

---

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 3 February 2009

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

### North/South Ministerial Council

#### Inland Waterways Sectoral Format

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wished to make a statement about the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in inland waterways sectoral format. However, the Minister is indisposed this morning, so the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, who also attended the meeting, will deliver the statement.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement, in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in inland waterways sectoral format.

The meeting was held at Waterways Ireland's headquarters in Enniskillen on 16 January 2009. The Executive were represented by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Gregory Campbell MP MLA, and me, and the Irish Government were represented by the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Éamon Ó Cuív TD.

This statement has been agreed with Minister Campbell, and I am making it on behalf of both of us.

Mr John Martin, the chief executive officer of Waterways Ireland, provided a report on developments during 2008. The Council noted the completion of work on the new Waterways Ireland headquarters in Enniskillen in September, and the subsequent relocation of staff into the new accommodation.

The Council noted the continuing progress on the restoration of the Royal Canal to the Shannon, including works at Lyneen Bridge. The Council also noted that an additional 242 m of moorings were provided on the

Erne system, 36 m on the Lower Bann and 36 m on the Royal Canal. The Council noted the successful removal of the old swivel bridge and installation of a new bridge over the Shannon navigation at Portumna, County Galway. The Council commended Waterways Ireland for an award for maintenance excellence, awarded in the maintenance and asset management category at the Irish Maintenance and Asset Management Society company awards, for its bridge-survey system.

The Council reviewed progress to date on the restoration of the Clones to Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster Canal, and noted that Waterways Ireland had met a wide range of statutory agencies and the majority of landowners who will be affected by the project. The Council noted Waterways Ireland's decision to undertake the preliminary design stage internally. The Council also noted that, following the acquisition of land and receipt of planning permission, Waterways Ireland will let the contract for the design and construction of the project to a single entity. The Council welcomed Waterways Ireland's successful enhancement of the facilities and services on the Lower Bann and Erne waterways to further develop access to those waterways and waterside activities.

The Council agreed proposals for a number of property disposals in the context of a range of development projects on the waterways. The Council also noted the draft 2009 business plan for Waterways Ireland, which is under consideration by both sponsor Departments and Finance Departments, in line with budgetary processes in the two jurisdictions. Both sponsor Departments will work together to finalise a business plan and to bring it forward for approval at a future NSMC meeting. The Council noted Waterways Ireland's annual report and accounts for 2007, which were presented prior to being laid before the Assembly and the Oireachtas.

The Council agreed that its next meeting in inland waterways sectoral format would take place at a date to be arranged. Go raibh maith agat.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In February 2008, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure met representatives of Waterways Ireland. We were told that one of its key priorities for 2008 was to begin the design and land-acquisition processes on the section of the Ulster Canal from Upper Lough Erne to Clones. In April 2008, we also met representatives of the Blackwater Regional Partnership, who strongly put the case for the reopening of the Ulster Canal.

In light of those submissions to the Committee, were timescales mentioned during the discussions on the reopening of the Ulster Canal? When is the land expected to be acquired and planning permission

received? The Minister will need no reminding that the Blackwater Regional Partnership is made up of partners from Armagh, Monaghan and Tyrone who came together in 1994 to form a strategic local authority alliance.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I thank the Member for his question. The Member is well aware that the Ulster Canal flows through my constituency. It is an issue on which I am very keen, and I wish to see it expedited. Waterways Ireland has had discussions with representatives of a wide range of statutory agencies, and has met 46 of the possible 50 landowners, representing approximately 97% of the ownership of the linear length of the canal. Waterways Ireland has decided to undertake the preliminary design stage internally, and following the acquisition of land and receipt of planning permission, a contract for the design and construction of the project will be let out to a single entity.

Waterways Ireland reports on progress at a monthly monitoring meeting with the sponsor Departments. Although no specific timescales were given at the meeting, I am sure that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure will want to reflect on the Hansard report and may reply to the Member in writing. I know that time is one of the issues, and that both Ministers are very keen on seeing progress, but obviously there are other agencies involved, so it is impossible for me to give a definitive answer on timescales. However, I can assure the Member that everyone at the meeting was in favour of the project progressing as quickly as possible.

**Mr McCausland:** I am sure we all agree that inland waterways and their development make a major contribution to the tourist product in Northern Ireland.

Was any consideration given at the meeting to the impact of the proposed tourism developments and on how we can maximise their potential benefit for Northern Ireland?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Our waterways have enormous potential to attract tourists. The Waterways Ireland marketing and promotion strategy, which was launched in 2004, will be reviewed this year. That strategy has five key marketing objectives: awareness creation; development of a corporate identity; promoting greater use of the waterways; working in partnership with other bodies; and building a platform for sustained development. Those objectives are met through a range of marketing activities, including the publication and distribution of promotional material, guides and charts; attendance at relevant trade and consumer shows; advertising campaigns; press familiarisation visits and other promotional activity by way of a signage programme, the development of an award-winning website and many other marketing tactics.

Waterways Ireland delivers its marketing and promotion strategy in partnership with a range of local authorities, trade organisations and tourism bodies, including the NITB (Northern Ireland Tourist Board), Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland. From a product development perspective, Waterways Ireland, in partnership with relevant local authorities and tourism bodies, has begun the development and formulation of recreation and tourism development plans with the inland waterways as a centre around which other tourism activity can be clustered. It is anticipated that those development plans will be in place at the end of this year.

**Mr K Robinson:** I thank the Minister for her statement, which she delivered under very difficult circumstances.

First, I note the positive progress that has been made on the Clones to Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster Canal. As other Members said, we all welcome that from a tourism point of view. What is the estimated cost of the proposals that the Minister has outlined?

Wearing her other hat, can she tell the House what steps are being taken by the inland waterways agency to tackle the invasive progress of that most unwelcome visitor from the Republic of Ireland; namely, the zebra mussel?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** The estimated capital cost of restoring the entire Ulster Canal is £171.5 million. That includes site investigation, environmental impact assessments and project management, as well as construction costs. The estimated cost of restoring the Clones to Lower Lough Erne section of the Ulster Canal is €35 million. The construction cost of that project is being funded entirely by the South, and when built, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will contribute to ongoing operational costs. Waterways Ireland intends to seek planning permission by mid-2010 on that section of the canal, which will be followed by tendering for detailed design and build contracts.

There is nothing in my briefing this morning about our wee friend the zebra mussel. However, as the MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, I am well aware of the impact of the zebra mussel on the fishing trade. I am sure that Ministers will examine how to protect our waterways from invasive species such as the zebra mussel, although there is a fairly strong acknowledgement that its presence is widespread across the island and might be difficult to keep out entirely.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I welcome the Minister's statement on Waterways Ireland. Will she outline the tourism potential of the investment in the development of access to facilities in the Lower Bann area and the promotion of sports activities there? How will local authorities be

involved in that? I had hoped that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure could have been here to answer questions about the tourism potential of the River Foyle, but I will ask Ms Gildernew to answer my questions, as she has some remit to maximise its potential.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I am sure that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, having read the Hansard report, will write to the Member, and will answer any questions that I am unable to respond to today.

In 2007, Waterways Ireland established the Lakelands Initiative along with NITB, Fermanagh Lakeland Tourism, Fáilte Ireland, Shannon Development and Tourism Ireland. Under that initiative, resources have been pooled, and the concept of a lakeland corridor from Fermanagh to Limerick is being developed. The initiative encompasses a 30-mile corridor around the Erne System, the Shannon-Erne Waterway and the Shannon Navigation. A range of marketing materials has been developed under the catchline “Discover Freedom”, with direct access to tourism markets abroad through the dedicated website.

The Loughs Agency, which is under my Department’s remit, is responsible for the Foyle tourism initiative. The Member is aware that we gave out grants last year to develop the tourism potential of the River Foyle in order to attract people to the area. I want to work with other agencies to develop the tourism potential of that beautiful part of Ireland.

10.45 am

**Mr McCarthy:** I thank the Minister for her statement. My question follows on from that which the Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure asked about the completion date for the restoration of the Ulster Canal. The Minister said that she had met the majority — 46 out of 50 — of landowners along the length of the canal. What was their reaction? Did they all agree with what has been proposed, or did some object? I ask that question because we all know that it takes only one objection to delay a programme.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** Kieran is listening well this morning. Good man. Waterways Ireland met 46 out of a possible 50 landowners — 97% of the ownership. From listening to the comments that Minister Ó Cuív and Minister Campbell made at the meeting, I think that most of the responses were fairly positive. At the meeting, I, in my capacity as Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, offered to help to deal with any difficulties that may emerge, because I am keen to see the restoration of the Ulster Canal progressed.

Although the work may create a nuisance factor or cause some annoyance initially, benefits for the entire area are to be derived from it. No farmer who lives along the length of the canal wants to deprive his community

of those potential benefits, so we can work together on the matter. Waterways Ireland conducted those meetings, so I do not have the specific answer that Mr McCarthy seeks; however, I think that, by and large, the landowners were fairly amenable to the proposals.

**Lord Browne:** I welcome the enhancement of the facilities and services on the Lower Bann. Can the Minister outline the work that has been undertaken to date on the Lower Bann, and any future work that is planned? Has the monetary exchange rate had any detrimental effect on that proposed work?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** As I said, quite a bit of additional mooring has been provided. Along the Lower Bann, 504 m of additional mooring was provided between 2000 and 2008. The Maid of Antrim, which is now in private ownership, operates day trips on both Lough Erne and the Lower Bann. Another private operator is based in Coleraine. Waterways Ireland has been working to improve the infrastructure, including the provision of new moorings — for example, at Mount Sandel in Coleraine — which are used mainly by private boats and water-sports enthusiasts. Any decision to locate a hire-boat centre to provide day trips is a commercial decision.

Waterways Ireland is keen to encourage additional commercial operators to work on that attractive waterway, and if there are any such proposals, I am sure that Minister Campbell will be happy to examine them.

Waterways Ireland gave an excellent presentation and showed some beautiful photographs of the Lower Bann, which were obviously taken on a lovely day. I studied at the University of Ulster at Coleraine, and the sun was not always shining there. The before-and-after pictures of the Lower Bann were particularly impressive. Excellent work has been done on that stretch of river.

**Mr Shannon:** I thank the Minister for her statement. I know that she is deputising today, but she may be able to answer my questions anyway. First, in light of the economic downturn that we are clearly experiencing, both in the Province and in the Republic of Ireland, can she confirm that the moneys that have been allocated to the Waterways Ireland scheme still exist and that there will not be any delay in processing the scheme?

Secondly, close co-operation is not always there between the boat owners and the anglers who use a canal or river. Can the Minister confirm whether those two groups have built up a relationship and that the angling organisations’ viewpoints on proposed Waterways Ireland schemes have been listened to, so that fishing can continue alongside the boats?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** You can answer either question, Minister.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I am definitely not answering the second question, because I do not think that there is an answer that the Member wants to hear.

The first question was about the economic downturn and whether the works would go ahead. Minister Ó Cuív was keen to point out that the work on the Ulster Canal — which is 100% funded by the South — will go ahead, which is very welcome. In the present climate, we do not know what the next 12 months will bring, so I do not want to say anything that could cause difficulty down the line.

As regards the relationship between anglers and boat users, we must realise that we are not the only people who use the waterways, so we should have respect for one another. The phrase that comes to mind is:

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”.

It is important to remember that we all should take enjoyment from our waterways and that nobody has the exclusive right to those waterways.

**Mr Cree:** I thank the Minister for her statement. With regard to the Ulster Canal, it is interesting to note that there is a budget price for the restoration works, but the preliminary design stage has not yet been completed. The time frame should be firmed up fairly quickly because that is a very important part of the work.

The Minister referred to the number of property disposals. Will she clarify the nature of the properties and their estimated value?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** As I said, the outline business case indicated a capital cost of £171.5 million for the restoration of the entire canal. The estimated cost to restore the section from Clones to Lough Erne is €35 million. I am sure that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure will take on board the Member’s question and answer it in full, because I do not have the details in front of me. I am sure that he will get back to the Member in writing.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Is the Minister satisfied that Minister Campbell has not ducked his ministerial responsibilities in relation to North/South matters? Surely there is no collusion between Sinn Féin and the DUP on that matter.

I thank the Minister for her very brief statement about Waterways Ireland. What additional work streams were added to the programme? I noted that the Minister said that the date of the next meeting was yet to be arranged. Why are there not regular calendar meetings? What particular vision or programme do the Ministers have for developing Ireland’s loughs?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** The Member asked several questions, and I will not answer all of them. Given the time of year that is in it and the weather conditions, it is

reasonable enough for anybody to be ill. The meeting was extremely positive and businesslike. I have attended quite a number of those meetings, and the latest was no different. It was conducted in very good spirits, and it was an excellent meeting. I have no doubt that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure is genuinely ill, and it is remiss of the Member to make that accusation.

A schedule of meetings was agreed at the recent North/South Ministerial Council plenary meeting, which was held on 23 January 2009 at Magee College in Derry. I have no doubt that those meetings will be ongoing. They are extremely important and their usefulness is obvious to all of us.

**Mr Dallat:** I also welcome the statement. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to Waterways Ireland. It is one of the best cross-border bodies with regard to practical work. I note that progress on the canals is measured in metres. Coming from the north coast, which the Minister knows well, may I ask when metres will become kilometres? Given that the area that I represent has lost 3,000 jobs in the past two years, when will the Lower Bann be connected to the River Shannon, so that international tourism can take off in the way that it has done in the Republic?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I am not the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, so I do not have the answer. It was not discussed at the meeting to which we refer.

As I have said, the potential of water-based tourism is obvious to all of us — it was extremely obvious to the three Ministers who attended the meeting. We want to encourage the link-up of the island’s navigation systems. The Member is correct: Waterways Ireland is a very good organisation, and it has carried out its work very professionally. Its headquarters building is beautiful and has already won a number of awards. I urge any Members who pass through Enniskillen to go to see it.

We can encourage more people to visit Ireland in order to take part in water-based activities, which are enjoyable and calming, although, for me, such activities are only calming if I leave the children at home. I thank the Member for the question.

## North/South Ministerial Council Language Body Sectoral Format

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in language body sectoral format. As I said earlier, the Minister is ill and, therefore, is unable to attend this morning, so the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, who also attended the meeting, will deliver the statement.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I shall make the following report on the third North/South Ministerial Council meeting in language sectoral format since the restoration of the Executive and the Assembly. The report has been endorsed by both Ministers.

On 16 January 2009, as previously, the meeting was held in Enniskillen, and the Executive were represented by Gregory Campbell MP MLA, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and me. The Irish Government were represented by Éamon Ó Cuív TD, the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. Gregory Campbell chaired the meeting, which dealt with matters relating to the North/South Language Body and its two constituent agencies: Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch, the Ulster-Scots Agency, and Foras na Gaeilge, the Irish-language agency.

I shall now summarise the matters that the Council discussed. The Council received progress reports from the chief executives — Mr George Patton and Ferdie Mac an Fhailigh — of the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge on developments in 2008. The Council welcomed the strong working relationship between the two agencies, which have collaborated on a range of projects, including the production of a film in Irish about Ulster-Scots language and culture, which is scheduled to be broadcast on TG4 during the first quarter of 2009; sponsorship of the Belfast International Horse Show; the organisation of the Young Ambassadors scheme in Downpatrick in 2008, whereby young people from the United States of America engage with the agencies in language and culture research; and joint funding by the agencies with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland of two arts development officers for language arts posts.

The Council noted the draft 2009 business plans for the North/South Language Body and its agencies, which are under consideration by both sponsor Departments and both Finance Departments, in line with budgetary processes in the two jurisdictions. The Council agreed that those plans will focus on key ministerial priorities in respect of each of the agencies. Both sponsor

Departments will work together to finalise the business plans and to bring them forward for approval at a future NSMC meeting.

The Council discussed staffing matters in Foras na Gaeilge, and it reviewed the decentralisation of Foras na Gaeilge staff to Gaoth Dobhair. That follows on from discussions held by the North/South Ministerial Council in language sectoral format in October 2007 and July 2008.

The position on outstanding consolidated annual reports and accounts was reviewed by the Council, which noted the complexities in compiling, auditing and consolidating annual reports and accounts. The Council welcomed the assurances given to members by the agencies' chief executive officers that that work will continue to be given the utmost priority, and it requested a progress report for the next NSMC meeting in language sectoral format.

Ministers noted and endorsed Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch protocol, which governs funded activities outside the island of Ireland by Tha Boord.

In closing, Minister Ó Cuív stated that he favours hosting the next NSMC meeting in language sectoral format in Gaoth Dobhair on a date to be agreed by officials and sponsor Departments. Go raibh maith agat.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim mo bhuíochas leis an Aire.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development said that the matter of outstanding consolidated annual reports and accounts was reviewed at the meeting. Given that the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure is examining how the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure manages its arm's-length bodies, particularly with regard to financial accountability, that news will be of considerable interest to the Committee.

Therefore, I ask the Minister whether the annual accounts of Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency have been signed off, and if not, what has caused the delay? Has delay been caused by historic difficulties in the Ulster-Scots Agency?

In addition, to simplify that entire accounting process and to allow quicker production of the books, could the requirement for the consolidation of the two sets of accounts be dropped?

What is the date of the next meeting?

11.00 am

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Go raibh maith agat. Mr McElduff's questions require a lot of detail, but as he is the Chairperson of the Committee, I am sure that he is anxious to ask those questions. I will answer them as

best I can. The accounts for 2000 and 2001 were qualified by the NIAO (Northern Ireland Audit Office), and there was a delay in signing off the body's consolidated accounts. That eventually happened in 2004, and the report and accounts for 2000 were not published until 2005. As a result, the clearance of subsequent annual reports and accounts was also delayed.

The report from the body for 2001 was published in June 2006, and the reports for 2002 and 2003 were published in May 2007. It is expected that the report for 2004 will be published this month. The NIAO must audit the accounts chronologically — hence the delay.

Following the Audit Office's decision to qualify the accounts for 2000 and 2001, the then chairperson of the Ulster-Scots Agency disagreed with the decisions and refused to sign off the accounts — hence the resultant problem.

At the North/South Ministerial Council meeting on 16 January, both Ministers noted the assurances given by the chief executive officers of the agencies who worked to clear the backlog that annual reports and accounts will be given the utmost priority.

The annual reports and accounts of the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaelige have to be consolidated to form the annual report of the North/South Language Body, as defined in the North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies)(NI) Order 1999, prior to being laid before the respective Parliaments. Therefore, it is provided for in legislation.

The North/South Language Body reports and accounts for 2000, 2001, 2002 and 2003 have been published, and it is expected that the report and accounts for 2004 will be published this month. The annual report and accounts for subsequent years will be progressed as a matter of priority.

The North/South Ministerial Council noted the importance of ensuring that the North/South Language Body accounts are progressed urgently, in keeping with good corporate governance, and Ministers agreed that the issue should be cleared as a matter of priority.

**Lord Browne:** I am pleased that the North/South Ministerial Council discussed staffing in Foras na Gaelige. However, I understand that approval, in principle, was given to the filling of Foras na Gaelige posts in 2001. Will the Minister explain the reasons for the delay in filling those posts? Have they all been filled?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** A number of issues contributed to the delay in Foras na Gaelige attaining its agreed complement of staff. First, the Irish Government's decentralisation policy applies to the Foras na Gaelige posts, and there have been protracted negotiations between unions and management regarding which posts will move to Gweedore. There have been problems with staff

retention in Foras na Gaelige due to market forces and the recruitment of specialist staff who speak Irish.

**Mr K Robinson:** I note that the Minister is continuing to do the double here this morning. I am delighted that the film that is being produced in Irish about the Ulster-Scots diaspora will be screened on TG4. However, I hope that it does not interfere with the excellent films that that channel carries.

Will the Minister confirm that one of the two posts that have been suggested for the arts development officers for language arts will have sole responsibility for the development of Ulster Scots, given the enormous gap that has opened between Ulster Scots and Irish over the years? Will she confirm that the young ambassadors who come to Downpatrick will be exposed in equal measure to Ulster-Scots cultural heritage and Irish heritage?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** I welcome Ken Robinson's questions. I do know whether I have the necessary detail that the Member requires, because I have not had a lot of time to go through it. Forgive me if I cannot answer the question in full, but I am sure that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure will be happy to respond to the Member in writing.

It seems that you will be watching the cowboy film at 9.00 pm on Friday night, Ken.

It is very important that production of the film is going ahead and that it will be broadcast on TG4 — I am sure that we all look forward to seeing it.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Fáiltím roimh an ráiteas, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas a chur faoi bhráid an Tionóil inniu. Tím ón tuairisc go mbeidh dhá phost nua á maoiniú ag an fhoras teanga i gcomhair leis an Chomhairle Ealaíon. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire an mbeidh an dá phost nua seo ann in áit an phoist a bhí ann cheana féin sa Chomhairle Ealaíon, sin é oifigeach na n-ealaíon traidisiúnta.

I thank the Minister for the statement, which I welcome. As has been mentioned, two new posts are to be funded jointly by the North/South Language Body and the Arts Council. Will those two new posts replace the post of traditional arts officer that existed in the Arts Council previously?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Discussion of that matter did not take place at the meeting on 16 January, so I am not in a position to answer that question. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr McCarthy:** I thank the Minister for her statement. I note also the strong working relationship that exists between the two agencies, which have collaborated on a range of projects — long may that continue.

The Minister mentioned a film in Irish about the Ulster-Scots language. As someone who is not an Irish-speaker but who respects those who speak Irish, I am interested to know whether the film will have subtitles. Does the Minister know what length the film will be? Has there been any chat about a reciprocal arrangement whereby, in the not-too-distant future, a film may be made in Ulster Scots about Irish language and culture?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I welcome the Member's question. As with the previous question, the detail of this issue was not discussed at the meeting on 16 January. My grasp of the Irish language is not what I would like it to be, but I watch TG4 frequently and am aware that many of its programmes are subtitled; therefore, I am content that you will be able to enjoy it.

**Mr McCarthy:** When is the film scheduled to be shown?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I am not sure — *[Interruption.]* Sorry? *[Interruption.]*

I do not know when it is likely to be scheduled. I am filling in for the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure at very short notice.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Mr McCarthy will have to get a programme.

**Mr Shannon:** The report that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development presented on behalf of Minister Campbell refers to the remit of the board of the Ulster-Scots Agency. Specifically, it mentions activities and travel outside of, as it says here, the island of Ireland. At present, there is a geographical restriction on the Ulster-Scots Agency that does not apply to Foras na Gaeilge. The remit of the Ulster-Scots Agency has been amended to allow its board members to travel to Scotland, along with their staff. Can that remit be amended to support travel to Scotland for those who are involved in the Ulster-Scots community?

I should like to ask a second question, if that is all right. The statement refers also to the Young Ambassadors scheme. The Ulster-Scots Agency, along with Foras na Gaeilge, sponsored 20 students from Virginia to attend a Rabbie Burns night at Corr's Corner Hotel. There was a lot of interaction in relation to the American students and their culture, which they very clearly had. Is it intended to continue that project? I have asked two questions, but I would especially like an answer to the first one, if that is possible.

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** I am glad to see that the Member chances his arm with other Departments as well as with mine — I do not feel so bad now.

As the subject of ambassadors was not discussed at the meeting, I am not in a position to answer that question.

The Member's second question was about the restriction on the Ulster-Scots Agency operating outside the island. In 2005, a protocol governing the approval, processing and accountability of funded activities and travel outside the island of Ireland was agreed by the sponsoring Departments and the agency. There is no restriction on the agency's board or staff operating outside the island of Ireland, provided that such expenditure contributes to the promotion of Ulster Scots on the island. Presumably, that applies to both agencies.

The discussion at the meeting, which was very helpful, centred on community groups and others going to Scotland, for example, to research the Ulster-Scots language, and so forth. The agency is reviewing its financial assistance scheme and considering extending the provision for travel arrangements outside the island of Ireland to community groups. Any changes to the financial assistance scheme must be cleared and agreed with the sponsoring Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel. Officials will review the detail of the proposal in the coming weeks. My understanding is that the scheme provides financial assistance for travel to Scotland, where the bulk of research and literature on Ulster Scots is found.

**Ms S Ramsey:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, and it is great to see her and Gregory working so well together. When the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure cannot attend a debate and Michelle steps in to take the flak, that sends out a clear message of joined-up government at its best.

The Minister has partially answered my first question, but I would like more information. In response to a question from Lord Browne, the Minister mentioned staffing levels at Foras na Gaelige. Will she outline the steps that are being taken to deal with that staffing shortfall?

Will the Minister also update the Assembly on the work being done by Foras na Gaelige to review how it funds its core organisations?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural**

**Development:** As I said, I welcome the question, but I am not in a position to give further detail on what is being done to achieve a full complement of staff at Foras na Gaelige. I am content that the Minister will respond to the Member in writing.

Equally, I am not in a position to answer the second part of the Member's question. However, I welcome the questions, particularly because I can bat them back to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when he is back on his feet.

**Mr McNarry:** I am tempted to ask the Minister to use some licence and to confirm the scrapping of the national stadium. Perhaps she will also confirm that there will be no Irish-language Act; that would certainly tie in with Sue Ramsey's promotion of the Ministers' dual roles. In case I am corrected about that, I will move on.

Perhaps the stand-in, stand-up Minister could provide the Assembly with more detail on the sponsorship, cost and expected impact on tourism of the Belfast International Horse Show. Will she also explain, for the benefit of those who may not know, exactly what language arts are, and who can apply for the two development officer posts mentioned in the report?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Although the Member puts me in the attractive position of abusing my role this morning, I will resist the temptation to make statements that are not in my remit. However, as neither subject was discussed in great detail, if at all, at the meeting on 16 January 2009, I am not in a position to answer the Member's questions.

**Mr Poots:** Was the closure of 'Lá Nua', the Irish-language newspaper, discussed at that meeting? Was there any mention of the disappointment of Irish-language enthusiasts at the support given to the newspaper by Foras na Gaelige, or was it the view that an Irish-language newspaper is simply unsustainable because of insufficient public demand?

**The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:** Most Members in the Chamber have been understanding of my position this morning. However, it is particularly unpalatable that the previous Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure should ask that question. Before his demotion, he would have known that certain decisions left 'Lá Nua' with no option but to close. The subject of the Member's question was not discussed at the meeting of 16 January and, therefore, I am not in a position to answer it.

11.15 am

## COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### Report on the Review of Teacher Education

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. In accordance with the Business Committee's agreement to allocate additional time to Committee Chairpersons when moving and winding-up a motion on a Committee report, up to 15 minutes will be allowed to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make the winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey):** I beg to move

That this Assembly supports the report of the Committee for Employment and Learning on its Review of Teacher Education; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, to implement, as a matter of urgency, the recommendations contained therein.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is always a major event for any Committee to bring an inquiry report to the Floor of the Assembly, and this is no exception. The Committee for Employment and Learning regards this report as a significant example of the Committee working at its best. An issue arose and the Committee investigated and aired the relevant opinions. A report has been compiled and this debate has been brought to the Assembly so that the issues can be discussed and moved forward.

