
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 10 March 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MATTERS OF THE DAY

Murder of a Police Officer in Craigavon

Mr Speaker: I have again received notice from party leaders seeking leave to make a statement on a matter that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I will call the leaders of each of the parties in order.

Mr Dodds: In the absence of the First Minister, who is travelling back to Belfast this morning, I speak on behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party.

It is with great sadness that for the second consecutive day, the Assembly gathers following a terrorist outrage. Our thoughts and prayers this morning are with the family of Constable Stephen Carroll, who was so callously murdered last night in the Lismore area of Craigavon.

That gallant police officer was gunned down in a cold-blooded attack as he, with his colleagues, went about the business of protecting and defending the community from criminality in all its forms. His devotion to duty and dedication to the service of the entire community stand in stark contrast to the wickedness and evil of the vile characters who carried out that atrocious deed.

Constable Carroll leaves a wife and young family, at whose grief we can only begin to guess. The DUP unreservedly condemns the evil deed for the heinous crime that it is. Now is the time for the entire community to unite as one to defeat those who would drag the Province back to the past — that unity requires deeds as well as words.

Those who murdered in Antrim and Craigavon must be denied any safe haven. Those with information that can help the security forces in apprehending and prosecuting the murderers must provide it, and those in positions of leadership in politics and in the community must give unequivocal support to the Chief Constable as he faces down this threat. Whatever resources,

whatever forces are required by the Chief Constable in order to eliminate this terrorist threat and to bring security to all our people must be provided, and it is the duty of all parties in this House to be clear and forthright in their support for those necessary actions.

It is right and proper that we speak words of revulsion, horror and, yes, anger at what has happened in recent days. That is what all our people are feeling, and it is right that we reflect that. However, those words must be translated into real and meaningful action, and the information given to the police and carried through so that those people can be brought to justice.

Now more than ever, the police family and those connected with the security forces need to know that all of us — politicians and the community — stand with them in whatever they need to do to prevent evil people from trying to drag us back to the past. The action that needs to be taken must be left to the Chief Constable and to the forces of law and order. There should be no question of people taking the law into their own hands.

What we are facing is, clearly, a fight between evil people who want to tear down democracy and those who stand for law and order. In that battle, there is no room on the sidelines for those who refuse to give their full support to the police, the Army and the security services.

If the terrorists' goal is to destabilise Northern Ireland, they will fail. The progress that has been made in this Province cannot be taken for granted. The shock of these murders is, of course, all the more telling coming after a dozen years without security force fatalities. We are being challenged by those who would seek to destroy the very fabric of democracy, and who would, as in the past, when there was a 30-year campaign of terrorism, seek to impose their warped ideology on the people of Northern Ireland.

Let the message go out loud and clear in these dark days — just as they were defeated in the past, so they will be defeated in the days to come.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, I apologise for the absence of our party leader, Gerry Adams, from the Chamber this morning. People are, of course, also aware that Martin McGuinness is unable to be here at this time.

Therefore, on behalf of Sinn Féin, I would like to express the party's absolute condolences to the family of Constable Carroll on the tragic and very untimely death of their loved one. Obviously, today, there is not a lot of point in rehearsing much of what was said yesterday, and it is important to restate that what was delivered from this Chamber yesterday and, indeed, from society was very much a unity of purpose among all of us: all the parties, the Governments, the police

themselves and all other elements of civic society that have addressed this matter since the weekend.

It is very important that we maintain that unity of purpose. We need to make sure that we give solidarity and sympathy to those families that have been bereaved, and those who have had their loved ones injured, and express our deepest sympathy for their very sad loss.

Last evening, I spoke to the Chief Constable and some of his senior colleagues to express our party condolences, and to express our support for all efforts that we as a community can take collectively to bring to justice the people who carried out those killings.

Sir Reg Empey: Today, our primary thoughts are with the family, friends and colleagues of the murdered police officer, and our gratitude goes to all the men and women of our policing and security services who, once again, find themselves on the front line.

Since the mid-1990s, the political representatives of unionism, loyalism, nationalism and republicanism have worked together to create a new way forward for Northern Ireland. Our aim was to deliver political stability and to hand on a peaceful environment to the coming generations — and we did. We built political institutions, in which the governance of Northern Ireland is shared by both traditions; we built a political platform, upon which progress can be sustained and new opportunities developed; and we opened a door to a new future. Of course, there are still difficulties, but there is nothing that cannot be overcome by dialogue, negotiation, compromise and goodwill.

The so-called dissidents fail to appreciate that circumstances here have changed immeasurably and for the better. Indeed, our parties have created a settlement that has been endorsed overwhelmingly by republicans on both sides of the border. Those criminal elements have thrown down the gauntlet to all of us; they have declared war on all people here. However, let me tell them this: there is a new, strong, determined and collective resolve in Northern Ireland; a resolve not to be dragged back to a darker, bloodier world; a resolve from both traditions that they will not be manipulated by the self-serving agenda of those criminal thugs; a resolve that our democratic institutions will not be uprooted; a resolve that the next generation will not be lumbered with the same problems; and a resolve that the people and parties of Northern Ireland will stand together, and together they will face down the forces of terror and anti-democracy.

Mr Speaker, I suspect that as we go about our business today, this dark cloud will hang over us, but there must be no doubt about our resolve to resist.

Mr Durkan: I begin by offering sincere condolences to the family of Constable Stephen Carroll, his colleagues and the wider policing family, which serves this community so well and so proudly.

It is important that we reinforce the strong regard and support that we have for all the people in the police service, who, day after day, serve the entire community in so many ways. The attack was designed to intimidate and unnerve them, just as it was designed to daunt and overwhelm those of us who represent the democratic will of the overwhelming majority of people in Northern Ireland.

It is important that those behind the recent atrocities get the message that they will not succeed. They are irredentist, ruthless subversives who are determined to thwart the chosen path of political stability and peaceful accommodation that the Assembly represents. They are determined to subvert the new beginning to policing and all the promise that it offers as a way of ensuring that no armed group can sentence us to the difficulties, tensions and suffering of the past. That is why, in coming times, we must keep our nerve on both the political front and the policing front.

It is not only those in the Police Service who are confronted with the spectre of past days. People in the Health Service, who must cope with so many other matters and who work miracles every day, must again confront and deal with callously, deliberately and calculatedly created trauma. For them, too, there is a sense of being put back into situations that they thought were well behind them, so I hope that the Health Minister will communicate to all the people in his charge that there is a strong appreciation of the vocational strain and of the prospect of the situation deteriorating that recent events have created for them.

We must make it clear that the people involved have managed to bring representatives of international and network media back to our region, some of whom have not been here before.

Some of the reports state that the power-sharing Executive and the Assembly are wobbling. There is no wobble here today. There is a strong, determined resolve across all the parties — as was reflected yesterday. The word and the message needs to go out to the people: do not listen to the headlines or the twists that people are saying in the media; listen to the plain, honest truth of all the elected representatives of all the people of the North here in the Chamber.

10.45 am

Those people who want to undermine, set back or divide us will not succeed. Whatever twisted agenda those people come up with, and whatever further atrocities they seek to create, must be met by a united and determined resolve, showing them that they will not divide us and that they will not create contentions and difficulties in and around the fabric and character that we have chosen for our society.

As we send our sympathy to the family of Constable Carroll, and as we express our support to all in the

policing family and all who support them and serve them in so many ways, let us remember that there are many victims from the past who recent events have touched in a difficult way. They feel stabbed, yet again, with the sense of the futility of their loss. In many ways, they feel hurt by the memory that they were denied the unanimity of condemnation and resolve that the victims of recent days have met. Therefore, as we talk about the events of recent days and the response, let us be careful not to create false differentiations between the nature of the crimes that have been committed in recent days and the nature of the crimes that were visited on people in the past and which victimised so many people in the past, because that creates hurt and difficulty. Let us be measured and sensitive, but let us be absolutely determined and totally united.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Ford: On behalf of my colleagues in the Alliance Party, I express sympathy to the wife, children and family circle of Stephen Carroll. Constable Carroll died as a civilian policeman, serving every part of this community — as his colleagues were doing in every part of Northern Ireland yesterday and as colleagues of his were doing in Antrim on Saturday.

The united response that we have seen to the attack and the support for the police family — as they see themselves — in carrying out their work, is a measure of how much this society has changed. It is important that a message of clear and unanimous support goes out from this place today.

I welcome the comments that were made on radio this morning by Sir Desmond Rea, chairperson of the Policing Board, Sir Hugh Orde, the Chief Constable, and Terry Spence, chairman of the Police Federation for Northern Ireland. Each of them said in different ways that we have a new arrangement here; we have a new civilianised police service that works with the community to serve the community. That is something that we must not lose — whatever the difficulties of the days in which we stand. There is a message and a lesson there for us all.

Although we assemble in sombre mood in a busy Chamber for the second day in a row, it is good that we take time to share our thoughts and that we have the same thoughts — regardless of which part of the political spectrum we come from. It is necessary that that message goes not only to the terrorists, but to the community, because the community is suffering as well and is unsure of what is to happen.

Many people are unsure about what they can do. It is clear that some people will have information, which they may not know is important. However, they can pass that information to the police and do what they can to help to bring the perpetrators to justice. For other people, it may be the case that they should

simply co-operate with the police service in its normal duties to make life easier and to spare resources so that they can go into catching the terrorists.

It is hoped that the call from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions for a silent demonstration at lunchtime tomorrow will give many people the opportunity to show the mood of this community, because I believe that we are entirely representative of this community as we stand united in the Chamber this morning in saying that there must be an end to this. There must be no bowing to the terrorists.

We have a settlement that is supported by, in the words of the Chief Constable, something like 99.99% of the population. There must be no going back, and the will of a united community, with its police service and its political representatives, is the way that we will ensure that there is no going back. We have to build on that mood in the coming days, and we have to show that democracy in this place and the rule of law throughout Northern Ireland can overcome whatever terrorists may throw at us.

Ms Purvis: I begin by extending my sympathies and those of my party to the family of Constable Stephen Carroll. I send my condolences to the Chief Constable and his colleagues in the wider police family, and I pledge my party's support for the work of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Our message today is the same as it was yesterday, it will be the same tomorrow, and it will be the same the next day: we are united, as a community and as politicians, in our condemnation of, and opposition to, these criminals.

There is a real fear and anger in the community. It is palpable, and it reminds us to be careful of the language that we use in the coming days. Those emotions of fear and anger need to be channelled positively. People should not react to these criminals but should respond by channelling these emotions positively and drawing strength from our unity of purpose, which is to make further political progress. People can channel their energy by helping and supporting the police to do their job, so that they can take these people off the streets, and they can show their united condemnation at the rally that is planned for 1.00 pm tomorrow at Belfast City Hall.

Politics is the way forward for our country; we will not be deflected from that.

Mr Speaker: We all left this House yesterday and did not believe that we would be reflecting on another terrible tragedy so soon. I ask all Members to stand for one minute's reflection on the matters spoken about this morning and yesterday morning, as an expression of our support for all those affected by the events of the past three days.

Members observed one minute's silence.

SPEAKER'S BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: Order. I would like to inform the House that I will be absent on Monday 16 March, as I will be away on official Assembly business.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Department for Employment and Learning's Response to the Economic Downturn

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Employment and Learning that he wishes to make a statement on the Department for Employment and Learning's (DEL) response to the economic downturn.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): Thank you, Mr Speaker. After the words that have been spoken, it is difficult to focus on ordinary business. However, we must focus on ordinary business, if the words that we have just expressed are to mean anything.

I want to bring Members up to date on a number of issues that have been happening in the past few weeks, but, perhaps, have not been brought together in one place. I felt that it would be useful to inform the House of the steps that my Department has taken to deal with the recession. I want to reaffirm the focus that I and my Executive colleagues are placing on the economy and the people affected by the recession.

I aim to show my commitment to those individuals by providing concrete actions to minimise the impact that the global downturn will have on their livelihoods and to ensure that Northern Ireland maintains a solid skills base and takes the opportunity to improve skills upon which to rebuild and strengthen our economy. As Members know, the Executive are committed to doing all that they can to protect local people and businesses from the worst effects of the economic downturn. That is demonstrated by the fact that the downturn is a standing item of Executive business. However, it is essential to have strategic long-term goals that provide the fundamental support required.

Recently, I made a number of announcements about extra help for employees and employers. I will update Members on those new measures and their implications in the present downturn. My Department will shortly be completing a timely review of our Success through Skills strategy, to ensure that we prioritise and target our resources to positively impact and support employers, employees and the unemployed in these times of unprecedented challenge and change, and, just as importantly, to focus Northern Ireland's competitiveness up to 2020.

My Department focuses on the needs of the people. I want to make it totally clear that my Department is not responsible for job creation or job losses. However, my Department is responsible for creating and maintaining a highly skilled and well-educated workforce. I aim to ensure that people have the right tools in order to avail themselves of the jobs that are available and to upskill the workforce so that Northern Ireland is in a

strong position to take advantage of the upturn when it comes.

My Department is about people, skills and jobs. It is about a dynamic and innovative sustainable economy in which everyone achieves their full potential. People are at the heart of the solution, as there is no magic wand that we can wave to get us out of the global downturn. A recession is not the time to back away from training, but a time to keep it firmly on the agenda. With that in mind, I have put in place a series of planned actions that will not be just for the here and now, but for the long term. By aligning skills to employers' needs and addressing barriers to employment, we can bolster productivity, make good our deficit in essential skills, and upgrade our higher-level skills so that we are fit to compete in a global marketplace.

My Department has, therefore, prioritised its work into three main categories: employers, employees and the unemployed. I will work closely with the new employment and skills adviser so that my Department can respond quickly and flexibly to needs as they arise.

I will deal first with employers. There is widespread recognition that the skills of our workforce play a vital role in raising productivity and increasing the competitiveness of Northern Ireland companies. In 'Success through Skills: The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland', we identified for the first time the scale of the problem across the entire skills spectrum; from the need to improve the levels of numeracy and literacy, through upskilling, to further development of management and leadership skills for companies large and small.

11.00 am

As part of the FE Means Business strategy, we created the six workforce-development forums to focus on meeting local skills needs. Those forums are led by employers and serviced by the further education colleges, whose role is to respond to identified skills needs in their respective areas.

A subgroup of the Economic Development Forum recently provided advice on skills during this downturn. In response, a partnership has been established between the National Skills Academy of Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies (SEMTA) and the six regional colleges in order to upskill college lecturers in business improvement techniques. The colleges, the National Skills Academy and local employers are now working together to plan the delivery of that course to their workforces.

At this stage, 19 companies in the manufacturing sector are involved, with the aim of 5,000 employees receiving an NVQ level 2 or 3 in business improvement techniques over the next two years. DEL has undertaken to cover the cost of the training, which makes it free at the point of delivery for the companies involved. Obviously, partnerships are key to delivery, and I am

delighted that my Department and Invest Northern Ireland have worked together to ensure that the course is attractive to employers and employees alike.

The initiative is expected to deliver important improvements in individual company manufacturing processes, which are all the more critical given the current economic climate. The management and leadership skills of the workforce are also essential. In many cases, it will be those skills that will help our companies to navigate the challenges that lie ahead and to seize the opportunities that will arrive as a result of the eventual economic upturn, recognising the predominance in Northern Ireland of small and medium-sized enterprises and their particular needs.

Such skills are also known to be a key driver of increased economic productivity. For those reasons, from 2 March until the end of 2009 only, my Department will cover all the training costs in all its approved management and leadership development programmes. That package amounts to an investment of £2 million. That enhanced level of financial support will enable Northern Ireland's small to medium-sized companies to improve their managerial and leadership skills through participation in the suite of programmes that are offered by the Department.

It must not be forgotten that employers still need to recruit. An employment service is available in order to assist employers to fill vacancies and, in some cases, to provide subsidies to employers who recruit people who are unemployed.

Turning to employees — skills are also important in promoting social inclusion, because they provide individuals with a route to stable employment, better wages and long-term prosperity, as well as to personal development and fulfilment. What I have described for employers obviously focuses on individuals in the workforce, whose upskilling is the single most important investment that an employer can make.

I am particularly pleased by the uptake of adult apprenticeships. Of the 4,903 apprentices who commenced the programme since September 2008, almost 45% are aged 25 or over. Since the essential skills strategy began in 2002, more than 37,000 qualifications have been achieved across Northern Ireland. Evidence shows that people with those skills have improved outcomes in many areas of their lives. Many of those improvements are intangible, including greater self-esteem and a growing sense of aspiration. There are also measurable outcomes in respect of sustained employment, career progression and increased income.

My Department has now incorporated information and communication technology (ICT) in the essential skills offer in order to ensure that employees can use language, numbers and ICT effectively in the workplace. Those are fundamental skills to provide the self-

confidence and self-management ability to think and to solve problems, to communicate and to work together in order to drive forward business productivity and profit.

The integrated all-age career strategy, 'Preparing for success: careers education, information, advice and guidance', launched by myself and the Minister of Education, Ms Ruane, last month, is another example of how interdepartmental working can ensure that people are well-supported and given the best possible advice regardless of their age, whether they are still at school and deciding their future path, in work and upskilling or have recently been made redundant and are considering retraining.

These are life-changing times and life-changing decisions. Already, 23 new careers advisers have been employed to ensure that the actions that are outlined in the strategy are implemented and to ensure that young people and adults receive a better service.

Members will be aware that the dramatic increase in the number of people who claim jobseeker's allowance has created and placed significant pressure on us. Unemployment here has now reached 5.1%. To address that, I have provided additional support to front line services. Indeed, the 23 new careers advisers about whom I have just spoken have been augmenting the services that are available. In addition, processes in jobs and benefits offices have been reviewed and improved to ensure rapid response, and where necessary, measures such as overtime and Saturday opening have been used. The impact of continuing changes to the unemployment pattern is being monitored constantly to make sure that needs are being met.

However, there are barriers. My Department continues to assist the unemployed and economically inactive to take part in employment and training programmes. In addressing the barriers that they face, I am pleased to announce additional initiatives to enhance the support that is available to those who take part in the Steps to Work programme and in other employment and training programmes that are administered by my Department.

The cost of childcare is an important factor in the decision of many lone parents and partners to take part in employment and training programmes. Assistance towards the cost of childcare for lone parents and certain other participants — mainly spouses or partners of benefit claimants — who avail themselves of Steps to Work and other departmental programmes will be increased from 6 April 2009. The maximum amount available will increase from £140 for each family each week to £240 for each family each week when care is provided by registered care, and it will increase from £85 for each family each week to £100 for each family each week when care is provided by a relative. The revised rates of childcare support will particularly help lone parents and the economically inactive to prepare

for work and enable them to move off benefits. It will contribute to achieving the Executive priorities of increasing the employment rate to 75% by 2020 and of eradicating child poverty by the same date.

The present economic downturn has reduced greatly the number of suitable accessible work placements for Steps to Work participants. Contracted providers are increasingly experiencing difficulty in finding suitable placements in their local areas. To ease the excess travel-cost burden on contracted providers, additional assistance will be given towards travel costs to facilitate work placements for participants beyond their local areas.

My Department offers Steps to Work participants the opportunity to undertake a short training course that is aimed at increasing their employability by developing new occupational skills and obtaining qualifications. That is particularly useful for those who are job ready but who may lack specific vocational skills or qualifications that would enhance their prospects of finding and sustaining employment. A typical course that a participant may undertake — for example, basic IT qualifications, hygiene certificates or construction skills registration — may last up to a period of 10 days and attract funding of £30 each day, which is £300 in total.

From 6 April 2009, I will approve additional Steps to Work funding for contracted providers for training costs. The upper limit will be raised to £2,000 from the current funding level of £300. That will enable them to provide access to a range of appropriate short training courses that will address the needs of a changing client base, such as those from technical and professional occupations who now find themselves out of work and face the need to upskill or reskill.

In conclusion, the key to working through the current difficult situation is never to lose focus of the needs of the individual. My Department will continue to work with other Departments and agencies to develop actions that will provide every individual with the opportunity to develop and reach his or her maximum potential. In doing so, I believe that we can achieve the vision in the Executive's Programme for Government of a dynamic and innovative economy that can attract and retain investment on our shores.

The difference between winning and losing lies in the enhanced skills and motivation of our people, which is imperative for our long-term competitiveness and prosperity as a society.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, and go raibh maith agat to the Minister for his statement.

On behalf of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I commend the Minister and his

departmental officials on the measures that have been taken. Although those measures are to be welcomed, they deal largely with people who are still in work. What actions have the Minister, his Department and his Executive colleagues taken to preserve the skills of those who are no longer in work? In that way, we can ensure that we utilise resources and best practice rather than allow people who have been paid off to sit idle.

Has the Minister considered doing away with the waiting period before the unemployed can access jobseeker's allowance and other programmes such as Steps to Work? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In my statement, I said that we had to address the full spectrum of issues, not only for employers but for others. We must upskill people who are in work to try to ensure that they do not become unemployed, but we must also address the issues faced by those who are already unemployed. Childcare can be a barrier that prevents somebody who is not in work from entering the workforce. The honourable Member will know better than most that that is the case. We have tried to provide the means by which a lone parent can find it financially viable to return to work, because many people face challenges.

To illustrate what is happening at the moment, I will take the example of a lone parent and their partner. If the partner loses their job, that can put extra pressure on the female in the household, and the temptation is then for the partner to try to find work. An increase in childcare support is one mechanism that we can use to help to break down that barrier.

I will write to the Member about the waiting period that she mentioned, because I want to consider some of the issues involved. There is no question that we are focused on people, whether they are in work or not. Sadly, I am expecting the next set of unemployment figures to emerge next week. That will be quite a testing period for us, because if the rate of increase is the same as it has been up to now, there will be more pressure on all of us. I have lists of the numbers of vacancies that arise in our offices in each district, and some of them are in single figures. That gives some idea of the challenges that we face.

Mr Newton: I welcome the Minister's statement. However, much of the information it contained is already in the public domain. That said, the additional funding for the Steps to Work programme and the childcare initiatives is to be welcomed.

I listened to the Minister's statement, but I noted nothing in it that will address the problems that companies, particularly manufacturing companies, face in an economic downturn. All the steps that the Minister has taken are for the future rather than for today.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: At the start of my statement, I said that I would mention a number of measures that had been put in place. However, because of their nature and the fact that not everybody picked up on them, I felt that it was important to bring details of them collectively to the House, particularly when they were part of a series of initiatives.

We recognise the challenges that face a number of local companies, but the Member will know that some management and leadership courses and so on are being delivered to the employer free of charge at the point of delivery. Therefore, I do not accept that there is no focus on those companies. However, there is no question that we are looking at other measures to help those companies. We must also remember that the next tranche of graduates will be coming out of universities in the summer. Will there be jobs for them? They represent a huge talent pool, but what are we going to do with those young people? We are looking at a whole range of measures that could help employers.

11.15 am

We are also watching very closely what is happening in London, as the Department for Work and Pensions made announcements in the past few days about making assistance available. Therefore, we are very focused on the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises in particular.

The Member drew attention to the manufacturing side. I think that the relevance and significance of manufacturing is now coming home to more and more people. However, some years ago, everyone was saying that we should go for financial services and for some of the new service industries. That was fine up to a point, but where are many of those service industries and financial-services sector businesses now? I think that any economy that does not emphasise maintaining a significant manufacturing base is doing a grave disservice to future generations.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his statement. Does he agree that, notwithstanding the short-term costs, there is clear evidence that firms that provide training are more likely to survive in the long run?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Only the other week, I was pleased to be in Coleraine, which is in the honourable Member's constituency, for the launch of a very important initiative. He and other Members will have grasped that I have pointed out repeatedly that it is easy for me and for other Members to stand in the House and say that companies should continue to train their employees. However, we do not have to manage the cash flow of companies, nor do we have to find the wages on Fridays. It is easy for us to sit here and say that those companies should continue to spend when we do not face those challenges. However, all the evidence points to the fact that companies that

maintain the training and upskilling of their workforces are two and a half times more likely to survive a recession than companies that do not maintain such training and upskilling.

As I said, those of us who have been in business and have had to meet those challenges know that any time that we were stuck for cash, we had to look at the easy targets where cuts could be made — for example, in training, marketing or maintenance — and the same applies to the public sector. Many Members who have sat on education and library boards will know that when budgets were being tightened, the first thing that was done was to cut back on maintenance, with the result that windows were not replaced, for example. That is how businesses operate. However, businesses that can maintain investment in their workforces are two and a half times more likely to survive than companies that cannot maintain that investment.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the Minister's statement. I hope that he will address the House at least every two months during the recession to update us on what is happening with the issues that fall under his responsibility.

I welcome the information about the uptake in apprenticeships for adults who are over the age of 25. The Committee for Employment and Learning urged the Minister to adopt that action, and it is very welcome. However, is the Minister not disappointed that Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE), which is a premier employer in Northern Ireland, made £100 million in profit last year and anticipates making a further £100 million in profit this year, yet it indicated to the Committee for Employment and Learning just last week that it may suspend its apprenticeship programme in September? Is the Minister not disappointed that such a profitable organisation may take that sort of measure?

The Minister told the Committee for Employment and Learning two weeks ago that there may be a case for revisiting some targets. However, does he accept that it is now time not just to revisit the targets but to revisit the Budget in order to ensure that his Department and other Departments spend taxpayers' money for maximum benefit during this time of recession?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am pleased to attend the House and to keep Members updated at any stage, and I am happy to consider doing so on a more regular basis if the Committee would find that helpful.

The programme of adult apprenticeships has, undoubtedly, been a success. People over the age barrier of 25, and, indeed, people in their 50s are participating, so there may be hope for us all. Adult apprenticeships have been a very positive development. I visited a training centre in the Nutts Corner area in which linesmen were being trained. I was also very impressed by an apprenticeship school that I visited there.

I will be very disappointed if such training were to be threatened in any way. We rely heavily on companies that are successful and that are weathering the storm. This is for the good of those companies — it is not for our benefit; it is for the benefit of their bottom lines. I cannot think of anything more likely to weaken their future business — other than some enormous crisis — than not training apprentices. There was a period when apprenticeships were phased out across many sectors of business and industry, and it is only in recent years that people have realised that that was a mistake and have learned the lessons.

Some of our bigger companies, such as Bombardier Shorts, will openly admit that they would probably no longer be in existence had they not continued to invest in apprenticeships. I very much hope that the company to which the Member refers will revisit its decision, and my Department will be happy to be in touch with that company to clarify the position.

