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# OFFICIAL REPORT

(HANSARD)

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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 10 November 2008

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

**Mr McCausland:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the Assembly last Monday, the Member for West Belfast Gerry Adams said that he denied and refuted certain statements which I had made about him. In your ruling on Tuesday, Mr Speaker, you also said that he had denied and refuted them.

The primary meaning of the word “deny” is to say that something is wrong; the primary meaning of the word “refute” is to prove that something is wrong. In view of the fact that Mr Adams did not prove anything, will you, Mr Speaker, clarify what Mr Adams said and confirm to the House that Mr Adams merely denied the charges?

**Mr Speaker:** Let me make it absolutely clear. I dealt with this issue last Tuesday. As Speaker of the House, I am absolutely clear that I dealt with the issue correctly. We should move on.

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### Maternity and Parental Leave etc. and the Paternity and Adoption Leave (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008

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

That the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. and the Paternity and Adoption Leave (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

I seek the Assembly's approval of the regulations, which are subject to the confirmatory procedure as laid down in the parent legislation, which is the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. The regulations were made on 1 September 2008 and came into operation on 1 October 2008.

It will be helpful to Members if I outline the background to the regulations. The Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 implements the European Union directive on equal treatment for men and women as regards access to employment, vocational training and promotion and working conditions. The equal treatment directive was amended in 2002 and the 1976 Order was subsequently amended accordingly. Comparable developments took place in Great Britain, where the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 was amended. In February 2007, the former Equal Opportunities Commission, which is now the Commission for Equality and Human Rights, brought judicial review proceedings against the UK Government, challenging its implementation of the 2002 amendments.

The High Court in London heard the judicial review on 27 and 28 February 2007. The High Court judgement, which was handed down on 12 March 2007, required the Government Equalities Office in Great Britain to amend the provisions in the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 on harassment and on pregnancy and maternity-leave discrimination. Northern Ireland legislation in that area corresponds to that of Great Britain, so the High Court ruling made it necessary for similar changes to be made to the Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976.

In April 2008, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister duly introduced changes to Northern Ireland legislation that amended the 1976 Order. It is sufficient to point out today that the amendments included provision to eliminate certain distinctions between periods of ordinary maternity leave and additional maternity leave. As a result of the changes, a woman could have a claim to an industrial tribunal if she were not afforded the same benefits of the terms and conditions of her employment during additional maternity leave — apart from pay — as she is during ordinary maternity leave.

Following that change, the Department for Employment and Learning, for the purposes of legal clarity, is amending the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999 to clarify that non-pay terms and conditions are available throughout the entire period of statutory maternity leave. The 2008 regulations will amend the sex-discrimination framework and will clarify the rights and responsibilities of employees and employers. Corresponding changes are being made in Great Britain for the same reason.

Members may wonder how adoption leave will be handled. Since statutory adoption leave and pay were introduced in 2003, the rights of an adoptive parent on adoption leave have — where possible — been kept in line with those of a biological mother who takes maternity leave. In order to continue that parity of entitlement, the Department has included comparable changes to adoption-leave provision in the regulations. Those changes come at a minimal additional cost to employers, and they ensure that adoptive parents have the same entitlements as biological mothers. The introduction of an unwelcome disparity in treatment between the two groups of parents is therefore avoided. Furthermore, by minimising differences between maternity and adoptive leave, unnecessary confusion is prevented. Again, corresponding steps are being taken in Great Britain.

The practical effect of the changes to both forms of leave is that a mother or an adopter is entitled to continue to access non-pay benefits during the full 12 months of maternity or adoptive leave, rather than during the first six months alone, which was previously the case.

Benefits to particular individuals will depend on their contracts but could include the use of a company car, access to a healthcare scheme or the use of a company mobile phone. Importantly, annual leave that is provided as part of the contract will now be built up over the entire period of maternity or adoption leave, rather than during only the first six months.

A preliminary equality impact assessment identified that beneficiaries of the change will be new mothers and adoptive parents. There are no adverse equality impacts. A regulatory impact assessment estimated that the cost to employers in Northern Ireland will be approximately £160,000 per annum for the adoptive measures and £4.83 million per annum for the entire package. Initial familiarisation costs are estimated at approximately £260,000.

I am grateful to the Committee for Employment and Learning and to the Office of the Examiner of Statutory Rules for its scrutiny of the regulations. I am also grateful to the Committee for its recommendation that the regulations be confirmed by the Assembly.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the

motion. The Committee first examined the Department for Employment and Learning's proposal on the regulations on 25 June 2008 and examined the proposed statutory rule on 1 October 2008. On both occasions, the Committee was content with the policy proposals.

The Minister explained to the House the purpose of the regulations, as well as the technicalities that are involved. The regulations will mean that women and adopters will now be able to take a second leave period of 26 weeks without fear of harming their terms and conditions of employment. That should be welcomed by us all, and it will mean that women and adopters will not feel that they have to hurry back to work if they are not ready to do so after the initial 26 weeks of leave.

Although I am pleased to give the Committee's support to this amendment to the regulations, I draw the Minister's attention to the fact that I have received reports recently stating that some men are not getting the paternity leave that they are entitled to, nor are they being given the stated flexibility as to when they can take that leave. Although I appreciate that the leave must be taken as a block, it does not have to be taken straight away. I call on the Minister to ensure that the entitlement and the connected flexibility are well publicised and that his Department seeks out employers who are not granting the full two-week paternity entitlement to those employees who are new fathers.

On behalf of the Committee, I am pleased to support the Minister for Employment and Learning's motion.

**Mr Newton:** I also welcome the legislation. When it comes to the health and welfare of children — either natural or adopted — the Assembly should adopt policies that are friendly towards children and that support the family in general.

In welcoming the legislation, I will make a small, but important, point. The amendment is another piece of legislation and bureaucracy, the administration of which is being imposed upon small employers without any support from Government. It will therefore create another burden, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises, which are so prevalent in the Northern Ireland economy. Some aspect of that burden must be considered. Indeed, in the past, the House has expressed concerns about such red tape and bureaucracy and the way in which they impede the expansion of those companies.

Although I welcome the amendment, I caution that it is another example of such bureaucracy.

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter:** I support the motion, and I thank the Minister for tabling it. The Ulster Unionist Party is a strong supporter of the family and of the benefits that it can bring, particularly to children. The party is also a strong supporter of people — women and men — maintaining their ability to put their vital

skills into the economy while supporting their families and fulfilling their individual potential.

Furthermore, the regulations, which change entitlements under additional maternity leave, will allow employees to achieve a better balance between their working and home lives. People should not be discriminated against for taking their full maternity leave entitlement, and the regulations will mean that many parents will be able to avoid having to make a difficult choice between home and work commitments.

It is also vital and correct that the regulations have been extended to include additional adoption leave. Parents who adopt children have as equal a right as any other parents to nurture their families while continuing with their employment.

Some may argue that introducing regulations that will cost business should be discouraged, particularly at this time. However, I note that the costs that the Minister outlined are relatively small, and although the UUP is naturally wary of unnecessary regulation for business, we support good regulation.

This is a good regulation that will, in the long run, help businesses and families alike. It will help businesses to retain those people whom they value and whom they have trained. For some parents — especially women — it will reduce some of the need to make difficult choices between family and working life. I thank the Minister, and I support the motion.

12.15 pm

**Mr Attwood:** I join other Members in welcoming the regulations. This debate — and this afternoon's debate on the maternity hospital — could mean a big day for babies and parents. As an expectant father, I look forward to taking the — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Kennedy:** You should have declared an interest. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Attwood:** Yes; I ought to have declared an interest. I look forward to taking two weeks' paternity leave if and when that event occurs.

I note the point that was made by the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning about the potential for more red tape for businesses. However, given how well maternity arrangements are embedded in most businesses in Northern Ireland, I do not envisage that the new regulations will prove an undue burden.

My concern is the same as that outlined by the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning — that there is a risk that some unscrupulous employers may not adhere to the new requirements, particularly in light of the current economic downturn. I join the Committee Chairperson in asking the Minister

to outline what efforts will be made to monitor the new arrangements to ensure that such a scenario does not arise.

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I am grateful for Members' contributions, and I will deal with a few of the points that were raised. The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning indicated that she felt that there may have been some evidence of improper treatment. If she has such evidence, I would be grateful if she forwarded it to me straight away, and I will ensure that it is investigated. I also appreciate her support and that of the Committee.

Mr Newton, Mr Attwood and the Rev Coulter mentioned the burden on businesses that may result from additional red tape and bureaucracy. We all understand fully — particularly in respect of sectors that have a high concentration of small businesses — that no one wishes to see that burden increased; nor do we wish to see businesses spending further moneys to deal with that.

However, I shall make two comments on that matter. First, it is important to consider that the genesis of the regulations is European-wide law. A case has been taken to the High Court in London and a judgement has been handed down that makes it absolutely clear that the current legislation was in breach of the United Kingdom's international obligations. As Members will know, under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Assembly is obliged to ensure that the United Kingdom's international obligations — as outlined in treaties — are adhered to. Consequently, we have no choice whatsoever in that matter.

I also wish to deal with the issue that was raised by the Rev Coulter on work-life balance, and I underline the point that Mr Attwood made: maternity leave is a well-established process in companies. My Department believes that the administrative burden of the regulations will be relatively minor because systems dealing with maternity-leave issues already exist in all companies. The regulations remove the distinction between the first six-month period of leave and the second. Therefore, in some senses, the regulations make the process more straightforward.

There is wide support throughout the House for adoptive parents. The regulations remove any possible distinction between adoptive and biological parents. There is no reason for such a distinction, and we are saying that all parents — adoptive or biological — are equal, and the regulations are translating that into law. I consider that an entirely appropriate thing to do.

Any unscrupulous employer who fails to adhere to the regulations is leaving himself or herself vulnerable to an employee taking a case to an industrial tribunal. Affirming the regulations will ensure that employees' rights are enshrined in law, which means that if anyone

attempts to breach those rights, they can be taken before a tribunal and will have to face the consequences of that.

I am not aware of any arrangements being put in place to deal specifically with implementing that resolution. I am happy to check and write to the Member about how it will be monitored. However, when the proposals become part of employment law, the matter will be subject to action by any employee who feels aggrieved, and it would be a foolish employer who went down that route, because that would be a clear breach of the law. The measure will also provide clarification where that was lacking. Furthermore, it will be introduced throughout the United Kingdom, so everybody will be on the same page, and that is to be welcomed.

I support the fact that, as Rev Robert Coulter said, parents' vital skills will be maintained in the workforce. Indeed, it would be most unfortunate if people had to decide between contributing to the economy or remaining with their children, and most working families have for years had to face that dilemma. Providing that adequate arrangements are in place for raising children, the Department would encourage as many people as possible to continue to participate in the economy, because many of those people, particularly women, have acquired skills and qualifications, and we wish to remove, rather than create, obstacles to their participating in the workforce. That being the case, I commend the motion to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That the Maternity and Parental Leave etc. and the Paternity and Adoption Leave (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Post-Primary Transfer

**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 move the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes in which to speak. Two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. Each proposer will have 10 minutes in which to move their amendment, and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes in which to speak.

**Mr B McCrea:** I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to end the uncertainty facing parents and teachers of children in Primary 6 by continuing with the existing post-primary transfer test until a replacement is designed and piloted by CCEA.

One year and six months ago, shortly after the restoration of devolution, the Minister of Education stated:

“My priority in every instance will be to put the welfare of children first.”

One year and six months on from the Minister of Education making that statement, the four main Churches last week issued a statement in which they felt:

“compelled to give voice to a deep unease among teachers and parents of primary school pupils, especially those parents with pupils in year 6”.

In addition, they expressed the fear that:

“year 6 children are increasingly likely to become anxious or distressed”.

Irrespective of recent debates and disputes about general education or about post-primary transfer, it cannot be denied that the deep unease to which the Churches' statement refers emerged on the Minister of Education's watch, and I find that quite incredible. The public is also questioning what the people on the hill do. Therefore, we must tackle those issues.

It is not just the Churches that are making such statements. In September, primary-school principals made their voice heard in the pages of the 'Belfast Telegraph', and it is worth relating some of their comments:

“The 11-plus will come to an end at the end of this year and we do not know what will replace it. That's just crazy.”

Another principal said:

“It is time for politicians to face up to reality — no new system will be in place in time for our P6, and even P5, cohort of children. The only option is to reinstate the old system and give children the choice whether or not to sit the Transfer Test. Then the politicians can take all the time they want to debate a replacement.”



I could quote from other sources, but the important thing to remember is that those comments were made by educationalists — not the ideological comrades of the Minister. They were made by teachers who have responsibility for children and for delivering education, and who are distressed at having to talk to anguished parents.

An Education Minister in any Administration carries a hefty, even weighty, responsibility. The hopes, aspirations and the futures of our children and — to some extent — society rest with the Minister of Education. Year 6 children, and their teachers and parents, want and need certainty about post-primary transfer arrangements. It is the duty and responsibility of the Minister of Education to deliver that certainty. Instead, the Minister has delivered anxiety, unease and threats of chaos, sanctions, and a fear that there is worse to come. Three months into the academic year of the current year 6 children, parents and teachers do not know what transfer procedure pupils will face next year. I am reliably informed that we may hear something soon, but I have heard that for the past year and six months.

The prospect of unregulated arrangements — or, as the four Churches described it, rightly, last week, an “abyss” — remains real. Such an outcome would be little more than institutionalised uncertainty; it offers no prospects for the future of our children.

It is difficult to suppose how the Minister of Education could make things worse, but ideologues rarely disappoint. In May, she announced that the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) could, after all, design a transfer test, which, admittedly, would be in place for only three years. However, she discovered that CCEA could design such a test — a situation, which, previously, we were told was impossible. The Minister wants the present year 6 children to sit that test.

It is ironic that Westminster's Children, Schools and Families Committee published its report on testing and assessment in May. That report addressed the Westminster Government's intention to introduce a single-level test for Key Stages 2 and 3 in English and maths. It is hard to escape the similarities between that and the proposed CCEA test. The report states:

“When so much is at stake, we consider this haste inappropriate at best. Our predecessors warned the Government about bringing in new tests with undue haste. We recommend that the Government allows sufficient time for a full pilot of the new single-level tests and ensures that any issues and problems arising out of that pilot are fully addressed before any formal roll-out of the new regime to schools.”

CCEA — the educational professionals — told us also that one cannot merely introduce a test. It must be prepared, validated and checked to be given a proper chance. It is not possible to introduce a new test in the timescale that is envisaged.

We informed the Minister of those facts, but she did not agree. In a heady mixture of ideology, arrogance and, some might say, incompetence, she said that there was no need for pilots of the new test to be carried out. She said that the year 6 children will sit the test that will be designed by CCEA, the production of which she refused to accept until May. That is part of her plan to exclude academic criteria from the transfer procedures.

Cynics will be forgiven for thinking that the Minister's ideological hostility to the use of academic criteria has led to that decision. Has the Minister's ideological bias led her to condemn year 6 children to an unproven, unpiloted and hastily-designed test? Perhaps she will answer that question when she responds to the debate. I do not believe that those actions are responsible, especially when there is an alternative.

12.30 pm

It might not suit the Minister of Education as regards an ideological position, but it would let year 6 children know exactly what they faced. She could extend, for a limited period, the current arrangements. We would then, as was called for in last week's statement from Church leaders, have the ability:

“to stand back from established positions and to create the space necessary so that, through dialogue between those with different outlooks, the best way forward may be found for all children”.

Surely that is the proper way forward.

I make it absolutely clear that neither I, nor my party, wish the 11-plus to remain beyond such a limited time. We are not defending the 11-plus; we recognise that it is far from perfect and that there are better things that we can do. However, it has several advantages — not least the fact that it has been around for quite a considerable time, it has been tried and tested, people know what they are supposed to do with it, and we can introduce it. Even at this late hour, it is within the power of the Minister of Education to prevent our education system from falling into chaos. She can set aside her ideological prejudice, put the welfare of children first, and extend the life of the present transfer test.

Over the past few weeks, we have heard, through the world media, considerable discussion about change and hope. One of the most significant comments that I heard from the President-elect of the US was that it may take more than one hour, more than one day — even more than one term — to introduce change, but that change is coming. We in the Ulster Unionist Party are not against change: we want to see change introduced. However, we also hope that we will see an end to the sterile politics of sectarianism, to parties representing narrow sectional interests, parties that cannot work together, parties that put ideology before children, and parties that have the arrogance to assume to dictate to parents.

The Ulster Unionist Party is anxious to hear what other parties have to say. However, in reality there is only one alternative, and that is to take away the misery of parents, teachers and children in P5 and P6 and extend the existing arrangements, pending proper negotiations.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Trevor Lunn is not available to move amendment No 1; therefore, amendment No 1 falls.

**Mr D Bradley:** I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after "Primary 6" and insert

"by presenting to the Executive the papers needed to advance change and avoid the dangers of deregulation; and calls on all parties to show due consideration, responsibility and urgency in the delivery of a sustainable outcome for the schools system which can be defined by both equality and excellence."

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá an-áthas orm leasú uimhir a dó a mholadh.

When the amendment was originally lodged with the Business Office, it referred to presenting papers without any specific reference to the Executive. However, for some reason, the Business Office saw fit to change the amendment without any consultation with me. Nevertheless, the part of the motion not in contention is the need:

"to end the uncertainty facing parents and teachers of children in Primary 6".

Mr McCrea has already referred to that. We all know that that uncertainty exists, and the Minister also knows that it exists. A serious gap has developed, and the anxieties of parents are flooding in to fill that gap.

The present vacuum is unfair to parents and teachers but, worst of all, it is unfair to the children in P6 who were told that the test was off and then told that the test was on. Those children are bewildered by the whole situation.

Agus, a Cheann Comhairle, ar a son sin agus ar son na bpáistí siúd atá níos óige tá dualgas orainne deireadh a chur leis an éiginnteacht seo agus soiléiriú a thabhairt dóibh.

For those pupils' sake, and for the sake of younger primary-school pupils, it behoves all Members to do all within their power in order to ensure that uncertainty is ended and clarity is brought to the situation. We can continue to table motions that demand this, that and the other, but the public wants us to reach a degree of consensus that will allow for forward movement. We can all bury our heads in the sand and take entrenched positions, but the public will not forgive us for prolonging the uncertainty and anxiety that so clearly exists.

At the moment, unfortunately, there seems to be no prospect that agreement will be reached, and that regulations on how to deal with transfer will be agreed. If that is the situation, schools will have to determine and apply their own admissions criteria, with the

Department of Education offering only guidance. If we continue to disagree, an unregulated system may well come into being, which will create even greater confusion. Schools that use their own tests may face the prospect of legal action, which, sooner or later, will render such a system inoperable. A lack of regulation is not a sustainable solution to the situation with which we are faced. In fact, that would lead to a nightmare scenario, which we must ensure does not arise. It is for that reason that the SDLP amendment calls on all parties, including the Minister's party, to:

"show due consideration, responsibility and urgency in the delivery of a sustainable outcome for the schools system which can be defined by both equality and excellence".

The Ulster Unionist Party's motion suggests that we should continue with the status quo until another test is put in place. As we all know, however, the status quo is not an option. Likewise, we all know that there is general dissatisfaction with the 11-plus, and simply to replace it with another test is not a solution. There are no tests of the current transfer type in reserve or in preparation, and it is too late for the CCEA to commission and trial such tests. In addition, such a proposal is contrary to the will of educationalists and that stated by all political parties. The objective of moving towards long-term certainty will not be achieved by further delay and procrastination, particularly when such behaviour is motivated by political interests rather than an understanding of the context in which education is being delivered or the professional views of teachers and educationalists.

Mr McCrea said that we should continue with the 11-plus in the interim because it has been around for a long time. That is exactly the point: we have tried 12 versions of the 11-plus, and each has been found wanting. Why, then, should we continue with a thirteenth version? I note that the Alliance Party has withdrawn its amendment, and I welcome that, because the Alliance Party amendment proposed only a temporary solution.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I do not want to interrupt the Member, but I must point out that the Alliance Party has not withdrawn its amendment. Rather, Mr Trevor Lunn was unavailable to move the amendment.

**Mr D Bradley:** I stand corrected. That being the case, I reiterate my point that the Alliance Party's amendment does not offer a solution. It calls for the clarification of a proposed temporary post-primary transfer test, but we need a long-term solution that will address a long-term situation.

Mr McCrea agrees that change is needed. The need for change is being driven by the global economy. The PWC report, 'Transforming School Leadership', states:

"The vision articulated in the recent Programme for Government (PfG), of Northern Ireland as a small but thriving, outwardly orientated

export-led economy, will not be realised unless something is done to improve the outcomes our education system is delivering.”

The revised curriculum and the entitlement framework in ‘Every School a Good School’ are designed to achieve those outcomes.

Change is needed because of the ongoing demographic decline. We cannot simply allow some schools to thrive while others wither on the vine, having been starved of pupils by neighbouring schools. Area-based planning and the sustainable schools policy aim to deal with that situation through partnership and collaboration between schools and other education providers. Change may be difficult, change may be painful, but change is needed. To unnecessarily delay change is to damage our future prospects and those of our children.

