
OFFICIAL REPORT

(HANSARD)

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NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 7 October 2008

*The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker
[Mr Dallat] in the Chair).*

Members observed two minutes' silence.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Cuts in Ambulance Services

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

Mr McCarthy: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the proposals to reduce the level of ambulance service provision and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to find savings elsewhere and to agree not to reduce the ambulance cover.

I express my gratitude to Members for agreeing that the Assembly should debate this vital issue. I hope that our worst fears can be allayed.

I pay tribute to the Ambulance Service in Northern Ireland. Its staff continue to save lives, and the Assembly is grateful for their work during the difficult years of the Troubles. Furthermore, more recently, crews on duty have been attacked by stupid, callous individuals. I hope that such behaviour is in the past.

I hope that the motion will trigger a positive response from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Michael McGimpsey. I remind Members that, despite the doom and gloom that some commentators offer, the Assembly has achieved positive outcomes for constituents. As the Alliance Party health spokesman, I want major improvements to be made to the ambit of health provision in Northern Ireland. That said, progress is being made.

On 15 May 2007, I proposed a motion that called for free prescriptions for all patients. The Assembly unanimously supported that proposal, and, on 29 September 2008, Minister McGimpsey agreed a time frame for the introduction of free prescriptions. That is progress.

On 17 September 2007, I proposed a motion to promote equality for all through the introduction of free public transport for women from the age of 60. That was introduced last week, and that is progress.

Many other positive health initiatives have been brought to the people of Northern Ireland. Indeed, only yesterday in the Long Gallery, the Minister launched the Lifeline scheme. That scheme is an extension of the mental-health provision and investment in the prevention of suicide and self-harm. That is also progress. Let us give credit to the Assembly and to Ministers for the positive new measures that benefit us all.

Given those steps forward, I hope that we do not back-pedal when it comes to good provision for our Ambulance Service. We are extremely concerned about the proposed cuts in ambulance cover across Northern Ireland. I welcome Michael McGimpsey's announcement last week that £17 million will be invested to purchase 60 new ambulances and 26 rapid-response vehicles over the next three years. However, real concerns exist about rapid-response vehicles as they cannot transport patients to hospital. Real concern is also being expressed about the proposed number of ambulance hours to be covered in all areas.

We are all too aware of the current unavailability of ambulances when required, and we have all experienced that deficiency. On some occasions, patients have had to wait far too long for an ambulance to arrive — and that has put lives at risk. We are also aware of difficulties in getting ambulances to move patients from one hospital to another — and that is before ambulance hours are cut. Furthermore, we are being told that the Ambulance Service will be cutting 15,000 hours, or more, from front-line ambulance cover in order to comply with 3% efficiency savings. That is horrendous and incomprehensible, and it will definitely leave more patients in real danger. I appeal to Minister McGimpsey to not put lives at risk by introducing the proposed cutbacks.

In my own constituency, patients have been deprived of ambulance provision in places such as Portaferry, Killyleagh and Saintfield, which is totally disgraceful. In other areas, there have been recent incidents in which ambulances have broken down simply because they were clapped out in the first place.

The Assembly wants an Ambulance Service in which constituents are confident. When there is a need for an ambulance, that need should be met; and patients should be transported to hospital where they should receive immediate, first-class treatment. In my own part of the Strangford constituency, we have been campaigning for an out-stationed ambulance for rural areas at the tip of the Ards Peninsula. Unfortunately, the campaign has not been successful to date, but we are determined to continue with it. Perhaps Minister McGimpsey will revisit that request.

Scepticism remains about the rapid-response vehicle (RRV) proposal in that both the RRV and the ambulance will be required to reach the patient early. That might not always be the case, leaving patients and relatives at risk.

The motion urges the Minister to make savings, if they need to be made, in areas where the lives of patients will not be put in danger. The major investment of £17 million announced last week is very welcome, but we have heard similar proposals in the past that were never delivered. How can we expect to have a first-class Ambulance Service when staff are not properly equipped, and when there is not the sufficient manpower to properly carry out the duties? Ambulance staff are unhappy about current management demands about working with greatly reduced ambulance-cover hours.

In conclusion, I am grateful that Minister McGimpsey is present to hear the many worries and concerns about the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. I ask Members to support the motion.

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion. No Member can doubt the invaluable service that the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has provided over the decades. I commend the paramedics and staff who, through difficult and dangerous times and circumstances, when they came under fierce attack, did not waver in providing a service and demonstrated their professionalism and dedication to the Northern Ireland people. Many people owe their lives to the professionalism and skills of the Ambulance Service's paramedics and staff.

Ambulance provision is a lifeline for people in isolated, rural communities who live some way from the nearest hospital. I come from a rural community in County Tyrone. Tyrone is the largest county in Northern Ireland, containing approximately 166,000 people, yet the Minister has stripped it of all acute hospital services. Consequently, the Ambulance Service is the only lifeline for the residents of west Tyrone, and that concerns people throughout the county.

Tyrone is the only county in Northern Ireland without an acute-hospital facility, and that concerns not just medical staff, consultants and patients but also elected representatives. Tyrone people must now depend only on the Ambulance Service.

People in Omagh were assured that a proper ambulance service would be put in place before the removal of acute-hospital services. Sadly, that assurance was put on paper but not into action. Without the necessary life-saving services, people in west Tyrone, and further afield, will be vulnerable.

I know that I am not popular with the Health Minister because I highlight health disparities and inequalities in County Tyrone; I know that I am a thorn in his side; however, I will continue to highlight such matters.

Given that my rural constituency is now so dependent on its much-needed ambulance service, I urge the Minister not to cut it any further. I note the Minister's announcement last week about the provision of a new ambulance fleet and about the finances that will be put into it; however, I am concerned that using rapid-response vehicles will put people's lives at risk. I am not convinced that that is the way forward.

At the scene of an accident in a rural community, a rapid-response vehicle would offer no more than a large box of medical equipment — it would not be able to move a patient from the scene. Another ambulance would have to attend in order to move a person who might be severely injured. Therefore, it would be better if fully equipped ambulances were put in place rather than rapid-response vehicles.

Perhaps providing rapid-response vehicles, which do not serve the same purpose as ambulances, is part of a money-saving exercise, which may result in people losing their lives. I urge the Minister to resist cutting ambulance services and to ensure that the required service is in place for people in rural communities.

10.45 am

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the Minister would disagree that you are a thorn in his side, Mr Buchanan.

Ms S Ramsey: He is the thorn and I am the rose.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend Mr McCarthy for tabling the motion, which is especially relevant on the day that the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety is hosting an all-day event for the emergency services in Parliament Buildings. Although that event is aimed at promoting the positive work that the emergency services do, it is important that we debate the negative aspects of the emergency services in order to rectify those, so that, together, we can achieve a positive outcome.

In supporting the motion, I commend the good work that the Ambulance Service carries out. Ambulance Service personnel are on the front line in dealing with healthcare issues. Those people have a difficult job to do at possibly every emergency that they are called out to deal with, and we must recognise the difficult circumstances that they face. I am glad that the Minister is present, because genuine concerns about emergency-services provision exist, especially over ambulance cover. That has generated concern among individuals, families and communities, who are worried about their safety in the unfortunate event of their having to call for an ambulance.

Over the past few weeks, as the previous two Members to speak have said, ambulances have broken down on their way to an emergency call. With that in mind, I welcome the commitment that the Minister gave last week to make available additional money to

replace the ambulance fleet over the next few years. However, I am concerned as to whether replacing the fleet will deal with the issue of availability of Ambulance Service cover for our communities — that balance must be struck. I do not want to come across as negative, because additional money for the Ambulance Service is welcome, but we must send out the clear message that, although we are replacing its fleet, we are not attacking the service that it provides.

We heard earlier about the problems with Ambulance Service cover and about the issue of efficiency savings. However, it is important that all Members, including the Minister, send out the clear message that, although we are considering efficiency savings — no one is being negative about doing that — all Departments must make such savings. We must make it clear that we will not attack front-line services, because such a commitment will go some way to reassuring our communities about those services.

When proposing the motion, Kieran McCarthy said that people have a genuine concern about the rapid-response proposal, and I agree with him. Thomas Buchanan raised the issue of rural communities having additional concerns, and I agree with Thomas on that. The Minister must reassure the unions —

Lord Morrow: [*Inaudible.*]

Ms S Ramsey: I am agreeing with everyone today, Maurice; I will agree with you later.

The Minister must reassure the House, unions, communities, Ambulance Service personnel and those who live in rural communities that his proposed changes will stabilise the service for rural communities and will result in a positive outcome.

It is important that we do not get confused or be negative about the additional money that was given to the Ambulance Service last week. We must find out whether renewing its fleet will make a positive difference to the service and the cover that it provides, whether that be in rural or urban communities or for rapid response. I support the motion.

Mr McCallister: It is regrettable that today's motion has been tabled, because it is based on rumour as opposed to hard fact. The Minister has made it clear that he will bring any proposed changes before the Health Committee; therefore, some perspective must be introduced into the debate.

The Health Service in Northern Ireland is undergoing a substantial period of change, reform and modernisation. Given his concerns about the rapid-response vehicles, Mr Buchanan should speak to health professionals and listen to their views on them.

It is undeniable that those changes are linked to the 3% efficiency savings that all parties and the Executive —including Sinn Féin and the DUP — have agreed to

and which all Departments are required to achieve. However, those changes also represent a goal of developing a more efficient and effective Health Service.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service is an integral part of the Health Service, and is, therefore, at the forefront of many of those necessary changes. All Members in the Chamber will accept that we have a Health Minister who is fully committed to the NHS and that he has already shown that devolution can have a significant, beneficial impact for the people of Northern Ireland.

Changes occur because they are necessary. We must work with the Minister to deliver those changes and achieve the best possible outcomes. The modernisation and investment that the Minister has announced to date has been necessary and will result in better ambulance service provision.

In July 2008, changes to the ambulance service provision were announced. That process of change was part of the 3% efficiency savings that all Departments are required to meet. As a result of those changes, the Ambulance Service was able to allocate £2.5 million for rapid-response vehicles, additional coverage at weekends and a new pilot scheme that uses doctors and control rooms to provide advice to patients. That modernisation process will enable the Ambulance Service to respond more quickly and appropriately to emergency calls, and, most importantly, patients will be put first.

In May 2008, the Minister opened the new regional dispatch centre at the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service's Belfast headquarters. That new centre uses modern command and control systems to assign clinical priority to emergency calls. Furthermore, it uses geographical information systems to dispatch the nearest ambulance available to a particular emergency. Moreover, the Minister recently announced that up to 60 new accident and emergency ambulances, 60 non-emergency vehicles and 26 rapid-response vehicles will be purchased over the next three years, amounting to a £17 million capital investment. The Minister also plans to invest some £100 million over the next 10 years in the fleet, the estate and vital equipment, such as defibrillators.

That amounts to the largest single investment in the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service's history, and it has been welcomed across the Health Service and the Assembly. With it, the Minister has given the service the ability to plan more effectively for the future and to regularly replace the ambulance fleet.

The reform package for the Ambulance Service must be viewed in its entirety, and the Minister's decision will create an improved service. Ambulance Service staff are some of the most highly skilled people working in the Health Service. They are at the front line of the provision of patient care, and they now have the vehicles

and command and control systems to match their skill and dedication.

It is widely recognised that the budget that was given to the Minister — even after he had fought for extra funding — was inadequate to deliver all of the desired improvements. That, together with inflationary pressures, which have led to the Ambulance Service's fuel costs increasing by £220,000 over six months, makes those achievements and the changes that the Minister has made all the more welcome and notable.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: No. I have very little time left.

The Minister is fully committed to involving the Health Committee, the Assembly and the Health Service in all of the changes that he is making. I urge Members to recognise that and to direct any concerns that they have to their colleagues on the Health Committee and to the Minister himself.

Mr Gallagher: I support the motion. As other Members have said, the Ambulance Service is highly regarded, and its personnel carry out valuable work in difficult circumstances. Often, they must put up with abuse and, in some instances, physical attack when they attend scenes in areas where rowdy mobs congregate at the weekends. There is public outrage that those attacks are still taking place.

The Ambulance Service is an integral part of the Health Service, and, as such, it requires major investment to bring it up to standard. I welcome the Minister's recent announcement to put additional resources into the updating of the Ambulance Service, as have some of the Members who spoke. The plans to purchase 60 accident and emergency ambulances over the next three years, as well as the non-emergency vehicles and the 26 rapid-response vehicles, are encouraging, because, as Members will know from the well-documented examples that have been cited, the fleet of ambulances in some parts of Northern Ireland has not been up to the job.

Can the Minister provide the House with more details on how the new fleet will be rolled out? Will the areas in greatest need be assigned vehicles in order of priority? Tom Buchanan informed the House of the concerns that exist in Tyrone, and the same applies in Fermanagh. Those are vast rural areas. Will those areas be given priority when the new vehicles are being distributed?

Sue Ramsey mentioned efficiency savings. I would be grateful if the Department could provide us with information on how efficiency savings and the Minister's recent announcement sit with the reductions in staff cover that the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service announced some time ago. Those reductions were particularly severe in Newry, in the Southern Health and Social Services Board, and they also raised concerns for people living in the west. In view of those proposed

staff reductions and the ambulance cover in the west, the Minister's recent announcement is important, welcome and encouraging.

It is also important that the future need for an air ambulance to serve all of Northern Ireland, particularly the remote areas, be kept on the agenda. Members accept that that need goes beyond Northern Ireland. If an air ambulance is ever to be in place, it will have to be implemented with the co-operation of the health authorities in the rest of Ireland. Therefore it should be raised at some of the North/South meetings. Does the Minister accept that? Has he had an opportunity to put that issue on the agenda?

Mr Easton: Members are aware that we live in a world of finite resources. It would be wonderful to have the unlimited means to finance all the schemes and programmes that we could devise for the Health Service. However, we must establish priorities for our spending, and it is imperative that we do not take chances or cut services without serious consideration of the consequences.

In the present financial context, the Minister is required to make efficiency savings as part of the most recent comprehensive spending review. Cuts in the health budget of 3% per annum for a three-year period amount to serious challenges for a Health Service that many regard as being already underfunded to meet the demands that are placed on it.

The Ambulance Service has been set targets of savings of £1.2 million for 2008-09; £2.7 million for 2009-10; and £4.4 million for 2010-11. That amounts to a staggering reduction in resources of £8.3 million over the next three years.

11.00 am

Dr Farry: I agree with the Member's analysis of the health budget. His party celebrated when the Budget was passed — and celebrated particularly the settlement for health. He seems to be telling a different story today, damning what he describes as "cuts" rather than efficiency savings and saying that the Budget was inadequate. Will he explain the DUP's change of heart?

Mr Easton: Those are efficiency savings. The Health Service received an injection of an extra £500 million from our Minister, so the Member needs to get his facts right.

To allay our fears, the Minister tells us that we have an overall planned net investment of £12 million for the next three years and that funding of the service will not be cut. We are also advised that an additional £5 million will be spent on replacing our ageing ambulance fleet, defibrillators and estate. Replacing clapped-out ambulances is, of course, a priority, and savings can be made by rationalisation, the management of the response system and the Health Service estates. The recent

announcement that several new ambulances will soon come on stream is welcome, and it is good to see that a DUP Minister supplied the extra money for that purpose.

However, we are told that one element of efficiency savings this year will come from a re-profiling of ambulance cover, with 17,520 hours of current planned ambulance cover replaced by 43,800 hours of paramedic cover using rapid-response vehicles. Around 35,000 hours will be cut by 2009-10 and 70,000 hours of ambulance cover will also disappear by 2011, which should concern us deeply.

To the man or woman in the street, such information seems to amount to smoke, mirrors and political spin. People want to be sure that if they require an emergency admission to hospital, an ambulance will arrive quickly for them or their loved one. First-responding schemes, serviced by volunteer groups and rapid-response paramedics, have a part to play in many emergency situations. However, people know that in any emergency situation the first hour is vital. In that golden hour, critically ill people or those seriously injured in road accidents must be delivered to hospital without delay, whether they live in east Belfast, Enniskillen, south Down or Londonderry. We need to provide all the people of the Province — both in rural and urban areas — with the security that Members of the Assembly put people first. We want for them what we want for our own families in an emergency — the knowledge that an ambulance will take them as quickly as possible to hospital, where specialists will be on hand to deal with them.

In this response-target environment we have the incredible situation of an eight-minute target. If a medical response reaches a patient in 10 minutes and the patient lives, it is registered as a failure; if a medical response reaches a patient in eight minutes, even if the patient dies, it is registered as meeting the response target. Everyone connected with the delivery of the Ambulance Service is worried about those changes. The target mentality will cost lives, which seems to be the evidence emerging from similar reforms in England.

Solutions for urban problems are not always applicable in the mainly rural environment of Northern Ireland. We need a fully resourced, fully staffed, modernised ambulance service, supported by rapid-response paramedics and well-organised volunteer first-responder groups to give taxpayers, who fund the service, the reassurance that they need.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I share the deep concerns of the Members who have spoken, and I thank the Member who proposed the motion.

The underinvestment in ambulance services in my constituency of Derry was exposed in the most dramatic fashion recently when the same ambulance broke down twice in as many weeks while answering call-outs.

Both of those incidents could have easily led to a tragedy, and the fact that they did not was due only to sheer good fortune.

