation apply to those three schools. We are working with parents and groups to decide how to proceed. One proposal is to examine the possibility of amalgamation. None of the schools is close to enrolling maximum pupil numbers, because of the flight of population out of the city, and in particular, out of the inner city.

One big challenge that we face is to find and to identify a site. A site search is ongoing, and is, I believe, close to conclusion. It is difficult to get agreement among the various parents' groups from the three primary schools about which site to select.

If we identify a site, I would like the Minister to indicate whether the new primary school will have to go through another process or whether the Belfast Education and Library Board will be able to enter into the procurement process. That is a key issue for the communities of Sandy Row, Donegall Road and Lisburn Road.

If we can get the type of investment that we seek in that area, I anticipate that we can get a similar response to that experienced by Finaghy Primary School, which was built and opened about three years ago. It has a tremendous track record as regards success and support.

Another issue is the plight of Newtownbreda Primary School. As Dr McDonnell said, there is a problem where we hit the division between the South Eastern Education and Library Board and the Belfast Education and Library Board. As Members are probably aware, the primary school is effectively surrounded by two major roads — the Knock dual carriageway and the Saintfield Road. The number of pupils attending Newtownbreda Primary School has decreased; therefore, any amalgamation that is being

proposed will mean that the school's pupils will have to travel across one of the busiest roads in Belfast.

We must try to find a way forward to give comfort to parents of pupils at the school. However, the South Eastern Education and Library Board's announcement about the strong possibility of the amalgamation of Rosetta and Newtownbreda primary schools has had an effect on pupil numbers at Newtownbreda. I understand that the number of P1 pupils enrolled at Newtownbreda is dramatically down this year.

That is one of those unfortunate responses: if there is a question mark over a school, that school immediately becomes unviable. There must be a clear indication of the way forward on what is happening with Rosetta and Newtownbreda schools. The South Eastern Board is looking at amalgamation around the Knockbreda area, and I understand that one of the proposals is the amalgamation of Knockbreda and Lisnasharragh schools. That is not logical to me; however, it is one of the issues that I would be interested in receiving further information on.

Those are the schools that are under the worst threat, not least because of investment but also because of the fabric of the buildings. The post-primary schools in South Belfast — Malone College, Aquinas Grammar School, Hunterhouse College, Methodist College, Victoria College — on the other hand are fully subscribed, if not oversubscribed.

One of the greatest needs of inner South Belfast is for a secondary school that is within reach of the local population — children are being bussed to and from school all the time. One of the problems with bussing was that if one were to go over a certain distance — three miles from one's home — one would not get transport. Ironically, that was one of the reasons that the new school on Blacks Road failed: its core catchment areas in inner South Belfast were just outside the three-mile limit. All those pupils — whose parents came from the most disadvantaged homes — had to pay for their transport. That was one of the contributory factors in the closure of that school. I argued at the time, along with others, that the school was being built in the wrong place; it should have been built in inner south Belfast.

Communities in inner South Belfast need a new secondary school; that is a constant. Taughmonagh school is a model for the way forward; I am not sure what is happening with Newtownbreda and Rosetta schools or what the way forward is for them. The way forward for inner South Belfast — for the Donegall Road, Blythefield and Taughmonagh — will be in identifying a suitable site. That can be done through the redevelopment of the Village area, which we support through the Greater Village Regeneration Trust. Once we have identified a site and reached

agreement among parents, I would hate for there to be a delay in the procurement. I would be grateful for an indication from the Minister as to the likelihood of that.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht seo ar chúrsaí oideachais i ndeisceart Bhéal Feirste.

I am glad to participate in this debate on education matters in South Belfast, and I have listened carefully to Members' points. It seems that many proposals for new buildings and renovations in South Belfast are stuck in the morass of antiquated procedures of the Department of Education's building section, awaiting final approval. They may not see the light of day during this financial year, which means that the money earmarked for those projects may not be spent. It would be regrettable if millions of pounds were to go back to the Department of Finance and Personnel at the end of this financial year. That money could be lost to education if delays in processing proposals are not eradicated. The Department of Education may have to bid to recover that money, but there is no guarantee that the money will return to education.