I welcome the Minister for Employment and Learning, and thank him for his help and support throughout the inquiry.

The Committee is not seeking to make any binding or final conclusions in the report, and it is not a stand-alone document. The Committee's stakeholder review of teacher education has allowed a full range of opinions on the issues surrounding changes in teacher education to be brought into the public arena and a debate started. The objective of the review, as decided by the Committee at its meeting on 28 May 2008, was:

"To collate and consider the opinions and views of those involved in, and affected by, proposed changes to teacher education and to produce a report of recommendations to the Minister for Employment and Learning".

The Committee believes that it has fulfilled that aim. Today's debate on the report is a starting point and an opportunity to highlight the issues in teacher education. A lot of discussion is needed to build a consensus around those issues and then to agree a strategy to take



teacher education forward. I welcome to the Public Gallery those who have an interest in the subject.

The Committee for Employment and Learning has no remit to consider changes to the structure of the North's education system. That is an issue for the Minister of Education and the Committee for Education.

The Committee's decision to undertake the inquiry was prompted by two particular issues. First, Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College felt that the changes to their funding model questioned their viability; and secondly, the decision by the authorities at Stranmillis University College to agree to a proposed merger with Queen's University.

In closed session on 12 March 2008, the Committee was briefed by the Minister for Employment and Learning on his plans to bring in a new funding formula for the two university colleges. On 16 April, the Committee heard the colleges' views on the new formula, which, both colleges believed, might make them non-viable unless additional sources of income were identified. The next day, Stranmillis agreed to a proposed merger with Queen's University, which, it said, would bolster its financial and institutional viability. The Committee was alarmed and dismayed by the speed at which the merger manifested itself. It was also unhappy with the announcement via the media, without any stakeholder debate and without Committee or Assembly input.

On 23 June, the Committee brought a motion to the Floor of the Assembly to seek the delay of the new funding formula for the colleges. The motion, which I withdrew after the Minister announced a number of proposals, served to highlight the issues in the Assembly.

In 2003, the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) commissioned a review of the way forward for teacher education. That review's remit included mapping the professional development of the teaching profession, from induction, through to early, and then continuing, professional development; taking consideration of the review of public administration (RPA) and the Bain Review; the roles that both Departments play in initial teacher education (ITE); and the changing demography of the pupil population and the subsequent impact on teacher numbers. We are still waiting for that review to be published. Perhaps the Minister will confirm whether that will happen in the next month.

The providers of teacher education have been waiting almost six years for the review to be published, as it would give them a framework to be able to plan ahead.

The Committee is conscious and concerned that decisions are being made on teacher education without any agreed overarching strategy having been established. Those decisions involve changes to the funding for Stranmillis and St Mary's University Colleges and the

proposed merger between Stranmillis University College and Queen's University.

The long-awaited review of teacher education must provide the basis on which consensus can be built around the issues of the reported oversupply of teachers and the changing demographic of school-age children. Once there is consensus on those issues and an overall strategy is agreed, the teacher education providers will have a solid foundation on which to build for the future.

The Committee is anxious that the future of teacher education should involve a synergy between the need for a professionally equipped teacher supply and the need to address the scale and cost of future teacher provision. There should be an agreed demand-led strategy for the provision of teacher education. However, that must be intelligent and flexible and take on board the fact that teacher education does not end after initial training.

The Committee has expressed its concern that in the absence of an agreed overarching strategy, change has been piecemeal and the processes involved open to question. A particular concern has been the impact of the new funding model on the thinking of Stranmillis and St Mary's University Colleges. The Committee has doubts about the way in which the number of allocated initial teacher education places is arrived at, the role played by the substitute teacher register in the process, and the unresolved issue of teachers who are trained in Britain and who return to the North in large numbers seeking work. No amount of reducing ITE places here will cut those numbers in the short to medium term. Are we really prepared to watch local schools struggle to find locally trained teachers?

During the evidence sessions that the Committee heard when compiling the report, it emerged that officials from the Department have been suggesting for years that they might make a move away from the historical funding model for Stranmillis and St Mary's, which protected the colleges from the ebb and flow of student-teacher numbers and allowed them to focus on teacher education, with a regulated number of additional students on diversified courses to balance out the total. That strategy was supported by the Comptroller and Auditor General. The new model, which has now come into being, is largely based on student numbers alone, and will see the colleges struggle with the existing caps on numbers of students on the diversified courses and annual reductions in ITE student numbers. An outside observer might almost say that the new funding formula will likely cause the two colleges to have to seek alternative, perhaps drastic, solutions.

In recognition of the Committee and the colleges' concerns, the Minister has provided moneys to both colleges this year to help them adjust to the new funding

model. In the case of St Mary's, he has also allocated money for a study to be commissioned into potential additional income streams for the college. Stranmillis, as has been mentioned, has sought to secure its viability by embarking on a proposed merger with Queen's University.

At this point, I should say that I personally do not believe the merger to be in the best interests of either Stranmillis specifically, or teacher education generally, in the long term. I am aware that a number of other Committee members share that view. However, the Committee's report does not seek to prejudge the merger. Both sides of the case have been presented. That said, the Committee has been concerned by the speed of the decision and would admit to uneasiness about how thoroughly other options have been explored, such as those outlined by the Taylor Report that the college commissioned last year.

In addition, the Committee heard a great deal of concern expressed about the survival of the Stranmillis ethos in any merger. The Minister and the Committee share the belief that the merger is highly unlikely to happen in time to achieve the target date of September 2009, even if the various necessary departmental and Assembly processes signal agreement. The Committee is also concerned by the lack of consultation on the merger, as perceived by the students and staff at Stranmillis. The Committee and the Minister have made representations to Stranmillis and Queen's about those concerns.

It is the Committee's view that the absence of an agreed strategy for teacher education and the change in funding for the colleges has placed Stranmillis in a situation whereby its authorities are convinced that the proposed merger is the only route to long-term viability.

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

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning:** I will give way briefly.

**Mr Easton:** Some members of the board of governors at Stranmillis have said that the merger is a done deal. Does the Member agree that those comments are a bit premature?

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning:** Personally, I agree that they are, but, at the moment, I am speaking on behalf of the Committee, and I do not think that view is shared by all its members. That is why I explained that my view on the merger is a personal one, but I agree that such comments add uncertainty to the issue.

The absence of an agreed strategy for teacher education, and the change in funding for the colleges, has convinced the authorities of Stranmillis University College that the proposed merger is the only route to long-term viability. Is the use of desperate measures

from some providers the best way in which to decide the future of teacher education?

In the report, the Committee has brought into the public arena suggestions that were made in evidence that might give the two colleges greater viability. Such suggestions include structured systems of induction; early and continuing professional development, which the teacher-education providers would fund and roll out; planning the numbers of students over the long term, using institutional viability as a consideration; greater options for providers to pursue work in specialist areas, such as in Irish-medium education at St Mary's University College and early-years learning at Stranmillis University College; potential sub-degree work in positions that are allied to teacher education, such as those of classroom assistants; and diversified courses with sustainable student numbers. Those are merely a few of the possibilities.

The chief inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate's report, which was released just days ago, indicated that the Irish-medium sector would benefit from an increase in the number of courses to allow its practitioners to develop their language skills and resources. St Mary's University College is seeking such work, so would that not be a good illustration of joined-up government?

I ask the Minister to note that in evidence from a group of stakeholders, fears were raised about equality of opportunity and access to the teaching profession should the merger of Queen's University and Stranmillis University College take place. The Committee appreciates that several of the recommendations in the report are relevant to the Minister of Education and commends the Minister for Employment and Learning for seeking the views of his ministerial colleagues. The Committee formally sent the report to the Committee for Education, which it noted. We did that in order to play our part in taking a joined-up approach to such issues.

The Committee is also keen that recommendations that are not associated with the key themes of the report not be neglected. To that end, the Committee commends the Minister for providing additional funding for educational and training resources for the deaf community, and it supports his continued dialogue to seek the best provision of facilities and services for that section of the community.

Again, I emphasise that the Committee's primary purpose when it undertook its inquiry into teacher education was to seek the views of all those involved in the sector, and to allow those views to be aired so as to create a forum for debate. The Committee wanted to hear the varied opinions of providers and stakeholders so that its members could make useful recommendations to the Minister for Employment and Learning and, in some cases, the Minister of Education. The report does

not seek to make any recommendations on the structure of the education system here. As I said at the outset, that issue is beyond the remit of the Committee, the Minister for Employment and Learning, and, therefore, this debate on the report.

I commend the report to the Assembly and look forward to the rest of the debate and the Minister's response. On behalf of the Committee, I thank all the stakeholders who contributed to the report, as well as the Committee staff, who worked hard over the past number of months to bring the report to the Assembly.

**Mr Easton:** In supporting the motion, I want to bring several concerns to the attention of the Assembly. I commend the research that was undertaken in the preparation of the report. The stakeholders' review afforded the Committee an opportunity to listen to the concerns that exist on changes in teacher education. That those concerns were fully explored and expressed added considerable value to the report. It would be remiss of me not to commend all those who gave of their considerable knowledge and expertise in the compilation of such a comprehensive report with a firm research foundation.

Time does not allow me to fully explore the 119 recommendations in the report, so I will highlight key areas.

The proposed merger of Stranmillis University College and Queen's University, and the process leading up to that, is a cause for disquiet. It has been referred to, correctly, in the body of the report as being "unnecessarily hasty".

We would do well to pay due regard to the old maxim: "Act in haste, repent at leisure". There are distinct advantages to taking a cautious approach to the proposed merger. First, the issue of equality is at the core of my concerns. It is also at the core of concerns helpfully expressed by the Transferor Representatives' Council. The Assembly must apply its mind to the real fear that exists with regard to the number of students from a Protestant background who would have access to a place at any merged institution at Stranmillis. All right-thinking people would regard it as fundamentally unacceptable to not act to prevent a scenario in which the number of Protestant teachers in the profession and in our schools is eroded.

*11.30 am*

A scenario clearly exists whereby the new merged institution would become a centre of excellence, attracting students from both main religious traditions here. Given that the Catholic certificate would still be accessible, it would afford Catholic teachers the distinct advantage of continuing to have access to all the educational sectors here. Meanwhile, their Protestant counterparts would continue to be excluded from the Catholic maintained sector, but, at the same

time, they would have to compete with their Catholic counterparts for places in the remaining sectors. That is unfair, and it cannot, and must not, be allowed to happen. That situation discriminates against Protestants, and it has to end.

In addition, there is considerable merit in considering the proposal from the Transferor Representatives' Council that teachers trained at Stranmillis college be channelled into the controlled sector, as St Mary's college prepares its teachers for the maintained sector. I, in common with the Transferor Representatives' Council, do not regard the controlled sector as secular, given the non-denominational assemblies and biblically focused religious education.

It is imperative that any proposed new merged institution have a Christian ethos. We acknowledge the historic link between the controlled sector and the Protestant Churches. I regard it as right and proper that the controlled sector should go forward with a Christian ethos. I would also like to see further development of the proposed suggestion that there could be a Protestant equivalent to the Catholic certificate required for teaching in the controlled sector.

The Assembly acknowledges the need for a clear process for the teaching profession, from initial teacher education and induction, through to early professional development, and, subsequently, to continuous professional development, to be set in the proper context of an agreed overarching strategy.

There is merit in exploring what financial mechanisms could be put in place to allow for a comprehensive system of induction for early and continuous professional development for teachers. It is interesting to note that Stranmillis college and St Mary's college regard that potential income as contributing to a more sustainable future for both colleges.

In conclusion, there is much to commend in the report. I wish to emphasise the real and present concerns emanating from the proposed merger between Queen's University and Stranmillis University College, the methodology of the announcement of the proposed merger, and, critically, the feeling of stakeholders most closely involved in the merger. I ask the Minister to consider a partnership approach — rather than a full merger — between Queen's University and Stranmillis University College, on the Stranmillis site. Both colleges would use the site, but they would keep their independence.

It must be a source of distress to the Assembly that staff and students feel insufficiently consulted in working through the options for Stranmillis and in the subsequent process of creating a merger. The strength of representations made to the Minister and to the institutions cannot be underlined strongly enough in that respect.

The report goes some way towards getting it right, and it highlights the issues that require attention and clarification. I commend the report to the House.

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter:** Having come latterly to the Committee, I must say that I was greatly impressed by the attitude of Committee members and stakeholders in supplying information and in looking at the problem. In particular, I commend the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for their work in that respect.

Some issues need to be considered when looking at the current situation. First, a huge backlog of maintenance work was required on Stranmillis estate, and, in March 2007, David Taylor was commissioned to investigate options for the college. From a financial point of view, the issue could not be swept under the carpet, and it had to be taken very seriously.

Having been through teacher training and knowing the work that it involves, I am concerned at the oversupply of teachers. The Committee cannot close its eyes to the fact that many young people who are keen to take up teaching as a vocation cannot get a job at the end of their training and may be found doing all kinds of jobs as an alternative. That is a waste of many years of study, the expense of training, and all the background work. It is compounded by the disappointment of being unable to work in the vocation on which they had set their sights.

**Mr K Robinson:** Does the Member agree that, despite guidance given by the Department of Education for ten years, the re-employment of recently retired teachers continues to add to the problem?

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter:** I was about to raise that as my third point; the Member must be a mind reader.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning:** I take on board the Member's point and that of his colleague. In my introduction to the debate, I said that we had waited six years for the completion of the review that was initiated by the Department for Employment and Learning and by the Department of Education. If the Minister can tell us at what stage the review is, we might have a basis for moving forward. Several of those issues involve both Departments, and we need the evidence before us so that we can take decisions, and not allow decisions to be forced on institutions by a lack of information.

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter:** I thank the Chairperson for her helpful intervention; it highlights the issue.

That issue has an enormous bearing on the education and training of teachers. So many teachers have taken retirement and the golden handshake only to return to work daily as supply-teachers. They do not get paid during the summer holidays, but they take up

places that young teachers who have been recently trained cannot obtain. The Committee was obliged to consider the whole scope of teacher education.

Many issues are relevant; however, the merger gives us an opportunity to get to the heart of the matter. The Taylor Report gave us the options, but the status quo was not one of them. Something must be done. We have to consider the two teacher-training colleges and their associations with the two universities. The University of Ulster was not terribly interested at first in assisting the Committee to work through the problem. Queen's University, however, which seems to be the natural partner for both colleges, was interested. We must consider whether a complete merger is best or whether teacher training is best self-contained and in its own college.

The Committee strongly recommended to the Minister for Employment and Learning that he meet the Education Minister to discuss more widely the possibilities. One of those was that the two colleges might provide sub-degree courses, such as a foundation degree for teaching assistants, to make the most of the colleges' expertise in providing links with schools and employers.

Having read the report and listened to the evidence, Members can do only one thing — commend the report to the House.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Someone's mobile phone is switched on, and it is interfering with the sound system. I remind all Members to switch off mobile phones.

**Mr Attwood:** I concur with other Members in thanking the staff and former staff of the Committee for Employment and Learning, as well as the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, who have handled this report with charm, humour and rigour.

The Committee's report is a major part of the story, but, in my view, it is not the entire story. I concur with the Chairperson of the Committee in finding it curious and odd that in the middle of a teacher-training review — which has, admittedly, been horribly mishandled by the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning — Stranmillis University College could unilaterally decide to go down the road of merging with Queen's University. I find that odd, and not very acceptable. In many ways, it pulls the carpet from under the Department's authority.

However, there are other curious issues. I am curious to know why the merger proposal with Queen's University became the only show in town. In December 2007, Stranmillis University College told the Department that:

“it was difficult to see Stranmillis's unique identity being sustained”

— in what Stranmillis University College referred to as a “takeover” by Queen’s University. Yet, within days, the University of Ulster advised the Committee that their view was that:

“it seemed that at Christmas time things changed direction.”

How was it that, when Stranmillis University College looked at various options and told the Department that the Queen’s University proposal was a “takeover”, within four months it was the only show in town, and that the proposal from the University of Ulster had suddenly disappeared into the ether?

There are other curious points about this particular process and how the Department conducted itself, because the Department, Minister and officials have told us that they have an open mind about the proposed merger. If that is so, why did the Department advise Stranmillis University College and Queen’s University on 24 April 2008 about how they should conduct their media campaign in light of the proposals? If the Department was at arm’s length from what was happening, why did an official tell Queen’s University and Stranmillis University College that:

“through future media interviews, it should be made clear that... the proposed merger had... the unanimous support of the Governing Body.”

Equally curious, in my view, is that, given what Stranmillis University College refer to as a “serious and increasing deficit” in their funding, why was it that the first time that some members of the board had heard about the funding formula and deficit issue was on the morning that the decision to merge with Queen’s University was taken? More curious is why the Department told the board of governors on the morning of the decision that they would “have to live with it” when it came to the funding formula?

Questions have to be asked about how arm’s length, independent and open-minded the Department has been in the proposal, given that evidence. It may well be that the merger between Queen’s University and Stranmillis University College is the right option — I do not know. However, I do know that the way the proposal emerged and, as some people have said to me, the way it has been engineered, is not how issues of such importance should be handled. It raises essential questions about who has command and control of education and teacher-training policy in the North.

It may be that Queen’s University is too big and Stranmillis University College too anxious to turn down the merger proposal. What must not happen is that those institutions in the North that have served the society so well should be put in jeopardy and their viability questioned. That also extends to St Mary’s University College on the Falls Road, which, in its submission to the Committee, gave the most rigorous and exhaustive proposals about the future of teacher

training, outlined a sustainable future for the college for teacher training, and outlined how that college can continue to develop its authority, good standing and appeal to all students in the future.

11.45 am

**Ms Lo:** In common with other Members, I thank the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, the Committee staff, and all those who contributed to the report. I concur, too, with Dr Coulter: it is a very good Committee with which to work, under the good leadership of Sue Ramsey.

I would like to speak about the oversupply of teachers. A key fact to emerge from the Committee’s inquiry is that teaching is an extremely popular choice of profession in Northern Ireland. It has also been shown that the quality of teacher education in Northern Ireland is very high, the result being that all teacher-training courses here are oversubscribed. The reality is that those who cannot get a place on a course here will, generally, seek an equivalent course in Great Britain, and return here once their training is completed. Those people are known as “GB returners”, and they contribute significantly to the reported oversupply of teachers here.

Another significant factor in the reported oversupply of teachers here is that there is a cultural tendency among graduates to go into the professions. That can be traced to a disproportionately low number of opportunities in the private sector here at graduate level. Relatively well-paid jobs in teaching are attractive to graduates, and the profession is seen as fairly secure and comes with a pension. Obviously, school holidays are compatible with family life, and that, too, is seen as a bonus. A shift in our economy away from dependence on the public sector, and greater opportunities in the private sector, are likely to bring a corresponding fall in applications for teacher-training places. That issue needs to be examined.

There is no suggestion on the part of the Committee that high demand for teacher training should mean that there should be no ceiling on the number of teacher-training places that are available. However, the Committee holds to the view that without an overall strategy for teacher education, simply reducing the number of teacher-training places without assessing the impact of that on the teacher education providers — particularly the university colleges — is, potentially, irresponsible.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

Some level of oversupply of teachers and teacher-training places can give flexibility of capacity and allow greater competition for jobs, which can lead to higher standards. It could also allow for the reduction of the pupil/teacher ratio in classrooms, and provide capacity that might facilitate additional teachers giving help in small groups to those pupils who need it. So

often we have heard teachers say that classes are too big, that there are far too many pupils to look after in one group, and that too many students leave school with low levels of attainment. Is there no creative and targeted way in which our additional teachers can be used to drive up standards?

The Committee is not seeking to ignore the issue of a reported oversupply of teachers. However, members would like to see that issue resolved as part of an agreed overarching teacher education strategy, and not on the current basis, which is causing concern for the viability of some teacher education providers. The Committee's report is designed to stimulate debate on the issues surrounding teacher education.

It is not a stand-alone document that makes final conclusions. Let us have the debate and reach consensus on the way forward, but let that necessary debate not take place against the backdrop of some teacher-education providers fearing for their future.

**Mr Hilditch:** I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning for tabling the motion, and I acknowledge the work that has been undertaken in producing the report.

I wish to focus on the new funding model and the fact that St Mary's and Stranmillis are unsure of their future. The Department for Employment and Learning has initiated a new funding formula because student enrolment numbers are falling at both colleges. That means that income from student fees also falls, which leads to the Department's element of the grant rising to compensate. Thus, the Department pays more, yet fewer students are being educated.

The colleges knew that the new funding model had been discussed over a period of years, but they were not aware of the precise time for the Minister's announcement on the matter. The colleges were waiting for teacher education to be agreed and for the funding change to be developed around that. Stakeholders were aware that departmental officials would consider moving from the historical funding model for Stranmillis and St Mary's to one that was closely based on the Higher Education Funding Council for England model.

As we are aware, the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning have yet to publish their review, so the new funding mechanism has been presented to colleges in isolation, without the expected offset of additional funded work. The colleges, therefore, have been confronted with a potentially uncertain future and have been asked to seek other options. It would have been more beneficial if that had been agreed as part of an overall strategy to take teacher education forward, which would have avoided the uncertainty that is presented by gradual changes.

In their evidence to the Committee for Employment and Learning in April 2008, St Mary's and Stranmillis

both relayed uncertainties about the formula. St Mary's thought that its financial viability and contribution to teacher education would be seriously threatened by the new formula. Stranmillis said that the constraints imposed by the new formula would make it difficult for any small college to propose ideas to raise money.

St Mary's accepts the logic of the funding mechanism that is linked to the numbers, but it suggests the introduction of a fixed-cost element to the mechanism. It suggests that it be allocated a fixed premium that is not dependent on numbers. Stranmillis wants funding for the reward and development of staff to be ring-fenced, and it would prefer the funding to offset employers' contributions to teachers' pensions to be retained as a separate funding stream.

It has been suggested that the Minister should discuss issues around the new funding formula with the colleges' management with a view to providing clarification on whether incorporating changes to the mechanism might allow Stranmillis to consider that it can explore other realistic options for its future in addition to the proposed merger with Queen's.

The conversion arrangements that were introduced by the Minister, which provided £50,000 of additional funding, have been welcomed by both colleges. It will give them time to consider their options. St Mary's was also appreciative of the extra £30,000 that it received for the consideration of the strategic options for its future.

Overall, the fundamental priority is to ensure that the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning work together on the review to ensure that teacher education continues to be of the highest quality, and, in doing so, ensure that they protect public funds.

Given the fact that the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning jointly commissioned a review of teacher education in 2003, I urge the Minister and the Executive to consider all of the recommendations in the report that has been discussed today.

**Mr Butler:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate and the report that the Committee for Employment and Learning has produced.

First, it is useful to ask how the debate arose. When the Committee was first made aware of the proposed merger of Stranmillis and Queen's University and the imposition of funding formulas on St Mary's University College, there was concern among all of the political parties. The Minister came to the Committee and said that he wanted to work with it, but there seemed to be a perception that he would impose funding models.

Some Members have mentioned ethos in St Mary's and Stranmillis, and the Minister has said that he does

not see any ethos-free zones in education here for the foreseeable future. The issue is not all about the merger. The report offers realistic recommendations to the Minister to try to deal with the issue.

There have been several reports on education here and about newly-qualified teachers trying to get jobs. We know, and the Minister will say, that the oversupply of teachers is a problem, because of the number of places available in St Mary's and Stranmillis colleges. The figures for 2007 bring that home — of the approximately 800 students who graduated, 38 secured places in the Catholic maintained sector. Eighteen secured full-time posts and 20 were employed to cover maternity leave. Therefore, we face a problem in how to develop teacher education.

Reports on the issue include one from the Comptroller and Auditor General; the Taylor Report, which was commissioned by Stranmillis; and the Osler Report. In addition, the Department for Employment and Learning has compiled a report that we have not seen. Today's recommendations, therefore, should spur the Minister into looking at the issue and at how to address the problem.

Stranmillis University College has made its position clear as regards the financial difficulties it faces for its estate due to the decline in numbers. The Taylor Report recommended a merger. However, all of us are concerned about the way in which that announcement was handled by the chair of the board of governors. The Committee was not fully informed, and neither Minister seemed to have a handle on the situation. Hence, there is concern about Stranmillis and the merger.

At the same time, we must consider whether the future of Stranmillis University College lies in a merger with Queen's University. Between them, Stranmillis and St Mary's provide an excellent supply of teachers to schools in both the state and Catholic maintained sectors. St Mary's place in west Belfast, where it has been for almost 100 years, must also be safeguarded. Teaching staff there are concerned about what is being advocated and imposed on St Mary's in this new model by departmental officials and by the Minister for Employment and Learning.

The Committee report refers to early and continuing professional development and induction at St Mary's. For example, the Irish-medium sector is growing, and St Mary's supplies teachers to that sector. Therefore, we appeal to the Minister to take the report's recommendations on board. I believe that they are based on a realistic assessment of the current situation. We know that there are issues about student-teacher numbers, the places available for newly-qualified teachers, and the returning to work of retired teachers. However, those issues were not within the remit of this report, which attempted to show — without the use of

alarmist language on the merger and St Mary's — how progress can be made on the development and implementation of a realistic strategy.

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

**Mr Butler:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle

**Mr Irwin:** Teacher performance has been in the spotlight in recent days, with the Chief Inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate, Stanley Goudie, calling for improvements and arguing that standards of achievement remain too low in Northern Ireland.

It is against that backdrop, and with that focus in mind, that the Committee presents its report and calls on the Minister to endorse and implement the recommendations urgently. The Committee listened intently to the views of the training colleges on the proposed new funding formula.

The Committee believes that the changes involved in the proposed merger require an inquiry to take account of the views of all stakeholders and to establish a basis on which to move forward. That is the only way to ensure that a sensible debate takes place and that some consensus is achieved.

The lack of a longer-term strategy to manage changes in teacher education was of major concern to the Committee. Problems of oversupply and the need for value-for-money solutions were recognised by the Committee, which shared the concern that the absence of the teacher-education report — commissioned by the Department of Education and DEL — is leaving teacher-education providers in a vacuum.

The delay in its publication has, in the Committee's view, hampered institutions' forward planning to enhance and improve their teacher-education courses.

*12.00 noon*

The Committee sought to provide a platform for stakeholders to present their concerns and views so as to allow the Committee to present meaningful and structured recommendations to both Departments' Ministers.

Committee members want proven local capacity and capability in teacher education to be protected in a context of development of a wider teacher-education strategy that combines both common sense and value for money. The Committee does not believe that that capacity should be reduced in the short term, only to be required again at a later date. The Committee wants an agreed long-term strategy for teacher education and hopes that the debate that the report has generated will be the first step.