Ms Lo: I very much welcome the Minister's statement, and I thank him for briefing us on developments. I commend the Minister on the various initiatives that have been developed and adopted in the economic downturn. Indeed, that is the benefit of having a local devolved Administration — to meet our local community's needs swiftly.

I fully agree with his comments about training programmes. I ran an organisation comprising 15 staff for 10 years and I know that training programmes are often the first thing to go when the budget is tight. I commend the different initiatives that are being introduced to encourage employers to continue training staff, because literacy, leadership and management skills are key to our economy.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to come to her question.

Ms Lo: OK; I will ask a question.

Further education colleges are also key to upskilling our workforce — will the Minister update us on the lecturers' pay dispute?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member is being very innovative. *[Laughter.]*

Of course, we believe in innovation in this place. Negotiations have reached a critical and sensitive stage. Proposals have been made to the trade unions by the employers' side, and I await a response. It would be inappropriate for me to say any more today because of the delicacy of that position.

However, if we consider the further education colleges in general, we find that they play a critical part. Look at what local further education colleges are doing: every one of them has drawn up a specific programme to deal with the recession in its respective area. Some of their ideas are innovative; they are being

flexible in the times at which they schedule classes and in the courses that they make available. This matter has not received the attention that it deserves, but they all have come forward with packages. I will find some way of informing Members about that.

I beg your indulgence, Mr Speaker, to respond to two points, which were made by Mr Attwood. One point was about revisiting targets. I have made it clear that, in general, the Executive must be mindful of their targets. Mr Attwood also asked me about the Budget. The Executive discuss the economy at every meeting now, and we discussed it briefly last week. The whole issue of targets will be continuously reviewed.

As far as the Budget is concerned, there are, at present, elements that we cannot quantify. As Members are aware, the Prime Minister and the Treasury have indicated that some resources might be taken away from us. That matter is not resolved, and until it is, it is difficult for us to know where we are going with the overall Budget. All those matters are being reviewed, and it is, sadly, obvious that some of our targets are beyond reach in the timetable set.

That is not to say that we ought not to set ambitious targets. However, one of the most obvious targets that we will fail to meet is the reduction of child poverty by 50% by next year. That is a huge challenge, and my colleague the Minister for Social Development will shortly be dealing with one aspect of it — the fuel payments scheme — which was designed to intervene directly in that area. I reassure Mr Attwood that we are prepared to review targets.

Mr Hilditch: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement. Will he give us an assessment of the fostering scheme for apprentices who face redundancy? To date, the Committee for Employment and Learning has received little evidence that that has been successful. Even last week, when representatives of Northern Ireland Electricity attended the Committee, the representatives in charge of the company's apprenticeship scheme said that they had never heard of fostering. That came as a great surprise to us, considering the standards that NIE applies.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As Members will know, we have a series of measures to help apprentices who are facing difficulty. The Department has contacted a number of employers to see whether they would be interested. We received positive responses from several of them. I cannot say whether NIE was one of those, but other responses have definitely been received.

We have a menu of options that can be used. The question for us is: what measure is appropriate? During the most recent Employment and Learning questions for oral answer, I gave the House statistics on what has happened to apprentices who have been made redundant.

The Member — or another Member — asked me questions about that, and I supplied answers. We have managed to deal with apprentices through other parts of the scheme. However, that remains an issue.

I must tell Members that if the recession lasts the whole of this year and a part of next year, we must lay plans for every eventuality that we can anticipate. I refer even to students who will graduate from university this year.

We have to prepare places for them as best we can. That is the context in which the Member needs to view that issue. The fact is that we have had positive responses. If we can deal with the client and the customer through other means, that is fine. So far, we have been able to process most people through that mechanism. If we need to use the fostering scheme, we will do so.

11.30 am

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement. As has already been mentioned, over the past couple of weeks, we have heard about childcare issues, travel costs and unemployed graduates. However, for the Minister to say that the Department for Employment and Learning is not responsible for job creation, but rather for creating a highly skilled workforce, sends out the message that each Department is looking after only its own responsibilities, and that there is no joined-up thinking around creating jobs or upskilling.

It is better to explain that point through an example: John Lewis, which is planned to be built in Lagan Valley, and is now subject to a decision by the Planning Appeals Commission, has the potential to create a couple of thousand jobs. In England, John Lewis has retail academies —

Mr Speaker: Do you have a question?

Mr Butler: Yes, I do, Mr Speaker. The Minister should be taking a joined-up approach to John Lewis, and to other projects. Although it is not primarily the responsibility of the DEL Minister, there should be a focus on trying to create jobs in that area.

Last week, NIE gave evidence to the Committee —

Mr Speaker: Can we have the question please?

Mr Butler: One of the areas in which NIE is lacking jobs is in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) areas such as electrical engineering. Is the Minister trying to think outside the box and get some joined-up thinking on that?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am merely stating the Department's remit in respect of job creation. There are formal protocols with Invest NI and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), and that joint team meets on a

regular basis. Those meetings are pre-planned, not ad hoc. When I said to the Executive that I wished to make this statement, all Ministers said that, although they understood that things were difficult, there are still some positive things happening in the economy. Indeed there are: in the past few weeks, there have been some good announcements from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, all of which are to be welcomed.

In conjunction with Invest NI, we contact the companies that are coming here — for example, John Lewis or Citi — and ascertain their training needs. We already do that. When companies announce that they are coming here, we do not wait for them to come to us; we go to them. That already happens. If John Lewis gets planning permission, we would, undoubtedly, with Invest NI, go to the company to ascertain its requirements — we would work with the company. In the past, we have run courses specifically for a particular company — such as Nortel — and we will do that again. We do that without problem, and I am very happy to do it.

The Member made a point about STEM subjects and, of course, he is right. At the moment, I am looking at how we define the STEM subject areas, because we do not want that definition to be too narrow. For example, in our economic profile there is a significant agriculture and agrifood sector. We have to make sure that the definition of STEM is not drawn so narrowly that it excludes potential job creation opportunities. The Member is correct, and that is one of our key challenges as we go forward. It is an area where there is beginning to be a bit of improvement; however, there is clearly a long way to go.

Mr Irwin: I also thank the Minister for his statement. Will he agree that there is a two-tier system of apprenticeship training in that some apprentices get first-class training while others are less fortunate? That is largely dependent on the employer, and the Minister's statement did not address that matter.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Generally speaking, programmes that are run and operated by the Department are subject to inspection by the Education and Training Inspectorate. I know that the Committee for Employment and Learning is watching closely for early signs that contractors are operating the new programmes effectively. However, the Department is not in control of training that is delivered by individual employers.

There is no doubt that the available training ranges from state-of-the-art to nothing, and the Member will know that. Sadly, one or two employers still take a negative attitude. For example, in private conversation, an employer asked why he would want to train employee A or employee X, given that that employee might ask for more money or go to work for a competitor. That

attitude, although not widespread, does exist, and there is huge variation among employers.

The Department cannot intervene in a private company's training programme, but, when companies involve us, we can ensure that there is a standard. I accept the Member's point that there is huge variation among employers; some of them are excellent and provide first-class facilities, and others fall short. If employers feel that the Department can offer any help or advice, they need only lift the phone.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I congratulate the Minister on the scope of his statement. Will he confirm that DEL's target to have 10,000 apprenticeships by 2010 has been attained early?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Recently, in answer to a question, I said that the Department had set a target of 10,000 apprenticeships by 2010. I remember a debate in the House in early 2008 when I was asked to withdraw that target because, at that stage, it looked unachievable as 6,000 apprentices were in training. I am happy to say that the most recent figures show that around 10,243 apprentices were in training, and that figure will vary.

In my statement, I said that the number of adult apprenticeships was showing encouraging growth. I said that the Committee's recommendation and the Department's decision to go ahead with the increase in age has been a major success. Given the gloom that has surrounded the economy in recent months, we are pleased to have achieved that target. However, we have passed that target and moved on. We want to increase the number of apprenticeships because that is the way forward. It is another matter whether the target will be revisited or whether a higher target will be set. We have achieved the target, and we have done so ahead of time.

Mr Dallat: I also welcome the Minister's statement, and I welcome his sincerity in how he presented it. In his opening remarks, he said that he was not responsible for job creation or job losses, and I am sure that he is very pleased about that. I represent a constituency that has lost over 3,000 jobs in the past two years, and I cannot find a sense of crisis or emergency in the statement. Indeed, without causing any offence, the statement could have been made any time in the past decade.

Will the Minister assure the House that there is a sense of cohesion between him and the other Ministers who have a more direct responsibility for job creation? People outside do not sense that the Assembly fully realises the crisis that we are in. Without criticising the Minister's statement, will he elaborate on how seriously the other Ministers are taking the crisis?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In my statement, I said that I was merely bringing Members up to date on a number of measures that

have been taken in recent weeks, largely because it is hit-and-miss about how much publicity those measures receive.

Although we have gone through that, and coverage has been given to each individual measure, it is appropriate that Members are brought up to date and given a comprehensive view of what the Department is doing. As I said in my response to the Member for West Belfast, I am happy to come back to the Chamber in order to keep Members informed. That is one job that a Minister should do.

The Executive have put that item at the top of every agenda. We circulate a matrix document weekly or every time that we have a meeting. Each Department that has an economic remit updates those figures. Ministers contribute to that each time that a meeting is held. Much of the Executive's discussion centres on the current situation and the financial pressures that arise from it, one of which I mentioned earlier. As regards my Department, we have sat down at the table and discussed how we can think outside the box. We have asked what we can do differently, what else we can do and whether we can bring our work together.

My Department has started initiatives with local authorities, including that of the Member. Two weeks ago, activity took place in his constituency. We have worked with other local councils to ensure that we can improve individuals' employability. At present, we are working with Larne Borough Council, and that work will be rolled out to other councils. It covers simple matters such as how to fill out curriculum vitae and informs people properly about how they should present themselves for interview. Although it is basic stuff, it is important.

Although there is a sense of urgency, I do not believe that there is a sense of panic. The Department works closely with Invest NI and DETI on those measures. I also work with the Department of Education because there is a clear linkage to schools. Therefore, "cohesion", which was the word that the Member used, is growing. At the start of the crisis, it was the case, perhaps, that Departments did their own thing. As a long-time critic of that over the years, I believe that there is now more "joined-upness" than there was previously. All Ministers realise that none of us, by and large, can act unilaterally. We can all do our own bits and pieces; however, unless there is an overall plan, there will be no progress.

Therefore, I am confident that cohesion now exists. Certainly, there is a sense of urgency. That is clear when the Executive discuss the economy at their meetings.

Mr P Ramsey: Does the Minister believe that the success of the tripartite model among local trainers, employers and the jobs and benefits office in Newtownabbey is a model of good practice? If so, does he intend to roll that out to other parts of Northern

Ireland? Is best practice in training aimed towards meeting the economic crisis and recession?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The position in jobs and benefits offices is evolving. Many of them have faced workload increases of over 100%. In the past nine months, the worst caseload increase has been around 150% or 160%, which creates huge problems. I am aware that, a couple of weeks ago, the Committee visited Newtownabbey to see what happens there. Obviously, the Department is considering the roll-out potential of that and other schemes.

The Department must also consider how each office manages the situation. Office staff are required to carry out certain functions under law, to adhere to departmental guidance and to emulate good practice. Given the pressure that has been applied, the Department has granted authority to the managers of those offices, who must assess whether they need more overtime or more staff; or whether they need to re-prioritise. Managers have been given flexibility on those matters. The Department works closely with its colleagues in the Social Security Agency because its offices and jobs and benefits offices are, in the main, joint offices.

The Department has also brought Careers Service Northern Ireland more into play. As I said in my statement, and as Members are aware, 23 extra careers advisers have been employed to help the service.

To answer the Member's question: we are definitely responding at a local level. If the Newtownabbey model is successful — which I believe it will be — the examples of good practice that we learn from that office, or other offices, will be used in the rest of the network.

11.45 am

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Mortgage-Rescue Plan

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

Mr F McCann: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern at the increasing levels of house repossessions and calls on the Minister for Social Development to bring forward a mortgage-rescue plan as soon as possible.

A Cheann Comhairle, ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo. Over the past year, we have all witnessed the huge growth in the number of people who have been taken to court for falling behind with mortgage payments. I am sure that all Members have heard horror stories about people who believed that they were in stable employment but lost their jobs, and, when only two months in arrears, were pursued by mortgage lenders, brought to court and, in many instances, lost their homes.

How many Members have been approached by constituents who have difficulties with mortgage payments because they have taken out a second mortgage in order to carry out work to their home? Such people were encouraged by building societies that offered them cheap loans, but they overextended themselves and now face losing their homes. How many Members have seen the adverts that ask people to tap into the finance in their home only to discover that those same organisations are now taking possession of their home?

Furthermore, other lenders prey on people who fall into desperate financial difficulties and see no way out. Those people are being offered a price for their home that is, perhaps, 20% or more below its market value, with the option to rent the house back. Thereafter, they find that they are in deeper trouble and will lose their home anyway.

On 28 February 2008, the Minister for Social Development said that she would introduce a mortgage relief scheme to assist people in difficulties. That was widely welcomed, and many people thought that the scheme would be available soon in order to assist people in their hour of need. Unfortunately, that did not happen. It is now 10 March 2009, and we have only a vague promise that a scheme has been drawn up and will be introduced at some stage.

Many people have been advised to take money-management advice from an adviser in their building society only to find that it cost £200. I have been in building societies in which I have seen people who merely want to pay their mortgage being asked to discuss taking out a loan on the strength of the equity in their home. How many people have been tempted to borrow additional unnecessary finance in that way? It is heartbreaking to deal with people who have been trapped in that way and who feel that they have nowhere to turn. They wait in hope that something will turn up and rescue them from their financial mess. Unfortunately, the situation normally worsens.

I commend the Housing Rights Service for its excellent work — especially on debt counselling — in assisting those people. The service must be supported with enhanced resources in order to address the hugely increased workload visited on it by the current circumstances. I recently attended the launch of a scheme that is jointly run by the Housing Rights Service and the Court Service through which legal advice and representation will be provided at the Courts of Justice and Lagside Courts to offer proper support for people who appear in court for mortgage repossession. The main piece of advice that the Housing Rights Service offers is that people must seek advice at the earliest possible stage. That is the best way forward.

The Department's consultation document of September 2008 stated that front line advice services were critical to the success of the mortgage-rescue scheme. However, the document continues by saying that the Department would seek funding for one additional post only. How can one post address a problem of that scale? A complete package is required, including several professional advice workers, under the auspices of the Housing Rights Service and the community sector, in order to resource the provision of a Six County-wide training programme. If we are saying that early advice and intervention is crucial, we need to properly resource that.

The huge increase in actions from mortgage defaults, which have totalled 3,628 over the past year, is an indictment on the inactivity of the Department for Social Development (DSD). How many of those people could have been saved had a scheme been brought to the House early last year? The Minister states that she has made a bid in several of the monitoring rounds for funding for a mortgage-relief scheme, but nothing was forthcoming. That, again, is a "blame everybody else" scenario.

The £50 million moved from the Social Security Agency capital programme in — I believe — the June monitoring round and reallocated for housing should have provided an opportunity to initially fund a mortgage-relief scheme. Had several million of that been moved to fund the advice package, many more people may still have been in their homes.

Last week I asked the Minister of Finance whether — if additional moneys became available — he would direct those towards such a scheme to help those in trouble. He did not rule it out. However, he did say that the Minister for Social Development had the ability to de-prioritise some elements of her budget to deal with the issue. The Minister for Social Development needs to explain why that did not happen. Tens of millions of pounds have been allocated over all monitoring rounds, and not one penny has been directed to deal with the ever-worsening crisis.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: No. We already said that co-ownership should play a role in the shared-equity side of any scheme. Why is it that those in negative equity are being excluded from tapping into the scheme? That is a matter of huge concern to us. Surely, the vast majority of those in trouble at the moment and who will be over the next few years, are and will be people in negative equity. The nature of the overheating in the housing market meant that most people paid house prices at the top of the market, and therefore need assistance to stay in their homes.

We, in Sinn Féin, were supportive of the move to lower the length of time — from 26 weeks to 13 weeks — to allow those on benefits to seek help in paying the interest on their mortgages. We also believe that that did not go far enough. If people cannot meet their mortgage payments, it would be of great help for them to be able to tap directly into benefit assistance sooner rather than later. It would also remove the need for unscrupulous moneylenders, from whom some seek assistance at such times.

Sinn Féin cannot understand why the Minister would say, on the one hand, that the purpose of any scheme would be to keep people in their homes, and, on the other hand, demand vacant possession of their homes when housing associations move in to buy the home.

People losing their homes join an ever-lengthening waiting list. If the common selection scheme becomes an obstacle, it should be reviewed and changed to deal with this emergency. The house would not have been available in the first place except for the unusual and exceptional circumstances. To put people through the emotional stress of losing their homes, when, with some imagination and intelligent resourcing, that could have been averted, simply does not make sense. Neither does it seem logical to increase the 40,000 people already on the waiting list in such circumstances.

The Minister has an immediate responsibility to introduce a mortgage-relief scheme, and that must happen forthwith. She also needs to address the issue of those losing their homes who do not fall under the scheme, so that repossession is prevented where at all possible. We await with interest the introduction of the

package of resources, which will, hopefully, address the needs of many in these difficult times. Tacaim leis an rún. Go raibh maith agat.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): The Committee for Social Development has considered proposals for the mortgage-rescue scheme at a number of meetings. The Committee welcomes the idea of a mortgage-rescue scheme, not just in its own right, but as part of a raft of measures to help hard-working families hold on to their homes.

The members of the Committee were alarmed by the increasing number of repossessions and believe that those would disproportionately affect people from working-class areas, who also experience high levels of other forms of debt. A mortgage-rescue scheme is essential to provide much-needed support for those largely working-class homeowners who have worked hard to purchase their homes, and have a limited number of options for dealing with other forms of debt.

The Committee was also concerned about the practices of unscrupulous companies that exploit homeowners who face financial problems. Members were appalled that some companies buy homes at well-below market value, negotiate a short-term rental agreement with the former owners, and then evict them. That leaves the former owner at the bottom of the property ladder with a poor credit history, and, therefore, little prospect of ever again owning a home.

The ability to limit the opportunity for such practices, which are often targeted at elderly people or other vulnerable individuals, must be a key aspect of any mortgage-rescue scheme. The Committee for Social Development made a number of recommendations to the Department on its proposed mortgage-rescue scheme. First, and most importantly, the Committee recommended that, under the scheme, homeowners must be able to remain in their homes; that is critical. Secondly — and to avoid the problems that were just mentioned — long-term rental agreements must be entered into with housing associations that can buy up equity. Thirdly, homeowners should, under the scheme, have the flexibility to be able to sell a portion of their equity at market prices and use that cash to clear outstanding debts.

Furthermore, homeowners should be able to staircase up and down as their circumstances change. That means that they should be allowed to sell or buy back portions of their equity in their own home. That should include the option to buy out the housing association's share of the equity entirely when the homeowner's financial situation improves.

Finally, prevention is better than cure. With that in mind, the Committee recommended that debt counselling and advice should be made available to all homeowners

and that those who are in immediate danger of repossession should be fast-tracked to that aspect of the mortgage-rescue scheme.

The Committee recognises the importance of a mortgage-rescue scheme and the difficulty in securing the necessary financial support for it. The Committee hopes that the Minister will work with her Executive colleagues to secure the necessary funding and bring the mortgage-rescue scheme into being as soon as possible.

Mr Armstrong: There is no question that the worldwide economic downturn has had a major impact in Northern Ireland. Like the raft of measures that have been suggested in response to that situation, a mortgage-rescue scheme is a good idea. Indeed, Northern Ireland is, at present, the only part of the United Kingdom that does not have such a scheme. However, without sufficient resources to enable it to be acted upon, the idea of a mortgage-rescue scheme is just empty words.

Excessive house prices, irresponsible lending and rising job losses as a result of the worldwide economic downturn have, therefore, combined to create a perfect storm in the local housing market. If we are serious about addressing this issue, we must provide the resources adequately to fund a mortgage-rescue scheme. Whether we adopt the idea of the homeowner selling the house and then renting it back, or selling a proportion to cover the debt in a reverse of the co-ownership scheme, the Minister requires money. If the recession continues, it is logical to assume that increasing amounts of money will be required and more people will find it more difficult to meet their mortgage payments.

I know that the Minister has made bids for funding in several monitoring rounds. According to the Department for Finance and Personnel (DFP) figures, a bid of £1 million was made in December 2008 in respect of a mortgage relief scheme. Yet, curiously, on 17 February 2009, a DSD spokesman told the 'Antrim Times' that the Minister's bids for funding that were made in the June, September and December 2008 monitoring rounds were not met.

I believe that much more funding will be required, and at a time when all departmental budgets are coming under extreme pressure. I ask those Members who expressed support for a mortgage-rescue scheme to press their party colleagues to put their hands up for it when the issue is discussed by the Executive.

Having made the plea for sufficient funds to be made available, I would emphasise that it is imperative that those who find themselves in difficulties should come forward at the earliest opportunity in order to seek help, advice and support.

This problem came on us very quickly as a result of a slump in the world economy and the global financial

system, and it is likely to be around for some time if the current economic forecast is anything to go by. It is also a problem that affects an ever-growing number of people in Northern Ireland.

In real terms, we are not talking about huge sums of money. However, when it comes to families struggling to make ends meet in difficult times, its value is immeasurable.

12.00 noon

A mortgage-rescue scheme would keep people out of destitution, it would free disposable income, it would create liquidity in the economy, and it would do something useful. I urge the Minister for Social Development to adopt a UK-wide approach to debt relief, and I also commend the motion to the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Mr Burns: I support the motion. Everyone knows that we live in difficult times. People are looking to the Assembly for leadership and help during this economic crisis. We are all concerned about the ever-rising numbers of repossessions, and that is certainly an area in which the Assembly can make a real difference. We can prove to the people that we listen to their worries and that we will help them when they are in need.

The Committee for Social Development has considered the mortgage-rescue scheme on a number of occasions, and I very much support the plan. However, the scheme can be open only to people who have fallen on hard times. It will not be a plan to bail out people who have lived beyond their means, who have bought second homes or holiday homes, or who have got into a lot of debt on the back of their mortgages. The rescue plan should be seen only as an absolute last resort. If families fall on bad luck because the breadwinners have lost their jobs, and if they are unable to come to an agreement with mortgage lenders and have no other options, we should step in and help.

The scheme that the Committee has considered is a worthwhile cause. Homeowners will be allowed to remain in their homes under a long-term rental agreement, and it will enable families to stay together and to remain in their communities. It is vital that children are able to stay at the same school, and that families do not have to move out of the areas in which they live.

Many people have worked hard to buy their houses, and hard-working families deserve help if they fall on difficult times. If people are badly in debt, they should be able to sell a portion of the equity on their house for the full market price and use that money to clear their debts. They should also be able to keep their homes under co-ownership agreements. Those people should also be allowed to keep a bit of money in the bank and to get benefits until they are back on their feet.

I want to see the most desperate cases — people whose houses are in immediate danger of repossession — being fast-tracked through the system. We want to help people to avoid long, expensive and stressful court cases.

I am disturbed by the behaviour of companies that take advantage of the rising number of people in mortgage arrears. They buy houses at below-market value from desperate people and then kick them out of their homes at the first opportunity. Those companies target the elderly and the vulnerable, which is totally unacceptable. We must do everything that we can to stop them. A mortgage-rescue scheme would seriously damage the ability of such companies to operate. It would also protect the people whom they exploit.

We have asked who will pay for this scheme and how much it will cost. Many figures — anything up to £5 million — have been suggested. I call on the Executive to find the money to give to the Minister for Social Development. I am sure that the Minister, in responding to this debate, will explain how important it is to have the money to make the scheme work. She has already bid for money three times but has been turned down. The scheme is worthwhile, and we should proceed with it as soon as possible. Therefore, I support the motion.

Ms Lo: I support the motion. As well as the increase in home repossessions, I am very concerned about reports of an increase in unregulated private companies that offer mortgage-rescue packages through sale-and-rent-back schemes. Such schemes exploit those who are in the vulnerable position of facing imminent repossession.

The consultation on the Department's proposed and very worthwhile mortgage-rescue scheme concluded in November 2008. The scheme was clearly welcomed by the voluntary sector and the public. There is a clear need and demand for the scheme to tackle the effects of our current economic downturn. The proposed scheme has a two-pronged approach: it offers advice and, as a last resort, practical assistance to enable people to remain in their homes, under either the flexible-tenure strand or the mortgage-to-rent strand. The scheme would help people to keep homes that they have worked very hard to buy and would allow them to stay in the localities in which they might have lived their whole lives.

However, funding is a big issue. In a recent letter to the Committee for Social Development, the Department stated that it is only seeking funding for the advice part of the scheme. DSD faces a deficit of £100 million a year for the next two years, so I can see the difficulty in pursuing the scheme in its full form. The Executive need to consider whether a mortgage-rescue scheme is a priority for Government. If so, they must come up with the cash necessary for DSD to implement the full scheme.

In Scotland in 2006-07, 173 households benefited from the Scottish mortgage-rescue scheme. That scheme cost £9 million and allocated an average subsidy of £50,000 to each of those households. By 2007-08, the budget for the scheme was £9.5 million, which helped just under 160 households and allocated an average subsidy of £60,000. In June 2008, the National Assembly for Wales announced that it was providing an extra £5 million for its mortgage-rescue scheme.

We need to be clear about how much money is, or will be, available for a mortgage-rescue scheme so that we do not raise false hope and expectation among people who already feel desperate and helpless and who look to DSD for help. If we do not have enough money, we need to be very clear and admit it. If we have enough money to provide the advice part of the scheme, at least that will be of some help to the community, but it is important that adequate money is provided to train and resource the advice sector.

In its response to the consultation, Citizens Advice was very concerned about the role of advice agencies, because they are not regulated to give mortgage advice, and they lack the resources necessary to support their increased workload.

I support the scheme and call on the Executive to back DSD so that the scheme will be ready, as soon as possible, to help all families who are in need.

Mr Craig: I support and welcome the motion. Unfortunately, it addresses the same matter that I raised in a private Members' motion last June on a not-for-profit mortgage-rescue scheme. At that time, there was, more or less, universal support for the implementation of a mortgage-rescue scheme. In fairness to the Minister, she supported the idea of such a scheme and came up with her own proposals. Unfortunately, we have seen no implementation of such a scheme since then.

The need for the scheme is probably much greater today than it was at that time. In the fourth quarter of 2008, some 939 writs and summonses were issued for the non-payment of mortgages, compared with 542 during the same period in 2007 — that is a rise of 73%. How many families and young couples most go through the stress, anguish, and even the embarrassment, of repossession before the Department acts?