Delays are causing untold frustration in schools and communities in South Belfast and elsewhere, as we have heard, where communities have been waiting for years for newbuilds and renovations to begin. That difficulty is not confined to one particular sector; it is experienced in the controlled, maintained, integrated and Irish-medium sectors. All sectors agree that those procedures must be changed without delay.

The Department of Education has told the Education Committee that it is working on streamlining procurement procedures; however, I think that more needs to be done. Some proposals have been in the system for over four years and have still not emerged at the other end. Take, for example, the new Holy Cross College in Strabane; it took seven years to develop that proposal and only 22 months to build the school — in my view, that is totally crazy. The Minister has been made aware of the problem by the Education Committee and, I am sure, by those whose projects are stuck in the system. I ask her to address that problem as a matter of urgency and to ensure that the processing of proposals proceeds at pace without the long delays now inherent in the system. That is something that ought to be done, and can be done, without the investment of huge — if any — extra resources; it is a matter of organisational change.

My colleague Dr McDonnell referred to the condition of the schools estate in South Belfast. Quite honestly, the point he made was hardly surprising when I recall that there is a £217 million backlog in schools' maintenance. That is not my figure; three weeks ago that figure was given to the Education

Committee by departmental officials. A huge backlog in high-priority school maintenance must be affecting the standard of accommodation in which our children are being taught, and their health and safety. The Department has put in a bid for £10 million in the monitoring round because that would:

“slow down the deterioration of the schools estate and reduce health and safety risks”.

If the health and safety of children is at risk, the Department of Education must have that money this year. I have sought more detailed information on that, which I will no doubt receive in the future. However, I am sure that Member's will agree; £217 million of maintenance is a huge figure, the equivalent in maintenance to the building of six large secondary schools or 10 new primary schools. What does that say about the fabric of our schools estate, not only in South Belfast, but overall? Given that huge backlog, I ask the Minister to assure us that children are being taught in buildings that are fit for purpose and in conditions that are healthy and safe. The Department of Finance and Personnel needs to come up with that £10 million, and more if there are issues of health and safety to be brought into the equation. Education needs extra funding to meet the spiralling costs of heating oil and school meals. Without that extra funding — £17 million — education and library boards will be faced with making cuts. I am sure that we all agree that the last thing that we want is cuts in education that will affect front-line services.

The primary-school principals who are here today are no doubt aware that in South Belfast, and, indeed, elsewhere, a primary-school pupil attracts £2,045 of funding per annum. In that same constituency, and every other constituency, secondary-school pupils attract £3,303 of funding and sixth-form pupils attract £5,000 of funding.

5.30 pm

There are five reasons that secondary school pupils in South Belfast attract more funding than primary school pupils in that constituency. Secondary schools need smaller classes for certain subjects; their teachers are afforded 10% preparation, planning and assessment time; and, in some subjects, secondary school pupils need specialist accommodation, as well as specialist equipment and support staff.

Primary school pupils in South Belfast do not attract the same level of funding as their secondary school counterparts because they are taught in large class groups; their teachers do not get 10% preparation, planning and assessment time; and, in many cases, they do not have the specialist accommodation or equipment needed in order to implement the revised curriculum —

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

Mr D Bradley: I agree with previous speakers that huge issues in South Belfast need to be addressed. Many of those issues are, however, replicated across the education system. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome Alasdair McDonnell's bringing forward this very useful Adjournment debate, and the tone of his contribution. There was a marked difference in tone between the proposer and seconder, but that is par for the course and is probably part of a familiar pattern.