For too long, the debate has centred on the idea of a test at age 11. There must be greater flexibility if we are to move forward. The use of criteria at age 14 has been mooted recently. That has not been rejected out of hand by all parties, and agreement on the matter is possible. The pupil profile — which was a feature of the Costello Report — may still have a role to play in the process at age 11 and beyond.

Aspects of those proposals formed part of the Churches’ joint statement. As the Church leaders stated, they represent an opportunity for all parties to step back from their stated positions and to look for an agreed way forward. That is exactly what the public wants of us. More of the same will not move things forward; it will only keep us stuck where we are at the moment. No one will benefit from that, least of all primary 6 pupils.

I call on all parties to accept the SDLP amendment and to show due consideration, responsibility and urgency in the delivery of a sustainable outcome for the school system that can be defined by equality and excellence. A Cheann Comhairle, gabhaim buíochas leat. Go raibh míle maith agat.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey):** I will first speak as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, and then I will say some other things, free from the shackles of the responsibilities of that role.

I draw Members’ attention to the Committee’s scrutiny of the Education Minister’s proposal for transfer from primary to post-primary education in the last year. The facts need to be placed on record, lest there be concern — as some people believe — that the Committee for Education was less than relevant in the debate. Following the Minister’s statement to the House on 4 December 2007 outlining her proposals to reform the education system, the Committee wrote to the Minister with 30 questions regarding the proposals.

Following a most unsatisfactory discussion with the Department’s permanent secretary and senior officials, the Committee wrote to the Minister again on 14 January 2008 in an attempt to clarify her vision statement for post-primary education. That letter sought answers to the Committee’s questions and asked that the Minister attend a meeting with the Committee as a matter of urgency.

*12.45 pm*

The Committee received a written response to its 30 questions minutes before its meeting with the Minister on 31 January 2008 — a process regarding responses from Ministers and Departments that has become wearying not only to the Committee for Education, but to other Committees. There followed a less than satisfactory question-and-answer session with the Minister of Education. In view of the nature of the written and oral answers that it received, the Committee again wrote to the Minister on 8 February 2008, seeking responses to 27 points of clarification and further questions. Another 10 points of clarification were forwarded to the Minister on 18 February 2008.

On 29 February 2008, the Minister wrote to the Committee with answers to its 27 points of clarification and questions. On 14 April 2008, the Minister responded in writing to the Committee’s request for 10 further points of clarification. The Committee received a written update from the Minister of Education on transfer proposals on the evening of 15 May 2008. The Minister appeared before the Committee, would you believe it, on 16 May 2008 — surprise, surprise.

The Committee then scrutinised the Minister’s updated proposals and sought views on them from key educational stakeholders. As well as the 18 responses that were received, the Committee commissioned specific views on the proposals from the five political parties that are represented on the Committee. The Committee considered all those responses in a number of meetings over June and early July and wrote to the Minister on 4 July 2008. That letter contained copies of the responses and a note of the Committee’s discussions, all of which were published on the Committee’s pages on the Assembly website.

On 8 September 2008, the Minister responded to the Committee’s letter of 4 July 2008:

“the materials you enclose with your letter were extensive and complex and warranted much consideration...and I am pleased that your letter offers the opportunity for some useful engagement.”

That was as much as the Committee got by way of recognition until the Minister came to the House and accused the Committee for Education of not delivering and of not engaging in the debate.

I remove my Committee for Education hat and now speak as the DUP’s education spokesman. It is totally and absolutely unacceptable that, in the context of being just 11 days away from the final 11-plus, the

Education Minister, who sits on the Benches opposite, has not yet got an agreement, a way forward or a replacement. That is not the fault of Members on this side of the House. The Minister has constantly and continually stated that she is the Minister of Education. She said, of course, that there was a growing consensus in the country about the future of education. Catholic head teachers do not believe that there is a growing consensus, and the four main Churches in Northern Ireland do not believe that there is a consensus. The wheels have obviously fallen off the Minister's consensus cart.

On the issue of the statement from the four main Churches, I welcome that there is now a consensus on one issue — academic selection. I recall that the Minister said that academic selection was immoral. I hope that the four Churches are not now advocating that something that she deems immoral is now acceptable. I support the motion.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the SDLP amendment and oppose the Ulster Unionist Party motion. I listened carefully to Basil McCrea's contribution on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. He spoke eloquently for 10 minutes without putting forward any proposals on behalf of his party in relation to the 11-plus. The Ulster Unionists have failed to produce any policy on how to deal with the transfer issue not just for the past 10 minutes but for the past 18 months.

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

**Mr O'Dowd:** I will not give way. I have only started.

One thing that is known is that if legislation is to be passed, agreement must be achieved. Those who advocate academic selection and who claim to have secured it as part of the St Andrews Agreement may well have done so. What they have not secured is agreement from this side of the House on how to move the transfer process forward. Legislation requires agreement in the House.

I listened with interest to last week's statement from the four main Church leaders. Some Members quoted from the statement today, but their quotations have been selective, because they failed to mention the fact that the Church leaders said that it is wrong to have a selection process at the age of 11, and that it is wrong for someone to decide on the future pathway of a child's life at that age. The Church leaders spoke about the use of criteria to access courses at the age of 14 and about the possibility of including academic criteria. Their statement deserves further investigation and clarification, and I hope that, in the coming days and weeks, we will receive that clarification and have further discussions on it.

A wide and diverse group has become involved in the debate, as should be the case. The Institute of

Directors and the trade union movement have told us that selection at the age of 11 is not appropriate, and the vast majority of educationalists agree with that.

The children who sit the 11-plus this year will be the last children to do so. We are clear about that. In the future, there will be no 11-plus in this system. It has failed previous generations, and it should not be allowed to fail future generations. Parents of P6 children, P6 teachers and, indeed, P6 pupils deserve to know, and need to know, what is going to happen. The revised curriculum will prepare children for the future —  
[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order, order. The Member has the Floor.

**Mr O'Dowd:** The revised curriculum will prepare children for whatever challenges they will face.

**Mr B McCrea:** When will the parents and children find out about the proposals?

**Mr O'Dowd:** That is a matter for the Minister, not me. If Members fail to reach agreement, the Minister will be duty bound, in the coming weeks, to make an announcement on the admissions criteria. Therefore, it is the responsibility of everyone in the Chamber to reach political agreement. That is the first step. However, if Members do not reach agreement, we will have to move forward.

People talk about certainty, but what certainty is there for children who have just sat the 11-plus? There is no certainty about their success in that test.

**Mr Storey:** It is said that, if something is repeated often enough, people will believe it, but I am growing weary of that. My son sat his first 11-plus paper last Friday, but he will not be a failure if he does not pass the test, because he knows that his future will be based on hard work and opportunity, which the Minister is not prepared to give to the children of Northern Ireland.

With regard to pupil profiles, they may as well be torn up and thrown in the bin.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Fortunately, no one is suggesting that we use pupil profiles. I wish your son well in the 11-plus, but, at the moment, there is no certainty for a child in P7. Everything depends on the child's results and on how many people applied to any particular school. Children will not know definitively what school they are going to until May 2009.

The parents of P6 children and P6 pupils must have clarity. However, if we do not reach political agreement, the Minister will be duty bound to make an announcement on the admissions criteria.

I urge Members to exercise caution in their use of language during debates on this subject. Basil McCrea spoke about children being in misery. Children in the Democratic Republic of Congo are in misery, children

in war-torn Afghanistan are in misery and children in Iraq are in misery, but we should not use the word “misery” to describe the state of parents and children who do not know what the future transfer arrangements will be. That is not the correct word to use.

Children should be allowed to enjoy their primary-school experience, and they should be allowed to enjoy the revised curriculum. The one thing that we can agree on — and even the Association for Quality Education can agree on — is that the revised curriculum will prepare children for whatever challenges they will face in the future. Therefore, we should let them enjoy it. We should not use nine- and 10-year-old children as political ammunition to fire at one another, because it is wrong.

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

**Mr O’Dowd:** I have already given way to two interventions.

In conclusion, I support the SDLP’s amendment. However, I am opposed to the Ulster Unionist Party’s motion; it maintains the status quo, so we cannot support it.

**Miss McIlveen:** It will come as no surprise that I support the motion. The DUP has consistently called on the Minister to provide leadership and end the mess and confusion that she has created. It is disappointing that we are still asking for that to happen, even after one of the last 11-plus tests has been taken.

It is astonishing that we have to keep coming back to this issue, and it is amazing that the Minister continues to ignore the Members of the Assembly, principals, teachers, parents and even the leaders of the four main Churches when they tell her that her attitude is harming children. How many calls do people need to make before the Minister realises that she has not provided clarity and that she does not have stakeholders’ support? How many grammar schools, or schools under the aegis of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), have to state that they wish to retain academic selection before she realises that that is something that schools want? The Minister’s role is not an impossible one, but it requires her to listen. Unfortunately, she has yet to listen.

I do not wish to labour points that I have made before in the Assembly on numerous occasions. I merely wish to call on the Minister to show maturity and to recognise that it is not the will of the people or of the Assembly to dispense with academic selection. The DUP has made it clear how it feels that progress can be made. Even if the Minister was able to dispense with academic selection, she has left matters too late to implement her plans, whatever they may be. It is time that she recognised and accepted that she is harming children with her actions.

The Minister waxed lyrical at a recent public meeting in Newry, when she talked about how she understood the importance of education. I do not agree with her at all, and I believe that the majority of people in Northern Ireland do not agree with her either. If she genuinely understood the importance of education, she would not be following her present course of action. Similarly, if she had the educationalists behind her, she would not have to resort to bullying schools.

The DUP feels that there may be a way to break the present impasse, and it has presented proposals to that effect. However, the Minister must realise that she is on a course that she cannot steer alone. In order to create and implement a system that will find support not only from politicians but from the people of Northern Ireland, she must engage with them. Consensus is not just a phrase to be used when walking away from a table when someone does not agree with you. It is something to be sought, not imposed. It is time that the Minister sought consensus and thought of the children and the impact that her intransigence is having on them. If she cared, she would talk, and she would find a solution.

It is clear that Sinn Féin is currently adopting a policy of it being its way or the highway. Indeed, it is living up to its name, “ourselves alone”. That is not the way a coalition, be it mandatory or voluntary, works. Perhaps the Minister believes that, as a Minister for schools, it is appropriate to adopt the politics of the playground. However, this is the real world of the Assembly. We need grown-ups, and we must ensure that we make grown-up decisions and that we do not resort to the tactics of the bully.

There is no reason that the Minister cannot accept the motion, other than her stubborn adherence to an ideological dogma that will be a wrecking ball to our education system. I ask the Minister to show some bravery and seek consensus, rather than continuing to cower behind the Sinn Féin propaganda machine in the vain hope that the problem will just go away.

**Mrs O’Neill:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the SDLP amendment; Dominic Bradley delivered his arguments in a constructive and helpful way.

Sinn Féin strongly believes that education can open many doors and should be readily available to everyone who wants it, not just those who can afford it. The education system in the North has had many successes, which have been regularly applauded, and I congratulate all who work to achieve them. However, as we all know, a tail of underachievement has been allowed to develop at the other end of the educational spectrum.

Around 12,000 young people leave full-time education every year with unacceptable levels of ability in literacy and numeracy. The vast majority of those young people

come from areas of social deprivation that have suffered during the conflict. That level of underachievement cannot be tolerated, and we cannot allow our education system to fail young people in that way. Sinn Féin is committed to building an education system that gives all young people the opportunity to reach their fullest potential.

1.00 pm

**Mr Storey:** Reference is continually made to the tale of underachievement. The Minister's Department commissioned Deloitte to carry out a survey on underachievement. Of the seven reasons that were given for underachievement, six identified socio-economic factors. The seventh reason made a slight reference to the presence of a selective system. However, the one issue that is continually used to back up the tale of underachievement is the ideological position that the Minister adopts in opposition to academic selection. Why is that the case?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member will have one extra minute in which to speak.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention. There are many reasons why children do not achieve acceptable levels of literacy and numeracy, but the 11-plus and the transfer system is one of the main reasons.

Sinn Féin wants an education system that produces creative, articulate young people, who can confidently take their place in the global community. The selective nature of the current education system contributes to the fact that many children leave school with poor qualifications or no qualifications at all. Change is needed for those reasons.

Much education reform is taking place, such as changes to the primary-school curriculum and to the entitlement framework. That reform means that children have more choices. Moreover, literacy and numeracy standards are raised. Further reforms include the establishment of a new education and skills authority and the development of area-based planning. All those changes can cause confusion, and I accept that many parents feel anxious about how their child will transfer to a post-primary school. On numerous occasions in the House, I have said that I am a parent of a child in P6, and, like every parent, I want the best for my son.

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Member tell the House what she thinks is the best and fairest way for children to transfer, if that is not to be done through the 11-plus or academic selection?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I want my child to transfer to post-primary provision; I want him to receive the same level of education as any other child and to be treated equally. That can be achieved only through political agreement in the House.

The Minister has set out her position for a compromise situation, whereby, over three years, she would allow partial academic selection, in order to allow schools time to adjust. Other parties did not take that compromise on board as a way forward. Sinn Féin wants an agreed way forward that ensures that all children are educated on the basis of equality and nurtured to help them achieve their full potential. If no agreement is reached, there will be an absence of admissions regulations. That is not anyone's favoured option, but it may be the only option and the only way forward. The best way forward is to provide certainty for parents on post-primary transfer through a legislative framework. I urge other parties to put children's needs first.

Sinn Féin understands that parents of P6 pupils want answers, and we are striving to provide those answers. We guarantee that current P6 pupils will not be used as guinea pigs. Sinn Féin puts the needs of children first. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Poots:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in this interesting debate. Children are in limbo, and that unacceptable situation has been brought about by the Minister's intransigence. The 11-plus is not going as a consequence of anything that the current Minister of Education has done but as a consequence of a decision that the direct rule Minister who preceded her made. Caitríona Ruane has done nothing to kill off the 11-plus, and the public perception should not be that she has done so. A British direct rule Minister made the decision.

There is an absence of anything with which to move forward. The Minister has not taken the opportunity to introduce and deliver, with the support of the House, a replacement for the 11-plus. No evidence has been demonstrated that that will happen any time soon. Is it any wonder, therefore, that the Catholic heads have spoken out to say that the Minister's proposals are unacceptable? Is it any wonder that, last week, the four main Churches said that time should be taken over the issue? The country needs time to change its education system. The Minister cannot simply bury her head in the sand and declare that this is the way that it is going to be and that everyone else must fall in behind to help her deliver it.

People clearly do not agree with the Minister on the issue. She does not have the support of the Churches, the schools or the other political parties.

She came forward with proposals to the Executive; however, those were not accepted. The Minister needs Executive support to deliver her wishes for education. If she cannot get that support, she cannot deliver: it is that simple. The Minister can continue banging her head against a brick wall, and she can continue to say that she is going to knock that wall down. However, that will not happen, because she needs to get consensus on views about education and, thus far, she has made

no effort to do so. Today, I challenge the Minister to get consensus, because we all care deeply about the education and welfare of our children and we want to provide the way forward for them.

It is nonsense to say that a child who fails the 11-plus has failed in life. Many people who did not achieve a grade A or B, or whatever, in their 11-plus and did not happen to go to grammar school are professionals, successful in business, or are engaged in work that is of great benefit to other members of the community. Failing the 11-plus did not make them failures, and it is a disgrace for Members on the Benches opposite to say that children are failures because they did not go to grammar schools. Many opportunities for people lie beyond grammar school.

However, one school report that does demonstrate failure is that of the Minister of Education. Her report is as follows: adhering to the ministerial code, fail; delivering an alternative, fail; communicating with schools, fail; demonstrating fairness and equality, fail; giving P6 children certainty on their future, fail. Comments on performance include: Caitríona fails to communicate well with other peers; she attempts to bully when others do not carry out her wishes; and she fails to pay attention to qualitative advice and appears to believe stubbornness will overcome rationale.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr K Robinson:** I thank the headmaster for that report; it was very interesting. I declare an interest as a governor of two primary schools and because my grandson sat his transfer test recently.

Mr O'Dowd provided a definition of the word "misery". The word "education" comes from the verb "educare", which is for all those Members who speak Latin, and it means "to lead out". In this instance, the Minister must consider the word "education", because she must lead us out of the mess that she has helped to create.

I have spent decades in the teaching profession, and, in all those years, I have never seen the spectacle of principals queuing to speak in front of a microphone or a television camera to express their exasperation, as well as that of staff and parents, and to reflect the uncertainty of pupils in the manner that we have seen recently. Principals are normally shy retiring people who like to keep out of the limelight. Therefore, when principals start to step forward, Minister, there really is a problem.

Recently, I read the report of a board of governors' meeting in which the school principal sought the board's views on the way forward. He asked the board to tell him what he could do; what he should do; and what he must do. The board, unanimously, told that principal that the school must continue to prepare pupils for whatever lies ahead, as has always been the case. A duty of care exists towards children, and the fact that that uncertainty exists reflects the seriousness of the

debate, which my colleague Basil McCrea expanded on when he moved the motion.

The first momentous step in a child's life is when he leaves the parental home and steps into his nursery or primary school for the first time. That momentous step is embodied in the words from a lovely poem — the more his feet went forward, the more his head turned back. It is a very emotional time. The second momentous step is when the child transfers from the safety of the primary school to the big school, be it a secondary or grammar school. The last thing that we need to do is add to the current uncertainty.

The whole history of making changes to the transfer procedure between primary and post-primary education has been a sorry spectacle. What should have been a thoughtful and measured process has been infected with political dogma and has descended into an unseemly mess. The sad thing is that the Minister must bear the lion's share of the responsibility for that because her fingerprints are all over the matter. Knowing that it was an issue edged with sensitivity and anxiety, it was the Minister's responsibility to implement a process that was genuinely inclusive and consultative and which gave the people a real sense that there was a genuine partnership Government approach to the transfer process. That has not been the case, and I am sorry about that, because it undermines the whole partnership approach to Government that is supposed to be at the core of how the Assembly operates.

The Minister must realise that consultation and achieving consensus is not about articulating her views in the same room as people who clearly disagree with them; it is about constructive dialogue, modifying views and attempting to build consensus. The trouble with the situation that we now find ourselves in is that it has become a real crisis. It did not have to be, but it has become one. Decisions need to be made, not only about our current P6 pupils, who are on the very edge of the selection process, but about the children in P5 and P4 whose needs must also be considered. There is no option at this late stage but to retain the current selection test and process for the next three years. That is the only viable option open to us.

Education planning is not a "pick and mix" process; it is a serious business, and it affects the lives and life chances, as referred to by Edwin Poots, of our children, who are our most precious resource. I do not pretend to be happy with the selection process as it stands; the concept of passing and failing is not what we should be about. I am glad that that point was challenged from this side of the House. There are no failures in our education system. Our children are different, not only in their backgrounds but in their families; we all know that there are differences among children in the same family. Our children have talents and areas where they need support.

The selection process should assess children on the basis of their individual aptitudes for school pathways that reflect and minister to their individual strengths. It should also take place within the context of parity of esteem for all schools and for all school pathways available to them. What we need now is a different kind of assessment procedure —

**Mr Speaker:** Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

**Mr K Robinson:** I will. Having said that, the current debate on academic selection has been mishandled and mismanaged, which means that we need decisions to be taken immediately. Up to now, the Minister has failed abysmally to lead in this case.

**Mr McCausland:** The most pressing problem regarding the whole issue is not academic selection in itself but lack of clarity about academic selection and the way forward. The prevailing uncertainty is having a corrosive effect on the system, whether it is expressed at public meetings, in newspaper columns, or in the views of principals or parents. The consensus is that there is lack of clarity.

The only certainty in all this is that the Minister is failing. Whether she likes it or not, the Minister is impotent — I was going to say incompetent — to prevent unregulated selection. She seems unable to admit or accept it, but that is the case. John O'Dowd came close to acknowledging it when he referred to the St Andrews Agreement and the protection enshrined in it. The Minister cannot prevent unregulated selection.

We are faced with the situation, so what can we do? The DUP, like a number of other parties, has argued for a period of reflection. We must seek to achieve consensus and an agreed way forward. Dominic Bradley referred earlier to the need for consensus. If that need is recognised, we are not going to achieve it in 11 days or 11 weeks. Sinn Féin might talk about consensus, but it does not work to achieve it.

Ken Robinson referred to constructive dialogue. That requires listening as well as talking; listening to people and talking to them rather than at them.

*1.15 pm*

How can consensus be achieved? A period of reflection is needed to allow different parties and sectors to reach the consensus that they all seek. Consensus should not only cover selection; reflection and discussion should cover all the pressing issues in education, including underachievement. The Minister tends to blame underachievement on selection and maintains that it causes the problem. That is not the case, as was pointed out by my party colleague Mervyn Storey. Underachievement starts long before the age of 11; it starts at the age of four or five or even earlier. In order to tackle underachievement, it must be moved up the

agenda. It is tragic that selection has been used as a convenient excuse not to tackle that problem.