On 13 September, the 'Derry Journal' reported that the city was without adequate ambulance cover for several hours on a Thursday night because there were simply not enough vehicles available. That situation has occurred time and time again. We are aware of those incidences and, despite the assurances given by the Minister yesterday, some have had association with fatalities because ambulances have had to attend from as far away as Fermanagh when not enough ambulances, or none, were available in the city of Derry. That is a shocking situation, and it is intolerable that any area — let alone a city the size of Derry — should be left without adequate ambulance cover for any period of time.

Instead of providing the kind of major investment in the Ambulance Service that is so clearly needed, the Minister is planning to slash the service. He wants to cut 15,000 staffing hours and replace traditional ambulances with rapid-response vehicles. That is a genuine concern for many people who may find themselves in need of a fully equipped ambulance that can transfer them to a hospital. Those RRVs will be unable to do that, and it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the proposals could end up costing lives. The proposals will have a huge effect right across the North, and no area or person will be left unaffected. Rural communities will become even more isolated, as Tom Buchanan said, and our health workers, who already feel so undervalued, will become even more demoralised.

In July, the Minister claimed that there would be no cuts to the Ambulance Service, but that is clearly not the case. Although I welcome the recent plan to replace old ambulances, ultimately, that will simply leave us at a standstill: the plan will not improve the service, it will merely replace the vehicles that are no longer fit for purpose. It is clear, therefore, that much more needs to be done, and the Minister must address people's concerns and abandon plans to make cuts to the service.

I am also keen to hear his plans for greater co-operation with the health authorities in the Twenty-six Counties, particularly in the border areas of Derry and Letterkenny. To be blunt, the issue of adequate ambulance cover boils down to a matter of life and death. Some Members in this Chamber may laugh, but the matter is certainly not funny. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Ms Anderson: Those cuts will devastate people right across the Six Counties. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Lord Morrow: Looking again at the motion, I must say that it could have been better put. It was incumbent on the Alliance Party to do a bit better, particularly given that it has taken on the mantle of opposition to everything that happens in the Assembly. The motion

calls on the Minister to “find savings elsewhere”. It is very original thinking, indeed, to ask the Minister to go out and get the money from wherever he likes. I have little doubt that the Alliance Party member who makes the winding-up speech will want to suggest where the money should come from. Money does not normally come from “elsewhere”; it is the responsibility of the proposer of the motion to suggest where the money should come from.

Dr Farry: I plan to do that.

Lord Morrow: That is very good; we look forward to listening to what our colleague will say later. The DUP will not divide the House on the matter, despite the motion’s ineffectiveness. Party members will allow it to pass because we agree with its broad thrust, even though it is light on detail.

I speak as a representative of a rural constituency, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, which others have mentioned this morning. It seems that when cuts are made in any area, rural dwellers are always hurt the most. I hope that the Minister will take cognisance of the comments made in today’s debate — I am certain that he will — and re-examine the Ambulance Service. He recently, and rightly, announced plans to introduce free prescriptions. I hope that the Ambulance Service will not have to pay for that proposal, and that there will be no other reduction in services as a result of it. We will await the Minister’s response — no doubt he will reassure us that that will not be the case.

Mr Buchanan and others have already pointed out that those of us from the west of Northern Ireland are concerned about the future of health services in general. For example, there are no longer any acute services in the South Tyrone Hospital; the status of the hospital in Omagh has changed or is changing; and a new hospital has been prescribed for Fermanagh.

It would be interesting to know how plans for that new hospital are progressing, because all those matters are interlinked and important. In May, I asked the Minister for his comments on ambulance services in Dungannon, bearing in mind that that area has the oldest ambulance on the road. In one incident in Tyrone, the back door fell off an ambulance as it was transferring a very ill patient from one hospital to another. That is not the type of service that instils confidence in the community. That is not a criticism of Ambulance Service crews, because they provide a valuable service, which is much appreciated.

I take this opportunity to condemn attacks on our Ambulance Service and other emergency services, and I condemn the irresponsible people who are involved in that activity. Such action is intolerable in this age.

The Minister declared that he was satisfied that the vehicles were roadworthy, but is it acceptable for ambulances of a certain age to be on the road? The

Minister made his recent announcement, and that was very welcome, but we want to ensure that ambulance services in rural areas will be fit for purpose and that will be as effective and efficient as that which is being provided for urban areas. I hope that the Minister will take time to address those issues, because they concern rural dwellers. At times, we feel that we are very much second-class citizens, and that we do not get the same treatment as people who live in urban areas.

I see that you are looking at the clock, Mr Deputy Speaker. I could say much more about this issue, but perhaps there will be an opportunity to do that in the future. We will propose a better motion next time, Mr McCarthy.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. This debate is very important, and it provides an opportunity to hear the Minister’s thoughts on this issue. Hopefully, the Minister will clarify that the threat is not as great as it first seems.

I pay tribute to the Ambulance Service for its work over the years in providing a service that takes the place of the health service that should exist in rural areas. When maternity and medical beds were closed, and acute services across Tyrone were closed, we were promised that there would be adequate ambulance services to ensure that patients’ safety was in no way endangered. However, that was simply a bluff to get people over the initial bed closures. It seems that every service is being transferred to the greater Belfast area and that whatever happens in rural areas is no one’s concern, but it is a concern to residents and representatives from rural areas.

The South Tyrone Hospital has closed, as have acute services in Mid Ulster, Omagh and Tyrone. Therefore, the promises that have been made must be fulfilled. Those were not simply promises to get over the media hype in the short term — they were promises to provide adequate cover for rural dwellers in those areas.

During the suspension of the Assembly, Ulster Unionist MLAs, MPs and party leaders, and other parties, promised that if they took the health portfolio in the future, acute services would be restored immediately and new hospitals would be built. However, the Minister has been in post for more than 12 months, but there have been no proposals for acute services to be replaced or for new hospitals to be built, as his party promised. It is important that those promises be fulfilled, along with the promises of investment in the Ambulance Service and other medical services. There is a proposal to replace the ambulance fleet with a smaller fleet, but that is not adequate to provide the essential cover that is required.

I welcome the fact that the Ambulance Service’s vehicles are to be replaced, but we must also ensure that adequate cover is provided across the North —

including rapid-response cover where required — so that patients can be delivered to hospitals quickly.

11.15 am

We were led to believe that none of us would need new hospitals at all, because the massive new building at the Royal Victoria Hospital was supposed to cater for the whole of the North and provide the rest of us with all the necessary services. Last Friday, I dealt with a constituent who had been in the Mid-Ulster Hospital for a few days receiving treatment for a number of broken bones, but who could not be transferred to the Royal Victoria Hospital. That patient could not be treated in the new building. If a patient lives in the greater Belfast area, he or she can be taken to the Royal Victoria Hospital within 10 minutes, but a patient from a rural area might have to wait a few days before an ambulance can take him or her to Belfast. Even last Friday, when my constituent was told that the transfer would take place, no ambulance could be found to take the patient from the Mid-Ulster Hospital to the Royal Victoria Hospital. It took several phone calls to obtain a response, and, in the end, a different vehicle had to be found. People in the rural community are concerned about those issues.

The Minister's announcement that prescription charges would be done away with was welcome. However, he accompanied that important statement by saying that there would be no reduction in other services. I hope that the Minister lives up to those commitments, and that they were not just PR stunts. I hope that services will be maintained and enhanced, and that the benefit of those services will be felt, particularly in rural communities.

Ambulances are the only lifeline available to those communities. It is important that the Minister reviews the decisions that were made by the Health Service and ensures that the promises that were made about ambulance cover to the people of Mid Ulster, Fermanagh, Omagh and across Tyrone are kept in future. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Storey: I pay tribute to the staff of the Ambulance Service in Northern Ireland, who over the years, and particularly in the dark days of our past, carried out a most demanding duty in a way that was a credit to their professionalism as they attended many incidents which were horrific to say the least. Ambulance Service personnel attend road traffic accidents and other incidents daily, reflecting their sheer determination and continued professionalism.

I concur with the comments of my party's chairman and Whip, Lord Morrow, who highlighted the deficiencies in the Alliance Party motion. We look forward to hearing that party put some meat on the bones, because it has failed to do so to date. To anyone who has suffered in an emergency, and who has

required Ambulance Service support to reach hospital and receive life-saving care, the prospect of cutting that most important link must sound like insanity.

Despite its ineffectiveness because of a lack of detail, the motion raises the prospect of a significant threat to the health and well-being of any of us who might at some time in the future need an ambulance in an emergency. The Minister is not excluded from that, even if it were only to remove the thorn from his side that was referred to earlier in the debate.

I wish to highlight to the Minister the particular needs of my constituency. Obviously, the debate gives Members the opportunity to raise specific issues. For some time now, fears have been expressed in Ballymena, in my North Antrim constituency, about the risks that local people might face as a result in the reduction in ambulance cover. Those fears are on the verge of being realised. One of my party colleagues on Ballymena Borough Council, Councillor Tommy Nicholl, articulated the problem that is facing Ballymena when he pointed out that Ballymena's ambulance cover must continue if local people are to be offered top-quality care.

I wonder what excuse the Minister will give if Ballymena loses one third of its daily cover. How much confidence in the Minister will the people of Ballymena have if he tells them that that cut is the result of efficiency savings, when he should be making ambulance cover a priority? Rather than carry out a cost analysis, the Minister should conduct a "care analysis". That analysis should be central to any decisions that he makes on ambulance cover.

I remind the Minister that there are currently three fully staffed ambulances serving Ballymena daily. The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service's proposed cuts in order to meet his Department's budget strategy will mean that the people of Ballymena will see one of those ambulances shed. That equates to 2,685 hours — or 112 days, 16 weeks or four months — of cover. That is the situation that my constituents in Ballymena are facing. Although much praise has been heaped on the head of the Minister this morning after his welcome announcement that new ambulances are to be provided and that money is being spent, we must seriously consider whether those developments are being implemented in a manner that is to the best possible advantage of the people who use the service.

Can the Minister confirm that his plans to purchase rapid-response vehicles and other ambulances for the fleet have the full confidence of Northern Ireland Ambulance Service staff? In discussions that I held with its staff in my constituency, they raised, and continue to raise, serious concerns about the future of the Ambulance Service.

Will the Minister clarify his position on obtaining public service vehicle licences for ambulances? Will

he perform due diligence and ensure that care is taken of the existing ambulance fleet? Lord Morrow referred to an incident recently in which a door fell off the back of an ambulance. I want the Minister to state his position on that incident —

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

Mr Storey: — and give assurances that he will continue to provide a top-class Ambulance Service for Northern Ireland.

Mr Boylan: Will I have extra time added to my speech? Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I thank the Members who tabled the motion. Sinn Féin admires the men and women of the Ambulance Service for their commitment and dedication to their work, especially in difficult circumstances. I come from a rural community, so I am aware of people in isolated areas' concerns about any cutbacks in services, especially cutbacks in critical services, of which ambulance services are one. Public concerns have also been raised in recent weeks about incidences of vehicles breaking down.

The Minister's initial announcement of his plans to replace fully equipped ambulances with rapid-response vehicles has, on reflection, raised the question of whether those vehicles will be able to satisfy all patients' needs. I ask the Minister to satisfy the public's concerns, as well as those of Ambulance Service personnel, particularly over the transportation of patients to their nearest facility.

Rural communities in particular feel that they need a greater degree of Health Service investment and increased ambulance provision. Ambulance Service personnel say that a system based on rapid-response vehicles is not suited to rural areas, considering that the Ambulance Service, by its own admission, treats everywhere outside Belfast as rural. That is a concern. Can the Minister assure people from the vast rural community that any changes to the Ambulance Service will not have a detrimental effect on them?

That issue, as I am sure the Minister is aware, has been a major concern in south Armagh. Whether ambulance services from Daisy Hill Hospital are to be retained is a concern. Indeed, the prospect of all that hospital's services being diluted is a concern. People in the area have asked for a review of the service. Most people in south Armagh live outside of areas that ambulances can reach within the stated 20-minute response time. When one considers that all medical evidence states that a stroke victim has a greater chance of recovery if reached within eight minutes, it is clear that many people fall outside that critical response time. Sinn Féin has consistently lobbied for action on that matter.

Is the Minister saying that his welcome announcement about the abolition of prescription charges a few weeks ago has forced him to make cuts in other areas, which will affect the overall quality of the Health

Service? If so, the Chamber and the general public would appreciate an honest answer. I support the motion. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Shannon: I said recently in the Chamber that one ambulance station to cover the whole of Strangford is not enough. Strangford is in severe need of at least one more new ambulance, because four of the five ambulances in the constituency are five years old. The mileage of those four ambulances is 167,000, 172,000, 174,000 and 192,000 respectively. The six-year-old ambulance has only 106,000 miles on its clock — perhaps it is being nursed because of its age.

Ye dinnae hae tae bae a car sales man tae bae fit tae wrocht oot at thae ambulances ir neir done. Thon isnae onie a wie fer me tae get mae spoke in aboot hoo mich we hae need fer new ambulances — bit hit shews hoo mich thae ambulances ir used an' hoo they ir allus in uise. Tae gie less cover wil hae the ootcum at simboadie at bes in an emergency an leukin fer an ambulance wulnae get yin es fast es they wud hae done.

One does not have to be a car salesman to work out that those ambulances are on their last legs. I am not quoting those figures to get the spoke in for how much we need new ambulances, but they illustrate how much those ambulances are used. Therefore, lessening cover will mean that someone who calls for an ambulance in an emergency will not receive one as quickly as they should. Newtownards is in the top 20 out of over 60 areas in the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service table of response origins by priority. Therefore, we require a fully functional and dedicated service. I pay tribute, as other Members have, to the Ambulance Service personnel; they do an excellent job and need the correct equipment to do it even better.

The statistics that I quoted are from the response to a question for written answer that was asked by my DUP colleague Jim Wells because an ambulance in his area had broken down when it was on an emergency call. The figures in the response are very worrying. Why are the emergency services in Strangford using vehicles that have nearly 200,000 miles on the clock and should have long since been replaced? Strangford requires several new ambulance vehicles and cannot afford any lessening of cover, lest it mean that a life is the price of cutting back the service.

The stated response target is for 70% of category-A — life threatening — calls to be attended within eight minutes. For those of us who live in the Ards Peninsula, eight minutes is an impossible target — the drive from Ards to Portaferry takes at least 25 minutes when driving carefully and adhering to the speed limits. The Ards Peninsula is already at a disadvantage, and we cannot afford to have any less ambulance cover. Therefore, I was dismayed to learn from the news that further cuts will be made to the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. It seems that more cover is taken each year from the Ards, and from the peninsula, in particular. Last June,

there was a threatened reduction of ambulance cover on Monday and Tuesday evenings — such threats cannot continue. It is time to put the house in order and allocate the necessary funding to ensure that our ambulance cover is not further diminished.

I agree with UNISON that the rapid-response vehicles simply do not cut it. They are not as well equipped to handle emergency situations as ambulances, and lives could be lost that would be saved if a fully equipped ambulance got to the scene quickly and transported the patient to hospital. A local district nurse told me that a rapid-response vehicle does the same job as her, and that, when she rings 999, she requires a vehicle that can transport the patient to hospital, not merely assesses the needs of the patient.

I often hear the sound of an ambulance siren when I am in my office, which tells me that someone is in trouble. We must ensure that when people are in trouble they receive the best service. Ambulances provide life-saving care, which is being jeopardised by cuts and by not having sufficient new ambulances in place. I ask the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to examine the Ambulance Service and not just demand savings at any price. We are playing not merely with figures — we are playing with human lives.

It is not a matter of saving pounds; it is about saving lives. The Minister must examine the matter personally and take responsibility for the service in the area in which he lives. The Ambulance Service in Strangford and across the Province must improve. People demand that from the Health Minister.

11.30 am

Mrs I Robinson: I thank my colleague Jim Shannon for pointing out the inadequacies of provision in the Strangford constituency. Not only is the ambulance fleet depleted, but it is inadequate for the job of work for which it was designed. We must remember the disadvantages that rural communities in Northern Ireland face. In the narrow roads, highways and byways of the Province, getting directions and finding addresses are some of the many factors that add to the time that is lost when ambulances are called out on emergencies.

There are several young people in the Gallery. I appeal to young people across the Province to stop making hoax 999 calls in order to have ambulances and fire engines dispatched. It is detrimental to people who genuinely need that provision. Ambulance and fire-engine crews do not need those additional pressures.

Mr McClarty: Does the Member accept that young people are not the only ones who make such calls to the emergency services?

Mrs I Robinson: I thank the Member for his intervention. Of course, that is the case — sadly. Adults should know better. Statistics show, however, that the younger generation usually make the calls.

The Ambulance Service has been a crucial emergency service in Northern Ireland throughout the years. I want to record the Assembly's gratitude to members of the service for their invaluable work in the community. They must not be short-changed in their ability to deliver the response that Northern Ireland's people expect. Like Members who have spoken earlier in the debate, I have concerns about the Minister's proposals for the Ambulance Service. I look forward to the fulfilment of the promise of £12 million investment during the next three years. I look forward to the renewal of 20 Ambulance Service vehicles each year for the ensuing three years. I look forward to the fulfilment of the promise of £2.5 million's being invested in new rapid-response vehicles. I also look forward to when the Minister brings his proposals to the Health Committee. However, like most Members, I am sure that those proposals will, once again, fall short of the service's needs and requirements.