It has often been said in the Chamber that the job of the Assembly is to make a difference to people's lives. It is the Assembly's job to do all that it can to help people during a time of economic turbulence. I agree with Thomas Burns that the Assembly must be innovative in its approach to helping people. The Assembly is in a position to help people by introducing a mortgage-rescue scheme, but its approach and the scheme require innovation.

Must the public purse and the Department fund 100% of the scheme? The clear answer is no. Many of the 26 housing associations in Northern Ireland have considerable amounts of cash to hand and, therefore, have the ability to finance many schemes. I do not say that as someone looking from the outside in; I have spoken to the housing associations, and they are willing to work with the Minister on how to finance the scheme.

That issue was brought to my attention by several constituents who, because of illness, found it difficult to pay the mortgage on their properties. After negotiations, housing associations purchased those homes from the individuals. Unfortunately, under the current legislation in the common selection scheme, housing associations immediately had to evict those individuals, because they had to be reassessed according to the points system in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that people who lose their homes are simply added to the housing list, which, as Members know, is already massive, and that there is insufficient funding to provide additional social housing to meet that increased need?

Mr Craig: I fully concur with the Member, and I was about to make a point about the additional cost to the taxpayers. They pay for everything, not only the cost of evicting people from areas in which they and their children had settled. As all Members know, there is not enough housing to meet the demand. Therefore, those individuals who were evicted ended up living in privately rented accommodation, the cost of which was subsidised by taxpayers.

Worse still, in one case, a house had been specifically adapted to meet the needs of some of its occupants. When, following their eviction, the Housing Executive and a different housing association had to provide them with a new house, the taxpayer had to spend further money to adapt it to meet their needs. The taxpayer lost out not once, but twice.

Why can the Assembly not intervene? Why can the Assembly not launch a mortgage-rescue scheme that at least uses the financial capacity of many housing associations to help those individuals? Taxpayers need not necessarily provide 100% of the money for the scheme. The Assembly must think outside the box and talk to the housing associations.

I plead with the Minister to talk to the housing associations to explore the options for helping those individuals. There may, or may not, be any point in asking the Minister of Finance and Personnel for additional funding; given the circumstances, he may provide some money. However, it is unacceptable to blame him continually for everything and to expect there to be a bottomless pit of available money.

There is no bottomless pit. In Northern Ireland, we are stuck with an even worse situation. There will, no

doubt, be more increases in demand from the security forces over the next few months, which will put even greater strain on the public purse.

12.15 pm

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

Mr Craig: I urge the Minister to rethink the policy, to talk to others and to bring forward a scheme.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The stark reality is that people are losing their houses and homes due to repossession. That is borne out by statistics issued by the Court Service on the number of repossessions. As has been stated, the number of actions for mortgage repossession from April to June 2008 was 929 — an increase of 345 compared with the same period in the previous year. As time has gone on, the situation facing homeowners has reached crisis level.

In February 2008, the Minister announced her intention to introduce a mortgage-rescue scheme, and said that it should be in place by July 2008. Of course, to date, nothing has been forthcoming: plenty of rhetoric, certainly, but no rescue scheme.

The proposed mortgage-rescue scheme will be administrative and discretionary and not statutory. Presumably, therefore, the people who qualify will do so based on a subjective rather than on an objective opinion of the administrator of the scheme. The provision of independent advice will be key in deciding who may qualify for the scheme, because people will have to show that they have sought and followed independent advice. Therefore, advice agencies will play a vital role in outlining the options available to those facing the mortgage crisis. People will be given advice as the last course of action open to them in their particular circumstances.

I agree with what Jonathan Craig said in relation to the mortgage-rescue scheme as proposed, because people will have to move out of their houses, and the common selection scheme will then be used. Surely, that contradicts the purpose of the scheme whereby people need to be helped to stay in their own homes? As has been pointed out, many homes are adapted for particular needs, and it is a burden on the taxpayer to add people to the waiting list, while people who may not qualify for adapted homes are moved into them. If the common selection scheme is a problem, as my colleague Fra McCann has stated, then it needs to be reviewed. That has been talked about for many years, and to date, again, nothing has been done to deal with that problem.

Any mortgage-rescue plan has to be welcomed. However, there needs to be a co-ordinated effort by all Departments to cope adequately with the problem. DSD needs to do more to provide adequate social housing

and not continue to blame others. Many people have been forced to purchase properties because of the lack of adequate social housing, and are then unable to maintain mortgage repayments through no fault of their own. That has to be recognised, and if adequate advice is to be a main plank of the proposed system, special advice agencies need to be given the proper funding and resources to maximise their input.

We have listened to the talk and promises from DSD; now is the time for action to stop this continuing blight on our society. The Minister has to take decisive action, and take it now. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Beggs: I, too, support the motion. We must consider the bleak financial outlook that many families in Northern Ireland generally face, which will put additional pressure on the Minister and on the Department for Social Development in their attempt to meet their needs.

Northern Ireland is witnessing increasing levels of unemployment, with some 36,000 people at the last count signing on to the jobseeker's allowance scheme. Many of those people are unemployed for the first time, and the recession is hitting white- and blue-collar workers hard. It is having a major impact on their lives. It is affecting people generally, and working families particularly, and their ability to continue to pay their mortgages.

We have also had to come to terms with the realisation that over the past five years, the Northern Ireland housing market, like so many markets, entered a parallel universe in which house prices were beyond what many incomes could sustain. Mortgages were all too readily made available by the banks, which have placed so many people in a vulnerable situation.

In the first quarter of this year, the number of repossessions has risen significantly, with 929 applications for repossession being made to the courts. Given the economic downturn, in coming months, that situation is likely to worsen.

Many households and, indeed, families with children throughout Northern Ireland, are facing an uncertain future. Therefore, it was with great encouragement that I and others welcomed the Minister for Social Development's announcement in February 2008, when she said that she would seek to introduce a mortgage-rescue scheme as part of a new housing agenda. In June 2008, the Minister welcomed an Assembly motion calling on her to introduce a mortgage-rescue scheme. The Minister claimed that she had the basis of a scheme, that it would be unique to Northern Ireland, and that it would be tailored to meet our specific needs.

What has happened since then? In fact, the Minister for Social Development's original budget did not earmark money for such a scheme, and since then, the

Department for Social Development's financial position has deteriorated significantly due to the drop in the value of assets that it had hoped to sell. I recognise that at each monitoring round since June 2008, the Minister has made unsuccessful — to date — bids for an additional £5 million to fund such a scheme.

I believe that the Minister is aware of how drastic the situation is becoming for many individuals and families, and like other Members, I am aware from constituency cases of how many vulnerable families, including those with disabled members, are threatened with homelessness and have been drawn into using moneylenders and buy-to-let schemes. Subsequently, many of those people have discovered that their tenure is insecure, so I ask anyone who is considering using such a scheme to examine it carefully and to get good advice before signing any new contract. I support the idea that housing associations might have a constructive role to play in the matter, although that role, in itself, could create difficulties. Buy-to-let schemes may have a place, but householders with secure tenures must be careful in case they end up becoming homeless.

For some time, the Ulster Unionist Party has been warning people that we are in a difficult financial situation. We are now discovering that a range of services are under threat. For example, the extended schools scheme is being underfunded and the Department for Social Development is unable to implement the social and affordable housing agenda. Significant financial failures have caused additional pressures, including the failure of the Workplace 2010 proposal, Land and Property Service's rates collection fiasco, and the failure by the Department of Finance and Personnel to accurately value the Crossnacreevy proposal. Consequently, the amount of available funds has deteriorated, so —

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

Mr Beggs: Therefore, there is an urgent need to make moneys available to enable that to happen and to ensure that we protect the most vulnerable people in our society.

Mr A Maginness: There is general agreement in the House about the need for a mortgage-rescue scheme. Indeed, the Committee for Social Development was presented with an outline of the scheme envisaged by the Minister. Furthermore, Members had an opportunity to contribute to the scheme's consultation process in the autumn. Given the grave financial situation in which many families find themselves, whether they are living in homes from housing associations, the Housing Executive or the private sector, a mortgage-rescue scheme is necessary.

The objective of a scheme of this sort is to assist people financially, and that requires money. It is

necessary that that money be advanced to the Department for Social Development so that such a scheme can be fully and effectively implemented.

Colleagues in the Chamber have said that the money should be found in the budget of the Department for Social Development. I ask them, given the financial straits that the Department is in, where will the money be found? If colleagues wish the Department's budget to be reprioritised, are they suggesting that the Supporting People programme be cut, for instance? Will the housing maintenance programme be cut further? Will the house-building programme be cut? Will the warm homes scheme be cut back? Please tell me which programmes should be cut. Furthermore, how will a scheme be implemented if new money is not made available?

Mr Craig said that we cannot go to the Department of Finance and Personnel to ask for money. Why not? The Department for Social Development has not got the money, and this is an urgent priority — as evidenced by the remarks that have been made around the Chamber. Where do we get the money? That is the question that I put to the House. Members should be putting pressure on the Minister of Finance and Personnel and his Department to advance more money to deal with this urgent problem.

If the money is not forthcoming, the central and substantive feature of the scheme cannot be put into effect and we will not be able to help people. We can help people by providing advice and by trying to postpone the evil day, but we cannot rescue them. The central element of the plan is to rescue homes and to do away with the devastating consequences about which many Members have talked today.

If we cannot reprioritise the DSD budget — and I am convinced that we cannot do that without affecting other vital schemes — how do we bring about a mortgage-rescue programme that will rescue people? There has been no answer to that question. Mr Craig is going to give me an answer now.

Mr Craig: I made a suggestion to the Minister, and I hope that the Minister takes it up. Housing associations are cash rich, because, over the past number of years, they have not been able to purchase land on which to build new social housing. We could tap into that source to fund a scheme that would rescue people from their mortgages. We do not need the old thinking; we need to start thinking outside the box. The taxpayer cannot bail everything out all of the time. It is time that we started to think about alternatives.

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

Mr A Maginness: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank Mr Craig for a useful and interesting suggestion. However, it is a wee bit like a remark that was made in

the House of Lords by the former Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, when he said that the privatisation of public assets was like selling the family silver. The problem is that although housing associations have assets and cash, they have to be careful because their main concern is to invest in new homes. If we deprive them of that, we are depriving them of the ability to maximise the use of that money to create new homes.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No; I will not give way.

I welcome the reduction in the waiting time for support for mortgage interest, from 39 weeks to 13 weeks from 5 January this year. I look forward to the introduction of the homeowner mortgage-support scheme, which will allow households to defer part of their mortgage payment for up to two years — that is a very welcome initiative.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the next Member to speak will be Jim Shannon.

The sitting was suspended at 12.30 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Shannon: I am glad to be able to speak on this issue, as it is a matter that is close to my heart and close to the heart of the Minister. It is a worrying time for homeowners across the Province, and I have been vocal, both inside and outside the Chamber, on the issue of affordable housing. I have listened to stories of some young people who were taking on mortgages of £1,000 a month for homes that had doubled in value, and now, with job losses and cutbacks, those young people — and older folks, too — are in real danger of losing their homes.

The situation is not limited to the Province; the mainland is being hit hard as well. However, the response over there has been a lot more prompt. My information comes from Internet research. The English programme was devised last year by the National Housing Federation, which represents England's housing associations, and the Council of Mortgage Lenders. Not-for-profit housing associations will buy homes from people who are struggling to pay their mortgages and allow them to continue living there. The Government have said that the £200 million scheme could help up to 6,000 households that might otherwise face repossession.

Scotland has had a similar scheme since 2003, and more than 700 households have benefited from it. The Scottish Government have said that they plan to extend the existing mortgage-to-rent scheme as well as to develop a new mortgage-to-equity programme, which, I believe, will help some owners to keep full possession of their homes, while substantially reducing their debt.

Wales also has a mortgage-rescue scheme, which involves housing associations registered with the National Assembly for Wales.

Northern Ireland's Department for Social Development has issued a consultation document on setting up such a scheme but has still to launch it formally — and that is one of my concerns. Perhaps, to be fair, that is where the problem lies. We have done nothing other than prepare the consultation document, but the time for consultation is well past for many people. Nevertheless, if a scheme were to be brought in now, it would be just in time to help other people.

In mi' ain area a' ken fowk whau hae wrocht herd fer tae bi' a bigger haem, en er noo faced wi' the proaspect o' sellin weel aloe tha velye fer feer that they irny abel tae pay aff ther mortgage. Fowk whau er tradesmen but hae haud nae bisness o' laet. Then there r yins whau's pertainers hae loast ther joabs. This soart o' thing is iver aw en is repeated iver an iver en needs oor Social an Developmunt Meenster tae step in an dae sumthin. This iw whut we er axkin fer tha day.

I know of people in my constituency who have worked hard to buy bigger homes, and who are now faced with the prospect of selling those homes well below their value, for fear that they may not be able to repay their mortgages. Those people are tradesmen, but they have had no business of late and, in some circumstances, their partners have lost their jobs. That situation is repeated far too often for the Minister for Social Development not to step in and do something. That is what we are asking for today.

Under the English scheme, the housing associations will buy homes at an independently assessed market price. Successful applicants will remain in their properties, either as tenants on affordable rent, or as owners, after receiving a loan from a housing association. It is intended that once the householder's financial situation has improved, he or she can pay back the loan in part or in full. The scheme is targeted at families with small children, households with a disabled member, pensioners or those deemed to be vulnerable in any other way.

People who seek help will apply to their local authority and will have their finances assessed by a designated agency. The property will then be valued, and the housing association will step in to buy it. The scheme is changing the lives of families on the mainland. Are young families and elderly people in our Province any less deserving?

The Government on the mainland have expanded the income support for mortgage interest (ISMI) scheme, which means that the time before homeowners who lose their jobs receive financial help with the interest payments on their mortgage has been cut from 39 weeks to 13 weeks. Under another initiative — the homeowner mortgage support scheme — householders who see their incomes fall unexpectedly will be allowed to defer part of their payments for up to two years. Under the mortgage pre-action protocol, lenders will be legally compelled to use repossession only as a last resort, after looking at other alternatives with the borrower, such as reducing monthly payments.

What has the Minister put in place in Northern Ireland? The answer is, unfortunately, not enough. The time for consulting is over; it is now time for action. I ask the Minister to deal with the situation as a matter of priority, before more families lose their homes and their livelihoods.

The number of warnings of mortgage arrears between July and September almost doubled since the same period the previous year — 1,006 writs and summonses in 2008, compared with 521 in 2007. In Northern Ireland in 2008, 3,628 mortgage arrears warnings were issued — a year-on-year rise of 64%.

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

Mr Shannon: There has also been an increase in the number of people seeking debt advice. I urge the Minister for Social Development to respond positively, which I hope she will. Members will hear later in the debate whether she will meet the mortgage needs of people in the Province.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I welcome this timely opportunity to look again at a Northern Ireland-specific mortgage-rescue scheme and thank Members who have contributed to the debate. If my response fails to address any of the points that they raised, I will write to them separately.

The motion calls for me:

“to bring forward a mortgage-rescue plan as soon as possible.”

I am happy to say that, subject to resources, I am ready to do so.

When I launched the new housing agenda last year, I made it clear that I wanted not only to help people onto the housing ladder but to support those who are striving to stay on it. I said that I wanted to establish a mortgage-rescue scheme and that I would bring forward detailed proposals later in 2008.

Members will recall a very positive debate in June 2008 on the need for such a scheme. In that debate, I said that I intended to publish detailed proposals and to put them out to consultation. I have done that. The consultation comments were received in November, and most supported my concept of a scheme that would offer enhanced advice and two main financial interventions.

The responses to the consultation have been analysed and a policy paper has been drawn up. We are in a position to move very quickly to introduce a robust mortgage-rescue scheme; therefore Members will recognise that we have done the work that we said we would. Members will also recall that in that June debate I said that those plans would require funding. That remains the position.

I have bid for funding for mortgage rescue in three successive monitoring rounds. Regrettably, those bids have not been met. However, there is no doubt that a mortgage-rescue scheme is needed now more than ever. During the fourth quarter of 2008 alone, 939 applications for repossession orders were made to the courts here — a 73% increase over the same period in the previous year. The total for the year, of 3,628 repossession applications, is a rise of 64% on 2007. That trend deeply concerns me, as it does Members here.

We may want to find someone to blame for all this, and we may ask questions about irresponsible lending or about financial institutions moving to foreclose too quickly. However, blaming the banks or others — as some in the House prefer — rather than looking for solutions does little to help people who are struggling

to hang on to their homes. The truth is that the economic downturn is landing many thousands of households and businesses in dire financial circumstances.

Members know that initiatives have already been implemented or are being considered, including reducing the waiting time for mortgage-interest support from 39 weeks to 13 weeks from 5 January 2009. Over the next few months, the Department for Communities and Local Government will announce details of the homeowner mortgage-support scheme, which will allow part of householders' mortgage interest payments to be deferred for up to two years. Allied to that, the Court Service is considering introducing a protocol that will require lenders not to seek a possession order for at least three months and to demonstrate to the courts that all reasonable avenues have been explored before seeking such an order.

With DSD support, the local Court Service and the Housing Rights Service have set up advice facilities at the Royal Courts of Justice and at the Laganside Courts for people taken to court without their own legal representation.

The mortgage-rescue scheme that I have developed can provide help through both preventative measures, that is, advice, and through direct intervention, that is, becoming a tenant of, or a joint homeowner with, a housing association.

The first element relates to assistance that is offered by an advice service. That part of the scheme is open to every member of the general public, including people who have mortgage arrears, as well as those who fear that they may not be able to meet mortgage payments in the near future. The second element relates to the part of the scheme that provides direct intervention through a scheme administrator, supported by participating housing associations. That element of the scheme is designed to help a small number of people who find it impossible to meet mortgage payments and who meet a number of other criteria.

I emphasise that the scheme is administrative and discretionary, rather than statutory. As well as meeting the eligibility criteria, applications must be prioritised to ensure that the most vulnerable could be helped within the limited resources that are available. As in other jurisdictions, the scheme will help only some of those who find themselves in financial difficulty. In England, the funding that was announced for mortgage rescue will help only 6,000 people out of potentially millions who are in financial difficulty. However, a relatively small amount of funding can go a very long way towards lifting the despair that many people will face in the coming months.

Let us be realistic about the money: the overall housing budget is facing a shortfall of £100 million in each of the next two years, and that is just to do things

that were planned at the start of the budget cycle. It does not include new schemes that we would like to establish, such as mortgage rescue.

People really need to get their heads around the fact that £100 million is not just a number: it is more than one third of the housing budget, and it will mean substantially less spending on housing — whether that be on newbuild, improvements or maintenance. Unless the Executive revisit the budget allocation for housing, the bitter reality of the shortfall will hit home very soon. A full-blooded mortgage-rescue scheme cannot go ahead without proper funding. After three bids, the outlook for that is poor. Until I secure the necessary funding, I will not raise expectations.

I will now address comments from Members. David Hilditch and others mentioned debt advice. I regard that as a priority. In relation to helping people, that is an efficient investment of money. Jim Shannon referred to the scheme that was launched in January 2009. It is important to remember that England, Wales and Scotland have the money to operate the scheme. Unfortunately, we do not.

Anna Lo and Billy Armstrong both referred to the need for the Executive to find more resources. I could not agree more. Roy Beggs helpfully acknowledged the financial crisis that faces housing, as did Alban Maginness and Thomas Burns. That is the reality. Jonathan Craig made the point that housing associations have cash resources that could be used to finance the mortgage-rescue scheme. To some extent, however, that would be like robbing Peter to pay Paul. We are pressing housing associations to pay an ever-increasing share of our newbuild costs so that our money — taxpayers' money — goes further. If we strip away housing-association reserves, we limit the contribution that they can make to much-needed newbuild.

I am grateful to Mr Craig because, unlike some others, he made a constructive suggestion.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister for Social Development: I have little time, so I will continue. I hope that the Member accepts my apology.

Yesterday, we saw what many commentators thought was a new maturity in our politics, given the recent atrocities. Today, however, it is back to business as usual for Mr Fra McCann and Mr Brady — scraping the barrel to score cheap political points.

Mr McCann, who has had personal coaching on housing finance matters, knows full well that there is a huge shortfall in the housing budget. I made it clear in the Chamber long before now that new money would be required to finance the mortgage-rescue scheme, yet the Member is happy to pretend not only that DSD should already have the money, but that mortgage

rescue would be a magic solution for everyone in financial difficulty. If Mr McCann did even the most basic arithmetic, he would know that to buy out everyone facing repossession in this year alone would cost something like £300 million.

2.15 pm

Mickey Brady also tried to pretend that the money exists, if only the Minister would allocate it. Those men shed crocodile tears for the many people who are facing repossession and hardship, yet all they are doing is exploiting fears and raising expectations so that they can score a few cheap points. That is despicable.

If proof of Sinn Féin's spin is needed, let me refer Members to that party's response to my autumn consultation on the mortgage-rescue scheme. This is what Sinn Féin said:

"Sinn Féin believes that resources should be made available by the Executive to allow for a mortgage relief scheme to be put in place as soon as practicable."

There it is in black and white.

However, I have a bit of good news. Although we cannot afford direct financial interventions, we can step up the provision of much-needed financial and legal advice. I am pleased to announce that, within the next few weeks, we will invest in excess of £100,000, in addition to the amount that we are already spending, to increase the volume of professional mortgage-rescue advice and legal support available to those facing repossession. We will also assist in the training of more specialist advisers. Together, those measures will still help a lot of people.

I welcome today's motion, and I know that there is support for the work that I have already undertaken and for what I have just announced. In addition, if we can secure the requisite funding for a full-blown mortgage-rescue scheme, then the House can rest assured that we have done the work and are ready to go.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank all the Members who spoke in the debate, which has been worthwhile. It is the second time that the Assembly has debated this subject: last year, it debated a motion calling for the establishment of a not-for-profit mortgage-rescue scheme.

When he moved the motion, Fra McCann outlined the human impact of unemployment and redundancy, and many Members spoke about the difficulties that their constituents face and of the many families who are being put through the mill. They are under great emotional, personal and financial pressure. They are trying to hold on to their homes, and, in some cases, sadly, their families.

In February 2008, the Minister announced that she would set up a mortgage-relief scheme, but, as Fra McCann pointed out, it is now March 2009, and there

is no scheme. The economic situation that has arisen has taken us all by surprise. Figures were quoted today. The number of applications to the court has increased by 73%, and that figure was not lost on anyone. Fra McCann, Micky Brady, David Hilditch, Billy Armstrong and others mentioned the importance of getting proper advice, particularly from the independent advice sector. The Minister's announcement on the advice facilities set up by the Court Service and the Housing Rights Service is to be welcomed — anything that will alleviate the pressure and burden on families must be welcomed.

David Hilditch, who is the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, outlined in some detail the Committee's views. Regular discussions have taken place on the issue. It is not a conspiracy — the political parties are not huddling in Room 144 or Room 135 to get at the Minister. The issue comes up regularly, and, as elected representatives, we are confronted by it almost daily, as we try to help the people who put us here. Therefore, I know that some paranoia exists at times, but let us put that one to rest.

Issues that were raised included families remaining in their homes, housing associations and rents, having cash to clear debts, and equity. However, above all, people go through a process and are then evicted. Fra McCann, Mickey Brady, Thomas Burns, David Hilditch and Jonathan Craig all raised that point. People must go through a process whereby they are declared homeless before they go back on a waiting list on the basis of the common selection scheme, and that almost defeats the purpose.

As elected representatives, we are continually faced with trying to find out how the mortgage-rescue plan gets resourced under the Minister's responsibility. That is one of our main concerns. Alban Maginness, if Members even need reminding, was like the Rod Tidwell character in 'Jerry Maguire', who said, "Show me the money!" He said that there is a need for agreement and for a mortgage-rescue scheme. He spoke about the necessity of the scheme, which, in fairness, all Members welcome. However, interestingly, he spoke about financially assisting people, and it brought me back to the debates that we had on the Financial Assistance Bill, which is now in law. Not for one minute do I interpret that Act as being somewhere where things that other Departments cannot afford are dumped. However, since we debated that legislation, there has been a marked increase in the number of people losing their homes.

Rather than try to respond to the comments that have been made in today's debate, and in previous debates, the Minister should genuinely take on board the comments made and consider what can be done. Regardless of what the Minister said today about my party colleagues, people are very concerned about

what can be done to alleviate the situation for people who are going through the mill.

Housing is DSD's responsibility, but we realise that there are resource problems. If the Minister went to her colleagues in the Executive with copies of Hansard and told them that the issue frequently arises, and if she made a robust attempt to have the scheme funded, I dare say that that would have more of an impact than her sitting here churlishly making personal insults to Members who have the audacity to care about their constituents does.

We then got a lecture on political craft from her colleague Alex Attwood. When the Minister attended the Ulster Unionist Party conference — I think that that is what the party was called then — she did not ask about mortgage-rescue schemes, nor did she ask about resources. Instead, she said, "No surrender." Furthermore, when her party leader went to Oxford and spoke about stripping down the whole issue of partnership, he did not argue for more resources for here.

The Minister needs to take on board what people are saying. I ask her to consider the comments that have been made today. I am delighted that Members who spoke did so with compassion and genuine concern about what is happening. If the Minister makes a real attempt to go to her Executive colleagues and argue for more money, the Assembly will support that. However, we firmly believe that the first port of call is DSD.

Today's announcement that an advice centre is to offer assistance is very welcome. The Minister has done well, but she needs to do more. I ask the House to support motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the increasing levels of house repossessions and calls on the Minister for Social Development to bring forward a mortgage-rescue plan as soon as possible.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Dual Mandates

Mr Deputy Speaker: In accordance with the Business Committee's agreement to allocate additional time where two or more amendments have been selected, up to one hour and 45 minutes will be allowed for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

I inform Members that a valid petition of concern in relation to this motion was presented on Monday 9 March. I remind Members that the effect of that petition is that the vote on the motion will be decided on a cross-community basis. Two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Beggs: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I suspect that some of the 30 Members whose names are on the petition of concern have a conflict of interest. Will the Speaker advise as to whether that conflict of interest has any bearing on this attempt to suppress the will of the Assembly? Will he also advise whether the list will be published, and will he tell us where it can be examined?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has decided that the petition of concern is valid, and it can be viewed in the Business Office.

Mr Elliott: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to request the UK Government to bring forward legislation to prohibit dual mandates of the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and the UK Parliament.