The debate on selection has been prolonged for several years; however, we have never had a proper or true debate. A Member who spoke earlier suggested that all academic experts are of one mind on the matter — they are all against academic selection. That is not the case. During the past two weeks, I have listened to two experts from the same department in the same university give two totally contrary views on the matter. Yet the myth is peddled that experts think one way, while we lay folk think differently. There is no one academic view.

How will consensus be reached? I appeal to the Minister to give people time and to work with them to reach it. A transfer system that selects the right school for each child is needed to ensure that every child has a fair deal and gets the best possible start in his or her secondary education. I support the motion.

**Mr Kennedy:** I welcome this important debate and declare an interest as a member of the boards of governors of two schools.

The objective of all democratic Governments and their Departments must, surely, be to lead reform that will improve services and outcomes for wider society. Unfortunately, the present Minister of Education has made much of her belief in the need for change and reform, but has failed miserably to deliver any agreed, meaningful plan that explains exactly what that change will entail. Subsequently, a year and a half after the Minister took office, teachers, parents, pupils and educationalists still wait for her to clarify how year 6 pupils will transfer to post-primary education. Concern, anger and frustration grow daily among parents, teachers, pupils and educationalists. In latter days, even the Catholic head-teachers' organisation and the leaders of the four main Churches have all desperately sought clarity.

Regardless of general debates that surround education and the best way for children to transfer, it is crucial that parents and pupils receive assurances and clarity that a robust and tested system will be in place for children's transfer to post-primary education. It is the Education Minister's duty to deliver certainty and a sensible and practical solution.

**Mr Storey:** The Member says that it is the Minister's duty to deliver a solution. I question her intentions. The Minister referred to a CCEA paper when she made her proposals to the Executive in May 2008. However, her response to a question that she was asked after she made those proposals, which is now posted on the Assembly's website, makes it abundantly clear that all that has emerged from CCEA is a bank of questions for numeracy and literacy. No paper has been formulated, and it has not been extensively trailed, so that is not the issue.



What was the Minister's intention? Was it to force schools into an unregulated system, and try some other plan?

**Mr Kennedy:** I accept the Member's important point. However, the Minister has deliberately run down the clock in a completely irresponsible manner, and she has made the fundamental mistake of pursuing a political ideology instead of practical politics. Current year 6 pupils will, therefore, be the guinea pigs for the Minister's shambles of an education policy.

The Minister knows that there is a sensible and rational alternative to that unfair and unnecessary situation. Although I recognise that her long-term goal is to remove the 11-plus, it surely makes sense to extend — for a limited period — the existing transfer test. Breathing space must be created to allow a reasonable and measured plan for transfer arrangements to emerge. Although the current procedures are not ideal, they are functional, and maintaining them for a limited period would improve the welfare of children and parents.

The threat of unregulated arrangements remains, and those would be in no one's interest. Recently, the four Churches rightly highlighted their concerns about that potentially dangerous situation. At this late stage, I again make an impassioned plea to the Minister to listen, learn and act now to avoid disarray. The Minister must do the right thing, and, in the circumstances that she has inflicted on herself, that means maintaining the current arrangements for a short time. I support the motion.

**Ms Purvis:** Through debating the future of the education system, the parties have created a truly unfortunate situation. An important issue has ended up in a state of chaos and discord, and the Assembly is nowhere close to reaching consensus. The Minister has been accused of a lack of clarity and of creating anxiety and uncertainty over plans for post-primary transfer next year. Unfortunately, in the public debate on the subject, the Minister and her party spokesperson on education are the only ones who are wholly enthusiastic about her proposals.

However, it is inaccurate to suggest that they are the only people who are aware of the proposals. Some grammar schools are fully aware of the Minister's proposals, and 33 of them have defied her by insisting on retaining their own systems of academic selection and testing. Those grammar schools did not take that stand because they do not understand the Minister's proposals for post-primary transfer, but because they do not like them.

If the Minister's proposals for selection based on geographic areas proceed, some grammar schools that have spent their entire existence living in glorious isolation and ignoring the areas of deprivation that are often immediately outside their gates will suddenly have to acknowledge their neighbours. They will have

to share the vast resources that for far too long they kept for themselves and the select few pupils whom they had the pleasure to hand-pick. Those grammar schools' rejection of the Minister's proposals is not fuelled by uncertainty, but by snobbery and, purely and simply, the preservation of social selection.

**Mr Kennedy:** Does the Minister accept that underachievement could be best tackled by the earliest possible intervention in schools? Is addressing educational need in early years not key to the solution?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an additional minute to speak.

**Ms Purvis:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I do not believe that addressing educational need in early years is the key. It is only one factor in addressing underachievement in schools. The House must examine the disparity in resources directed to secondary and grammar schools and must abolish academic selection.

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

**Ms Purvis:** No, I will not give way.

The Assembly must abolish academic selection, which unfairly disadvantages working-class children. I am at a loss to explain why a unionist party supports the retention of a policy that discriminates against working-class unionists.

**Mr B McCrea:** The Ulster Unionist Party supports academic selection because evidence in the Scottish constituency of Glasgow East — which enjoys a fully comprehensive system with well-paid, well-resourced schools and teachers — shows that 20% of the population is failing to attain accepted educational standards. That failure is a result of multiple levels of deprivation and other social issues. Academic selection and the 11-plus do not contribute to that failure, and people who make such statements without proper research mislead the public. The Assembly must find a solution. The Ulster Unionist Party is prepared to work with others to find a solution. We should be working together.

**Ms Purvis:** I thank the Member for his intervention. However, I disagree with his views. The system of academic selection in Northern Ireland is one of social selection, determined by class. Those children who have the opportunity to take the 11-plus, and who do well in it, are from more affluent backgrounds. Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds usually attend lower-performing primary schools, do not have the opportunity to attend grammar schools and do not have the opportunity to pursue further and higher education. The Member is propping up that system of snobbery and privilege.

The existence of separate school systems for separate communities in the Province is absurd and expensive, and segregates our children based on their religious

background. The current system of academic selection at 11 takes segregation one step further and divides our children based on social and economic class. The motion attempts to maintain a system that benefits few children and fails far too many. There is no point replacing the current system of testing with a different system of testing. The test is only one part of the problem.

The current system of academic selection offers nothing for too many children, particularly those from deprived areas, who have a greater chance of attending lower-performing primary schools that will not prepare them for this system. I hope that the House agrees that children's academic ability is class-proof and has no boundaries. Bright, capable children exist in every home, every neighbourhood, every ethnicity and every social and economic class. A child's academic performance is restricted, depending on the resources and opportunities that he or she receives. Children do not have access to the same educational resources, and, therefore, they do not have access to the same life opportunities.

The Assembly seems to be stuck in a strange cycle whereby Members debate a motion on maintaining academic selection one week and, the next week, express shock at the falling number of 16- to 19 year-olds in education, employment or training.

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

**Ms Purvis:** For the sake of effective financial management and the undeniable value —

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

**The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Since becoming Minister of Education, my Department and I have — as everyone would expect — devoted enormous time and effort to the issue of academic selection and to constructing a new transfer system that places the rights, welfare and educational success of the child at its core.

The 11-plus has failed many children and has created division and inequality. It has created elites, and, disgracefully, it has condemned the majority of our children as failures. Any system that inherently condemns even one child as a failure is wrong. A system that condemns the majority of our children as failures at the age of 10 and 11 is an outrage and cannot be sustained or credibly defended.

During the past 18 months, I have sought to balance the urgency of the issue with the need to listen. I want to achieve consensus. I want to move forward by agreement.

The St Andrews Agreement required that new laws on post-primary admissions be agreed and that, if they were not, no new laws would be made when the existing laws lapsed. That provision has led many who are in favour of academic selection to characterise that agreement as saving academic selection. However, it

demonstrates a mindset that refuses to recognise the challenge, handed to us all at St Andrews, to reach consensus on the issue. The St Andrews Agreement means that the absence of consensus and agreement will lead to the absence of admissions law, and ultimately an absence of regulation.

*1.30 pm*

My Department and I have made enormous efforts to reach agreement and to arrive at a robust legislative framework for the vital and pressurised process of schools admission. From 8 May 2007 — the date of the restoration of the institutions — to this debate today, my special adviser, Department of Education officials and I have conducted hundreds of meetings with the full range of education stakeholders. I have listened carefully, and the proposals that I have brought forward show that. They contain elements with which my party and I fundamentally disagree, but that we offer in the interests of consensus.

In respect of my plans for post-primary transfer, I have appeared before the Education Committee seven times and have provided written answers to every one of the Committee's 66 questions. This is my sixth appearance in the Assembly on this subject. I have put two papers to the Executive and have made a formal legislative bid for the post-primary transfer proposals. I have written to request individual meetings to discuss the proposals with each of my Executive colleagues.

The potential for agreement and proper, long-lasting certainty has been vetoed because those in favour of the 11-plus consider the default to be on their side. My efforts have been met by those who have a preference for the absence of law, permanent clarity and certainty. Now the motion asks me, because of an uncertainty that I have striven to avoid and resolve, to tolerate and extend the status quo that has so miserably failed the majority of our children.

Tabharfaidh mé léiriú air seo. Is é an DUP an t-aon pháirtí amháin a tháinig chun tosaigh le moltaí malartacha. Is iad an dá leathanach go leith seo na haon mholtaí malartacha a chuir mo chomhghleacaithe sa Rialtas faoi mo bhráid.

Let me illustrate: the only party that has presented an alternative view in writing is the DUP. That two-and-a-half-page document is the only alternative that has been put to me by my colleagues in Government. I will describe it, so that Members can judge how consensual those views are, and how far they address the inequalities and structural absurdities of the current arrangements.

The DUP proposes that the law should allow schools to opt into academic selection and that Government should provide schools with an assessment mechanism to use if they make that choice. That is exactly what we have now. Nothing forces grammar schools to use

academic admissions criteria — they opt to use it, and the Department provides a test. In other words, the only other proposal is, in effect, the current failed system. How will it address the fact that academic selection acts as social selection — as Dawn Purvis so eloquently put it? How will it address the challenges and inequalities that demographic decline brings to bear on the system? How does it attempt to face up to the challenge of St Andrews and reach a political agreement?

No one in the Assembly has put forward any realistic alternative proposals. We have had many debates in the Assembly, I have been asked many questions, and we have read endless — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Every Member has had an opportunity to speak in the debate. The Member who is shouting loudest will have 10 minutes to make his winding-up speech on the motion. The Member should not try to speak from a sedentary position.

**The Minister of Education:** We have read endless press releases. However, the same effort has been singularly absent when it comes to addressing the real issue. Let me put that in simple terms: the proposers of the motion have not done their homework. The absence of any credible alternative proposal demonstrates that many of my colleagues in the Assembly have never had any intention of reaching agreement.

Against my own principles and beliefs, and against those of my party, I have offered three years of partial academic selection. I offered a system that matched children to provision at age 14. That offer was derided, but has it been matched in any sense?

When talking about this issue, I have referred to our excellent academic traditions. I repeat those words to highlight my support for academic excellence in our schools. I want all our schools to be excellent, be it academically or in other areas that give our children and young people the educational opportunities that are best suited to their needs and abilities.

Given the proper encouragement and support, I believe firmly that every one of our children can be a success. Every one of our children is an individual with unique talents and abilities. It is the task of the education system to identify those talents and to encourage every child — not just a minority of children who are identified by questionable academic criteria. None of our children is a failure, but many of them are failed by the current 11-plus. The failure is the 11-plus; not the children.

In the absence of agreement, this motion tells me to retain the 11-plus test to end uncertainty. Just consider what sort of an end to uncertainty that that would be. How did the 11-plus serve us in this year's admissions process? For admissions into the new school year, 73% of the children who are transferring from primary

schools in Holywood transferred to a grammar school. The figure in Hillsborough was 72%, and the figures for the Malone Road and Stranmillis areas were 95% and 85% respectively.

However, only 37% of the children attending primary schools in the Sandy Row area transferred to a grammar school. The figure was 34% in Poleglass and Twinbrook. It was 22% in Rathcoole, 26% in the Shankill area and 20% in the New Lodge. Is that the certainty; the socio-economic determinism that those who proposed this motion would like me to continue? Are they really urging me to maintain an admissions process that, with grim certainty, leads to the appalling statistic that while one in four children in our non-grammar schools is entitled to free school meals, the ratio in the grammar schools is one in 17? That area-by-area situation is a true postcode lottery that has been endorsed and supported by those from the Benches opposite for far too many years.

How has the 11-plus served our primary schools? Do those who propose this motion recognise that they are urging me to continue the certain distortion of teaching in primary schools, as normal lessons are abandoned to put the children through practice papers in preparation for the test?

Some schools begin conditioning children in P5. Those who are not taking the test — one third of all children — are left out of the preparations and are, therefore, in danger of losing interest and falling behind in basic levels of literacy and numeracy. While children in Europe, in the South of Ireland and in every other part of the world learn languages, literacy and numeracy, drama, sport — all the wide variety of education — our children are being prepared for a test that is well past its sell-by date.

Is anseo, le linn na tréimhse dhá bhliana, a chliseann an córas ar pháistí agus nuair a chuireann sé a seasanna scoile ó mhaith.

It is during that two-year period that the system starts to fail children and condemns them to a poor future in school. How has the 11-plus served our non-grammar schools and the children who attend them? How has the 11-plus, and the current process, served Fermanagh, for instance? There are 14 post-primary schools in Fermanagh — four of those are grammar and 10 are secondary. Pupil numbers have fallen in Fermanagh to such a degree that those four grammar schools now educate half of Fermanagh's post-primary schoolchildren. The 10 other non-grammar schools educate the remaining half. One quarter of the desks in the 10 non-grammar schools are empty. Of the children who attend those non-grammar schools, 20.3% are entitled to free school meals. Together, those 10 schools educate 109 children who are in receipt of a statement of special educational needs.

By contrast, the four grammar schools are full, and 7·1% of their children are entitled to free school meals. Nine of their children are in receipt of a statement of special educational needs. Thanks to the 11-plus test and the selection process, Fermanagh has a fundamentally divided post-primary system, with 10 schools absorbing all the area's various challenges. The same can be observed in Belfast, Derry and elsewhere. Is this the divided system with which the proposers of the motion would like us to continue?

Let us consider the current position. My Department stands ready to process — at the first opportunity — legislation for the proposals, which I have developed after lengthy and detailed discussion. That opportunity can present itself only if the Executive engage with me on those proposals. I have always made clear that I am prepared to listen to any ideas that will improve the proposals and that pursue the objectives of equality, urgently needed structural reform and genuine consensus.

There is a great deal in the joint statement that the four Churches issued last week. I view that as a very helpful intervention, and I will meet the four Church leaders tomorrow to discuss their proposals further. I also pay tribute to the trade unions for their helpful intervention. I hope that the Members on the opposite Benches read the contents of those proposals and advertisements carefully.

It is not a question of my way or no way. Given the opportunity, I am keen to engage with people and to discuss matters in the appropriate forum. If agreement can be reached, children transferring to post-primary school for the school year 2010-2011 will have the option of sitting a test, and grammar schools will be able to determine part of their intake with reference to the results of those tests. If we do not achieve political agreement, there will be an absence of admissions regulations. In the event of that scenario, some schools have declared that they will continue to apply academic admissions criteria, based on their own tests. I consider that to be an awful prospect for the system and for the children whom it is there to serve.

In the absence of political agreement, I am duty-bound to inform parents, pupils and teachers of the way forward. I have instructed my departmental officials to draw up admissions criteria, and, in the absence of agreement, I will issue guidance.

To conclude, we have a collective responsibility to reach a settlement on this issue. Avoiding or postponing that responsibility, as the motion demands, will not bring certainty. We need to do what the majority of countries, in every continent of this world, have done and create a system that is based on equality. Everywhere else has grasped the nettle and got rid of outdated, academic criteria. This is not rocket science.

The motion demands the retention of the current flawed system, which divides, segregates and condemns the majority of our children as failures and which perpetuates and deepens inequality. For most children, the 11-plus means academic rejection. I prefer a legislative framework, and in the absence of political agreement, I will act as I am duty-bound to do. Parents, teachers and politicians have stated clearly that they require admissions criteria for transfer in 2010 as soon as possible. In the absence of political agreement, I will provide such criteria. We may then get fair and long-lasting certainty.

**Mrs M Bradley:** I am delighted to make the winding-up speech on amendment No 2.

Basil McCrea referred to the deep unease that exists about the future of the transfer system. No one would disagree with him on that, but the fact is that the UUP motion does not stand up to scrutiny.

As my colleague Dominic Bradley stated, no tests of the current transfer type exist, either in reserve or in preparation, and it is now too late for CCEA to commission and trial such tests. Basil McCrea stated that we should keep the 11-plus because it has been around for a long time. Dominic Bradley answered that clearly when he stated that 12 different forms of the 11-plus have been tried and none has been found to be satisfactory.

The Minister referred to the potential that the St Andrews Agreement created for consensus to be achieved. However, she must admit that with that agreement, Sinn Féin handed the DUP a veto over academic selection. That veto has contributed to the situation in which we find ourselves today.

All parties have agreed that unregulation is a nightmare scenario that is to be avoided at all costs. All parties have also agreed that the best way to avoid that situation is by achieving consensus in the House. The Church leaders made a statement on education last week that opened the door to such consensus. They asked the political parties to stand back from their stated positions and to look at the possibility for consensus for selection at age 14. Both the UUP and the DUP said that they welcome the Church leaders' statement, and I am glad that they do. I ask those parties to go one step further and respond positively to the proposals.

*1.45 pm*

We should all remember that the issue cannot be resolved if the parties retain their present positions, as is clear from today's debate. In such a situation, children will suffer and politicians of all hues will be punished for that by the parents, who are the voters.

The amendment that was to be proposed by the Alliance Party, asking for clarity on the temporary test,

is not a solution. We need a consensus that will carry us through to the long term. We live in a rapidly changing world with a global economy, as we are all too well aware lately. We need to be able to compete in that global economy. My colleague also referred to the PricewaterhouseCoopers report, 'Transforming School Leadership', which states:

"The vision articulated in the recent Programme for Government (PfG), of Northern Ireland ... will not be realised unless something is done to improve the outcomes our education system is delivering."

We cannot dilly-dally for much longer; otherwise, change will not only overtake us but will leave us behind while others prosper. Let us put those who matter at the forefront of the debate and at the heart of this process — that is, the present P6 pupils and their successors.

I appeal to all parties to support amendment No 2, which calls on the Minister to present the required papers, advance change and avoid the dangers of unregulation, and further calls on all parties to show due consideration, responsibility and urgency in the delivery of a sustainable outcome for the school system, which can be defined by equality and excellence.

**Mr B McCrea:** After the comments of Mrs Bradley and the SDLP, I am deeply disappointed — and I say that with a heavy heart — that the people in Northern Ireland who take a different position to either of the two nationalist parties do not get their voices heard. As the Minister knows, people went along to St Mary's University College and explained with great clarity that they want to find some form of solution to the problem. In a democratic system, it is simply not good enough that no one is representing those people's views. Those people are not only parents but headmasters — including those from Catholic schools — and we are doing them a disservice by not having a proper debate.

The SDLP is ambivalent about the issue, because I have attended SDLP branch meetings where many people have stated that they are deeply concerned about the position that their party is taking.

The Alliance Party tabled an amendment but decided not to move it or to speak to the motion.

**Mr Speaker:** Order, order. I ask the Member to take his seat. I have clarified that situation on two occasions: the Member who tabled the amendment was unavailable to move it. I do not believe that we should be discussing an amendment that has not been moved.

**Mr B McCrea:** I thank the Speaker for that clarification. The point that I wanted to make was that I would have liked to debate certain opinions that have been expressed by members of the Alliance Party on previous occasions. In particular, Mr Gerry Lynch, who is the director of policy in a north Belfast branch, said that he previously supported the 11-plus but that he had changed his mind recently, and he went on to

give various points of view that went backwards and forwards between the two positions. However, he also said that, regardless of one's point of view, something must be done now for the children in P5 and P6.

It is really disappointing that, when my party proposes a motion that tries to find a bit of space and a way forward, people do not listen to what is being said and seem to be fixated with stating the same old things.

In answer to Mr O'Dowd's assertion that the Ulster Unionist Party has not drawn up any proposals, I have one in my hand now — it is on one of these bits of paper, anyway. *[Laughter.]* It is like the famous blank piece of paper.

Seriously, the Ulster Unionist Party tabled the motion because it is not possible to do anything else in the time that remains. I accept that there are differing opinions about whether academic selection is justified, whether selection criteria are appropriate, whether there should be streaming or setting, or whether we should have all-ability teaching in classes. Many such concerns could be discussed. Furthermore, I have yet to encounter consensus among experts. Nevertheless, the Ulster Unionist Party believes — and evidence of this exists in the House of Commons — that it is impossible for people to consider the rights and wrongs of new tests or any changes to the system without first having a period of reflection. One cannot just impose a solution without wrecking the entire system.