The Committee believes that changes in teacher education must be considered carefully and must flow from consensus. A synergy must be found between the

need for a supply of professionally equipped teachers and the need to deal with the scale and cost of future teacher provision. That is the Assembly's duty to the taxpayer. Intelligent, flexible solutions are required. I support the motion.

**Mr Adams:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh thuairisc an Choiste. Ba mhaith liom fosta an Coiste a mholadh as an obair atá déanta aige. Gabhaim mo bhuíochas fosta le Cathaoirleach agus le Leas-Chathaoirleach an Choiste.

I welcome the report and commend the endeavours of the Committee Chairperson, the legendary and universally acclaimed Sue Ramsey, the Deputy Chairperson and other Committee members. I agree largely with other Members' comments about Stranmillis University College; however, my remarks will focus on St Mary's University College. The college, a Cheann Comhairle, has been at the heart of west Belfast for over 100 years. In recent years, its relationship with the community has deepened.

The college has shown remarkable ability to adapt to changing circumstances. It has introduced non-teacher-training courses through its liberal arts degree. As a result, it has gained the distinction of becoming the university with the second-highest level of participation from students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in universities throughout the Six Counties and Britain.

That was achieved despite irresponsible decisions by some Government officials, who, in recent years, sought to cut teacher-training places. In addition, senior DEL officials have tended, inexplicably, to hark back to a 1980 report that called for the amalgamation of all teacher-training provision.

The Committee's work has helped to deal with that incoherency by providing a more rational picture to facilitate informed decision-making. However, an agreed framework is required. Objectives and direction must be provided. The fact is that, 10 years ago, the Audit Office recommended that there should be academic diversification at colleges that provide teacher training. In 2008, the Minister agreed that the allocation of sufficient diversified places was essential to secure the viability of St Mary's University College. I welcome that; it is consistent with good practice elsewhere. For the record, I commend the Minister for that decision.

The numbers that are allocated to St Mary's University College for enrolment on the BA Liberal Arts degree and teacher-training degrees will determine its viability for considerable time to come — all the more so now that the Minister has introduced a new funding model, which is directly responsive to student numbers. Therefore, before student numbers are finalised for the incoming year, I urge the Minister to meet stakeholders in order to ensure that the college's viability is secure.

The time has come to provide long-term certainty for people who are employed, are enrolled or seek to enrol at St Mary's University College in the time ahead.

I am sure that the Minister agrees, a Cheann Comhairle, that provision of third-level education in Belfast and west Belfast should be cherished and cultivated and that the record of excellence at St Mary's has been well proven.

The principal of St Mary's has told me that applications to the college have risen dramatically. For September 2009, there was a 42% increase in applications to the diversified BA Liberal Arts degree and an increase of almost 30% in applications to the Bachelor of Education degree. Those figures are a potent reminder of the accessibility and good standing of that institution. The Minister, when he had a different remit, helped to bring about the West Belfast and Shankill Task Force report that highlighted the valuable role that St Mary's plays in aiding local regeneration.

I commend the Committee's report. It will allow the Minister to consolidate and enhance provision for St Mary's in the open way in which he has approached the issue thus far. I hope that that approach will be grasped by all in the time ahead. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mrs McGill:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The key points of the debate have already been made. However, I, too, compliment my fellow Committee members, the Chairperson, the Deputy Chairperson, the Committee Clerk and everyone who was involved in producing the report. I will concentrate on a couple of points, and I declare an interest as having been formerly involved with both St Mary's and Stranmillis colleges.

The first of the report's 'Key Conclusions and Recommendations' states:

"The Committee strongly recommends that the Education and Employment and Learning Ministers bring forward their review of teacher education to the Assembly".

Their delay in doing that was mentioned several times at Committee meetings, and it is vital that the review be brought forward.

The second recommendation states:

"The Committee urges the Education and Employment and Learning Ministers to ensure that a long-term view is taken of teacher education provision in terms of flexible capacity and that value for money is pursued in tandem with quality of provision."

I highlight the reference to "quality of provision". Stranmillis and St Mary's colleges have history and tradition, and the quality of their education provision over many years cannot be challenged. How that quality of provision can be continued is central to the debate.

When I hear discussion of 'Every School a Good School', what springs to my mind is every teacher a good teacher; I made that point at some of the Committee's



evidence sessions. Whatever the future arrangements for teacher training, every child deserves every teacher to be a good teacher. We would then have: every school a good school; every teacher a good teacher; and every child willing to learn. My experience is that children are willing to learn, but that difficulties sometimes arise with classroom experience.

In the Committee's discussions and evidence sessions, much was made of mergers. Whatever the future holds, there must be quality of provision for young people who want to be teachers; they deserve a rewarding teacher-education system.

**Mr K Robinson:** Lest a false impression arise from the debate, does the Member accept that people who are training to become teachers in Northern Ireland — in St Mary's, Stranmillis or any other location — require much superior qualifications than those that are required in other parts of the British Isles?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

**Mrs McGill:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I will not waffle; I am not in a position to agree or disagree on that point. I am aware of the learned gentleman's background, and, therefore, I presume that he is correct and accept his point.

The situation at St Mary's has been well articulated, and the report states:

"St Mary's model of an autonomous, specialist teacher education provider, with a distinctive ethos, educational vision and mission should be sustained and enabled to co-exist with other models existing in the university sector".

That point is important.

I want to make a final point about the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) in order to ensure equality in my remarks. That body was concerned that the number of young people from the Protestant sector who wanted to train in a particular educational environment would decrease. It is important to accommodate every ethos, background and educational environment with equality of provision. Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey):** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. I thank those Members who contributed to the debate, and I thank the Committee for its constructive approach to this important issue and for its work towards producing what is a comprehensive report.

My fundamental priority is to ensure that initial teacher education in Northern Ireland continues to be of the highest quality. The calibre of our teaching workforce is well known and makes an immense contribution to our society and economy. I will try to address as many points as possible but, in essence, the Committee report seeks to address two separate but related issues: the future funding position of the university

colleges and the proposed merger of Stranmillis and Queen's University.

Members will be aware that initial teacher education intake numbers are set by the Department of Education. The Minister of Education has informed me that her Department will write soon to provide initial teacher education numbers and to outline the academic intake for next year. That is a normal annual process. Once those numbers have been confirmed, my officials will calculate the funding that the intakes will generate. Funding for university colleges will impact on issues such as the intake numbers for diversified places and any conversion funding for the next academic year.

I note the Committee's recommendation for a graduated level of diversification that could comprise approximately one third of the total numbers. I will examine that interesting proposal carefully. It is important that the Committee has recognised that the colleges' primary business should relate to teacher training. I fully support that notion.

I have always made it clear that in recognition of the current circumstances, I will provide conversion funding for up to two years. I am grateful that the Committee has recognised that funding has been allocated to the colleges this year, the purpose of which is to ensure that neither college suffers a drop in income compared with the 2007-08 academic year. That has been the case in the current year. Until we know the position for 2009-2010, we will rely heavily on the initial teacher education intake numbers that are supplied by the Department of Education, and will not be in a position to determine what level of conversion funding, if any, will apply to the forthcoming academic year.

12.15 pm

I should remind Members why we have had to consider a new funding formula. The result of the old funding formula was that the fewer students were enrolled at a college, the more money was allocated to that college. Perhaps, Mr Speaker, with your vast experience in politics, you would be able to defend that in front of the Public Accounts Committee, but I would struggle to do so. It should be remembered that that is why the issue has arisen. The lower the number of students, the greater the amount of money that went to the college. I am not going to spend time explaining that, but that was the outworking of the formula.

In relation to future activities of the colleges, I note the Committee's comments, particularly in relation to St Mary's, about the possible types of provision that the colleges will deliver. I have written to my Executive colleague the Minister of Education in relation to the spectrum of professional development. Ultimately, delivery in that area will be determined by the new education and skills authority. Similarly, any provision

for Irish-medium teacher education will be determined by the Minister of Education.

I am pleased that officials from both Departments are in the Officials' Box today. We are working very closely on these issues, because that is the only way that it can be done in practice. I have had a lot of briefings for this debate from the Department of Education, and we are taking forward a number of the issues together. St Mary's has commissioned some work, and I hope that that will prove to be of benefit.

The second issue that has been raised by the Committee is the proposed merger between Stranmillis University College and Queen's University. I recognise the concerns over certain aspects of how the proposed merger was announced, but we have to move on from that. I have now received the draft business case and economic appraisal, and departmental economists are examining the business case to ensure that it complies with all green book standards. When that and other associated internal processes are completed, the business case will be considered by the Department of Finance and Personnel. If that Department grants approval to the business case, I will give it my full consideration.

As the Committee is aware, any merger can only proceed following a series of stages, including public consultation and the consideration of appropriate legislation by the Committee and the Assembly. I note the Committee's concerns over such issues as communication, the future use of the site, the Stranmillis ethos, and the position of the transferor's representatives.

As you may know, Mr Speaker, in regard to the latter matter, which was raised by several Members, in 2005, Stranmillis University College was incorporated by legislation to bring its legal status in line with that of other higher-education institutions. As part of that process, the automatic right for members of the three main Protestant Churches to be represented on the governing body of the college was removed. Although my party opposed that at that time, legal advice to the Department for Employment and Learning was that to retain the Churches' representation would contravene equality legislation.

I understand that the Minister of Education is prepared to meet the transferors' representatives. I had a meeting with them last year. Obviously, the issue is very sensitive, and will have to be taken forward. If and when a proposed piece of legislation comes before the House, Members here will have an opportunity to deal with that issue at all levels.

Time and again, the other issues that arise are things like land use, and so on. I have made it absolutely clear that although the assets are currently in the control of the board of governors, should legislation be required and the college cease to exist, the assets will revert back in whatever direction we determine in the

legislation. There will be no free-for-all. We will have the final say on that. It will be in the legislation, and the House will have its say on that, should the issue arise. There will be no fire sale of land or assets to anyone.

It is an interesting point that, when Stranmillis was established in 1922, the land originally belonged to Queen's, and was transferred by the then Ministry of Finance. Ultimately, it will reside with the Department to determine, and if there is legislation, this House will have the final say on it.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning:** I appreciate the Minister's explanation of some of the steps that have been taken on land speculation. As Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I have a duty to inform the Minister that the Committee has not had a knee-jerk reaction to some of the speculation, and it is systematically examining the information that is before us.

The Minister will appreciate that when the Committee decided to embark on its inquiry, the issue of the merger with Queen's University came up the day after we talked to representatives from Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College. In Committee on 16 April 2008, the chairman of the governing body of Stranmillis University College said that a final decision would not be taken tomorrow. He went on to say that a decision might be taken to enter into negotiations, but that that would be a decision of which the Committee would be informed.

The Committee took what he said at face value but then learned about the merger in the media the next day. It is easy to appreciate the uneasiness among Committee members when all that happened outside our control.

**The Minister for Employment and Learning:** I understand that, and I have already indicated to the Committee that I was not happy about the way in which the merger was announced. I am simply saying that, over time, I have received several representations from MLAs, by letter or in meetings, expressing concern about the land issue. I am simply saying that we will be able to deal with that in the House, should the need arise. There is an assurance that nothing will happen to that land that does not have our agreement and consent.

Several Members have made thoughtful points in the debate, and I will try to cover as many as I can. Alex Easton commended the research that was done, raised the issue of the disquiet that was caused by the proposed merger with Queen's University, as did other Members, and mentioned the ethos issues. I will brigade a few of my comments on the merger issue. It must be obvious to everyone that the issue has been around for several years. As I understand it, discussions involving the University of Ulster also took place,

although I suspect that the two universities did not approach the issue from exactly the same point.

I do not believe that the University of Ulster proposes to develop a campus in south Belfast. I believe that it was more interested in working with Stranmillis University College on the additional courses and academic qualifications that the university could offer, verify and accredit, because a university college requires a university to accredit its courses. That was the general direction of the university's interest, rather than in establishing a campus in south Belfast. As we discovered yesterday, the University of Ulster has said that it has other plans. We must be a wee bit careful about making assumptions.

That said, I support the view that the governing bodies of the university colleges must have a responsibility to explore all the options. My Department has received only one formal option from the governing body of Stranmillis University College. If it produces another option, or a variation on it, we are obliged to examine it. I can consider only what the governing body of Stranmillis University College puts to me; it is an independent, incorporated body.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter mentioned maintenance issues and estate issues. Several other Members also mentioned the issue of oversupply of teachers. We have put a great deal of capital into the site — many Members will have seen the fantastic new facility that has been built — but huge maintenance issues remain. There is a long maintenance backlog, and there is no disguising the fact that many millions of pounds will be required to deal with that backlog. The University of Ulster has submitted papers in which it outlines the work that will have to be done, but, one way or another, regardless of whether there is a merger, the maintenance issue cannot be ignored.

The issue of teacher numbers has vexed us for a long time. Mr Butler referred to the fact that in 2006-07, only 27% of all teachers were employed in a permanent or significant temporary post.

That is a big issue. I accept the point that Anna Lo and other Members made about not destroying an asset simply because of one year's figures; I would not be party to that. For young people to put so much of their time and effort into a course that lasts four years and not to see a positive outcome is a bad thing. However, we must examine the totality of the matter.

I have said many times in the House that I am not proud of the fact that the review of teacher education is taking so long. The Minister of Education and I have reached the final stages of the review's completion, and we hope that it will be available fairly soon. I cannot be as precise as to say that it will be ready in one month's time, but we are working to conclude it as quickly as we can.

As for Mr Adams's point about St Mary's University College, I acknowledge the fact — as everyone can see — that it is a centre of excellence, as is Stranmillis University College. The courses offered at both are very popular, which is a sign that those institutions are regarded highly. The reason that so many people apply for those courses is due to the size of the private sector here, and that demand means that for each place available, sometimes almost 10 people apply.

I believe that those colleges have very good futures, and my objective is to get them to offer as much teaching-related activity as possible. The Minister of Education and I are holding ongoing discussions. The report contains some very good ideas, and we must and will examine them all. As we move forward, I hope that we will be able to offer the comfort and assurances that are needed. Unfortunately, however, arithmetic cannot be avoided at some stages and we must deal with that.

**Mr Newton:** I thank the Committee Clerk and his team for the production of an excellent report. The full report runs to more than 600 pages, which indicates the amount of work that was involved. I also commend the Chairperson of the Committee for the authoritative manner in which she presented her remarks on the report. This debate has been conducted in a practical and non-emotive manner. Certain aspects of the report could have led to emotive exchanges. Therefore, I commend everyone for the manner in which this debate has been conducted.

That said, this report cannot be a stand-alone document in addressing the matter of teacher education; rather, it is a contribution to the debate, and both the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education have a responsibility to take the matter forward in tandem.

Throughout the report, the Committee has stressed the need to apply a value-for-money concept to every aspect of the future provision of teacher education. In recommending the report, the Committee does not have a hard and fast view on what constitutes the best teacher education model for the future, but it does have a clear understanding of the importance of delivering value for money in this policy area, as it would in any other area. In deciding future policy, synergy must be found between the need for a professionally equipped teacher supply and the need to address the scale of future provision, because that is the Assembly's duty to the taxpayer.

If I were a potential student teacher, would I be attracted by a Russell Group university teacher-training place? I believe that I would be attracted to such provision.

The Committee, however, does not accept that high demand for initial teacher education in Northern Ireland should justify a disproportionately high number of places

being made available. Future policy must involve a demand-led strategy that is intelligent and that recognises that education does not end after initial training.

However, we cannot afford to keep training teachers for over-supplied areas. We must concentrate our efforts on vacancies that are traditionally hard to fill. Several Members mentioned the statistics on the over-supply of teachers, so I will not go into those.

*12.30 pm*

I will now turn to the ethos and equality issues, which will be primary to the future debate about teacher education. The Committee heard a lot of evidence about the ethos of Stranmillis. Many of the contributions suggested that the proposed merger with Queen's University might mean that the distinctive ethos of the college would be lost. The Committee also voiced its concerns for the Stranmillis ethos if the proposed merger goes ahead. The Minister for Employment and Learning said that he does not see Northern Ireland becoming an ethos-free zone. The Committee believes that the issue of ethos in teacher education is important and should be discussed, rather than being lost in the general debate about a proposed merger.

The Committee was impressed by the Transferor Representatives' Council's evidence. The TRC indicated that it wants Stranmillis to be a modern training institution, strengthened by the research and practice that Queen's University could bring to it — assuming that the merger proceeds. However, the council also suggested a mechanism that will ensure that its Christian values — and respectful awareness of those values — are renewed and fostered among teachers who are preparing to work in schools that have that unique ethos in which the majority of pupils are from the Protestant community.

That matter leads into equality issues. The TRC expressed concerns about the number of students from a Protestant background who might gain places in any merged institution at Stranmillis. I commend the Queen's University authorities for indicating that access to the Catholic certificate in religious education — which is currently provided by Stranmillis and accredited by the University of Glasgow or St Mary's College at Strawberry Hill — would continue to be available at any new institution.

Should the merger proceed, the TRC suggested that the merged institution is likely to be a centre of excellence and will attract students from both traditions. I believe that a state-of-the-art, high-quality Russell Group university would be attractive to people from all sides of the community who want to be teachers. As the Catholic certificate would still be available, Catholic students would enjoy the benefit of having access to all educational sectors here, but Protestants will continue to be excluded from the Catholic maintained sector while

having to compete with their Catholic counterparts in all other sectors. Protestants would be at a disadvantage in that situation.

The TRC seeks reassurances that a new merged institution would have a Christian ethos. This report recommends that the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education should note the council's concerns about the possible effect on the number of students from the Protestant tradition who would enter the teaching profession, should the merger between Stranmillis and Queen's University go ahead. The report also recommends that the Education Minister should engage with the TRC to explore its concerns surrounding the integrity of the controlled sector. All that the council seeks is a level playing field.

Before I attempt to address the points that were raised by other Members, I will say a few words about the Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People (CACDP). CACDP has no remit to undertake teacher education or the preparation of college lecturers. However, the Chairperson and the Committee agreed to take evidence from it.

CACDP suggested that steps should be taken to provide the development of tutors who wish to gain a formal further education teaching qualification. That would put them on a footing with lecturers and would help to create a pool of qualified tutors who could teach and develop badly needed interpreters. The report recognises and quantifies the need for deaf people to be given the opportunity to compete on an equal footing with all other students.

Although that matter is outside the Committee's remit, its members have expressed support for an appropriate initiative to address the identified education needs of deaf people.

Although Members raised some concerns about the report, their remarks were generally of a supportive nature. Alex Easton expressed concerns about the merger process. He commended the report in its entirety, but to illustrate his disquiet about the proposed merger, he quoted the well-known maxim: act in haste, and repent in leisure. In addition, he raised concerns about Protestant places being secured.

The Rev Robert Coulter, who is not in the Chamber at the moment, maintained that Northern Ireland is oversupplied with teachers and that that is a significant matter. In an intervention, his colleague Ken Robinson brought up the issue of early-retired teachers returning to jobs, which is a matter that was discussed in the Committee. Robert Coulter went on to mention paid teachers, and he echoed concerns about teachers returning to the profession having taken redundancy payments. He indicated that the University of Ulster did not seem particularly interested in a full merger, and questioned whether a full merger between Stranmillis

College and Queen's University was necessary. He suggested that some sub-degree work might be made available in Stranmillis College.

Mr Alex Attwood has played a major role in the Committee, and his legal skills and background have given him some advantage in this area. In the Committee, he has never been quiet about matters relating to St Mary's College in particular. He said that he finds it odd, and unacceptable, that the merger between Stranmillis College and Queen's University was announced in the press before the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education published their report of the review. Like Robert Coulter, Mr Attwood is concerned about why the University of Ulster's proposal was not put forward, and he raised questions about why the Stranmillis College board was not better informed about the new funding formula. Indeed, some board members heard about the formula's implications only on the day the decision was made to merge the college with Queen's University.

Anna Lo also emphasised the fact that there is an oversupply of teachers in our community, and she indicated that any reduction of ITE places must be handled responsibly. All Members would agree with that. Ms Lo insisted that a debate is required and that consensus must be sought on the way forward. David Hilditch, as well as other Members, made several important points about the new funding formula, and he indicated that St Mary's College has suggested several ways around the funding mechanism.

Paul Butler expressed his support for the content of the report and, again, commented on the funding model and the proposed merger. He emphasised that the Minister for Employment and Learning must consider the report's recommendations, and then produce a developed strategy in conjunction with the Minister of Education. In addition, he outlined concerns about Stranmillis College's merger with Queen's University, particularly with respect to staff jobs. Like David Hilditch, Mr Butler highlighted St Mary's ideas about how early professional development, continuing professional development and Irish-medium work could support and maintain St Mary's.

My colleague William Irwin spoke about the oversupply of teachers. He also said that the absence of a review by the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning meant that no strategy was in place and that any change must be well considered — as Alex Easton said — and based on consensus.

Mr Gerry Adams, the MP for East Belfast —

**Mr Easton:** West Belfast.

**Mr Newton:** My apologies to that party's leader; I will not say any more.

Mr Gerry Adams, the MP for West Belfast, talked about the courses provided by St Mary's University College and its significant appeal for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. He said that St Mary's University College will depend heavily on the BA Liberal Arts degree for viability in the future. He also said that St Mary's plays a vital role in the west Belfast community.

Claire McGill finished her speech without mentioning Strabane; that is most unusual for her. Members wait for her to mention Strabane at every Committee meeting. She urged the Department of Education and DEL to publish their review and stressed that there was a need for a long-term review of teacher education; she is not interested in short-term fixes. Mrs McGill also emphasised the high quality of service that is provided by St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College.

Ken Robinson, who is not in the Chamber, commended the high quality of teacher training in Northern Ireland and endorsed the report. He also placed emphasis on the Transferor Representatives' Council's equality issue.

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

**Mr Newton:** I am sorry that I did not have enough time to comment on the Minister's remarks, but, in general, he commended the report.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly supports the report of the Committee for Employment and Learning on its Review of Teacher Education; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, to implement, as a matter of urgency, the recommendations contained therein.

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

*The sitting was suspended at 12.42 pm.*

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

2.00 pm

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Civic Forum

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

A valid petition of concern was presented on Monday 2 February in relation to the motion. The effect of the petition is that the vote on the motion will be held on a cross-community basis.

**Mr Moutray:** I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the ongoing review of the Civic Forum; notes that it has not met since 2002; notes the absence of any value from the Civic Forum to date; notes the lack of a widespread public concern about the absence of the Civic Forum; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister not to establish a new Civic Forum, but instead to investigate modern ways to interact with the public, including online interactive means of helping to shape public policy.

The motion says as much as is needed to say at any time and in any place about the Northern Ireland Civic Forum. The forum was born of a belief that it would be the great and the good who would bring about the final settlement in Northern Ireland. Therefore, places on the Civic Forum were found for those who shunned politics and who left it to others to get their hands dirty in political debate and risk their lives giving political representation.

It was hoped that the forum would ride to the rescue of the Belfast Agreement, and so it was stacked with pro-agreement nodding dogs. The fact that a growing majority of unionists rejected that failed agreement was denied at every turn. Those are the core elements of the Civic Forum's DNA, but there are other aspects to consider.

As a result of the facts that I have laid out already, it was necessary that certain inclusions and exclusions be applied. We have heard much in recent days from both the UUP and the SDLP about what they have called a power grab. That is very strange. Does anyone remember a deafening outcry from the UUP or the SDLP when the then First and deputy First Ministers were given the right to appoint 10% of the forum? I, for one, certainly do not.

That provision allowed David Trimble and Seamus Mallon to have their own placemen sitting on the Civic Forum. It also meant that, although there were to be 18 members from the voluntary and community sector and four members representing the culture sector, there would be no official place for the largest community and cultural organisation in the Province, namely the Orange Order. Such an appointment could not be tolerated because it was well known that the Orange Order was uneasy about the Belfast Agreement.

So much, therefore, for the core of the Civic Forum's being and its intended role. What about its operation? On the first day — that of its launch — it was decided, with no discussion with the members of the forum, to provide simultaneous electronic translation from Irish into English. That was a move beyond what took place in the Assembly or even in Dáil Éireann. That decision was deemed necessary in order to heap pressure onto the rest of us who still, quite rightly, view the Irish language as hopelessly politicised because of the antics of people such as the members of Sinn Féin.

Members should consider also the forum's work, findings and recommendations. Not a single original recommendation came from the Civic Forum and was taken up by the Executive. The forum proved to be an utter waste of time, effort, resources and public finances, amounting to £500,000 a year, when it was active. The Assembly need not take my word for it — Members need only consider the accelerated falling-away in attendance from the forum, to such an extent that, when the final suspension to date was ordered, less than a third of its members were present.

In 'The Irish News' on 4 April 2007, no less a person than Lord Kilcooney stated that the Civic Forum was:

"a luxury the people of Northern Ireland cannot afford".

That was a belated but welcome conversion. I trust that we will hear that comment reiterated by his colleagues in the House today.

The Civic Forum was not necessary when it was created; it was not heeded when it spoke; it was not valued enough by its members for them to attend; it was not noticed when it fell; it is not missed in its absence. It encumbered the ground for long enough during its brief, pitiful life. It was put out of its misery in suspension, and it should never see the light of day again.

**Mr McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat. The concept of the Civic Forum was developed during the lengthy discussions that led to, and were part of, the negotiations on the Good Friday Agreement. It was accepted that many imaginative and innovative steps were required to address the many decades of political failure, particularly the many long years of unionist one-party rule. Recognition was required that during that period

there had been many abuses and denials of human rights and of the rights of the other. There was anxiety to ensure that protections were built into the political process and that society could work through the problems, some of which had a long legacy.

During those negotiations, the establishment of a Civic Forum was agreed, and the Good Friday Agreement made provision for it, not only as a means of ensuring more transparency in a political process that is mysterious to many, but of creating a degree of buy-in and participation in that process. It should be accepted that the Civic Forum was problematic and challenging to some political parties, but it provided an important function; its processes were an exemplar of how to deal with issues in a transparent way. Even the most difficult and sensitive issues could be rehearsed, debated, researched, and reported on in the forum, in a way that complemented and supported the formal political process. It was a good idea then, and it is a good idea today.

The political process is now some years old; although now re-established, the process has often stuttered. However, that process, and the establishment of the Assembly as a means by which local political control could be exerted over people's lives was not a bad idea. Extremely difficult issues had to be resolved, and the concept of mandatory power sharing, which is a feature of the Assembly, reflects the considerable tensions that remain to be resolved through the agreement of the parties.

The parties are moving in the right direction, and the Executive are now functional. The Executive are sometimes described as a mandatory four-party coalition. However, that is something of a misnomer or misrepresentation; there is nothing mandatory about the number of parties, and nowhere is that number specified. It is simply in the gift of the electorate to determine which parties receive sufficient mandates to entitle them, under the rules, to be part of the Executive.