Again, the proposed investment is cosmetic. It simply replaces what already exists. It does not enhance the service's ability to meet emergencies that happen on the roads; sudden illnesses; or unfortunate tragedies that happen in communities through various accidents. There have been several examples in the debate of the service's inadequacy in meeting emergencies, particularly in the west of the Province. People want an Ambulance Service that is not funded by recycled money, but by new investment. I am delighted that the Minister is present to respond.

The Ambulance Service cannot be short-changed. It is matter of saving lives. Time is of the essence when emergencies occur. If a door falls off an ambulance while a patient is being treated in it; if a wheel comes off; if an ambulance breaks down when it has a history of doing so — it is not fit for purpose. It is not fit to deliver the provision that the community needs. The service is only as good as the provision that exists. It is only as good as the vehicles in which investment is made.

I appeal to the Minister: in order to deliver a first-class service, he must examine the matter more closely and ensure that adequate resources are found in order to provide the best vehicles and fleet that is required for the service to have an impact in the community and cut the number of lives that are lost for reasons that we cannot understand or know about. Time is not on the side of a person who is found lying by the side of a road, or in his or her home, having suffered a major heart attack. I appeal to the Minister to consider the matter and, rather than come up with a cosmetic answer, find real solutions that involve real funding.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank Mr McCarthy and Ms Lo for proposing the motion. Several points have been made, and I will attempt to respond to them. I welcome the opportunity to clarify the position on Ambulance Service efficiencies and to address some of

the misconceptions about what will happen over the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period. In particular, I reassure Members that the level of Ambulance Service provision will absolutely not be reduced.

I share Members' appreciation for the work carried out by the staff of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. It is not merely a transport service; it is the front line of emergency care. The men and women of the service — skilled health professionals who deliver that vital life-saving service — deserve to have modern equipment, vehicles and technology to allow them to deliver high-quality emergency care to the public.

To that end, on 1 October, I announced a major investment in the Ambulance Service, which totals almost £100 million over the next 10 years. That includes £17 million over the current CSR period. That is a hugely significant investment that will allow the service to modernise its estate and replace its fleet and equipment on a regular basis. During the CSR period, that will allow for the purchase of around 60 new accident and emergency (A&E) ambulances over the next three years to replace older vehicles. A further 60 non-emergency patient-care vehicles will also be purchased, as well as 26 rapid-response vehicles.

A rapid-response vehicle carries all the equipment of an A&E ambulance, except for a stretcher. The point of that vehicle is to arrive at the scene of the emergency rapidly: the first few minutes are vital. Ambulance work is not all about snatching people off footpaths, or out of their homes, and rushing them off to hospital. It is about rendering vital medical support as quickly as possible; and rapid-response vehicles — which are always manned by a fully trained paramedic — provide a way to do that.

I realise that many who have looked at that my proposals for efficiencies in ambulance services have thought only about the A&E ambulance numbers, and they have equated that to the levels of service. I wish to explain the impact of the efficiency measures and the new investment in our ambulance services.

It is interesting to note how some DUP Members talk. When Peter Robinson was Minister of Finance and Personnel, he spoke of “efficiencies”. However, now those efficiencies have become “cuts”. My proposals contain efficiencies, not cuts. The money that comes out of the service goes back in.

To clarify the position, the Executive has agreed that all Departments must deliver 3% efficiency savings over the next three years. My Department will deliver £118 million, followed by £233 million, then £344 million.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No. I am in the middle of my speech.

Mrs I Robinson: He will not give way.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I may give way in due course. I do not need asides. I am explaining this matter to the House and reminding it where we are with respect to efficiencies.

Those efficiencies will total around £700 million. That was agreed to by the DUP and Sinn Féin at one of the Executive Committee meetings that we managed to hold.

Every health and social-care organisation has been asked to deliver efficiency savings. The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has been set the same target, relative to its size. The efficiency savings set for the service over the CSR period are as follows: £1.2 million in the first year, £2.7 million in the second, and £4.5 million in the third.

The Executive had good reason to ask for efficiency savings. This is not just about money; it is about making the service more efficient. The need to improve the efficiency of public services is real. It is crucial that additional resources be released to improve the way in which those services are delivered to the public. The Health Service is one of the areas most in need of investment, so it must be involved.

As I have said repeatedly, we need investment, we must be efficient, and we need to engage the population in public health. The demand on the Ambulance Service is rising at around 10% per annum — year in and year out, an extra 8% to 10% burden is added to the service. Clearly, if the Ambulance Service continues to work in the way in which it always has done, it is not going to meet that demand.

The Department has identified savings of £4.5 million by year 3. Of the total funding generated throughout the CSR, I will allocate £12 million to the Ambulance Service in additional revenues. That will see the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service's operating budget increase by around 24% from £46.5 million last year to £57 million in 2010-11. Therefore, I will continue to invest in the resource. Ambulance Service resources will increase, rather than be cut as has been suggested. The additional investment of £12 million will allow the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to modernise its services; respond to emergency calls faster, and help to deliver life-saving emergency care to the people who need it.

The Ambulance Service has suggested a range of realistic proposals on how it will deliver its CSR efficiencies without affecting services. For example, up to £1 million will be found from a reduction in absence and from generic efficiencies. Those will include more efficient training and administration, fleet servicing, and reconfiguration of non-emergency vehicles' hours of operation. Several Members expressed concern about that point. The Ambulance Service's proposals will see a small reduction in the number of accident and emergency ambulances and an increase in the number of rapid-response vehicles. Overall, there will be a net increase of seven vehicles providing emergency care and delivered by skilled paramedics.

I will make another point clear: the effectiveness of the provision of ambulance services is not measured simply, or solely, by the number of accident and emergency ambulances on the road. We must examine the service's capability to respond to emergency calls and ensure that available resources are targeted at enhancing the level of the emergency cover that the Ambulance Service provides. By the end of the CSR period, paramedic-response capacity — by which I mean the total amount of cover provided by accident and emergency ambulances and rapid-response vehicles — will be increased by 61,000 hours to more than 600,000 hours of cover.

The net increase in vehicle numbers means that more vehicles will be on the ground to provide emergency care. I assure Members that jobs will not be lost as a result of the efficiencies. At present, the Ambulance Service employs 1,076 people. There will be no reduction in that figure as a result of the efficiency proposals.

Reports in the media and elsewhere have insinuated that a paramedic who responds to a call in a rapid-response vehicle is somehow not as effective as one who responds in an accident and emergency ambulance — I do not accept that argument. An accident and emergency ambulance is manned by one paramedic and one technician whereas a rapid-response vehicle is manned by one paramedic. The paramedic model of service has been in place in Northern Ireland for four years. It is accepted nationally as an effective and modern treatment model that provides direct assessment, care and treatment to the people who need it.

All rapid-response vehicles are staffed by skilled paramedics. The vehicles have an advantage over accident and emergency ambulances in that they can provide a faster response and can gain access to some places that ambulances cannot get to. Mr Shannon made that point.

The equipment provided in a rapid-response vehicle is the same as that provided in an ambulance. The only difference between the two is that a rapid-response vehicle cannot transport patients to hospital. I stress that in the event of an emergency call, an ambulance and a rapid-response vehicle are sent to the incident at the same time. As soon as a rapid-response vehicle arrives at a scene, the paramedic will immediately start to treat and stabilise the patient and will also decide whether an ambulance is actually required. Around 10% of all category-A — life-threatening — calls are, in fact, not life-threatening at all. In one case, an ambulance responded to a category-A call only to discover that the person had a toothache. In another case, a person had called because they could not get a GP appointment, and in another case, a person called because they had cut their finger.

The paramedic who operates a rapid-response vehicle will be able to indicate immediately whether a situation is life-threatening. I had first-hand experience

of that during one of the busiest social nights in Belfast, when I accompanied a rapid-response vehicle paramedic during his shift. In one incident, he went to the aid of a young man who had been knocked down. Within minutes of the call being received, he was at the scene and had started to treat the victim. Only a few minutes later, an ambulance arrived to take the injured man to hospital. That is how I envisage the RRVs working; getting support and help out there as fast as we can.

11.45 am

There is a target for ambulances to respond to 70% of life-threatening incidents within eight minutes, and we are on target this year. From April 2009, I will increase that target to 75% because the period immediately following an incident is crucial. It is not always a matter of rushing in and snatching away the patient; it is often a matter of providing the emergency medical support that the patient needs, particularly if it is a life-threatening incident. That is why those eight-minute targets are in place and why we are providing RRVs.

We are following a practice that has been in place for some years and has a proven track record nationally. That way of working means that patient care is not compromised; getting a paramedic response to an emergency more quickly means that there is a chance of saving a patient's life. If a patient needs to be transported to hospital, the ambulance will take them, freeing the RRV to attend another emergency. An A&E ambulance spends 60% of its downtime waiting at the ambulance station to be called out; the RRV is constantly out patrolling the hot spots, as I saw that night. They are there to respond rapidly because, as I said, in around 10% of cases an ambulance is not required.

Each year, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service receives 360,000 calls of which 125,000 are emergencies, and, as I said, that figure is rising by 8% to 10% every year. However, around 25,000 of those calls are for incidents that are neither immediately life-threatening nor serious. In addition, the service has to deal with some 6,000 hoax calls, and, as David McClarty said, those are not all made by youngsters but by people from all walks of society. All of that adds significant pressure to resources.

To help to address that problem the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service intends to pilot a scheme that uses doctors in the ambulance control room to provide clinical advice to people who call the service. That control room will operate for 16 hours a day, seven days a week, and it will enable the Ambulance Service to target emergency resources better. In order to help the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service further, the public too has a responsibility to make sure that they dial 999 only in an emergency. Every call that is not an emergency only delays an ambulance from attending a real emergency. We are saying, "think before you ring".

I recognise the genuine concerns expressed by Members. Martina Anderson talked about two ambulance

breakdowns, but the fact that that is memorable indicates how extremely rare a breakdown is, given that ambulances respond to some 360,000 calls a year. Further to what I said yesterday, the first occasion involved a category-A call, and the patient experienced a seven-minute delay before a second ambulance arrived. The second occasion was a category-B call and the patient experienced a 19-minute delay. I apologise for that; it should not have happened.

I have an inherited fleet that I am seeking to invest in and replace. Over the next three years the Department will buy 60 A&E ambulances, 60 patient-care service vehicles and 26 RRVs, giving us 146 extra vehicles. However, over the next five years, I have allowed for the full replacement of the entire fleet and investment in a rolling programme of replacement so that, in future, no vehicles will be more than five years old. Some of the current vehicles, as Members pointed out, are long past needing to be scrapped.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: If Mr McCarthy would just allow me to finish, Tommy Gallagher made a point about an air ambulance. There are no plans at the moment for an air ambulance and that is probably some years away. I have explained how the fleet will be rolled out. Lord Morrow talked about replacing ambulances in Dungannon, where there is one of the oldest ambulances on the road; that is exactly what I am doing — scrapping the old vehicles and replacing them. Ambulances are serviced every 12,000 miles, which is far more frequently than the manufacturer recommends. They are very well looked after, but it is long past the time for them to be replaced.

Sue Ramsey raised the point that replacing the fleet does not mean attacking the service that it provides. In fact, the opposite is the case; the fleet follows the service that we provide. Investment has been made throughout Northern Ireland, including in Omagh. Tom Buchanan has obviously forgotten about the new accident and emergency ambulances in Omagh and Enniskillen and the 24/7 cover in Castlederg.

Dr Farry: I join all other Members who spoke in commending the work of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service: that sentiment is shared across the community. Furthermore, it reflects the concern at the current situation. In addition to its other work, the Ambulance Service is one of the core emergency services. Many people rely upon it, and they fear the consequences of changes in the system.

Many issues affect the people of Northern Ireland, and, although they look to the Assembly for answers, the solutions are often outside our control. However, through the Budget that it passed earlier this year, the Assembly created the problem of cuts in ambulance services, and we have the solution in our hands. The Assembly is accountable for the problem, and the

people of Northern Ireland should be in no doubt about where the answers and responsibilities lie.

The Budget, which was passed by the Assembly and agreed by the Executive, was opposed by the Alliance Party. Despite the claims that were made at that time of record levels of investment in the health budget, investment in health in Northern Ireland is flatlining compared with the UK average. It does not keep up with the pace of investment elsewhere in these islands in reflection of new demands in the field of health, such as more expensive drugs or an ageing population. That amounts to a potential shortfall of around £200 million by 2011, which is a sobering reality.

At that time, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety acknowledged the problems with the Budget. Disappointingly, however, he claimed victory because of a cosmetic set of changes that were made in response to his protests. Those changes have not tackled the underlying problem of underfunding of the Health Service.

As a solution is sought, much emphasis will be placed on the forthcoming monitoring rounds, during which the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has the first claim upon new resources that come forward. The October monitoring round is already well behind schedule — yet another victim of the Executive's paralysis. Even if a monitoring round does take place, it remains to be seen how much in the way of resources will be made available by other Departments for reinvestment in health, given that the budget is tight across the system. I am not optimistic about resources becoming available.

The so-called efficiency savings are another key aspect of the current financial difficulties. The Minister said that money from efficiency savings goes back into the pot for spending on other aspects of health. That is not exactly the case. The Budget was premised on the basis of 3% efficiency savings across the board. The baselines were recalculated on that basis. The whole settlement has been tightened, right across the board, based on spending 3% less than has so far been the case.

A fine line must be found between efficiency savings and cuts. We can all welcome efficiency savings if it means shifting resources from outmoded policies and practices and reinvesting them in more efficient ways of doing things to provide more effective outcomes. That makes a lot of sense. However, cuts are seen as reductions in services.

That raises a point, which, although it does not relate directly to the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, relates to the accountability of how those efficiency savings are being found in the system. Several bodies below the Department deliver health services, and I am not sure how clear in practice the accountability lines are to show where those efficiency savings will be found.

To my mind, and in the experience of numerous colleagues, many bodies are taking a simplistic approach to making efficiencies by simply slicing their services by 3%. That brings me to the core issue of the reduction in the hours of cover by accident and emergency ambulances with the capacity to transport a patient. In 2008-09, 17,000 hours of cover will be lost, rising to 35,000 hours in 2009-10, and 70,000 hours by 2010-11. That profile of cuts mirrors the practice of how efficiency savings will be implemented over the three years of the comprehensive spending review.

The Ambulance Service is a front-line service, and people become extremely concerned when they see savings that are, in practice, cuts, being made to such services. The cuts will create gaps in the service. Members spoke about the non-availability of ambulances in response to emergency calls or for the transportation of patients who may miss their slot or have to wait for many hours. Although the new rapid-response vehicles may have a role, people are concerned that their introduction is at the expense of cover from traditional accident and emergency ambulances.

My colleague, Mr McCarthy, began the debate by making the strong point that the Assembly can make a difference, and he outlined, in robust terms, the case for retaining the full range of front-line services.

Several other Members referred to the impact of cuts in their areas, particularly the problems that would be created in the west of Northern Ireland in Derry, Tyrone and Fermanagh.

Sue Ramsey made a critical point about the new investment in the ambulance fleets; and everyone will welcome the positive news that the fleet is to be modernised. However, that is a slightly different issue from the number of hours' cover that the Ambulance Service provides. One could envisage a situation in which brand new ambulances are not used to their full capacity due to a lack of commitment to staff them, which is in contrast to the new investment.

I was disappointed that only one Member from the Ulster Unionist Party, John McCallister, defended the Minister's position.

Mr B McCrea: I am faintly surprised that the Member is calling on me to say a few words. The Minister spoke with clarity on the correct position to take and on how to move forward, and we are 100% behind what he said. If the Member wants to know the position of the Ulster Unionist Party, he should listen to our esteemed Minister.

Dr Farry: I am glad that, as far as the cuts in the Ambulance Service are concerned, Mr McCrea has put the entire Ulster Unionist Party on the hook. The UUP's representatives across Northern Ireland will know where to look when they join others in complaining about the situation in their areas and people are objecting to having been sold a pup.

It was fascinating to listen to Members of the DUP. Today, they let the cat of the bag: they no longer defend the Budget that they so rigorously endorsed when it was passed earlier this year. Members of the DUP now talk about the inadequate health budget, and their use of the phrase "efficiency savings" has been abandoned in favour of "cuts" — I welcome them to reality. However, had they spoken in that way when the Budget was being debated, there would, perhaps, have been a very different settlement.

Lord Morrow, and others, challenged the Alliance Party to state what it would do differently to provide funding, and I will address that point. However, the DUP did not propose any solutions to the problem that it identified as existing across Northern Ireland.

In the short term, the problem can be addressed during the monitoring rounds. As the Minister said, the total shortfall over a three-year period is only £4.5 million, which equates to approximately £1.2 million in the first year. Such a shortfall can be addressed in the monitoring rounds. However, I sound a note of caution about what the first monitoring rounds this year may bring; but we will see what happens.

12.00 noon

Furthermore, monitoring rounds do not affect the underlying baseline, and, therefore, we are forced to address that problem annually. In the long term, the Assembly must grapple with wider Health Service problems in order to release resources. Ultimately, the solution lies in better investment in public health and preventative care. We must reduce the number of situations in which people become sick and must be treated by the Health Service. A reduction in such instances will occasion a major change in how money is spent on health in the long term. I do not want to disappoint Mervyn Storey, and, therefore, I must mention that the cost of division is an obvious area in which we must seek solutions.

This issue is of great concern in Northern Ireland. It threatens people's sense of health security. Ambulances are a front-line service, and I urge the House to support the motion and to send a clear message.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the proposals to reduce the level of ambulance service provision and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to find savings elsewhere and to agree not to reduce the ambulance cover.