Every party has stated the need for consensus, and, consequently, we propose to meet the Minister half way in order to agree that we need to find a solution. My party will not support the 11-plus in its current form, but it will help to develop a different method for post-primary transfer. However, as Mr Storey said, the problem cannot be solved in 11 days, or even in 11 weeks. The matter requires genuine consensus, politicking and discussion — not press releases and secret meetings.

The Minister said that she wishes to gain legislative support for her proposals; however, she should attempt to gain legislative consensus in this, a legislative Assembly, not with her friends in the trade unions or with other people outside the Assembly. If she attempts to force measures through without achieving some form of consensus, they will be doomed to failure and all our children will suffer. By tabling the motion, the Ulster Unionist Party is attempting to find some means by which to move this sorry state of affairs forward.

I listen to the Minister, and I hear that her position is softening. I hear that she no longer intends to drive her proposals through and that she accepts that unless the problem is resolved, we will enter into unregulated circumstances, which would be far from favourable for everybody. Fair enough, but what should we do next?

I did not intend to provoke — as I evidently have done — mirth from the Minister. I intended to outline a serious position. The parties on this side of the House set out to affirm that consensus is required. However, as Nelson McCausland pointed out, although the Minister calls for consensus, she does nothing to build it. When the findings of experts are trotted out, there is no mention of the fact that they do not all agree. Similarly, not all unions and parents agree, and, when we are attempting to find a way forward, they are entitled to have their positions articulated.

Ms Purvis kindly accepted my intervention when I stated that our point is not that we do not accept that there are areas of educational underachievement and that more resources must be directed towards them, it is that we do not agree that the 11-plus — or any other form of academic selection — is the fundamental cause of that underachievement. As Members on the far side of the House said, many of those who underachieve came from the areas of multiple deprivation that suffered most during the conflict.

When I visited a school on the Shankill, a teacher pointed out a young lady who, at the age of nine, is the principal carer for her family. She has no father, and, unfortunately, her mother has a drink problem. There are days when she cannot come to school because she must look after the family. Such circumstances cause educational underachievement, and the Minister's insistence on clinging to some ideological position on the 11-plus merely distracts us from the real issues in this country that must be resolved. People talk —

*[Interruption.]*

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

**Mr B McCrea:** People talk about some halcyon future in which everyone will attend identical schools. However, they fail to realise that we live in a segregated society, with segregated housing, education and churches. Until such problems are tackled, how can we expect to improve matters?

Education should be child-centric. I urge the House not to misunderstand the Ulster Unionists when we say that we want a three-year moratorium; that does not mean that we will back the 11-plus for ever more. We are saying that there is no alternative; the Minister cannot introduce anything else that will withstand a legal challenge. She will try to introduce some geographic criteria that will disadvantage rural communities; she will try to introduce some sort of quota for social backgrounds, but that will not work. For instance, one has only to look at the bussing, and the associated troubles, that took place during the civil rights movement in America to see that those sorts of measures do not work.

We have to find the way forward. The eyes of the people of Northern Ireland are on this place, and they

are finding all of us wanting. People do not single out any Member as being particularly effective; they think that we are all pathetic. They think that we spend a lot of time talking about a lot of nonsense. The one good thing about this debate is that it is, at least, on a real political issue about which people are talking. At least the parents of children in P5 and P6 who are at their wits' end are acknowledging that the Assembly is talking about the issue.

**Mr Storey:** Even if the Assembly had reached consensus in August or September, this matter is not the priority of the party opposite. Its priority is to get devolution of policing and justice; that is the test for that party. Let us get away from the smug concern that Sinn Féin has about children. Even if the Assembly had reached agreement on post-primary transfer, Sinn Féin would not be allowing an Executive meeting to take place.

**Mr B McCrea:** I agree with the Member's comments.

**Mr Speaker:** Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

**Mr B McCrea:** The motion provides a genuine attempt to find a way forward. We must get a period of reflection. We will work with the Minister to achieve a solution for all the people of Northern Ireland.

*Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.*

*The Assembly divided: Ayes 45; Noes 47.*

#### AYES

*Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr Dallat, Dr Deeny, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Dr Farry, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane, Mr B Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs M Bradley and Mr D Bradley.*

#### NOES

*Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Sir Reg Empey, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry,*

*Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Kennedy and Mr B McCrea.*

*The following Member voted in both Lobbies and is therefore not counted in the result: Ms Purvis.*

*Question accordingly negatived.*

*Main Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to end the uncertainty facing parents and teachers of children in Primary 6 by continuing with the existing post-primary transfer test until a replacement is designed and piloted by CCEA.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### New Regional Children and Women's Hospital

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

**Mr Adams:** I beg to move

That this Assembly calls for funding for a new regional hospital for women and children; and calls upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a timetable for the commencement and completion of the project.

Maith thú, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá mé iontach sásta a bheith anseo le labhairt ar an ábhar an-tábhachtach seo inniu, ar son na mban is na leanaí go háirithe.

Many of us have been campaigning for a new regional hospital for children and women for 14 years; the campaign began in the mid-1990s. About six years ago, the then Minister of Health announced that the new regional hospital for women and children would be sited at the Royal Hospital. The Jubilee Maternity Hospital and the Royal Maternity Hospital were amalgamated soon afterwards, and a new hospital was to follow. Cheann Comhairle, that has not happened.

There is overwhelming evidence that a new regional hospital for women and children is an urgent necessity. I hosted a briefing for MLAs at Stormont on 1 July, and no one who listened to the arguments of the trusts, the staff and the women who had recently given birth can be in any doubt about the significance of the project and the urgent need for it to be commenced.

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

I am aware that the Committee for Health recently visited the Royal Hospital to see conditions there at first hand. I welcome the efforts of the maternity liaison group, others in the community and voluntary sector, and local political parties to unify behind a renewed campaign for the children and women's hospital. I am aware that the campaigners have written to all political parties in the Assembly, and the time-to-deliver campaign will be launched next week.

I also commend the care provided by men and women in our healthcare service over many decades. Providing care for the people in greatest need is made all the more difficult when facilities are outdated and/or poorly maintained. Many sections of the children's hospital and maternity unit are situated in buildings that are between 60 and 70 years old. As a result, there are problems with general maintenance, space for patients and administration.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, no one — not even the Minister — disputes the wisdom of the provision of specialist healthcare for women and children in a new integrated regional hospital for women and children on the site of the Royal Hospital. Therefore, there must be no further delay in the commencement of the project. Inevitably, there is talk about costs and about how much money will be required to commence and complete the project. However, the cost of not proceeding with the project should also be estimated. The cost of not proceeding with — or of further delaying — the building of a women and children's hospital will be counted in the health of our women and children; in the confusion that will be experienced by health trusts across the North; and in the adverse effects on the future planning of those trusts. It makes bad economic sense to delay the project.

Now is the time for firm decisions to be taken. A clear timetable for the commencement and completion of the new regional hospital must be drawn up, and financial commitments must be made in support of the project. The Assembly has a huge opportunity to have a positive impact by endorsing the motion.

2.15 pm

The Minister must grapple with many problems, but he also has the responsibility to end the uncertainty and to begin the real work of providing that essential facility. There must be clarity about the timetable for commencing clearance and the beginning and completion of construction work. If such a facility is to meet the twenty-first-century needs of women and children, it must be a state-of-the-art resource that provides the best and most modern healthcare available. The project, at somewhere in the region of £400 million, will be costly.

The first step is to clear the money in order to enable the required on-site clearance and decanting work to begin. The Department of Health will spend £225 million on capital projects between 2008 and 2011. It is disappointing that the Department has not made the new regional hospital for women and children a priority in that period. In April, the Minister acknowledged that the new regional hospital was "badly needed". However, he has refused to provide, in his words:

"a timetable for the completion of the new hospital at this stage." — [Official Report, Vol 28, No 1, p26, col 1].

I hope that the Minister takes the opportunity of this debate to announce a timetable for the completion of the new hospital.

The failure to give the new regional hospital the required urgent priority is having a profound and adverse affect on planning for maternity and children's services by the Department and by health boards and trusts across the North. It is understandable and natural

that health boards are reluctant to spend money on the expansion or renovation of smaller maternity units when they expect that a new regional hospital for women and children will be built. A recent example is the public concern around maternity services at Lagan Valley Hospital. This comes at a time when birth rates have been steadily rising across the Six Counties. In the past year, more than 5,500 children were born in the Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital.

There is nothing more important to society than the provision of health facilities and resources; in particular, facilities that save the lives of women giving birth, of babies and of children. A few months ago, I visited the Royal to witness for myself the care and compassion provided by nurses and doctors to some of the most vulnerable infants. No one disputes the wisdom of the provision of specialist healthcare for women and children in a new integrated regional hospital at the Royal. That is especially true of essential lifeline services for those with serious health complications. Even the smallest baby can be saved today because of scientific advancements. I saw babies smaller than the palm of my hand.

However, once a child has been brought into the world, every moment counts. Therefore, the Minister must now provide clarity about the timetable for commencing clearance work, the beginning of construction and the completion of work at the site for the new hospital. Minister, it is time to deliver. Go raibh mile maith agat.

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

I am pleased to speak to this motion. The Committee has been concerned about the issue for some time. In September, we met the Royal Jubilee Maternity liaison committee, which raised serious concerns about existing facilities and highlighted the urgent need to make progress on plans for the new hospital.

My Committee subsequently wrote to the Minister, and last month it visited the Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital and the children's hospital. Committee members had the opportunity to see for themselves the conditions at both, and there was a presentation on the plans and design of the new hospital. Most people accept that the journey towards a new regional maternity hospital in Belfast began approximately 14 years ago, since when it has been the subject of many reviews, consultations, announcements and judicial reviews.

It has been the responsibility of various direct rule and local Ministers. The decision to build a new women and children's hospital was made more than five years ago, and the provision of funding to get the work under way is long overdue. The Minister, in his response to the Committee, said that issues relating to the business case were outstanding and that the trust



would have to address those before making any decision on the funding or timing of the project. During the Committee's recent visit to the hospital, the trust assured members that all outstanding issues have been addressed and that the matter is now clearly in the Minister's court. One wonders who to believe in such situations.

In the short time available to me, I will mention some of the main concerns about the existing facilities which have been brought to the Committee's attention. The Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital is in a 1930s building, which has long passed its sell-by date. The general standard of accommodation is poor, and there are major health and safety concerns about standards and about the infrastructure of the building. The hospital has a minimal number of single rooms to provide privacy.

When the Jubilee Maternity Hospital closed in 2000, it was anticipated that there would be approximately 4,900 births a year. However, last year, there were 5,600 births, and that number is rising, which is causing serious overcrowding problems in all departments, including antenatal appointments, antenatal wards, delivery suites, post-natal wards and the neonatal unit.

The Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital fulfils two important roles. It is the local maternity hospital for women living in the greater Belfast area and it is the regional hospital for specialist maternity services for the whole of Northern Ireland. The services include fertility treatments and those for pregnant women with severe medical complications. The hospital does not have direct links to other parts of the system; therefore, women and babies are often transported by ambulance in crisis situations for diagnostic tests, adult intensive care or to the children's hospital for paediatric services.

The children's hospital is suffering from many of the same problems as the maternity hospital. It is mainly in a 1930s building, with similar poor standards of accommodation, overcrowding, lack of single rooms for very ill children, infrastructural problems and health and safety concerns. It is also the regional centre for paediatric services, and many children and their families travel from all parts of Northern Ireland to attend the hospital. However, unlike the maternity hospital, where mothers and babies generally have a short stay, some children with chronic or severe conditions often have repeated admissions or lengthy stays in what are totally unsatisfactory conditions.

The Minister acknowledged that the provision of a new women and children's hospital is one of the Department's priorities, but a firm commitment and timetable have not yet been given. That must happen now without further delay. The estimated capital cost of the project is around £400 million, and it will cost almost £30 million and take up to two years to clear the proposed site and relocate the services based there.

Even if the green light were given today, it would be several years before the new facilities would be ready. In the meantime, it will take considerable investment to maintain the existing buildings.

During the Committee's recent visit to the hospital, the difficulty in maintaining staff morale was also highlighted. Therefore, the Minister must act now. I support the motion.

**Mr McCallister:** I thank the Members who brought the important motion to the House. However, it should be remembered that the Jubilee Maternity Hospital was closed in 2000 by the then Sinn Féin Health Minister, Bairbre de Brún, despite the fact that many health experts were against the closure. However, following the closure, it was recognised that a new regional women and children's hospital was needed for Belfast.

Northern Ireland has 11 trust sites providing acute maternity services, and although the range of annual birth numbers across the trusts is lower in hospitals here than in those in England, there is still a need for the development. Not least, that is because maternity services cannot be considered in isolation, and a range of services for women and children must be taken into account. There is a need for a specialist facility that caters for pre-natal and post-natal care as well as caring for children.

The Minister is aware of the situation, and in an ideal world, I know that he would give the go-ahead for the development of a new regional women and children's hospital as soon as possible. However, it must be recognised that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety does not exist in the best of all possible worlds. The health budget is limited, and would be even more limited had it not been for the Minister's strong response to the draft Budget — a response that was questioned and criticised by some in the Chamber.

**Mrs I Robinson:** Name me.

**Mr McCallister:** I am, of course, happy to name you, Mrs Robinson.

The build capital for the development of a regional women and children's hospital, as was stated earlier, is about £400 million. The capital available for the three-year budgetary period is £728 million, all of which has already been spoken for. As part of an investment strategy, the Minister made a bid for £5.7 billion in 2008, but he received only £3.3 billion to cover the 10 years. That highlights the fiscal constraints that the Minister faces. Given those constraints, the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) undoubtedly has a key role to play in this matter.

We are all aware that many hospital facilities and buildings in Northern Ireland are too old, and, in many instances, have deteriorated to worrying levels. That is

a legacy of decades of under-investment. Far from being removed from the issue, the Minister has been closely involved with the latest developments. Departmental officials have worked closely with the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust in order to finalise proposals for the women and children's hospital. The business case for the development is with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

In light of the competing needs of potential capital projects, and the limited money that is available, the Minister has instigated a review of capital priorities, within which this, and other capital schemes, is being considered. I look forward to the Minister's response, while recognising the difficult choices that he has to make.

Maternity services are facing various challenges. The birth rate is increasing across Northern Ireland, but we must recognise where that is happening. There is an increasing demand in the Southern Trust area, as well as in the east of the Province. Although the Minister has considered the need for a new regional hospital, he also recently announced plans to review all maternity services in the greater Belfast area. Although we — and the Minister — may not get all the outcomes that we want, I am confident that he will deliver the best outcomes possible.

It is worth recognising that the Minister has invested £500,000 towards the improvement of maternity services at Daisy Hill Hospital, which serves a large part of my constituency, and has opened a state-of-the-art £13 million maternity unit at the Ulster Hospital in Dundonald. That unit can accommodate an extra 1,000 births, and it is essential that all spare capacity in the Belfast area is used in order to meet the current needs of women and children.

The Ulster Unionist Party recognises the need for a new regional women and children's hospital for the greater Belfast area, and hopes that it can be delivered in the near future.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. We will continue the debate after Question Time. The next speaker will be Mrs Carmel Hanna. In the meantime, Members may take their ease until 2.30 pm.

*The debate stood suspended.*

2.30 pm

## Oral Answers to Questions

### HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

#### Childhood Vaccinations

1. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to ensure that all illegal immigrant children or children with non-EU status (i) arriving and (ii) born in Northern Ireland are given the complete course of childhood vaccinations, in the interests of public health. (AQO 952/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey):** All children who are born in Northern Ireland are entitled to the full range of childhood immunisations, irrespective of their parents' immigration status. For children who arrive in the United Kingdom, the expression "non-EU" includes many possible categories of immigration status. Many non-EU families are, in fact, legally ordinarily resident in Northern Ireland. In the interests of public health, the trusts use a range of means to reach undocumented migrant families and to ensure that all children are immunised.

**Dr McDonnell:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Is he aware that the nature of their status means that many of those children are transient? Equally, language barriers result in many parents being unaware of the health objectives here. Can some sort of assessment be made on the effectiveness of the various trusts' outreach programmes? From the information that has come my way, many of those children slip through the net on the various vaccination programmes that are in place.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** UK-wide practice is that, if children who come to the UK are not known to have been completely immunised, they are assumed not to have been immunised at all, and a full course of vaccinations should be given. It is difficult to document illegal migrant children, so the trusts take any opportunities that present themselves to reach such families. Effective communication, translation and interpreting approaches, such as the use of information packs and translation services, are important ways in which to reach a migrant population, including people who are

considered to be here illegally. The Health Service follows that approach in order to find those children.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I call Mrs Michelle O'Neill, the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I am not its Chairperson.

Will the Minister confirm that public-health workers who are attached to schools and communities that deliver services and information on vaccinations and other healthcare will not be affected by the cuts that are proposed in the current comprehensive spending review (CSR)?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The CSR proposes efficiencies, not cuts. Those efficiency savings are placed as a responsibility on me by the Executive and, by definition, the House, and I have no choice other than to make them. If Mrs O'Neill has better ideas or knows another way in which to find money, I am all ears.

The child-health system includes a range of functions that helps us. The system helps with the monitoring and scheduling of immunisations, and it tracks children according to their schools. It may also track children through their addresses having been registered with GPs and through recording of test results. The follow-up system, therefore, is fairly elaborate.

**Mr Newton:** Do parents or guardians have the right to object to the complete course of childhood vaccinations on the grounds of religion or culture, or for any other reason?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The universal practice, or principle, is that for there to be any healthcare intervention, including for vaccinations, consent must be given.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question 2 has been withdrawn.

### **Ambulance Service: Omagh District**

3. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money will be invested in the Ambulance Service in the Omagh district and specifically how this money will be spent. (AQO 1028/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I am investing an additional £3 million over the next three years to improve emergency services in Fermanagh and west Tyrone. In the Omagh area, £500,000 will be used to fund an additional 24/7 accident and emergency ambulance and crew, and £110,000 will be used to purchase a new accident and emergency ambulance. Omagh will also benefit from additional funding allocated to provide 24/7 ambulance

cover in Castlederg, to roll out paramedic-administered thrombolysis, and to train additional paramedics. The area will also benefit from £100 million in capital funding, which I announced in October, to enable the Ambulance Service to modernise its estate and replace its fleet across Northern Ireland.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for the investment in ambulance provision in the Omagh area and in other parts west of the Bann, as has been detailed. I ask him to intervene to ensure that those intermediate-care ambulance vehicles are deployed and remain in Omagh. I have been told by patients and ambulance staff that the ambulances are often used for less urgent work outside the area. I ask the Minister to ensure that resources are used efficiently and that ambulances are deployed in Omagh, where they are needed.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** That is precisely my point; the issue is about efficient use of resources. The Ambulance Service is a regional service. If it cannot address a challenge locally and immediately, it will search for spare resources in other areas to do so. It is quite normal for patient-care vehicles to be based in Omagh and to serve people in other towns, as happens with accident and emergency ambulances. Resources are targeted where they are required. I assure the Member that the Ambulance Service in the Omagh area provides an excellent service. It receives approximately 800 category-A — life-threatening — calls a year. In March 2008, the Ambulance Service aimed to attend 70% of those calls in eight minutes. It is very close to that target.

**Mr Bresland:** My question has been partly answered. What progress has been made on 24/7 accident and emergency ambulance provision in the Castlederg area?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The investment has meant the introduction of one additional accident and emergency ambulance, which is based in Omagh, and the appointment of 12 staff. Four staff will provide 24/7 accident and emergency ambulance cover in Castlederg, which amounts to 1,773 additional hours per annum, and a roll-out of thrombolysis. That will take approximately two to three years to put in place, because extra paramedics must be trained.

In the meantime, pending training and the introduction of the new crew, we will increase accident and emergency cover in Omagh at the weekends to 24/7, which will provide 36 additional hours of cover. We will also increase immediate-care ambulance cover 24/7, which will provide an extra eight hours of cover, seven days a week. That package of measures includes Castlederg, which did not have a 24/7 ambulance station until I intervened and provided it.

**Dr Deeny:** My question is on the effective and efficient use of ambulance resources. I am not sure whether the Minister is aware of this, but according to clinical governance and patient safety, ambulances must transfer patients to the appropriate hospital. If the Minister is aware of this, why are my patients, who have potential fractures and who live east of Omagh, being driven past the Tyrone County Hospital, which has an excellent radiology department, and taken to the Erne Hospital which has no orthopaedic services? If the patient's fracture is diagnosed, and orthopaedic treatment is required, he or she is then being transferred to Altnagelvin Hospital in Derry.

The Minister knows that such practice is putting patients' health at risk. It is also a medically inefficient use of ambulances, because they are being driven around the west and are, therefore, out of circulation for hours.

I am sure that the Minister would agree that those patients should be scanned and/or X-rayed at Tyrone County Hospital, and then transported to Altnagelvin if necessary.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Please ask your question, Dr Deeny.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Like you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I was waiting for the question. Ambulance cover in the Omagh area is about getting the appropriate treatment to the patient as quickly as possible. That is what the service does in Omagh, and throughout Northern Ireland. I am confident that the correct principles and protocols are being followed, and that patients are being taken to the hospital that will provide appropriate care.