I want to thank the principals of different schools in South Belfast that I have visited and who have invited me to visit. I will be going to some of those schools in the near future, and I look forward to that. I want to pay tribute to the principals, parents, boards of governors, teachers and classroom assistants who do tremendous work. Alasdair McDonnell has kindly asked me to meet some of them to have a chat after the debate. I am happy to do that, and I hope that other MLAs from South Belfast will join me in meeting them.

I am on record as recognising fully the problems with the conditions and facilities at a number of schools, and not in just South Belfast but right across the North. That is a legacy of underinvestment in the schools estate in earlier decades, which we inherited and need to address. I will not deal today with every query that Members raised about every school. However, I will ask my officials to go through the Hansard report and to write to Members regarding the schools that they mentioned. I share Members' concerns about the situation, and I am committed to dealing with it.

The Programme for Government includes the objective:

"To provide modern school facilities which meet the needs for teaching and learning".

The investment strategy for the next 10 years sets out ambitious plans for new investment in the schools estate, to create modern infrastructure for schools and youth services to tackle the backlog of underinvestment, and to provide facilities appropriate for the twenty-first century.

Under the investment strategy, some £3.5 billion worth of investment over the next 10 years has been identified for education, with approximately 100 major work schemes to be advanced in the next three years alone. That reflects the recognition by me, and by the Executive, of the importance of modern, fit-for-purpose facilities for teaching and learning. I have ensured that equality and social inclusion will be part of those procurement processes.

The Irish-medium sector faces particular problems, with many of its schools in poor-quality, temporary accommodation. That, too, is the case in the South

Belfast constituency. That was highlighted during the Irish-medium education-policy review, which is soon to be released. Urgent steps must be taken to address that sector's accommodation difficulties.

In delivering significant investment in sustainable schools in the coming years, appropriate planning, procurement and delivery arrangements must be in place.

A more strategic approach to estate planning, through area-based plans, will help to identify more fully educational needs in local areas, and how they might best be met. The policy for area-based planning is the subject of consultation. Modern, stream-lined procurement arrangements that can efficiently and effectively deliver the required capital investment must also be established. As I have said, equality and social inclusion will be part of that capital investment.

The Department has taken steps with the education sector to improve the processes. A new education and skills authority would have the central role in modernising the estate in future and would work with all education sectors to assess needs and deliver approved schemes. I look forward to my colleagues in all parties working with me to fast-track the review of public administration and the establishment of the education and skills authority.

The planned capital investment will help to address the major infrastructure deficiencies and improve facilities in the coming year. Pressing maintenance requirements must also be addressed. Under the local management of schools funding arrangements, the relevant education and library board has responsibility for landlord maintenance — structural-type repairs and maintenance — of controlled and maintained schools in its area. Individual schools are responsible for tenant maintenance, which includes internal decoration, heating and lighting, cleaning and caretaking, and the upkeep of grounds.

As part of the education and library boards' block grant, they receive funding specifically for high-priority maintenance pressures. In the current financial year, some £18 million has been allocated for that. In order to provide boards with the flexibility to manage their budgets and to respond to local needs and priorities, the maintenance budget is one of several budgets that are not earmarked by the Department. As a consequence of other emerging pressures, the amount of funding that is spent on maintenance has not been sufficient to make inroads into the backlog that exists in the education estate. It is important that priority is given to maintenance work to reduce the deterioration of the estate and to reduce health and safety risks. We must ensure that sufficient resources are available to do that.

The common funding formula allocations, which are delegated to each school, are designed to cover all

essential expenditure on items that must be met from the school's budget. The premises factor allocates resources to schools to enable them to meet their tenant-maintenance obligations for the management of school buildings. In 2008-09, the total formula funding that was allocated to controlled and maintained schools in the South Belfast area was just over £16.7 million, an increase of 7.3% over the 2007-08 funding levels. That amounts to an increase of 6.1% per capita, after an increase in funded-pupil numbers for schools in the area of 1.1% is taken into account.