Opportunities for Special-Needs School Leavers

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

Dr W McCrea: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide the opportunities and support necessary to ensure that young people leaving special-needs schools at 16 and over 19 years of age can further their education and aspire, where appropriate, to meaningful employment.

The motion asks the Assembly to consider the need to enhance life after school for young people with learning difficulties and/or physical disabilities, who have spent up to 15 years in a well-resourced, highly structured and supportive learning environment, in which professional staff and helpers have been dedicated to enabling pupils to achieve their best in all aspects of education and essential life skills.

Although the benefits of the special-school system are evident, it is not true to assume that the needs identified in statements of special educational needs have been magically met by the age of 16 or 19. Many parents and carers are disappointed to discover that at school-leaving age, there are, largely, only day-care services available. Moreover, that highly pressurised provision is, at best, limited and, at worst, non-existent. Although further education schemes are offered in theory, the majority of pupils who leave special schools will be unable to take up independent education. Most pupils will still require supervision and help with personal care, medical needs and safety — services that are, typically, more readily offered in a Health Service day-care facility.

Therefore, it is sad that the effort, encouragement and financial resources that define the excellence of the special-school system are quickly eroded when children reach school-leaving age. As a community, surely we want to offer those young people a chance to lead fulfilling lives and to achieve what we take for granted. We must offer them choice, create opportunities for them and give respect to them. There is an overriding need to continue the quality of education that young people receive up to the age of 19.

The Beattie Report, produced in Scotland in 1999, recommended that young people with learning difficulties and/or physical disabilities:

“should have access to adequate and appropriate learning provision”.

Furthermore, the report outlined:

“the needs, abilities and aspirations of young people should be recognised, understood and met within a supportive environment

which encourages them to achieve their goals and to make real, measurable progress.”

The Beattie Report recognised that in order for those young people to progress, it was likely that they would require more than one type of support and that their needs may change over time. Although the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) cannot be expected to deliver the entire solution in isolation from other Departments, the further education sector has a generous part to play in helping those young people to lead fuller and more valued lives.

The Warnock Report, which was published in 1978, found that people with learning difficulties should be seen, first and foremost, as learners. It is with regret, therefore, that the Student Voices report, which was produced by Skill Northern Ireland in 2002, recorded that the perception of members of the disabled community was that further education was not for them.

I appreciate the Minister’s presence at the debate, and I have no doubt that he will be keen to inform us that valuable progress has been made since then. I place on record my thanks to the Northern Regional College and the East Tyrone College of Further and Higher Education for their willingness to embrace the ideas and ideals of parents and carers who seek a more appropriate and meaningful provision for their children.

Access to education is the right to equal opportunity — not just physical access. Those young people deserve as much opportunity to enjoy ongoing education as mainstream students, but they desperately need a structured learning environment in which they may continue to progress beyond the age of 19 to attain the kind of life skills that others take for granted.

I want the Department for Employment and Learning to focus more on learning for that group of young people. The emphasis has been placed upon academic achievement and employability for far too long. The FE Means Business and Training for Success programmes are both work-orientated and focus largely on vocational training. Alas, for many of those young people, the world of work is not a realistic option. That is why there is a challenge for further education to provide those young people — where appropriate — with the support and high-quality provision that they need to benefit from education and to improve their chances of a successful life.

In a letter to me, the principal of Clifton Special School in Bangor stated:

“the availability of training and resource places a constant concern for school principals and also for parents who need to provide care, occupation, training and entertainment for their children, seven days a week, if an appropriate adult alternative cannot be found.

The more one tries to explore the options, the more one becomes aware of the gaping holes in provision. Throughout their school lives, we constantly strive to help them to fulfil their potential and it is

demoralising for school principals and devastating for the child and their parents to find that at 19 there may be no future provision for them.

This is an issue that needs urgently addressed by those with responsibility for ensuring that consideration is given to the needs and the rights of our learning disabled."

The principal of Elmbrook Special School in Enniskillen felt that the issue of provision for special-school leavers:

"will continue to be an ever increasing problem unless it is addressed at the highest possible level and long term strategies employed."

The principal of Riverside School in Antrim commented that further-education provision is often dependant on a work placement; that would not be possible for many pupils who leave a special-needs school. For those for whom a work placement is possible, it would not be so without support. Those young people require a means of continued stimulation, whether at a further-education campus or through further-education input at an adult day centre.

At ages 16 and 19, their young lives open up, and educational advancements become noticeable. Simply because those advancements are not measurable on the national qualifications framework does not mean that they are not real. They should not be ignored.

We are duty bound to ensure that the intensive help and support provided by the special-schools system is not eroded and that a choice greater than that which is currently available is offered to those young people.

I ask the Minister: what assessment has his Department made of the situation; what contact has he had with his ministerial counterparts to consider areas of mutual concern; what priority has he attached to the promotion of link courses between further education colleges and special-needs schools; and how much funding will he guarantee for the maintenance and promotion of non-vocational courses for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities at further education colleges and in day-care settings?

If we are to embrace a society in which learning is a lifelong pursuit for everyone, I — and, I believe, the House — cannot accept that educational opportunities appear to end for some of the most vulnerable people in our society, who might have major learning and physical disabilities and who may have a 19-year-old body, but the mind of a six-year-old.

In order to help young people with special needs or disabilities to embrace the lifelong pursuit of learning, the further education sector must be flexible and responsive; its access routes and the content, type and delivery of its courses must meet the needs and aspirations of those young people. Life after school is the next big challenge; the Assembly must ensure that those young people have a chance to overcome the barriers that they face, and our society has a responsibility to make that happen.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I support this important motion, and I congratulate the proposer on having it selected. However, I must reflect on the fact that almost a year ago to the day, the House debated a similar motion — which I proposed — that called for increased employment and training places for disabled children and young people. Six months ago, my colleague Michelle O'Neill proposed a motion that expressed concern about the lack of further education provision for young people with learning and physical disabilities.

When I read the record of those debates, I was struck by the fact that there were no dissenting voices. Even the Minister for Employment and Learning — who responded to both the motions and who will respond today — more or less agreed with what was said. Nevertheless, I remind the Minister that the Committee is still waiting for the review of the extent and nature of, and ways to improve, special-needs provision throughout the further education sector, which was promised by the end of June 2008. Perhaps, in his contribution to the debate, the Minister will give us an update on that review.

I do not intend to use my time to share statistics — Dr McCrea highlighted some, and I am sure that other Members will do the same. We are not dealing solely with statistics and numbers; we are dealing with people. We must never forget that young people with special needs or disabilities are as important as anyone else.

Every Member in the Chamber takes his or her education and training opportunities and access to jobs for granted. Young people with special needs or disabilities should also be able to take such things for granted. Let our society be judged on how it provides, and cares, for its weakest and most vulnerable members.

The Committee for Employment and Learning is fortunate. Organisations that represent the young people whom the motion is about trust the Committee and come to seek its help. We have been lucky enough to develop close working relationships with groups such as the Union of Supported Employment, Disability Action, and Ulster Supported Employment Ltd. We work closely with those groups and attempt to ensure that we consult them at every relevant opportunity.

The Committee is united in its support for the work of those, and other similar, groups, and the motion aims to provide greater Government assistance for their activities. Although the motion primarily addresses the Minister for Employment and Learning, all Ministers have a role to play, as the proposer of the motion said.

I shall take this opportunity to share with Members the story of a young man who, before recess, made a presentation to the Committee. Robert has a learning

disability, but he wanted to tell the Committee about how his life has been enhanced by the work of the Union of Supported Employment. Robert works for four days a week in a cinema; he cleans and helps out. He has a boss who looks out for him, and his support worker, who organised work experience for him before he left school, helped him to get the cinema job, for which he is paid.

12.15 pm

When Robert started his job, he also moved into his own apartment. He delighted in telling us that his job provides him with money; he can buy his own CDs and listen to them in his own apartment. He loves his job, and he is appreciated, liked and respected by his workmates. He has friends, and he feels secure and supported. I know that not every young person with special needs or disabilities will be able to have what Robert has; however, we must aspire to make those opportunities available to all who want them. To me, Robert represents how things should be, but we all know that reality is very different.

There are multiple barriers to accessing further education or training and employment for those with special needs or disabilities who are leaving school. Those barriers include current employment practices; a lack of organised support systems; prejudice; indifference; a lack of sustainable programmes and long-term funding; and a reliance on the European Social Fund.

As Dr McCrea highlighted in his opening remarks, all Ministers have a role to play to rectify the situation — I support that statement. In particular, the Minister for Employment and Learning should ensure that the views of young people with special needs and disabilities are taken into account during the development, delivery and assessment of relevant programmes.

We all wish for a world in which all people are treated equally and have the same opportunities and choices. Thankfully, we have moved on from the days when young people with special needs and disabilities were institutionalised and hidden from view. However, our challenge is to ensure that when those young people leave school they have opportunities and a purpose and are supported in making their contribution to society.

I do not believe that any of us would seek to deny young people with special needs any of those rights. I call on the Minister for Employment and Learning to listen to what is said in the debate and reflect on what has been said in previous debates on this matter. No one here disagrees with young people with special needs or disabilities having the right to progress from school into whatever further education, training or employment will allow them to fulfil their potential and enjoy their lives.

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

Ms S Ramsey: I support the motion.

Mr McClarty: I declare an interest as chairperson of the board of governors of a school with a special-needs unit.

I am delighted that we are debating this issue, because I believe that the Assembly has a responsibility to bring the requirements and potential of young people with special needs further into the public domain. Regardless of the investment and strategies that we put in place, if the mindset of the wider community is not open, educated and welcoming, the potential for young people with special needs to gain achievements through further education and, where appropriate, gain meaningful employment, will be diminished. For that reason alone, the debate is crucial.

The Minister has overseen a substantial increase in the funding that is available to support students with disabilities in further education. The additional support fund provides assistance with the cost of technical and/or personal support. It is my understanding that in 2004-05 that fund was increased from £500,000 to £1 million, was further increased in 2006-07 to £1,125,000, and has been increased to £1.5 million in 2007-08 and 2008-09.

In 2007-08, the Department made £1.5 million available for discrete provision, and that has been increased to £2 million in 2008-09. That fund enables colleges to meet the cost of reduced classroom size, additional lecture contact time, an increase in the number of classroom assistants, or the development of other services involved in delivering tailored courses for those with learning difficulties.

In 2008-09, £2.5 million has been given to the support fund, which enables colleges to provide help to students whose participation in further education is prohibited by financial considerations. Since 2001, the Department has allocated over £18 million of capital funding to colleges to improve access for people with disabilities. It is my understanding that £474,000 has been set aside in 2008-09 for capital programmes expenditure, which includes funding to improve access for people with disabilities. I believe that the Minister is dealing with the issue proactively.

I understand that the review of special needs provision in further education, which the Minister announced during a debate in 2007, has been carried out and completed by the Department. That review will include recommendations that will be brought to the Committee for Employment and Learning for consideration as soon as possible.

Ms Ramsey: The Member is a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, which was assured that it would be presented with the review in June. It is useful to keep returning to these issues because, irrespective of what the Member's understanding is, I,

as Chairperson of that Committee, do not know where the review is.

Mr McClarty: I appreciate the fact that the review should be brought to the Committee. This is the third time that the Assembly has debated the issue in just over a year, and it is important that we highlight it.

I welcome the action that the Minister and his Department have taken to promote positive attitudes towards people with disabilities and to encourage their participation in public life. There are concerns about the ability of young people with special needs to gain access to employment — an area that my colleague Dr Coulter will explore in more detail later.

Every parent recognises the desire that their children fulfil their potential in life. That desire is no different for the parents of people with additional needs. Furthermore, we can all recognise how disillusioning and frustrating the inability to achieve that potential can be. Society must do more to recognise and welcome the benefits that people with special educational needs can bring.

More can be done, and we have a Minister who is engaged in, and committed to, further improving the potential and opportunity for young people with special needs. I and my colleagues on the Committee for Employment and Learning look forward to the review of special educational needs in further education being brought before the Committee. I support the motion.

Mrs M Bradley: I support the motion. The issue has been an ongoing concern for parents and education facilitators of special-needs young adults for some time.

The degrees of special needs are more complex than ever. As such, many parents, when their young adult reaches school-leaving age, face a blank canvas without the tools that they need. The security of the school setting is a far cry from the oasis that is the future for many special-needs young people. Current transition systems and post-school opportunities appear to be less than helpful in easing those difficult pathways from the child-friendly school scenario to the adult world — a world in which there are many pitfalls and dangers for young people with disabilities.

I consulted my local special-needs school, which had no hesitation in affirming the sentiments of the motion. That school told me that the dire lack of post-school placements available to young people with disabilities in the north-west is causing continuing anxiety.

However, like Sue Ramsey, I can tell the Assembly about a young man with special needs. He is called Kevin, and he is a very badly disabled 21-year-old who requires a great deal of medical help. Kevin attends the North West Regional College and is making wonderful progress. Indeed, he believes that he is ready to face anything in the world. That is great for Kevin, but we

need the same to happen for all our young people with special needs.

The rights of special-needs young people cannot be allowed to be eroded. In my preparation for today's debate, my first port of call was the Assembly's Programme for Government. Page 4 of that document clearly states:

“Working together we can build a shared and a better future for all — a society which is at ease with itself and where everyone shares and enjoys the benefits of this new opportunity.”

For the young adult with disabilities, and more importantly for that young person's parents, there is a basic human right to a future; a future that is equal in care, education and opportunity; and a future that will, where possible, equip them with a skill, and, at its most basic, give them a reason to get up in the morning and go to their job, no matter how menial that job is.

Those young people are capable of much more than they are often given credit for. My local supermarket employs a number of young people with special needs, and they are more than capable of carrying out their daily duties. Furthermore, they are often more open to change and the transition process than would be expected.

Since last November, motions centred around young people with special needs have been debated in the Chamber on no fewer than three occasions, including today. That will illustrate the level of affirmation and concern that the Assembly has for the issue. I have no doubt that the Minister will give his full attention to the topic, as there is undeniable parental concern about the issue, and I am sure that the ever-changing environment in which we live will continue to evolve and be as uninviting as ever for someone who is slightly different. However, within those differences, often there lies an untapped source of richness and creativity that will improve the lives of the young people concerned and help them to become valued by others beyond their family boundaries.

The situation calls for a cross-cutting approach from the Department of Education, social services, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Employment and Learning. The problem cannot be solved by a single-Department approach. Although the Minister for Employment and Learning is the obvious target of the motion, the solution does not lie solely at his door. However, it is hoped that he will take the outcome of the debate on board and do whatever he can to help our young disabled people.

Mr Lunn: The transition from special schools to post-school provision can be difficult for the young leavers and their families, particularly due to the anxiety caused by moving from a special school to a new and unfamiliar setting. The Alliance Party welcomes the motion, and I congratulate Dr McCrea for moving it and for setting out the related issues so eloquently in his speech.

The Alliance Party welcomes the motion as a further reminder to the Minister that there is a problem; although I am sure that he does not need to be reminded. The motion follows on from a similar motion that was tabled by Sinn Féin on 7 April 2008, which the Alliance Party also supported.

If Members are serious about a shared future, a better economy and a sustainable society, it is important that everyone has access to the education that they require to enable them to contribute to that future, economy and society. Furthermore, as my colleague Anna Lo reminded Members in the debate on 7 April, there is already a legislative framework under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 for the protection of young people who wish to exercise their right to be educated. There is, therefore, a moral and a legislative requirement in place. In fact, there is also a moral and legislative imperative to back our early contention that the objective for many people with learning disabilities should be mainstreaming.

The Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 developed the right of children with special educational needs to attend mainstream schools. That objective and the terms of the motion can, and should, be transferred further up the system.

Approximately 80% of people with learning difficulties who leave special schools in Northern Ireland each year do not require day-care provision. Therefore, mainstream further education is often an option for many of them. That does not mean that the solution is to set up courses that are aimed, specifically, at them, because that would be counterproductive and hinder their access to mainstream society. The objective should be to improve access to the existing courses while ensuring, as far as possible, that the necessary support is available to ensure their full participation.

Building a fair and inclusive society must be the basis for a future in which people are not prevented from accessing services or from reaching their full potential by a disability, or any other reason.

I have no doubt that the Minister has sympathy for the content of the motion, and I urge him to do everything in his power to ensure the best possible provision for school-leavers with special needs and those aged 19-plus. It is also hoped that the Minister's room for manoeuvre is not restricted by any further extension of the current Executive impasse, which, I accept, is not of the Minister's doing. I look forward to hearing from him about any proposals that he may be able to offer the House today. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet at lunchtime today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.29 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Newton: I support the motion. It will unite the entire Chamber, and support for those in need should be the motivation of all Members. In his opening remarks, Dr McCrea said that more than one type of support was necessary, and I agree entirely.

Last week, I met a group of primary-school principals representing east Belfast. They expressed their concerns about primary-school funding and quoted the differential in funding between primary schools and secondary-level education as £1,000 for each pupil. They were not saying that funding for secondary-level education should be cut; rather that funding for primary education should be upgraded. The funding package is not sufficient, given the responsibilities placed on teachers, which include social and psychological care, and the need to teach the three Rs. The principals stressed the impediments that that lack of funding has on children with special needs. I refer to that fact because there are children with special needs at primary school who are not in receipt of the support that they need and deserve at the required levels. Early support is necessary if children with special needs are to achieve their full potential.