### Agency Nurses

4. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much his Department has spent on the employment of agency nurses in the last financial year. (AQO 956/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Trust expenditure on agency nurses ensures that safe and effective services are sustained for patients and clients at all times. In the past year, the cost of employing agency nurses — approximately £13 million — represents less than half of 1% of the total health and social care budget. Nonetheless, trusts have been asked to examine reliance on agency staff, and my Department will continue to monitor expenditure closely.

**Mr Burns:** How will the loss of 700 jobs impact the front-line service of nursing?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** As Members are aware, efficiency

proposals are the subject of consultation. Among those is a proposal for a cumulative reduction of 700 nursing posts across Northern Ireland, as the service realigns and modernises. I remind the House that that number is out of a total of approximately 18,000 nurses. That is a matter for consultation. No decision has been made, and I will examine the results of the consultation early in the new year.

As for agency nurses, vacancies occur through natural staff turnover in the nursing workforce — through promotion, career breaks, retirement, career progression, maternity leave, and so on. The use of agency staff is one of the ways of managing short-term vacancies, sickness and maternity leave. Although the cost of employing agency nurses has fallen by around £1.5 million over the past three years, I have asked the trusts to do better, and I am looking hard at that particular budget. Reliance on agency staff is caused by historic underinvestment, which we have now moved beyond.

**Mrs I Robinson:** The Minister has kindly provided figures for the cost of agency nursing staff, but will he provide the cost for recruiting all agency staff? Will the Minister's plans to cut hundreds of nursing posts not merely increase the need for agency staff to be employed further down the road, which is a more expensive alternative? Even he would have to agree with that.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I will write to the Member with information on the first two parts of her question, in respect of agency staff. As for the reduction of 700 posts, the proposals came from the trusts, and are under consultation. Mrs Robinson, along with everyone else, will have an opportunity to respond to that consultation.

As Members are aware, I was asked for efficiencies. In fact, some Members virtually screamed and yelled at me to find efficiencies.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**The Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Those are the best proposals that the trusts say that they can come up with. If Mrs Robinson has alternatives or other options, I am listening and I am waiting. It is a matter for — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** All remarks must be made through the Chair.

**The Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Thank you Mr Deputy Speaker — that is how some people got into trouble before.

I will make decisions as necessary. I hope that consensus is reached. If there is a consensus, I have no decision to make. If there is not a consensus, I have a decision to make.

Members need to be aware that I must find £700 million in efficiency savings over the next three years. That requirement has been imposed on me. If the Assembly does not want me to have to find that £700 million, it must vote that the money is secured for the health budget.

2.45 pm

**Mr Gardiner:** Does the Minister — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order, please.

**Mr Gardiner:** Perhaps you would bring order to the House, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I repeat my earlier instruction that all remarks must be made through the Chair. Mr Gardiner, you now have the Floor.

**Mr Gardiner:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Does the Minister agree that the amount of money that is spent on agency nurses demonstrates just one reason why efficiency savings are important if improvements are to be made throughout the Health Service during the next few years? Does he also agree that more must be done to attract new graduates to midwifery and mental-health nursing, and will he consider devolving more resources to meet growing need in those areas?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** Although one of the Department's key aims is to strive for efficiency in the Health Service — and bearing in mind that health takes up about 47% of the Budget — there is a shortage of mental-health and learning-disability nurses, for example. In addition, a large number of nurses from overseas work in the private sector. I can say to graduate nurses that there are absolutely no plans to reduce the number of nurses who are being trained. The number is appropriate. There are absolutely no plans in any of those exercises for any form of compulsory redundancies, and I expect that all graduate nurses will find employment.

### New Regional Hospital for Women and Children

5. **Mr Adams** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what communication he has had with the Minister of Finance and Personnel on the release of public investment to commence work on the new regional hospital for Women and Children at the Royal Victoria Hospital site. (AQO 1029/09)

**Mr Adams:** Ceist uimhir a cúig.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I met the Minister of Finance and Personnel in May 2008 to discuss a broad range of issues that relate to funding constraints on the delivery

of the capital programme for health and social care. That discussion included the new regional hospital for women and children.

After the outcome of the recent review of capital priorities, I will meet the Minister of Finance and Personnel to discuss the capital profile that has been allocated to me, and the impact that that will have on the timing and delivery of the new women and children's hospital.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members that if they speak in another language in the Chamber, they must repeat what they have said in English.

**Mr Adams:** I noticed that the Minister did not need any help to translate what I said, so congratulations to him.

I thank the Minister for his answer. It is good that he is having those discussions with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Will he inform the House where the new hospital is in the priorities that he has set out for capital projects in the coming year? Does he agree that there is a significant health and economic imperative to ensure that his Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel work diligently to fast-track the release of funds for the new hospital? Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I am sure that Mr Adams is aware that we are where we are with regard to funding. I inherited a funding position, which is that during the first three years of the CSR, capital funding is, essentially, bespoke on projects. That is historical. The capital review that I launched through the trusts shows that £7.8 billion of funding is needed. However, £3.3 billion of funds were allocated.

Another problem with the allocation, which I must discuss urgently with the Minister of Finance and Personnel, is the fact that a third of that money will not come through until the last two years of the 10-year project, and that in year six there is virtually no money with which to do anything. Funding comes in a rush, then nothing, and is then followed by a second rush.

From a health perspective, whoever devised the allocation did not think it through. I must examine how investment strategy for Northern Ireland deals with the capital allocation and how funding from the Budget is allocated to my Department. The funding is not nearly enough to meet demands, and the profile accorded to health does not come close to serving the Department's purpose. If I could, I would launch the project right now and build the women and children's hospital tomorrow. However, the funding is not available.

I will outline the time frame for the women and children's hospital in the later debate, but I do not consider it to be satisfactory.

**Mr Shannon:** I thank the Minister for his response. Does he agree that the provision of a new regional hospital will benefit multiple constituencies and enhance the role of maternity hospitals throughout greater Belfast, particularly the Ulster Hospital at Dundonald?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** One option that my Department is considering is to build the hospital in two parts — one part for women and the other for children. However, I do not favour that option because of the critical linkages between the two and throughout Northern Ireland, and the children's hospital in particular will be a key regional resource.

If the Assembly, and particularly my Department, has a goal, it is to look after the most vulnerable members of society, and none are more vulnerable than sick children. As far as I am concerned, the hospital is an urgent priority, but I cannot build it without the proper resources, and my current position is one that I inherited.

**Mr Attwood:** Will the Minister remove doubt and create certainty on two issues? Is he telling the House and the wider community in Northern Ireland that, because the bespoke projects that he mentioned use up the next three years of funding, there is no money in the health budget even to clear the site for the proposed hospital?

The Minister stated that he has completed the review of capital projects and assessed its impact on the timing of projects. Is the project at the Royal Victoria Hospital his number one priority, or is it a catch-all priority?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I am not sure whether Mr Attwood was present when I said that the hospital is a high priority. However, I am working on a 10-year capital programme, the first three years of which are taken up with bespoke projects; for example, the new hospital that is being completed at Downpatrick requires capital, as does phase B at the Ulster Hospital.

The funding for the subsequent two years is entirely taken up by two PFI projects: one at Enniskillen and another proposed project at Omagh. The nature of the capital programme means that there is virtually no money in the kitty for year six. Therefore, I will not be able to start projects over which I have discretion until the year after that, and I confirm that the work on the hospital will start in year seven of the 10-year programme. As things stand, the hospital will be completed in 2017-18. Given the available capital resource, that is the soonest that I can start, and I will build the hospital as fast as I can. As I said, I need extra money; the identified priorities require £7.8 billion, but the allocation is only £3.3 billion. I am

considering clever ways to find the extra money. Perhaps if some schemes prove to be unnecessary, money could be released.

However, we are where we are; I inherited the health profile and, unless extra money can be found, I will not be able to exercise any discretion until year six because capital spending is planned years in advance.

## Respite Care

6. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many young people under the age of 18 with special needs are currently waiting for respite care. (AQO 981/09)

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The most recent estimates from boards and trusts indicate that approximately 400 young people are waiting for respite care provision. That figure is unacceptable. The comprehensive spending review secured a total budget of £43 million — £24 million recurrent over the next three years — to benefit children and adults with disabilities in Northern Ireland. That funding will enable health and social care trusts to provide, over the next three years, an additional 400 new or enhanced respite care packages for people with special needs and their families and carers.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I concur; a waiting list containing more than 400 young people is unacceptable. The Minister said that the money will be spent on all people with disabilities, particularly learning disabilities. Does he mean that the funding will not be specifically directed towards young people? How much money will be spent on young people? How much money will be spent on each child with special needs?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The target is to provide, by 31 March 2011, 200 new or enhanced respite packages to benefit 800 people with learning disabilities. Furthermore, the target is to provide 200 new or enhanced respite packages to benefit approximately 400 children with special needs. I understand the need for such provision and appreciate the difficulties that carers face. The Department must find the resources to support carers, without whom the Health Service would be in a dire situation. Those measures include residential, domiciliary and day-care packages, and respite care is an important support element. Although I hope to benefit that number of people, it is optimistic to think that those measures will address all the problems, which are increasing annually.

**Mr Poots:** Does the Minister recognise that leaving school at the age of 18 causes consternation for many young people with special needs and their parents? Will the Minister ensure that those children have adequate opportunity to enter employment or further

education or to attend resource centres? That is not currently the case.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** I recognise that the transition at 18 is difficult for looked-after children and adolescent children with mental-health difficulties and learning disabilities. The Department is keen to address that major transition, particularly for looked-after children. Other help is available for children with special needs. In light of the Bamford Review, we want to work with the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning to provide help, and we will publish an action plan in early 2009.

**Mr F McCann:** Go raibh maith agat. Has the Minister had discussions with the Minister for Social Development about social-housing provision for people leaving respite care under the Bamford Review?

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:** The Minister for Social Development has a key role on the interdepartmental ministerial group on Bamford. We have discussed supported housing for individuals with mental-health problems, learning disabilities, dementia, and so on, on several occasions. As I said earlier, resources are required to address the problem.

The Department for Social Development provides accommodation, and my Department provides care packages — we have a partnership.

3.00 pm

## REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### Rapid-Transport System

1. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the rapid-transport system for Belfast. (AQO 1032/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy):** Good progress has been made since the take-note debate in the House on Tuesday 3 June. We have concluded the engagement with key stakeholders. As a result of some concerns that were expressed, we have further explored an alternative route for rapid transit in east Belfast. The result of that work has shown that use of the Upper Newtownards Road for that purpose is not viable.

We are also establishing a dedicated delivery team for rapid transit and are purchasing land for the scheme. In recognition of rapid transit's wider benefits, I have written to my ministerial colleagues to invite their comments on any proposals.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response. Will he outline why certain routes have been chosen for pilot schemes ahead of others?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Member, as are some other Members for North Belfast, is particularly concerned about the routes that have been chosen for pilot schemes. However, we anticipate success with the routes chosen, and other routes across the city of Belfast will then be adopted.

The first route chosen runs from the city centre through east Belfast. It is a corridor that suffers from high congestion levels and limited public-transport provision. Along a significant part of that route, there is an opportunity to develop the former Belfast to Comber railway line, and the route will serve the potential development around Dundonald, as is highlighted in the draft Belfast metropolitan area plan 2015.

A second route runs from the city centre to the Titanic Quarter. In light of the large scale of new development proposed for the Titanic Quarter, it is considered essential that an appropriate public-transport scheme connect that area to the city centre during its initial planning stage.

A third route that the pilot plan considers runs from the city centre to west Belfast, which houses one third of the city's population and contains the Royal Victoria Hospital. That hospital serves many people in the city and beyond. The emerging Glenmona development site opens up an opportunity for a rapid-transit route to serve west Belfast and link it to the city centre and beyond.

I reassure the Member, and other Members who have a particular interest in north Belfast, that scope exists for development of rapid transit in north Belfast at a later phase of development. It includes use of the Crumlin Road to serve proposed development at the Girdwood site, Crumlin Road jail and courthouse.

**Mr Poots:** Does the Minister recognise that the draft Belfast metropolitan transport plan's rapid-transit study failed? One of the areas of major traffic movement is between Lisburn and Belfast. The proposed rapid-transit system does not address that problem. Therefore, we have gridlock on our motorways every morning, in spite of the £100 million that has been spent on the Westlink.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Westlink and M1 project is not yet finished; it is still a roadworks site. One of the proposed routes for rapid transit runs into west Belfast in the direction of Lisburn. I appreciate that the Member would like to see the project developed — *[Interruption.]*

I know that the Member does not recognise west Belfast as a useful destination to which to take any project. However, he will know, from his time in the

Executive, when the plans were discussed and endorsed, that these are all pilot studies. It is my intention that the rapid-transit system will work and that it will be expanded to other routes across the city and beyond.

**Mr B McCrea:** When I travelled in from Lisburn this morning, I sat for two hours in a traffic jam. What measures will the Minister take to wean people off using their cars? How will he encourage them to use the rapid-transport system? That is the only way in which the system will be made effective.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** This morning, while travelling to Belfast, I sat for more than two hours in a traffic jam, so I am aware of the frustrations and difficulties involved in getting into and out of the city amid the congestion.

Rapid transit is one of a number of solutions to traffic congestion. We have provided park-and-ride facilities — the Member will be familiar with the one at Sprucefield. We are developing other such facilities around the city, as well as improving the quality bus corridors.

Car parking in the city centre must be addressed. We must adopt a carrot-and-stick approach: provide as good a public-transport system as we possibly can while discouraging car usage. Residents' parking schemes are one part of that approach, and car parking in the city as a whole must be considered.

The Department launched a range of measures, including the travel-to-work weeks and Travelwise initiatives. We talked to schools and major employers about people car sharing and children walking or cycling to school, and about trying to improve road safety for that to happen in and around the city.

The rapid-transit system is one of a series of proposals, but we face a huge issue, as the Member pointed out. We have spent hundreds of millions of pounds on road networks and a substantial amount of money on the motorways — the M1 and the ongoing work on the M2 and the Westlink — but we will still experience congestion problems after that work has been completed. That points to the bigger question of how much we are prepared to spend on road improvements as opposed to other measures that are targeted at reducing the number of cars that come into and out of the cities.

**Dr McDonnell:** Is the Minister aware that a light-rail system would be the carrot, and that a stick would not be needed to get people out of their cars? The Atkins Report, which was commissioned some months ago, dismissed a light-rail system as too expensive. Will the Minister tell us what mechanism was used by the Atkins consultant to cost a light-rail system? I subsequently talked to several interests who claim to be able to do the work for approximately 70% of what the report quoted.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Many people knock on our doors and offer all sorts of propositions and cheap ways of doing things; often, however, they do not stand up to scrutiny when examined. The Member raised this matter previously, when he said that alternative figures were on offer. Following that remark in the Chamber, I wrote to him and asked him to provide the figures, but I have not received them.

Atkins conducted a study on a rapid-transit system, including the light-rail option; but it was substantially dearer than the bus-based option. Cities in Ireland, Britain and Europe of comparable size to Belfast opt for bus-based systems. However, a bus-based system could be upgraded to a light-rail system in future if the numbers and the economic case stack up. That possibility is in the proposals.

## Departmental Information/Services

2. **Mrs O'Neill** asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to ensure that people from ethnic minorities can access information and services provided by his Department.

(AQO 1058/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department is committed to making information about its services as accessible as possible. The Department has developed a guide to making information accessible to help staff to provide customers with accessible information as quickly and effectively as possible. That includes advice on translations and interpretations.

Information is translated into minority-ethnic languages when requests are received or in advance where a need is identified. The guide is updated annually in association with the Equality Forum, which has representatives from business areas and the voluntary and community sector, including representatives from many section 75 groups. The most recent update was completed in September 2008.

To complement the guide — and in recognition of the increasing linguistic diversity that is evident in the North — I launched a multi-lingual section of the Department's Internet site on 29 September 2008. The site has received more than 2,000 hits since that date. The multi-lingual section provides a range of background information about the functions that are carried out by the Department for Regional Development and its Roads Service agency in 11 different languages. Useful contact details and links are provided, as well as information about issues of direct interest, such as parking enforcement, and the Blue Badge and Travelwise schemes.



Details of the Department's complaints procedure have also been translated to ensure that members of ethnic groups know how to inform us of any problems or difficulties that they may experience. That helps us to rectify problems and continues to deliver a high-quality service to all our customers. We intend to keep working on the site to refine and improve the information that it provides.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he detail whether he intends to expand the site? Are there other similar innovative projects that benefit those who wish to access information in a language other than English?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I intend to keep working to refine and develop the information on the site. My officials will be reviewing the site with the Equality Forum and with organisations that represent indigenous and ethnic-minority groups. A meeting is planned with Pobal soon.

In addition, my Department supports 18 rural-community transport partnerships to provide specialised transport services in rural areas. Those services are available to all rural dwellers who experience social exclusion.

Partnerships work with local ethnic community-support groups and migrant support workers and promote their services to those groups. A number of partnerships provide transport-to-English classes to help people to develop their personal language skills. One partnership is developing a Polish leaflet in conjunction with the passenger assistant.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister inform the House of the actions that he has taken to ensure that passengers who seek information on rail and bus services to Derry can do so without exception being taken? Will the Minister confirm that Derry is a recognised destination?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Of course Derry is a recognised destination. Part of the rationale for developing departmental information services is to help to ensure that people can easily access information from the Department through whatever means they wish.

The Department has a complaints procedure that people can avail of if they encounter any hostility to the type of service that they require, or if they feel that they have been unfairly or rudely treated. If the Member knows of any instances when that has happened, I would be happy to receive the relevant details, or for him to direct the complainants to the relevant officers in the Department.

**Mr Neeson:** What provisions are being made by the Department in relation to signage to assist people from

ethnic minorities travelling on all forms of public transport?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Initially, the information available on the Department's website relates to documentation that is distributed by the Department or its agencies. I am examining the development of a policy to deal with road signage, which is currently limited to English only.

I have not received any specific communication in relation to signage from people from other language backgrounds who wish to access services. However, the intention is to improve the service as we proceed. If issues arise whereby people find it difficult to use services, the Department will look favourably at attempts to deal with those issues.

### Water Bills

3. **Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many premises have been issued with water bills since 1 April 2008. (AQO 941/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by NIW (Northern Ireland Water) that 92,317 premises have been billed since 1 April 2008.

**Mr O'Loan:** Will the Minister inform the House how he will address the £400 million gap in his budget? What part will water charges will play in that?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I can perhaps satisfy the Member's first question by stating that I do not have a £400 million gap in my budget.

As for his second question, the Executive have drawn up proposals in respect of water charges. That was an Executive-led, not a Department for Regional Development- (DRD) led, proposal and the resources to satisfy that proposition will be found from the Executive, not DRD.

Perhaps the information that the Member referred to was contained in a paper that was — unfortunately and regrettably — provided to the media, I believe, by a member of the Committee for Regional Development. In doing so, that Member hampered the good work of that Committee. The purpose of that paper was to make DFP aware of current departmental pressures — something that the Department is required to do and that a number of other Departments have done.

Returning to the issue of water charges, that was an Executive proposition, supported by all the Ministers in the Executive. If any resources are required to satisfy that proposition, those resources will come from the Executive.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister provide information to the House about the bills that have been issued? How

many have been measured and how many have been unmeasured?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by NIW that around 66,000 measured premises and 26,000 unmeasured premises have been issued with water bills since 1 April 2008.

**Mr McFarland:** Does the Minister agree that the miscalculation of approximately 8,000 water bills represents a grave management failure such as might be expected when a chairperson is also acting as chief executive? What does the Minister intend to do about that?

3.15 pm

**The Minister for Regional Development:** That did not inspire confidence, and it was a matter that the Department looked to NIW to deal with.

NIW must have robust and reliable data in order to deliver sustainable efficiencies and improve customer services. As part of its commitment to openness and transparency, NIW has alerted its key stakeholders, including the Committee for Regional Development, about several issues relating to billing and revenue that have emerged as a result of our continuing development of information systems and data quality.

In the area of billing, a number of non-domestic customers have paid more than they should have, while a smaller number have not paid enough for water and waste-water services. Those who have paid too much will be compensated fully, and NIW must still decide its approach to those who have not paid enough. That approach will be based on ensuring fairness of treatment for all its customers and the taxpayer. Importantly, the issue will have no impact on households. I agree that the matter raises issues of confidence, and I have raised those issues with NIW continuously. NIW is working through its systems and trying to improve them, and the sooner that that is completed, the better for all of us.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question 4 has been withdrawn.

### Water Service Commitments

5. **Mr Bresland** asked the Minister for Regional Development if commitments made by the Water Service to customers before 1 April 2007 will be honoured by Northern Ireland Water. (AQO 987/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by NIW that it will endeavour to carry out any capital investment commitments made by Water Service, subject to its statutory obligations under the Water and Sewerages Service Order 2006, the availability of funding, and competing priorities in its capital works programme.