**Mr A Maginness:** The coalition is not mandatory in the sense that it has been misrepresented by some people. Parties do not have to join the coalition; in that sense it is voluntary as much as it is mandatory.

**Mr McLaughlin:** The Member made my point for me, and I welcome that comment from Alban Maginness. Any party can decide that it does not want to be part of the coalition now or in the future. However, it confers on those parties with sufficient mandates a responsibility to form the Executive and to act subsequently according to the ministerial code and legislation that governs this place.

To return to the topic of the debate, the idea of the Civic Forum is not to challenge the authority of this place. In many ways, it was designed to facilitate a greater understanding of the processes, and a greater

rehearsal, examination and analysis of the challenging issues that could cause conflict or division among parties, or create problems for the overall process. There have been enough years of failure and political vacuum.

If the Civic Forum was a victim, it was due to the difficulties that were at the heart of the political process. During the first mandate, as it has become known, the Executive was more often dysfunctional than functional, and the Assembly was more often in suspension than in full operation. In spite of that, in its brief period of activity, the Civic Forum went on with its work and demonstrated its value to us all.

I ask the party opposite to consider the value of allowing society to be part of this process in the manner described by the existence of the Civic Forum. It will address the issues that are relevant to the work that we are doing here but in the context of the overriding authority of the Assembly to make decisions and to set and implement policy. There is nothing to fear from opening up the process, and there is nothing to fear from transparency.

**Mr McFarland:** In the final hours of the final day of agreeing the Belfast Agreement back in 1998, the Women's Coalition managed to get a sop — the Civic Forum. It was full of worthy people from civic society, NGOs, etc. Unfortunately, when it met it produced little, its attendance dwindled month by month, and, in the end, many members of the forum met —

**Mr A Maginness:** I am really taken aback by the Member's criticism. I thought that he would be more forthcoming on the matter. The Civic Forum had a short time in which to act in a deliberative manner and its demise was the result of political circumstances that were beyond its control. However, at any rate, is there not value in the voluntary and community sector having some connectivity with the political process? That, in effect, is what the Civic Forum is all about.

**Mr McFarland:** The Member should have waited for the rest of my illustrious speech.

The forum produced little, attendance dwindled, and those on the forum would admit that it was of little use. The Ulster Unionist Party supports its being laid to rest with dignity.

In 2006, the Preparation for Government Committee produced a report in which all parties in the House agreed that the ways in which civic society engaged with the Assembly should be reviewed. I was heartened by the comments of the now First Minister, Peter Robinson, who, when asked what should be done about the Civic Forum, said, clearly, that it should be abolished.

My party is behind engagement with civic society. We need a system for dealing with civic society, but how should we go about that? We are against a European-style partnership model or another non-elected quasi-

parliamentary organisation. However, we have a system that is well tried: anyone wishing to engage with the Assembly — NGOs or whoever — can directly link with our Assembly Committees by building up relationships with Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons. If Committees have any sense, they will build up relationships that allow NGOs, or those parts of civic society, to talk to them when they have problems. That is the way in which we should engage with civic society, and it is the established system in this place.

The Ulster Unionist Party agrees with the motion. However, I am confused because at St Andrews, the party to my left — the Democratic Unionist Party, which claims to be against the Civic Forum — agreed to an all-Ireland version. Perhaps that party will explain today why it is so against the Civic Forum, why —

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

**Mr McFarland:** — at St Andrews, it agreed to the all-Ireland version of that.

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

**Mr McFarland:** My view is that —

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

**Mr McFarland:** — the Civic Forum should be laid to rest in peace —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. The Member has the Floor. Mr Hamilton has asked the Member to give way, and he has decided not to give way. Mr McFarland has the Floor.

**Mr McFarland:** I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker; I did not hear the Member. I will give way if he wishes to speak. *[Laughter.]*

2.15 pm

**Mr Hamilton:** Obviously, I was not bellowing loudly enough. The Member mentioned the St Andrews Agreement, which he knows full well is an agreement between two Governments and not an agreement between political parties. He referred to the all-Ireland civic body, but is he aware that its genesis was in the Belfast Agreement? Perhaps that was another issue that he and his party colleagues slept through discussions on — much like the Civic Forum, which he referred to as a last-minute sop that his party did not see coming down the line.

**Mr Cobain:** There is no Belfast Agreement — that was destroyed.

**Mr McFarland:** Not only that, but we were assured that the matter was all tied up, and that never again would anything emerge from here that unionists did not like — the St Andrews Agreement promised that. *[Interruption.]* We await the appearance of the all-Ireland civic forum. UUP members believe that the Civic Forum should be laid to rest. We strongly believe

that civic society must engage with our Government and the Assembly, and we firmly believe that that should be done through the Assembly Committees. That is the right place to deal with people who wish to give us their views.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Another day in the life of this dysfunctional Assembly and Executive — while the global economy is in meltdown and Governments everywhere are garnering their resources and best brains to cope with the crisis, legislators in this Assembly are reduced to taking part in little more than sixth-form debates. While the First Minister and deputy First Minister procrastinate on strategic decisions regarding the economy, investment, education, infrastructure and housing, the DUP and Sinn Féin send their Back-Benchers to table smokescreen, sham-fight motions that seek to draw the public's and the media's attention away from the fact that there is a stark absence of legislation and vision from the two main parties in Government.

Before Christmas, when Sinn Féin agreed to attend Executive meetings again, the public — you and I — were promised that Ministers would burn the midnight oil —

**Mr McElduff:** On a point of order.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Point of order.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I will call the point of order, Mrs Kelly, thank you.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want the Deputy Speaker to make a ruling on the relevance of Mrs Kelly's remarks to the debate on the Civic Forum.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Mrs Kelly, please continue with your speech.

**Mrs D Kelly:** It is quite clear that the truth hurts. The public were promised that Ministers would burn the midnight oil in an attempt to lead Northern Ireland plc out of the economic crisis. However, seven weeks on, we are back to our debates while people are losing their jobs and homes on a daily basis, the road networks continue to disintegrate and farmers' wages continue to decline.

**Mr Ross:** Is the Member seriously saying that, in a time of economic crisis, Government should be ploughing more money into a Civic Forum that achieved nothing for the people of Northern Ireland?

**Mrs D Kelly:** If Members had any experience of the Civic Forum, they would know that when the forum had an opportunity to meet, it produced very good papers on social inclusion. The publication of that paper has been delayed for the past 18 months by the party opposite. Perhaps the Civic Forum might get some decisions made around here — perhaps we might



see some papers and ideas rather than just listen to sixth-form debates. *[Interruption.]*

It will come as no surprise to Members that the SDLP is opposed to the motion. After all, it is another cynical move by the DUP, in a year of elections to the European Parliament, to satisfy the demands of the Mr and Mrs Noes who continue to exist within the party — with one eye, of course, on its arch-critic Jim Allister.

The motion is nothing more than further evidence that the DUP wishes to grab power. Not content to grab power from Ministers who are not under the control of Peter Robinson and the deputy First Minister, they now wish to grab power from the community. It is yet another attempt by the DUP to chip away, bit by bit, at the Good Friday Agreement as it attempts to delude itself, and its voters, that it has not signed up to all the institutions. Although others might be content to have their eye wiped, the SDLP will stand up to the DUP and tell it like it is.

In previous mandates, the Civic Forum was not given a chance due to the collective failures of Sinn Féin and the DUP. It produced an excellent paper on social inclusion and, if properly reconstituted, it has much to offer to help to increase civic participation in our democratic structures on issues such as the review of public administration, a shared future and the economic downturn.

The forum also has a responsibility to work with our counterparts in the South of Ireland to form an all-Ireland consultative forum to challenge the Governments on their policies for addressing the economic downturn and to give a voice to the people.

While DUP Back-Benchers deflect attention from the important issues, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are holding inter-sectoral meetings to discuss with civic society how to cope with the economic downturn. I fear that they are speaking out of the corners of their mouths. I rest my case.

**Ms Lo:** We oppose the motion, but understand the concerns that it raises.

**Mr McCarthy:** No, we do not. *[Laughter.]*

**Ms Lo:** The Alliance Party recognises that the Civic Forum did not perform as expected; however, we prefer to reform, rather than abandon, it. It is important to note that the Civic Forum is a requirement in the Belfast Agreement to engage wider civic society. The engagement of those in wider society who have a diverse range of expertise and experience should be of value to the governance of Northern Ireland and offer a process to enrich — not diminish — traditional representative democracy.

The Civic Forum cannot easily be judged on its past effectiveness because, to a large degree, it was a hostage to the political process. Each suspension of the

Assembly put the forum into abeyance, which created long periods of inactivity and drift. Since restoration, there has been considerable uncertainty about the forum's future.

If the Civic Forum is to continue, its role and remit must be more clearly identified. The well-established structures of the Assembly Committees and the all-party Assembly groups for liaison between Members and civic society on various issues mean that clarifying a role for the Civic Forum is more important than ever. Clarity is not just important to justify the expenditure associated with the forum; it is also important to justify to members of the forum the time commitment expected of them.

To avoid duplicating the functions of other bodies, the Civic Forum should not be a lobbying body, nor should it act as a consultative channel. However, it should be given a role to address, in a less adversarial setting, some of the thornier issues that society faces. Although there are good examples of where such a policy has been effective, there are others where it has not, such as the Bill of Rights Forum.

As Departments often work in silos, the Civic Forum can provide a more joined-up and cross-cutting approach to address complex social issues, such as poverty, community relations or environmental sustainability. The make-up of the forum should be as broad as possible, which could be achieved if it is composed of representatives from different sectors and has seats that are filled through an open-application process.

The Alliance Party is concerned that any appearance of political patronage, particularly associated with individuals nominated by the Office of the First and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), could have a negative impact on the dynamics of the forum and could undermine public confidence in the independence of the individuals concerned and in the forum as a whole.

In conclusion, the Alliance Party would support an effective Civic Forum, working in partnership with the Assembly and providing advice to Government on socio-economic and cultural matters —

**Mr Simpson:** The Member takes a great interest in voluntary organisations, and, as a member of the Committee for Social Development, she will be aware of the Committee's effectiveness when it takes evidence from different organisations.

Mr McFarland made a very positive suggestion, which was that members of civic society could address relevant Committees here. Surely that would be better value for money?

**Ms Lo:** It works quite differently with the Committee on which the Member sits, in that people are called in to give evidence on certain issues. However, this is a much wider approach, bringing all the groups together and

contributing to debates on issues such as the Programme for Government, for example, or policy issues —

**Mr McFarland:** Surely there is nothing to stop those groups from coming together every day or every week — in fact, I think that the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) already does so — to discuss whatever they want and then produce a common view to an Assembly Committee if that is what they want to do. It seems silly to have a separate non-elected Parliament costing large amounts of money to do something that should happen anyway.

**Ms Lo:** We are not talking about large amounts of money. Furthermore, one must also think about the voluntary sector, as it is under-resourced; therefore, it would not be feasible to call NICVA to have meetings every day of the week.

We would support an effective Civic Forum, working in partnership with the Assembly and providing advice to Government on socio-economic and cultural issues. However, we agree that a new approach is needed to ensure that such a reform provides value for money.

**Mr I McCrea:** I thank my colleagues for tabling the motion. The Civic Forum was established in 2000 under section 56 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and it adopted the following mission statement:

“The Civic Forum will exercise effective community leadership and directly influence the building of a peaceful, prosperous, just, cohesive, healthy and plural society.”

However, during its two years of operation, it failed to exercise community leadership, and it failed to influence directly the building of a peaceful, prosperous, just, cohesive and plural society. In fact, if we are to believe that the intentions of the mission statement were to exercise community leadership, surely that would have been manifested in its membership.

The Civic Forum failed mainly because it was not truly representative of Northern Ireland society; its make-up was anti-unionist, anti-orange and anti-evangelical. The Civic Forum was regarded by many people as anti-unionist, as its membership was designed to ensure that the majority of unionist opinion, which was opposed to the Belfast Agreement, was in the minority on the forum. Proof of that was seen in repeated efforts to suppress the opinion of that majority.

The Civic Forum is without doubt anti-orange, as the Orange Order, which represents the largest cultural movement in the Protestant community — representing thousands of members and supporters — was denied a place on the forum. It is also particularly sickening for people who regard Orangeism as a culture and as an identity that the spokesman for the Bogside Residents' Group was given a place on the forum.

Furthermore, the make-up of the forum was anti-evangelical. Before the forum members were appointed,

the appointment process was overseen by several consortiums, as they were called at the time.

2.30 pm

They were tasked with looking at a specific stream of appointments; for example, voluntary or community appointments. One of those consortia was appointed to oversee the Church representatives. At its first sitting, Dr David Stevens of the Irish School of Ecumenics attended as the specially invited guest and virtual spiritual advisor of the civil servant who headed up the consortium. That was arranged without any discussion with the invited groups and no regard for the anti-evangelical stance of the Irish School of Ecumenics. Dr Stevens was removed only after a written protest by the Caleb Foundation.

Undoubtedly, the Civic Forum was unelected and unnecessary. It was also unrepresentative of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland. Thousands of people from the unionist, Orange and evangelical communities felt that their voice was not heard within the Civic Forum. For that reason, the forum will never merit any respect or trust from those of that background.

The Civic Forum had no proper checks and balances on the chairperson, who was appointed by the First and deputy First Minister and, as such, was not accountable to the body. It was not only unelected, unnecessary and unrepresentative — it was also very expensive. That talking shop cost the ratepayers of Northern Ireland in excess of £750,000 in its two years of operation.

We should learn from the failures of the Civic Forum, and I call on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to refuse to establish a new one. I support the motion.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The concept of the Civic Forum is positive and inherently good. Politics, it is said, is much too important to be left to politicians alone.

The Civic Forum was set up through strand one of the Good Friday Agreement to protect and ensure better governance. It is a part of the overall political architecture, along with the Assembly, the North/South Ministerial Council and the east-west arrangements. It is meant to be a truly consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural affairs.

The forum did not get a chance to succeed, as a result of political instability and political underdevelopment during the period when it was expected to deliver. My colleague Mitchell McLaughlin made the point that, when the Executive and Assembly failed, nothing happened in the Civic Forum either, and it lacked dynamism or momentum. The forum was unable to operate properly during times of suspension, although it met in plenary format 12 times during that period.

I acknowledge that it is right and proper that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have arranged

for a formal review of the mechanisms whereby civic society may promote its views.

The last part of the DUP motion urges the First Minister and deputy First Minister to:

“investigate modern ways to interact with the public, including online interactive means of helping to shape public policy.”

I welcome the fact that the motion acknowledges the role of civic society in shaping public policy. That is positive.

The review examines all the options, and the last part of the DUP motion is an area worth exploring — namely, models of civic partnership. In view of current changes in the social and economic environment, it is important to hear — not in an ad hoc or hit-and-miss fashion, but in a structured way — from, for example, the construction industry. In a new civic forum, I would like to hear from the construction industry, which is so important to this society and economy, in a structured manner. I want to hear from the community and voluntary sectors.

Equally, I would expect leaders of the voluntary and community sector to report back to organisations on, perhaps, a quarterly basis: organisations such as those in the Omagh district like Omagh Forum for Rural Associations, an umbrella group for rural community groups; FOCUS (Forum in Omagh for Community Understanding and Support), an umbrella group for town-based community groups; Omagh Ethnic Communities Support Group; and Omagh Women's Area Network.

There is a strong voluntary and community sector in Omagh, and I would like to think that whoever ended up representing the community and voluntary sector on a civic forum would properly reflect the views of the groups that I just mentioned. There should be a requirement for reporting back. It is a good idea to take a critical review stance with regard to the membership of the Civic Forum.

Ian McCrea suggested that it was not representative enough, and he made some strong points until he took exception to a Bogside residents' spokesman being on the Civic Forum. Surely, it is not good practice to discriminate against people on grounds of political opinion, including the Bogside residents' spokesman? The Bogside residents have every entitlement to be heard in a civic forum. Mr McCrea's point was strong until he started to discriminate against people who do not share his political opinions.

**Mr I McCrea:** If the Member takes great offence at my description of, or discrimination against, the Civic Forum member from the Bogside, will he not accept that the whole forum discriminated against many members of the unionist, Orange and Protestant Churches' tradition?

**Mr McElduff:** The merit of Mr McCrea's case should be examined by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and the review of the Civic Forum. It should, at least, be listened to, and given a strong hearing. Equally, I suggest that it is wrong for the Member to discriminate against anyone from the nationalist tradition — from Derry, for example — who has a contrary political opinion to that of his good self.

The Assembly's engagement and outreach strategy is also very important. We need to reach rural communities, provincial and county towns, and meet the people as an Assembly. That is why I welcome the roadshow idea that is, I believe, being developed by the director of engagement.

**Mr Ross:** I welcome the opportunity to speak, and congratulate my colleagues on tabling the motion. In considering the motion, we must ask ourselves whether the Civic Forum was value for money, and whether it served any real purpose. What did Northern Ireland get from the tens of thousands of pounds that were ploughed into the Civic Forum? It was described by some as a second Chamber of sorts, its membership was appointed from civic society, and it was somewhat based on the assumption that we in this Chamber cannot represent the views of those who elect us.

I have heard and read comments made by Members over recent days, saying that the Civic Forum is the voice of the people. In that case, what is the point of us? Do we not represent those people? Do we not consult with the public, and listen to their views? It has already been said by my colleagues, but it seemed to many that the Civic Forum was comprised of people who simply may not have been able to get elected in any other way. It was not representative of the community as a whole; rather, it was made up, for the most part, of those who were seen as safe or friendly by the then First Minister and deputy First Minister.

We have enough quangos and organisations in Northern Ireland already without reconstituting that one. It is recognised how over-governed we have been here in Northern Ireland —

**Mr Attwood:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I resisted getting involved earlier, but two members of the DUP have now characterised the membership of the Civic Forum in that way. Mr Ross said that members of the Civic Forum were, for the most part, “safe or friendly” to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and Mr Ian McCrea referred to the members of the Civic Forum as “anti-unionist, anti-Orange and anti-evangelical”. Is it in order for people to be portrayed in that way?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** That is not a point of order; it is a matter of opinion that Mr Ross is entitled to express in this Chamber.

**Mr Ross:** As I was saying, we are already over-governed in Northern Ireland. We have had 26 councils; there are 108 MLAs at Stormont, and that is in addition to our MPs in Westminster, our peers in the House of Lords, our MEPs in Europe, as well as other bodies such as the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council.

Our party has been consistent in seeking to slim down government. The Local Government (Boundaries) Bill reduces the number of councils from 26 to 11, and the Assembly backed a motion to reduce the number of Executive Departments. Ultimately, we will have to look at reducing the number of MLAs and examining whether, in the current economic climate, the various North/South bodies are really value for money for Northern Ireland taxpayers. Having tens of layers of government — or big government — does not make for good government. We cannot afford huge wastage and duplication of services at present. We should be seeking to optimise the use of taxpayers' money.

Anna Lo spoke of the huge sums of money that are associated with the Civic Forum. The major issue is not, perhaps, the huge amount of money, but whether people are getting value for money. Dolores Kelly said that the debate is a deflection from the big issues. I would ask her how many hospital operations, childcare places, residential care-home places, even social houses or roads maintenance could be provided with the money that was ploughed into the Civic Forum. That money would be much better spent on front-line services.

**Mrs I Robinson:** Does the Member agree that the last forum was made up of people who were rejected by the electorate, and that it was another case of nodding and winking?

**Mr Ross:** Yes, I made the point that many people believed that the forum was made up of people who perhaps could not get elected. I would like to turn to the issue of —

**Mr A Maginness:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Ross:** Very briefly.

**Mr A Maginness:** We have the list of names of people who were members of the Civic Forum; will the Member go through that list and name those who stood for election and were rejected?

**Mr Ross:** Bill Jeffrey was one, and another that springs to mind is Gary McMichael, who could not get elected to this Chamber and who was then appointed to the Civic Forum. I want to move on; I gave way so much the last time that I missed out on any speaking time.

I now turn to the issue of the Civic Forum being a voice of the people. My colleagues and I on these Benches hold weekly constituency surgeries in our offices — indeed, the DUP boasts a plethora of offices throughout the country — to ensure that, at every

level, our representatives are accessible to the people that they represent. We are directly answerable to the public; the public, essentially, interview us at every election time and decide whether we return to this Chamber. We do not need a Civic Forum to tell us what the public think, because my staff and I talk to the public every day through meetings, letters, emails or telephone calls. The public tell us what they think and what they want us to do here. If other Members do not feel that they are getting that communication with the public, perhaps they need to reassess how they are doing their jobs.

In East Antrim, people are coming to me with issues such as care home closures, education, health, public transport and people losing their jobs in the current economic times. Therefore, they do have that voice and they come to us for that reason. Mr McFarland spoke about groups in civic society having a voice. Well, they do have a voice, and he outlined how they can interact with Assembly Committees. In addition, many groups in civic society regularly meet with the all-party groups that have been set up in the Assembly.

How can civic society play a role? That is a question that we have talked about, and which, as the motion says, needs to be examined further. Over recent weeks, the Assembly Commission has received a number of questions about how to improve public interaction with the institutions at Stormont in order to help people to understand what goes on, whether improving the video link from the Committee rooms or the Chamber. Every day, hundreds of people come to visit Parliament Buildings, including youth groups which I meet almost daily. It is a positive thing that more young people are coming to see what we do here and that they can interact in that way.

It is important that more people respond to the Assembly's public consultations than has been the case. There are steps that we can take in order to ensure that the level of interaction with the public is improved. However, that will not be achieved by reconstituting a Civic Forum; it will be done through better thinking and better interaction with the public.

**Mr Elliott:** I was just listening to Mr McElduff — and I am sure that he will keep me right if I do not quote him precisely — but he said something such as politics is much too serious to leave to just the politicians. I agree with him in that respect. However, there are many ways that the public can interact with politicians, rather than through just a Civic Forum. I am not entirely sure how much interaction there was between the Civic Forum and politicians.

I for one would not want to deny Mr McElduff the opportunity to liaise with and discuss issues with people in the Omagh area — and in the Fermanagh area when Omagh becomes part of the greater Fermanagh

council — because he will have to do that anyway. I, too, would welcome such an opportunity.

2.45 pm

I wish to consider what might happen beyond the life of the Civic Forum. Many of us will accept that, although the Civic Forum was a reasonable talking shop, it did not do a lot of positive work. I am pleased to hear many Members talk of a reduction in bureaucracy, in the number of Government Departments and in the whole Civil Service attitude. The Civil Service can be over-bureaucratic, but bureaucracy can be found outside the Civil Service too. We need to be careful of that, because there are two sets of bureaucracy.

Some Members talked about their parties' wishes to reduce the number of Departments, but, at the same time, they talk about introducing a new Department for policing and justice. Not long after they got their hands on OFMDFM, they wanted more advisers for that Department.

**Mr Ross:** Will the Member acknowledge that any future Department of justice will not be a new Department; justice powers will simply be devolved from the NIO to the Assembly?

**Mr Elliott:** I understand that that will be a new Department under the Assembly. The Member has tried to say that the current Government will reduce numbers. There was no need to appoint new advisers to OFMDFM, just over a year ago, if the Government did not think that that was necessary.

Most Members sit on Statutory Committees and are aware of the huge number of lobby groups in society. I welcome the opportunity to liaise and co-operate with those groups, most of which bring valuable work to the Committees. The Rural Community Network, the Ulster Farmers' Union and Barnardo's, for example, all bring that bit of expertise that we need. They do so in a specific way — unlike the Civic Forum.

The Civic Forum brought together everyone who had a viewpoint, whether it was a rural, an urban, a health, a social development, or a regional development viewpoint. Those interests all fought their own corners, but, when Committees receive information from lobby groups, it is relevant to the Committees' jurisdiction and inquiries and, as Mr McElduff said, to issues that affect our own constituencies. There are many ways of receiving information without the Civic Forum.

Almost every week, Members receive notices of all-party working groups, which also play a valuable role in the Assembly on specific issues. They provide another way of commanding the expertise that is needed in the political field. To return the original point, that is a way of ensuring that politics in Northern Ireland is not just left to the politicians; it involves the wider community, the wider public

service, and voluntary and community representatives. Those are all important issues.

At the time of the St Andrews Agreement, we heard that an all-Ireland civic forum would be established. If we are trying to get rid of the Civic Forum in Northern Ireland, the last thing we need is an all-Ireland civic forum.

**Mr Hamilton:** The Member missed the earlier part of the debate, and he must not have been listening elsewhere. Will he accept that the truth is that the genesis of the North/ South civic forum was the Belfast Agreement, to which his party agreed and signed up?

**Mr Elliott:** We have all heard the DUP say that the Belfast Agreement is dead and gone, so I wonder why the Member is so surprised and why he keeps bringing up the issue. Perhaps the DUP was not at St Andrews, but I clearly remember that it was. The DUP brought out a document that said that an all-Ireland civic forum would be considered. Once we get rid of the Civic Forum in Northern Ireland because we do not think that it can do the work, the last thing we need is an all-Ireland civic forum.

**Mr Attwood:** We must be crystal clear about one thing — the motion is not merely a punchbag for DUP Members, whose speeches thus far have been carefully researched and deliberately worded, with the intention of achieving a very clear strategic outcome. To be fair, DUP Members have a very clear strategic intent. It is not simply a matter of the party's doing down the Civic Forum.

When it comes to talking about people rather than institutions, we have once again heard some very unfortunate turns of phrase from the DUP. Stephen Moutray said that the Civic Forum should be "put out of its misery" and that it should:

"not see the light of day again."

Ian McCrea described the Civic Forum's membership as being "anti-unionist, anti-Orange and anti-evangelical." Those statements are part of a pattern of attitudes towards some of the people of Northern Ireland, and towards the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement, and, as such, people must wake up, catch on and draw conclusions.

An attempt is being made to unpick one of the structures that brought about agreement politics in the North, and to dismantle the architecture of those agreement politics as expressed through the Civic Forum, 10 Departments and the North/South Ministerial Council. Let us not be naive about the DUP's ambitions and intentions. The motion is part of that pattern, and of a family of motions, designed to achieve that strategic outcome.

I can perhaps live with that, but I cannot live with the demeaning and diminishing of people involved in

the old Civic Forum, who, in my view, over 40 years, stepped up to the mark in many places and in many communities in Northern Ireland to keep this society more stable than it might otherwise have been. How many times over the past 40 years were we within touching distance of civil war's emerging from civil conflict? Civil war was averted on every occasion for many reasons, including the core stability of our families and communities.