At the outset, I extend my personal sympathy both to the family of the police officer who was tragically murdered last night and to the families of the soldiers who were murdered on Saturday night. I also wish a speedy recovery to those who were injured. It is only right that I do so at this time.

It is unfortunate that there is a need to debate the motion, and it is an even greater shame that one of the two amendments that we will debate attempts to confuse and water down the issue and kick it into touch. Some people will say that there is no focus on councillors, and, indeed, our motion is clearly focused on the dual mandate of Members of the Assembly and Members of the House of Commons in Westminster. However, we hoped that the issue of councillors would be resolved by new legislation under the review of

public administration (RPA) and that, therefore, there would be no need to confuse the matter.

As the world looks on, we are debating a situation that is almost more appropriate to a banana republic than to a regional Assembly of the United Kingdom. It is unfortunate that a petition of concern has been presented. I wonder whether some Members lodged that petition of concern in respect of their own jobs. Is it a petition of concern for their own jobs? "Working the double" is a term that is often used in this society to describe the offences of benefit cheats. However, that term also seems to apply to the 16 Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly who are MPs, including seven Ministers and one junior Minister. It is worth noting that Sinn Féin and the DUP are the most conspicuous parties in that matter. Nine of the 17 double-jobbers throughout the United Kingdom are from the DUP, and five are from Sinn Féin.

In stark contrast, no Members of the Welsh Assembly are MPs, and only one Member of the Scottish Parliament — the First Minister — is an MP. It is already a robust and well-established constitutional convention in both Scotland and Wales that a Member of the regional Parliament or Assembly should not also be a part of the national Parliament. It is also expressly forbidden for an MEP to be a Member of the national Parliament.

It is difficult for ordinary voters in this society and community, many of whom are losing their jobs or whose jobs are under threat, to accept the number of MLAs who are working the double as MPs.

2.30 pm

The situation is indefensible. It reeks of personal empire building, and no reasonable man or woman can accept this situation or accept that it should be allowed to continue for one more day — let alone leaving it, as the DUP amendment says, for further consideration and subjecting it to "a phased approach". It is a matter that must be judged on principle: it is either right or wrong, and, if wrong, it must be ended forthwith and not subjected to a phased approach. This is just the same as last week's vote on the provisions of the Health Bill [HL] dealing with tobacco. The amendment is self-serving. If working the double is wrong tomorrow and will ultimately be phased out, it is wrong today and should be done away with immediately.

I know that there is a temptation for parties to run high-profile candidates, and that is why this matter should not be left to those parties alone. Rather, it should be enshrined in legislation, so that the parties and individuals concerned cannot yield to the temptation. It is insulting to the electorate — and to the main institution of democratic representation and Government in this country, the Westminster Parliament — that being an MP should be considered a part-time add-on

job by the 16 Members of this Assembly who are also MPs. Of those 16 Members, eight are also Ministers.

Let us speak plainly about this. It may seem all right to those who benefit from this double-jobbing: they are often insulated from the realities of life in the real world. However, ordinary members of the public see that double-jobbing as personal enrichment at public expense.

I am informed that a Member of Parliament earns almost £62,000. For an Assembly Member who is also an MP, that figure rises to over £76,000. A Minister earns an additional £37,800; a junior Minister an additional £19,600; and the First and deputy First Ministers an additional £71,500. That has led to some individuals in this Assembly earning almost £150,000 per year. That is before one takes into account the keep-it-in-your-family effect which seems to be peculiar to one party. Is that the real nature of the family party? Some political households may be close to doubling the aforementioned amount — and that does not include payment of expenses and allowances available to both Members of the Assembly and Members of Parliament. There are times when the public must wonder whether those people might be better paid than some of the now-notorious former directors of the Royal Bank of Scotland.

Some of the DUP and Sinn Féin double-jobbers might say that their rates of pay as Assembly Members are cut because of the double-jobbing. The answer to that is clear: are there two classes of Assembly Members — those paid a full-time rate for a full-time job, and those paid a part-time rate for a part-time job? Then there is the question of which job is the part-time one. Is it that of being an Assembly Member, or that of being a Member of Parliament at Westminster? Are the constituents of Assembly Members who double-job as MPs receiving full-time representation in both legislatures?

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Elliott: The Member has been looking to get in all the time, so I might as well.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he clarify for me whether he is the same Thomas Elliott who ran in 2005 for both Westminster and his local council while being an MLA? Perhaps that was some other Thomas Elliott? I would be happy to receive information from the Member on that.

Mr McNarry: There is only one Thomas Elliott.

Mr Elliott: I wonder whether this is the same Peter Weir who also ran for Westminster while an MLA. I indicated clearly on that occasion that, if elected to Westminster, I would stand down as an MLA. I do not know whether Mr Weir gave a similar indication. If not, I leave him to answer for it.

Do those MPs who sit in the Assembly mean to tell us that they can be in two places at once? Can they be in this Chamber while they are in Westminster?

Mr McClarty: Does the Member agree with me that, although an Assembly Member who is also an MP has his Assembly salary abated, the office cost allowance remains? In that way, as an MP, he or she will get a full MPs' office cost allowance, and also, as an MLA, a full office cost allowance for the Assembly.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for his intervention. I understand that the person gets the full office cost allowance for being a Member of the Assembly and the full office cost allowance for being a Member of Parliament. Quite clearly, there is a huge difference between what someone can earn — or receive in expenses — as a Member of Parliament and an MLA, and someone doing solely one of those jobs.

The editor of a major local newspaper wrote recently:

“Observers at Westminster tell me the presence of some Northern Ireland MPs is increasingly fleeting. It is obvious that some of our representatives cannot do two jobs properly. They are making quick trips to London, popping in and out of the House of Commons, and turning what should be a vitally essential full-time occupation into a part-time charade.”

I believe that the initiative for change should come from the Assembly. The legislation has to be initiated by Westminster, and that is the purpose of the motion. If that happens, it will look as if the national Parliament can intervene and do something about it. I think that the initiative should come from the Assembly and that the people who are doing the double-jobbing should stand up and say that it is right to call for legislation and to do it now.

Miss McIlveen: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert

“notes that the issue of multiple mandates, including council membership, is to be further considered by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, and believes that a phased approach to this matter represents the best way forward.”

Before I begin, I would like to express my condolences to the families of those killed during the past few days and to wish those injured in those murderous attacks a swift and full recovery. Events such as those bring into focus how petty motions such as this are, given the bloodshed that has once again blighted the streets of Northern Ireland.

In relation to the proposed amendment, I declare an interest as someone who holds a double mandate — I am a councillor in Ards Borough Council. I was elected in the 2005 local government elections, and in that council area the DUP polled 49.1% of the vote. In the 2007 Assembly elections, the DUP returned four MLAs in my constituency of Strangford, with 50.1% of first preference votes. In the last Westminster election, my party colleague Iris Robinson polled

56.5% of the vote, with a massive majority of more than 13,000 votes over her closest rival, who just happened to be an Ulster Unionist. The Assembly elections and the Westminster elections have something in common for all the DUP candidates; we all held other elected mandates. Despite that, however, the public overwhelmingly elected us into office.

When I first read the motion in the names of two Ulster Unionist Party Members, I thought: why would Members from that party choose to set down such a motion? Could it be that they would never hold a dual mandate? When I think about the membership of the Ulster Unionist Party Benches, I am struck by the Members who not only occupy those Benches, but the benches of local councils.

Mr McClarty: Will the Member give way?

Miss McIlveen: No, I have a lot to say.

I need look no further than the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, Sir Reg Empey. He is a Belfast City councillor, an MLA, the Minister for Employment and Learning, and, of course, perpetual candidate for the East Belfast constituency. Is the motion an indication that the Ulster Unionist Party leader will not be contesting that constituency come the next general election? Is it an indication that we can expect to hear about his resignation from Belfast City Council?

Sir Reg is not the only Member sitting on the neighbouring Benches to hold a dual mandate. His ministerial colleague, Mr McGimpsey, keeps him company in Belfast City Council. They might have been joined in the Northern Ireland Assembly by other council colleagues, Jim Rodgers and Bob Stoker; however, the electorate decided against that.

I believe that dual-mandate holders in the Ulster Unionist Party — and I am willing to be corrected if I am wrong — include Mr Basil McCrea, Mr Kennedy, Mr McClarty, Mr Cobain, Mr Savage, Mr Ken Robinson, Mr Cree, Mr Beggs, Mr Gardiner and Mr Elliott. I look forward to seeing none of those names on the ballot paper at the next general election, particularly that of Mr Elliott, one of the proposers of the motion. I hope that he is now going to leave the job of regaining Fermanagh and South Tyrone for unionism to the person best placed to do so — Mrs Arlene Foster.

There are other local councillors in the Chamber, and I am sure that they will not mind me mentioning their names — Mr Farry, Mr McGlone, Mr Burns, Mr McCann, Mr Brian Wilson. In fact, every party, bar the single Member PUP, has local councillors who are also MLAs.

One noteworthy fact is that, of the 108 MLAs who were elected in 2003, 54 stood as candidates for Westminster. Therefore, the reason behind the motion

is not for the Ulster Unionist Party to show that it is a one-mandate-only party, and perhaps it is because it objects to MPs holding more than one elected mandate. In the dim and distant past — the bad old days, so to speak — the former Ulster Unionist Party leader, Mr Trimble, and the deputy leader, Mr Taylor, were MPs when they held seats in the Assembly, so it definitely cannot be that.

Then I considered that perhaps the Ulster Unionist Party was saying that those who held dual and multiple mandates could not carry out their duties properly. My attendance at my local council has been over 90% in the past year — not that I keep track of such matters. I am also advised that, from May 2007 to January 2009, my voting record in Divisions in the Assembly was 93.3%, and my attendance at Committee meetings was also noted as 100%.

The DUP's overall voting record in the Assembly sits at a healthy average of 84.2%, far outstripping any other party in the Assembly. Even the PUP, which has a single Member, has a paltry record of 29.2%. Mr Deeny's record is 23.6%, and Mr McHugh's record is 29.2%. Perhaps it could be said that it is more difficult for single-Member parties to cope with the additional work, but let us compare their records with DUP Ministers. Sammy Wilson MP has a voting record of 62.9%, Nigel Dodds MP has a voting record of 64%, Peter Robinson MP has a voting record of 70.8%, Jeffrey Donaldson MP has a voting record of 74.2%, and Arlene Foster has a voting record of 77.5%.

When that is compared with the Ulster Unionist Party's multiple-mandate Ministers, Sir Reg Empey could manage a voting record of only 37%, and Mr McGimpsey managed to cast his vote 47% of the time. The SDLP's Dr McDonnell, who holds a seat in Westminster and in the Assembly, has a 54% voting record in Divisions here and a 22.9% voting record in Westminster since the last election. His party leader, Mr Durkan, has a 58% voting record in Divisions in the Assembly and a 25.9% voting record in Westminster.

In Westminster, Sammy Wilson has a 47.5% voting record, William McCrea has a 47.6% voting record, my colleague Gregory Campbell has a record of 44.1%, Nigel Dodds has a record of 43.9%, and David Simpson's voting record is 41.1%. All those records are available online, with information on the number of debates in which Members participated and the questions that they asked. It is a very interesting read.

Sinn Féin, of course, does not represent its constituents in Westminster, so we cannot compare its multiple-mandate holders. The Ulster Unionists, of course, do not currently have anyone in the House of Commons against whom to compare multiple mandates, given that that party was left clinging to a single seat in the last general election.

That brings me to my next question: is the Ulster Unionist Party saying that a single-mandate Member could do the job better? I have already referred to the records of Ms Purvis and Dr Deeny, but perhaps I should look no further than at the Ulster Unionists' very own David Burnside, who has an astonishing 20% voting record in this Chamber. Mr Burnside did not have the distraction of Westminster any more, nor did he have to warm his seat in his local council, but he did not warm his seat too much in the Assembly either.

Mr Elliott: Will the Member give way?

Miss McIlveen: No, I have a lot to get through.

Perhaps the SDLP's single-mandate MP, Mr McGrady, could help out to show that his voting record far outstrips that of the DUP's MPs. No: his records show that he has voted in only 17.8% of Divisions in the House of Commons. Therefore, it cannot be that single-mandate Members do the job any better than dual- or multiple-mandate Members. I could go on and on with various statistics about multiple mandates, Committee Chairs and various other Members —

Mr Shannon: Keep going.

Miss McIlveen: Time is limited, Mr Shannon.

I am left to wonder whether the motion is a UUP motion, a Conservative Party motion or, indeed, a UCUNF (Ulster Conservatives and Unionists – New Force) motion.

Is the UUP simply tugging its forelock to its Conservative Party masters? Have the big house unionists taken up residence in the gate lodge?

2.45 pm

If the First Minister were to be excluded from being an MP, that may weaken Northern Ireland's lobbying position at Westminster. The DUP does not send a B-team to represent Northern Ireland's interests. From a unionist perspective, that is exactly what happened until the Stormont Parliament was prorogued in the 1970s. As a result, Northern Ireland lost out.

It seems that because the UUP cannot defeat the DUP at the polls, it will try by some alternative means. I am inclined to believe that the motion is based on sour grapes and green cheese. The issue of dual and multiple mandates is being considered by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. It is unnecessary to request the UK Government to bring forward legislation to prohibit dual mandates. Such legislation would be grossly unhelpful when the best method to deal with the issue is by a phased approach, which would ensure that the wealth of knowledge that exists is retained while, at the same time, nurturing fresh talent.

Northern Ireland is undergoing vast change in its governance, particularly at local government level, and

it is vital that there is smooth transition. To ban the talent that currently exists, who sit in the Assembly and on local councils, across all parties, would not be helpful. The motion is premature. Discussions are still ongoing in the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, and the motion is simply an attempt to short-cut and circumvent those discussions. In any event, it is up to the electorate to decide.

Mr O'Loan: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"calls on the UK Government to bring forward legislation to prohibit dual mandates in the devolved institutions and the UK Parliament; and requests that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee reports with recommendations for a definite timetable for ending dual or multiple mandates in this Assembly, including interim deadlines for prohibiting dual mandates being held by Ministers."

At the outset, I declare an interest as a member of Ballymena Borough Council. I have no embarrassment whatsoever in making that declaration and proposing amendment No 2, because my party's view is that the dual mandate needs to be brought to a conclusion. The discussion is about the manner in which that is done, and it needs to be done in a measured manner.

Therefore, I move amendment No 2, which stands in my name and in the names of others from my party. We believe that the matter needs to be addressed, but in a careful and considered way. The original motion is weak in that regard. It does not say what the legislation should contain. It says merely that legislation should "prohibit" dual mandates, without any indication of how or when that should happen.

The issue is complicated and tricky. Decisions could be made on the issue that might not lead to a good end. Therefore, it needs to be thought through carefully. My party believes that that thinking is not well provided for in the original motion, and that is why it has tabled its amendment, which it asks the Assembly to support.

Amendment No 2 is better than amendment No 1. It is clear in outcome: its goal is the abolition of the dual mandate through legislation at Westminster. It is clear on how to get there: to refer the matter to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, asking it for recommendations for a definite timetable to end the dual and multiple mandates in the Assembly, and to provide a specific timetable for the end of dual mandates that are held by Ministers, which are a particular and important issue.

The DUP amendment is better than the original motion. Nonetheless, it gives no real indication of the direction of travel or the intended destination. To that degree, it is unsatisfactory. It puts the matter much too much on the long finger.

I will summarise the essential arguments against the dual mandate. The Assembly needs to be aware of

widespread public comment on the issue. It is addressed frequently in the media, and when it is addressed by the public and through the media, it is in critical terms. People are critical of dual and multiple mandates, which, essentially, they see as holding down two or three jobs at once. They ask why that should be the case and believe that it should not be so.

There is the difficulty with the workload that is carried. If each of those roles, certainly at Assembly and at Westminster level, is viewed as a full-time occupation, people ask how someone can carry both of those jobs. Quite naturally, they ask why one person should receive two substantial payments for their political work. I note what was said about the reduced-pay arrangements between Westminster and the Assembly. However, that certainly does not fully address public concern on the issue. The public ask a fundamental question about whether such arrangements provide value for money.

The second important point is the issue of conflicts of interest, which, clearly, arise routinely when a Member belongs to two Chambers and particularly when that Member has Executive authority. The worst case arises when Ministers make decisions that affect other arenas in which they operate.

The Minister of the Environment, Sammy Wilson, has been mentioned. As the Minister with Executive responsibility for the Planning Service, he has no inhibition about making representations to the Planning Service on planning cases that arise in his constituency. A person whose judgement leads him to that conclusion is not the first person I would approach if I want sound judgement on the matter of conflicts of interest.

Mr Weir: I appreciate the Member's point. However, will a person not make representations, irrespective of whether that person is an MP or a councillor? Someone who is a Minister and an MLA will encounter the issue of representing their constituents' interests vis-à-vis their ministerial interests. The Member's argument is not particularly pertinent to the issue of dual mandates.

Mr O'Loan: In this case, the Minister has the Executive authority for a Department that manages the Planning Service. It can be seen as a clear conflict of interest for him to make representations on planning cases. If he is approached by an individual, it would be natural and proper to offer to find someone else to make the representation on the basis that his doing so would cause a conflict of interest.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: With respect, I will not give way again.

The Minister of the Environment is a member of Belfast City Council and, amazingly, continues to sit

on its planning committee. That represents a transparent conflict of interest.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Nigel Dodds, is also a member of Belfast City Council. He makes, and routinely announces in the Chamber, financial decisions — particularly on the rating system — that directly impinge on councils. However, some people, evidently, do not perceive that as a difficulty. The SDLP thinks that that is a significant difficulty that must be addressed. The two key issues are the community's perception of workload and value for money, and conflicts of interest.

It is important not to overstate that case, because someone could argue that, when a person stands for election, the public can decide not to vote for a person who sits in another Chamber. People must recognise that our political parties have a great deal of power. When the public vote, they do so, by and large, for candidates that represent political parties with which the voter has an allegiance. Therefore, they will support that party's candidate. The public do not have a simple free choice in the matter, and it is possible for the public to elect the same person to two Chambers but, at the same time, to be unhappy with that situation. Members should recognise that reality.

If one wants a job done, a busy person is often the one who will do it. There are many examples of that, even in our own Chamber. Those of us who are MLAs and have no higher role in the Assembly regard ourselves as quite busy. However, MLAs who take on other responsibilities — such as Committee Chairpersons or Ministers — fill their roles successfully and undoubtedly work even longer hours than the rest of us. Those issues are not absolutes, but there is an argument that people who have other jobs outside politics bring real-life experience and add value to the Chamber. That point must not be dismissed.

In addressing the matter, we need to think about the business of implementing change — that relates to my earlier point about why the original motion is weak. Making those changes is not as easy as it might seem at first sight. An example of that is the discussion of the issue of severance for councillors, which everyone seemed to support, including the Minister. However, the closer it came to making a decision on that, obstacles started to loom, and people began to see that it was not as simple as they thought it was at first. At the moment, there is no severance scheme on the table at all.

The same must be thought of this matter. It needs careful consideration, and the bringing forward of well thought out proposals, when decisions are eventually made on the issue. That is why the SDLP amendment is a far more prudent and sensible one. It states that the matter needs to be addressed and brought to a conclusion. We need to abolish dual mandates, but that

must be done in a proper and considered fashion. I ask for support for that amendment.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (Mr McCartney):
Éirim le labhairt mar LeasChathaoirleach an Choiste agus ansin mar bhall de Shinn Féin.

As Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, I can confirm that the issue of dual or multiple mandates is a matter with which the Committee can concern itself. The Committee identified the issue of dual or multiple mandates as one to be considered as part of its examination of the overall operation of Parts III and IV of the 1998 Act. There is a legal obligation on the Committee under section 11 of the St Andrews Agreement Act 2006 to report on the operation of Parts III and IV of the 1998 Act by 1 May 2015.

Although the matter of dual or multiple mandates is not an explicit feature of the Committee's work programme, in July 2007, as a first step, the Committee canvassed views from the leaders of the political parties represented in the Assembly on the issue. On 31 March 2008, the then Minister of the Environment, Arlene Foster, declared an intention:

“to work with colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office in order to introduce legislative proposals to end the dual mandate of those councillors who are also Members of the Assembly and/or Parliament.”
— [*Official Report, Bound Volume 29, p3, col 1*].

At that time, in light of that announcement, the Chairman of the Committee wrote to the party leaders to offer them a further opportunity to let the Committee have more detailed views on the following: the preferred method for phasing out multiple mandates, for example, by way of legislation or self regulation; any priorities or time frames for phasing out multiple mandates; how each of the various levels of multiple mandates should be dealt with; and the scope for employing co-option arrangements in circumstances in which Ministers or Members might choose to resign as councillors.

The Committee also sought a meeting with the Minister of the Environment to explore more precisely what plans there were to legislate to end the dual mandate. That meeting took place a number of weeks ago, and was attended by myself, the Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, Jimmy Spratt, and the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Environment Committee, Patsy McGlone and Cathal Boylan, who also have an obvious interest in the matter.

At that meeting, the Minister, Sammy Wilson, indicated that it was not his intention now to plan to legislate to end the dual mandate, and the Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and the Chairperson of the Environment Committee

reported in that regard to their respective Committees last week.

It is worth noting that, for some considerable time now, the Assembly and Executive Review Committee has been preoccupied with the very important matter of the transfer of policing and justice powers. However, I assure the House that the Committee does intend to return to the issue of dual and multiple mandates in due course.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, I will now speak as a member of Sinn Féin. As I previously stated, the Assembly and Executive Review Committee has been tasked with exploring the impact that dual mandates might have on the working and efficiency of the Assembly. Indeed, some preparatory work on the matter has already been carried out, and all the parties have submitted initial papers to the Committee for consideration. It is an issue to which the Committee has stated its intentions to return, and therefore, in some respect, the motion before us is ill-timed — or do I smell or suspect that there is an election in the air? That is for other people to decide.

3.00 pm

It is fair to say that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, at that time, took the position that it would wait until the then Minister of the Environment finalised her plans in respect of the review of public administration, in the belief that it would be premature of the Committee to consider the matter until she stated her intentions. Last Monday, the current Minister of the Environment briefed the Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of the Committee for the Environment and the Assembly and Executive Review Committee on his intentions, and that matter is now under consideration.

The proposals that Sinn Féin submitted in a paper to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee were underpinned by the question of whether dual or multiple mandates undermine the smooth running and efficiency of the Assembly, and that they should in no way permit any conflict of interest, real or perceived, to occur. We believe that the best way to resolve the issue is to allow the Assembly and Executive Review Committee to continue its work, and to await discussions within and between parties. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Dr Farry: At the outset, I join other Members in expressing my sympathy for those who lost their lives and for those who were injured in the past few days. I condemn those brutal and murderous attacks, as any right-thinking person would do.

In addressing the motion, I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council. The Alliance Party is opposed to the motion. We lean towards the DUP amendment as, perhaps, the best and most realistic

way forward, although we have some sympathy for the SDLP amendment as well. *[Interruption.]*

I hear the heckling from the Members on my left; clearly, they missed the comments that the Alliance Party Members made last week on the economic policies that are being pursued by the DUP in the Executive. Let us not hear any more notions about how my party judges issues in the Chamber. We judge every issue on its merits; we use no other benchmark whatsoever.

In the context of the economic downturn, the motion strikes me as an exercise in navel-gazing. Given what has happened over the past few days, that comment is doubly important. The Assembly should be discussing issues that are directly relevant to the people of Northern Ireland whom we represent.

It would be easy for the Alliance Party to support the motion and claim the high moral ground. At the moment, my party does not have any MPs — although we are always hopeful in that regard — and we will continue to contest Westminster elections. The danger for my party is that it may fall into the trap that the Ulster Unionist Party — or the Conservative Party — has fallen into, which is that its motives in proposing the motion are not genuine, but are more a reflection of its current electoral situation. That is the inevitable conclusion that people will draw.

In the past, when the Ulster Unionist had MPs who were also Members of this House, it was never a problem for David Trimble, John Taylor and the others who availed themselves of that situation. The motion strikes me —

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that the Ulster Unionist Party has attempted to limit that in recent years, and, in fact, the fallout with Jeffrey Donaldson began when he was not allowed to continue to double-job? Will the Member accept that a person cannot be in two places at once, and that, in recent years, in allowing Members to stand for Parliament, there is a clear indication that, if elected, such persons would stand down from the other role?

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

Dr Farry: I am grateful for the intervention. I am almost tempted to say that the Ulster Unionists have done a wonderful job of limiting double-jobbing all by themselves in recent years.

The Member touched on a wider point that I was going to make. We must recognise that the public at large is concerned about this issue, and there are two fundamental things to say about that. First, political parties have the opportunity to regulate those matters themselves; if the Ulster Unionist Party is claiming to have given leadership in that regard, fair play to it — others may follow in its footsteps. It will be

interesting to see who the Ulster Unionists field in the Westminster election when it takes place.

My second point is that it is the electorate that ultimately regulates who gets and wins seats. When people have dual mandates, the electorate are fully aware of who they are voting for and the implications of that. Ultimately, therefore, we have to respect the views of the electorate about who they wish to represent them.

A particular problem exists with Ministers with regard to a conflict of interest. Declan O'Loan made a point about Ministers who hold Executive authority and who are also members of bodies that intersect with their ministerial offices, such as city councils. I recognise that, for example, Mr Sammy Wilson, as a constituency MLA, is perfectly entitled to make representations to any Department or any agency. That point needs to be separated out.

The wider problem is one of time management, and how people can give their all to two jobs and be in two places at one time. Certainly, my role as an MLA is enhanced by my role as a councillor, because I have a better understanding of what is happening in my area. Councillors are part time because it is envisaged that they would have other, full-time jobs in the community, and being an MLA may well be one of those jobs. Doing both jobs helps one to get a more rounded perspective of what is happening in one's area.

The crucial factor has to be that Members who have dual mandates give priority to the Assembly as their primary mandate and responsibility, and ensure that the business that happens in this Chamber and in Committees is not affected by our business elsewhere.

Westminster is a little more complicated because of the time and the sheer distance involved, and because being an MP is a full-time job. However, there can be a major overlap between the constituency work of an MP and an MLA. Again, there may be benefits in economies of scale in that respect.

In light of the events of the past few days, I was touched and moved by the opportunity for at least two of our party leaders to make comments in this Chamber on Monday morning about the murders in Antrim and then go to Westminster that afternoon and make the same comments.

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

Dr Farry: That was one occasion on which the two different aspects of democracy in this country were useful to the community in Northern Ireland.