**Mr Bresland:** I thank the Minister for his response. Some years ago, the Water Service agreed to carry out the Grange sewerage scheme at Bready, near Strabane. Assurances were given in 2006 that the scheme, costing £88,000, would be completed within three or four months. That undertaking has been honoured by Northern Ireland Water. What assurance will the Minister give that Northern Ireland Water will complete the sewerage scheme?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** As part of the original Bready sewerage scheme, Water Service proposed to provide a pumping station and pumping mains to transfer sewage from Grange village to the Bready waste-water treatment works. That would have enabled first-time sewerage services to be provided for homes in the area. Unfortunately, land acquisition difficulties concerning the proposed Grange pumping station meant that the scheme had to be completed without the Grange section. Northern Ireland Water is currently reviewing the Grange proposal in line with current legislation and its capital works programme.

**Mr Burns:** Will the Minister explain why it was at least two years before he was informed that customers' water bills were in a mess? What action does the Minister intend to take against the chairman and acting chief executive of Northern Ireland Water in relation to that?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Based on the evidence that was presented to the Committee for Regional Development, it seems that the current chairman and chief executive was not aware of that problem for a substantial period either, and that issue was raised with officials at the Committee. I was informed of the problem at the point when it was required that I be informed. I asked NIW to explain the problem and take action to deal with it. NIW is taking action currently, and I will make a decision when I see how that pans out.

### Speed Management Review

6. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Regional Development what impact the failure of the Executive to meet is having on the Speed Management Review. (AQO 974/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The failure of the Executive to meet has not had an impact on the speed management review, as the draft policy contains some cross-departmental issues. On 18 September 2008, I wrote to my Executive colleagues asking them to consider the draft policy and requesting their comments before it is issued for public consultation. I have received replies from the majority of Ministers and am making preparations to go to public consultation shortly.

**Mr McClarty:** Will the Minister agree that several reviews and programmes with the potential to benefit the lives of the people of Northern Ireland are presently being blocked because of his party's intransigence? What is the Minister doing to ensure that the Executive meet as soon as possible?

**Mr Kennedy:** The Minister must answer that.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** That is what I am here for.

I assure the Member that I would like to see the Executive meeting as soon as they possibly can. It is my intention — and that of my party — that the Executive meet as soon as possible; however, there are issues that must be resolved before that can happen. Although other parties may wish to behave as if there is a functioning Executive, we intend to ensure that there is equality and partnership at the heart of that Executive.

Those are the issues that we are pursuing, and as much as I would like to deal with all of the pressing issues facing all of the Executive Departments, until we establish that there is genuine equality and partnership at the heart of Government, we are unable to deal with any of those issues. Therefore, the issue of equality and partnership must be dealt with first, and I hope that that will be done in the very near future.

**Mr G Robinson:** Will the Minister state the impact that his party's failure to allow Executive meetings to take place is having on his Department's overall plans?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Like all other Executive Ministers — I presume — I am carrying on with work in my Department. Last year, the Executive agreed a Programme for Government, and a Budget with which to implement it. Ever since, I have been working away to deliver that Programme for Government. Although I want to see the Executive meet, and there are matters — some that relate to my Department and some to others — that I want them to discuss, I hope that the current discussions will bear fruit and that we will be able to hold an Executive meeting. Nevertheless, I assure the Member that, as he will know from his work on the Committee for Regional Development, we have been getting on with our projects as set out in the Programme for Government and have been spending the budget allocated to us.

**Mr Brolly:** Go raibh maith agat. Will the Minister tell Members his Department's position on providing traffic-calming measures for rural communities?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Traffic-calming measures to reduce inappropriate speeds and traffic volume will be considered in line with demand and the regional transportation strategy. It is Roads Service policy to provide gateway features at entry points to villages and settlements, in order to highlight

to drivers any changes to the road environment. In many cases, a speed-limit change is associated with a gateway feature. Furthermore, central islands and additional road markings have been used to improve the road environment.

## Rathlin Island

7. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the work he has carried out in relation to Rathlin Island since taking up office.

(AQO 1052/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I visited Rathlin Island in the summer of 2007 and was struck by the difficulties that islanders face. Consequently, I sought and received endorsement from my Executive colleagues to develop a central policy for Rathlin Island. To date, good progress has been made. I met the islanders twice, and all relevant Departments identified senior officials to liaise on Rathlin matters.

Rathlin now has an enhanced ferry service, and I have increased expenditure levels in order to improve the island's roads infrastructure. In June 2008, I formally switched on the new sub-sea electricity cable, and work continues on a range of projects to improve the islanders' quality of life. In addition, I will shortly be introducing a Rathlin Island policy.

The Department's ongoing contact with the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in the South will allow us to learn from its experience of working with island communities to advance sustainable growth and development. In conjunction with Minister Ó Cuív, I am arranging a study visit to an offshore island in the South, during which we will bring Rathlin islanders, Government officials and local islanders together to share experiences and to help shape our ideas for developing a comprehensive island policy. Gabh mo leithscéal, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer and for his work for Rathlin to date. He said that a policy for Rathlin Island is being developed. When will that policy be announced?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Significant work has been progressing on two fronts. Having identified specific matters with the islanders, we dealt with several that were our responsibility, and I know that other Ministers also visited the island and dealt with some matters for which they are responsible. Given that Rathlin is our only offshore inhabited island, we wish to develop a specific policy. Therefore, in the next few weeks, I intend to prepare a draft policy for circulation among my Executive colleagues for

their comments, and to bring that before an Executive meeting as soon as possible afterwards.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Minister for the interest that he has shown in the concerns of the Rathlin islanders.

What is the state of play with his Department's three ongoing investigations; namely, the internal audit; the investigation into the procurement process; and the investigation of complaints against DRD staff?

Furthermore, can the Minister assure the House that the concerns about the tender process will be fully investigated and that, first and foremost, the islanders and, secondly, the House and the general public will be satisfied that everything was done appropriately?

Moreover, will the Minister take a personal interest in that matter, in order to ensure that no whitewash takes place and that we get to the truth?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Minister can choose whether to answer those questions.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have no difficulty in answering that question. I assure the Member that there will be a proper investigation. However, I disagree with him: the complaints have not come from the islanders, and the islanders have not sought reassurance on the issue. Nonetheless, the Department has received a number of complaints and allegations about the tender action, which resulted in the appointment of the new Rathlin ferry operator on 1 July 2008. In response, the Department appointed an independent investigation team to review those claims in detail. Until such time as that review is complete, I am not in a position to comment further, but I assure the Member that it will be a full and complete inquiry that will satisfy all concerns.

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter:** Does the Minister accept that maintaining and improving road surfaces on Rathlin Island is a priority? Is the current road maintenance budget sufficient not only to meet the maintenance requirements on Rathlin Island but throughout Northern Ireland?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Roads Service has committed £250,000 to fund improvements on road surfaces on Rathlin Island by March 2011. It is intended to carry out bitmac surfacing next year and surface dressing in 2010. Roads Service also plans to carry out some limited resurfacing on the Spire Road, but the progress of those works will depend on favourable weather conditions — as the Member will know.

The Member will be aware that Roads Service has secured some £200 million for its overall structural maintenance budget over the next number of years. It has been estimated that some £300 million will be required, but the Department for Regional Development pitched for as much as possible — as did other Departments. Roads Service has benefited from

in-year monitoring returns to supplement the structural maintenance budget, and we will try to secure and spend as much of that as we can. If there is less money in the budget than we require, we will have to prioritise.

### Rail Travel Time: Belfast to Dublin

8. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development when he will make an announcement on the reduction in travel time by rail between Belfast and Dublin. (AQO 960/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** NIR (Northern Ireland Railways) and Irish Rail have developed Vision 2020. It is a long-term initiative, which includes the reduction in timetable travel time between Belfast and Dublin. The range of options to deliver the reduction in travel time has not yet been tested in a detailed economic appraisal. To achieve the objective of reduced travel time, resources will have to be secured and an economic case made.

Provisional figures suggest that the capital cost of Vision 2020 will be some £500 million to £700 million, most of which will be required for the track and infrastructure upgrades that are necessary to reduce travel time. That estimate does not account for the revenue consequential that may arise for the two rail companies.

Therefore, there are no plans in the foreseeable future to make an announcement on the reduction in timetable travel time by rail between Belfast and Dublin.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister inform the House how many times the Enterprise service was delayed for more than 20 minutes from June to September 2008? What action is being taken to avoid such delays in the future?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Enterprise service has been stopped on a number of occasions, but some of those stoppages were due to circumstances beyond the control of Translink. The Member will be aware that there have been security issues along the line.

Over the period, there were significant issues outside our control that contributed to trains running more than 10 minutes late. After adverse weather conditions in August, which contributed to an embankment slip outside Moira, transport continued along a single line only, and most trains were delayed by up to 30 minutes. That circumstance lasted for several days.

On 4 August, services were disrupted by flooding north of Dublin. In March and April, services were disrupted over several weekends as Iarnród Éireann

renewed track and crossings after a derailment at Skerries in February. From March to August, there was a spate of security alerts, which resulted in line closures and bus substitutions.

To minimise delays outside its control, NIR works in close conjunction with Iarnród Éireann, security personnel and others. It remains committed to delivering service, punctuality and reliability in excess of the passenger's charter targets. However, it is regularly faced with factors outside its control, which have a detrimental effect on punctuality.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In the meantime, what is the Minister doing to improve the service on the Belfast to Dublin rail line?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** As I said in response to Dominic Bradley's question, the beginnings of a case have been raised with NIR and Iarnród Éireann to improve the overall service.

I had a meeting with the Minister for Transport, Noel Dempsey TD, on Friday in Trim, and that issue was discussed. NIR and Iarnród Éireann are working on a business case to improve the service on the Belfast to Dublin line through the introduction of an hourly service using refurbished, existing spare train capacity.

3.30 pm

The introduction of an hourly service is also part of the Enterprise Vision 2020. The business case includes the possibility of capital investment to improve the reliability of existing trains, which will help reduce delays experienced on the service. Progress so far on the business case suggests that a case exists for the proposal. However, funding for the introduction of an hourly service is an issue.

## SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

### Lisanelly Army Site

1. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of (i) the regeneration potential of the former Lisanelly army site; and (ii) the benefits such regeneration could bring to the area.

(AQO 984/09)

**The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):** The 120-acre Lisanelly barracks site lies within the development limits for Omagh, and, with over 200 houses and a wide range of other buildings and facilities, offers great potential for redevelopment for a variety of purposes, most notably the possibility of creating a shared education campus. Many people in

Omagh are doing great work in pursuit of that objective. The adjacent 47-acre St Lucia barracks, with its fine historic buildings, provides a natural development corridor from Lisanelly to the town centre.

The potential developments of regeneration of those sites include the expansion of commercial and residential opportunities in close proximity to the centre of Omagh. If developed for a shared educational campus, they would deliver a tangible symbol of the shared future that many of us are working towards. In addition, there are opportunities for expansion of the town's retail and commercial core offered by the potential freeing up of town-centre sites currently occupied by several schools.

I will launch a master plan for Omagh town centre shortly that will take account of the exciting possibilities at Lisanelly and St Lucia.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister provide a progress update on the attempts that are being made to gift some of those Ministry of Defence sites to the Executive?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I raised the issue of the gifting of those and other military sites with my Executive colleagues shortly after entering office. Despite several approaches by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to the British Government, I understand that, as yet, there is little sign of the Ministry of Defence agreeing to gift further sites. My officials inform me that the Ministry of Defence continues to pursue a determined line in relation to open-market disposal of the sites, which I and many others see as a legitimate part of the peace dividend for the people of Northern Ireland.

For my own part, although the overall gifting issue is a matter for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), I engaged the Army on the question of transferring surplus accommodation for use as social housing, and I raised the matter directly with the General Officer Commanding, Mr Chris Brown, at two meetings recently. While others may prefer to direct their energies towards pontificating about the British Army's unsavoury past, I am more focused on the future and the possibility of securing more housing for those who badly need it.

**Mr Bresland:** In his report on the location of public-sector jobs, Professor George Bain highlighted the role of the Lisanelly military base in attracting public-sector jobs to Omagh. Will the Minister give an assurance that her Department is taking the recommendations of the Bain Report into consideration when planning the future of the Lisanelly military site, should it be transferred to the Northern Ireland Executive?

**The Minister for Social Development:** My officials and I are assessing the outworking of

Professor Bain's report on decentralisation. I met Professor Bain on two occasions, and I support fully the principle of decentralisation.

However, I must emphasise that until the British Government, and, in particular, the Ministry of Defence, gift those sites to us, the task we face is insurmountable. The Lisanelly and St Lucia sites are adjacent to Omagh town centre, and I have absolutely no doubt that the development of those sites is pivotal to the town's regeneration and will provide the necessary economic catalyst and job opportunities that Omagh earnestly desires.

**Mr McElduff:** I know that the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Minister of Education have recently lobbied strongly for the transfer of the sites. Has the Minister recently directly lobbied the British Government for the transfer, which has such massive potential for the redevelopment of Omagh?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I have lobbied the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on that matter on several occasions. As late as the British Labour Party conference, I spoke to a former Secretary of State for Defence about the importance of gifting former military sites. It is essential that all sites, including the Lisanelly and St Lucia sites, be used positively for the future regeneration of many parts of Northern Ireland. I hope that everyone will lobby British Government Ministers in that respect.

**Dr Deeny:** I thank the Minister for her commitment to securing the Lisanelly site. The proposed projects to redevelop the site are very exciting, and they have generated major public interest in Omagh and the wider Tyrone area. Where do matters stand with the project in general, and with the educational campus in particular? Can she say, in her individual ministerial capacity, when she believes the project is likely to become a reality? Are we in stasis?

**The Minister for Social Development:** That is an interesting question. Allow me to put the matter in context: officials from the Department for Social Development (DSD), working with colleagues in the Department of Education and the Strategic Investment Board, recently finalised a draft outline business case for the acquisition of the Lisanelly site and the adjoining St Lucia site to allow for their planned regeneration, which includes a proposal for a shared educational campus. That draft outline business case is currently with the Department of Finance and Personnel for comment. However, in the absence of gifting arrangements, affordability remains a key outstanding issue for the Executive. I am sure that the Member will happily agree that this is one of the many issues that the Executive must discuss, if only an Executive meeting could be held.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question No 2 has been withdrawn.

### Andersonstown RUC Barracks

3. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister for Social Development what advice she received and the direction she gave, in relation to the development of the site of the former Andersonstown RUC barracks in the immediate aftermath of the withdrawal of commercial development proposals by the Carvill Group. (AQO 1042/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** I was disappointed by the withdrawal of the Carvill Group's proposals on 4 October 2007. Those proposals — which emerged through a competitive process that was followed by consultative procedure — incorporated a mixed development that had a residential and substantial community element. Subsequently, I received a great deal of advice, both solicited and unsolicited, from inside Government and externally. Much of the external advice called for more consultation and for the site to be gifted to the community. However, there were precious few positive ideas.

Moreover, I considered a range of options for the development of the former Andersonstown barracks site. I decided to broaden the brief to focus on the economic regeneration of the Andersonstown gateway area, in line with the priority given to growing the economy in the Executive's draft Programme for Government and the final Programme for Government. I announced the way forward on that initiative on 20 November 2007. Possibly one of the most interesting and best proposals to emerge from the consultation was for a community police station to be based on the site. Some members of the public wanted that, which reflects the level of crime and antisocial behaviour in west Belfast.

**Mr P Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I take umbrage at the Minister's remark about the level of antisocial behaviour in West Belfast. The problem of antisocial behaviour is no more or no less severe in West Belfast than anywhere else, and the Minister should retain perspective.

Does the Minister agree that the Department has completely mismanaged its dealings in respect of Andersonstown barracks? Will the Minister confirm that she proposed to proceed with another commercial development following the Carvill Group's withdrawal? I have acquired a document, under freedom of information legislation, which indicates that she agreed to go ahead with another commercial development after notifying a second developer. That blatantly ignores the consensus for the site to be developed for community use to be determined by local people.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to put a question to the Minister.

**Mr P Maskey:** Did the Minister propose another commercial development on the site following her Department's disgraceful actions in respect of the Carville Group?

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Member seems to be under some misapprehension — I have no predetermined plans for the future use of the barracks site. The Andersonstown barracks site is one of several sites being considered in the context of the gateway feasibility study. The purpose of that study is to develop various options that can be considered for future action in the context of the wider economic regeneration of the Andersonstown gateway area. It is probably too early to consider the development of any of those sites.

The West Belfast Partnership Board is part of the relevant steering group, which political parties were asked to join. Representatives of both Sinn Féin and the SDLP were asked to participate — the SDLP participated, but Sinn Féin did not. It may not be too late for Sinn Féin to decide to participate fully in a community process that it claims to yearn for so earnestly.

**Mr O'Loan:** What practical steps has the Minister taken to achieve regeneration at the Andersonstown barracks site and throughout Belfast more generally?

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Andersonstown gateway project has been chaired by Pádraic White, who has done much for regeneration and economic development on the island of Ireland. I will receive those proposals for consideration soon.

On the wider policy of regeneration, the Member alludes to the sequential policy for taking forward large retail-led regeneration schemes in Belfast city centre, which requires my Department's support. That policy has delivered the £400 million Victoria Square scheme this year, and it is on course to deliver the £360 million Royal Exchange scheme by 2014. People have said that the pace of delivery that the policy has achieved in Belfast compares favourably with that achieved in any other city that has undertaken regeneration schemes of such magnitude. However, nothing is set in stone. I am prepared to evaluate the policy and assess the impact of the sequential approach to regeneration within Belfast city centre and outside Belfast.

## Neighbourhood Renewal

4. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline what contingency plans she has in place to ensure that vital services, funded by her

Department under Neighbourhood Renewal, are not wound up in March 2009 when funding is withdrawn from these programmes. (AQO 1046/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** The reality is far from funding being withdrawn from neighbourhood renewal services. On 15 October, I announced the provision of significant levels of funding — from March 2009 — for many services that are vital to neighbourhood renewal. My Department also funds services that fall under the core responsibility of other statutory bodies. The contracts are deemed “category 2” because they meet neighbourhood renewal objectives, but are not led by DSD. Those statutory bodies have a role to play in providing financial support for those services in the longer term. As for individual projects, that role continues to be the subject of negotiations with the relevant statutory bodies.

I expect to comment further on the future of those projects before the end of the financial year. I reiterate a basic point that I made to the Committee, in public and in the House: neighbourhood renewal is an Executive strategy. Although my Department will lead and facilitate that strategy, other Departments must play their part.

3.45 pm

**Mr F McCann:** It is right that, like most things in the Assembly, the Executive have the final say. However, the Minister is correct to state that DSD has the lead. Will the Minister confirm that she proposes to withdraw £5 million from programmes across Belfast in April 2009, with disastrous consequences for the community sector in areas of greatest need? I also understand that some groups in Derry are considering legal action over the withdrawal of their funding.

**The Minister for Social Development:** As in most things, Mr McCann does not listen to my initial answer. Therefore, I will repeat it. I would like to make several points. In my initial answer, I said that neighbourhood renewal is an Executive strategy, and that although my Department will lead and facilitate, other Departments must play their part. It may be worth noting that my Department has issued contracts for 92 category 2 projects, with the remaining 59 under consideration. That is a good survival rate, with 23 category 2 contracts issued in west Belfast.

I remind people on this side of the House that neighbourhood renewal should be focused mainly on services, and on mitigating and reducing deprivation and disadvantage. That is what my officials and I intend to do. I hope that that is the message conveyed from the Chamber, rather than Mr McCann scaremongering and trying to undermine the very groups that are trying to do the work on the ground.

**Mr Easton:** The Minister was good enough to visit Beechfield estate in Donaghadee in the summer — a

visit that was much welcomed. She assured me at that meeting that she would consider whether Beechfield was a small area of deprivation, and the possibility of appointing a part-time community worker for the area. I have since heard nothing more. Will the Minister look into that issue and come back to me on it?

I am also deeply concerned about small areas of deprivation for community workers in Rathgill estate and Breezemount, whose funding is due to end soon. Will the Minister assure me that she will consider further funding for those community workers in order that the good work can continue in Rathgill and Breezemount, which is vital for the local community?

**The Minister for Social Development:** As Mr Easton said, I visited Beechfield estate in July of this year, and we had a general discussion about the area's at-risk programme. In the not too distant future, I will make an announcement about the next tranche of funding for areas at risk. As Members know, neighbourhood renewal refers to the 10% of most disadvantaged areas. Areas-at-risk qualifies those areas that are slightly outside that category, but which still have a measure of disadvantage.

In relation to small pockets of deprivation (SPOD) areas, such as Rathgill estate, I am happy to discuss that with the Housing Executive on the Member's behalf, because the Housing Executive has responsibility for SPODS, as they are commonly known.

I assure Members that funding for neighbourhood renewal is secure for the foreseeable future. However, I hesitate to use the term "at all times" because, as we recently discovered, that means "forever" to some Members, and "just this once" to others.

**Mr McCallister:** What steps has the Minister taken to encourage the private sector to become involved in services and social projects associated with neighbourhood renewals?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I have no problem with others outside the general neighbourhood renewal partnerships subscribing to the idea of reducing disadvantage. If the private sector wants to get involved, therefore, that is all to the good because it shows that Government, local government, the community and voluntary sector, and the private sector are subscribed and signed up to reducing disadvantage and deprivation, and are subscribed to working for everyone in the community.