My comments are somewhat wider than the motion. Nevertheless, all children with special needs deserve to have the educational building blocks in place to assist them in leading a full and productive life after school.

Although I believe that a holistic approach from all Departments is necessary for pupils with special needs, the essential preparation for a successful and complete life takes place in the secondary-school years. School-leavers should be prepared with careers-education lessons that will help them to make informed decisions about their future; be provided with opportunities to take part in attractive work experiences; and — in connection with what Dr McCrea said — have access to college-linked courses that will allow them to attend local further education colleges on vocational-linked courses to prepare them for leaving school. Such an approach allows students to prepare for a quality of life that will be enjoyable and profitable.

There is no doubt that access to post-school education should be available to all. Many students with special needs will not be able to take up employment opportunities and, in such cases, after-school experience in further education colleges must be satisfying and rewarding.

I agree with the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, who referred to the presentation given to the Committee by a young man called Robert, representing the Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment. In many ways, the eyes of

Committee members were opened following his presentation.

I visited the Orchardville Society recently and was taken to the Law Courts to meet a young man with special needs who had secured a job in the post room. He is operating within the same terms and conditions as all the other staff in the post room and is also attending a further education college. The Orchardville Society provided him with in-house training, a wide range of employment opportunities compatible with his abilities, a chance to gain vocational qualifications, and support all the way through to his gaining his own place to live.

The Committee also received evidence from Ulster Supported Employment Limited, which takes a different, but nonetheless valuable, approach. It offers in-house skills training that will lead to employment on site or outside its premises, vocational qualifications and supportive and sheltered employment.

The support to enable people to live a fulfilling life from early years — whether that leads to employment or gaining further experience at a further education college — should be available to people at all levels.

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

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt do David Simpson agus do Willie McCrea as an rún seo.

I thank David Simpson and Willie McCrea for bringing this motion to the Assembly. As several Members have said, this is the third time that we have discussed the difficulties that young people with learning difficulties encounter in accessing further education.

The expectation is that most people who complete 12 years of primary and post-primary education can make a transition to further education colleges or university, and that also applies to people with learning difficulties. In the debate on 7 April 2008, the Minister said that in the year 2006-07, almost 17,000 students enrolling in further education declared that they had some form of disability. In the same year, around 1,400 students in further education colleges declared that they had severe learning disabilities.

In the previous debate on this subject, I mentioned the research that states that the percentage of people with learning difficulties and disabilities in Britain is much higher than it is here. The Minister may want to comment on that again. Around 20% of people in further education have complex learning difficulties, and that is an issue. In some ways, it is good that we are focusing our attention on the matter. Many people with disabilities, and their families, look to elected

representatives to raise those issues in forums such as this, because they do not have a voice.

The Minister said in the debate of 7 April that a review was to take place, and Mr McClarty said that the review has now been completed by the Department. I am a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, and as the Chairperson of the Committee has said, the Committee has not yet had sight of any report on the review. The review was to have been completed in June, and it is now October. The Committee should be told of the outcome of that review as a matter of urgency. The most important issue is how the review's recommendations will be implemented in further education colleges. I also appreciate that this matter does not just concern the Minister for Employment and Learning; the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety also has a role to play, as the Minister for Employment and Learning has mentioned before.

Many parents want their loved ones to be educated or trained in Health Service day centres because they know that their loved ones are being looked after there — those centres provide a sense of security as well as transport to and from the place. However, the disadvantage is that according to some evidence, attending such centres can perpetuate social exclusion — people with severe learning difficulties or disabilities are not mixing with people in mainstream further education colleges and universities.

Willie McCrea mentioned the 'FE Means Business' document, which was drawn up by the Department for Employment and Learning. The document sets out how the Department sees the future of further education. It recognises that students with learning difficulties should be given opportunities to gain qualifications. However, I will raise an issue that I raised with the Minister in Committee meetings and in the previous debate: further education colleges are offloading courses that are aimed at people with special-learning difficulties. I think that Willie McCrea made that point, too. The main thrust of the document seems to be about gaining qualifications, perhaps at the expense of people with learning difficulties.

It can be difficult for many people to achieve success in further education colleges, but it can be particularly difficult for people with learning difficulties. I support the motion.

Mr Hilditch: I thank my colleagues for proposing the motion. People with learning difficulties have huge problems trying to find employment, as they are socially and educationally disadvantaged. It is not only people with learning difficulties who need more employment opportunities; disabled people also lose out.

Little provision is made for people with special needs who are unable to participate in further education, or who are unable to cope with finding employment.

Students who attend special-needs schools are expected to leave at the age of 19, but no assistance is made for suitable follow-up services to promote life skills and independent living. Children with moderate learning difficulties are offered compulsory education up to the age of 16, and those with severe learning difficulties are offered it up to the age of 19. However, after that, young people and their families face a minefield, and we, as elected representatives, regularly witness the distress that that causes. I have spoken to many people in my constituency who struggle to deal with those issues. Fewer than 10% of people with learning difficulties are in paid employment, and it is very unfair that parents and carers are left to deal with the responsibility of that situation.

Although there are both good and bad examples in my constituency of East Antrim, I know of only one organisation in Carrickfergus that is designed to cope with filling the gap between full-time education and employment, and it is a fine example of what can be achieved. Kilcreggan Urban Farm in Carrickfergus employs 36 adults with learning difficulties. Originally set up to teach job skills to the residents of Kilcreggan supported housing, the farm is now open to the public, and it teaches employability skills to adults with learning difficulties, with the hope that those skills will lead to employment. The farm has also been running a very beneficial pilot scheme in which children with learning difficulties and mainstream children work together on the farm in the evenings. I praise Kilcreggan Urban Farm for its work, and urge the Minister to consider the situation and try to promote and assist similar organisations so that young people get the appropriate level of training and education.

According to a representative from the Northern Trust, Carrickfergus has no form of social enterprise, yet Larne and Newtownabbey have facilities where people with special needs can learn the necessary skills. We need more training establishments to offer those adults vocational qualifications. It is a shame that there is no training organisation in Carrickfergus to deal with the special educational needs of young people aged 16 and over.

Hawthorn Day Centre has an enrolment of 65 people from the age of 19, and sometimes it is difficult to believe that there are no suitable job opportunities for those people. Surely, given the correct support, there could be opportunities in our ever-increasing service industries, for example, for people to progress and to aspire to employment, with the help of departmental supported training and further education.

I understand that the care of special-needs school-leavers is a concern for the Department of Education and for the Department of Health. It is not simply a matter for the Department for Employment and Learning — it is a cross-departmental issue. Therefore,

a multi-disciplinary approach to supporting young people is needed to secure the necessary support that will actively encourage social inclusion, challenge discrimination and inequality issues, and develop personal control and choice.

I urge the Minister to take immediate action to provide sufficient further education opportunities to ensure that young people with special needs achieve their full potential. The health and social services trusts must work together with the Department for Employment and Learning to tackle that gap. The Departments must adopt a joint approach to address the urgent issues that have been raised today. I support the motion.

Mr Armstrong: I support the motion. It is important that the needs of young people over the age of 16 are addressed, and that the necessary systems are put in place to support them, so that young people with complex, multiple disabilities are guided in the choices that they make and that those choices can be achieved. Everyone continues to learn throughout their adult lives, and that situation is no different for people with special needs.

However, we must appreciate that those people who come from the special-needs schooling system cannot simply step into further education and learn at the same pace, from the same curriculum or by employing the same techniques as others.

2.15 pm

I appreciate that something could be done to improve special-needs provision for those over 19 years of age, but I trust that before any action is taken, the Minister and his Department will do their utmost to ensure that individuals' needs are catered for. Blanket provision for all school-leavers with special needs is unrealistic, given the individual and unique characteristics associated with the varied needs for which special-needs schools currently provide.

The Department for Employment and Learning is making great strides in improving provision for this specific age group. I wholeheartedly support the work that it has done to date and that which is planned for the future. In my constituency of Mid Ulster, Kilronan Special School in Magherafelt and Sperrinview Special School in Dungannon cater for more than 150 pupils, who can stay at school until they are 19 years of age. Those schools, through a combination of specialist teaching and provision, give individual pupils the opportunity to move into further education and employment.

Projects such as Skill Northern Ireland highlight the good work that the Department and the Minister have undertaken in developing the necessary provision for special-needs school-leavers. Skill Northern Ireland promotes opportunities to allow young people and adults to achieve their potential in further education,

training and employment in Northern Ireland. The good results that have been seen in the pilot schemes in Beechlawn School and Sandelford Special School will no doubt be applied to more schools in Northern Ireland.

I know that the Minister is aware of the challenges that must be faced, and I am grateful for his ongoing commitment. In particular, I look forward to hearing the outcome of his Department's review.

The young people at Kilronan Special School, like young people at special schools in all our communities, deserve opportunities that are appropriate to their abilities. I am also aware of the good work that Parkanaur College has done. Many of its residents are my constituents, and I encourage the Minister to continue to provide funds for the people who attend the college. I thank the Minister for his ongoing commitment to making that continued funding a reality, and I look forward to hearing his response to the debate.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I declare an interest as chairperson of the board of governors of the new special school in Ballymena.

For the first time in Northern Ireland, we have brought three special schools together, and we are working closely with the Northern Regional College. Having worked with that section of our community for several years now, I am fully conversant with the problems that arise.

We seem to be concentrating in this debate on one section of those people with learning disabilities. However, there are two sections. One section can undertake a certain kind of employment, but there is another group of people who cannot do so. In that second section, there are people who remain in a special school until they are 19 years of age; for example, those who are afflicted with autism. When they reach 19 years of age, they are not able to move on to further education or employment and are left in their parents' care. Their only outlet is to go to a day centre, where they are grouped with older people who, very often, are suffering from some kind of mental disability. In that context, we must examine both sides of the equation.

I support everything that has been said about employment for people who are 19 years old, or even younger. That is something that we have concentrated on in our new school, Castle Tower Special School, in Ballymena. We monitor those young people as they grow up through their teenage years. Working in close co-operation with what is now the Northern Regional College, we have had the pleasure of seeing so many of those young people enter some form of employment, which has enhanced their quality of life.

On that note, we should pay tribute not only to the teachers in special schools — of whom I cannot speak

highly enough — but to those in the further education system who take on board the problems of those young people, and to the lecturers who have given themselves the special task of endeavouring to help those young people towards some form of normality in life. We should pay tribute to those people who have done so much to help young people with special needs.

We should also pay tribute to the Department for Employment and Learning, and to the Minister, who has done so much. He is engaged in a process of improving the opportunities and support that are necessary for young people leaving special education to gain access to further education, and, where appropriate, to meaningful employment. That is what we are talking about. That is why, in every speech on this issue today, full support for the motion has been expressed.

Although improvements have been made, it is recognised that more can, and should, be done. In that context, we need to give support to the Minister, and to help him in every way. However, as has been said on a number of occasions today, it is not a matter for one Department. The problem is surely a cross-departmental one, which must be tackled together by a team effort. Together, we can enhance the lives of those young people who are in need of our help. I fully support the motion.

Mr G Robinson: I would first like to point out that the term "special needs" covers a wide spectrum, and there are many unseen conditions that must be remembered in the context of the debate. There are many positive aspects of the present further and higher education structures. Provision is made for young people, especially those with disabilities requiring them to use a wheelchair, such as: assistance with travel costs; specially adapted university accommodation; the provision of carers and note-takers for lectures; and the putting in place of special arrangements for them during exam periods. Those provisions are very welcome, but let none of us be fooled into believing that enough is being done to ensure that young people with learning and physical disabilities achieve optimum performance.

Much is made of the potential of our young people, and the role that they can play in the new prosperity that I believe Northern Ireland plc will enjoy. However, we must also ensure that those children and young people with a disability are permitted their chance to enjoy the proceeds of Northern Ireland plc. There is much discussion of reskilling the workforce; let us not forget that that includes people with a disability.

I feel that, perhaps, the opportunities for third-level education are more restricted for disabled young people. Much has been done to ensure that schools and campuses are wheelchair friendly and that rooms are

accessible, but there is a problem in the number of disabled people attaining the necessary grades to access the secondary-level education necessary to obtain university entrance. Stigma, whether real or perceived, can be a major factor in a child's educational attainment at secondary level. That obviously impacts on a child with a disability who wishes to enter further and higher education. Perhaps the Minister of Education will think about how she will address that problem.

I support addressing the problem as a matter of great importance, because although much is being done, much more needs to be done, so that Northern Ireland can utilise a home-grown workforce in rebuilding the economy, whether individuals have a disability or not.

I urge the Minister for Employment and Learning to examine closely what can be done to help disabled young people to achieve all that they can. We must facilitate their desire to fulfil their potential. I am sure that the Minister will seek to provide the facilities and courses that special-needs, and disabled, students require to maximise their potential. I support my colleagues and commend them for tabling such a worthwhile motion.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the motion tabled by my colleagues, which addresses an important issue in Northern Ireland.

In my constituency of Newry and Armagh, I am well aware of the difficulties faced by young people with special needs who have left school and are seeking gainful and meaningful employment. In the early part of the year, I was made aware of the funding plight faced by the Appleby Trust in Armagh city; a crisis that almost closed the facility but for the generosity of an anonymous sponsor and the match funding from the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, for which we are extremely grateful.

The Appleby Trust is a supported employment agency based in Armagh city, and its team helps those with learning disabilities to find employment and supports them during employment. Another vital part of its work is Appleby's social firm, which specialises in preparing people with learning disabilities to enter the workplace. The trust does a marvellous job in the city and district and is to be commended. However, its funds are only secure for the remainder of the financial year, and it is unacceptable that it should face another episode of crisis and uncertainty when that current funding runs out. Several meetings have been held in my constituency between the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, the Appleby Trust and local Assembly Members. I am conscious that time is running out and that we could face another funding dilemma.

In several representations that I have made to the Health Minister and the Minister for Employment and

Learning, I have proposed cross-departmental co-operation in funding provision as a potential solution. Undoubtedly, the situation in my constituency is repeated across the Province. We are failing those with learning disabilities, and although available funding from the various health and social care trusts is stretched, programmes under the remit of the Department for Employment and Learning are not suitably structured to allow services, such as that operated by the Appleby Trust, to attract funding. That must change.

In response to a question for written answer that I asked earlier in the year, Minister Empey stated:

“Programmes funded by the Department, with the exception of some of those that are match funded, are generic in nature and not targeted at any particular disability category such as people with a learning disability.”

I ask the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Health Minister to consider a closer working relationship on the issue to ensure that there is a coherent and meaningful support system aimed specifically at those with learning disabilities. We must not short-change young adults with learning disabilities.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. As always, the debate has been very interesting. It has also united Members from all sides of the House, which we must take comfort from.

As has been mentioned, provision for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has already been at the centre of two debates in the Chamber. I reaffirm my commitment to do everything possible to meet the requirements of young people with special needs and everyone with a disability.

Those young people cannot be categorised neatly, because each individual has different and diverse requirements, which, in many cases, have to be assessed by a range of Departments and agencies. It is encouraging that a key priority of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people is provision for children with special educational needs in mainstream and special schools, including the transition to adulthood and the provision of appropriate health and social care interventions.

The importance of collaborative working to deal with those young people's needs cannot be overstated.

2.30 pm

As with all school-leavers, young people who leave special-education schools have different aptitudes, abilities and expectations. My Department does everything possible to ensure that its support measures and programmes are accessible to them, in order that they are fully able to fulfil their potential and can, in the motion's words:

“aspire, where appropriate, to meaningful employment.”

My Department assists young people who leave special schools by offering several programmes, which include careers advice and guidance; mainstream and specialised further-education provision; and various training, employment and support programmes.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Careers Service Northern Ireland has been restructured, and several careers advisers have been trained specifically to work with clients who have statements of special educational need. Additionally, all careers advisers are provided with basic training in that area. That is a new development. Careers advisers attend transition-plan meetings for year 10 pupils — 14 year olds — who have special educational needs. They also attend subsequent annual reviews. The advisers work with a range of professionals and contribute to transition plans by providing impartial information, advice and guidance on the variety of educational and training employment opportunities that are available. That allows individual young people and their parents or guardians to make informed decisions.

The Department funds a range of training and employment provisions through the Disablement Advisory Service, which works closely with Careers Service to ensure that young people's transition from education to the wider world is as smooth and effective as possible.

Participants on the Department's Training for Success and Apprenticeships NI programmes are given every opportunity to overcome difficulties and to develop using the most appropriate support mechanisms. In order to enhance those programmes' effectiveness, a group with expertise in dealing with young people who have disabilities was established. The group's recent report makes 30 recommendations that focus on disabled people's needs. The Department will fully consider the recommendations, with a view to further enhancing provision in those programmes.

Much has been mentioned about the interface with further education. Colleges are required under the Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 to:

“have regard to the requirements of persons over compulsory school age who have learning difficulties.”

Furthermore, under the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 (SENDO) colleges are required to make adjustments in order to allow people who have learning difficulties and disabilities to access their provision. Mainstream courses are not always suitable for everyone. Colleges, therefore, collaborate with adult day centres to provide customised training and development opportunities for young people who have severe learning difficulties. Those may be offered in a college, day centre or other suitable premises. It is not unknown for that to include clients' houses.

I am encouraged that a recent Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) report confirmed that colleges are making good progress in collaborating with health trusts and other key players to improve further their provision to those who have learning difficulties and disabilities.