How many times, in moments of greatest jeopardy, did people in civic society step up to the mark and show leadership on the streets of our communities, at city-centre rallies, and in statements that urged people to remain calm, step back and avoid pushing the conflict any further? I believe that the Civic Forum was an expression of the culture and character of our community organisations. It was an expression of the political world's saying that, without those people and groups, civil conflict might have tipped into civil war. Without them, we might not have had our best hopes realised in the Good Friday Agreement. Without them, our society might have been more unstable, and more vulnerable to our worst fears than to our best hopes.

Therefore, when I hear the DUP verbally beat up Civic Forum members — as has happened today — it is not the forum that is being beaten up but the community that stood with all of us in the days of threat and terror over the past 40 years. DUP Members should be ashamed that some of their language, and the content of their statements, leads people towards that conclusion.

I would rather say to Members who want to hear — I do not think that there are many — that they should look at the European experience of engaging with civil society in order to maintain stability and to build cohesion and partnership. One need look only 100 miles from here to see how, over 35 years, the National Economic and Social Council in the Republic has been central to the creation of a new fabric of society that makes that society work better economically, socially and culturally. That is the road down which we should go. Yes, reconfigure the Civic Forum in the manner in which Anna Lo and others suggested, but do not throw out that which is best in our society today, because, if it is thrown out today, the consequences may be a society in future that is less stable than it otherwise would have been.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As my party colleagues said, when the negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement were ongoing, Sinn Féin argued strongly for the inclusion of a civic forum as a necessary part of the agreement. My party believes that there must be engagement with civic society in its capacity as business, trades unions, the voluntary sector and others in order to discuss cultural, social and economic issues.

Members are aware of the Civic Forum's brief existence, which has been mentioned several times in the debate. However, despite what Mr Moutray says, the forum, during its brief existence, produced some good work, published reports and carried out key research.

Despite that good work, however, there were lessons to be learned. In recognition of that, OFMDFM initiated the review to examine the forum's structure and role and to consider innovative ways of engaging with civic society. As the Assembly awaits the outcome of the review, it is clear from listening to Members who took the time to view OFMDFM's website and to read the responses that have been forwarded to the Department that there is demand among various sectors for that type of engagement — despite what the DUP member suggested in his opening comments.

Disability Action, for example, states that one of the main achievements of the forum that existed between 1999 and 2002 was that it:

“gave a focus to economic, social and cultural debates which would otherwise not have been included in the political agenda current at that time.”

It also states that the Government must ensure that they consult people who are significantly and directly involved in civic society.

The Commissioner for Children and Young People also stated that:

“it is important that OFMDFM encourage participation by children and young people in fora such as this, especially on issues that have an effect on their lives.”

Other Members referred to NICVA. It believes that the role of a civic forum is still appropriate today, and that it offers the opportunity for a more deliberative context and a more structured avenue to enable groups to express their views.

Those are only three examples of about 60 responses that OFMDFM received. They call for the re-establishment of the Civic Forum, although not necessarily in its original format. The review will examine that issue in order to determine, we hope, new and innovative ways of engaging.

I do not believe that anyone would argue against the latter part of the motion, which calls on the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to investigate modern ways of interacting with the public, including online interactive means to help to shape policy. In this day and age of modern technology, there is no reason why there should not be more of that type of interaction. Again, the review will consider that as a case in point. OFMDFM has responded to several questions by stating that the review will examine that very matter in order to determine how such technologies are being used to consult the public in other areas.

I suggest that the Assembly await the outcome of the review. Members must be clear: the Civic Forum proposals were part of the Good Friday Agreement, and it was legislated for in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The legislation provides that there will be a forum as envisaged in the Good Friday Agreement.

Regardless of that legislative imperative, the role of the forum is to include civic society in the work of the Executive and the Assembly. It is about hearing the views and voices of other people; it is about listening to people's viewpoints and experiences; it is about enhancing the Assembly's decision making and making it relevant to people.

**Mrs I Robinson:** Will the Member kindly tell me — because I am a bit lost — what there is to prevent Disability Action and the other groups that she mentioned from meeting the Committee that represents the relevant Department? Those groups have total access to the Long Gallery, and all Members are happy to sponsor their events. The door is not closed on anyone's efforts to highlight their needs to the Assembly — which is an elected body.

**Mrs O'Neill:** I thank the Member for that intervention. The Health Committee, on which we both serve, has met numerous groups on various occasions, and we will continue to do that. I welcome that. However, as my colleague mentioned earlier, the establishment of a forum will provide a structured approach to allow groups to come together and put their voices collectively to the decision makers of the House.

Although some Members have expressed strong concerns about the role and model of the Civic Forum, they should not delude themselves that the views of civic society can be set aside. The Assembly is here to listen. It is not good government to send out a message that the Assembly's doors are closed and that it is not interested in listening to people. The Assembly must recognise that there will be a civic forum, as legislated for in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Let us set our collective will and expertise to developing a forum that will enhance decision making and promote inclusion. Go raibh maith agat.

3.00 pm

**Mr Hamilton:** In order to counter some of the accusations that have been made, I make it absolutely clear that I and my party value highly the input that so-called civic society makes and has made to Northern Ireland through the years. Indeed, far from discouraging engagement, we positively encourage engagement. However, we disagree with other parties on whether the Civic Forum is the best way of encouraging positive engagement with civic society, the business sector, the community and voluntary sector, cultural groups, and others.

There are many reasons why we should seriously reconsider whether the Civic Forum is the right way to promote that sort of engagement. Many of those reasons have already been mentioned, one of which is cost. In the two years that the Civic Forum was running — and those were not even full years — it cost in excess of £750,000. That may not be a massive amount of money in the grand scheme of the overall Northern Ireland Budget. However, it is a massive amount when measured against the output that the Northern Ireland people receive for the money that they have put in.

I have heard a lot of talk about how the Civic Forum did this, did that, did a lot of good things and produced a lot of good reports. However, no one who defended the Civic Forum today cited a single example of a positive action that it took or any recommendation that the regime at that time deemed good enough to enact in legislation or to take forward through the House or a Department. I am happy to give way to anyone who can cite a single, good, Civic Forum recommendation that the then Executive, which was governed principally by the UUP and the SDLP, took forward.

I cannot accept the idea that the Civic Forum is needed to encourage interaction between political representatives and civic society. Countless Members have already said that that engagement happens day in, day out in the Committees of the House. It also happens through the meetings with all-party groups, individual Members, party groups, and people who make presentations to various forums in the Assembly.

Indeed, Departments are already involved in better forums than the Civic Forum. One example is the Economic Development Forum, which is chaired by a Minister and includes other Ministers and senior departmental officials. That is a much better way for the business sector to engage on issues about which it has great concern, and the influence exerted by civic society groups in that forum actually pays off.

It is not as if we are turning deaf ears to what people are saying. We are listening to what is being said, and we are responding. I can think of no better example than when, just before Christmas, hundreds of older people visited the Assembly and stood out on the steps outside. Many of us went out to see them, and we listened to their call for action on the bleak winter that they faced due to fuel poverty; the Executive has responded positively to their call. I am sure that others can recall examples of when influence was exerted on Members, individually or collectively, and positive responses were made.

We are the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland. I am concerned that another body — even if it did not seek to challenge the decisions made in the Chamber — would be manipulated by the media

through the juxtaposition of its views against ours. I had bitter experience of that sort of situation when I sat on the Bill of Rights Forum with other Members. That experience showed me clearly that some members of civic society need to grow up. Some of them took positions on issues that they had no business taking positions on and stood in opposition to majority political opinion as exerted by people in this House. That is a difficult and dangerous path to continue to go down.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Is the Member effectively recommending the censorship of the views of independents and individuals? Is the DUP's real problem that it will not control the Civic Forum and that independent members of that forum will, indeed, be independent? There is a saying that one does not bite the hand that feeds. Is the DUP saying that it wants only nodding dogs in positions of power and influence?

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

**Mr Hamilton:** Let me respond to the first intervention first. The Member's intervention and previous comments suggest that she would like there to be a second chamber, one that was not merely a talking shop but one that had actual power. Perhaps, that is because, as she keeps telling us, her party has no power in this Chamber. I will now give way to the Member.

**Mr McLaughlin:** I confess that I did not hear Mr Hamilton make the comments that the Member who made the previous intervention has suggested he did. However, I am interested in Mr Hamilton's contribution. Last week's events at the launch of the Eames/Bradley report were unfortunate, and I know the DUP position on that matter. However, no one could fail to be touched by the amount of grief and trauma experienced by the various families, from all sides of the community, who attended that launch. Could the Civic Forum help to articulate and develop an approach to such matters? The political process has, to date, been unable to do so.

**Mr Hamilton:** I want people — and not necessarily special interest groups via the Civic Forum — to engage with the Assembly. I was interested in the comments made by George Reid, former Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament, at the NICVA conference recently when he talked about engaging with people and the Assembly.

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

**Mr Hamilton:** That is a better way to approach the matter rather than through the Civic Forum, which is a costly waste of money.

**Mr Shannon:** As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and as a taxpayer, I have been watching the progress of the Civic Forum carefully.

I always hoped that people would see sense and that the forum would officially be considered defunct and unnecessary. As Members know, I am not one to forecast doom and gloom, but it is an MLAs' job to provide hope for the people of Northern Ireland in the future. However, everybody knows that the UK faces a difficult journey to return to economic prosperity, and we should ensure that every penny is well spent and benefits the Province. The Civic Forum is neither beneficial nor provides a good stewardship of money.

Lets hae a' luk at tha facts. Tha facts er that tha forum wus set up wi' tha help o' tha Bilfaust Agreemunt as a' wae tae infoarm tha fowk o' tha Proavince oan tha wae fort. This wus tha raisin ahint it an why it wus set up. Tha reality is that it haesnae met since 2002 an ther haes bin nae less woarkin wi' tha fowk — indeed ther haes bin a' gae dael mare. If ye wur tae gaun doon oan tha street an ask oany bisnissmaun hoo they feel er hae they miss'd oot oan tha forum pittin fort ther views the muckle an maist o' them wus ask whut wus tha forum in tha furst place. An ther second comment wud be that it wus mi' jab as yin that wus elected tae pit fort ther point o' view.

Let us look at the facts. The forum was established under the auspices of the Belfast Agreement as a means of interacting with the people of the Province on the way forward. The forum has not met since 2002, and there has been no less community interaction — indeed, there has been much more. If we were to ask local businessmen on the street if they have missed the forum representing their views, the huge majority would ask, first, what the forum was and, secondly, comment that, as an elected representative, it is my job to represent their viewpoint.

Even its own members felt that the Civic Forum was not the best way to use time and resources. That fact can be ascertained from members' horrendous record of attendance — only six of 61 members attended every meeting, which indicates the extent of their interest and tells a tale of how valued the forum was. Those facts tell a story themselves, and we do not need to examine the matter further. If MLAs attended plenary sessions with the same regularity as members attended forum meetings, reconsidering the value of the Assembly and its work would be justified. Why is the situation different for the Civic Forum? The taxpayer demands value for money, and the forum does not provide that in any shape or form.

**Mr McCarthy:** I thank the Member for giving way. Is it not hypocritical for the DUP Benches to complain about value for money, given that one of its Ministers squandered almost £4 million on a proposed stadium at the Maze that has never progressed and has no intention of doing so?

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.



**Mr Shannon:** I thank the Member for his intervention. However, the Member will see value for money when the three sporting organisations receive their part of the money.

People involved in the finance sector will say that we have missed paying the expenses but have not missed diverting funding from other areas to a Civic Forum that is not useful or necessary. In all practicality and reality, the Civic Forum's role to liaise with businesses and community workers is already being fulfilled by MLAs' interaction with people in advice centres, and so on.

**Mrs I Robinson:** To counterbalance that comment from the Alliance Party Member, I would like to say — and I am sure that my colleague in the Health Committee will agree with me — that the £700,000-plus cost of the forum would go a long way towards paying for the three-dimensional tesla scanner required for children with intractable epilepsy. Not only that, but it would allow autistic children and those with acquired brain injuries to avail themselves of equipment that does not presently exist in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Shannon:** I thank the Member for her intervention; her words are very wise. Kieran McCarthy and I both represent the same constituency, and, as we spoke about yesterday, that £700,000 would go a long way towards maintaining the roads of the Ards Peninsula — which Kieran and I speak about every day of the week.

It is important for us to be involved in interaction with our people. We do that through our advice centres and through communication with community groups each and every day of the week. We attend meetings of those groups, and my office deals with some 200 items of business per week — that is 200 items of interaction carried out in my office every week. If that is not an indication of what one can do as an Assembly Member, then that is a question that we should be asking ourselves.

There are also more inexpensive methods of interaction, such as the Internet — a medium which is not selective, nor biased according to gender, race or creed, and the use of which would enable more time and money to be poured into the essentials of what we are trying to achieve. I urge Members to support the motion, and ask them to join me this afternoon in making it clear that the Assembly is cost-effective, time-effective and work-effective, and is streamlined as much as it can be.

**Mr Dallat:** I will try to be constructive in my speech, as ever. What causes me difficulty this afternoon is the modesty of the DUP, the members of which are pretending that they are not woodpeckers chipping away at the Good Friday Agreement. The contribution made by Ian McCrea was the most valuable. He made an overwhelming argument in favour of the Orange Order and other fundamentalists

becoming involved in the new Civic Forum. I would, of course, support that.

In regard to the kernel of the issue, I would have thought that DUP members would know better than most — since they are experts at it — that communication is a two-way process between humans; an exchange of knowledge and understanding. That practice has kept democracy alive for thousands of years. In all honesty, does the Assembly believe that it has reached the level of maturity where it can sweep all of that aside, dispense with it, and not have to rely on the lifetime of experience of academics, educationalists, people in the voluntary sector, and a lot of people who kept this country going through 30 years of violence?

We are in danger of developing a degree of decadence, which, in itself, is not a healthy thing in a democracy. It leads to arrogance — “listen to us; we know what is good for you”. That has led to the downfall of democracy in many parts of the world, but usually only after a lifetime of poor leadership, poor management, and a failure to listen to others. Here it has happened remarkably quickly. I do not think that we have the God-given right to act on behalf of everyone without reference to other people. We must allow people to feel part of the ownership of this new experience, which 71% of people in the North, and almost 100% in the Republic, voted in favour of in 1998. That was the first indication that we were moving into something that could be described as democratic.

**Mrs I Robinson:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Dallat:** As the Member has been speaking across the Floor at me, it is probably better that she does it through the Chair.

**Mrs I Robinson:** I thank the Member for giving way. I am not so proud as to worry about the reason why he allows me to interject. Is the Member aware that, since 1998, there has been another election, and that the St Andrews Agreement was the agreement on which we all went to the electorate? The DUP became the largest party, because it reflected what the people wanted. That is why we are sitting here as the largest party, while the Member's party is the second-largest republican party.

3.15 pm

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

**Mr Dallat:** Yes, of course.

**Mr Attwood:** Is the Member not curious that Mrs Robinson has just confirmed that the DUP went to the electorate on the basis of the St Andrews Agreement, when, in the past 30 minutes, her party colleagues have disowned it? Is the Member not surprised by that contradiction?

**Mr Dallat:** No. I am never surprised by what I hear in the Chamber from the Members opposite.

I will deal with the issue that Mrs Robinson raised.

**Mrs I Robinson:** Iris.

**Mr Dallat:** If the Member wishes to be called Iris, I will do that gladly. Does she realise that tens of thousands of people who breathed life into democracy in 1998 have not been to the polls since then. *[Interruption.]* Is it any wonder, when we witness the performances here?

Let us get real and accept that we desperately need advice and wisdom from the kind of people who would make up a new civic forum. I will give the House a serious example, and I want the Members opposite to listen carefully. The Civic Forum dealt with literacy and numeracy. Some 240,000 people in this society between the ages of 16 and 64 were denied the right to basic skills in reading and writing. The report that the Civic Forum produced reverberated through the Department of Education, the Department for Employment and Learning, and many other Departments.

As a result, many more people today have the ability to read and write. If the Civic Forum did nothing else, it gave those people the tools and the skills to have their voices heard. Today, however, it appears that the DUP does not want those voices to be heard, because they may start to ask questions about how the Assembly is run. They may discover that it is not good value for money for us to spend our time discussing a bogus motion, which has absolutely nothing to do with the crisis that we are in at the moment. I do not have much more to say than that.

**Ms Purvis:** I will begin by encouraging Members to take a step outside and have a good look at this Building. Better yet, they should take a stroll down the Newtownards Road and look up at that long, steep hill on a day like today, with the wind, sleet and rain blowing at a sharp 90-degree angle. In order to get here, my constituents have to wait in the rain for the Metro bus to travel up the Newtownards Road, where they are delivered to the gates at the bottom of the hill. Visitors must then trek up the hill to the far side of the Building and go through the visitors' security check. By the time that they have reached the reception desk, they have had their workout for the week. The front steps are now blocked off, and there is no parking in front of the Building. If visitors dare to drive here on a sitting day, they will find that the car parks are jammed by mid-morning, and they may find themselves having to park somewhere near the Ulster Hospital.

This is not a Building that naturally invites civic participation. Those who do not have a privileged parking space outside the door must expend a fair amount of effort in order to arrive here in a decent condition to engage in the democratic processes that are meant to be conducted within these marble halls.

As we all know, democracy without the full participation of society is anaemic. It is too easy, in a Building of this size and location, with the distractions and demands that come with elected office, to lose the connection with what is real and be unable to determine what is fantasy.

The Civic Forum was designed to bridge that gap and to ensure that civic society, in all its forms, had a regular presence and role in the business of the Assembly. From its beginnings, the Civic Forum has been met by apathy, sometimes bordering on contempt, by those who were meant to organise it and implement it. Those who now characterise the Civic Forum as a failed experiment should direct their critical focus on those members of the Executive who had, and have, responsibility to make it work.

Civic forums work. They work for local government in London and Edinburgh. Civic forums work for the Scottish Parliament and for the European Parliament. If there are suggestions for enhancing the political effectiveness and levels of participation in the Civic Forum through technology, by all means let us examine those. However, attempting to substitute technology for the voice of real people is cynical, mean spirited and strange.

What is to be feared from letting the people of Northern Ireland have a stronger voice in the Assembly and its business? What does the DUP fear? Does it fear itself or an organised and well-structured civic society? If the motion is passed, it will add more fuel to the fire of public scepticism of the Executive and it will support the view of those who feel that the folks on the hill do not have their best interests at heart. I strongly oppose the motion, and I urge the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to focus their efforts on re-establishing the Civic Forum by making it bigger, bolder and stronger. That can only help.

**Mr McCausland:** Before I summarise Members' contributions, I can honestly say that in the past six years, since the demise of the Civic Forum in 2002, I have never had one constituent say to me that he is concerned about that body. In the past six years, I have never met anyone, whether it is on the Newtownards Road, the Ballysillan Road or the Shore Road, who has said that they want to see the Civic Forum come back and that they feel passionately about it. Most people do not even know that the Civic Forum has disappeared, because it made so little an impression on them. In fact, some media researchers, whom I spoke to yesterday as they were looking into this issue, asked me what had happened to the Civic Forum. It says a lot about the Civic Forum that the media does not know about it and the public do not care about it.

In proposing the motion, Stephen Moutray spoke about places for the great and good. He said that the

Civic Forum was packed with pro-agreement nodding dogs — the first mention of that phrase during the debate. He said that no recommendations of the Civic Forum were taken up, that it was marked by poor attendance, and that it was unneeded, unheeded, unnoticed and not missed.

Mitchel McLaughlin spoke about how the Civic Forum would help to address years of political failure. If one looks at the membership of the forum, one will see a number of political failures, such as those who could not manage to get elected to anything for a range of parties, from the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition to the Workers Party. The fact is that people in the Civic Forum were — in my view and in many other people's views — not representative of Northern Ireland. Mr McLaughlin spoke about its important function, but I listened carefully and he did not really say what that was.

Alan McFarland made the valid point — and he is absolutely right — that the Civic Forum was the brainchild of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, which is now gone. That is another example of the fact that the Civic Forum's membership comprised people who did not think that they could get elected to anything else and who wanted to find a way into an organisation.

During an intervention, Alban Maginness said that the Civic Forum was cut short by the collapse of the Executive. However, the fact is that it was already in terminal decline and that it was simply being put out of its misery.

He asked that non-governmental organisations —

**Mr A Maginness:** The phraseology in the motion is: “that it has not met since 2002”.

That suggests that the forum itself is to blame for not meeting. My point was that it did not meet because of circumstances beyond its control.

**Mr McCausland:** That is absolutely right. The forum did not meet because it was already on its way out. In fact, seven out of 60 members had ceased to attend — they had resigned from it. That would be akin to 10 Members of the Assembly resigning. The drop-out level was tremendously high, as was the non-attendance record of those who remained.

During an intervention, Simon Hamilton said that the Civic Forum was born out of the Belfast Agreement, and that is absolutely true. It was very much a creation of the Belfast Agreement and groups such as the Women's Coalition.

I listened to Dolores Kelly, but she did not tell us very much except that the SDLP will stand up to the DUP. That is a frightening thought; it is really worrying.

Anna Lo spoke about the need for reform and about the fact that the forum is a requirement of the Belfast Agreement. For some of us, that may be one of the many reasons why it should not come back. She said that there was considerable concern about the forum's future. However, as I pointed out, nobody ever stops me in the street to stress that considerable concern.

Ian McCrea set out the background to the forum. He said that it failed to provide community leadership and to influence the building of a peaceful society. He again emphasised the refusal to provide a place on it for the Orange Order, which is the largest community organisation in Northern Ireland. He also said that the forum was unnecessary, unelected, unrepresentative and extremely expensive, at a cost of around £750,000.

Barry McElduff reminded us that the forum was part of an “overarching political architecture” — a grand phrase. He said that it should contain representation from the construction industry. We should then include representation from the manufacturing, farming and fishing industries, the IT sector, and others. I gather that the forum's first meeting was held in the Waterfront Hall, probably in the BT Studio. After everybody whom Barry McElduff wants on it is included, someone will need to book the main arena of the Waterfront Hall, or even the Odyssey Arena, because — *[Interruption.]*

That may not be quite what I would have suggested.

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

**Mr McCausland:** No; I am very short of time.

**Mr McElduff:** Is the Member aware that the Greek form of democracy took place in a stadium?

**Mr McCausland:** Yes, but the stadium in Greece may not even have accommodated all the people whom Barry McElduff wants to include.

He also referred to a member of the forum who was a member of the Bogside Residents' Association. Mr McElduff was concerned about comments that were made about that individual. Interestingly, that person represented not the Bogside Residents' Association on the Civic Forum but the Irish-language community. That may say more about the Irish language than it does about the individual.

Alastair Ross commented on the need to achieve value for money. He said that we have too many quangos. Under the review of public administration, he pointed out that the number of councils will be reduced from 26 downwards. Mr Ross also said that we are over-governed and that we are seeking to reduce the number of Departments and MLAs. Furthermore, he said that we should save money, end the wastage and put more money into front-line services.

Tom Elliott spoke about the number of lobby groups that engage with the Assembly already through our Committees and in other ways. Alex Attwood said that we were demeaning and diminishing the Civic Forum. The fact is that one member of the forum was quoted in the press as saying that it was:

“a wasteful talking-shop which never made a single original suggestion”.

I have talked to other members of the previous forum who share a similar view.

There are ways in which to engage with civil society, but the problem is that there are some organisations that act like gatekeepers to society. They think that nobody is allowed to represent society except them. As we experienced during the Bill of Rights Forum process, some of those organisations were extremely unrepresentative. Apart from the one or two organisations that generally stayed out of the political discussion during the lifetime of the Bill of Rights Forum, the fact is that in almost every case, the so-called representatives of civil society voted with the SDLP and Sinn Féin and against the UUP and the DUP. I understand why the SDLP and Sinn Féin are so much in favour of there being a forum. The only party that voted with the UUP and DUP from time to time was the Alliance Party. Therefore, I can understand why Alex Attwood is so supportive of the Civic Forum.

Michelle O'Neill spoke about the submissions to the review process. When one studies those, there is no agreement among them — they are at odds with one another. They cannot even agree on what sort of forum should be used. The level of disagreement is quite staggering.

Simon Hamilton spoke about the contribution of civic society. Who is civic society? Some people who regard themselves as the voice of civic society may not be. Recommendations were made, and the previous devolved Administration were supposed to take those up. When I asked about those, nobody produced a single, solitary recommendation that the previous Administration took up and implemented. Simon Hamilton said that it was much better to take up the model of the Economic Development Forum, in which the business sector engages with the relevant people in the Assembly. That is a very good model with which to work.

Mr Hamilton also referred to the Bill of Rights Forum. Along with other Members here, I sat on that forum. If that was anything to go by, we should not have a Civic Forum. In fact, Mr Hamilton rightly said that some people needed to grow up. Jim Shannon called for sense, and said that the forum was defunct.

John Dallat spoke for some time, but he did not really tell me very much. I could not find anything much to write down, other than that our not having the forum is a great way in which to save £750,000.

3.30 pm

Dawn Purvis spoke about difficulties accessing Parliament Buildings, and on a wintry day such as today, I can understand that concern. However, the fact is that every day hundreds of people come through this Building to see the Assembly at work; to talk to and lobby Members; to lobby and engage with Committees; and to take part in all-party working groups. There is a range of reasons why people come here, and we should encourage more interaction. She said that the people of Northern Ireland should have a bigger say. I do not disagree; I want the people of Northern Ireland to have a bigger say. Too often, however, it is the gatekeepers who have the say.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I am happy to support the motion, and I commend it to the House. Deciding not to establish a new Civic Forum would be a good way to save £750,000 a year, which could be put into front-line services. Therefore, we would get value for money and if the Civic Forum were to disappear for ever, I doubt whether anyone would be too concerned.

*Question put.*

*The Assembly divided: Ayes 41; Noes 44.*

AYES

UNIONIST

*Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McCallister and Mr I McCrea.*

NOES

NATIONALIST

*Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ruane.*

UNIONIST

3.45 pm

Ms Purvis.

OTHER

Dr Farry, Ms Lo, Mr McCarthy, Mr Neeson, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Attwood and Mr Boylan.

Total votes	85	Total Ayes	41	[48.2%]
Nationalist Votes	38	Nationalist Ayes	0	[0.0%]
Unionist Votes	42	Unionist Ayes	41	[97.6%]
Other Votes	5	Other Ayes	0	[0.0%]

Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Women's Organisations

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

**Ms Anderson:** I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern about the number of women's organisations that have been unable to secure funding to deliver services for the community; and calls on the Executive to action cross-cutting Departmental commitments and for the Office of the First and deputy First Minister to monitor outcomes.

I am grateful for the opportunity to commend the motion to the House. Women's groups are close to my heart, and the lack of funding has a major impact on every constituency in the North. Every Member will be aware of women's organisations that do sterling work in the communities that they represent. However, that is now in jeopardy, and if the Assembly does not take decisive action, I fear that much of their great work will cease.