Mr Campbell: The issue of multi-mandates is one that the media love, because the issue for them is straightforward and simple: no one can be in two places at one time, no one should be doing two jobs,

and a person with more responsibilities cannot do their job as well as someone who has fewer responsibilities. The problem with that approach is the simple issue of the facts. I want to deal with two issues: payments and performance.

The DUP supports — and, I believe, there seems to be a broad consensus — the fact that we should work towards a single-mandate approach. However, our view is that we should do that by informing the public that it will, in fact, be a costly option. For example, the salary cost — which was the other side of the coin to which Mr O'Loan alluded — of each single-mandate MLA is £28,000 per annum more expensive than an MP who is also an MLA, because of the two-thirds reduction in an MLA's salary. Therefore, if we have, for example, 12 MPs —

Mr McNarry: That is a red herring.

Mr Campbell: It is not a red herring at all; it is factual. If we have 12 MPs who are also MLAs, it means that the public purse is £300,000 less well off than would be the case if those MLAs held a single mandate.

With regard to expenditure, it is an obvious conclusion that those who have one staffing allowance are more likely to spend more of it to pay for staff than those who have a staffing allowance from the Assembly and the House of Commons. An examination of the expenditure of MLAs and MPs will bear that out. So, we are in favour of moving towards single mandates, but the public should know that it will cost more. It will cost more to have single-mandate MLAs. As long as the public are content with that, and appreciate and have knowledge of that, it at least adds to the debate.

I want to turn to the issue of performance, because it is there that we find much that has not been alluded to, although Miss McIlveen did allude to it earlier in the debate. If we measure the performance of single-mandate MPs, in the current Parliament or in the 1990s, we would find that — not to put too fine a point on it — the fewer responsibilities that some MPs had, the worse their performance.

If we set aside the crucial matter of constituency duties, which elected politicians forget at their peril and which are impossible to verify independently, the accepted criteria for performance in the House of Commons — and to some extent here — are four fold: making speeches; voting; tabling questions; and tabling motions. It would strengthen the argument for fewer responsibilities if present or previous single-mandate MPs gave top-quality performances in all four categories. The case for that argument is weakened considerably when the precise opposite is found to be true.

I want to examine briefly the average number of questions asked, speeches delivered, votes made and motions tabled in the House of Commons. I have

compiled an average deliberately so that people cannot accuse me of cherry-picking. On average, DUP multi-mandate MPs have made 19 speeches in the House of Commons, and single-mandate MPs have made four speeches. DUP multi-mandate MPs have tabled an average of 101 questions, while single-mandate MPs have tabled an average of 63 questions, and DUP multi-mandate MPs have a 40% voting record, whereas single-mandate MPs have a 24% voting record. Again on average, DUP multi-mandate MPs have tabled five motions, whereas single-mandate MPs have only tabled 1.5 motions.

I will summarise to avoid any doubt about performances: multi-mandate MPs in our party table 60% more questions, have a 60% better voting record, have a 300% better record for tabling motions, and speak five times more often than single-mandate MPs. I would very nearly say that I rest my case. There is a considerable amount of work to be done before we can proceed to impose single mandates.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I oppose the motion and support the DUP amendment. Although I have some sympathy with the SDLP amendment, I cannot give it the same support for reasons that I will explain. I speak as someone who believes that dual mandates should end. When elected to the Assembly in 1998, I resigned from Derry City Council. At that time, I was in my fourth term as a councillor.

The Ulster Unionist Party motion reflects the fact that that party has only one MP, who, indeed, may even be considering her position in the party. Therefore, the Ulster Unionist Party — if that is still an accurate description — may not have any MPs to be concerned about and, consequently, could have no women elected to either the Assembly or Westminster to take account of those bodies.

What is the motion about other than being a mischievous distraction? We are all aware that a very significant reform process — the RPA — is under way. That has been mentioned already. In that context, it is simply common sense to take forward the issue of multiple mandates. The sponsors of the motion know that well enough, but their intention is to foster division and to be opportunistic rather than to promote a strategic response.

When the Assembly was established in 1998, the Ulster Unionist Party had 10 MPs, half of whom held dual mandates. Did that party bring forward the issue of single mandates then? The issue of dual mandates is an anomaly that can be explained in the context of the development of politics and the difficulties with politics over a considerable period. However, it is an issue that can and must be addressed.

The key argument that goes to the heart of the SDLP amendment and with which I have one particular disagreement is that Sinn Féin has always sought to establish a sustainable agreement in the Assembly. Despite some efforts, that goal proved unattainable when the Ulster Unionist Party was the largest party in the Assembly.

The issue of dual mandates is inextricably linked to the demonstrable achievement of a sustainable and functional power-sharing arrangement.

3.15 pm

That arrangement may yet be tested from time to time. Reference was made to the tragic events of the weekend and yesterday evening, and as an MLA for South Antrim, I identify with the earlier comments that Members made. The statements from my party leader yesterday and Martin McGuinness this morning absolutely reflect my position on those tragic events.

Those were testing times for the power-sharing arrangement, but the parties stepped up to the plate. In doing so, they may have gone some way towards answering the question of whether the point has been reached at which a sustainable working arrangement is possible. If so, it becomes imperative to resolve the issue of multiple mandates.

The DUP amendment sets out a practical solution for the resolution of the issue, whereas the SDLP amendment fails to recognise the germane point that I have made. Therefore, on behalf of my party, I support the DUP amendment and oppose the motion.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest as a local government councillor in Carrickfergus.

At the start of the debate, I raised a point of order on the potential conflict of interest of those who signed the petition of concern. Subsequently, I obtained a copy of that document from the Business Office. Members should bear in mind that those who signed the petition of concern have a direct financial interest in the motion not being passed and in the continuation of multiple mandates that generate additional income for those individuals.

Nigel Dodds is paid £62,000 as an MP and £37,000 as a Minister. He also earns £14,000 as an MLA and £10,000 as a councillor. All those figures are approximate.

Jeffrey Donaldson also signed the petition of concern. He earns £62,000 as an MP and £19,609 as a junior Minister. He earns a further £14,000 as an MLA and £10,000 as a councillor.

William McCrea earns £62,000 as an MP, a further £10,000 as Chairperson of an Assembly Committee and £14,000 as an MLA. I believe that he is still a councillor, for which he receives a further £10,000.

Ian Paisley Snr also signed the petition of concern, and he earns £62,000 as an MP and £14,000 —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I did not give way earlier, but I may have time to do so when I have finished making my point. As an MLA, Ian Paisley Snr receives an additional £14,000.

I turn now to the “Swiss Family Robinson”. Iris Robinson earns £62,000 as an MP, £14,000 as an MLA, £10,000 as the Chairperson of a Committee, and £10,000 as a local government councillor. Peter Robinson earns £71,000 as First Minister, £62,000 as an MP, and £14,000 as an MLA — he stood down as a councillor.

Sammy Wilson earns £62,000 as an MP and £14,000 as an MLA. As Minister of the Environment, he has responsibility for local government and receives £37,000 for that role. However, he is still a local councillor, for which he is paid £10,000.

Each of the aforementioned has a direct conflict of interest in signing the petition of concern. The issue of dual mandates must at least be assessed to determine how those with a direct financial interest in their retention could thwart the will of the Assembly now or in the future — that is neither right nor proper.

Mr Weir: I wonder whether the Member has included his father in that list of villains to be condemned. In the 1980s, his father was, simultaneously, a Member of the 1982 Assembly and an MP. For 22 years, he had a dual mandate as a councillor and an MP.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has one extra minute.

Mr Beggs: The Member knows that the majority of those in the House, including him, are still councillors. Virtually everyone in local government who has not reached pensionable age remains in some type of full-time employment because the role of councillor is still regarded as a part-time position.

Certainly, as far as my own council is concerned, meetings occur in the evening. On Monday evenings, I frequently attend council meetings in my area when business in this House has been completed. If one were to examine my record of attendance, both in this House and in local government, one would not be disappointed. I have a reasonably good attendance record, and I make a contribution that I hope will be recognised.

Apart from DUP and Sinn Féin Members, the only other member of a devolved institution who holds a dual mandate — in either the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly — is Alex Salmond of the Scottish Nationalist Party. Michelle McIlveen indicated that she thought that that was a wonderful thing, and that he should be able to continue to do that.

Are she and her party aligning themselves with such a nationalist party?

When people have dual mandates, as Members of regional Assemblies and Westminster, it limits what one can do and where one can be. One cannot be in both places at the same time. Figures have been produced showing how Northern Ireland Ministers and MPs have been here for voting — presumably, on Mondays and Tuesdays they stay here — so, how can they be at Westminster if there were a vote there on a Tuesday?

Mr Weir: They get on a plane.

Mr Beggs: Therefore, late on Tuesday, or on Wednesday, they fly over to Westminster — they fly in and fly out — they appear on the television and take any media opportunities that they can.

Presumably, on Thursdays, they have Committees here — those of them who are not Ministers —

Mr T Clarke: Will the Member get to the point as regards the Member to whom Miss McIlveen referred and who has a voting record of 22%? He only sits in this House — he does not sit anywhere else. Will the Member list the Committees that his colleague sits on whenever he is here?

Mr Beggs: The Member will already know that the decision has been taken that the Member to whom he is referring will be standing down. *[Laughter.]*

How can any person commit the time and effort that should be given to a ministerial post or to being a Committee Chairperson by holding all those other jobs at the same time?

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

Mr Beggs: I support the motion, and I am prepared to support the amendment.

Mr Durkan: I declare an interest as someone who holds a mandate here and in the Westminster Parliament, so I am one of those “plane” people of Northern Ireland who moves about from one place to another to make appearances.

This is not an unimportant issue. Obviously, in the context of current events, it is not the highest priority, but it is a matter of legitimate concern. It has already been addressed by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, and that Committee has agreed that it needs to return to the issue. It is not inappropriate that we have a discussion on such matters.

The SDLP does not support the motion, as tabled, for various reasons. We do not believe that this is a matter that should be imposed upon the First Minister and deputy First Minister, particularly if they are reluctant advocates of the idea. We do not see the point of that.

We do not see that it would help the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in their wider work on relationships, to make a case relating to the circumstances of Scotland and Wales, and not just ourselves, in circumstances where the question of the dual mandate of the Scottish First Minister is a matter of controversy and contention in Scottish politics. We could do without getting ourselves embroiled in that, or having our position misrepresented. If we have an issue, we should address it on our terms and in our own way.

The debate should not be just about the question of the dual mandate between here and Westminster but should take in the issue of mandates at local government level also. That is why we have tabled an amendment that tries to deal with the issue, but in a way has regard to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's role, and has regard for the fact that this matter will have to be handled, and phased in, in an agreed way.

We prefer our amendment to the DUP's because it is quite clear that the DUP amendment is simply fudging the issue; it is about kicking the issue into touch or throwing it into the longest grass that they can find.

Miss McIlveen's speech proposing the amendment did not propose the amendment; it did not argue for the amendment and it did not say that anything would flow from the amendment. It was a case of defending dual mandates indefinitely. The DUP did not even mount a credible, rational, persuasive argument in support of its own amendment; it was actually discounting it as an issue to be addressed.

In circumstances in which the DUP does not believe that anything will flow from its own amendment, I do not see why any other party should labour under that illusion.

If the argument is for a phased approach, the SDLP amendment allows for that as well, stating that it is up to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee to consider the issues and to bring forward recommendations for a definite timetable, which would take account of the opinions and arguments that have been heard.

Now that it is increasingly apparent that we have a settled process and working institutions, it is unacceptable for the dual mandate to remain indefinitely. At various times, all parties have stated in their manifestos that this matter must be addressed, and they have said that it is being regulated. However, Members lose credibility with the public when nothing different happens. We constantly use circumstances and mandates to justify the dual mandate, but people want more follow-through on the political commitments that we all make, so let us address ourselves to that. We would all face the same test in the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Members have mentioned voting records, and as someone who sits in the Parliament here and in Westminster, I make no apologies for the fact that in Westminster, I do not take part in many of the votes for which I am present. I do not take part in votes dealing with local government, or other matters, in England and Wales unless I believe that a precedent or principle will be created that, in turn, might be extended, or applied, to here. If it does not, I stay out of it.

It is strange that the DUP attacks the UUP for its link with the Tories, because the knee-jerk reaction of DUP MPs is generally to vote with the Tories. If there are Tory amendments to Government motions, the DUP usually votes for them, unless it has been bought off with a promise, or the speculation of a promise, from the Government.

The SDLP has no problem with staying out of a vote on principle. Although SDLP MPs have the Labour Whip, often, if we disagree on a point of principle, we do not support the Labour Government's motions, or its amendments to Tory motions. SDLP MPs sit out votes; we do not vote on matters in which we do not believe, and we defend our proud record of strong interventions in Westminster. Nevertheless, as someone who holds two mandates, I have the honesty to say that one cannot juggle both indefinitely.

Mr Weir: I join with other Members in offering my condolences to the families that have been bereaved in the past 72 hours. Furthermore, in common with other Members who spoke, I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council.

It is interesting that this motion is one of the first to come forward since the Ulster Unionist Party's link-up with the Conservatives — the UCUNF, or new force, in our politics. The DUP was accused earlier of being in some way close to nationalism. However, what is the import of the motion, if not to debar 108 British people from the British national Parliament?

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that someone holding multiple mandates is frequently not in the British Parliament, and, therefore, cannot contribute to British parliamentary life? Such a person cannot create networks, cultivate friends and make people more aware of matters here. Of course, local MPs can turn up and vote on a matter that affects local government in England — something irrelevant to Northern Ireland — but, equally, they might not be there at key times.

Mr Weir: Indeed. However, the figures for this place and Westminster that have been mentioned show that DUP MPs have a better voting, speaking and questioning record — any criteria that one might choose — than any other single-mandate representatives. I am disappointed by the Member's remarks, but given the source, I am not surprised.

The motion is anti-British and anti-unionist. It is an attempt to debar people from Westminster. Let us consider the history of dual mandates. Between 1921 and 1972, throughout the term of the old Stormont, there was, in effect, a convention that meant that only on rare occasions did someone hold a dual mandate. Was that good for unionism? Were Northern Ireland's interests best protected, particularly from a unionist perspective, when the country plunged into difficulties in the 1960s? Did we benefit from having the B team at Westminster? The answer is no; we were utterly unprepared and, indeed, we failed to have any of our big hitters at Westminster.

3.30 pm

Members must question the timing of the tabling of the motion. For a number of years, the First Minister here was Mr Trimble, who was an MP and an MLA, and we had Mr Taylor. However, during that period, the silence of the UUP calls for the ending of dual mandates was utterly deafening. That is not surprising, given that of the 18 Members —

Mr McClarty: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I have given way once, Mr McClarty, and I am not giving way again. Of the 18 Members who sit on the Ulster Unionist Benches — with the honourable exception of the Rev Robert Coulter, I think — 17 of them have a dual mandate, have had in the past or have tried to obtain a dual mandate, so strongly do they feel about dual mandates.

Perhaps the party's current lack of electoral success is the reason for their feelings about dual mandates. Mr Beggs said that the party intended to limit its use of dual mandates, just as I have managed to limit my appearances for the Northern Ireland football team of late — I have not been selected. The Members opposite have found that this is the politics of sour grapes.

Mr Hamilton: The Member should announce his retirement from international football.

Mr Weir: I take this opportunity to announce my retirement from international football but not from my council seat. In 2005, Mr Elliott, as an MLA, ran in the Westminster and council elections. When I pointed out to him the hypocrisy of that, he responded by saying that I did the same. That is correct, but I do not have a problem with dual mandates; Mr Elliott is seeking to abolish them.

It has been said that this proposal has been made in response to the electorate. This might sound like a strange idea, but can we not allow democracy to decide? Can we not let the people decide who they elect and who they do not elect? During the debate, it has been said that parties have a high level of influence in elections and that voters simply troop into their polling stations and vote for the big names in their constituencies.

However, every MP who has stood for the Assembly has had running mates. As I look around the Chamber, it seems apposite to use the Strangford constituency as an example. The MP for that constituency is Iris Robinson, but, if DUP supporters were deeply annoyed about dual mandates, they had the opportunity to vote for Mr Hamilton, Miss McIlveen or even Mr Shannon, but Iris Robinson topped the poll.

The import of Declan O'Loan's comments, in particular, is that people need to be protected from their own stupidity and that they cannot be trusted to vote the right way, so the field should be skewed for them to ensure that dual mandates are removed.

The motion is a cheap electoral stunt by the Ulster Unionist Party. It cannot get its top people elected, so it wants to try to nobble the opposition and remove a range of people from the field. As the DUP amendment states, the issue is to be considered by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. Let us not jump forward with this Ulster Unionist Party stunt. I urge Members to oppose that party's proposal and support the DUP amendment.

Ms Purvis: This is a difficult day to focus on the business of the Assembly, and it feels out of place to be discussing the regulation of mandates in the shadow of three deplorable deaths. However, I suggest that focusing on improving the quality of representation in the institutions that deliver to the people of Northern Ireland is an appropriate response to those who would like the peace process to fail. It is a small but meaningful act of defiance.

The motion has an admirable goal, but it suggests a convoluted way of going about it. We are asking the Executive to ask the UK Government to do something that we should be doing ourselves. The primary reason for limiting the number of elected offices that any individual can hold relates to quality. It is imperative to ensure that the quality of the representation that citizens receive is as high as it possibly can be.

When an elected official carries more than one mandate, he or she will run into a number of conflicts, the most benign being a conflict of time. It is not possible to be in two places at once, and that is particularly challenging for individuals who represent one area at one level and a different area at another level. That gives bifurcation a whole new meaning.

At least 76% of Assembly Members — including the authors of the motion — have the commitment of another elected office outside this Chamber. Although I appreciate that most will argue that they possess the intellectual capacity and physical fortitude to meet the demands of delivering two jobs at once, there are issues, needs and constituents who will slip through the cracks in such a situation.

However, the more disconcerting problem is that of conflicts of interest. That issue has been raised on a number of occasions as we go through the review of public administration and as the Assembly and the Executive take decisions that impact on the form and functions of local councils. That is being done despite the fact that the majority of Members of this Chamber are also sitting members of local councils.

In their most insidious form, there is a danger that conflicts of interest could influence the work of Members of this Chamber, meaning that those Members are not representing the needs of their constituents, but those of specific groups or individuals. I am certain that no one here would deliver such an allegation against another Member today, but the issue is not simply about whether a conflict of interest can be proven — it is about whether there is a perceived conflict of interest. The appearance of corruption can be as damaging as corruption itself, and democratic institutions must be formed in such a way that any possible opportunities for actual or perceived misdeeds are removed. That is especially true for this Assembly, where we still have a lot of work to do to build confidence among all members of our communities in the ability of this body to deliver for them.

Additionally, democracy is about participation. The more people who participate in Northern Ireland's decision-making processes, the better the outcome will be for all of us. Looking around this room at times, it is a dizzying sea of blue and grey, and it is not just the suits that are grey. This Chamber is badly in need of more young people, more women, representatives of minority ethnic communities, and newcomers to this Province, who could bring new perspective and new ideas to the work of this Assembly.

It is absurd to suggest that the 108 people who have been elected to this Chamber are so vital to the well-being of this Province that they are required at every level of public office. There are more than 1.5 million people in Northern Ireland; the odds are that there are quite a few people out there who could be just as good or even better than we are at preaching in this Chamber, in local councils and in Westminster. At a time when people are fighting to keep one salary coming into their households, it is a bit outrageous to suggest that there are Members of this Chamber who deserve two, three, or even four or more layers of compensation.

It is also inaccurate to argue that voters select those people and question why we are interfering in that process. In our electoral system, the voters do not select the candidates — the political parties do. I note with interest the DUP amendment, which refers the matter back to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. The authors of that amendment are correct that the issue has been on the Committee's agenda —

it has been for the last two years. In two years, we have seen very little meaningful action from that Committee on this issue. The SDLP amendment would add clarity to the situation with the Committee and I am happy to support it, although I remain sceptical as to whether it would help to speed things up.

We have an obligation to ensure that we are delivering the best possible system of decision-making and governance for, and with, the people of Northern Ireland. Under that standard, there can be no argument for maintaining multiple mandates. I look forward to continuing work with my colleagues on this issue.

Mrs Hanna: As Mark Durkan has said, the Ulster Unionist motion has no timescale and recommends leaving the matter with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, but the SDLP does not believe that that would work. There was an expectation that this issue would be legislated for, following the outcome of the review of public administration. I should declare an interest as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, which has already been mandated to deal with this issue.

As Raymond McCartney stated already, in March 2008, Arlene Foster stated that she intended to introduce legislative proposals to end the dual mandate of councillors who are also Members of the Assembly and/or Parliament. Members will recall that, having led by example by resigning from Fermanagh District Council, the Minister stood in the Enniskillen by-election six months later — last September — in an endeavour to secure a DUP win.

That illustrates clearly that some Ministers will blow with the party political wind, and it underlines the need for legislation that cannot be negotiated away by party politics.

Unfortunately, we now have a Minister of the Environment who has a quadruple mandate. He states that there will be no laws developed to prevent a representative from holding more than one mandate and he has declared that he does not share Arlene Foster's opinion on dual mandates. Therefore, those are the views of our two DUP Ministers of the Environment.

The SDLP acknowledges the public's concerns about multiple mandates, including the fact that two, three or four salaries can be drawn down at once with double, triple or quadruple mandates. I know that Gregory Campbell has said that he can make a good economic argument for that, but I would like to see the figures.

It is understandable that, given the high level of political uncertainty in the past, it has taken a couple of years to have a more stable Assembly and for the time to be right to take the issue forward. With the review of public administration due to give more power and a larger workload to local government, it is important

that the public have effective public representation, and that can best be delivered with a single mandate. However, the Assembly has had two DUP Environment Ministers with diametrically opposed views on the matter.

It is important that the matter is referred back to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, where it has been for the past couple of years. The SDLP amendment calls for that; for common sense; and for the timetable for ending dual mandates to be referred back to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee — as already mandated by a DUP Environment Minister. However, it is hard to see the principles of the DUP Ministers on the issue.

I will comment on some of the presentations made during the debate. Michelle McIlveen made absolutely no case — even for her own amendment. It was just a beauty contest, and a case of whose party is bigger. It was all about votes. We have had an awful lot of that today. For a party that has had two Ministers holding responsibility for the issue, the DUP has not made any case for or against it. The matter has just been batted about, with the DUP saying that its party is bigger than the other parties, and so it does not have to worry about doing something that might be good for everyone.

Raymond McCartney spoke as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, and stated that the matter should be legislated on.

Mitchel McLaughlin made a very sensible contribution, although I am still not sure why he is opposed to the SDLP's amendment. On several occasions he said that the amendment was good and sensible, but that he could not quite agree with it. However, during his contribution, I could not figure out what he could not agree with.

Stephen Farry talked about the amendments being the moral high ground: I just think it is sensible and is avoiding a conflict of interest. I would have thought that that was a good enough reason.

I support the SDLP amendment. It is the sensible way to deal with the matter. There should be a timescale and the matter should go back to the Committee that has already been mandated to deal with it.

Mr Hamilton: Members will be very pleased to hear that I will not be participating in any beauty contest. *[Laughter.]* I would be worried about my contribution to the swimsuit round.

I apologise for missing the initial part of the debate. However, from what I have sensed — despite the banter — there has been general agreement from all quarters that we all see the ending of multiple mandates as an objective. Amidst the banter, there has been discussion on the means by which we can achieve that

aim, and I believe, fundamentally and firmly, that all parties hold true to that.

I agree with Mr McLaughlin: I can understand why we have got this anomalous situation as he described it. The instability of political arrangements in Northern Ireland over the past few years has generated such a situation and, as it took time to create that situation, so it will take time to rectify it.

3.45 pm

I do not understand the position adopted by that new British political force, UCUNF, which suggests — I agree with Mr Weir on this — such an obviously anti-democratic and anti-British position. To effectively bar British citizens from running for election to their own sovereign Parliament is not something that I consider to be democratic. It is certainly not in the finest traditions of British parliamentary democracy.

I suggest that it is also anti-devolution, which I believe is the point that Mr Durkan made, to tell the people of Scotland and Wales what they should be doing. Surely that is a matter for them. It is the nature of a devolutionary settlement that they are sovereign over their own affairs. We deal with our own matters and would not appreciate Scotland and Wales interfering — to adopt any other stance would be quite despicable.

Given the context of how far we have come, a phased approach is the best way forward. I have different views on how to achieve that. It may be principally a matter for individual parties to deal with. However, Mr Weir touched on the point that, ultimately, it is a matter for the people to decide. We all sit here because the people put us here. They are the ultimate arbiters on all of these matters. If the people do not want Members to have more than one mandate, then the people will decide that matter. That is something for them — if the electorate do not want us to represent them in more than one place, they can deal with that.

Some of the benefits of multiple mandates have been discussed. I heard Dr Farry talk about the duality of the roles in councils and in the Assembly. There is some benefit in sitting in both places. Mr Campbell made the case that there is a financial benefit in having more than one mandate. I believe that there is also some benefit — as Mr Weir usefully stated — in senior politicians here developing long-term, beneficial relationships with their counterparts at Westminster.

I find it difficult to grasp the approach of UCUNF Members, who say that they are speaking for the people when they are really echoing the media. Consequently, the Assembly debates motions that are dictated by the editorial pages of the 'Belfast Telegraph'. Looking at the record of UCUNF Members, one might assume that they are somehow whiter than white, have some higher moral standard and that they do not engage in that sort of behaviour.

It was easy for them to put forward the motion, because — on the principle that the people decide — the people have decided that, in many cases, they do not want Ulster Unionists to represent them in even one place, never mind in two.

The examples were cited of Mr Trimble and Mr Taylor, who sat both here and in Westminster, without a word being said; and of Mr McGimpsey, who sought dispensation to run for Parliament in 2001. The example was given that 11 of 18 Ulster Unionist candidates in the 2005 general election were Members of the Assembly, including the two people whose names are on the motion — Mr Kennedy and Mr Elliott.

Therefore, for the Ulster Unionist Party, on this matter, it is a case of do what they say, not what they do. In fact, some of those 18 Westminster election candidates, such as Mr Burnside, cannot handle one mandate, never mind two.

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

Mr Hamilton: A phased approach, as outlined by our amendment, is the most sensible way to progress on this issue.

Mr McNarry: I thank all who have contributed to the debate. In light of recent events — terrorist murder back on our streets, innocent men gunned down by low lifes, new widows created, and grieving parents and children plunged into despair — I honestly did not have, at the start of the day, the heart for this debate. However, I must take part. I must push myself to ensure that the evil that has revisited to destroy all that I fervently believe in does not succeed.