The allocation of a school's budget is determined by its board of governors and principal, who are best placed to make decisions on relevant priorities and the most effective use of resources in accordance with the school's needs. It is, therefore, for the schools to determine the level of expenditure that they wish to make on tenant maintenance. I recognise the challenges facing primary-school principals, and I fully accept the value and vital role of early intervention in preventing or reducing later difficulties.

My officials and I have had several meetings with representative bodies about the funding of primary schools. From my visits to schools and correspondence that I have received, I am aware of the feelings about the resources that are provided to primary schools, particularly in comparison with post-primary schools. It must also be recognised, however, that the Department is working with finite overall resources. I welcome the fact that some Members have said that they will support me in looking for additional resources.

Of the £20.4 million uplift to schools' budgets between 2008-09 and 2007-08, some £12.7 million was directed to primary schools, representing an overall cash uplift of over 3%, and over 4% for each pupil. The average increase per pupil for primary schools for 2008-09 is £102, which is higher than the average increase per pupil for post-primary schools. Significant resources are also being made available to primary schools outside the current funding formula arrangements.

Over the next three years, an additional £32 million, including £7 million in the financial year 2008-09, will be made available to support primary schools in their delivery of the foundation stage of the revised curriculum. That additional funding will provide, for the first time, access to classroom assistants for every pupil in year 1 and year 2. In the same period, a further £12 million will be available specifically to help to ensure that, from September 2008, principals of smaller primary schools will be released from teaching duties for at least two days each week.

I welcome the fact that academic selection and the transfer procedure were mentioned today. People will see that the House is divided on the issue. I welcome

the support from this side of the House for the abolition of academic selection. From my many meetings with primary-school teachers, I know that they support the new arrangements. They are glad to know that the curriculum will no longer be distorted. Primary-school principals from all sectors told me how it broke their hearts to see how the transfer test affected all children, and particularly those who were told that they had failed. Failure can be dressed up in fancy words, but the children understand the message that the exam sends.

I welcome the recent report from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recommends the end of academic selection. I also welcome the input of the Children's Commissioner in the North and of those in England, Scotland and Wales. As Members know, the South of Ireland does not, fortunately, have a system of academic selection.

The changes are under way, and progress is being made. The revised primary curriculum is in operation and will no longer be distorted. The transitional arrangements that I will introduce do not require pupils to sit a test in primary schools. Therefore, 2008 is, fortunately, the last year of the 11-plus, and many principals and educationalists across the board welcome that.

I also welcome the fact that Alasdair McDonnell, and others, raised the issue of newcomer children. According to the 2007 school census, 592 newcomer children attended schools in South Belfast, which is 10% of the pupils throughout the North. In recent years, my Department has taken specific action to ensure that schools have the necessary support to teach newcomer children. Specifically, resources are provided to schools and, for South Belfast, those amounted to more than £500,000.

Schools also received support from the inclusion and diversity service that was established in April 2007. Its diversity co-ordinators provide direct help to cluster groups of schools. In conjunction with one of my counterparts in the South of Ireland, Conor Lenihan, the Minister with responsibility for integration policy, I launched a diversity toolkit that was sent to primary schools across the island. I also launched a parents' website on the education sector in the North that is available in 16 languages. The Catholic maintained sector also launched a valuable website.

I am conscious that I am approaching the end of my allotted time, but I have a couple of final comments. In recent years, two primary schools in South Belfast, Cranmore Integrated Primary School and Finaghy Primary School, received new school buildings, and St Ita's at Carryduff on the edge of South Belfast is a new school that opened in 2006. As Michael McGimpsey mentioned, building at Taughmonagh Primary School

is expected to start next year, and targeting social need in all communities is one of my Department's key strategic objectives. Minor works were recently completed, or are under way, at several other schools in the area. Earlier this year, I approved a nursery unit with 26 full-time places for Scoil an Droichid.

Go raibh maith agat as an díospóireacht seo. I thank all Members who contributed today, particularly Alasdair McDonnell, who secured the debate.

Adjourned at 5.44 pm.

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