In 2005, a review group was established in response to concerns about the funding of the women's sector. The motion and, I believe, the amendment address those same concerns. Although limited in scope, the group's report recognised the value of the work being carried out across a range of areas, such as community development, childcare, training, education and many others. It also identified significant gaps in the responsibilities of several Departments that were affecting the ability of women's groups to sustain their services.

Over the past four years, the situation has continued to deteriorate, and many organisations now lurch from one short-term funding stream to another as they struggle to survive. I, therefore, support the amendment, because a new review would supplement the limited work that was carried out in 2005. Matters have now reached a head, and funding is finally running out for many groups and organisations.

In my Foyle constituency, I have been working closely with several women's groups that now face into the abyss because funding is no longer available.

**Mrs D Kelly:** The Member serves alongside me on the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Is she not concerned about the

failure of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to make a decision on Peace III funding, which has a direct impact on women's organisations in particular?

**Ms Anderson:** I am concerned that £1.1 million of funding for neighbourhood renewal was returned in December 2008. That is also of major concern to the women's groups. It would be a travesty for organisations such as the Galliagh Women's Group and the Creggan Preschool and Training Trust — and Members could cite many more — to be allowed to go to the wall because of a lack of funding. I applaud those organisations for providing an invaluable service to their local communities.

I also commend the dedication and commitment of those workers who, despite the absence of funding, have carried on working voluntarily to maintain the services. Many Members could list such groups and organisations from across the North that do likewise. The fact that they work voluntarily gives some idea of the character of the people involved in those projects, but they should not have to do that.

One of the cross-cutting themes in the Programme for Government is to proactively change existing patterns of social disadvantage and deprivation. Community-based women's organisations have a key role to play in achieving those goals, and they have already shown that through the work that they have done. However, it is clear that the kind of cross-cutting departmental commitments that are required to sustain the sector, and which are called for in the motion — and, indeed, the amendment — have not yet materialised. Too many groups and organisations are falling between two stools because Departments are refusing to fund them as they feel they are the responsibility of another Minister.

It is clear that the current arrangements are not as robust and effective as they should be — because money that is earmarked for neighbourhood renewal, and to which I referred earlier, is routinely being surrendered during quarterly monitoring rounds. That is happening at a time when the organisations that are delivering the services on the ground are being starved of funds. However, I do not want to get into the blame game on that issue, because I do not believe that the people at the coal face — those who are facing the blunt end of the cuts — want to see a slanging match between Members over whose Ministers are, or are not, to blame.

There can be no doubt that there is a collective responsibility here, and that is precisely why the motion called on the Executive to action cross-cutting departmental commitments to address those issues. It is OFMDFM's responsibility to monitor outcomes. After all, that is where the Gender Matters strategy and the duty of equality are located. In the past, we have

had too many so-called cost-cutting strategies that have failed to change outcomes in our community.

It is time to take a new approach; one that will be effective and robust, with ongoing tackling and monitoring mechanisms to ensure that it will deliver. The need for such an approach has always been recognised by the OFMDFM Committee. For example, in its response to the child poverty inquiry, the Committee concluded that OFMDFM, as lead Department, should:

“have a role in challenging departmental Delivery Agreements to ensure the relevance and robustness of departmental targets and actions.”

The Committee went even further and recommended that OFMDFM and DFP should consider introducing a scheme of financial incentives and penalties to ensure that cross-departmental priorities, such as child poverty, are delivered on. It was the lack of an effective structure to ensure the implementation of any given strategy that prompted — I believe — the inclusion of clause 2 in the Financial Assistance Bill. Clause 2 gives the Executive the opportunity, and the authority, to take effective action when social need has been identified — in child poverty, affordable childcare, or through the problems faced by the women's sector.

Without that kind of structure and ongoing monitoring there is nothing to ensure that strategies — any strategies — will be implemented to their original intent. We can have all the great strategies, plans and programmes in the world, but they mean absolutely nothing if we do not have the means to implement them. They would remain on a shelf gathering dust somewhere in the bowels of this Building.

However, we are in a new political dispensation, and we must deliver for all the people of the North on the basis of equality. That includes the women's organisations, which, with some justification, feel that they are being airbrushed out of public policy programmes and funding streams. They see themselves as the weak link — always the first to bear the brunt of budget cuts.

We all understand that Departments have financial pressures. The fact is that there is simply not enough money in the block grant from Westminster to go around. It is precisely for that reason that Sinn Féin supports the transfer of fiscal authority to the Assembly. Only then, when we take control of our own destiny, and cut the purse strings from Britain, will we be able to deliver the kind of change that the people rightfully demand. The sooner some of the other parties in the Chamber accept that analysis, the sooner we can get on with building the shared and better future, based on equality and human rights, to which we are all committed.

I support the motion and the amendment. Go raibh mile maith agat.

**Miss McIlveen:** I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after “Executive” and insert

“to initiate a cross cutting review to ensure (i) that the current mapping of the provision of services is adequate; (ii) the most effective use of resources to address the identified needs of the sector; and (iii) the equitable distribution of those resources.”

Although, in general, I agree with the sentiments of the motion, I do not agree with the comments of the Member who spoke previously, Ms Anderson, about cutting the “purse strings” with Britain.

A number of women’s organisations have been unable to secure appropriate funding to deliver services, as Ms Anderson pointed out. However, I feel that it is necessary to amend the motion to represent what is, in my opinion, a more practical approach to the problems that the organisations face. The amendment is designed to bring focus to the debate on women’s organisations, not to alter a motion for the sake of it. If there is a magic circle of groups that benefit from the current funding arrangements to the detriment of others, that imbalance must be identified and addressed. If there is duplication in services, we owe it to the taxpayer to ensure efficiency in provision.

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

According to Charlotte Whitton:

“Whatever women do, they must do twice as well as men to be thought half as good. Luckily this is not difficult.”

The Executive’s gender equality strategy recognises that women in Northern Ireland face a number of unique challenges and disadvantages. That is why it is essential that the resources that Government allocate to women’s organisations be properly targeted and distributed equitably. Questions are being asked as to why groups such as Women’s Forum Northern Ireland, the Women’s Guild, the Women’s Institute, the Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform, Training for Women Network, Women into Politics — the list goes on — are not adequately funded.

This year, the Department for Social Development provided funding to women’s organisations to the tune of £2.9 million. Under the Positive Steps policy, the Department has a particular responsibility to encourage participation from women in marginalised and disadvantaged communities, and that includes support for the Women’s Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP). I am sorry to report that there is a belief that that is a flawed structure that could support more than the 14 centres that it currently supports. Women from the Protestant and unionist community are under-represented at the highest levels of WCRP, which does not encompass all key strategic women’s organisations in Northern Ireland, or even OFMDFM’s Gender Advisory Panel. A concern has been expressed to me that WCRP is not representing the wider sector and is, perhaps, following the agenda of its four directors.

In 2005, a DSD review was carried out by the Review Group on Women’s Organisations, and a report was completed and submitted in July of that year. One of the main flaws in that review and subsequent report was that, instead of gathering fresh information, it relied on a 2001 Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (NIVT) report on the sector. Such information was four years out of date, and, as a result, key groups were missing. Therefore, the terms of reference referred to a map of the existing infrastructure and services, but the reality was that they continued to rely on the 2001 information.

Many in the women’s sector have expressed a concern that the original mapping was flawed and that the current funding distribution is based on a flawed model. The 2006 strategy is regarded by many as merely a box-ticking exercise. The terms of reference require a review, but, to date, only an evaluation has been carried out by DFP. That evaluation was completed in December 2008, but the problem with such an evaluation, rather than a comprehensive review, is that there is no opportunity for the rest of the sector to contribute. The mapping of the sector can identify and alleviate gaps, where they exist. In 2009, we are still using the flawed model of 2001 services and infrastructure. That was out of date in 2006 when the WCRP was established, and no attempt has been made to improve it since then.

Of course, funding for women’s organisations does not come from DSD alone. DCAL, via Sport Northern Ireland, has made a planned investment of £354,784 over the period 2006-09. That investment supports netball, hockey and camogie, and will end on 31 March this year. However, decisions on future investment in performance sport between 2009 and 2013 are pending. Since 2006, DETI has funded a number of organisations on an ad hoc basis, including Women in Business and Women in Enterprise, to a total of £332,208.

The Department of Education, via its youth and community relations branch, has approved funding of £100,000 to Belfast and Lisburn Women’s Aid to bring its youth service facilities up to the necessary health and safety standards. To date, £83,728.51 has been allocated. In addition, £21,333 has been awarded in 2008-09 via Youthnet.

*4.00 pm*

I am trying to make the point that, given the demands on the public purse, the amount of funding is not the issue. Instead, the return on investment is the key issue. No one is disputing the positive impact that women’s organisations can have in their local communities, but proper and adequate mapping will ensure that the Government have a full picture about what is happening in the sector across Northern Ireland. That will identify gaps in provision and

eliminate duplication. Given the strained financial times in which we find ourselves, surely that is a key goal. All sides of the House want to see the best possible return from investments made in the sector — value for money should be the key issue.

As we move forward, women's groups must engage with Government in a way that dispels the cynicism in the sector that I and other Members detect. That is not a view that is just expressed within the community that is represented on these Benches. Sometimes, there is a sense that mainstream funding is determined by who groups know. However, groups in Ardoyne face the same issues as groups in Kilcooley.

For example, Kilcooley women's centre receives funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs in the Irish Republic, the Christian Brothers and neighbourhood renewal. Despite only having six members of staff, three of whom are part-time, in the period September 2005 to June 2008, that group supported 672 women in education who achieved 889 qualifications. Of those women, 621 progressed to further education, 59 found full-time employment, 41 found part-time employment and four started their own business. The centre also created and sustained five new jobs and provided 142 childcare places. That group is outside mainstream funding; how favourably would some groups that have 20 or 30 staff, and receive what has become recurrent mainstream funding, compare with that?

In response to questions from my colleague Mr Weir, the Health, Social Development and Agriculture Ministers outlined the amounts of funding available to each women's group for 2008-09. Kilcooley women's centre kindly mapped that information — pardon the pun — a copy of which I will leave in the Assembly Library for Members' information. That map demonstrates the Belfast- and Londonderry-centric nature of funding. I understand that those cities are the main population centres in Northern Ireland, but where is the representation for women in Ards, Fermanagh or Strabane?

The amendment calls for a review that should address the major criticisms of the current arrangements. I have spoken about the flawed foundations, the incomplete representation and inconsistent funding, but there are even problems in a wider context. According to the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform, the current system does not meet the targets of the gender equality strategy; it frustrates the delivery of cross-departmental service provision; it does not lend itself to appropriate recording to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women; and it does not permit NGOs for women to develop organised civil society.

The current system is too piecemeal and lacks a coherent strategy to encompass the entire sector. As a

result, in addition to wasting resources in implementation, the views and concerns of women in Northern Ireland are not adequately represented at regional, national and supranational levels. A cross-departmental approach would provide and promote greater partnership across the sector, which would allow a more strategic approach to ensure that priorities for women are met, duplication of work is eradicated and there is value for money.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank the Members who tabled the motion and the amendment. It is useful to discuss the funding of women's organisations.

More Members should be better aware of the valuable work of women's organisations. Women's centres can play a role over a distinct district area, while others exist to provide a particular service and to address identified needs, such as childcare, or, perhaps, to support people who may be suffering from domestic violence.

In the past, childcare and other women's issues were often overlooked in the adversarial world of macho, constitutional politics. However, I am pleased that the Ulster Unionist Party and I have been highlighting the need to invest in the young, thereby addressing childcare provision, for example, which is a key issue to the women's sector. Many organisations that have been funded in the past have been providing that service.

For the past six or seven years, I have been involved in the Northern Childcare Partnership in the Carrickfergus area, which successfully gained Sure Start funding for Horizon Sure Start, which benefits young mothers and children in Larne and Carrickfergus. Some women in that partnership gained, and developed, confidence through their involvement in the Women's Forum, with the result that they have been better able to contribute to the improvement of health services through discussions with childcare services that took place on the partnership. Furthermore, training courses provided by the local Women's Forum have encouraged some women back into education, giving them additional confidence, and, ultimately, enabling them to get back into the world of work and contributing to the economy.

Domestic violence is a difficult issue for anyone seeking help. It is a very personal issue, and many people keep it to themselves. Women's groups can be an important first step whereby individuals can share their burden with others and, ultimately, gain confidence and be directed to support that may be provided by organisations such as Women's Aid.

As other Members said, funding of women's organisations has been of a very temporary nature. They received European funding, the Executive programme fund for children and neighbourhood renewal funding, but all of them short-term funding. On occasion, therefore, much of the training and experience, and the teams that were built up, were lost



when that funding came to an end. Clearly, there is a need to review that.

Indeed, the changing picture of the need for quality, affordable childcare is another reason why the funding issue must be addressed. Many women's organisations and centres provide quality, affordable childcare, and that will become increasingly important given the nature of changes that have been announced to benefits. In the future, single parents will be required, when their children reach secondary-school age, to undergo training or employment, or risk losing their benefits. There will be an increased need to provide additional childcare. Therefore, we must ensure that the valuable services and childcare places that are provided by many women's organisations and centres will continue.

**Mr McCarthy:** Does the Member agree that the decision that was made to take the children's fund away from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has created many of the problems that we are all now experiencing across Northern Ireland?

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank the Member for his contribution. I am aware that gaps have developed as a result of the decision to end that funding. There is no doubt about that. Indeed, the Department for Social Development's voluntary and community unit has had to provide emergency packages to sustain 13 women's centres through that period. Therefore, I welcome the fact that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, through Sinn Féin in its motion, and through the DUP in its amendment, has recognised the gap that has been created by the ending of such Executive programme funds. They are now, some two years later, belatedly beginning to recognise that gap that has occurred, and are attempting to fill it.

There is a need to act swiftly in this area, so that the skills and the training are not lost, and so that the contribution that women's centres and organisations have made will be recognised fully.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I welcome junior Minister Donaldson to the debate.

I thank the proposers for tabling the motion. What would we have done otherwise? There is no legislation before the Assembly today — none whatsoever. There is no Executive Business. So, here we are: another day, another afternoon, and another sixth-form debate in the Assembly. Nonetheless, I shall roll up my sleeves and play my part in the ongoing drama and saga of the DUP sham fight.

The SDLP will support Sinn Féin's motion. Whereas, on the face of it, there is little wrong with the DUP amendment, I am surprised that Sinn Féin is not more cautious about part (iii), which requires:

“the equitable distribution of those resources.”

Miss McIlveen defined what was meant by an equitable distribution of resources. However, if we are already targeting all our resources on the basis of objective need, then an equitable distribution of resources should not be a matter of concern for anyone in the House. I trust that we are not entering into a new round of tit-for-tat distribution of resources rather than targeting them on the basis of need.

The motion expresses:

“concern about the number of women's organisations that have been unable to secure funding to deliver services for the community”.

I do not know why Sinn Féin is surprised about that. Ms Anderson said that Government has “airbrushed” women's organisations out of the Programme for Government and the Budget. Is Sinn Féin not one of the two main parties that set out the Budget and the Programme for Government and denied the SDLP the ability to review them and take stock?

Ms Anderson then went on to blame — Westminster. Now, there are many arguments for breaking the link with Westminster, but if that did happen, how would Sinn Féin be able to play the blame game? Its Members would be silent on that front.

The motion goes on to call on the Executive:

“to action cross-cutting Departmental commitments”.

Few Members will have a difficulty with that — except that Sinn Féin and the DUP, in the Programme for Government and Budget, took away the cross-cutting departmental funding to action anything.

We heard Miss McIlveen talk about the gender action panel of OFMDFM. Members might be surprised to learn that the panel has not even bothered to meet since last May, and that there is no action plan for the strategy on gender action, never mind any money. So, I do not know why the motion should be a surprise to either of those two parties.

What we are seeing this afternoon is mere lip service being paid to the organisations in the community that are facing real hardship. The SDLP is not fooled: we voted against the Programme for Government and the Budget because we knew what they would mean for the communities that we represent.

It might come as a surprise to some Members, perhaps more to Sinn Féin Members than to others, that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has £10 million at her disposal to spend on alleviating rural poverty. She has £10 million — but no action plan or strategy on how to spend it or get it out to the community that needs it.

Let us face it: these are not women's issues — these are family issues; and the sooner we take that point on board the better the delivery will be.

It may also come as a surprise to those on the Sinn Féin Benches that the school sports strategy, which the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department of Education have a responsibility to deliver, and for which millions of pounds have been set aside in the Programme for Government and the Budget, has been held up by the Minister of Education. She has not agreed the strategy, and it has been delayed. It was due to be published last October.

I support the motion. There is a need for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to start looking at what Ministers under their control are doing to deliver cross-cutting actions with the money in their budgets.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Time is almost up.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I think that that will do. *[Laughter.]*

4.15 pm

**Dr Farry:** That will be a hard act to follow. I congratulate Mrs Kelly in achieving a first in this House: getting Martina Anderson to accept an intervention.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear. *[Laughter.]*

**Dr Farry:** She wins the sweepstake.

The Alliance Party is content with the motion and the amendment, although we see more merit in the amendment. We take issue with remarks by the proposers of the motion and the amendment in justifying their respective cases; however, as always, we will judge by what is recorded in the Official Report.

I recognise the good work of the women's sector in Northern Ireland; there is a health and vitality in it, notwithstanding the issue of resources. I had the opportunity, when I was Mayor of North Down, to see much of that up front. I was particularly pleased to help to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of North Down and Ards Women's Aid as part of my official duties.

There is a breadth of activity in the women's sector: from childcare to education and training, general advice, engagement on healthcare issues and the provision of practical help on issues of domestic violence. It is also worth recognising the important good relations outcomes that often result from work done in the women's sector, sometimes direct, sometimes indirect.

I also recognise the strong leadership role played by women in the ethnic-minority sector in particular. Indeed, in my own constituency, and possibly elsewhere, it can at times be difficult to get men to engage in the community sector, whereas women are very willing to participate in programmes across society.

It is important to stress that this is not about placing women's issues in a silo; it is about ensuring that people can engage in society on a free and equal basis and that everyone has proper opportunities. We must recognise that there have been historical patterns of

discrimination and indirect policies that have led to a lack of opportunities for women.

As other Members said, this also relates to wider issues such as families. We must recognise that we are living in a very changed environment. We previously made the point about the flawed mapping exercise conducted by the Department for Social Development several years ago. It can today, with the benefit of hindsight, be seen as more out of date and in need of updating.

We must also recognise the changing environment as a result of the ending of Peace II funding; the ending of that funding may have created many of the immediate financial challenges. It is worth stressing that we should not necessarily lament the shift from Peace II to Peace III. Peace III has its merits, and there is an argument for a much stronger focus on a shared future and reconciliation. That places a responsibility on Government to intervene and pick up the pieces with resourcing, and to do what they should be doing rather than looking to external funding to offer short-term relief.

Those are ongoing concerns: the Government should be giving a sense of guarantee in the continuation of funding.

**Mrs D Kelly:** The Member is quite right about mainstreaming. However, neither the proposer of the motion or the amendment has explained where they would take money from in order to carry out the work that they want done.

**Dr Farry:** The Member makes a valid point. We are often lectured by the DUP and Sinn Féin for criticising the Budget. It is ironic, therefore, to hear parties that champion the Budget and the Programme for Government point out the inadequacies of both documents in debates such as this. I am not sure what planet they are living on, because their positions are utterly illogical. I am mystified why Sinn Féin — a supposedly left-wing socialist party — signed up to the Budget and the Programme for Government. I cannot get my head round that.

The other change that we must take into account is the effect of the economic downturn — the recession — that we face. That will have a disproportionate effect on women; we should be in no doubt about that. In part, that is due to the fact that women tend to suffer disproportionately from disadvantage and poverty already, and the recession will affect them even more. In the same sense, the economic policies being pursued by the Executive have a disproportionate effect on women who are overly dependent on under-funded public services. We must stress that point as well.

We must be very vigilant and ensure that, if they are struggling to maintain their levels of employment, companies handle the situation fairly. Women must not

bear the brunt of redundancies as a result of wrong assumptions and the traditional, but outmoded, view that men are the breadwinners. We have moved past those outmoded attitudes, but it is important that we remain aware of the dangers.

It is important that the Government have a proper strategy and that we recognise the breadth of Departments that are involved. The Department for Social Development has an important role to play through its voluntary and community unit, yet a whole range of Departments is involved. I want to see women's issues become a core element of the current review of economic development policy.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close, please.

**Dr Farry:** There is much to do, and my party is happy to support the motion, although we may be leaning towards supporting the amendment at this stage.

**Mr Shannon:** It is not often that I speak on women's issues, but I am here to support my colleagues and their proposed amendment. I am very pleased that the proposer of the motion has accepted the proposed amendment.

In every fair and modern society, there must be parity among all classes, creeds, colours and sexes. Any hint of partiality towards cannot be tolerated if society is to move forward. Gone are the days of the boys-only club — of which, I am sure, I was a member of one or two — and of rules that excluded women from certain occupations. That is a positive step forward. Therefore, if it appears that any kind of sexism is impacting on funding for women's organisations, a review must take place to ensure that that is not the case.

The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, on which I sit, has tried, through its child-poverty recommendations, to advance the notion that adequate childcare provision is needed in order to enable ladies to return to work. That is one of our priorities; it is something that we are trying to do; and it is something on which we are making progress. I hope that we begin to get a response.

We would not accept it if ethnic minorities were being sidelined, nor should there be any sidelining on the grounds of gender. For that reason, as I said, I support the proposed amendment, and I am happy that the proposer of the motion has done likewise. Some Members suggested that a review to assess the situation and ensure that there is parity across the board would focus solely on funding. It is not all about funding, because much of the funding is in place — there is duplication. Rather, it is about ensuring that that funding goes to the right place and is spread across the Province.

Many women's organisations play a large role in the rural community, and, in many cases, they are the backbone of that community. Much good work is done by organisations such as the Women's Orange Order, which helps the sisterhood as much as it can. I hope that the Women's Orange Lodge receives the same funding as any other group, and I will be very pleased if that is the case; however, we will have to wait and see whether the motion delivers. Another group that does not receive deserved recognition is the Women's Institute. Has it been funded correctly? I presume that it has not been. It is very important that the work that it does in supporting the community and its membership be recognised through funding. Questions have been raised to which we seek answers.

There is a desire for Northern Ireland to move forward, and that means all people being equal. If that is in doubt, a review is necessary. It is my fervent desire that that be done soon, in order to put any questions to bed. Any findings can then be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Dolores Kelly mentioned rural poverty, and the money that is available through DARD to tackle it. In her shotgun approach, she fired off a couple of salvos, and everybody got hit — including the Member herself from the ricochets. However, it was very important that she made those comments, because it is imperative that we all look at ourselves and at how we deliver.

I commend the Ballybeen Women's Centre, a group that has worked extremely hard to try to help the people in that area. It has been industriously involved in ensuring that ladies can obtain qualifications, and its awards ceremony is an indication of what it can achieve. That is one of the organisations to which funding is not as active as it should be.

**Ms Lo:** Will the Member agree that those groups provide real value for money? They help to get women into jobs and training, which is good for the local economy as a whole.

**Mr Shannon:** I agree with the Member's comments. It is important to have those types of groups all over Northern Ireland, which is what the DUP amendment seeks to achieve.

Before any departmental action is enforced, we must ascertain what is currently being done and whether it is sufficient. I support the amendment, and I ask the House to support it.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and the amendment. I have been under a misapprehension for many years, because I understood that the SDLP claimed to be a socialist party, yet its Minister voted for the Programme for Government and the Budget. I hope that Mrs Kelly is not too bored, because she obviously had nothing else to do with her afternoon but sit in the Chamber

and listen to what might be considered to be an important debate on women's groups and the need for funding.

As with many groups in the voluntary sector, women's groups continue to have great difficulty in accessing adequate funding to continue their invaluable work in the community. Funding for those groups continues to diminish, and, recently, some of them have received no funding at all.

The Department for Social Development has lead responsibility for supporting the regional infrastructure of the women's sector. There has been no agreed analysis of the sector's needs with regard to infrastructure and, in particular, the infrastructure that is required to support its capacity to deliver services to the disadvantaged communities that are most in need of them.

In November 2008, the Assembly debated voluntary sector funding, and it was accepted that the social compact has been largely aspirational and ineffectual. Anyone who has been involved in the voluntary sector for many years, as I have been, will be aware of its contribution and the fact that funding for it is piecemeal. That cannot be allowed to continue. The absence of a statutory basis for the compact has limited the impact of practical attempts at its implementation.

NICVA is calling for legislation to replace the compact, and it has called on the Minister for Social Development to introduce a pre-legislative policy paper. That would be, in effect, a White Paper, which would provide the context for policy and funding relationships with the voluntary and community sector. However, the Minister seems to be lukewarm about agreeing to that request, and she has not given any specific answers on what she intends to do about it.

Many women's groups such as Women's Aid and the Rural Women's Network do invaluable work in my constituency of Newry and Armagh. Indeed, I am saddened that Newry, along with areas such as Strabane, was not mentioned by Miss McIlveen. Women's Aid in Newry does an important and valuable job, but the funding it receives is also piecemeal. It receives some funding from the Housing Executive under the homelessness strategy. Funding is aimed at specific areas, and other aspects of its work are not taken into account. The organisation does other important work apart from —

**Mrs D Kelly:** Will the Member acknowledge the fact that the strategy to tackle domestic violence, particularly support for Women's Aid, is the responsibility of the First Minister and deputy First Minister?

**Mr Brady:** The objective of this debate is to focus all of the Departments who are responsible for funding towards a common cause. In addition to Women's Aid and the Rural Women's Network, Home-Start does invaluable work with childcare in my area. Those groups need sustainable funding.

The Executive now have the opportunity to introduce a pre-legislative policy paper that would define and clarify the relationship between Government and the community sector. The role and value of women's groups should be recognised, and there should be a firm commitment to multi-annual outcome-focused funding. The diversity of the voluntary and community sector should be recognised, and the Assembly should view that sector, and particularly women's groups, as an essential requirement to the health and well-being of society.

4.30 pm

For many years, the voluntary sector has lobbied for mainstream funding, which is something on which all the relevant Ministers should focus their attention. Fundamental questions must be asked about the role of the voluntary and community sector, and what Government wants and expects from it. The role of women's groups and their effect on the community cannot be overestimated. It is incumbent on all of us to give those irreplaceable groups access to proper and sustainable funding that will allow them to continue to fulfil vital roles in our communities. Go raibh míle maith agat.

**Mr McCallister:** I thank the Members who moved the motion and the amendment. We support both. I also want to put on record my appreciation of the wide range of work that is done by women's groups across communities. I will touch later on some of the work that is done in the area of health, because I sit on the Committee for Health. Domestic violence, sexual health and well-being, and childcare — all of those are hugely important issues.