## Fuel Poverty

5. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister for Social Development if her Department will meet its annual commitment to reduce fuel poverty in 9,000 homes.  
(AQO 1024/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** My Department is on course to meet its target of alleviating fuel poverty in 9,000 homes this year by implementing energy-efficiency measures. Although that level of alleviation is on target, it will not effectively counter the overall rise in fuel poverty resultant from huge increases in energy prices. My Department is also trying to help people to help themselves. It has developed a television advertising campaign, which aired on 27 October, and will run throughout the winter. The campaign encourages people to seek help and advice on budgeting for energy bills. The television advertisement will be supported by a wider media campaign.

**Ms Lo:** Will the Minister update Members on the progress of the report from the fuel poverty task force, which she set up in May? I understand that the task force's proposals were sent to the Executive.

**The Minister for Social Development:** As Members will be aware, I developed a comprehensive set of proposals after work undertaken by the fuel poverty task force. I circulated a paper to ministerial colleagues in advance of the scheduled Executive meeting of 18 September. The Executive failed to meet, so I took on board the written comments that I received from ministerial colleagues and redrafted my paper in advance of the scheduled meeting in the first week of October. I asked for that paper and its content to be taken by the urgent procedure route, and it was submitted on 2 October. Regrettably, more than one month later, I have not received a response. Therefore, I can conclude only that one or both parties in OFMDFM do not agree with the proposals and may not want to discuss them.

I shall continue to work with the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to take work forward. However, the issue of fuel poverty merits a considered response from the Executive as a whole, because OFMDFM has responsibility for poverty, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has responsibility for energy prices and social tariffs, my Department has responsibility for energy efficiency in the home, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has responsibility for health-related issues — a significant report was carried out by Dr Liddell into the matter — and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has a significant responsibility for fuel poverty in rural areas. Therefore, there is a cross-ministerial responsibility in respect of the issue.

I ask only that those who are continuing their blockade of meetings of the Executive stop in the interests of the wider community, because people are concerned about how they are going to keep warm this



winter, and that is the issue that is confronting the wider population. Therefore, I urge those who are preventing Executive meetings to stop now.

**Mrs McGill:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister believe that the warm homes scheme targets the most vulnerable sections of society, in particular, older people? I had an elderly constituent in Strabane who had difficulty applying for the warm homes scheme, but the issue was resolved with the assistance of a DSD official, and I wish to thank that official and the warm homes scheme for dealing with the matter. Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister for Social Development:** I thank Mrs McGill for her kind comment, which I will pass on to my officials.

The warm homes scheme has been very successful since its inception, and many people in Northern Ireland have benefited from it. However, in order to focus on those who are most in need, I have initiated a consultation process on the scheme. A consultation paper is on my Department's website, and MLAs and members of the public are invited to comment on it. It is only through informed comment from the public that a better, more beneficial policy can evolve.

It is also interesting to note that I have put more money into the warm homes scheme than did the former direct rule Ministers. There is no doubt that the scheme has been successful, but it must be more clearly focused on those who are most in need. That is why there will be a consultation period, inviting comments from Members and the wider public.

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter:** Will the Minister tell the Assembly what the consequences have been for those families and households who are already facing fuel poverty because of the failure of the Executive to meet for almost five months?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I fully sympathise and empathise with the Minister — with the Member — who asked the question.

**A Member:** You were right the first time. *[Laughter.]*

**The Minister for Social Development:** We need a little bit of jocularly in the Chamber now and then.

**A Member:** And spiritual activity, too.

**The Minister for Social Development:** Yes, and spiritual guidance from Rev Coulter.

The Member asked a very serious question. It is time for cross-ministerial activity and discussion in the Executive as well as cross-ministerial response and decision-making. People will be in peril if we do not do that. I am not scaremongering: the most important issue is that those people who are blockading Executive meetings — they know who they are, what they are doing and why they are doing it — are placing

the lives of people in severe danger. I ask them to stop it and to give immediate consideration to my paper on fuel poverty, which was submitted in the second week of September 2008. It is unacceptable that we have not yet had a response from the First Minister and deputy First Minister to my request for that paper to be dealt with by urgent procedure.

## Co-Ownership Housing Scheme

6. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the re-opening of the Co-ownership Housing Scheme. (AQO 962/09)

12. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Social Development to report on the future of the Co-Ownership Housing scheme. (AQO 1021/09)

**The Minister for Social Development:** With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 6 and 12 together.

The Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association remains an important vehicle for helping people to get into affordable home ownership. There has been a major surge in demand for co-ownership since I took responsibility for housing. At the start of this year, I was able to provide the association with a grant of £15 million, which is almost four times its pre-devolution opening grant. However, unlike many housing associations, the Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association had been entirely dependent on DSD funding and had not taken advantage of its ability to borrow.

The association has used its large asset base in order to secure a private funding package totalling £35 million, which will enable it to meet its Programme for Government target to provide 500 affordable houses this year. The association began to accept new applications from Monday 3 November. I am delighted that the scheme has reopened, and that the association has sought a more sustainable financial underpinning.

I look forward to a future in which co-ownership remains an important element of the housing mix. As many Members will be aware, the new housing agenda, which was announced here on 26 February 2008, envisages further developments in that area.

4.00 pm

**Mr A Maginness:** I thank the Minister for her answer. I congratulate her for increasing the amount of money that is available for co-ownership. Is there any other way in which she can encourage the Co-Ownership Housing Association to invest more money through private funding from the banks and other lending organisations?

**The Minister for Social Development:** The Co-Ownership Housing Association should discuss

that issue with its lender, but I will provide some information. Since devolution, the number of people with loans who are in the co-ownership scheme has increased by 25%. In September 2008, that numbered 4,039 people, compared with 3,242 at the beginning of April 2007. A record amount of more than £80 million was spent in 2007-08, which helped in excess of 920 households. Co-ownership is on course to deliver the target of 500 homes this year, and support for co-ownership has increased dramatically since the restoration of devolution. The facts are available, and they speak for themselves.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### New Regional Children and Women's Hospital

#### *Debate resumed on motion:*

That this Assembly calls for funding for a new regional hospital for women and children; and calls upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a timetable for the commencement and completion of the project. — *[Mr Adams]*

**Mrs Hanna:** I support the motion. I regret that the amendment that the SDLP submitted, which called for a specific budgetary allocation for a regional maternity hospital project, was not accepted for debate. It would have added teeth and substance to the motion, and pressure on Sinn Féin and the DUP to permit the Executive to meet and to make such a vital decision that affects the health and well-being of mothers, babies and children. Babies must be given the best possible start in life; that is where early intervention really begins.

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

I declare an interest as I qualified as a midwife in the Royal Maternity Hospital. I supported the retention of the Jubilee Maternity Hospital on the site of the City Hospital until a firm timetable was put in place for the building and opening of a new regional maternity hospital. At that time, I was a member of the Health Committee, which was chaired by my former colleague Dr Joe Hendron. The Committee asked that the Jubilee Maternity Hospital be kept open until the new regional hospital for women and children was built and in operation. A letter from Dr Hendron to Health Minister de Brún, in June 2000, stated:

“The Committee would prefer that the Jubilee and the Royal Maternity should both remain open until a new regional maternity hospital is built.”

The letter also stated:

“the Committee would implore the Minister when making the announcement, to clearly spell out the timescale for the provision of a new regional maternity hospital and exactly where the funding is to come from”.

As we know, Minister de Brún took the decision to close Jubilee Maternity Hospital in May 2000, and that decision was overturned by judicial review in November 2000. Incredibly, the judge found that, although the sorry saga started in 1995, Minister de Brún took the decision to centralise maternity services within two days of receiving her papers.

However, it is now 2008, and we are where we are. I emphasise that the debate is about a regional, Northern Ireland-wide hospital for women and children; the issue is not about just Belfast. A year ago, my first

grandchild, Maeve, was born in the Royal Jubilee Hospital, and that was a very happy occasion for us.

Two weeks ago, with some colleagues from the Health Committee, I met the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. The trust has put together a business case, the clinical case has been well made, and the urgency is obvious. Two weeks ago, I also visited the Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital and the Belfast Hospital for Sick Children. The staff were enthusiastic, busy and positive, but it is evident that there are staff shortages and overcrowding. Although the staff do their best, the situation is not acceptable.

It is now 144 days since the Executive met. That is longer than the Siege of Derry. Even if the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety had his papers tomorrow, he could not be sure of when he would get an Executive decision on expenditure, considering the magnitude of the sum involved — £360 million.

I appreciate the strains of competing resources. However, we want the best possible start for babies and the best circumstances for mothers. It makes sense to have clinical linkages, including joining level 3 of the women and children's hospital to level 3 of the adult theatre and intensive care units of the Royal Victoria Hospital. That would be important if there were an emergency, and the mother needed urgent transfer. It makes excellent sense to have the delivery suite, the neonatal unit and the paediatric theatres all on one floor. That would ensure that newborn babies who are desperately sick would have immediate access to all the necessary expertise.

At this stage, it is essential that we anticipate needs and employ best practice to get the plans right; that will avoid the need to amend them later. I regularly meet former colleagues — doctors, midwives and nurses — who are deeply concerned about safety issues in the Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital, primarily due to staff shortages and overcrowding.

Sometimes morale is low among staff because they feel that they cannot do the best possible job for their patients, and they are worried that patient safety is being compromised. When people are under pressure, they are more likely to make mistakes. Many of the good people —

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

**Mrs Hanna:** The issue is vital. The Executive must meet. Sinn Féin and the DUP are supposed to be running the show to get resources. We are disillusioned by the macho politics.

**Ms Lo:** I support the motion. In 1994, Dr James McKenna chaired the initial project to consider maternity and other services in the Royal Victoria

Hospital and Belfast City Hospital. Fourteen years have passed, with decisions made and overturned by five Health Ministers, three judicial reviews and three further consultations. In June 2003, Angela Smith, the then Minister with responsibility for health, social services and public safety, announced a move to centralise a new maternity hospital on the site of the Royal Victoria Hospital. However, we are still nowhere near seeing that promised state-of-the-art new regional maternity hospital being built in Belfast. It is no wonder that women and their representative groups feel so let down.

At present, maternity services are delivered at the Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital, which was meant to be an interim measure until the proposed new hospital was built. That 1930s building offers a poor standard of accommodation and cannot meet the requirements of twenty-first century maternity services. I have visited friends in hospital, and I have seen the unacceptable standards there.

An increase in birth rates over the past few years has led to problems of overcrowding in antenatal wards, delivery suites, post-natal wards and neonatal units. Patients have a lack of privacy, and, at times, partners are unable to stay in the antenatal ward because of a shortage of available facilities. We do not want that for our maternity services.

In 2000, Bairbre de Brún, the then Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, stated that the new hospital would be built during the 2005-08 funding period. When I was in Brussels last week, I spoke to Ms de Brún about the issue. She was quite clear that the Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital was meant to be only a stopgap. Last month, it was announced that another review will be conducted to examine maternity services in Belfast and the surrounding areas. Much money has been spent on reviews, consultations and design work. Rather than talking about it, is it not about time that construction work on the hospital was started?

We understand that the Health Minister has only a limited capital budget that is less than half of what is needed to proceed with proposed priority projects. I, therefore, call on the Executive to consider granting extra funding to the Department in order to fulfil the commitment that previous Ministers gave to building this much-needed hospital for women and children. Our public deserve a modern building that is equipped with first-class facilities. Moreover, a major public-spending project would help the construction industry in Northern Ireland.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr Easton:** Everyone present will recall the decision that the former Health Minister, Miss Brown, made to locate the new hospital for women and

children at the Royal Group of Hospitals complex. At the time, the Minister used her power under the divisive — and failed — Belfast Agreement to act without reference to the Assembly and, as I recall, against the express wishes of the relevant Assembly Committee. Thankfully, under the new dispensation that is growing from the St Andrews Agreement, that level of unaccountable power and the potential to override the democratic process are no longer available to Ministers.

At the time, Miss Brown's behaviour caused a great deal of bitterness in the wider community, especially as her action came from one who was so strident in her demands for equality. The urgent need for a new hospital for women and children in the eastern part of the Province was never in question. One wonders how time passes so quickly, and one reflects on where we would be today had the decision to progress the plans been advanced speedily under a stable Assembly.

The impact on employment opportunities in west Belfast cannot be calculated. However, Miss Brown's party played a major role in ensuring that political and economic progress came to a standstill. Sadly, we find ourselves once again in a situation where the need for the "ourselves alone" party to advance its own selfish agenda is causing delay and deadlock in advancing a range of urgent and important projects, all of which have enormous economic potential and which can create opportunities to provide jobs.

The dedication, skills and humanity of those who work in the Health Service in all circumstances to meet the needs of women having children and the needs of children before, during and after birth are not in question. We must never lose sight of our priorities in Government, and we must never fail — in that context — to put mothers, children and families at the heart of things, along with the provision of all necessary support for our health professionals.

I assume that we have all studied carefully the 2006 report on the 'Audit of Acute Maternity Services', which outlined the potential for economies of scale by the average length of stay in Northern Ireland maternity units and the occupancy levels in smaller units. The report made clear that maternity services, with their important links to other specialties, cannot be considered in isolation. It also reminded us of the opportunities to review the model of maternity care across Northern Ireland. A striking feature of the report was the information on the higher rate that exists here, as opposed to comparable areas in England, of Caesarean sections and instrumental deliveries. One cannot help but feel that that is an area where we might require those who make that form of delivery a lifestyle choice to pay for the privilege.

It is also clear that we must ensure that robust procedures are in place to make sure that we are reimbursed adequately for private-patient maternity activities across various trusts. In that context, the new direction that was reported by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and its list of guiding principles was most encouraging. The underpinning principle was that our top priority must be safe, high-quality care for all parents and their babies. It is clear that the construction of the new hospital for mothers and children is an urgent priority.

The Minister has been in post for long enough to come to terms with the conflicting pressures and priorities that exist in the Health Service. He knows the levels of resources that are available to him and the requirement to provide efficiency savings. He knows the financial cost of delay in such matters. He must be aware of the economic and social advantage, in the present financial climate, of providing employment for those who would build the facility and those who would staff it. He has all the information that he needs to act decisively. We need a declaration of intent. The Minister must by now be in a position to make whatever decisions are necessary in order to establish priorities and to develop a strategic plan for the road ahead.

4.15 pm

By now, the Minister must be able to take whatever decisions necessary to establish priorities and to develop a strategic plan for the road ahead and to share that plan with the Assembly. Members are entitled to ask the Minister where health provision is going and to ask him to lay out a clear and realistic timetable for the commencement and completion of construction of a new regional hospital for women and children.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I speak in favour of the motion and commend my party colleagues Gerry Adams and Sue Ramsey for bringing it to the House.

As other Members said, the battle for the new regional maternity hospital at the Royal Group of Hospitals site has been ongoing for many years; there have been consultations back and forth, ministerial decisions and judicial reviews. The motion, however, calls for immediate action.

The structural provision at the Royal Group of Hospitals site is outdated and does not provide adequate facilities for sick women, children and babies. In a lobbying letter that it circulated among MLAs, Sure Start stated that the site's maternity hospital is almost always overcrowded due to the closure of other maternity units and the increase in the birth rate since 2003.

As a representative from west of the Bann, I must put on record my concern about the provision of

maternity services in that area. The Minister has said that he does not provide hospital services on a county basis; however, County Tyrone has a population of 166,000, but it has absolutely no maternity services. That said, I understand that the new hospital will provide a regional service and will assist women throughout the North with fertility treatment or help women who have severe medical complications, while at the same time being Belfast's main maternity hospital.

I commend the excellent job that is done by midwives, often in difficult situations. Last week, I watched UTV's 'Insight', during which Breda Hughes from the Royal College of Midwives described the severe pressure that some midwives experience. I am concerned about that issue, which the Health Committee intends to investigate further with the Royal College of Midwives. I want to put on record that the Assembly commends midwives' good work.

The building of the new hospital offers an opportunity to enhance women's services. Recently, the Health Committee visited Scotland to examine its excellent perinatal services, which include mental-health in-bed services for women and children. I ask the Minister to consider the introduction of that service, which is practically non-existent in the North. On that visit, I met women who said that the service had been their saviour and that it was the difference between their being able to keep their children and their children being forced into care. Any specialist service must reflect the needs of women in the North. I urge the Minister to consider those issues carefully.

A regional service is needed that benefits all women and children throughout the North, and there must be a timetable for its implementation. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Shannon:** I support the motion and thank the Members who brought it to the House.

Naturally, the miracle of childbirth instils enough fear in the menfolk of the Chamber to make the hair on the back of their necks stand on end; never mind the stories that have accompanied some births about the lack of available beds or anaesthetists, for example, that one occasionally hears in the news. Although they do not happen often in Northern Ireland, such situations must not arise again due to overworked and overcrowded maternity units. That is the crux of the debate. It must be ensured that every mother-to-be has a safe and secure birth, no matter from what town or area of the Province she comes. The children and women's hospital, which can help to ensure that, has been promised but not yet delivered.

Not long ago, I represented my constituency in the campaign to upgrade the maternity unit at the Ulster Hospital in Dundonald. That work was carried out. The hospital now has a state-of-the-art maternity section that should be able to cope with an extra thousand

births; however, not enough staff are available to attend that number of extra births. There is no doubt that a specialised women and children's hospital must be based at the Royal Group of Hospitals site. Money must be found to fund it.

The birth rate has risen by 6.25% over the last 4 years and that trend is expected to continue. When I spoke to a midwife who works at the Ulster Hospital at Dundonald, she told me that things are at the limit and there is no room for a substantial increase at this hospital.

Over the past four years, the birth rate has increased by 6.25%, and that trend is expected to continue. When I spoke to a midwife at the Ulster Hospital in Dundonald, she informed me that the hospital is operating to its limit and there is no room for a substantial increase.

**Mr Poots:** The Minister said that the new hospital will not be built until 2017-18. Does the Member agree that, in the absence of that hospital's development on the site at the Royal Victoria Hospital, it would be lunacy to close other maternity hospitals, such as the one at Lagan Valley?

**Mr Shannon:** I thank the Member for his intervention, and I agree with him. In fact, I was about to comment on Antrim Area Hospital. Whether in mid-Ulster, the Antrim area, Lisburn or Dundonald, the delay in the construction of the new hospital will have a domino effect on the rest of the providers of maternity services. In practice, it means that as Antrim Area Hospital comes under greater pressure, it will send more patients than normal to the Royal Victoria Hospital, which, in turn, will pass on cases that would usually have been within its remit. The effects will be felt right down the line, including at the Ulster Hospital at Dundonald, which is staffed to capacity. That will directly affect the provision of maternity services in my constituency. Therefore, today I ask for a dedicated maternity service to ensure that every woman in every area is catered for.

I was heartened to learn that the rate of satisfaction with services in the Province is quite high; over 57% of women stated that they were very happy, and a further 32% said that they were happy, with the care that they received from the hospital. That compares favourably with the level of satisfaction in England. Northern Ireland is slightly ahead. Although those figures are pleasing, I want that high standard of care to continue, and that will be possible only if the new hospital is built soon.

Politicians hope to entice young people to stay in the Province — a subject that is often debated in the Chamber. As part of the plan to keep young people and young families in Northern Ireland, we want to offer the best jobs, care facilities and schools in the United Kingdom. However, in doing so, and given the increasing

number of families moving to Northern Ireland from other European countries, the infrastructure is under increasing pressure. I understand that resources are, unfortunately, not unlimited, but there must be investment in children, and that includes giving them the best possible care.

Not for one moment am I telling the Minister, or any Member, anything new. The Minister knows better than the rest of us that there is a real need for the new hospital. He read the report that was accepted by his predecessor, the details of which culminated in the announcement of a state-of-the-art facility. I simply urge the Minister to begin work on the project, and to give the contract to a local firm that uses local suppliers and is staffed by local tradesmen. That would boost the economy and provide appropriate care.

The figures quoted by the Minister, in conjunction with the predicted rise in births, demonstrate to him that the new hospital is required. He has said that the new hospital is one of his priorities. I simply ask him to turn that priority into a reality and to ensure that midwives and doctors know that there is a light at the end of the tunnel that will ease the pressure on them. I support the motion.

**Mr Gardiner:** It is important to be clear that all hospital services are interlinked. In October 2006, the Department's audit of acute maternity services noted:

"Maternity services cannot be considered in isolation. As a service, it has important links with other specialities and is closely aligned to gynaecology, anaesthetics and paediatric services. This is due to factors such as shared obstetric and gynaecology rotas, the role of the paediatrician in providing clinical expertise at the birth of a baby and the relationship between paediatrics and neo-natal services."

That must be kept in mind when considering the overall level of provision in any area of the Health Service, and it is particularly valid in light of the financial restraints under which the Assembly operates. My party is seriously concerned about a black hole in the Executive's finances. Therefore, any proposals debated by the Assembly must be financially realistic.