At this point, I want to respond to the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning's remark on the review's lateness. The Department received the ETI's part of the review on 24 September 2008. In fact, that part is available on the ETI's website. In addition to the ETI's contribution, my Department has carried out an internal review in consultation with stakeholders, which we are currently considering. I hope that it will be presented to the Committee for its deliberation in early November.

In the past, concerns were raised about the emphasis that colleges place on provision to support the economy. Although they are being asked to increase the proportion of their provision that is on the national qualifications framework, it must be remembered that many courses already on the framework are suitable for young people who are leaving special-needs schools and will assist them to attain qualifications that they require to move into employment. However, I fully accept that that is not the only way in which to tackle those issues.

I want to raise a couple of other points that flow from the report that the Department commissioned. The report concluded that college provision had improved since a survey carried out in 2003-04 and noted that:

“Considerable progress has been made by the colleges in introducing suitable accredited programmes, revising provision to focus more strongly on the development of skills for independent living or employability where appropriate.”

The report highlights many examples of good practice across the further education sector, including examples of sound working relationships between colleges and other statutory and voluntary agencies to support students with learning difficulties or disabilities.

One of the key points of the debate is that this is not simply a matter for one Department — it is for several, and for a range of agencies as well. I am pleased to say that I am a member of the Executive subcommittee that deals with children and young people, and, through that work, I have the opportunity to work closely with several Departments. I brought one particular case to that subcommittee, which is chaired by the junior Ministers and examines gaps in provision for young people throughout the governmental system. We will have the opportunity to draw matters to the attention of that subcommittee when we believe that collaborative activity is useful.

In his opening remarks, Rev McCrea — who has apologised for his inability to be present this afternoon — raised a number of issues that I wish to address. He asked me specifically about contacts with ministerial colleagues, and I have indicated that the subcommittee is a forum that allows us to raise all these matters. In addition, we work closely with the Department of Education and with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to develop joined-up services for disabled young people who are passing into adulthood through the Disablement Advisory Service and the careers service of my Department, which work with their counterparts in the Department of Education and in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Cross-party and departmental co-operation can always improve, but I do not want leave the debate without indicating that there is already a significant level of co-operation.

Rev McCrea also raised the issue of the links between special schools and further education colleges. Some Members are familiar with the vocational enhancement programme (VEP), which was piloted in a number of schools, including those for young people with special needs. The VEP offers advice on the curriculum, the needs of clients and other issues. That will be extended through the entitlement programme and implemented across all schools within the next few years.

Several Members referred to the unsuitability of links between further education and pupils with particular difficulties. That is a difficult interface — we must come clean about that. Rev Coulter made the point that, when a college proves to be an unsuitable environment for a particular individual, perhaps due to a pupil's medical needs, there has been a tendency for that pupil to end up in a day-centre environment, which is not always suitable. A younger person may be placed with a number of older residents who have mental health and other difficulties. That is not ideal.

As I have said, colleges are prepared to discuss the needs of individual clients. In future, as part of its contract with the Department, each college may have a requirement to produce programmes to satisfy us that those issues are dealt with appropriately.

At present, much of the weight on the issue is being carried by South West College, which provides services throughout the system. However, the Department will ask all the colleges to draw up proposals for any new arrangements that it may enter into with them. Colleges are prepared to be flexible, to look at each client individually, and to teach off campus if required — and the degree of flexibility is growing.

Several Members mentioned the issue of resources. The Department has increased the amount of resource available to create opportunities for school-leavers

with special needs. However, the issue is not always about money. The Department has provided the system with more cash. As I said, if I felt that the problem was simply a lack of resources, I would examine that. However, that is not the entire answer; it is more than that. The solution involves examining the co-ordination of the systems, the Departments and the agencies that already exist and, of course, the resources that flow from that. We are improving the amount of resource available, but it is not the entire solution.

I am confident that collaborative work has improved. The Department expects that the reports that are due to be published in a few weeks' time, along with the one that I already mentioned, will provide, by the end of the year, a comprehensive picture of how the entire system is working. Undoubtedly, improvements can be made.

Members will be aware of the system's weaknesses from the experiences of some of their constituents. Although the focus is on the pupil, we must remember that this issue also affects his or her family. As parents grow older they perhaps become less able to cope and that may cause them to have concerns about the future of their children. Parents want to give their children the best possible start. From the experiences of friends, I know that some people are seriously worried that they will not be able to maintain the level of care that their relative will require.

I conclude by emphasising that the Department is doing much to ensure that all programmes are accessible to school-leavers with special needs. However, I agree that we must continue to strive to make programmes and services even more accessible and, wherever possible, to support those young people into employment. That is a worthy objective, and some Members have highlighted the success stories.

I confirm that the Department will work with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Department of Education to develop and to enhance services for children and young people making the transition to adulthood. I will keep the Assembly informed of progress in those areas. I am sure that my colleagues will do the same in the areas for which they have the lead responsibility.

Mr Simpson: I thank all the Members who took part in the debate. I was encouraged by the fact that no amendments were tabled. That shows a great degree of unity on the issue. Prior to today, Members also debated the issue in October 2007, and in April 2008. I was reassured by some of the Minister's points, and I know that he is not unsympathetic to the subject. Sometimes there are financial restraints, but, as the Minister said, the issue is not always about money.

It is about systems, structure, management, and how things are fed into the whole procedure.

2.45 pm

I am sure that the vast majority of Members have families and that they have watched their children grow from infants and go through primary school, secondary school and on to college or university. All parents take a degree of pride in seeing their children develop; how much more proud must the family of a child — in many cases more than one child — with learning difficulties be as they see that child develop through those early years.

Sue Ramsey raised the issue of equality for young people and the lack of progress of the review; the Minister has answered that. Some of that review has been finished, and we can examine it. Dr McCrea referred to the Beattie Report and the Warnock Report, which indicated that young people with learning difficulties should be seen, first and foremost, as learners. He also mentioned the concerns raised by Clifton Special School and others.

Rev Coulter raised a very poignant point about children or young adults being denied support beyond the age of 19, which is a bone of contention for parents. In many cases a child's reaching adulthood takes parents unawares. All of a sudden it dawns on them that their child has reached the age of 16, and, when that happens, those parents ask themselves: what do we do now?

I am glad that the Minister outlined that there will be more career officers who can go into schools and identify the tasks that young people with learning difficulties can do or the future that they might have. The Minister also mentioned funding. In my constituency of Upper Bann, I deal primarily with two schools, the Ceara Special School and the Donard Special School. Other schools have special needs classes, and we visit them, but those are the two main schools for children who have learning difficulties, and I will outline some of the points that they have raised. I would like the Minister to pay special attention to the funding aspect.

Changes to the funding of further education colleges have resulted in considerable difficulties for young adults across the Province. The courses that the majority of young people with special needs undertook have been discontinued as they are not financially viable and do not attract funding from DEL, because they are below a specific academic level. We must address that issue. Only a few days ago, I met with parents who were trying to get their young lad — a sufferer of autism and a very bright individual — into the further education college in Craigavon. He could not get into that college simply because the course that he was used to doing at school was not on offer.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Colleges have resources for courses that do not lead to specific qualifications.

If the Member wants to raise a particular case, he may write to me, and I shall pursue that for him.

Mr Simpson: I thank the Minister for that, and I certainly will be in touch with him.

I thank all Members who contributed to the debate. Many Members have attended events that have been held on behalf of those with autism. Teaching children with autism is a major part of the work of, for example, Ceara School in Lurgan. Members who visit special schools will see the great work that is carried out by teachers, speech therapists and occupational therapists. That work is a credit to those people; they do a fantastic job. As Rev Coulter did, I pay tribute to those people.

In the Long Gallery in this Building, Members have heard speeches from young people who, as children, were diagnosed as having severe autism. Some time ago, a young man of 19 or 20 years of age spoke in the Long Gallery and explained his background, and how he was diagnosed as having autism, to the audience. He was able to stand up in front of an audience and speak because of the courses that he attended and the help that he received from his teachers.

The Minister referred to parents of those with autism. Although parents will be proud of their children, they also have a heavy burden on their shoulders. I ask the Minister to do anything that can be done to improve the situation for parents. I know that the Minister is sympathetic, and I understand that he is doing his best to work within his remit. I urge him to make every effort through his Department to make it easier for those young adults to have a future, and to make it easier for their parents.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls upon the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide the opportunities and support necessary to ensure that young people leaving special-needs schools at 16 and over 19 years of age can further their education and aspire, where appropriate, to meaningful employment.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Regional Investment Inequalities

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.

Ms Anderson: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on Invest NI, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Executive Committee to develop urgently, and implement, new and innovative measures for tackling the existing patterns of regional investment inequalities; and to target resources and efforts towards those in greatest objective need.

Sinn Féin's decision to table the motion is part of a necessary political campaign to fundamentally challenge Invest NI's corporate mindset and to positively transform the existing patterns of inequality and disadvantage in regional investment. The Programme for Government pledged all Departments and Government agencies 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 irony of the Alliance Party's amendment is that that party supposedly campaigns for the Executive to meet to address social needs, yet the same party has called for the deletion of that Programme for Government objective from the motion.

Sinn Féin will not allow that overarching commitment to be sidelined or soft-soaped by the Alliance Party or by the vacuous statistical contortions that have increasingly become the hallmark of Invest NI's propaganda workshops. Sinn Féin supports indigenous small and medium-sized enterprises, but that sector must be bolstered. Although Sinn Féin is conscious of the effects of the global credit crunch, when it comes to the location of foreign direct investment initiatives sponsored by Invest NI, there is, undoubtedly, a major institutionalised problem in the Six Counties. Therefore, Sinn Féin is not merely questioning or criticising, but actively lobbying for major investment from overseas urgently to locate in the most deprived areas of the Six Counties and the border corridor. That will ensure that those who suffer most from the conflict do not get left behind in the peace.

A fine example of Sinn Féin's efforts came during the US investment conference in May 2008. Sinn Féin worked successfully, despite Invest NI, with local communities and human rights activists to persuade the New York State Comptroller, Tom DiNapoli, and representatives from the New York City Office of the Comptroller to visit some of the most deprived areas in Belfast and Derry to see for themselves the huge potential for regeneration. For the record, Invest NI did not even put west Belfast or anywhere west of the Bann on the golfing itinerary, never mind on the investment agenda.

That is only one of many reasons that led Sinn Féin to step up its campaign for a full inquiry and report from the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Public Accounts Committee. Their focus should be on patterns of investment distribution and, notably, Invest NI-sponsored foreign direct investment across the Six Counties over the past decades.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) is belatedly and as a consequence of the Varney Review II organising a general review of Invest NI. As far as Sinn Féin is concerned, the more scrutiny of Invest NI's failings, the better. Therefore, I publicly invite every political party in the Assembly formally to support Sinn Féin in its campaign for those two substantive reports on Invest NI.

It is worth remembering that the last substantive report on investment distribution patterns in the North was published by the Westminster Public Accounts Committee some 10 years ago, and the areas of social economic deprivation have hardly changed in the interim. That is what makes the patterns of inequality that Sinn Féin uncovered over the past decade so shocking. For example, one in three of all first-time inward investment projects promoted by Invest NI was located in South Belfast — although not, I hasten to add, in the Markets area or Donegall Pass. Furthermore, one in two of all new jobs promoted by Invest NI was created in the three north-eastern constituencies of South Belfast, East Belfast and East Antrim.

Over the past decade, the constituencies of east Derry and North Antrim, both served by MPs from the DUP, received no new first-time inward investment projects promoted by Invest NI. Using a range of indicators, the amount of Invest NI jobs created and projects promoted in South Belfast routinely exceeded the combined total for the entire border corridor of Foyle, West Tyrone, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and Newry and Armagh. Worst of all, Invest NI and DETI have refused to provide Sinn Féin with detailed statistics of the number of jobs created or lost either by parliamentary constituency or with specific reference to client companies in Foyle. Its excuse was the absence of a so-called comprehensive data set.

3.00 pm

Moreover, Invest NI and DETI have refused to provide Sinn Féin with detailed statistics on the amount of financial assistance and overall investment that has been secured in parliamentary constituencies and, specifically, in client companies in Foyle. They claim that the cost of publishing that information would be too expensive; however, I presume that that refers to the cost of their own credibility.

It is important to note that Invest NI's failure to collect and collate that basic statistical information for public scrutiny contradicts directly the clear recommendation that was contained in the respective reports of the Auditor General and the Public Accounts Committee 10 years ago. Some Members will, undoubtedly, seek to defend Invest NI by using empty buzz words such as "labour mobility" or by referring to the type of creative accounting that characterises Invest NI's bulging expenses sheets, which I recommend are examined and held up for public scrutiny. However, I will leave it to some of my party colleagues to tackle the spurious arguments that Invest NI has creatively concocted to defend its maintenance of regional structural inequalities. When scrutinising Invest NI's expenses sheets, the media could perhaps investigate the close relations between the Assembly's business-class membership and Invest NI's extended family.

Although parties might argue about the causes of the existing regional investment inequalities, it is Sinn Féin's firm view that the reasons are structural and systemic. No party can credibly dismiss the realities. The Alliance Party's attention-seeking amendment is merely a spoiling exercise that, as usual, ignores the needs of society's most vulnerable individuals. In contrast, Sinn Féin supports a modern economic agenda that recognises the interdependency of sustainable economic growth and sustainable social improvement. Therefore, unsurprisingly, we reject the amendment.

For those reasons, Invest NI, DETI and OFMDFM must introduce new and innovative measures urgently to tackle existing inequalities and target objective need. Sinn Féin will work with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure that such measures promote new standards of equality in regional investment patterns on the basis of efficiency, effectiveness and economy. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Neeson: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "inequalities;" and insert

"recognises that businesses will seek to make investment decisions primarily for economic and financial reasons; and calls for action to address the current barriers to labour mobility."

The Alliance Party welcomes the motion, given that it highlights a relevant issue. The increasing numbers of visitors to Northern Ireland have not failed to notice that Belfast city centre is booming. However, they have also noticed that such prosperity is not shared across Northern Ireland or, indeed, in Belfast. In fact, the Belfast City Council area has the third highest gross domestic product or gross value added per capita of any UK city except Edinburgh and London.

Members are entitled to question why that strong performance has not spread elsewhere; however, the issue cannot be resolved by resorting to outdated ideology.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Neeson: Sinn Féin has a particularly high representation in areas of greatest need. However, the areas of Northern Ireland that are in greatest need now are the same places as 10, 20 and 30 years ago. That indicates that the Assembly must try a new course, rather than seek Government intervention or allocate Government resources, which will, certainly, be more limited in the future.

One of the proposers of the motion represents West Belfast, which is the most deprived constituency in Northern Ireland. However, almost one third of all Northern Ireland's employment lies within two miles of the centre of that constituency.

Opportunities exist, but segregation, division and poor services — particularly in housing, transport and education — disable people's access to those opportunities.

This issue needs practical solutions that are focused not on increasing red tape and Government intervention, but on enabling people to share growing prosperity by ensuring that they have access to jobs — wherever those new jobs are located. For that to be achieved, it must be remembered that businesses create wealth and high-quality employment. The role of Government is that of an enabler. The costs of dividing our society are paid by the very investors who should allocate all their resources to tackling exclusion — not propping up artificial segregation. People must have access to jobs, both physically, through sustainable transport and housing; and educationally, through training and skills.

Ultimately, this issue — like so many others — is about ambition. In our society, in our economy and even in this Assembly, we are obsessed with looking after our own communities. Rarely are we interested in looking after the community as a whole. As a result, we get the idea that what is good for one community must be bad for another community, whether the segregation is along the lines of religion, class, or whatever. It is time that we got rather better at looking at the bigger picture — getting to a stage at which

training or job opportunities that are created anywhere are good for people everywhere, not just in one small district.

The segregation of our society continues to come at a great cost. It means that ongoing fear and distrust are present in society, in the economy and even in the Executive. For our economy, it means that there are severe limitations on labour-market mobility. In other words, it is time that many people got on their bikes.

We live in uncertain economic times, but one economic absolute is that prosperity comes to places with the highest levels of labour-market mobility. If people cannot move house or workplace for fear of being labelled by the other side, we will all be condemned to poor economic performance and, therefore, to relative deprivation compared to our neighbours.

Segregation is a clear competitive disadvantage. It is to the shame of this Executive that they have failed to tackle it, despite claiming to make the economy their priority. The cost of division and the need to rebalance the economy have an impact on the public services that potential investors could use. During this Assembly term alone, the provision of education, leisure and health facilities on a segregated basis has already cost billions — money that could have been invested in our workforce.

The unbalanced economy means that the skills that are available to businesses are limited because they are seized by the huge public sector, or by the brain drain due to private-sector opportunities elsewhere. It is no good saying that investment opportunities are limited in certain locations when our investment potential is not being maximised in the first place.

Other aspects of Executive policy have failed to tackle levels of economic inactivity and exclusion. Nearly half of those who are economically inactive in Northern Ireland have mental-health problems. Despite the budget for tackling such problems already being comparatively lower than those of our neighbours, we find the Executive content to cut the health budget in real, comparative terms.

Social exclusion can be tackled by reforming our education system, delivering better social housing and investing in a much more ambitious public-transport system, so that people have access to a range of job opportunities. In that regard, the Executive are either gridlocked or blocked.

Although the Alliance Party welcomes its broad content, the motion hints at the passive acceptance of a failed policy, rather than a determination on behalf of one of the main Executive parties to put things right.

The issue is not that investment is not going to certain locations, but that people in certain locations are being denied access to the jobs and prosperity that would

result from such investment, which is limited anyway due to the Government's failure to tackle the root causes of segregation, division and exclusion in our society. It is time for change, and it is time for Members of the Assembly to realise that it is time for change.