The proper, long-term funding of all groups has been one of the big issues that I have encountered since becoming a member of the Health Committee. The fact that so many groups spend so much time chasing after funding for a year, 18 months or two years is a big pitfall and is not a productive use of time and energy. We must look at the whole system of how, and for how long, groups obtain funding.

Another huge concern is the inequality of funding. Some groups get money and others do not. The rationale behind such decisions must be examined in order to establish how funding is distributed.

I accept what other Members have said in the debate. It is very much about getting cross-governmental working, not just here, but across councils, the police —

**Mr B McCrea:** Is the Member aware of the Atlas Women's Centre in Lisburn, its excellent work in encouraging many women to develop their lives, and the challenge that it faces through lack of funding? The centre somehow failed to win support in a recent city council funding package. Does the Member agree with me that this policy should apply to local government,

which should be encouraged to prioritise funding for women's aid associations?

**Mr McCallister:** My honourable friend raised an important point — the closer to the ground that we bring these issues, the much easier it is to gain access, to solve them, and to work with all parts of Government.

I also draw Members' attention to a round-table event between the Department of Health and the police that will take place at Stormont. It will look at some of the excellent work that has been, and continues to be, done, with a particular focus on domestic violence.

The debate is about creating the conditions in which Government, local government, the police and community groups work together. I am at a loss to know — it is a bit of a mystery — how cutting our links with Britain would do anything in that regard. We are, however, used to Ms Anderson making such remarks in all her speeches.

Apart from distributing resources fairly around the various groups, the other big factor is that those groups have to be delivering something. There must be a mechanism by which to evaluate them. That was certainly highlighted in the Health Committee's report on suicide and self-harm. Many groups must be evaluated in order to ensure that they serve a purpose and represent best value for public money.

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Member join me in commending the Health Minister for his initiatives on domestic abuse and domestic violence, particularly the campaign over the Christmas period and liaison with the police, and for the real sense of engagement that those initiatives that involve the Policing Board and the Health Minister have given to Women's Aid and other women's groups, which feel that they are being listened to at long last?

**Mr McCallister:** I am grateful for my colleague's intervention. It is a hugely important issue.

**Ms Lo:** It must be borne in mind that women's groups that receive funding from the Peace programmes, DSD or other Government sources are subject to stringent monitoring.

**Mr McCallister:** I am grateful to the Member for that important point. Monitoring and evaluation of groups must be carried out to ensure that money is used well, and all Members will have examples in their constituencies. Funding must not become centred in Belfast or Londonderry; there are huge problems in rural areas.

I am pleased that the House is unlikely to divide on this important motion.

**Mr A Maginness:** I wonder where some Sinn Féin Members would be if Margaret Ritchie were not in the Executive, because they spend most of their time

attacking her and little time criticising the Finance Minister, who introduced a flawed Budget that is Thatcherite in essence.

**Mrs D Kelly:** A Budget for which Mickey Brady voted.

**Mr A Maginness:** I will come to that point in a moment. A junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister agrees that the Budget is Thatcherite.

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

**Mr A Maginness:** No; I am having fun. I am aware that the Member for Newry and Armagh Mr Brady is agitated. My friend reminds me that he voted for the Budget. The complaints and implicit criticisms of the Budget with regard to women's organisations are well placed. However, the Member and his colleagues must, of course, take responsibility for that Budget and for the very criticisms that he has made about funding for women's organisations.

As far as the DSD Minister and the Health Minister are concerned, their Departments have funded women's organisations. Although demand can never be satisfied, £2.9 million is not bad going. Of course more money should be made available. However, the DSD Minister must, at least, get credit for the money that she has already distributed. I am aware that it is impossible for Sinn Féin to see beyond the fact that the DSD Minister belongs to the SDLP.

**Ms J McCann:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr A Maginness:** Ms McCann never takes interventions from me, so why should I take an intervention from her? When she learns to allow interventions from other Members, I will allow her an intervention.

The children and young people's fund has been abolished, which has resulted in the underfunding of crucial support for families. Again, that was supported by Sinn Féin. If its members are critical of that, they must examine their own record on the matter and criticise the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which brought about that reversal of policy.

As regards DSD's contribution to the Foyle constituency, I point out to Ms Anderson — if she were not more interested in her private conversation — that, at a rough glance, well over £300,000 has gone to women's organisations in that constituency. No credit is ever given for that sort of funding.

Neighbourhood renewal is also demand-led, and if there is criticism that money is not being used, it is because the demand has not been properly assessed and presented. *[Interruption.]* Does the Member wish to make an intervention?

**Mr F McCann:** During the December monitoring round, £1.6 million of neighbourhood renewal money was handed back. That money could have been used.

**Mr A Maginness:** I hope that I will be given another minute in which to speak.

My point is that neighbourhood renewal is demanded. If money is not being used, it is because the demand is not being properly presented, through programmes, to the Department. If the demand had been properly presented, the money would have been used.

**Mrs D Kelly:** For the record, in the November monitoring round, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister handed back more than £1 million from the Ebrington Barracks and ILEX project. Indeed, only last week, OFMDFM handed back thousands of pounds from a north Belfast community empowerment network.

**Mr F McCann:** There was no November monitoring round.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Mr B McCrea:** Does the Member agree that like the children's fund, this is a serious and cross-cutting issue? Does he also agree that the removal of the children's fund was yet another power grab by the DUP/Sinn Féin axis that went badly wrong? The people who have suffered as a result are the very women's groups that we are trying to help today.

**Mr A Maginness:** I agree entirely with that point, and I am grateful to my friend for raising it. That reinforces the point — *[Interruption.]*

Unfortunately, Sinn Féin Members suffer from a form of political amnesia. I am working on the formula for an antidote. If any medical or political experts can assist me, I will produce a remedy that will cure them. *[Laughter.]*

**Ms Purvis:** The Kilcooley Women's Centre provides essential services for residents of the Kilcooley estate and surrounding area. It is a glowing success story. Of the hundreds of women who have participated in the centre's programmes, almost 900 have achieved qualifications, and more than 600 have progressed into further and higher education. Dozens more have been able to achieve full-time or part-time work as a result of their participation.

One of the most remarkable achievements of Kilcooley Women's Centre, and other similar organisations, is that it has accomplished all that with no core Government funding. Despite its proven track record, Kilcooley Women's Centre struggles to get adequate funding to deliver critical services to the area. It is the same story for other women's organisations, such as the Walkway Women's Centre and the Greenway Women's Centre, which provide essential programmes

and services to assist women to acquire the information and to develop the skills that they need to enjoy full participation in education, society, the job market and, hopefully, politics.

There has been some progress. A number of women's organisations now receive core funding through the Department of Health and the Department for Social Development's community investment fund. In some places, moneys have been found to cover the cost of childcare, a provision that is critical to helping women into education and training.

However, women's organisations remain largely dependent on short-term, project-based funding. That leaves them in a constant state of start-up and shutdown, and having to manage high levels of financial insecurity. The uncertainty can mean that the skills and experience of valuable staff is lost too easily, which ladders an organisation with the additional burden of having to train new staff when funding eventually returns.

Those organisations are left in that state despite unequivocal evidence of the value that their services bring to society. Women's organisations are on the front line of dealing with complex issues and connecting with hard-to-reach women, particularly those struggling with deprivation and exclusion.

The community education provided by women's organisations is critical in encouraging women to go into further and higher education. Unfortunately, the Department for Employment and Learning has been slow to recognise that fact and even slower to fund it. The Peace programmes recognised that contribution and funded such programmes directly. However, the Department for Employment and Learning has, unfortunately, not reached the same conclusion and ties those programmes to further education colleges, which many women are unable or still unwilling to attend.

4.45 pm

Women who undertake education and training in the community give much back to those communities. In turn, that builds social capital in the area. Investing in community-based education and training is an investment in the entire community, not only in the individual who completes the programme. As such, those organisations' work is critical to achieving the priorities outlined in the Programme for Government. There will be no growth without the development of essential skills and social capital in our most deprived and excluded areas. We know that providing women with the resources, support and skills to lift them out of poverty has the potential to enable entire families to escape poverty — a key goal established by the Executive.

Funding for other essential services is starting to disappear. The childcare provision that has been funded by the Department for Social Development has made a real difference, but those moneys might disappear

next month. Groups with childcare places that are funded through the neighbourhood renewal programme have been informed that the money will not be available after 1 April 2009. Our society cannot develop without considering the well-being of women. When I look around the Chamber, I have no doubt that politics in Northern Ireland could benefit from the increased participation of women.

The amendment appears to be a Tippex clause. It may seem to add an element of fiscal structure. However, in reality, certain Departments may use it to white-out the intentions of the original motion. I hope that I am wrong, but I remain to be convinced and will, therefore, abstain from the vote on the amendment. I support the motion and encourage the Executive to engage on this critical issue.

**The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Donaldson):** I am thankful for the opportunity to respond to the debate. I commend the Members who proposed the motion and those who tabled the amendment. Ms Purvis was absent when the proposer agreed to accept the amendment. Therefore, she cannot abstain from the vote on the amendment, because there is now, in effect, a single motion. She will have to revise her voting strategy.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister appreciates that discussion has taken place and that a consensus has been reached on the motion. I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate. I will briefly discuss some Members' comments.

Ms Anderson moved the motion and accepted the amendment that stands in the name of my friend the Member for Strangford Miss McIlveen. I have taken careful note of Ms Anderson's valid points on issues that must be addressed, which we will consider in conjunction with other relevant Departments. Indeed, we will seek to address issues of genuine concern that have been raised by other Members during the debate.

In her intervention during Ms Anderson's speech, Mrs Kelly said that OFMDFM was delaying the release of Peace III funding. That is not the case. The Department has approved an award of £2,766,000 to the Training for Women Network, and the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) issued a formal written offer on 22 December 2008. The period of assistance is 30 months, and the SEUPB has already made an initial payment of £400,000. I hope that Mrs Kelly updates her research.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the junior Minister for giving way. Does he acknowledge that the decision was reached only after much lobbying by the Training for Women Network and has been awaiting the approval of the First Minister and deputy First Minister since August 2008?

**The junior Minister (Mr Donaldson):** If Mrs Kelly was aware of the facts, she would know that there were legal challenges to the European funding. Therefore, the Department was not at fault over the delay.

In a democracy, if people want to challenge the funding process, they must be given the opportunity to do so. Scoring cheap points, which are not based on reality, is unhelpful in a debate such as this.

I commend the comments of my friend the Member for Strangford Miss McIlveen. She is right to point out that there is a concern in the sector about the under-representation of Protestant women and groups from the Protestant side of the community in regard to the distribution of funding. That must be considered, and we must review the distribution of funding to identify gaps in that provision. Miss McIlveen and other Members, including Ms Purvis, mentioned as an example the Kilcooley Women's Centre and the excellent work that it undertakes in north Down. I had the privilege of meeting representatives from Kilcooley, and I am aware of their achievement. It is important that such groups are able to compete for mainstream funding and that they get their fair share.

The Member for East Antrim Mr Beggs spoke about a gap in funding, and said that that was because of the ending of the Executive programme funds. During one of his several interventions, the Member for Lagan Valley Basil McCrea said that the decision to end the children's fund was a power grab by the DUP and Sinn Féin. In fact, if Mr McCrea knew anything about Government, he would know that the children's fund was controlled by OFMDFM, but that that control was given up, and the funding was redistributed to other Departments. That is called power sharing, not power grabbing. The only grabbing going on in the Chamber today is headline grabbing by some Members who really ought to check their facts before they make such silly, nonsensical comments. *[Interruption.]*

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

**The junior Minister (Mr Donaldson):** Mrs Kelly referred to a delay in the gender equality strategy — we are seeking to take that forward. All the Departments have provided OFMDFM with contributions to the gender equality action plan. We will submit proposals to the Executive later this year, together with a report on implementing the strategy. However, again, Mrs Kelly is wrong to suggest that the gender advisory panel has not met; in fact, it met in January 2009. Again, if Members were to check their facts before making contributions in the Chamber, we may have a more reasoned and rational debate.

My friend the Member for Strangford Mr Shannon praised the work of women's groups, such as the

Ballybeen Women's Centre in his constituency. He is absolutely right to refer to the excellent work that it does.

The Member for Lagan Valley Mr McCrea referred to the Atlas Women's Centre in his and my constituency. I am aware of its work, and I am hopeful that funding will be forthcoming shortly from DSD to enable it to continue that very important work in the Lisburn area.

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the junior Minister join with me in calling for all sources of funding to be sought for that excellent organisation? There are a number of other sources, and perhaps we can work together on that particular issue.

**The junior Minister (Mr Donaldson):** Indeed, I am happy to power share with my friend from Lagan Valley, and to take joint responsibility for seeking to help the Atlas Women's Centre.

The Member for Newry and Armagh Mr Brady was happy to acknowledge that he had been a volunteer. *[Laughter.]* He also said that he had engaged in voluntary work in his local community. We commend him for that.

There were contributions from other Members, including Mr McCallister from South Down; Mr Maginness — who made some points of which we will take note — and Ms Purvis, to whom I have already referred.

Mr Farry said that the problem lay in the funding of the sector. In fact, many of the women's groups that I, and others, have talked to said that their main concern is the fair distribution of funding. That is the problem that the motion seeks to address. It is to ensure the equitable distribution of available funds.

I pay tribute to the work of women's groups across Northern Ireland, and several of those groups have been mentioned already. Miss McIlveen talked about the Belfast and Lisburn branches of Women's Aid. Recently, I had the privilege of visiting the Women's Aid centre in Lisburn, which does excellent work in providing sheltered accommodation for women who have been victims of domestic violence. It is important that we ensure that there is a fair distribution of funding to organisations such as Women's Aid.

I commend the Department for Social Development for its work on women's issues. The total funding provided by that Department this year is almost £2.9 million, which is intended to deliver services, including education and training support — we have heard how important that is — access to childcare, respite childcare and referrals, information and advice, counselling, healthcare, personal development and family support groups. Those are all important areas of work that must be taken forward. We will continue to work with DSD and other Departments, including the Department of

Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education, to ensure that we have a co-ordinated approach to those matters.

We will examine ways of improving those services, because there is always room for improvement in Government. Indeed, that is implicit in the motion, which we have accepted along with the amendment. We must do things better, and ensure that the work that is taken forward by women's groups is funded, supported and provided for, so that women have access to services, educational support and childcare facilities that will enable them to progress and to develop at a personal and family level. OFMDFM wants that work to be given a high priority.

Let us not overlook the contribution of groups that support women's enterprise. Networking and support are crucial to small and medium-sized enterprises in surviving the current economic downturn, and much of that work has to take place outside Government. However, Government also have a role in harnessing and supporting entrepreneurial talent and nurturing sound business skills wherever they are found in the community. In working with women's organisations to meet the Programme for Government commitments, OFMDFM will continue to engage with Executive colleagues, including DSD, given its key role.

I commend the proposers of the motion and the Members who tabled the amendment. We note carefully what has been said in the debate by all Members, and we need to afford the matter the appropriate priority and to secure the best possible return on investment for women and for the communities to which they contribute across all funding streams. To that end, as I said, we will bring an interim report to the Executive on funding for women's organisations. That will signal the continuing direction of travel and will inform the comprehensive review that will form part of the mid-term review of the Executive's gender equality strategy.

**Mr Weir:** The debate has been, largely, very constructive. Although it has risen above sixth-form quality, I am sad that some Members felt that they were wasting their time. I was disappointed with the SDLP's contribution to the debate. Indeed, to use Mrs Kelly's words, I could engage in tit-for-tat exchanges and spend the entire five minutes dealing with the inadequacies of DSD on this issue. However, I will concentrate on the more positive aspects of what is an important debate.

*5.00 pm*

Most Members who spoke acknowledged the valuable work that women's organisations have done and continue to do in the areas of childcare, training, capacity building and education.

Given that several Members mentioned it and that I am a Member for North Down, it would be remiss of



me not to welcome, in particular, the excellent work of the Kilcooley Women's Centre. Indeed, my colleague Miss McIlveen provided detailed statistics about the centre, which Ms Purvis later reiterated virtually word for word; however, it is good to see that the PUP and the DUP are singing from the same hymn sheet for once.

As Dr Farry said, we live in a changing environment; consequently, it is important that we secure the maximum support for women's organisations. Ms Purvis, Mr Beggs and Mr McCallister also made that point.

One of the problems that has beset funding — and one of the issues that the amendment seeks to raise — has been the piecemeal and somewhat temporary way in which it was granted and how that has prevented an opportunity for joined-up support for women's organisations.

The amendment deals with three aspects, which will perhaps reassure Ms Purvis. The purpose of the amendment is to add to the motion, not to take away from it; that theme was developed throughout the debate. The first aspect is mapping. In proposing the amendment, Miss McIlveen highlighted the fact that the last substantive mapping happened in 2001. Indeed, many of those who work in the sector question how thorough the 2001 mapping was.

Leaving everything else aside, it is time that we had another thorough process, because the existing one is eight years old. The aim is to provide a joined-up approach. Although DSD provides the biggest single source of funding, various Departments provide different funds.

It is important that we provide as much joined-up action as possible. We must also provide access to information, particularly for smaller women's groups that perhaps do not have the same resources as the well-funded groups that have a plethora of different funding sources, organisations and Departments. Those small groups must be able to access information in a way that is most beneficial to them. Therefore, the vital purpose of the mapping exercise is to take stock of where we are and to examine the direction in which we are going.

The second aspect of the amendment is the need for the most effective use of resources. In these difficult circumstances, it is important that we get the best possible value for every penny that goes into the women's sector. That means that we must operate in a strategic direction and ensure that services are not duplicated. Indeed, as someone put it to me, it is not simply a question of re-inventing the wheel; rather it is about putting added value into everything that we do.

The third aspect of the amendment is the need for equitable funding. That is not, as has been alleged, tit for tat, because it crosses the sectarian divide. It is undoubtedly the case that some of the funding has

been very Belfast- and Londonderry-centred, as shown by the mapping exercise.

Some Members mentioned the investment that DSD made; however, not a penny of it went to women's centres in Fermanagh. We must ensure that the allocation of resources is equitable. Several Members said that we have an inclusive process that ensures that everyone can access resources and that the valuable work of women's organisations is supported in the best possible way. That is the purpose of the amendment, and it marries closely with the motion itself. I urge Members to support the amendment.

**Ms J McCann:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and the amendment. Much has been said about the contribution that women's organisations and groups make to society. In introducing the motion, my colleague Martina Anderson set out the types of contributions that those groups make. She said that community-based women's organisations have a key role to play in tackling social disadvantage and deprivation.

She said that we can make all the strategies that we want, but those strategies will not matter if people and groups on the ground do not receive funding. We have listened to a lot of debate, and there is agreement that women constitute a diverse group and have many talents and experiences in every aspect of life. No one denied that women's organisations and groups are experiencing a funding crisis, both at a policy-making level and the community-based level at which those front-line and essential services are delivered.

I was somewhat disappointed that Michelle McIlveen flagged up the funding that is available, rather than the lack of funding. However, I agree with her that the funding is too piecemeal and that there is a lack of a coherent strategy. The mapping exercise will hopefully firm up a strategy. My colleague Mickey Brady talked about the wider community and voluntary sector being a key social partner that works with Government to deliver social and economic change. In that respect, I agree with the junior Minister that the SDLP contribution was very disappointing, given the seriousness of this issue. The SDLP chose to attack various parties in the Chamber instead of showing a united front in support of women's funding.

It was also acknowledged that the women's sector is well placed to deliver services. Many Members talked about the fact that that sector has delivered those services for many years and how the lack of dedicated funding is having a major impact on those services. Dawn Purvis outlined the difficulties that those women's groups and organisations underwent to secure funding. She also talked about the quality of services that those bodies provide. She suggested that they connect and access women who are hard to reach, and I agree. Very

often, women who do not feel confident — such as young mothers — would feel better going to a locally based women's centre to train and learn skills, rather than going to a college.

Many people raised the issue of affordable quality childcare and its importance. Roy Beggs talked about that, as did Stephen Farry and Dawn Purvis. Jim Shannon talked about how women in rural communities are excluded. That is a very important issue, particularly in relation to the lack of affordable quality childcare in rural communities. That adds to women's social exclusion.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I thank the Member for giving way. I see that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is with us. I understand that DARD has a rural childcare and anti-poverty strategy. Has Jennifer McCann's party colleague shared with her when that strategy might be published?

**Ms J McCann:** I do not have any information about that. However, in the rural communities —

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I am sorry for interrupting. Unlike the previous Agriculture Minister — Dolores Kelly's party colleague Brid Rodgers — does the Member acknowledge that the Agriculture Minister is investing in women for the first time ever? Is that not to be welcomed? Dolores should say something nice before the day ends. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Ms McCann should continue.

**Ms J McCann:** Mention was made of the role of women in family life. That comes through in many of the debates that we hold. We often talk about the role that women have in caring for children and elderly parents. I mention that because the economic downturn has affected advice services in women's organisations. More than ever, there is a clear need for advice services to be made available to people; particularly to those people and families who find themselves in debt. There is a need for specialist debt advisors, based in local communities, to whom people could go for that type of help. Women's centres could provide that help.

Once again, we are talking about chasing after bits and pieces of funding, when people's time could be spent more productively — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. Ms McCann has the Floor. There are too many private conversations going on.

**Ms J McCann:** John McCallister said that we must consider core funding groups and organisations that deliver those services.

Junior Minister Donaldson said that he would address some concerns, and I welcome his announcement of an interim report on women's funding, which is a good development. One of the UN Committee for the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) main recommendations is

for Governments to provide increased and sustained funding to organisations that are involved in working towards women's equality. In addition, it has called for information about that funding so that it can be included in its next report. Therefore, although individual Departments are responsible for ensuring that their policies are gender proofed, OFMDFM bears overall responsibility for gender equality, and that is why Sinn Féin is calling for it to monitor departmental actions in respect of the CEDAW commitments. Therefore, I am glad to hear that the interim report is forthcoming.

Finally, given that women's organisations and groups are seeking the Assembly's help, it is important the Assembly demonstrates leadership. Unfortunately, given the tone of some Members who spoke in the debate, I am sure that many of those groups and organisations will be disappointed. Go raibh maith agat.

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

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

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly expresses concern about the number of women's organisations that have been unable to secure funding to deliver services for the community; and calls on the Executive to initiate a cross cutting review to ensure (i) that the current mapping of the provision of services is adequate; (ii) the most effective use of resources to address the identified needs of the sector; and (iii) the equitable distribution of those resources.

*Motion made:*

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

## ADJOURNMENT

### Closure of Maghera High School

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak, and all other Members who speak will have approximately seven minutes.

**Mr Armstrong:** I oppose the closure of Maghera High School, so I am here to encourage the Minister of Education to keep it open for the foreseeable future. The decision by the Minister and the North Eastern Education and Library Board to close the school has left people in Maghera and the surrounding area distraught.

Anger and sadness are coupled with the belief that the school could have been saved, had Minister Ruane, the Department of Education and the North Eastern Education and Library Board been prepared to work flexibly with the school to keep it open. Instead, teachers, pupils and parents were pressurised into the situation in which they now find themselves.

Maghera High School plays a crucial role in the town's wider community and in surrounding areas, including Curran, Cullnady, Upperlands, Tobermore, Tamlaght O'Crilly and Inishrush. For many years, the school has served local people well, and its closure will be resisted by all right-thinking people.

As the only controlled-sector school in the town, Maghera High School mainly serves the local Protestant community, which is a minority in the area and already feels vulnerable and isolated. During the Troubles, the community survived the onslaught of republican violence, only to face the closure of its school at a time of peace. That is shameful.

Due to its location, Maghera High School impacts little on traffic congestion in the town — the same could not be said for other schools in Northern Ireland. Moreover, the school is a prime example of a community asset. It has a swimming pool that is used by more than 700 pupils from other schools in the area, and it serves the entire community. In the House, we hear much talk about a shared future. However, thanks to the decision to close Maghera High School, it will be extremely difficult to have a shared future in Maghera.

To close that school, especially at this time, sends out all kinds of negative messages to the local Protestant community in Maghera. Feelings are running high, and I have even heard some people say that what is happening in Maghera High School amounts to educational ethnic cleansing.

5.15 pm

Much more could have been done to help the school to survive if the Department of Education and certain senior officials had been determined that it should remain open. Why, therefore, is the school closing? Mention will, no doubt, be made of the problem of falling rolls, but that is a common problem in rural areas, and Maghera High School is not unique in that regard. The small number of pupils at the school was, in fact, one of the reasons why some parents chose to send their children to Maghera High School, but that parental choice has been removed.

Those who made the decision to close the school did not take due account of the number of houses that are being built in the school's traditional catchment areas of Maghera and its rural hinterlands such as Cullnady and Upperlands. Those new houses provide the real prospect of increasing the numbers of pupils at Maghera High School in coming years, and that factor should not have been overlooked.

It is my belief that the school was run down deliberately. Furthermore, school-bus routes were introduced, which collected children from Maghera's outlying villages, but bypassed Maghera town, and travelled onwards to Magherafelt. That could be only detrimental to Maghera High School. Once rumours began to circulate that the school was in danger of closing, parents, understandably, became nervous and chose not to send their children to the school, because they feared closure and upheaval to their children's education. As a result, the eventual closure became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

One of the most shameful aspects of the issue is that Maghera High School is not being closed because it is in a state of disrepair or because it is a building in which pupils' education would have suffered due to their being taught in classrooms that were not fit for purpose. On the contrary; it is a school of superior and sound buildings. That is in stark contrast to the venue in Magherafelt to which the Maghera High School pupils are expected to transfer in the autumn.

Ironically, it is Magherafelt High School that is in great need of repair, and we have been awaiting progress for some time. The original consultation document that was issued in November 2007 announced that planning for a new £10.5 million post-primary school on the site of Magherafelt High School was at an advanced stage, and that site works were expected to commence in mid-2008 — this is 2009 — with the school due to open in 2010. There was always no chance of that happening. The best-case scenario is that the much-needed school might be ready in September 2011.

Any progress at Magherafelt, however belated, is welcome. However, what about the current and future

pupils of Maghera High School? Even if one were to accept that Maghera High School should be closed and its pupils accommodated elsewhere, it defies logic to transfer them from a perfectly good set of school buildings to what will, effectively, be temporary classrooms on a building site. That will do nothing to bring out the best in any pupil. One must not forget that the pupils' education and well-being should be the priority in this issue.

Maghera High School should, at the very least, be kept open until such times as Magherafelt High School is totally rebuilt and in a fit state to accommodate the Maghera pupils in a permanent accommodation and provide them with the first-class school and education that all pupils deserve. It is ironic that that was the recommendation that was passed to the North Eastern Education and Library Board, but in February 2008, it decided, on a vote of 18 to 5, to accept an education committee recommendation to close Maghera High School on 31 August 2009, or as soon as possible thereafter. However, a recommendation was made that Maghera High School should not be closed until the new school at Magherafelt was completed, but the board did not vote on that.