Thanks be to God that we in this place do not need bullets in order to make our points and that the message that was sent out yesterday and today — no matter how difficult it was for unrepentant British unionists such as me, who have worked for change and for a better Northern Ireland — has been unequivocal. I recognise that debates in our democratic institution have won the day, and that they will continue to win over the darkness that hangs over our country. That said, I trust that my point about democracy was well made and heard.

What, then, is the point of introducing a petition of concern for this debate? We all know that that is nothing short of a wrecking mechanism. It is a sure sign that those who bring forward a petition of concern have no confidence in their own argument. That is what we have here — the DUP using a wrecking mechanism to attempt to hide its obvious embarrassment over its standout role in the use of dual mandates.

The Ulster Unionist Party, first and foremost, believes that Northern Ireland deserves the same quality of public representation as Scotland, England

and Wales. However, if a Member of Parliament is also a Member of this Assembly — and even, in many cases, a member of our Executive — they cannot possibly claim to serve the people in their parliamentary constituencies sufficiently. Double-, and often triple-, jobbing should not be allowed to continue. Hence our motion.

Through tough negotiations over a decade ago, Northern Ireland now has a viable form of devolution. However, many crucial political decisions are taken in London every week to which Northern Ireland makes a less than substandard contribution. Why should people here not have an equal say about fuel excise duty and foreign policy as people in greater London? The banking crisis is having a much-felt impact on Northern Ireland. However, with only two MPs whose full-time jobs are at Westminster, we get little opportunity to express our feelings about those problems in our national Parliament.

A few hours each week is a totally unacceptable time for our Members of Parliament to spend in Westminster. Would we regard a public-service worker who works one day a week as a full-time worker? Would we be happy if we were paying that worker a full-time wage, even if they had two other full-time jobs? Of course not: that would be a gross abuse of public funding. Why, therefore, should it be acceptable for Members of Parliament to do such a thing?

It is no surprise that I am delighted that the Conservative Party has supported Ulster Unionist calls for an end to double-jobbing. In the near future, we will, we hope, have legislation in place that will prohibit that abuse of the political system. We also hope that it will focus minds as we have good reason to believe that it is the intention of the next Government to legislate against double-jobbing.

The DUP amendment is cowardly, to say the least. What is so wrong with calling for legislation that will inevitably increase the quality of our representation at Westminster? The DUP amendment mentions a “phased approach”. Frankly, that is ridiculous: we need clear-cut legislation that prohibits dual mandates.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister should take the lead and make representations to the United Kingdom Government detailing Northern Ireland's concerns with the current set-up. We all share those concerns. Of course, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are themselves guilty of dual mandating. Therefore, I am not surprised that the DUP amendment so cleverly attempts to deflect attention to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. However, surely they are responsible enough to look past their personal circumstances to see what we are trying to do.

The Northern Ireland Assembly is the only devolved institution in the United Kingdom in which double-jobbing is not frowned upon; unfortunately, it seems totally acceptable for members of the DUP and their brothers in Sinn Féin. Indeed, the entire DUP parliamentary team are Members of the Assembly; all nine of its MPs sit alongside us in this Chamber. Then again, it is nearly seen as a prerequisite that if one wants to be a DUP MP, one has to sit in the Assembly. One would almost think that double-jobbing is written into the job description of a DUP MP; and it appears that Sinn Féin is following suit.

We have a First Minister who is also an MP, and a deputy First Minister who is also an MP. We have a Finance Minister who is also an MP. The Regional Development Minister, the Environment Minister, the Culture Minister and the Agriculture Minister are all double-jobbers. A Sinn Féin/DUP working party, acting in concert, is what is represented here and in the membership of Westminster. Therefore, we must ask which of their responsibilities suffer — is it their Northern Ireland Executive work or their Parliament work?

I have listened to the debate, and I have heard what Members have said. I am not surprised that the DUP, having aligned itself with republicans in this House, is willingly aligning itself with the republicans in Scotland.

Interestingly, DUP Members left out the point about dynasty. There was no mention of the dynasties that operate within the DUP. There are two in existence, and one — optimistically — in the making, and that new dynasty will perhaps be carried into Europe. We will see how that works out.

I want to say the following to Sinn Féin members: in Westminster, they cannot sign in, but they have signed up for the money and for the finance to have a free presence in London. They must deal with that. I hope that they reflect on that, because I have reflected on the long and welcome journey that they have made to be here in this House; this democracy. I know that they still have a long way to walk before they enter into the mother of Parliaments, and I encourage them to take that walk as soon as they possibly can.

Minister Campbell, who was sitting on the Back Benches earlier, made the case for value for money on the basis that he is a BOGOF (buy one, get one free) Minister. His proposal was buy one, get one free — or half price. That was a spurious argument from a Minister who is saying, “Vote for a DUP MLA, and you will get him or her as a half-price MP.” The electorate's answer, the next time it goes to the polls, will be “No way”, and the DUP is going to know it. I am sorry that the Minister could not do better and that that is his best argument.

The Minister also omitted to mention another important point. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee is important to Northern Ireland. How important is it to the DUP? Northern Ireland Ministers cannot sit on that Committee. Indeed, Gregory Campbell sits on no parliamentary Committee. Despite all the facts that he put forward, he forgot to tell us that fact.

The debate has been good and necessary, and one on which we should move in the fullness of time. Ulster Unionist Party Members tabled the motion, and we are grateful for the interest in it, which has resulted in two amendments. We shall support the SDLP amendment and encourage the House to do likewise.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if it is made, amendment No 2 will not be called, and I will proceed to put the Question on the motion, as amended.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 46; Noes 24.

AYES

Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Butler, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Craig, Dr Deeny, Mr Dodds, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mrs McGill, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Shannon, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Bresland and Mr Hamilton.

NOES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mr Elliott, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McNarry, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Mr K Robinson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Beggs and Mr Elliott.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 47; Noes 26.

AYES

NATIONALIST:

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

UNIONIST:

Mr Bresland, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

OTHER:

Dr Deeny, Dr Farry, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCarthy.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Bresland and Mr Paisley Jnr.

NOES

NATIONALIST:

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

UNIONIST:

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr McCallister, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McNarry, Ms Purvis, Mr K Robinson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Beggs and Mr Elliott.

<i>Total votes</i>	<i>73</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>[64.4%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>[61.3%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>[62.2%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly notes that the issue of multiple mandates, including council membership, is to be further considered by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee; and believes that a phased approach to this matter represents the best way forward.

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

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Violence Against Teachers

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

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the increasing reports of violence towards school principals and teachers; and calls on the Minister of Education to address this matter urgently, by establishing a joint working party with the recognised teachers' unions, statutory agencies and other stakeholders, to ensure that uniform recording and reporting mechanisms are in place for all schools, that a training and awareness programme is developed for all teachers, and that principals and governors are provided with appropriate advice and guidance on dealing with violence against staff in schools.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuil an-áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht thábhachtach seo.

I am delighted to participate in this important debate.

I express my condemnation of the murder of Constable Carroll near Lurgan last night, and I express my sincere condolences to his family and colleagues.

Corporal punishment in schools in Northern Ireland was abolished in 1987, which was 22 years ago. At the time, there was a general welcome for that move, and schools adapted quickly to develop new codes of conduct. The majority of pupils have abided with those codes of conduct.

Since then, further child-protection measures have been introduced. Again, they have been welcomed by teachers, parents and the general public. Unfortunately, measures to protect teachers have not kept up with measures that have been introduced to protect children. As I said, although most children adhere to codes of conduct in schools, a small percentage of children, albeit a growing one, do not abide by those codes of conduct and involve themselves in physical and verbal attacks on teachers.

That entire area of school life — violence against teachers — has largely been ignored by authorities. However, it causes increasing concern, and the Assembly cannot continue to ignore the issue. To do so would be to allow a growing problem to continue unchecked until it is well-nigh impossible to bring under control. Members are aware that society has changed. The behaviour of children, albeit a small number of them,

has grown increasingly challenging for their parents and teachers to manage. It is not unusual for that behaviour to manifest itself in violence against parents in the home and against teachers in the school setting. We must remember that violence is not only physical but can be verbal.

Surprisingly little work has been done on that aspect of school life. Last year, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) carried out the most comprehensive investigation into assaults against teachers in Northern Ireland. The union surveyed the Department of Education, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the education and library boards, Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (NICCEA) and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta. Its survey discovered that the Department of Education does not collect information on assaults against teachers. NICCEA did not respond to requests for information from the teachers' union. Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta did not collect or compile information on assaults. CCMS began to collect information only after 2005, in accordance with the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997 (RIDDOR).

The five education and library boards did collect information. However, there was no consistent procedure for collecting it, and no clear route along which the information was passed. There were no guidelines for follow-up on incidents, such as risk assessments. There was no clear policy training, nor were support services available. Such an approach might be best described as being a recipe for disaster.

One clear finding of the INTO survey is that the number of assaults is increasing gradually and alarmingly. Between 2002 and 2007, assaults on teachers increased from five to 69 in primary schools; from five to 85 in post-primary schools; and from 56 to 68 in special-education schools. The number of incidents during that period increased from 63 to 173, which was an increase of almost 200%.

Therefore, assaults on teachers are clearly a growing problem that the Assembly cannot continue to ignore. Nor can it continue to approach the matter in the haphazard way in which it is dealt with at present. If the Assembly continues to approach it in that way, there will be more and more incidents in which teachers are injured, become ill or are absent from work. Moreover, their lives will be sorely affected. Pupils will lose tuition, and the cost to the public purse will become greater.

The Assembly cannot continue to ignore the problem. The question arises about what can be done and what must be done. First, the Assembly and the Minister must make a clear statement that any assault

or violence against a teacher is unacceptable. We need to commit to a zero-tolerance policy.

4.30 pm

We also need an assessment of the scale and scope of the problem. As I said earlier, there is a haphazard approach to the collection of information on the issue, and we do not know what is going on. If anything, the problem has been under-reported. I understand that the Department has agreed to conduct a survey but that the necessary resources are not yet available to action it. We all understand that budgets are under severe pressure. However, this is a serious health and safety issue that we ignore to the peril of the health and well-being of teachers. We need a commitment to carry out that survey to give us a clear picture of the situation.

Also, we need to stop covering up the problem. As I said, the information that we need is not readily available. It is as if we have been afraid to bring the problem into the open and deal with it directly. We need publicity and information on the number of assaults and the level of violence against teachers in schools. The House must ensure that all teachers know what to do if they are assaulted. A clear statement must be displayed publicly in every school to the effect that violence, in whatever shape or form, is totally and utterly unacceptable.

School governors must ensure that they know what to report, when to report it and where to report it to. The House must consider recommending that governors report annually on the number of assaults and violent incidents in their schools. We need to look again at regulations that allow violent parents and carers into schools. In England and Wales, the law on trespass has been successfully incorporated into the education regulations in order to allow principals and governing bodies to exclude individuals who act with violent intent towards teaching staff. The House must introduce such regulations in Northern Ireland in order to ensure that schools that are forced to exclude violent individuals can do so with confidence that they act within the law and in the best interests of staff and pupils.

Although violence is a major health and safety concern, there is no overall health and safety structure in the education system. There must be a ministerial commitment to establish a strategic health and safety committee involving the recognised teachers' unions. Such a body could advise the Minister and the House on the overall way forward on various issues that impact on the health of the teaching workforce.

The Minister and her Department are wedded to the vision of "every school a good school", and several policies have that as their title or subtitle. Until the House addresses the issue of violence, publicises the zero-tolerance approach in every school, trains and informs every teacher, audits the level of assault and

gives schools the necessary — and deserved — guidance and authority to tackle the issue of violence, schools will not be safe. Before every school can become a good school, they must become safe and secure schools for pupils and staff. Teachers who feel secure can deliver the revised curriculum in the confidence that they are free from the risk of violence and assault.

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

Mr D Bradley: I commend the motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): I want to preface my remarks by extending my sincere sympathy to the family of Constable Stephen Carroll and to those who loved him dearly.

As the Chairperson of the Education Committee, I inform the House that the Committee considered the Irish National Teachers' Organisation report on assaults in schools that was adopted at the INTO northern conference in 2008.

Prior to my taking up the post as Chairperson, the Committee reflected its concerns about the growing number of assaults on teachers — and INTO's nine recommendations to address that matter — by asking the Department to make an important addition to the terms of reference of a proposed school workforce review. The Minister agreed to add the subject of the health and well-being of all school-based staff to the issues to be addressed in that review.

The school workforce review is a strategic review of school-based staff. It is an important review, examining the personnel, finance, pay and management dimensions of all school staff. The timescale of the review scheduled interim reports in September and December 2008, with a final report by March 2009. However, I am concerned that the work of the review has been substantially delayed, and I ask the Minister — who is in the House today — to inform Members of the position of that important review and tell us when its final report will be available.

I will now make some comments on a personal note with regard to the motion. I support the motion, and commend my Deputy Chairperson on the Education Committee, Mr Bradley, for bringing the matter to the House. In his remarks, he referred to the fact that society has changed — I think that that is true. Many of us say that, in some respects, it has not changed for the good, because many of the values that would be described today as old fashioned have been thrown out.

It is not that many years ago that I was at school — *[Laughter.]* I knew that would bring a smile to your faces. There were certain people whom one respected and certain institutions to which one gave regard — the local clergyman, the local policeman, and one's teachers. They were people whom one respected and in

whom one placed a sense of importance. However, for various reasons, the trust in many of those institutions has broken down. We now have a society in which, unfortunately, there are dysfunctional homes. There are no longer those parents who feel that it is necessary for them to bring up their children in a way that will lead them to give respect to their teachers.

I concur with the comments of the NASUWT, which are that staff are entitled to work in an environment that is free from violence and disruption; that staff are entitled to appropriate access to training and support on behaviour matters; and that pupils are entitled to a safe and orderly learning environment, together with effective teaching and support to assist them in achieving their full potential.

We need to ensure that our schools are safe environments for teachers and pupils. It is regrettable that we do not have the statistics that are gathered by the Department. We need to ensure that the administrative arrangements for boards of governors and the Department of Education are robust enough to protect teachers and that when incidents occur — as, unfortunately, they do — we can deal with them in a way that addresses the particular needs of the pupils and protects the teachers, who are an invaluable asset in our schools

Mr O'Dowd: Ba mhaith liom tacú leis an rún.

I support the motion, and I welcome the debate because it allows expression to be given to the need for proper services, not only for teachers, but for young people in our schools. I apologise for not being present for the beginning of the proposer's speech, but I listened carefully to the figures outlining the number of young people who are involved in assaults or abuse of teachers — particularly primary-school teachers.

We must ask ourselves why there has been an increase in attacks on primary-school teachers. Those attacks are being carried out by primary-school children; that is surely a reflection of broader society. We should support those primary-school teachers by gathering information on the number and frequency of attacks and gaining a better understanding of the nature of the abuse. We must also understand why children between the ages of five and 11 are attacking their teachers. There is something wrong —

Mr Storey: As a parent, as well as someone who has an interest in the issue of education, one of my concerns is that children are, by and large, no longer innocent. They are not innocent in their primary-school days. There are children who are subjected to a culture that feeds them, at an early age, through videos and DVDs, with some of the most vile and reprehensible filth, which gives them a sense that if something can be done in a video, it can be done in a classroom or in the playground. That is an issue in wider society that we cannot ignore.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member's comments more likely belong in another debate, but the issue boils down to parental control. I know that Mr Storey did not intend to stereotype all children, but I am not keen on doing that across the board. Our children are still innocent, and there are young children who want to be young children. However, if a primary-school child is attacking a teacher, that suggests that there is something seriously wrong in the family home of that child, and it may well be that the circumstances that the Member described are part of the problem. We must provide support services for those children, and we must identify what is going on in those homes at an early stage.

I heard the figures that Dominic Bradley quoted with regard to secondary schools. We must be careful not to paint the picture that our secondary schools are war zones; they are not. The vast majority of our young people are responsible and good people, who attend school and reap the benefits and opportunities that youth brings.

Mr D Bradley: I will point out to the Member that on two occasions, I said that the pupils who are involved in this type of behaviour are in a very small minority.

Mr O'Dowd: I accept that; I was not being pointed in my comments towards the Member. I was saying that those observing, or the media reporting, this debate must be careful not to portray our secondary schools as war zones. I accept that the Member said that only a small number of pupils are involved in attacks on teachers.

It is not only the working lives of the teachers concerned, however, that are affected, regardless of how many pupils are involved. Their private lives are affected, because they bring the trauma of physical or verbal abuse home with them. There is an onus on the employers and the Department of Education to ensure that we provide the services that are required to support teachers in those circumstances. We must gather information and corral it in such a way that will allow us to understand properly what is happening. We must also ensure that once that information is gathered, we provide those teachers with a support network so that their welfare is at the centre of everything that we do.

Therefore, I welcome the fact that mechanisms exist in the Department of Education for that purpose. Can they be improved? There are very few areas of Government practice that cannot be improved. If this debate results in the creation of sound proposals, they should be taken on board by the Department and the employers in order to ensure that if there are services that we are missing out on, or if existing services are not being properly resourced, we do everything in our power to correct that situation, so that teachers receive all the support that they need.

We must also ask ourselves why young people in secondary schools are attacking their teachers. Where necessary, we must assist young people from troubled backgrounds, who have troubled lives and who have been disadvantaged throughout their lives, and give them a chance to become good and model citizens in society.

We must get that balance right. The protection of teachers, young people and the wider school environment — although not involved directly in attacks — must be balanced.

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

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat.

4.45 pm

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Members who tabled the motion. I join other Members in offering my condolences to our brave officers in the PSNI. I have been away from the House for much of the morning and afternoon discussing that issue, and I was struck by the amount of unity and cohesion, and the willingness to get things done.

At the risk of introducing a little bit of levity into what is a serious subject, when I first read the wording of the motion on violence against teachers, I was not sure whether it referred to the transfer test, the education and skills authority, the review of public administration or one of the many initiatives that the Minister of Education has brought forward. I was also somewhat dismayed by the tone of the exchange that took place at the Committee for Education this morning. I mention that point because, if this place is to survive, it is extremely important that we remain relevant to the people of Northern Ireland. We must demonstrate to everybody that we are in a position to deliver the improvements that people expect.

It will come as no surprise that all Members are against violence in schools. Mr O'Dowd, who is no longer in the Chamber, questioned why there is violence in schools. I am concerned about the level of domestic violence, and I think that the two issues are connected. There is no doubt that children who grow up in abusive homes must express that experience in a different way. I am struck by the similarities of the issues that we are trying to deal with, including better recording by the PSNI and the need for a better understanding of the significance of what we are trying to do. Mr Bradley raised that point: one cannot fix what one cannot measure.

We need a joined-up approach and co-ordination to deal with crime against our education system. To date, it seems that such an approach from the Department of Education is strangely lacking. Certainly, many Members considered the difficulties that schools in the

east of the Province have experienced. At one school, there was a long-standing debate that seemed to damage not only the people who were involved directly but those on the periphery.

The key question is: how do we ensure that our teachers do not feel vulnerable and isolated, and that they receive the necessary advice, support and confidence from the wider community? It is not only the teachers whom we have to look after but the children whom they teach. It is extremely difficult for teachers to work in an environment in which they fear for their physical safety.

I am not a great supporter of many of the reforms that will be introduced under the education and skills authority; that much is known. However, the RPA gave the Minister of Education a number of opportunities to address those issues, and I urge her to prioritise them. The issue of domestic violence often goes unsaid; however, it is a cancer in our education system. The problem is not that the number of cases is small but the fact that it happens at all.

Members referred to the issue of recording, and something must be done about that. I was struck by what Mr Storey said about the need for respect. It appears that many of our teachers fear to deal with problems in the classroom, because they do not feel that the disciplinary code supports them. Rather, they feel that it supports those who cause the problems. We must find some way to provide teachers with that specific level of help. When teachers are assaulted, they need help, advice and guidance, because they can feel somewhat out of sorts.

I will finish by addressing why we are in this position. It seems that we have an overzealous, litigious and rights-based culture. People may ask what causes the problem, but if our culture encourages violence in some way, exemplified by recent events, we should not expect it not to have an effect on our young people. We are reaping what we have sown — people cannot have rights without responsibility. If people are put in a position of trust, they must also be given the authority to do the job properly. On that basis, I hope that the Minister takes on board my party's suggestions. We support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: A mobile phone is interfering with the sound equipment. I ask the Member who owns that phone to switch it off.

Mr Lunn: I have a terrible feeling that that is my phone — it is definitely off now.

Before I commence my remarks, I associate myself with all the expressions of sympathy to the bereaved following the dreadful events of the past few days.

We welcome all aspects of the motion. I assume that, like us, the proposer of the motion held discussions

with the trade unions, because the motion reflects their views and their wish list for the future. According to the published statistics, there seems to have been a downturn in the instances of violence towards teachers: in 2002-03, there were 365 suspensions for physical attacks on teachers, compared to 186 in 2007-08. However, it is widely recognised that those figures are unreliable as a true indicator, because they refer only to the offences that are punished by suspension. The evidence from the chalk face contradicts those statistics. It appears that there are hundreds of unreported incidents, which clearly points to the need for the uniform reporting and recording mechanism to which the motion refers.

I understand that INTO and employers were working on a survey document to assess more accurately the true level of attacks. As Mr Bradley said, that document was sent to the Department some 10 months ago, but no response or agreement from the Department has been received. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that.

There is a clear definition of assault, and we should encourage the reporting of all physical assaults. However, where would foul or abusive language or threatening behaviour rank on the scale of violence? That is important, because such behaviour can make teachers' lives difficult and, if unchallenged, can easily turn into physical assault. Such violence can include the use of weapons, even at primary-school level. It is not just pupils — parents and carers can be equally guilty. Anecdotally, that is not uncommon at primary-school level in particular.

Having said all that, our schools are in no way out of control. We need a standardised and accurate reporting mechanism. We await the Department's response on that.

The motion also refers to a training and awareness programme, which is a timely suggestion for teachers, principals and governors that we welcome and support. One matter that that programme could address is exclusions. There appears to be a difference in the incorporation of the law of trespass in England and Northern Ireland, which Mr Bradley mentioned. That difference seems to make it much more difficult to enforce an exclusion order over here than on the mainland, or it may mean that principals here are reluctant to even try enforcing one.

In 2007, if the figures are adjusted to reflect population differences, there were 10 times more expulsions in England than there were in Northern Ireland — 1,500 compared to seven. I am not encouraging mass expulsions; they are the last resort, but I still ask whether the legal impediment is the reason why there are so few expulsions here. As Mr Bradley asked, why will the Department not endorse the posting of a zero-tolerance statement in every school? That seems

such a simple and basic measure. There are many ways in which we can make life less difficult for teachers, some of which are in the motion, which we support wholeheartedly, but there are others.

No teacher should have to work in fear, or under threat, of violence from pupils or parents; neither should they be subjected to abuse. If a teacher lays a hand on a pupil in this country, his or her job is on the line — unjustifiably so in many cases. One particular case in my constituency involved Mr David Bell, who, after touching a pupil's chin, has been unable to work for seven or eight years. That seems ridiculous, and I suggest that a balanced approach to such cases would be no bad thing. Notwithstanding that point, the Alliance Party supports the motion.

Miss McIlveen: It is sad that the matter has even to be debated in the Chamber. What is the state of society when the Assembly finds itself debating violence against teachers and school principals? I realise that the figures probably seem low when taken out of context; nevertheless, the available statistics are appalling. In 2006-07, there were 182 physical attacks on staff in post-primary schools, and in 2007-08, there were 132 such attacks. It is simply breathtaking to discover that in the same periods, there were 66 and 54 attacks respectively in primary schools.

Last year, I put a question to the Minister on the level of teacher absence through stress. It is little wonder that in response to that question, I discovered that in 2007-08, some 473 teachers fell ill, resulting in the loss of 18,698 teaching days. The issue, therefore, goes beyond physical assaults.

Clearly, teachers are not being provided with a safe, comfortable working environment or the appropriate tools to deal with an unruly class and/or problem children. It is clear that neither the causes nor effects of such behaviour are being addressed.

I do not want to restate the case for the good old days, as argued by my colleague the Chairperson of the Committee for Education. Although probably longer than I would like to admit, my school days are probably not as long ago as those of the Chairperson. When I was at school, pupils in my peer group at least had respect for teachers, policemen and others in positions of authority. I remember that we stood as a mark of respect when a teacher entered the classroom. That may have been unusual at that time; it is particularly so now.

As Members said, teachers have the right to carry out their duties without fear of physical or verbal abuse. However, teachers are confronted with physical or verbal abuse from not only pupils, they fear abuse from certain parents. I am sure that many in the Chamber will have heard from those employed in the profession some horror stories about teachers being abused.

In May 2008, I asked the Minister what plans she had to introduce a policy to reduce the number of assaults on teachers in schools. Her response was that her Department planned to hold a workshop in the autumn. The Assembly has not heard about the outworkings of that workshop; indeed, as mentioned by the Chairperson of the Committee and the Member who proposed the motion, the Department remains policy-light on the issue.

Teachers are leaving the profession because they consider that they receive little support from parents, and they, therefore, feel powerless. Children as young as four years old are attacking teachers. In 2006-07, according to the response to a question from Mr Bradley's colleague Mr Burns in November, some 16 children of that age were suspended.

To pick up on a point that Mr Lunn raised, it appears incredible that, despite the need for suspensions, almost every disciplined child has been allowed to return to school. We must question whether suspension is an appropriate and effective means of punishing a child, as he or she may regard a few days off school as a reward for bad behaviour. Parental input and support are, therefore, vital in tackling the problem.

Concern has been expressed about the number of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties who spend an inordinate amount of time on waiting lists for assessment by educational psychologists. I am not saying that children who engage in physical and verbal assaults necessarily have emotional or behavioural difficulties, nor that the opposite is true. However, to leave children waiting for assessments and appropriate treatment for such lengths of time is asking for trouble.

I will outline, by board area, the most up-to-date figures that I have for children waiting for assessment: 267 in the Belfast Board; 593 in the North Eastern Board; 421 in the South Eastern Board; 516 in the Southern Board; and 242 in the Western Board. That is clearly not acceptable.

5.00 pm

My colleague Mr Moutray asked the Minister a question earlier this year about the waiting times for statutory assessment of special educational needs. The Minister advised that boards have 16 weeks in which to complete the assessment from the date on which they notify parents that they are considering making an assessment, or from the date on which the request to carry out the assessment is received by them from the parent or the school.