Although there is some value to this debate, the debates that are being undertaken in the Chamber remind me of those in the Forum for Political Dialogue in the Interpoint building. In other words, unless the Executive meet again soon, the Assembly will be discredited not only in the eyes of the public but in the eyes of the world.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): On my own behalf, I welcome the motion, and I commend the Member who proposed it.

For some time, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has been awaiting the answers to several questions about matters relating to the motion. Last year, the Committee welcomed the fact that growing the economy was stated as a top priority for the lifetime of the Programme for Government, which built on the consensus that had been achieved prior to devolution in the Preparation for Government Committee.

In addition, the Committee welcomed the fact that DETI and Invest NI had been given a high-profile budget to deliver on that commitment. Accompanying that responsibility is a compelling need to address regional investment inequalities, and the enhanced budget capacity provides an opportunity for a properly planned subregional commitment, incorporating real financial capacity, which the Committee has discussed on several occasions.

In the past, the Committee has expressed concern that the Department's spending priorities did not include sufficient resources for the social economy and offered only limited resources for local economic development. Committee members were concerned that DETI appeared to be reducing its budget in that area of growing importance, and having expressed concern, we received assurances from Ministers and Invest NI about the suggestion of psychological withdrawal from local social-economy initiatives.

The Committee is also concerned about achieving the best balance between the effort to attract foreign direct investment and support for local businesses — both existing businesses and newer, more innovative enterprises.

Committee members have continued to stress that, in order to tackle social and economic inequalities and to add to the sum of opportunity in the region, the Executive must provide joined-up support for local businesses in areas of economic disadvantage.

At Budget time, the Committee expressed concern about the removal of the integrated development fund, which was a good means by which local people could work to secure support from different parts of Government and to attract identifiable funding for cross-cutting initiatives. Unfortunately, the Budget did away with such means, which could, for example, have provided the exact wherewithal for Limavady to respond to the challenges that it faced after Seagate closed.

In addition, questions arose in the Committee about Invest NI's, and, indeed, DETI's, corporate plan. In the past, Invest NI encouraged investment in targeted areas of social need, but in its 2008-11 operating plan that goal was removed and replaced with a commitment to secure 75% of land acquisition in areas of economic disadvantage. We have questioned that a number of times. In particular, I have stressed concerns about the need to understand the implications, and the real meaning, of that shift and what it represents, and we have still to receive clear answers. The Member who proposed this motion probably shares that concern.

Given that Invest NI always claims that that target was a success, what is the rationale for doing away with it and replacing it with a target that is about land acquisition rather than job creation and location?

3.15 pm

On several occasions, the Committee raised the case for Invest NI having a stronger subregional emphasis in its work. Last week, the Minister met the Committee and told members about the review that she is commissioning into Invest NI and wider matters of economic development. We welcome that initiative from the Minister and her Executive colleagues' agreement of to it. She has offered the Committee the opportunity to contribute to the terms of reference for the review — we will want to clarify some and amplify others; not least, the final term of reference, which mentions:

“the sub-regional distribution of inward investment and the effectiveness of policy in encouraging the location of investment.”

The Committee also wants to see a subregional element in relation to indigenous business. The subregional issue should not only relate to inward investment, it should relate to support for indigenous business also. Such support is echoed throughout the Chamber.

The Committee is also concerned about how the Start a Business programme is being developed. We hope that the Minister, when conducting her review, will reconsider some of the changes that are being made to the programme, so that the new contracting system will not suffer from the same problems that have affected some of the other DEL programmes.

Mr Newton: I support the amendment. It is the responsibility of all elected representatives in this

Chamber to do everything possible to ensure that there is prosperity and that career opportunities are available in equal measure to all our constituents. The question is how we can bring that about.

Had Members felt inclined to support the motion, the Member proposing it may have put them off doing so. What came through during her speech was a communist, or Stalinist, approach to the economy — the kind of thinking that brought about collective farming in other areas of the world, and we all know what that led to.

Obviously, a greater level of mobile, inward investment must be attracted to Northern Ireland. That will not be easy in the days ahead, given the current economic climate. Although many people are talking about it, we are not in a recession currently, difficult as times may be. Given the current world economic downturn, there is limited potential in the banking and finance sectors. However, in spite of the current difficulties, we must be certain that Northern Ireland is ready for an upturn when it comes.

We must make Northern Ireland economically attractive to investors — not only those from overseas but indigenous businesses with the opportunity and potential to expand. In the area of excellence in education, we must produce high-quality, motivated and qualified students, especially students with qualifications in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects. We must develop motivated and entrepreneurial businesspeople, as well as a creative business culture that embraces risk-taking and within which business failure does not carry a stigma.

Additionally, we must ensure that the skills base of our labour force can be benchmarked favourably against the best in the world. That can only be ensured if we start to embed business sense into the education system during children's very early years, by incorporating it into the primary curriculum. Primary-level education must encourage business thinking and entrepreneurship, as is commonly found in other countries. We compete with such countries currently and will do so in the future.

Secondary-level education must provide the opportunity to gain meaningful vocational qualifications and the increased opportunity to gain access to higher educational courses and attainment of vocational foundation degrees or, where relevant, other types of degrees.

We must have apprenticeship training schemes that can be measured against the best in the world, and not be found to be inferior, to give our young people the best possible training options.

Road, rail and air links will be important features in the future, and we must ensure that those links are available if businesses are to locate in Northern

Ireland. Of course, technology links are no impediment to our business success. We are fortunate in Northern Ireland in having such technology links in place at present and a measure of that success is readily apparent in the successful roll-out of broadband in Northern Ireland

Furthermore, as the proposer of the amendment suggested, we must also encourage mobility in our working-age population: jobs cannot always be guaranteed to be on the doorstep.

If we can put in place our business culture, job skills and support infrastructures, mobile investment will be attracted to — at the very least — consider Northern Ireland as a potential place in which to invest.

I reject the narrow thinking that is implicit in the motion. We all want to see prosperity and jobs located in our own constituencies. However, it is the businessmen and women with funds to invest who will make the decision whether — and where — to locate in Northern Ireland. If we can create the right conditions, the whole of Northern Ireland will benefit through business success.

Mr Cree: The motion under debate calls for the Executive Committee urgently to develop new measures to address so-called regional investment inequalities. I will come to the economic policy issues in a moment, but first I must examine the irony, although perhaps much stronger terminology could be used. The irony is that Sinn Féin Members have tabled a motion calling on the Executive Committee to act urgently when that party has blocked all meetings of the Northern Ireland Executive since the 19 June — 110 days ago.

In the midst of a global economic crisis that is seriously affecting the economies of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, Sinn Féin has brought the work of the Executive to a halt. Across the world, Governments are striving to keep pace with the economic threats and challenges that appear daily. What does Sinn Féin do? It vetoes any meetings of the Northern Ireland Executive during the most serious economic crisis that the international economy has witnessed since perhaps 1929 — I do not personally remember those events, by the way. Sinn Féin now has the affront to table a motion calling on the Executive urgently to address an economic policy issue. The motion simply cannot and should not be taken seriously. After three months of vetoing Executive meetings, amidst a global economic crisis, Sinn Féin has neither the necessary political or moral authority to call on the Executive urgently to address economic matters.

If this motion were to gain the support of the House, how exactly does its Sinn Féin proposer expect it to be implemented? How can the Executive Committee urgently develop policies on regional investment when

the Executive Committee has not met for three months as a result of a Sinn Féin veto?

I, and my party, agree that there needs to be a debate on regional investment policies. For example, there must be a debate on the role of foreign direct investment in the present economic climate. Furthermore, there must be a serious debate on whether we should reconsider our reliance on foreign direct investment as the core of our economic policy or whether, perhaps, we should move to a renewed emphasis on indigenous business start-ups.

However, today is not the day for such a debate. Why? Because of Sinn Féin's intransigence in blocking any meetings of the Executive during an economic crisis. The Northern Ireland public will, quite rightly, not take the Assembly seriously if we are seen to support a Sinn Féin motion requesting the Executive urgently to address economic policy while that party continues its three-month veto on Executive meetings.

That being the case, I, unfortunately but respectfully, see no merit in engaging meaningfully in debating a motion that, in present circumstances, has no meaning. Therefore I oppose the motion.

Mr Hamilton: I support the amendment because it is rooted in the real world. My colleague Robin Newton detected some Marxism — some old-style communism — in the comments of the mover of the motion, Martina Anderson. Although I accept that she and her party have a different ideology to mine on economic matters, her contribution was another example of a speech that was more Groucho Marx than Karl Marx.

Thankfully, I have no insight into republican thinking, but I could have made a fairly good stab at guessing what the Member would say and what her party colleagues will say later.

However, I acknowledge and welcome Sinn Féin's conversion: its members are now calling for investment in Northern Ireland. I wonder, as I am sure do other Members, where the fundamentals of our economy would be today had it not been for Sinn Féin's support for the IRA and the succour that that party gave to it down through the years when that organisation did all in its power to destroy businesses in Northern Ireland, to deter investment here and to single out and murder members of the business community. Would the areas that the Member and her party are trying to identify in the motion be as blighted had they not been in the grip of terrorism for so long? Members should ponder those questions.

I want to see the whole of the Northern Ireland economy grow and develop, and I want to see every area and everyone in every area do well out of a booming Northern Ireland economy. That situation may not be easy to visualise at this time, when we are

facing the sort of financial crisis that Mr Cree talked about. Indeed, his comments were valid. I want the worst areas and the people who are the worst off in those areas to do well out of any investment, but one must live in the real world. Businesses will base investment decisions on what is best for that business, and they will seek to locate their business in an area in which they will have an advantage.

The Assembly cannot do anything to make those decisions for the businesses; that is not what we do. As a Government or, indeed, as an Assembly, we are not in the business of making such decisions. The area that is best suited for the location of a business may well be in the Member's constituency or in the constituencies of the other Members who tabled the motion, or it could be in my constituency of Strangford.

Mr McCarthy: Hear, hear.

Mr Hamilton: I hear one voice in support of that idea. If we wanted to go down the whinging-and-whining route that we have come to expect from Sinn Féin Members during debates on this type of motion, I could match them by whinging and whining about Strangford.

An Invest Northern Ireland publication, 'Invest NI at a Glance', provides some details on the amount of inward investment and financial assistance that has been made on each person in the population, and, it shows that constituencies such as mine are among the worst off. I could stand here and whinge and whine about how badly off my area is. The figures in that publication show that the constituencies from which the Members who tabled the motion come are doing well out of investment and financial assistance per capita and also out of company visits that are organised by Invest Northern Ireland. They are doing better than other constituencies, such as mine and those of my colleagues. However, we do not whinge and whine about it, because we see the whole Northern Ireland economic picture. We acknowledge that Northern Ireland will boom if Belfast is booming. Likewise, other places will boom if their surrounding areas are doing well.

I do not accept the argument that people in north or west Belfast will not benefit from investment unless it is made in their areas. I wish that the Titanic Quarter development was within one mile of the boundary of my constituency. That area provides one of the biggest employment opportunities in Northern Ireland's history, and it is within a mile of west Belfast and is probably less distance from the boundaries of north Belfast. Huge employment opportunities have been created, and that is where the issue of mobility, as mentioned in the amendment, is pertinent.

I welcome the review into Invest Northern Ireland, as did both Sean Neeson and the Chairperson of the

Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I do not hold any torch for Invest Northern Ireland; it is important that the work of that body is reviewed. Invest Northern Ireland should be focused on doing what it can to develop the whole Northern Ireland economy so that everyone benefits, rather than merely spreading the wealth and investment around the country.

3.30 pm

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. This is not only a major issue for members of Sinn Féin: it is a big issue for many of the small and indigenous businesses across the North. During the past year, I met several business owners in the north-east branch of the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB). Their attitude to Invest NI is one of severe criticism, and they recognise that regional inequalities must be addressed. That criticism deals not only with regional inequalities, but covers dealing with Invest NI in general.

In its response to the Varney Review last year, FSB stated that:

"Invest NI has not been a fully engaged partner with the small business sector... Whilst its corporate plan pays lip service to the desire to help develop small business in reality a large proportion of members are unhappy with the outcomes from their dealings with the body."

There is not only a problem with regional inequalities; there is a whole array of problems with Invest NI. I welcome the fact that the Minister will carry out a review. It is hoped that that review will be far-reaching and bring to Invest NI a degree of transparency that has not been seen to date.

My constituency has some very stark figures with regard to the work that Invest NI has not done over the past 10 years. I listened to the Alliance Party talk about outdated ideologies, etc. It is wrong for the Alliance Party to turn a blind eye to the inequalities that exist in society and the causes of those inequalities. At this time, people will understand the need:

"to target resources and efforts to those in the greatest objective need."

as the motion outlines.

However, the figures in my constituency speak for themselves. My colleague Martina Anderson referred to the fact that there had been 133 first-time Invest NI inward-investment projects over the past 10 years, along with 17,180 jobs promoted by those projects — none of which has been in North Antrim. Over the same period, almost 15,000 new jobs had been promoted by reinvestment projects from externally-owned clients, and only 35 of those were in North Antrim. Over the past five years, there were close to 700 visits by potential inward investors, and only three came as far as North Antrim. The issue affects not only

republican and nationalist areas; it affects unionist areas as well.

When Sinn Féin says that it wants to deal with the inequalities and target those based on objective need, it will do so regardless of religion or political opinion. Sinn Féin wants to target and help those in greatest need — and more people will come under that category over the next few months as the recession kicks in.

I welcome the Minister's decision to review the workings of Invest NI and the need for that to be transparent. We must ensure that regional inequalities are addressed, and Invest NI has yet to demonstrate that it is willing to address those inequalities. It must start to listen to some of the criticisms levelled against it — not only by ourselves, but by small and indigenous businesses. The response that they get is one of ignorance and disdain. That approach is all wrong and it must be reviewed.

The opportunity exists to change the remit, policies and direction of Invest NI so that investment is directed to areas of greatest need, and investors are actively encouraged to locate in those areas. There is a clear need for Invest NI to listen to what businesses say that it does, and to change the way it does business. Only then will Invest NI be able to address the extreme lack of confidence that many in the business and wider community have in it. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Gallagher: I support the motion. It is regrettable that the debate takes place against a backdrop of an Executive that are unable to function.

The public, particularly the business community, expects the social and economic interests of the people whom we represent to take precedence over any narrow political interests, especially those obstructing Assembly business.

I agree with Sean Neeson about the difficulties that we all face in attracting investment to Northern Ireland — that is a fact. However, my party colleagues and I oppose the Alliance Party's amendment because it distracts from the main issue of addressing regional inequalities. The amendment refers to labour mobility; however, to talk of labour mobility is, in many cases, to let the powers that be off the hook. Some of my constituents — who support the various parties in the Chamber — are losing their jobs in the public sector, for example, in the Water Service, and their options are not good: they are being asked to move to Belfast — that is the kind of labour mobility that is being presented to them. Therefore, the SDLP cannot support the amendment.

There are difficulties across the board, but they are particularly acute in Fermanagh and Tyrone because of the legacy of neglect of the west. There are some clear priorities for addressing that legacy, not least a step up

in Invest Northern Ireland's general approach and in the Department for Regional Development's approach to roads infrastructure. I commend the Minister for announcing a review of the activities of Invest Northern Ireland, because that agency has so far failed to address the problems here, particularly in the west.

Simon Hamilton mentioned visits that were organised by Invest NI. In 2006 and 2007, Invest Northern Ireland brought 230 possible investors to Northern Ireland, but none could be brought to Strabane, the biggest employment black spot in the west; and only one of them could be brought to Fermanagh, which is the second-biggest employment black spot.

Devolution was supposed to make a difference to the lives of people here. Since devolution, Invest Northern Ireland has published a new strategy, the aim of which is to concentrate on directing all investment towards Belfast and Derry. Labour mobility is hinted at, which does not bode well for Fermanagh. I hope that the review of Invest Northern Ireland will include an in-depth exploration of tourism. Much has been made of signature tourism projects, but where are they based? They are in Antrim or Down — none of them is based in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, areas that attract large numbers of visitors.

Last week, the Bain Report on public-sector jobs highlighted the poor roads infrastructure in the west. Enniskillen and Cookstown, which are in the west, and Downpatrick, which is in Mr Wells's constituency, were not chosen as locations for public-sector jobs because of their very poor infrastructure and transport facilities. It is time that we took the subject of the motion seriously. In parts of the North, and especially in the west, the Department's record on inward and infrastructure investment — and these are areas in which there is no alternative to roads — has, so far, been very poor.

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

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I thank the Members who tabled the motion. I also thank the proposer of the motion who, at the outset, was upfront about the motivation behind it. She said that Sinn Féin's decision to table the motion was part of a political campaign against the corporate mindset of Invest NI.

That is very upfront, and it lets us know where the motion is coming from. Mr McKay tried to resile slightly from those comments in his speech, but it is clear that one party wants to make a political campaign against Invest NI. However, it is very upfront about that, and I thank it for that.

I welcome the motion. First, it allows me to reaffirm the commitment of the entire Executive team to fulfil

their responsibility to support the regions of Northern Ireland that have deep-rooted and complex social and economic problems. I should say at the outset that, as a representative for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, I have a clear understanding of the issues. Tommy Gallagher outlined our thoughts on the Bain Report and what it had to say about roads infrastructure, not taking into account that, in this modern era of technology, accessibility does not necessarily mean that people have to travel by road. Secondly, the motion enables me to clarify the capacity of my Department, via its policies, programmes and resources, to impact on regional investment patterns. Thirdly, it affords me the opportunity to clarify for the Assembly the regional investment patterns that have arisen as a result of Invest NI's activity.