The possibility of continuing to use Maghera High School until the new building is completed at Magherafelt was discussed at length but, as I said, no decision was taken. I cannot help but feel that that was an opportunity lost. A strong suspicion remains that there were those in the board who had made up their minds to close the school and that that was the only option that they were prepared to entertain. Even so, it is not too late for common sense to prevail and for the Minister to reverse her decision.

It is a crying shame that those buildings are being abandoned. If a bit of vision were shown, not only could the school be kept open, but it could be used by other agencies to deliver training, for example. That idea would require further exploration and the involvement of the relevant Departments; however, surely it would be preferable to retain a community asset than to settle for the sight of an empty school being vandalised.

Many people talk a good game about respecting rights, particularly the rights of a child, but what about the rights of the children at Maghera High School? Surely they have the right not to have their school life disrupted and to complete their education in a school that is fit for purpose.

I cannot accept that the concept of a shared future is advanced by removing Protestant secondary school pupils from Maghera. Over the years, the high school has built up links with St Patrick's College in Maghera, with the two schools participating in joint initiatives and events such as careers conventions and presentations by the police on road safety. Such events have provided

excellent opportunities for social interaction and for promoting good community relations among all the young people of the area.

As I stated earlier, the school is a prime example of a community asset. It has a swimming pool that is used by more than 700 pupils from other schools in the area, thus serving the entire community. Allowing that facility to be lost hardly demonstrates a commitment to a shared future.

The closure is wrong on so many levels. It will have a detrimental effect on pupils who are already at the school, as it will condemn them to a period of study in temporary classrooms on a building site. It will signal to the Protestant community of Maghera and the surrounding district that they have no future in the town, and it will have a detrimental effect on community relations in the area.

Once again, I urge the Minister to revisit the issue, even at this late stage, and at least keep Maghera High School open until Magherafelt High School is up and running and fully able to meet the needs of the children of that area.

**Mr I McCrea:** I thank my colleague from Mid Ulster for securing the Adjournment debate. It seems that we have the same interests in that I, too, requested a similar debate; however, I think that he has used his position and influence on the Business Committee to secure his. Either way, we both agree that the issue needed our attention.

It is unfortunate that we must debate the Minister of Education's decision to close Maghera High School. The decision is an insult to the minority Protestant community in Maghera, and I suspect that that is one of the motives that drove the decision. We have debated many issues in the House since devolution was restored; however, this evening, we are debating one of the most important issues affecting the teachers and pupils of Maghera High School as well as the parents of those pupils and the wider community in Maghera.

The decision to close the school has been the worst-kept secret of the North Eastern Education and Library Board. When considering the closure of the school, that education board forced parents to take a long-term decision in the interests of their children and to enrol them in other nearby schools. That is, in effect, how the demise of Maghera High School began.

For over a year, I, and my DUP colleagues on Magherafelt District Council, have continually opposed the closure of Maghera High School. My colleague Councillor Anne Forde tabled a motion calling on the council's support for the status quo to remain. Her motion received unanimous support, including that of councillors from the Minister of Education's party. My colleagues and I wrote to every member of the education and library board, asking

them to vote in support of the retention of the school. Along with representatives of the school's board of governors, teachers and parents, we met the board's chief executive. A group, including colleagues from the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party, also formed a cross-party delegation that met the Minister.

I also spoke to the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, and he raised the issue in that forum. However, to date, we have not been able to change the mind of the Minister. The number of pupils at the school has been steadily declining over the past several years because of the school's uncertain future: in 2006, there were 200 students; in 2007, the number fell to 150; and in the current school year of 2008-09, the number stands at 134. That latest decline was caused by a combination of sixth-year pupils having to attend another school to take A levels and a smaller intake of only 18 new students. Undoubtedly that is because many parents, faced with the stark reality of the Minister's decision, had to consider their children's future.

Maghera High School's determined efforts to improve community relations in the town include, as Mr Armstrong mentioned, making its swimming pool available to many pupils from both sections of the community. Maghera High School has co-operated, worked together and shared facilities with schools from across the religious divide, including St Patrick's College in Maghera and St Paul's College in Kilrea. Whereas Maghera High School has been on the front line of improving community relations in the town, this decision, and the Minister who made it, are on the front line of destroying them.

In 2007, Maghera High School outperformed 18 schools with its GCSE results, and from a detailed analysis of Northern Ireland statistics, it is evident that it serves the community.

In making her decision, the Minister gave little or no consideration to where the students will be placed when the school is closed. I remind the Minister that the newbuild for Magherafelt High School has not even commenced, and an additional two mobile classrooms must be erected to accommodate the extra pupils from Maghera High School. Given the poor condition of Magherafelt High School, it is unthinkable that almost 150 pupils will be sent from a school with good facilities to one in which the conditions are almost as bad as some in the Third World.

Furthermore, when the work on the newbuild commences, the children will be subjected to the building site that Magherafelt High School will become. Had the Minister put back the closure of Maghera High School until the new buildings were complete, at least she would have demonstrated that her decision had been thought through. However, as it stands, it is

evident to many, and particularly to the minority community in Maghera, that the decision is reckless.

I have tried to detail the concerns of my constituents and the needs of the community in Maghera. I remind the Minister of the statement that she released when announcing the sustainable schools policy:

"Schools will be reviewed against these criteria on a case-by-case basis to ensure all relevant facts, including local circumstances, are considered in the best interests of the education of our children and young people."

Today, I ask the Minister whether she will review the future of Maghera High School based on the "local circumstances" and in the "best interests of the education" of children in Maghera. I support the Committee for Education's request that the Minister review her decision based on that policy.

However, I, the teachers, pupils, parents and the feeder schools want the Minister to find some way to retain Maghera High School. Not to do so would be detrimental to the already dented community relations in Maghera; I hope that she will reconsider her decision.

5.30 pm

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I pay tribute to Mr Armstrong for tabling the Adjournment debate, which I supported at the Business Committee. Perhaps some of the terminology used does not, in any way, facilitate the case for the school, but I will come to that later.

What is a school? A school is a centre of activity; a centre of excellence; a centre of education; a centre of social, and, of course, cultural activity. That all applies to Maghera High School. From my contacts with the school, I am especially aware of the good working relationship with St Patrick's College in Maghera, which also supports the school in its campaign to retain its function and existence in Maghera.

I have been contacted by local parents and teachers on behalf of Maghera High School, which is complimented highly, and I support entirely the retention of the school, given the high standard of education it has provided to the people of south Derry. Unfortunately, there has been much talk in the community, provoked mainly by the Department and the North Eastern Education and Library Board, about the uncertain future of the school. That has been referred to already, and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; it creates uncertainty in the community and uncertainty among parents and, therefore, diminishes the role of the school.

In this instance, it can be seen that there has been a long-term agenda. Those of us who attended meetings with the chief executive of the North Eastern Education and Library Board tried to maintain some degree of certainty in the community around the future and viability of the school and around the service that it

provides to the local community. Indeed, I and other colleagues attended a meeting with the Minister to present the case on behalf of the school.

The school has potential, the teachers have hope, and the community has a future. The Bain Report suggested that smaller schools which were the only option for a minority community in a particular area should not be subject to the same viability criteria quotas as other schools. The Minister should reflect on that, given the circumstances of Maghera High School in the south Derry area.

'Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools' has been mentioned and, according to page 47 of that policy, the matter should be revisited and reassessed in light of the criteria.

A point was made earlier — although referring to ethnic cleansing may not have been the best way to articulate it — about the shared future. We in the Assembly and the Executive should be doing all in our power to implement a shared future where communities can live and work together, and can learn to come to terms one with the other and respect each other's difference. That difference can reflect and complement itself through education and be an enriching process.

The shared future policy provides for that diverse society, and anything that diminishes that should not be seen as a contribution to that shared future. In that circumstance, any proposal to close Maghera High School diminishes that shared future for the wider community in south Derry. For that reason, I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

**Dr W McCrea:** I thank Mr Armstrong for tabling the Adjournment debate. It is timely and important, and it has the tremendous support of the community in its desire to retain the services of Maghera High School. I have served as a member of Magherafelt District Council for 35 years and, during that time, Maghera High School has always been a beacon of educational excellence. I pay tribute to the staff who, under enormous pressure through the years of terrorism, retained a dignity and an excellence of education against great odds.

Indeed, there was a genuine belief that, for a period, ethnic cleansing of the Protestant community was being carried out in that area. Therefore, the school staff rightly deserve to be recognised for their contribution, particularly the cleaning staff — the school stands out from many others for its high standards of cleanliness and maintenance. I pay tribute to all those staff.

As a result of many years of terrorism, pupil numbers have decreased. However, that in itself did not reduce the numbers to their current level. In fact, the Department and the education and library board did more to destroy pupil numbers in Maghera than the terrorists ever managed to do over 30 years. The

Department and the board allowed a continual threat to hang over the school's future, so parents had to ask themselves whether their child would be able to complete their education there or whether they would be moved to another school midway through their education. The board's recent debate on the future of the school, its decision to recommend its closure and the Department of Education's proposal to close it all helped to aid and abet a self-fulfilling prophecy, and pupil numbers decreased. That is a tragedy.

Let us be frank about the matter. The sustainable-schools policy has been mentioned, but rural proofing is also an important consideration. I am the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has said that every decision that Executive Ministers make should be rural proofed. In Maghera, it is a rural community that is under threat. If the proposal to close Maghera High School is being rural proofed and tested to see whether it offers sustainability, account must be taken of the fact that a small Protestant community educates its children there.

We have told the Minister that there is no justification whatsoever for closing the school, should she and the board decide to do that. I have heard the Minister say so many times that she is thinking about the children. However, the Minister is not thinking about the children if her suggestion is to move them from an excellent school — by virtue of the standard of education that it provides and the condition of its buildings — to mobile classrooms or to a building site in Magherafelt. That shows that no thought whatsoever has been given to the children. I beg the Department of Education and the Minister to reconsider that decision. In particular, I beg the board to reconsider its decision. Before the board took the decision, my colleagues and I wrote a letter to each individual board member, begging each one not to back the Department's decision. The board must also carry a certain amount of responsibility for the proposed closure.

I ask the Minister and the board not to proceed with the foolish decision that they seem to be on track to take. I ask them not to remove children from a good school, which provides an excellent service and has well-maintained property, and not to move them to mobiles in Magherafelt. Magherafelt High School does not need repairing; it needs the brand-new school that Magherafelt was promised. It is absolutely impossible to move the children of Maghera High School to Magherafelt High School — there is no room for them there. There are already mobile classrooms at Magherafelt High School, so to add more would be to create an estate of mobiles, some of which are already falling to pieces.

In the time that I have left, I appeal to the Minister to reverse the decision. Moreover, I appeal to her at

least to give the community an assurance today that she will allow the school to remain open until the new school that has been promised to Magherafelt is built, so that children can be taught in new buildings and at an excellent facility.

I prefer that the school is kept in Maghera. The teachers there have provided an excellent education for the children under very difficult circumstances, and the parents have saluted that provision. No one wants a better education for children than their parents. I make a solemn appeal to the Minister: if she does not change her mind on closing the school, will she ensure that there will be no extra mobile classrooms in Magherafelt and that the children will be allowed to stay in the excellent school buildings in Maghera until the new school opens?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I did not intend to speak in the debate. However, having listened to certain contributions, I cannot help but respond. The comments of some Members in the debate are an example of how not to win friends and influence people.

The comments about sectarianism that were directed at the Minister and at the Department of Education cannot go unchallenged. The same Members who point a finger at the Minister and the Department fail to point that finger at the North Eastern Education and Library Board, which is where the development proposal came from. It was the board that drew up the development proposal, examined the school's case history and, as Mr Armstrong said, approved the proposal by a majority. The proposal was then sent to the Minister of Education for ratification. That is how school closures are brought about. At least, Mr McCrea Snr referred to the board's role; the other Members who spoke did not. Instead, they chose get involved in basic and naïve sectarian politics.

I have no doubt that all of the staff at Maghera High School are excellent — the mark of our education system is that the vast majority of people who work in it are dedicated. I also have no doubt that the school has provided excellent results in education. However, the fact is that pupil numbers have declined. We can talk about the conspiracy theories, or that that the Department of Education and the board have deliberately run the school down. However, I am confident that no one from those two bodies knocked on doors in Maghera and told parents not to send their children to the school because it would close.

There is another factor that has led to the demise of Maghera High School and other post-primary schools across the North, which has not been mentioned — our old friend, the grammar school system. I have no doubt that hundreds of children are being bussed out of Maghera to grammar schools. Those schools are

grammar schools in title, but they accept children who achieve a grade 'D' in their 11-plus exams. Therefore, they are all-ability, rather than grammar, schools, and they are no lesser schools for that. However, as a consequence, fine schools like Maghera High School suffer — the same thing is happening in Fermanagh, Belfast and other places.

**Dr W McCrea:** Does the Member not know that there are other schools with fewer pupil numbers than Maghera High School that are being allowed to remain open? Equality is required.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Each school must be judged on its own merits, and each development proposal from a board or the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools must be judged on its own merits. Parties supporting academic selection cannot complain when that system drives the closures of fine secondary schools across the North. There is an example of that in my constituency, in a community that needs its secondary school. I am deeply concerned that it will lose its secondary school, not because of the lack of fine buildings, fine teachers or an ethos, but because many parents are bussing their children out of the town to grammar schools 15 miles up the road.

**Mr I McCrea:** I accept what the Member says, and I have no information to doubt his description of the situation in his constituency. However, grammar schools are not the reason for the demise of Maghera High School.

I honestly believe that the North Eastern Education and Library Board continually held the threat, or the consideration, of closure over Maghera High School, and that is what drove parents to take a realistic decision for the future of their children.

5.45 pm

**Mr O'Dowd:** I welcome that intervention. I am not saying that that is the sole reason for the decision, but it is a reason that cannot be ignored in the debate.

It must also be remembered that there are 50,000 empty school desks, which will have an effect on our school estate. Regrettably, there will be more debates of a similar nature in the Chamber, as Assembly Members, rightly, bring forward concerns about their local schools. However, as the school population falls, unfortunately, there will be school closures, which are driven by economics and by educational reasons.

The Executive and the Assembly are under increasing fiscal pressures. The Department of Finance and Personnel rightly expects all other Departments to run an efficient shop. The Minister of Education, or any other Minister, cannot run an efficient Department by keeping open financially unviable projects. I hate to refer to any school as a financial project, but, at the end of the day, finance comes into it. Therefore, the

Minister of Education and other Ministers are under pressure to ensure that the projects that they are running are financially viable. That is another reason why we will lose more schools.

I appeal to Members opposite to look at the entire picture when they are talking about rural school closures.

**Mr B McCrea:** I had always intended to speak on this topic, because I have visited the school. I have also written to the Minister about the issue, and I have raised it at the Committee for Education. I did not intervene during the debate — though I am quite capable of intervening, as Members will know — for fear of not making friends and of influencing people in the wrong way.

I understand that there are financial issues at stake. We accept that there has been a reduction in the number of pupils attending the school and that that will have some impact, but the issue is about a change of policy. When the North Eastern Education and Library Board considered the matter, it was doing so under a previous policy, which put finance at the very core of the issue. The new policy, which has been brought to us, looks at sustainable schools in a different way. It looks at the impact on culture in rural areas and a whole range of other issues, such as special needs, which, quite rightly, should be considered. The issue is not just about finance, although finance is important.

In all of the new criteria brought forward, Maghera High School achieved the highest possible score. It is a great school, and the building is not falling apart. It has excellent facilities, which are shared by the community, and they will be shared further. Therefore, when Mr O'Dowd told me to look to the North Eastern Education and Library Board, I did so. However, now that there is a new policy, it may be a good idea to review the school — which has a great deal of community support — against that accepted policy.

I asked the Minister if she would do that, and the Minister said — and I will stand corrected if I am wrong — that she felt that it was too little, too late, because the school had indicated its willingness to work with St Patrick's College, and it had identified the problems to do with the curriculum, staff cover and other issues. Nevertheless, the school has so much more to offer, and it has come forward with good ideas. The school was asked to bring forward ideas, and it suggested that an outreach centre could be set up for further education, because, in Magherafelt, which is some distance away, there are colleges and technical colleges, but people do not like to travel. Other Members mentioned the issue of travel, because it really affects people's uptake of services. Is it really reasonable to ask people to travel 10 or 15 miles from

Upperlands to another school? It is simply not the way to do things.

**Mr I McCrea:** I am not sure how often the Member travels through Magherafelt, but anyone who does so regularly will know that, at the best of times, it is a bottleneck in the mornings, afternoons and evenings. The added traffic, the increased numbers of buses and parents leaving off their children will further exacerbate our problem.

**Mr B McCrea:** The only time that I travel through Magherafelt, I add to the bottleneck. Usually, I am travelling somewhere else.

My visit to the school was an eye-opener. It is a great school with great teachers and great interaction with special needs. It is the sort of school to which everyone would want to send their children — whether or not there is academic selection. It is too good a school to lose. All I ask, on behalf of all sides of the community and in the presence of elected representatives, is that the Minister undertakes to reconsider the decision in the light of the new policy.

How her decision to close the school is understood in the wider community is an issue. Some Members were disappointed in the use of terms such as “ethnic cleansing” and “sectarianism”. They are regrettable aspects of our past, and we do not want to make them a part of our future. There is a viable Protestant community in Maghera — albeit a minority — that wants to live, work and educate its children in harmony with its Roman Catholic neighbours. It has indicated a willingness to do so. It wants to share and go forward together, and it wants to find creative ways to address issues and work together. A decision by the Minister to reconsider would send out a powerful, positive message that would be to the advantage of everyone.

I accept that there are schools that will be the subject of rationalisation. However, taking that to its logical extreme would mean that we should close every school bar one, build the biggest school in the world and site it somewhere around Templepatrick. That is not right. Schools are about education, but they are also about so much more, such as community and involvement with people.

The situation provides an opportunity. I accept that the Minister and I have exchanged words, and I do not expect her to say that I have won her over. However, she may be surprised to hear that I believe her when she says that she puts children first. This is an opportunity to put all our children first within the new sustainable policy. I ask her please to demonstrate, by her actions, that she means what she says. The rewards will be significant.

I am also drawn by what the Minister says about equality. I accept that she believes in it. She deals with



other smaller schools that we do not close, and for good reason. Let us see some equality in action.

An economic tragedy is happening over the whole of Northern Ireland, the island of Ireland, the Western World and the whole world. The people of Northern Ireland — and particularly those of Maghera — want our community and political leaders to get together, do the right thing, provide some leadership and save the future for our children. That is what this is all about.

I urge the Minister strongly to reconsider the proposal in the light of the new policy so that we can try to keep open an excellent school.

**The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Armstrong for bringing this debate to the House as it gives me an opportunity to explain in some detail the reasons why I agreed with North Eastern Education and Library Board's proposal to close Maghera High School. To be fair to the Member, he raises the issue of this school with me on every occasion, even when we meet in the corridor.

Members can be assured that I do not take lightly a decision to close any school. I fully empathise with the views expressed by local representatives and those directly involved. However, my overriding concern in such matters must be for the educational interests of the pupils concerned.

Some people here appear to think that only schools in one sector have been closed in my time as Minister. Nothing could be further from the truth. The list of schools that have been closed shows that they are from all sectors: the Irish-medium, integrated, controlled and Catholic sectors. I ask Members, please, not to play the sectarian card. This is not an issue about religion; it is about the educational interests of children and young people. It is important that people recognise that.

I meet political representatives before I make any decision on schools, because I do not like making decisions without knowing the full facts. I have met the two gentlemen opposite, I have met Billy Armstrong and Patsy McGlone, and I have read — in detail — all of the documents that were sent in relation to the consultation process.

Enrolment in Maghera High School is, undeniably, very low. This year, there are 133 pupils attending, 15 of whom are in the sixth form. My Department does not insist that schools below particular enrolment thresholds should be closed, only that they should be reviewed to ensure that they are providing a quality educational experience for their children. Each case is evaluated on its own merits.

I join with John O'Dowd in saying that I think there is a little bit of hypocrisy in the debate. We are discussing many different policies. Sustainable schools;

special needs; area-based planning — there is a range of policies being debated. We are also discussing transfer 2010. We discussed transfer 2010 yesterday, when I brought forward my proposals. Let us not pretend that there is not demographic decline. Let us be honest about this, we all know that one and one make two, and we all know who will be affected if there are 50,000 empty desks in our classrooms, and grammar schools take children who achieve grades A, and then B, and then C, and then D.

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

**The Minister of Education:** No, I will not. I have listened to what people have said. Good-quality secondary schools will be affected. By burying their heads in the sand, people are contributing to the closure of good-quality secondary schools.

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

**The Minister of Education:** No, I will not. I have listened to what people have said. Good-quality secondary schools should not be put in that position. That is the position that the two parties opposite are putting them in.

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

**The Minister of Education:** No, I will not give way.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. The Minister has made it clear that she does not want to give way. It is the custom of the House to leave it at that.

**The Minister of Education:** I am asking people to put the interests of children before the interests of institutions. We need to deal with reality, and the reality here is that we have demographic decline.

**Dr W McCrea:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister has talked about hypocrisy, which is a serious point of order. The Minister's colleagues on Magherafelt District Council unanimously implored the Minister to change this decision. Will she tell us whether they are hypocrites also?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** As far as I recall, the Minister did not address that remark to an individual.

**Dr W McCrea:** Were they hypocritical?

**The Minister of Education:** I did not say that individuals were hypocritical; I said that there is a debate here in which people need to be realistic and understand the current state of our education system and the deep inequality within it.

I want to make clear, to anyone listening to the debate in the general community, my support for the wonderful work that secondary schools have done. They have done that work against all the odds. They have done that work in a very unfair system, in a system where grammar schools accept children with

grades A, B, C and D, and then reject children on the basis of so-called perceived academic ability.

6.00 pm

Secondary schools have special-needs children, and a much higher percentage of children receiving free school meals. That is why, in the new proposals that I have brought forward, free-school-meals children are at the top of the agenda. Unfortunately, that is all too late for schools such as Maghera High School. I want to put on record my appreciation of the work that that school did. My comments are made in the context of understanding the situation in which Maghera High School found itself.

The Department asks for a review once enrolment thresholds reach a certain point. That review looks at a broad and balanced education experience for the pupils; access to a full set of subject choices that can be pursued to the highest level; the improvement and sustainability of high standards of educational attainment, and the possibility of a reversal of declining enrolment. Those four points are integral elements of the recently published sustainable schools policy. That policy is important for the future development of education, including area-based planning and the delivery of the entitlement framework.

Given its low numbers, it is very difficult for Maghera High School to adhere to the entitlement framework. That is not the fault of the school; it is the fault of demographic decline. We cannot have a situation where, in year 13, there are two young people in a business studies class; three young people in a health and social care class; two young people in a technology and design class. Or, in year 14, four young people in an art and design class; five young people in a health and social care class; one young person in a technology and design class — the list goes on. When there are such small numbers, it is very difficult to provide a broad curriculum. That is why we are changing the system, so that there can be fair play for schools across the North.

People are speaking about children's rights. Every Member here knows that I talk about that every day, because I firmly believe that children have rights. They have the right to an equal education system; the right to an equal transfer system; the right to equal access to a broad-based curriculum; the right to make sure that they are not sitting in classrooms with one or two other children. Education must be much broader than that. Therefore, the sustainable schools policy will help us to ensure —

**Mr B McCrea:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. When I requested to speak in the debate, it was made clear to me that I was to speak on only constituency matters. We have, I think, moved into a discussion of policy that is not directly related to the

debate. That is regrettable, because I had hoped to discuss the matter specifically to hand.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I do not see how the Minister can explain her case without discussing policy.

**The Minister of Education:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think that it is in everyone's interests and concerns everyone's constituency how children transfer from primary school to post-primary school. We are talking about the secondary-school sector, and how I can talk about demographic decline and numbers without referring to policy, I do not know.

I also want to make it clear that the particular needs of rural communities such as Maghera were a central consideration in the development of the sustainable schools policy and transfer 2010. As my colleague said earlier, currently, there are buses of children transferring, leaving their towns and villages to go to schools in other towns and villages. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**The Minister of Education:** The new policies that we are bringing forward will change that. Unfortunately, it is not in time for Maghera High School.

**Mr B McCrea:** Why? Put the children first.

**The Minister of Education:** If Members will let me make my point — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. I must call the Member to order; he has continually interrupted and the rules make it very clear that once you have spoken, that is it.

**The Minister of Education:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Maghera High School and Magherafelt High School are located nine miles apart, and are the two schools primarily serving the post-primary secondary-school needs of the Protestant population in rural Maghera.

Many of the pupils who attend Maghera High School live within 3.5 miles of Magherafelt High School. Therefore, it is anticipated that the majority of the pupils who attend Maghera High School will choose to transfer to Magherafelt High School in September 2009, but we will keep a close eye on that and see what the parents decide. Magherafelt High School has some surplus capacity to accommodate those pupils, and that will be supplemented by temporary accommodation, pending the availability of the new school, which is expected to be completed in the summer of 2011.

I wish to address the specific points that Members raised on the needs of statemented pupils, cross-community relations, and the use of Maghera High School's swimming pool. Magherafelt High School already has a number of statemented pupils, and it has expertise in meeting their needs. The transfer of the learning support centre from Maghera High School

will enhance Magherafelt High School's existing provision. Staff from the centre will move with the pupils, and that will ensure continuity. The board is currently in discussions with the school to address the accommodation implications of that move.

Magherafelt High School has good relations with all schools in the area and, thus, the North Eastern Education and Library Board has confirmed its view that pupils who transfer will not be disadvantaged in the area of cross-community work.

I note and pay tribute to Maghera High School, because it is part of the North Eastern Education and Library Board rural area learning community. There are six schools in that learning community — two controlled schools and four maintained — and I know that Maghera High School works closely with Garvagh High School, Magherafelt High School, St Colm's High School, St Mary's Grammar School, St Patrick's College and St Paul's College. I pay tribute to all of those schools for the way in which they work together.

The North Eastern Education and Library Board has advised that many of the groups that use the swimming pool at Maghera High School have already made alternative arrangements. A meeting is planned in the near future that will involve the school, the North Eastern Education and Library Board and leisure representatives from the local council to explore what else can be done to assist swimming groups that have been unable to arrange an alternative venue.

Finally, I pay tribute to the teaching staff and the board of governors at Maghera High School. I know that this is very difficult time for them and for the children and their parents. I pay tribute to the valuable service that they have offered to young people in that area over the years. Go raibh maith agat.

*Adjourned at 6.07 pm.*