It is clear that there is a problem in our classrooms. It affects teacher morale; it affects the employment and retention of best quality teaching staff, and it affects the education of our children.

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

Miss McIlveen: We cannot stand idly by and allow that to continue. I impress upon the Minister that work needs to be done.

Mr Elliott: I thank Mr Bradley for proposing the motion: indeed, there are two Bradley names attached to the motion — Mr and Mrs Bradley — but I do not think that they are cohabiting.

I am pleased that I can contribute to the debate. I want to pick up on something that the proposer of the motion mentioned, which is that despite the fact that there are a number of incidents of violence in schools at the moment — and that number is growing — there are a lot of good children in our society. That needs to be recognised and focused on. We must remember that a very small minority of children are violent toward teachers.

There is no doubt that violence against teachers is a plague on our society, and it is growing. We must look at what brings it about. Several issues are involved, the first of which is discipline. Mr Storey said that there was respect when he was at school. I will not debate with him now about which of us was at school last — we will keep that for a private conversation. However, many of us recognise that there was discipline and respect, and that they went together.

Sometimes, there is lack of discipline and respect; not only for teachers, but for wider society — and one only has to look at the antisocial behaviour that goes on in many of our towns and villages to see that that is the case. I have noticed that the school windows in my own village are broken on a weekly basis. Fires are started, and graffiti is written on walls; but where is the discipline? Are we encouraging bad behaviour, at times, through lack of proper discipline, as one Member has just alluded to?

We do not have to go back to the old ways of 60 or 70 years ago. However, we do have to look at the methods that we use. And the same goes for society: we must look at methods for instilling respect on one side and discipline on the other. That means society — parents, communities, churches and schools — working together.

It is only right that parents should recognise when their child has misbehaved and has been violent towards a teacher. If parents do not recognise that, how is the child going to realise that he or she has done wrong? There is a huge onus of responsibility on parents.

I have talked to teachers who have been the subject of violence from their pupils. It is a hugely harrowing experience, and it surprises me that more teachers do not suffer incidences of emotional breakdown. It is an extremely difficult situation to comprehend — some of

the pupils who carry out violence against teachers are known, and their families are known, by the teacher. That creates the added difficulty of having those families living in the community.

There is a gap in the Department's policy on the matter that needs to be examined closely. The teachers' unions have flagged up, and my colleague Basil McCrea has alluded to, the fact that there are no figures — there is nothing against which the incidents can be measured. That is my first point: we need better statistics on the degree of difficulty we are facing. We need that first.

Secondly, we need to look at the background and see where that can be improved. Thirdly, we need the support of the Department. I am sure that we will hear from the Minister later on how she is going to develop this. Teachers, and the community at large, badly need the support of the Department. That is one of the big gaps. They feel that they are isolated and do not have the support that they are crying out for.

Mr McCausland: I support the motion. We live in an increasingly lawless society, and, only too frequently, we see evidence of that on our streets. Society is breaking down in many ways. We see it within families and in antisocial behaviour, which has been mentioned already. That is reflected in schools. The behaviour of young people outside schools is replicated in many ways inside schools. Increasing lawlessness is a trend throughout the British Isles and, indeed, much of western Europe. In Northern Ireland, in particular, such behaviour has been reinforced and encouraged by many decades of violence.

That is an observation on the state of our society, but what are the issues for schools? First, we must consider the rights of teachers. Much emphasis is placed on the rights of pupils, but employers have a duty of care towards the teachers they employ. This issue cannot be ignored. Therefore, the Department of Education and other employing authorities have a responsibility to address the matter.

As well as the rights of teachers, the rights of other pupils must be considered. The bad and violent behaviour of a small minority of children in a classroom significantly affects the other children, whose right to education that small minority disrupts.

I welcome, and wholeheartedly support, the motion. Levels of violence against teachers vary throughout the Province, and the situation is more acute in some areas than in others. In addition, there is significant variation among the boards in the number of expulsions and suspensions, and that is why a joint working group should be created in order to deal with the matter on a Province-wide basis. There is a clear need for a policy, and a strategy, to address the problem of violence against teachers.

My teaching career ended approximately 25 years ago. I taught in a secondary school in Belfast, and, even then, there was a problem with violence against teachers. I remember one teacher being attacked by a pupil who decided that that was a good way in which to get expelled from the school. Another teacher had to give up teaching as a result of an assault on him. That was quite a few years ago; there was a problem then, but is it not the case that the problem is somewhat more acute today? As a governor of several schools, I am well aware of the situation that we face.

We have talked about schools, but one cannot divorce this issue from the role of the family. The importance of parental support for schools and teachers is sadly ignored by many people. A joint working group would be able to analyse research, consider current statistics and prepare a policy and strategy to address the problem, which is complex and has many contributing factors. Therefore, there will be no single, simple resolution; rather, a multifactorial resolution will emerge from that joint working group in terms of policy and strategy.

Such a resolution must include proper funding for psychology services to address the long delays in children's receiving the right diagnosis, treatment and support. We need to ensure that the psychology services are adequate to address the needs that exist.

There are also issues regarding the family, and parenting skills and classes have a role to play in that. Some parents have difficulty in accepting and addressing the responsibilities of parenthood: perhaps they had a difficult upbringing. The joint working group would consider such issues.

Schools should also provide classes in citizenship and teach children about the importance of respect for others, as well as respect for themselves.

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

Mr McCausland: The media have a role to play with regard to what they set out as the perceived norm for children. I encourage Members to support the motion and say that the Department of Education has a solemn responsibility to take it forward.

Mrs M Bradley: I wish to be associated with the comments that my colleague Dominic Bradley made about the sad deaths that have occurred over the past two or three days.

It is shocking and worrying that we are discussing attacks of any nature by children and young people on teachers — a profession that used to command respect. Throughout the 1970s, many calls were made for the end of corporal punishment that was, so often, delivered upon school-age children — a call that was,

eventually, heeded and legislated for in an effort to protect the rights of children.

In today's society, we are trying to preserve the rights of teachers and principals to teach in an environment that is free from all forms of abuse from children or young people who, at one time, would have been thought to have been incapable of such acts. Thankfully, there has not been a fatality in Northern Ireland as there has been in England, where a principal was stabbed at the school gate. However, there is always a chance that there will be a fatality where there is the threat of any type of violence.

If the relevant mechanisms are not in place, we will have to depend on parental control to ensure that such situations do not arise: however, that is lacking in many families these days. In order to protect the child and the educator, it is essential that the procedures detailed in the motion are established and implemented without delay.

The teaching profession has been hit hard in recent years, with some teachers being physically assaulted by children who are in their first year at school. Those children need help; and, in the majority of cases, that help should come in the form of early intervention. However, the teacher is being left to deal with the incident and the after-effects.

During many debates in the House, Members have used the phrase "zero tolerance". Many teachers' unions are calling for zero tolerance when it comes to any abuse — be it verbal or physical — in the classroom. I have no doubt that all Members have sat on school boards at one time or another. I, for one, find nothing more disturbing than tales of a child attacking a teacher or another child in his or her class.

I recall a memorable incident from recent times in which an eight-year-old abused his classmates and teacher regularly. When he was sent to the principal, he physically attacked the principal. Sadly, that is a familiar story, and it leaves me in no doubt that now is the time to do what the motion calls for so that the teachers and principals can have renewed confidence in the educational environment.

I call on the Minister to act without delay on the issue and to reinforce the Department's commitment by providing the necessary information and resources to allow educators to combat and deal with attacks in the proper manner.

The creation of a working party, in the first instance, would give all concerned a sign that the Department is being proactive in its approach to attacks, and, in conjunction with all stakeholders, would be a positive in the sea of negativity surrounding the teaching profession at this time.

I support the motion that was moved by my colleague Mr Bradley who, as a former teacher, has only the best interests of teachers and pupils at heart.

Mr Poots: I welcome the opportunity to address the motion, although we should not have to be debating such an issue. It is ironic that the proposers of the motion come from the SDLP. We are in this position because of the liberal, namby-pamby attitude that permeates through society and which makes it impossible to deal with individuals who demonstrate aggressiveness and bad behaviour. The SDLP was the great enunciator of the Belfast Agreement and all of the human rights legislation that flowed from it.

5.15 pm

There are human rights for those who behave aggressively, but the human rights of the victims are not given equal importance. I see that Mrs Bradley is shaking her head, but that is a fact of life. The Commissioner for Children and Young People is an ex-SDLP Assembly Member, and she has squandered over £100,000 of public money in seeking to enforce her views that a parent cannot physically discipline his or her own child. Let me say this: the banning of corporal punishment in schools was the biggest enhancement of the problem that we are addressing today.

No public servants — whether they are ambulance drivers, Fire Service staff, police officers, school teachers or nurses — deserve to be punished for carrying out their job. None of them deserve to be assaulted or to be the victims of aggressive behaviour. However, the truth is that that is happening on a daily basis because of the human rights legislation that exists, which protects the human rights of the aggressor but not those of the individual who is being attacked.

Ultimately, if we are to deal with this issue, we need to wind the clock back. The sanctions that can be taken against those pupils who are aggressive to other pupils and teachers are detention, suspension and expulsion. Very often, children do not attend detention when they are given it. When a child is given a suspension, it is worn as a badge of honour, and they say: "look how cool I am, I have just got suspended from school for a number of days, or a week." Suspension is no punishment — the children stand outside their school sneering and making fun of those who are actually attending school. Unless we wake up to the reality that there has to be a punishment that is suitable to the crime that is committed, we are going to be debating this issue again in another five years' time.

Mr McCarthy: I am a bit astounded at the line that the Member is taking — are you telling this Assembly that you would support corporal punishment?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order; the Member should direct his remarks through the Deputy Speaker, not directly at another Member.

Mr McCarthy: Sorry; you are disciplining me, obviously. *[Laughter.]*

I then, Mr Deputy Speaker, ask the Member whether, in view of all that he said, he is actually asking this Assembly to support schools reverting to what went before, which is the corporal punishment of youngsters?

Mr Poots: I am now astounded that Mr McCarthy could think that that is such a bad thing. I suspect that every one of us who attended school attended in a period when corporal punishment was implemented, and I do not see many of us having taken much hurt from that. I was subjected to a fair degree of corporal punishment in school, and I deserved every single bit of it — it did not do me one button of harm. I would be quite happy for schools to introduce corporal punishment and for my children who attend school to be dealt with in that manner if they misbehaved. There is no need for this particular nonsense; that is, the argument that we cannot have corporal punishment in schools or smacking within the home in order to discipline our children.

Mr McCausland: I intervene at this point to recall a comment that was made by the Minister of Education in her former incarnation as a promoter of the West Belfast Festival. A noted pop singer of the period refused to take part in one of the festival's concerts because of the stance taken by certain circles in west Belfast at that time regarding punishment beatings. I remember well that the Minister of Education said that it was not a black and white issue. In light of that interesting comment regarding punishment beatings, I want to hear her views on Mr Poots's comments about corporal punishment.

Mr Poots: I will let the Minister answer that herself. That sort of corporal punishment is more of a black-and-blue and broken-bones issue, and that was not what I was suggesting for schools.

There was corporal punishment in schools for many years, and it is not anathema; it is not something that is wholly wrong —

Mr Dallat: Will the Member give way?

Mr Poots: My time has gone. I wish the Member had asked me sooner, because I would have loved to have had the opportunity to deal with his point.

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

Mr Poots: However, violence against teachers will continue if we do not have the means to deal with it, and there is nothing in the proposal that will deal with it.

Mr K Robinson: Before I begin, I wish to express my condolences to the families of the three members of the security forces who were murdered over the

weekend. The House is still shocked at the onset of violence again.

I declare a vested interest, as I am a governor in two primary schools. As someone who has had the benefit of the cane, both as a pupil and as a school principal, I have a certain sympathy for some of the things that Mr Poots said, although I am not sure in which order that sympathy lies.

We have a problem with violence against teachers, and that has always been endemic in schools. However, it appears to be a growing problem. The frightening thing is that it has moved downwards from secondary-school level, where young teenagers — adolescents — were trying to portray themselves as young men or young ladies who could go against authority and had the willingness to do so, to primary-school level. When teachers in the lower levels of primary schools — P1 and P2 — are being assaulted fairly regularly, we have a problem.

Where does that problem come from? Many Members have suggested that there is a latent problem of indiscipline in some homes today. That problem is then transported into the school system. There is a widespread lack of respect for authority, in all its shapes and forms, and for authority figures right across society. Teachers fall into that category, and they bear the impact of that societal failure.

The impact of such behaviour on individual teachers is something that we often forget, and it can be devastating for those professionals. The effect ranges from simple embarrassment that it has happened to them, to disbelief. There is a loss of confidence: how and why did it happen? There is a sense of anger as to why it happened to them. There is a fear of repetition: it has happened once, could it happen again? Sometimes that leads to the serious illnesses that have been mentioned by other Members. Sometimes it leads to a desire for a teacher to leave a school or, worse still, to leave the profession and rob it of many latent skills and abilities that future generations will miss out on.

The reaction to violence against teachers has a wide range of responses. There is the support of colleagues in the school, which is usually very positive; there is the backing of the senior management team and the principal of the school, which, again, tends to be positive; there is the intervention of the chairman of the board of governors, if the matter moves on to a serious level; there is the role of the relevant officers of the education and library board, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) or the other bodies that have oversight of education; and then there is the rather detached role of the Department of Education.

Mr Elliott: Does the Member agree that the support of the parents of the pupil who has been violent to the teacher is equally important?

Mr K Robinson: Yes, I agree with my colleague and thank him for his intervention. The role of the parent is absolutely pivotal. If the parent arrives at the school and believes that wee Jimmy has done nothing wrong and that the problem is the fault of everyone else, it is a lost cause. However, if the parents come to the school and accept that wee Jimmy has done something wrong, and they wish to help to sort out the problem, that is of benefit.

Immediate colleagues in the school will be supportive, and the principal will — hopefully — have a disciplinary scheme in place that will support the teacher and involve the parents, as well as the board of governors. A serious case will be referred to the education and library board or CCMS officers, who will, hopefully, provide specialist support. Again, several Members commented on the lack of help from educational psychologists, and that is something that should concern us all. That help must be available at a fairly early stage, and guidance must be given to the teacher and the school.

The Department, of course, will have its guidelines — the Department has guidelines for everything. The school, as a corporate body, is in a difficult position, because it is torn between the need to address the individual incidents, and the need to do that without attracting the adverse publicity that may surround such behaviour and attach a negative label to the school as an institution.

The unions may support their members who are assaulted but be tempted to make a cause célèbre out of the issue, perhaps in pursuit of a national agenda, dare I say?

Teachers, schools, parents and pupils — all those involved — must recognise that violence against teachers exists and is a problem. If our children are to be educated, teachers require the respect of their pupils, the respect of parents, and the respect of school authorities in all their many guises.

The school must maintain a positive public perception that it is a well-run, disciplined institution that sets standards and has policies that are accepted by parents, pupils and the community that the school seeks to serve.

We must ensure that initial teacher training prepares young teachers in particular to enter the profession in their early days with the techniques and knowledge that will enable them to control the classroom and command attention and respect. Those courses should be regularly repeated throughout teachers' school careers. Principals, governors, board officers and departmental officials must also attend such courses. That will guarantee that the issues involved are understood and that a consistent approach is taken in addressing those issues by everyone involved in our education system.

The role of the parent in ensuring that their children adhere to clearly identified school policies on behaviour and discipline is central to the smooth working of any school. It focuses attention on behavioural parameters that the school has set down in its disciplinary policy and ensures that that code protects every child who attends the school.

Dr Deeny: I support the motion. As Members said, the vast majority of pupils are law-abiding and are not involved in abuse or violence; however, it takes only a small number to create a major problem, and we have had life-and-death evidence of that in recent days. At this point, I express my sympathy and condolences to the families of the three people who lost their lives in the past 72 hours.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] In the Chair)

I am interested in the subject of violence against teachers because many of my relatives and relatives of my wife are teachers. As a doctor, I suggest that the issue is bigger than people realise. The Chairperson of the Education Committee, who has left the Chamber, talked about the respect in which various professions were once held — I must talk to him about not mentioning the local doctor. That was the case, and we see that in society nowadays.

Teaching is a valued profession and teachers valued professionals. After all, we entrust them with our children for a large part of the day. Teaching was always stressful, but it is becoming more so. Our teachers must be protected, and society and we, its elected representatives, must see to it that that is the case.

After a great deal of pressure, zero tolerance was introduced into Health Service hospitals; it does not yet apply to health centres, but that should also happen. Zero tolerance should also be introduced as a written policy in all our schools and educational institutions. It is important to ask why that should be done. People talk about a lack of discipline in families and in society, which may be the case, but that lack of discipline must not be brought into schools. Regardless of a young person's background or social circumstances, there should be a law against verbal or physical violence and abuse in our schools.

As GPs, we see the major health consequences — mentioned by Dominic Bradley — of violence against teachers. Many of the teachers that doctors see are suffering. I suspect that those cases are not documented and do not involve pupil suspensions. Yet teachers arrive with symptoms and signs of ill health, particularly mental health — stress, anxiety, insomnia and depression. We doctors are signing teachers off work because of the health impact of their jobs. That is due to the abuse — and the fear of potential abuse — that teachers experience.

5.30 pm

The effects on other pupils have been mentioned, and I will also touch on that. Other pupils suffer emotional problems, such as fear and anxiety. They also feel threatened and may feel bullied into siding with the pupil who is the aggressor.

I think that the proposer of the motion mentioned that teachers may be working when they are unwell due to mental-health issues. Through no fault of their own, they may not be performing up to standard, or they could be off sick. Teachers who have been abused verbally, which is being threatened — or physically, which is being assaulted — must have the total support of their principals and their school governors. Sometimes, I think that principals are not sure what protocols or procedures to follow to give full support to the teachers. I am aware of situations like that.

I am aware of teachers in my area who are currently not working because of the health consequences of the situation. The unions must step up to the mark and ensure that the rights of disorderly and aggressive pupils do not supersede, diminish or displace the rights of teachers. That is very important, and it has already been mentioned. There should also be a standard protocol in legislation for all schools about how principals and governors should deal with violence and abuse against teachers. This problem is bigger than we think. We need action now in the form of appropriate legislation, and I support the motion.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I join with my colleagues in extending sympathy to the family of Stephen Carroll.

I welcome this debate, which raises an important issue that faces staff in schools. Attacks on staff — whether physical, verbal or electronic — are totally unacceptable. Teachers are the most valuable asset as we seek to equip our children for the challenges of life and work. For the most part, teachers are equally valued by their pupils, the parents of their pupils and by society in general. In Ireland, we have some of the best, and most highly committed, teachers in Europe.

I gcás ina mbíonn múinteoirí faoi bhagairt drochíde nó ina mbíonn drochíde a thabhairt dóibh, áfach, caithfimid teacht ar an mbealach is fearr chun an bhagairt a laghdú agus caithfimid smaoiniamh ar an mbealach is fearr le tacaíocht a thabhairt dóibh. Cé go bhfuil an bhunfhreagracht agus an dualgas cúraim ar fhostóirí na múinteoirí maidir le sábháilteacht agus folláine san áit oibre, is ceist í seo a bhaineann le chuile dhuine againn atá bainteach le cúrsaí oideachais.

Where teachers are under threat of abuse or where they experience abuse, we need to consider how best to minimise the threat and how best to support them. Teachers' employers have the primary responsibility

and duty of care in relation to safety and well-being in the workplace. This issue concerns all of us who are involved in education.

We need to build a culture of democracy and respect in our schools. Respect needs to be earned. If children and teachers feel valued in their workplace, there is much less likelihood of violence against, or bullying of, teachers or pupils. I am not sure that I agree with the terminology "zero tolerance", although I understand the concept behind it. We need to make sure that our teachers are supported. However, in some cases, we are talking about children who have emotional and behavioural issues. There are a couple of things that I would like to say about that.

We must consider the language that we use regarding violence against children and teachers. That is something that we can debate and discuss. I put clear blue water between me and the Member who argued that corporal punishment should be brought back. I distance myself from that view. I also point out that any use of corporal punishment in our schools is illegal.

When I hear statements like that, I am glad that I instructed my departmental officials to work with the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), the Ulster Teachers' Union (UTU) and Amnesty International so that we can build a culture of rights in our schools.

As a former human-rights and equality spokesperson, I also want to distance myself from the comments that were made about rights and equality. The institutions that we have built into the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement — an agreement that the Member's party supports — are very important. I find the Member's attack on the Children's Commissioner surprising, and I want to distance myself from those comments, too. I want to put on record my support for the work that the commissioner is doing in very difficult circumstances.

Another Member from the same party attributed to me what is a misquotation. It is absolutely incorrect. I want to put on record my absolute abhorrence of punishment beatings. I have always been on record as saying that. I ask people not to play politics with the very important issue of violence against teachers.

One area of concern is the current patchy recording of incidents in schools. Draft guidance that is currently being drawn up seeks to provide schools with a simple mechanism for recording incidents and for liaising with their employing authority to ensure that robust statistics are kept. As matters stand, only incidents that result in suspension or expulsion of pupils are likely to be recorded by a school and come to the employing authority's notice.

Chomh maith leis sin, níl meicníocht ar bith ann chun taifead a choinneáil de theagmhais ar áitreabh

scoile a raibh daoine eile páirteach iontu, mar shampla tuismitheoirí nó tríú páirtí.

Moreover, no mechanism is in place to record incidents on school premises that involve others, such as parents or third parties. During the 2006-07 school year, pupils were suspended 1,829 times for verbal abuse of staff, and 248 times for physical attacks on staff. The following year, pupils were suspended 1,799 times for verbal abuse, and 186 times for physical attacks on staff. I hope that the topic's current high profile will encourage schools to keep accurate records of incidents so that we might observe patterns and changes. I am pleased to be able to inform members that considerable work has been undertaken in the past year.

The working group was established, and it held its first meeting on 12 May 2008. Since then, there have been four meetings, and a further meeting is scheduled for this month. To date, the group has organised a workshop to examine the extent and nature of teacher abuse. That workshop was held on 20 November 2008. In addition, the group has drafted a revised guidance document and is currently working on that to take account of feedback from the workshop and advice received from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). I hope that the revised guidance will be available to schools early in the new year.

It is likely that the working group will recommend that posters be put up in schools to warn that perpetrators of violence—for example, visitors or parents—will be prosecuted in cases of attacks.

The focus of the school workforce review is primarily on structures, but it will also take on board the outcomes from ongoing work on violence against teachers that is undertaken by joint working groups with unions and employers.

I also want to echo some of the comments that were made—by Basil McCrea, I think—on the high level of violence against women and children, and the significant impact that that has had on our schools. I share those concerns. The levels of violence are totally under-reported, and that is borne out by PSNI statistics. I have had a couple of meetings with Women's Aid, and I am currently working with that organisation and my departmental officials to ensure that we deal with emotions in the curriculum at the appropriate age level. I look forward to working with my colleagues on that.

The working group has reviewed the existing guidance document, 'Security and Personal Safety in Schools', which was published in 1997, and has identified a number of areas that requires updating, in the light of the advance of modern technology. Those include the comparatively new potential for abuse through the Internet and by mobile phone. The group has examined the guidance that is available to schools

in England and Wales, and at research undertaken by teachers' unions that operate in both jurisdictions.

The Department will also be looking at what is happening in the South of Ireland. I will be addressing INTO's all-Ireland conference during the Easter break, and it is one of the issues that we will be looking at.

I will also take this opportunity to acknowledge the positive input made to the working group by teachers' unions here. They have been instrumental in drafting the proposed guidance and in sharing their experience of the problem. As I said, a workshop was held in November 2008. Invitees included serving teachers and principals, as well as representatives from the employing authorities, the Department, the teachers' unions, members of the Labour Relations Agency, the Health and Safety Executive and the PSNI.

The event was hosted on my behalf by my permanent secretary, as I was unable to attend due to an unexpected clash of dates, with the first meeting of the Assembly Executive in many months. Attendees were invited to consider the proposed revised guidance and to offer feedback. It was a useful exercise, as it enabled the working group to take on board the views of people working on the front line. A further redraft of the guidance is being undertaken by the working group, informed by comments received at the workshop, and further advice is being sought from the HSE. The working group has not yet decided on any specific recommendations regarding training and risk assessment in schools, and it is awaiting advice from the HSE.

The working group hopes to have the redraft completed in the near future, and it will then be able to put it forward for consideration by the teachers' negotiating committee. I hope that the work will be completed and updated guidance available to schools early in the new school year.

As well as looking at prevention of abuse, it is vital that we offer support to teachers who are unfortunate enough to experience it. I am, therefore, pleased to note that the employing authorities recently agreed to extend the provision of counselling services to all teachers. That service will be available from 1 April 2009, and it will take the form of a 24-hour confidential telephone helpline. Teachers can also avail themselves of face-to-face counselling and a range of welfare services through their employing authorities. Members will know that children also have access to counselling services in post-primary schools, and I have extended that to primary, and special, schools.

A parallel joint working group is looking at a wider strategy relating to teachers' health and well-being, with particular regard to stress.

In the case of abuse perpetrated by pupils or other school staff, the school may make use of the provisions of its discipline policy for pupils, or agreed procedures

for staff discipline. In the case of abuse perpetrated by parents or other third parties, consideration may be given to civil or criminal action.

Tá mé ag súil go mór leis go mbeidh baint leanúnach ag an Roinn, ag na fostóirí agus ag ceardchumann na múinteoirí chun an obair thábhachtach seo a thabhairt chun críche.

I look forward to continued involvement from the Department, employers and the teachers' union to progress that important work.

There will always be differences in people's perception of abuse, and one person's reaction to an incident may be unlike another person's. It is important that we avoid situations in which school staff feel compelled to make a complaint and, equally, that we avoid becoming overly apprehensive. The vast majority of school staff's dealings with pupils, parents and others are positive and productive, and I am sure that teachers recognise that, most of the time, they do not have a difficulty with the majority of people.

I look forward to working with all my colleagues in relation to the changes that we are bringing about. Members will also know that I am funding the anti-bullying forum.

I will finish by reiterating one point. We need to build a culture of respect and empowerment, and we can lead by example in the House. However, at times, Members do not lead by example. I have had a lot of experience of Members resorting to personal abuse, but it is time that we led by example. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Bhí díospóireacht ardchaighdeáin againn inniu, agus tá áthas orm gur ghlac an oiread sin daoine páirt inti.