The Minister has already told the Assembly that his capital budget is only £3.3 billion — less than half of that required to implement all infrastructure projects that are considered a priority.

Furthermore, the Assembly must consider the geographical spread of births when choosing a location for maternity facilities. The Minister has already provided the finance to enable Craigavon Area Hospital to deliver an additional 500 births a year. My honourable friend John McCallister mentioned that the Minister has supplied funding to Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry and the Ulster Hospital in Dundonald. Therefore, he has taken an active approach to maternity services, and I applaud his efforts thus far.

Has the Minister contacted the Minister of Finance and Personnel in order to obtain additional funds, particularly for the new hospital for women and children in Belfast? The Ulster Unionist Party supports that project. I wonder whether the DUP — during its post-St Andrews negotiations — will raise the matter with the United Kingdom Government. I would have thought that the new hospital for women and children in Belfast would feature in any peace dividend. Given that Sinn Féin proposed today's debate, I know that it supports the project. Although that party's then Health Minister Bairbre de Brún proposed a location for the hospital, she did not secure the funding for it. Will Sinn Féin now find that funding? Moreover, Sinn Féin might, perhaps, facilitate an Executive meeting with this item on the agenda.

**Mr Attwood:** My contribution to the debate is based on personal experience. Two and a half years ago, my daughter, Nora, was born in the Royal Maternity Hospital, and, for different reasons, I have visited the hospital in the past two weeks. Both experiences characterise the problem in the Royal Maternity Hospital. Two and a half years ago, my wife was under caseload midwifery care. However, the caseload midwives did not have a room in which they could attend to patients. Through no fault of their own, they had to rush around the hospital to identify a room in which they could see my wife. That situation has been experienced by hundreds of women.

Two and a half years later, the same midwife is treating my wife. Although she now has a room for patients, it has no facilities, such as the scanning devices that are necessary to maintain the health of the mother and child. That experience is, unfortunately, typical. Although the midwives and doctors display the highest standards of professionalism, dedication and commitment, the accommodation is not fit for purpose and creates additional anxieties for staff and parents — particularly mothers — over and above the natural stress and anxiety experienced during childbirth.

My experiences — which I am sure are shared in Belfast and beyond — arise 14 years after the McKenna review. After seven consultations and six Ministers, there is still no hospital. The hospital would have cost £15 million to build 12 years ago, whereas now it will cost in excess of £400 million. Those figures highlight how the delay has compounded the problem medically and financially.

I have three questions for the Minister, to which I request that he respond specifically. Those questions arise, in part, from his answers during today's Question Time. The Minister made it clear that, for the next three years, the capital funding for bespoke projects has already been spent.

4.30 pm

Will the Minister rule out definitively any ambiguity that may have arisen? It is estimated that it will take £30 million to clear the site at the Royal Victoria Hospital in preparation for the new building. Is that money available for him to spend during the course of the next three years? During Question Time, the Minister indicated that it may not be; however, that is not what many people involved in the campaign for the hospital understand. His remarks will confirm their anxieties and frustrate their hopes for the development of the new hospital.

My second point also arises from Question Time. If the Minister has conducted a review of all his spending priorities and now wishes to see the Minister of Finance and Personnel in respect of that, will he, given the unanimous feeling of the House, publish the list of capital priorities for his Department arising from his review? We could then all clearly understand the problems he faces. Will he put the creation of a new hospital for children and women on the Royal Victoria Hospital site at the top of his list? It is understood that there are many competing priorities.

My third point is that OFMDFM's 10-year investment strategy, presented to and endorsed by the House but opposed by the SDLP and a few others, makes no mention of this project although £18 billion is due to be spent in capital projects. Will the Minister explain why that is so?

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

**Mr Attwood:** Will OFMDFM explain to the House why this issue was not mentioned as part of that plan for the next 10 years?

**Mr G Robinson:** Any move towards increasing health provision for children and women, especially as it is on a regional level and targets expert services at this specific area, can only be welcomed. No one can object to provision of the very best of healthcare for our population. I would be amazed if any Member objected to the provision of good services for children and women. However, a project such as this is heavily capital-intensive. Every Member is fully aware of the global crisis that the economy is suffering. The Minister, therefore, must be sure that he can deliver the project within his budget before a decision to proceed is taken.

I also call on the Minister to ensure that the financial resources at his disposal are providing value for money. He is well aware of a serious complaint, made by a constituent of mine, with regard to levels of cleanliness in a leading Belfast hospital over recent months.

The Minister must also address the appallingly long waiting lists, especially for eye treatments and neurological conditions. Outpatient treatment for

age-related macular degeneration (ARMD) cannot be delivered because there is a lack of suitably trained staff and accommodation sufficiently spacious for vital sight-saving treatments. My information on that topic comes from a well-placed source.

In principle, I support the idea of a new children and women's regional hospital; however, I hope that the Minister ensures that his guidelines, with respect to cleanliness and reduction of waiting times for treatment in some specialist areas, are enforced.

Having said that, I support the need for a new regional children and women's hospital, and I support the motion.

**Ms Purvis:** I support the call, made by proposer of the motion, for a clear timetable for the commencement and completion of a new regional children and women's hospital for Northern Ireland.

As other Members have said, there have been eight consultations or review processes on the provision of maternity services. The Jubilee Maternity Hospital has been gone for eight years, and over that time, money has been set aside, in bits and pieces, for a facility which, we have always known, will have to be built and which will cost in excess of £300 million.

That is not a small price tag: it is a figure that would certainly stand out in any planning document. Why has so little been done to set aside and protect the funds that are needed for that vital facility?

Maternity services are groaning under increased demand throughout the Province for those services. The birth rate is growing, which is an exciting trend. When the Jubilee Maternity Hospital closed in 2000, the maximum number of births anticipated in any year was 4,900: but there were 5,600 births last year. That suggests that more people are staying or settling in Northern Ireland and choosing to raise their families here. Ideally, that means that people are optimistic about this country and its potential, which is good news. However, new people and new families need to be provided for, and that provision was promised when the very controversial decision was made to close the Jubilee Maternity Hospital.

Even without the growing birth rate, it is questionable whether the Royal Maternity Hospital was in a position to absorb all of the patients who would otherwise have gone to the Jubilee Maternity Hospital. Perhaps, as some argued at the time, we should have kept the Jubilee Maternity Hospital in service until the doors of the new women and children's hospital were opened.

Although the quality of maternity services in Northern Ireland is unquestionably exceptional, midwives and consultants must be given the tools and facilities to do their jobs properly. We have all heard

stories of women in labour who were turned away from the Jubilee Maternity Hospital because no beds were available or who were jammed into overcrowded wards. That situation adds to the stress of parents, patients and staff alike. The privacy and dignity of women, at what is a very emotional and special time, are undoubtedly compromised in such an environment. That is no way for maternity services to operate.

I appreciate the attention that the Minister has given to the important issue of maternity provision and his decision to invest in maternity services and facilities throughout the Province. I also respect his vision of providing world-class health and social-care services in modern facilities. However, even if the most recent draft timeline in which to have the hospital up and running by is met, that will be 2017 — almost 20 years from the time that the Jubilee Maternity Hospital was flattened to a replacement facility being provided. That would be a long time and a fair amount of money to have been potentially wasted by having to constantly revisit the planning process for something that should already be in place.

I am curious to know why it took so long for the Royal to formulate a business plan for a new hospital when it was clear, from 2003, that the new hospital would be built on the site. I recognise that budgets are getting tighter and that all Departments are currently targeting efficiency savings. However, that service has been promised for a long time and is badly needed. Confidence that the hospital would be built would be renewed if funds were set aside to clear the site. I ask the Minister to give an assurance that funds will be made available and that the site will be cleared.

The new women and children's hospital must be a priority for the Department. I urge the Minister to provide a clear timetable of when action is likely to occur. I support the motion.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey):** I strongly support the proposal for a new women and children's hospital. There is an urgent requirement for additional capacity in Belfast. The new, modern facilities will be a centre of excellence that will provide the most comprehensive and best-possible services to mothers, babies and young children in Northern Ireland. Once built, it will bring relevant clinical services — including neonatology, obstetrics and children's services — together in close proximity, as opposed to the current situation in which services are provided at opposite ends of the Royal Group of Hospitals site.

It is clear that our maternity services face a number of challenges. There has been a 10% increase in the number of births in Northern Ireland between 2004 and 2007, and that number continues to rise. Increased demand means that maternity services have to be

developed if the immediate pressures are to be met, particularly in relation to the lack of space and capacity in our current hospitals.

To help identify the scale of the problem, I asked the Eastern Health and Social Services Board to conduct a review of maternity services that will consider the existing capacity and the immediate pressures that face maternity services in Belfast and its surrounding areas. In addition, my Department is also conducting a further nursing and midwifery review this year that will examine the anticipated demand for midwifery services over the next five years.

We must modernise and adapt our service provision to take account of new models of care. For example, we must ensure that we treat children in a child-friendly and safe environment. Furthermore, women in hospital should have the choice of a range of care options.

Other factors must be considered in line with best practice, such as the decision to raise the age of children treated in the children's hospital from 13 to 16. That will involve the transfer of children aged up to 16 who are treated in acute adult wards at present. Additionally, the transfer of services from the Royal, the Ulster, Musgrave Park and Lagan Valley hospitals to the children's and women's hospitals must also be taken into consideration.

The Royal Group of Hospitals provides the most comprehensive range of services for some of the most critically ill mothers and babies in Northern Ireland. However, it does so in accommodation that dates from the 1930s and which is now past its sell-by date. We must update the existing maternity and children's hospitals.

In 2003, a decision was taken to locate the central Belfast maternity hospital at the Royal Hospital site; five years later the new hospitals are not in place. The capacity for additional activity in the Royal Maternity Hospital and the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children is limited. Much of the estate is old, many parts are in poor condition, and it is no longer fit for purpose.

To address that, purpose-built accommodation is required to meet the needs of modern clinical practice into the foreseeable future. That accommodation must be able to respond flexibly to future changes and service models as well as physically linking key services for adults, women and children. That is why I am so keen to progress the development of the new children's and women's hospitals.

However, Members will be aware that I recently had to carry out a review of capital priorities with the boards and trusts. I have been forced to make some very difficult decisions over the projects that I can afford to fund and when those developments take place.



That must be seen in the context of years of historic underfunding in our health and social-care infrastructure. This is the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the National Health Service. In Northern Ireland, that led to a major building programme during the 1960s and 1970s when the vast majority of our larger hospitals were built. As a result, many of those facilities are now almost 50 years old; some are even older. Those buildings are outdated and desperately in need of modernisation. During the past 50 years, there has been limited investment in our healthcare facilities and that has left us with a huge deficit. I am now faced with trying to rebuild many of those rundown hospitals, all at the same time.

I am committed to building a world-class health service for patients, carers and staff. The public rightly demands and expects high standards of healthcare. We cannot lag behind the rest of the world in harnessing new technologies and developments in medicine that will save lives.

Under the investment strategy for Northern Ireland, I have been allocated £3.3 billion, spread over the next 10 years, to invest in the infrastructure of our health, social care and public safety services. That money will be spent on new and refurbished buildings, modern equipment and technology and will bring real benefits to staff and public. Several major projects are already in progress, and the planned investment will deliver new facilities such as the new acute hospital at Enniskillen and the next phase of redevelopment at the Ulster Hospital and the critical-care building at the Royal Hospital.

In addition, I will be making a series of announcements over the coming weeks and months, outlining the projects that I intend to implement across the various trusts over the next 10 years. That process has already started: in October, I announced a planned £100 million investment in the Ambulance Service; almost £170 million in the Fire and Rescue Service; and £300 million for information and communications technology — £264 million of which is capital.

4.45 pm

However, although £3.3 billion is a large sum of money, it is simply not enough for all the capital developments that are required. To meet current capital priorities, we need £7.8 billion — more than double what we are getting. Almost one third of the £3.3 billion that has been allocated will become available only in the last two years — that is, in 2016-18. Therefore, we must make the best use of the available resources and target them at areas where they will have the maximum impact on the delivery of high-quality services.

In relation to the new women's and children's hospitals, the current investment strategy for Northern

Ireland profile presents us with a major problem. I did not draw up that profile and, in relation to Alex Attwood's point, I stated repeatedly that the allocated resources were not adequate. The profile has a major trough from 2013-16, which is described in the Department as "the valley of death", during which virtually no funding is available to start any major projects.

The reason is that in the profile the period from 2011-13 is designed around two major hospital projects for the south-west, which are due to be completed then. There is also an issue of equity — I cannot focus on only one geographical area when, across Northern Ireland, there are hospitals and other health-care facilities that need to be replaced urgently. Nor can I focus solely on the acute sector when there is a pressing need to develop services in the community and primary-care sectors.

All those issues have a significant impact on the timing of the women's and children's hospitals. Therefore, at the moment, we can plan only for a phased implementation. For the women's hospital, that involves site-enabling works starting in 2011 and construction happening in 2015-16, with an expected completion date of 2017-18. Construction of the children's hospital is not due to start until 2017-18, with an expected completion date of 2021-22. That is the best that we can do with the resources that are available.

I do not want to split the development — it makes sense for the women's and children's hospitals to be developed together and it would be more cost-effective to do it that way. However, we are where we are as far as finances are concerned. The timetable is completely unsatisfactory for me and for many others; I want the work to progress much more quickly. However, as I have stated already, I am faced with many competing demands to replace and refurbish buildings that are no longer fit for purpose.

Today, I seek the support of my Executive colleagues to have the investment strategy for Northern Ireland profile improved to allow me to proceed with the development much sooner or to have additional funding provided specifically for this important project. In that regard, the first thing that I must do is have a meeting with the Minister of Finance and Personnel — I have been requesting that for some time and it is now in my diary for 24 November.

In order to pursue this issue, the next important thing that I need is a meeting of the Executive. The Executive must meet in order for me to get agreement on the review of the investment strategy for Northern Ireland profile. If I do not get that, we are stuck with the existing timetable. If I can get the profile changed — which requires a meeting of the Executive — we

can bring the project forward. Getting extra money into the budget would be even better, because it would allow me to implement it in a timescale that would be acceptable to most people.

We need an additional £250 million to allow us to complete the full development of the women's and children's hospitals within the 10-year investment strategy for Northern Ireland period and, ideally, to complete both hospitals as one project. I must emphasise that the current amount of capital that has been allocated to my Department for the next decade is less than half what I require to meet all the demands on the Health Service that have accumulated after years of investment neglect.

Unfortunately, that means that unless additional funds are made available to me, some much-needed projects cannot be funded. Without the necessary investment, the health and social care service cannot become more efficient. The staff of that service — and those from the Fire Service and the Ambulance Service — need, and deserve, to work in modern facilities with the latest equipment so that they can deliver the best services to the public. Our patients deserve no less.

Our clients deserve to be treated in welcoming and well-maintained buildings in order to help with their recovery and sustain their well-being. I am determined to ensure that that happens, and I hope that Members will support me.

**Ms S Ramsey:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am disappointed with the Minister's response. I will return to that concern, but I do welcome him to the debate. In any debate, it is quite useful for the relevant Minister to attend, so that he or she can take on board any points that are made.

As other Members said, the majority of adults will interact with maternity services at some point in their lives, so it is difficult to overemphasise their importance. However, we must also appreciate that such care is not just about the safe delivery of healthy babies; proper maternity and children's services have significant positive impacts on long-term public-health outcomes.

Although I realise that the Minister cannot reply, I shall ask him several direct questions that struck me as I listened intently to the debate, and I would appreciate it if he would respond to them at a later date.

Several Members outlined the sequence of events following the initial consultation about the merger of the Jubilee and the Royal Maternity Hospitals. In 2005, the then Health Minister, Shaun Woodward, announced that £300 million would be made available for a women's and children's hospital, which would mean that women and children in the North would have access to some of the best facilities in the world. That is no different from what the current Minister is

saying. That announcement answered many questions at the time, but I would appreciate the Minister explaining what happened to the £300 million, because it has given rise to further questions.

When the Jubilee Maternity Hospital closed in 2000 — and other Members raised this point — anti-closure campaigners and people here were reassured that a new state-of-the-art hospital would be built on the site. That was supposed to have been in the 2005-08 spending cycle. However, we are now in the 2008-11 spending cycle and not a penny has been allocated to the building project.

The Minister and his officials, who are following the debate, must accept that such uncertainty is bad for staff morale. For every day that we debate buildings and services, morale drops. I wish to take this opportunity to congratulate and commend the staff of the Royal Jubilee Maternity Service and the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children, who, even now, continue to give 100% care for patients. No matter what happens, we depend on their loyalty and goodwill, and it is important to recognise that.

As Members said, services are being delivered in a 1930s building, and the Minister accepted that it has passed its sell-by date; it is "not fit for purpose". Is the Minister now telling us that we are failing — that the Department that is failing women and children — because the building is "not fit for purpose"? We are on dodgy territory there, and we need to then try and improve the services.

We are talking about overcrowding. Other Members, including Jim Shannon, have mentioned that birth rates are continuing to rise. We are talking about limited choices for women. We are talking about health and safety standards not being met, and we are talking about women and babies having to be transferred in crisis situations by ambulance.

My party colleague Gerry Adams acknowledged the cost of the project. However, he went on to inform the House that we need to look at it in stages. The first step would be the clearing of the site, and that would send out a clear message that we are serious about this project, especially to the staff and the patients and the campaigning groups. I know that they are in the Public Gallery today. If we give a commitment to that, it will send out a clear message that we are serious about this newbuild.

The Chairperson of the Health Committee, Iris Robinson, outlined the work that the Committee has done in the meetings and the visit which we undertook. I agree with her that funding is long overdue.

I appreciate the support that my Health Committee colleagues have given to the motion. In a recent visit to the Royal Jubilee Maternity and the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children, the Committee saw at first

hand the pressures that staff are under. We saw bins in corridors due to the lack of space. That is wrong, and it needs to be examined, especially when one considers hospital-acquired infections. Such a lack of space leads to overcrowding, which, in turn, leads to high-risk infections and potential deaths. That was highlighted in last week's 'Insight' programme. We must therefore be careful about how we achieve a balance.

John McCallister and Samuel Gardiner supported the motion and accepted the need for a new hospital, but they gave reasons as to why it cannot be built. I acknowledge that a lot of money is involved; it is a frightening amount. However, I accept that the building must be completed in stages. Do Mr McCallister and Mr Gardiner accept that it would be worthwhile to clear the site now? That would cost only 14% of the overall budget and would have a positive impact.

The provision of a new regional hospital would mean that pregnant women here would no longer have to be sent to Dublin, England or Scotland. In a recent case, a pregnant woman — and support staff — had to travel to Dundee by private jet in order to deliver her premature twins. Is it right, in this day and age, that we send people away to deliver premature babies because we cannot provide the necessary facilities? How would Members like it if their partners, wives or family members had to do that? How much do such trips cost? Are we clouding the issue by sending people to Dublin or Dundee? Do we know the overall costs of such travel? Can the Minister inform the House of how much such travel costs? Are we wasting money by sending pregnant women away?

Alex Easton supported the motion — as did his party colleagues — but he spent his time criticising everybody. We have a good working relationship in the Health Committee, but perhaps he could spend some time talking to his party colleague the Finance Minister and ask him to release the necessary money. We all need to work together so that the money can be released and the Assembly can send out a message that the hospital will be built.

**Mr Easton:** Sinn Féin would be better employed meeting in the Executive so that the Minister could formulate a case to get the hospital built. With regard to the new hospital, the Member is failing her constituents in West Belfast, because Sinn Féin Ministers will not meet in the Executive to discuss the issue. The problem lies solely with the Member's party and no one else.

**Ms S Ramsey:** The Member is still clouding the issue. The money is there, and it could be released. The Minister of Finance and Personnel could make that decision, and the Health Minister could spend the money. The Member should not cloud the issue any more.

Jim Shannon was correct to highlight the negative impact that the delay in building the hospital is having on other hospitals such as Lagan Valley Hospital, the Ulster Hospital and others that provide maternity services.

The Minister informed the House that he supports fully the newbuild. However, there has been no movement on it. He said that there had been a review, but there have been continuous reviews. Since the need for the new hospital was announced, how much money has been spent on reviews, business cases, business plans, consultations and the employment of consultants? If we knew that before the building commences, we would get a flavour of how much money is being wasted.

My party colleague and I tabled the motion in order to bring the issue to the House. We appreciate the all-party support for the motion, and it is important to send out a clear message that the Assembly is serious about ensuring that a new regional hospital for women and children will be built.

In his meeting with DFP, the Health Minister should highlight the construction jobs that securing the newbuild would create. Every day, we hear about the lack of construction jobs and about the credit crunch. We are talking about the construction of one hospital only, but that hospital will have positive knock-on effects for the North's economy, and it must be progressed.

I have asked a lot of the Minister this afternoon. However, my last appeal is for him to update Members on the meeting that he had with the Department of Finance and Personnel in order that, collectively, we all know where we stand.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly calls for funding for a new regional hospital for women and children; and calls upon the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a timetable for the commencement and completion of the project.

*Adjourned at 5.00 pm.*





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