As the motion acknowledges, the Programme for Government recognises that achieving sustainable economic growth and improving prosperity for all will require strong and determined action to address poverty and disadvantage. However, the complexities and underlying causes of the problem place an overarching responsibility on the Executive to address existing patterns of economic and social disadvantage proactively. Therefore, a co-ordinated cross-departmental approach is vital if we are to be successful in helping the most vulnerable in our society and create strong, vibrant and sustainable communities that we all desire.

There are targets in the Programme for Government that focus on delivering economic improvement, and they are supported by a number of public service agreement targets that have an economic development focus. However, Sean Neeson made the point — and it was reiterated by Robin Newton — that those targets are the responsibility of other Departments, including the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Education, the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Economic development policies and initiatives, and the investments that flow from them, are not the exclusive responsibility of one Department, nor can they be substantially impacted on by the actions of one Department acting in isolation. Through its focus on productivity growth and increasing employment, my Department can, and does, make a significant contribution to the overall objective.

The role of Invest Northern Ireland is to contribute to the growth of Northern Ireland's economy by helping new and existing businesses to compete internationally and by attracting new investment into Northern Ireland. I want to pick up on a point that was made by Mr McKay, who said that the FSB had expressed discontent with Invest Northern Ireland. Invest Northern Ireland does not deal with very small

companies, and I have been examining that issue to see whether there is a gap.

Invest Northern Ireland deals with companies that have potential for export or that already export. Mr McKay also commented that indigenous companies were not being supported, but, over the past five years, some 54% of all assistance by Invest Northern Ireland has gone to locally-owned NI companies.

Inclusivity is the cornerstone of the approach for Invest Northern Ireland. As its corporate plan makes abundantly clear, its overriding objective is to increase business productivity in order to create wealth for the benefit of the whole community.

DETI and Invest NI are primarily focused on business development and growth — that is what we have been tasked to do by the Executive. Indeed, we do not have powers to intervene on a social basis. At a time of credit crunch and global economic difficulties, focus on business development and growth is essential.

However, our work is underpinned by the principles of equality of opportunity, anti-poverty and social inclusion. DETI and Invest NI are fully committed to contributing to the Government's objective of developing a balanced regional company.

We have consistently demonstrated our commitment to ensuring that services can be accessed by businesses and individuals throughout Northern Ireland. Invest Northern Ireland uses its influence, where possible, to alleviate the problems of economic disadvantage and to help narrow the gap in key indicators such as economic inactivity.

3.45 pm

Invest Northern Ireland seeks to ensure that its programmes and services can be accessed by businesses and individuals throughout Northern Ireland. It is scrupulous in ensuring that it meets its equality of opportunity obligations and in its reporting of its activities and their spatial impact in a transparent and detailed manner. Those activities are published in Invest Northern Ireland's 'Performance Information Report 2002/03-2006/07', which I commend to Members, and which is available on the organisation's website.

However, there is a limit to what Invest Northern Ireland can achieve and influence, given its limited access to policy levers and resources. In a resource allocation context, the annual Invest Northern Ireland programme activity budget amounts to approximately £150 million. To put it another way, that amount represents less than 2% of the Executive's annual Budget.

Invest Northern Ireland has given a firm commitment that, over a three-year planning cycle of its corporate plan, it will ensure that 75% of new land acquired for the use of its clients will be located in disadvantaged

areas. Furthermore, it is important to note that we also ensure that 70% of new foreign direct investment is located within 10 miles of an area of economic disadvantage.

Those are well-judged, practical and sensible targets, and they are a direct response to the travel-to-work patterns that characterise modern economies, including that of Northern Ireland. It must be recognised, however, that there are no longer any self-contained labour markets for foreign direct investment projects. People are now much more willing to travel to other areas in order to reach their place of work.

Invest Northern Ireland has the facility to offer enhanced rates of assistance to projects that are located in disadvantaged areas and has used that facility to good effect. Invest Northern Ireland has sought, with some success, to encourage potential inward investors to consider locating in disadvantaged areas. Between 2002 and 2008, for example, 71% of first-time inward-investment projects assisted by Invest Northern Ireland were located in such areas. In addition, 51% of all financial assistance offered by the agency during the same period was to clients located in such areas, the populations of which account for only 30% of the Northern Ireland total. By any measure, that is a significant skewing of Government assistance to those in areas of greater need, mainly in rural areas in the west of the Province.

It is important to examine investment patterns, which are the result of a wide variety and complex set of location decision-making factors, of which the availability of serviced industrial sites and access to financial support are secondary. Invest Northern Ireland's interventions are by their nature largely demand-led and driven by private-sector clients — both companies and individuals — bringing forward their proposals for growing their businesses. That is important, because people are making commercial decisions about what they are going to do.

As I said earlier, a project that is assisted in a particular location has significant potential to create benefits across a much wider area. Many investors draw their workforces from areas beyond council or constituency boundaries. Even the workforce of a hospital, large school or Government office will show that pattern. Much has been made of the fact that a large proportion of inward investment in Belfast is located in the south of the city. In reality, however, 96% of inward investment in Belfast was located within a three-mile radius of the city centre, thereby creating employment opportunities accessible to all in the greater Belfast area. Indeed, it should be noted that almost three quarters of those who work in South Belfast live outside that constituency area.

Making judgements that are based on superficial comparisons of performance across the different geographical areas of Northern Ireland is highly and, undoubtedly, wilfully misleading. People should consider what they are saying when they make those points.

It is also important to consider the new companies that have come to Northern Ireland to do business in the manufacturing and tradable service industries. Invest Northern Ireland has assisted projects in a range of locations, such as Armagh, Bangor, Larne, Newry, Antrim, Enniskillen, Strabane, Kilkeel and Carrickfergus. Recently, in the north-west, significant project announcements have been made by key investors such as Du Pont, Perfecseal Ltd, Firstsource Solutions and Fujitsu. It is important to note that those companies have made investments in Northern Ireland, and instead of using the anti-capitalist rhetoric that we have heard here today, we should be welcoming those companies to Northern Ireland and encouraging them to invest more.

The amendment rightly recognises that businesses make investment decisions primarily for economic and financial reasons. Unfortunately, the days of philanthropic investments have long since disappeared. Internationally-focused businesses, particularly those supported by Invest NI, will first choose to invest in Northern Ireland, and secondly to invest in specific subregional locations, only for sound economic and financial reasons. They will only invest if they perceive the commercial risk to be acceptable, and, after that, they will then consider whether they can generate a sufficient return on their investment. The level of commercial risk is determined after consideration of all location decision-making factors, such as political and economic stability; labour and skills availability; roads infrastructure; transportation linkages and affordability; accommodation; and grant assistance.

The amendment also calls for action to address the current barriers to labour mobility. The Department, through Invest NI, seeks to ensure that it has sufficient land zoned for industrial use for the use of its clients across Northern Ireland. At the moment, Invest NI is targeting specific areas in which it needs to increase its holding. Its land bank has been fast diminishing in recent years as a result of strong client demand, and it only has approximately 750 acres currently available for letting to clients. That is something that needs to be addressed.

Arguments have been put forward concerning a perceived neglect of the north-west, or an east-west bias regarding chosen investment locations. The reality, when one considers the facts, is very different. Investment secured per head of population shows that Invest NI-supported projects in the north-west have resulted in the highest level of planned investment per head of any part of Northern Ireland. That is not a

vacuous statistical contortion; those are the facts. They may not sit very well with Ms Anderson's warped anti-capitalist view of Northern Ireland, but those are the realities. If Ms Anderson wishes to make any specific allegations in relation to the expenses of members of Invest NI's board, I firmly suggest that she write to me, so that I may investigate everything that she produces.

To repeat: although the Department and Invest NI seek to fulfil their role in tackling regional disparity, they do not have all of the policy levers and resources to materially influence spatial patterns of investment.

Finally, Members will be aware that I announced to the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment last week that there would be an independent review of economic development policies and programmes. That review will examine the structure and remit of Invest NI, as well as the subregional distribution of inward investment, and the effectiveness of policy in encouraging the location of investment. I will, of course, keep the Members of the House informed of the progress of that review.

In conclusion, if the deep-rooted and complex social and economic causes of disadvantage are to be successfully addressed, the co-ordinated effort of all parts of the Executive, as well as the support of the private, voluntary and community sectors, will be required to ensure that investments are utilised to the maximum benefit of those in our society in the greatest need. I can assure the House that the Executive is fully committed to focusing on those important issues, and will continue to do so. The success of the Programme for Government will depend on all Ministers and their Departments working closely together to ensure optimum economic outcomes on an equitable basis for all of Northern Ireland. I can also assure the House that the Executive, my Department and its agencies, including Invest NI, have been playing, and will continue to fully play, their role in this important matter.

Dr Farry: I welcome the fact that we are having this debate today, although I must express regret at some of the thinking that has been expressed by the proposers of the motion. Everyone in the House will agree that there is an issue to be discussed regarding the distribution of economic opportunities across Northern Ireland, but there is a profound disagreement as to the means of best addressing that. The proposers of the motion have demonstrated outmoded economic thinking that is a relic of centuries long ago. They are essentially speaking about a command economy rather than a market economy. One would have thought that the lessons that were painfully learned during the twentieth century would have demonstrated the fallacy of a command economy, whether under national socialism or communism.

Market economies are the only way to ensure that there is maximum economic prosperity for societies around the world. That is accepted internationally by most people. Sinn Féin seems to be more concerned about how the cake in Northern Ireland is divided, rather than its size.

Mr Wells: The honourable Member will be interested to know that, in the past six years, there have been 165 inward-investment visits to the constituencies of the four Members who tabled the motion. Considering that North Antrim received three, South Down received five and Strangford received nine, those Members can hardly complain that DETI and Invest NI are not making an effort to bring inward investment to their constituencies.

Dr Farry: The Member makes a good point, which I will address shortly.

We must appreciate that there is a limit to how much we can direct the location of investment. As the Minister clarified, businesses will ultimately take decisions that are based on economic and financial reasons, which she broke down into the competitive issues that they will examine, such as transport and the local skills base. It is hard enough to attract investment to Northern Ireland, particularly of a high-quality and high value-added nature, without attaching further strings to the location of that investment.

We have to acknowledge that investment has been made in areas that are close to deprived communities across Northern Ireland. As Sean Neeson stated, there is a high GVA and high employment in Belfast. However, those figures are largely based on commuters coming into the city, which means that there are people who live in Belfast who miss out. For example, although the gasworks site is next to the Markets and Donegall Pass areas, very few people from those areas are employed there. Why is that?

The investment that has been made in Belfast is closer to people who live in West Belfast than it is to those who take most of the jobs and commute from the suburbs of the greater Belfast area and beyond. Why are people in West Belfast not taking those jobs? Therefore, insisting that jobs are created on the doorsteps of certain communities does not address the fundamental problem, which goes much deeper. Forcing the issue will buck the market for no reason, which is to the ultimate disadvantage of Northern Ireland.

We must address skills gaps and the levels of economic inactivity, including issues that are linked to disabilities and mental-health problems. We must invest in accessible and sustainable public transport and address segregation caused by peoples' fears of moving to an area because a different side of the community is perceived as dominant there.

An efficient and effective economy requires full and proper labour market mobility, which we do not have in Northern Ireland. We have a two-speed society, in which an advanced section has labour-market mobility and is able to access jobs, and the remainder do not. The Executive must invest their efforts in addressing the barriers that exist for some people to access jobs, instead of micromanaging the economy, which has no discernible benefit — and is potentially detrimental — to the economy in Northern Ireland. The economic situation is fragile enough as it is.

I stress the Alliance Party's support for a review of Invest Northern Ireland, which I think will have support from all sides of the House. There is a range of issues that must be addressed, but the motion is flawed. I urge Members to support the amendment.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I make no apologies for whingeing and whining, which Simon Hamilton accused me of, or for having outdated or outmoded ideologies. The motion is not about whether people can travel to and from employment; it is about helping people who live in disadvantaged areas where there is deprivation and need.

The motion calls for investment to come into those areas, provide employment for local people and help to grow the local economy. If that is whingeing and whining, that is fine. Long-term economic development that is stable, sustainable and socially beneficial to all is at the heart of the motion.

4.00 pm

Invest NI has a long history of not delivering publicly-sponsored investment to areas such as West Belfast and North Belfast, which have some of the most deprived electoral wards and super output areas in the North. For example, of 16 inward-investment projects for Belfast that Invest NI offered £20·7 million of assistance to in 2006-07, none were located in the west Belfast and greater Shankill area. Some of my colleagues have already provided statistics and mentioned the difficulty in getting those statistics from Invest NI. During the past 10 years, the number of jobs that were promoted by Invest NI-sponsored first-time inward-investment projects totalled 4,748 in South Belfast compared with 1,302 in West Belfast, despite the fact that five of the most distressed wards in the North are located in West Belfast. The people of West Belfast and of areas west of the Bann are entitled to have investment opportunities come into their areas.

During the debate, Leslie Cree, among other Members, attacked Sinn Féin I do not know how many times. The previous leader of his party brought down not only the Executive, but the entire Assembly. Therefore, it is a bit ridiculous of him to lecture Sinn Féin on whether the Executive meets.

The subject of the debate is the long-term corporate approach of Invest NI and its predecessor, the Industrial Development Board, which has damaged areas and groups that already suffer significant disadvantage. Even in economic terms, that approach is outdated, incompetent, wasteful and short-sighted. I have noted the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's comments. She said that equality of opportunity and social inclusion underpin Invest NI's corporate plan. However, she did not explain why half of the assistance that it has offered has gone to clients that are already located in affluent areas. It does nothing for people in disadvantaged areas. That must be remembered.

New and innovative measures to integrate sustainable economic growth and social improvements on the basis of objective need are the cornerstone of modern economic development. Mark Durkan and Tommy Gallagher referred to that. The core of the issue is the compelling need to challenge regional inequalities. Job creation must be targeted towards TSN areas. That is the only way. People do ask to live in poverty or to be poor. Social inequalities put people in that situation.

Ms Gildernew: I listened carefully to the Minister's comments. My constituents will be disappointed that she defended Invest NI's abysmal record in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

Speaking in my capacity as MP and MLA for that constituency, I ask whether the Member is aware that, according to figures that have been published by DETI, my parliamentary constituency experiences an economic inactivity rate of 36%, compared with 17% for East Belfast and 19% for East Antrim. Is the Member also aware that the number of new jobs that were promoted by first-time inward-investment projects that were sponsored by Invest NI during the past decade was just 641 in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, compared with almost 5,000 in South Belfast?

Does the Member agree that the Minister's strong support for Invest NI is yet another example of the worst excesses of big-house unionism, which rides roughshod over the objective needs of working-class and socially deprived unionists, nationalists and republicans throughout my constituency? The Assembly must stand up for people's rights. My party will not be afraid to campaign against patterns of inequality, especially generational inequality, which Invest NI has perpetuated.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Member for her comments. It is also clear, regardless of whether the Assembly agrees, that the areas that receive the lowest levels of financial support and investment are predominantly nationalist areas. No matter what statistics are quoted, that is the reality. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Ms J McCann: We must take every opportunity to ensure that those directly affected by social and economic disadvantage are also directly targeted by the public organisations responsible for creating and retaining employment. We may be facing an economic downturn — or whatever Members like to call it — but there are still opportunities for us to build for the future. Our priorities must be to protect jobs and to bring forward planned funding for the delivery of major infrastructure projects in roads, housing, education and health as outlined in the investment strategy.

We must use procurement programmes by ensuring that all public procurement expenditure — including that for services, works and goods — integrates long-term economic and social sustainability through the development of creative contract compliance measures in relation to corporate delivery. That important measure could have a significant impact by targeting the long-term unemployed and the economically inactive in the areas that I have talked about. Through the creation of apprenticeships, we can collectively develop a wider sustainable skills base.

We must ensure that local small-to-medium enterprises and social-economy enterprises enter competitions for public contracts at a tendering stage with the same level of expertise as other larger companies, since that will positively impact on the local economy. That is what we are talking about: building local economies.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: No.

We are not just talking about people travelling to and from the city centre into work, but rather building local economies to produce social outcomes and challenge poverty, disadvantage and need.

Invest NI has failed on several levels. In particular, it has not delivered for areas of severe disadvantage, such as North and West Belfast — sorry for whingeing, Simon. Invest NI must be held to account for that. The promotion of equality of opportunity in the discharge of public funds is essential if people are to have confidence in public bodies and organisations.

Members have talked about everything in this debate: skills, technology and mobility, and Sinn Féin has been attacked quite a number of times. The party opposite has talked about outmoded and outdated ideologies, Marxism and communism — but we have not about regional inequalities. That is what the debate is about.

Neither I, nor my party, apologise for tabling the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 40; Noes 22.

AYES

Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Neeson, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Farry and Mr McCarthy.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Ms J McCann, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Anderson and Mr McKay.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on Invest NI, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Executive Committee to develop urgently, and implement, new and innovative measures for tackling the existing patterns of regional investment inequalities; recognises that businesses will seek to make investment decisions primarily for economic and financial reasons; and calls for action to address the current barriers to labour mobility.

Adjourned at 4.19 pm.

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