We have had a good debate today, and I am glad that so many Members had the opportunity to participate in it. The debate was largely conducted in the correct spirit, with one or two exceptions.

5.45 pm

It is regrettable that Mr Poots chose to party-politicise the debate; no other Member who spoke took that route. I am afraid that he is mistaken in his belief that assaults on teachers began when corporal punishment ended. There were assaults on teachers before corporal punishment ended, and such assaults continued afterwards.

Let us face it — corporal punishment is itself a form of violence. Mr Poots sees corporal punishment as the solution to violent attacks, but the answer to violence is not more violence. Indeed, violence only generates further violence. I regret Mr Poots's view and his attack on our party for bringing the motion to the Floor

of the House. If he had been so concerned about the matter, he would have taken the trouble to table a motion, but he did not.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr D Bradley: No; the Member will not give way. The Member asked Mr Poots to give way and he refused, so I am afraid that there will be no opportunity to make an intervention at this time.

I will continue by dealing with what the Minister said. It is important to evaluate her contribution early, because I have to deal with many speeches. I welcome the Minister's strong statement and her view that violence and assaults against teachers are totally unacceptable, and it is important that we make that clear. I also welcome her belief that teachers are among the most valuable assets in the education system and that we — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I must restore a sense of discipline; I ask Members to remain quiet while Mr Bradley concludes the debate.

Mr D Bradley: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I assure you that those Members had not interrupted me in the least. However, I see that you are at pains to establish good discipline here, just as a teacher would in his or her classroom. It is unfortunate that you have to do that, but you do it very effectively.

I welcome the Minister's view that our teachers are among the best in Europe. She asked how we can best minimise the threat to teachers in the classroom, and, indeed, that is a key question. She is at pains to develop a culture of democracy in schools, but we need to know exactly what she means by a "culture of democracy". The rights of children must be fully respected, but there must be clear limits in schools and, indeed, in family life. As the Minister said, respect must be earned. A contract based on mutual respect should be at work between teachers and pupils in schools; it is when that contract breaks down that teachers are assaulted.

I was disappointed that the Minister was not prepared to endorse zero tolerance for assaults on and violence against teachers. Many Members spoke in favour of zero tolerance; I am not sure why the Minister is unsure about it, and I would like her to clarify that at some future stage. As Dr Deeny said, a zero-tolerance approach is taken to attacks on Health Service staff; therefore I do not see why there should not also be a zero-tolerance approach to attacks on the education workforce. Some children come to school with a great deal of baggage, but emotional and behavioural difficulties should never be used to excuse violent behaviour — verbal or physical — in any way.

The Minister says that schools should be encouraged to keep accurate records of violence

against teachers; however, we need to go further. The Department must insist that schools keep accurate records of such incidents. As many Members said, we need to have the most accurate and up-to-date information in order to build an accurate picture of what is going on and to act accordingly.

The Minister described what has been done to date. She also mentioned that the use of the Internet and mobile phones to bully and bring violence on people is being dealt with. I welcome that, too; as well as the fact that she is exploring the experiences of the Republic of Ireland, England and Wales. I was disappointed, though, that she did not commit any specified amount of resources to the problem. As we know, Ministers' commitment to particular issues is often measurable by the amount of resources that they are prepared to put to those issues. I would like the Minister to clarify in the near future the extent to which she will dedicate resources to this problem.

I will review some of the contributions made during the debate. I begin with what was said by Mr Ken Robinson. He will forgive me for singling him out, but I was struck by the insight that he brought to the problem of the suffering of teachers who are assaulted. He portrayed clearly the distress and the suffering endured by a teacher who was the victim of an assault. Although, importantly, he noted the support available from fellow members of staff, he indicated that, in some cases, principals and boards of governors did not always, for particular reasons, provide the level of support that teachers deserve in that difficult situation — a situation in which teachers find themselves through no fault of their own. I thank Mr Robinson for that insight. Obviously, his long experience as a teacher and principal is evident from his contribution.

Mr Storey, the Chairperson of the Education Committee, reminded us that the Committee had dealt with the INTO report to which I referred in my initial speech. He pointed out that the Committee recommended to the Department that the report be dealt with under the review proposed by the Minister into the education workforce. Unfortunately, that review has been delayed and Mr Storey called on the Minister to bring it forward and to incorporate in it the recommendations made by the INTO report.

John O'Dowd commented on the growth of attacks on primary-school teachers, and that was echoed by several other contributors, including Michelle McIlveen. Mr O'Dowd said that we need to understand why children between five and 11 years of age are involved in violent attacks on their teachers. He believed that it was due to a lack of parental control and an indication that something was wrong in the family and the home. He also said that services were needed to support those children and their families. He underlined the fact that teachers, too, needed support

and that accurate information should be collected about assaults on teachers, and relevant action taken.

Mr Basil McCrea saw a link between domestic violence and violence in schools. He said that a joined-up approach was needed by the Department. It was extremely difficult for teachers to teach when their safety and security were uncertain. He said that the Minister had, possibly, lost an opportunity to deal with this issue through the education and skills authority Bill. He said that help, advice and guidance should be available to teachers who were assaulted.

I could continue: there were many other useful contributions.

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

Mr D Bradley: I think that it was a very worthwhile debate and I hope that the Minister will take into account the points that I have made in my winding up speech. I am grateful for having had the opportunity to debate this issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the increasing reports of violence towards school principals and teachers; and calls on the Minister of Education to address this matter urgently, by establishing a joint working party with the recognised teachers' unions, statutory agencies and other stakeholders, to ensure that uniform recording and reporting mechanisms are in place for all schools, that a training and awareness programme is developed for all teachers, and that principals and governors are provided with appropriate advice and guidance on dealing with violence against staff in schools.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

The Hope Centre, Ballymena

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

If Members have private business to conduct, please do it outside the Chamber and allow other Members the opportunity to be heard.

Mr Paisley Jnr: As has been the practice today, I wish to express and add my sympathy to the family of Constable Carroll following his brutal and callous murder. Our sympathy and prayerful support goes to his wife and family at this time. I am sure that the House will join with me in welcoming the fact that one person has already been arrested, and we hope that others are made amenable to the law in the days, weeks and months ahead.

The Hope Centre in Ballymena is a voluntary community alcohol- and drug-addiction project located in the town centre. It serves adults, children and the families of those affected by addiction — directly or indirectly — across the Northern Health and Social Services Board area. As Members know, that is one of the largest board areas in the country. The Hope Centre provides a vital service within the community and is the only one of its kind, not just in Ballymena, but in County Antrim and, indeed, in Northern Ireland. I tabled the topic for debate to draw attention to the fact that such a vital local service in a constituency that has needs in the area of addiction — and which serves the rest of the country — is on the brink of a major funding crisis.

The Hope Centre treats and supports over 400 clients. Clients are mainly from the Ballymena area, but come from as far away as Cookstown, Portstewart, Newtownabbey and the city of Belfast. Clients are referred to the Hope Centre from a variety of sources. The Probation Board for Northern Ireland, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Court Service, numerous GP practices, and the Northern Ireland Community Addiction Service all regularly refer people to the Hope Centre. That speaks testament to the fact that the Hope Centre provides a very useful and valued service across the community.

Not only does the Hope Centre help the individual who has an addiction, it assists the entire family circle; that can be the user's children, parents, partners or

siblings. Since 2000, the Hope Centre has been addressing the issue of hidden harm. Addiction is well documented across the community and we know of many people in the news who suffer from the devastating disease of addiction. Addiction not only affects the individual physically and psychologically, but it affects the family circle and the community from which that individual comes. Addiction impacts on social deprivation, crime and antisocial behaviour — all of which can flow from such problems.

Almost all of us know someone who has a problem with alcohol or drug addiction. The Hope Centre has over 219 clients — well over 50% of its client base — registered through the alcohol addiction programme. The Hope Centre works with the sickest of the sick. It works with those who have nowhere else to turn, who are without hope and who need to be given hope. It deals with people of all age groups. One of its clients is a nine-year-old child who is addicted to smoking cannabis; at the other end of the spectrum is a 66-year-old man who has had a drink and alcohol abuse problem all his life.

The Hope Centre works with all sections of the community; all races, creeds and colours — it turns no one away. However, in April this year, the centre will be in the midst of a major crisis because funding to that service has been cut. It stands to lose four members of staff, leaving only three staff members to service what is a growing community. The centre would simply not be able to function and would have to face the possibility of closure. Amid the economic downturn and the looming depression, alcohol and drug problems are, in my opinion, only set to get worse. However, facilities such as the Hope Centre are about to disappear.

6.00 pm

We have a moral responsibility to address the issue precisely and urgently. I ask the House to give the Hope Centre the hope that it requires to maintain a vital service in the community. It is part funded by the Northern Drugs and Alcohol Co-Ordination Team, but that funding will run out at the end of March, with the loss of a further two posts and a substantial portion of its rent. Without that assistance and help, the Hope Centre would be faced with closure.

What actual nuts-and-bolts service does the Hope Centre provide? I shall use the word “hope” as an acrostic in order to spell out the answer to that.

“H” is for the help that it provides to people who are most in need. As I said, the sickest of the sick use the facility. It is used by people on whom society has turned its back and by people who have turned their backs on society. It helps people who are regarded as down-and-outs and who are regarded as being beyond help. The centre provides help to the people who are in most need.

“O” is for the opportunity that the centre gives by way of services. It provides therapy, counselling, physical training, IT training, one-to-one support, family support and helps people with craft development. It helps people to build confidence so that they can go out and seek employment and seek to rebuild their lives. It provides the opportunity for character building and of helping people with their money-management problems. It provides alcohol and drug education and helps people by providing relapse prevention courses, recovery planning and help with stress and anger management as a result of the problems that they face because they are in the downward spiral of an addiction crisis. Without the Hope Centre, that opportunity would be lost.

“P” stands for the fact that family support is put at the heart of the Hope Centre. When people have an addiction problem, whether that is through alcohol or drug abuse, it does not affect them as an island but it affects the entire family unit. They may end up stealing from their family and may drive their family towards depression. They may hurt their family as well as hurting themselves.

The Hope Centre not only provides help and opportunity to the person who suffers from addiction but it provides the same help and opportunity to the entire family group, letting the family know that they are not alone with the problem. It builds the family’s support network and helps the family to experience sharing the problem in order to learn about how to deal with a person with substance abuse and to put things out of harm’s way for the substance abuser. I believe that that family support network is one of the secrets as to why the Hope Centre has been regarded as such a success for the past nine years and explains why people flock to it in the numbers that they do.

Finally, “E” stands for the experience that the Hope Centre delivers. The people who work in the Hope Centre have experience of dealing with those with addiction problems not only on a professional basis but they have the experience of going through that with either a family member or a friend. They know exactly what it means for the individual, and that personal experience by the volunteers who work for the Hope Centre is absolutely crucial in demonstrating that it provides something vital, crucial and unique to society. We should be loath to throw that away so easily because it needs a few thousand pounds.

The financial crisis that looms for the Hope Centre is, on the scale of things, not massive. However, if it does not get the resources that it requires, the consequences will be massive, not only for the community in my constituency but for the entire Northern Trust area. I am concerned that, so far, the ministerial response to the matter has been woefully inadequate. A partnership

approach from Ministers is important, and a co-ordinated approach by them is also important.

I wrote to the Minister for Social Development and, indeed, to the Health Minister. I also contacted the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Social Development Minister recognised in her letter to me dated 18 February 2009:

“The valuable support services that are provided in the Centre to those affected by drugs and alcohol abuse are to be commended”,

However, I was disappointed that she went on to say:

“This project funding will end in March and there are no further funding streams available to support the work of the Centre”.

She recommended that I contact the Department of Health. Unfortunately, I got a similar response from that Department. Although concerned about the centre’s work, it said:

“On this occasion, the Hope Centre was unsuccessful in gaining the contract to provide Community Support services in relation to substance misuse across the Northern Board area.”

I stress that small organisations, such as the Hope Centre, do not necessarily have the skills to put in place long-term tendering bids and projects. The 14 tenders that have been granted by the Northern Health and Social Services Board have been won by people who are professional when it comes to putting together tender bids. Do they, however, have the expertise or nous on the ground to deal with the individuals who approach them? My concern is that the skills and experience to deal with those who have problems with substance and alcohol abuse will be lost because of the need to acquire a few thousand pounds.

I am delighted that junior Minister Donaldson is present to respond to the debate. I encourage the Health Department and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to see whether there is some way in which additional support can be given to develop the centre’s family services or some aspect of its work so that funding can be made available. Will the junior Minister urge the Department of Health to seek a meeting with the centre and to put in place a discussion that will hand-hold it through a process that will, hopefully, lead to a successful bid and application for additional funding?

Urgent action is needed this month to keep the centre going. I hope that that urgent action will be followed up by a sustained and sustaining plan that will allow the Hope Centre to continue to do what it does best — give hope to people who are in dire straits; give help; give opportunity; put people first; and give of its experience.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for bringing this issue to the House and, indeed, congratulate him on beating me to it. That is, however, a good thing: it shows that all of North Antrim’s MLAs are keen to speak on the

issue and to do as much as they can for the Hope Centre. As the Member has already explained, much more could be done by certain Executive Ministers.

In front of me, I have a copy of a letter that I sent to the Health Minister on 7 January 2008 to request an urgent meeting with him to discuss the immediate crisis facing the Hope Centre in Ballymena. Unfortunately, the Minister did not feel that the matter was urgent enough to necessitate that meeting. Indeed, he is not present today. Members could be forgiven for thinking that the Minister is running away from the issue. He needs to face up to his responsibilities on the matter, which is a pressing issue not only for people in our constituency of North Antrim, but for people much further afield.

The Hope Centre is a proactive organisation. Indeed, the family and relatives group that is based there has done a lot of good work in the Ballymena area during the past number of years. In February, some of the area's other MLAs and I attended a series of presentations in a hotel in Ballymena that demonstrated the impact that drugs have not only on the individual user, but on his or her immediate family and friends. If one thinks about the impact that drugs have on the user or addict, and multiplies that by five, 10, 20, or even 30, that gives an idea of the impact on an entire community.

One individual who spoke that day was a grandfather whose son had become a drug addict. His account was powerful, as he spoke of how his son, and his son's girlfriend, became addicted to drugs. After that powerful account, he outlined the emotional and financial problems that he and his wife face in looking after their grandchild. That example demonstrates the effect that drugs can have on an entire family.

The Hope Centre is a unique community and voluntary treatment and rehabilitation centre. It is the only such centre in Ireland, and as Mr Paisley Jnr said, it deals with addicts as young as nine and as old as 66. It is frightening to think that people as young as nine are becoming addicted to substances and that people as old as 66 are struggling to escape them. Community workers in the area have made it clear that the problem is entering third and fourth generations.

Earlier today, I spoke to workers from the centre, who have been informed that the Northern Health and Social Care Trust will not fund the centre for the next two years. The Health Minister should at least ensure that the managerial post — the key post at the centre — is retained in order to ensure that the structure that holds the centre together remains in place while other funding avenues are explored. The fact that local groups, such as churches, are collecting money to help the centre demonstrates how greatly the centre and its work are respected.

The Health Minister cannot sit idly by while the service goes to the wall, which will happen if funding is not secured within the next few weeks. Drugs users need help to wean themselves off substances such as heroin; without the centre, they will be left on the street. As one worker pointed out, the economy is entering a recession, and drug addiction and its associated problems, such as antisocial behaviour and petty crime, will worsen. Given that fact, rather than allow the centre to close, the Health Minister should provide extra finance to the centre and to other services across the North.

Other Departments have responsibilities in the matter, and given the number of referrals that the centre receives from the criminal justice system, the NIO should provide funding. I urge the junior Minister to consider that fact and to speak not only to individual Ministers but to the NIO, because it is important to adopt a co-ordinated approach to ensure that the buck is not passed from one Minister to another.

The misuse of drugs is a major issue in North Antrim; it has destroyed houses, homes and communities — and continues to do so. We need to adopt a united, direct approach to deal with the problem. Some people say that Ballymena does not have such a bad drugs problem; they do not want people to talk about it because it might affect the town's image and business prospects. However, Sinn Féin believes that rehab workers, community workers and families of addicts have a much better insight into the drugs problems. That is why we listen primarily to those who believe that the area has a major drugs problem and that putting our heads in the sand will only make it worse.

Many addicts who use the Hope Centre make the same remarks about their experience, but in different words. One former addict said but for the Hope Centre, he would not be here. If the centre is allowed to close, people's lives will be put on the line, and it is time that people here woke up to that reality. Go raibh maith agat.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I join others in expressing my sympathy to the families that have been bereaved by the awful events of the past few days.

I apologise to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and to Members because I will leave immediately after my speech; I should have been at the Assembly Commission meeting 30 minutes ago.

I fully support all the comments of the Members who spoke previously.

I think that Mr Paisley laid the situation out very clearly. There is little more that could be added to what he said, except to say that that one centre perhaps does more than many others that are well financed. When one realises the extent to which people are being

helped, it is clear that it is not just the addicts, but their families and friends, who are being helped.

6.15 pm

The Hope Centre has been grown from experience. It is not something that was set up just to get Government funding and to then carry on with a management team, bringing in experts and getting more money. That is not the purpose of the Hope Centre. The experiences of those who have been through the awful depression of addiction and those of the people who have worked with them and their families in their homes have built the Hope Centre in Ballymena.

From that point of view, we should pay tribute today to the great work that has been done for families, children, relatives, and especially the addicts. There is a history of help to the Hope Centre in Ballymena. Such work is not something that has been going on since just last year or the year before; the people in the Hope Centre in Ballymena have been helping others for many years, sometimes at their own expense. They have been giving their own time and whatever assistance that they can because they care for those who cannot help themselves.

It is not just the work that the centre does on drugs that we need to look at; we must look particularly at its work on alcoholism. In the Ballymena area, there has been a history of alcoholism that goes back a long way. That history shows that in that area, one could get poteen very easily, and in that particular mid-Antrim region, it was not favourable to popularise alcoholism — it was kept under the surface. Sometimes people — especially women — did not know where to go when they needed help, but when the Hope Centre came, they had a chance. They were given an opportunity and were helped in a way that gave them the confidence to try to overcome their problem.

When one realises how many people have been referred to the Hope Centre in Ballymena by the courts, the police, and different organisations, one begins to realise the importance of the Hope Centre, not just to mid-Antrim, but to the whole of Northern Ireland. As has been said, people come from quite a distance to go to the centre, and it is because of the ethos, the atmosphere and the honesty of help and hope that is given there that they can go to it with confidence and be treated.

Ballymena, mid-Antrim and Northern Ireland need the Hope Centre. Although we have tried to speak to the Health Minister and others, at this moment in time, the dark cloud of closure hangs over the centre. Can we not today appeal to the Executive to somehow or other give enough money to the centre to keep it open so that in the days to come, many others will be helped?

I thank Mr Paisley for bringing the issue to our attention this evening, and I trust that, together, we will succeed.

Mr O'Loan: I also thank and congratulate Mr Paisley Jnr for securing this Adjournment debate, and I likewise thank and congratulate Dr Coulter for organising and sponsoring an event recently at the Assembly on behalf of the Hope Centre. I regret, however, that I was not able to attend that event.

I will try not to be repetitive. Like others, I am very aware of the work of the Hope Centre, and I am very high in my praise of it.

It has created meaningful programmes and delivers them well. The Hope Centre staff work with the whole family, not only with the individuals who are recovering from addiction. At present, the funding for three or four staff at the centre — most importantly, for the manager — is about to run out, and that presents a very serious situation. Although funding is to continue for three staff, it will not be available if key staff, including the manager, are not in place.

Ballymena has a particular problem with drugs, including hard drugs such as cocaine and heroin. At least two recent deaths in the area have been directly associated with drugs, so the situation is one that we must all take seriously. We all agree on that. Referrals by key statutory agencies to the Hope Centre have been mentioned. Only recently, I attended a meeting at which senior police officers said that they had done exactly that, and they expressed their appreciation of the work that the centre does. The centre is very well run — if it were not, we would know about it. Working in such a difficult environment is not an easy thing, and the staff and the management do their job very well. I understand that the Hope Centre failed in one recent critical funding bid, but I believe that one funding bid is still live, although I am not absolutely certain of that.

I do not wish to be controversial for the sake of it, but I will comment somewhat critically on a few of the remarks that two Members made during the debate. Mr Paisley Jnr said that the sum of money that was being looked at was not a small sum. Of course, the money that is required to run a centre with seven or eight staff, associated buildings and substantial programmes runs into many thousands of pounds. In the context of the Northern Ireland Budget as a whole, it is not a large sum of money. Nevertheless, that money does not come out of the main Northern Ireland Budget but out of some section of some Department's budget. When looked at in that light, it is by no means an insignificant sum. Budget managers have difficult choices to make when critical decisions on such matters must be made, and there is no point in blinking at that fact. Hard realities must be faced, but those

decisions are not easy for budget managers and those who deliver services.

Likewise, when Daithí McKay criticised the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for what he saw as a failure to respond properly, he trivialised the situation. It is fatuous to portray the Minister as being a heartless wretch who simply will not do what he so easily could for those poor drug victims and their families in Ballymena. I am quite sure that Mr McGimpsey —

Mr McKay: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: Yes, I will give way.

Mr McKay: Will the Member confirm whether he is in the SDLP or the Ulster Unionist Party?

Mr O'Loan: In some ways, that makes my point. I dare say that if a Sinn Féin Minister of Health were to take the same decision as Minister McGimpsey, the same criticism would not be levelled at the former. It is pathetic for a Member to misrepresent the Minister's stance on the matter. If I felt that the position had some semblance of reality, I would support it. However, the Member has made a cheap jibe that does not help the Hope Centre, nor is it the sort of constructive contribution that North Antrim MLAs should be making in order to assist the Hope Centre.

Out of all this, I can offer only two possible constructive ways forward. As has been mentioned, there are people in the community who are very concerned about the fate of the Hope Centre. Those people are thinking of ways in which to raise money to help it. Those efforts are somewhat embryonic, even though a crisis is imminent, with funding running out at the end of this month.

It would be useful if some extension to the funding for the Hope Centre could be found in order to keep it operating for a short period. That would allow some of those initiatives to be tested to see whether they could come to something.

The fundamental question is whether the Hope Centre provides a service that is vital to health and social provision in Ballymena. If the centre were the subject of an independent evaluation — which I would be happy to see — and if it stood up to that test, the onus would be on the system to respond. I direct that particular point to the junior Minister.

If an element of our Executive system commissioned an evaluation of the work of the Hope Centre and found that it is a worthy enterprise but that it does not provide a unique and specialised service that is critical in its overall contribution, we should accept that. However, if such an evaluation said otherwise, we should respond to that. It would be a useful step if the Minister were to allow time for that to happen by granting

some extension of the funding and by commissioning an independent evaluation.

Mr Storey: Mr McKay and Mr O'Loan could do with some therapy; it might have been useful when they were having that bit of a spat, and it could have brought some harmony to them.

First, I commend my colleague Ian Paisley Jnr for bringing this issue to the House. It is an important issue; unfortunately, however, topics for Adjournment debates generate interest from only the Members that represent the constituency that is concerned. However, the impact of this debate will have repercussions beyond the bounds of North Antrim. We are discussing the Hope Centre today, but tomorrow we may discuss some other centre or facility that offers services that are similar to those of the Hope Centre.

As other Members stated, anyone who takes the time to acquaint himself or herself with the work of the Hope Centre cannot not fail to be impressed greatly by the work that it does and by the services that it provides. Tackling the problem of alcohol and drug misuse and how those can harm individuals, families and even entire communities, is a priority.

In recent days in Ballymena we have seen the sad consequences of another young life destroyed and brought to an end as a result of drugs misuse. When the Hope Centre was established in 2000 by a group of concerned parents who came together to offer support, information and advice to anyone affected by drug misuse, it made a real difference to many people's lives.

Although the work of the Hope Centre is difficult and challenging for those who are engaged in it, the volunteers, who draw on their own experiences, are able to provide the kind of advice and insight that simply cannot be taught or learned. They have been through the school of experience, and they have used that knowledge wisely and in a way that has been beneficial to those who use the centre. Their understanding and experience far outstrips that which could be learned by mere theory.

Since it was established, the Hope Centre has provided that kind of help to the many hundreds of people who have been impacted by drug and alcohol misuse, and it has helped many of their families through difficult circumstances.

The honourable Member referred to the need to not trivialise this issue; we need to ensure that we do not do that.

6.30 pm

It is ironic that the Minister for Social Development, when she visited the Hope Centre in June 2008, presented volunteers with a certificate and a candle that bore the motto of the Hope Centre. We should remind ourselves

of that motto — keeping the light of hope alive. It is very sad that, in regard to the service that the Hope Centre provides, the light is not only flickering, but it is ready to be extinguished. In her description of the facility, the Minister said:

“Volunteers have a profound effect on those around them: their generosity can offer a lifeline to the most vulnerable; their commitment can bring communities together; and, their example can be an inspiration to us all.

Volunteering changes lives. It can build bridges and can empower individuals and communities to tackle the issues that are important to them.”

She added:

“I have no doubt that the Hope Centre is making a real difference to the lives of people in Ballymena, and even further afield, through your outreach services.”

She then concluded:

“I want to thank you all for the good work. I know that the work you do to combat substance abuse is not easy. It is appropriate that we are here at the Hope Centre today as your work to combat substance abuse has brought hope to so many people.”

We can give the Hope Centre all the praise and all the platitudes, but we need to ensure that it has the resources necessary to carry on its work. The last thing that people in the Hope Centre needs is more tea and sympathy. Instead, it needs the appropriate and adequate resources.

The Hope Centre was delighted to receive a visit from the former First Minister and local MP, Dr Paisley. On that occasion in April 2008, Dr Paisley said that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety’s new strategic direction for drugs and alcohol would have a platform and strategy for cross-sectoral and cross-Government action to prevent and address substance misuse. That still needs to be the priority for the Executive and the Administration not only for the Hope Centre and those who benefit from its use, but for general society in Northern Ireland.

I hope that the unanimous call that has been made here, led by my colleague Ian Paisley Jnr, will be heeded and that junior Minister Donaldson will convey our comments to the appropriate Ministers and those who are able to take a decision. Hopefully that will ensure that that light of hope in Ballymena is maintained and continues to provide a lifeline for those in need. That service is invaluable, and it is something that we cannot do without. I support the motion.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Donaldson): I thank the Member for North Antrim Ian Paisley Jnr for bringing forward such an important issue for discussion. I also acknowledge the unanimity with which other Members for North Antrim have spoken.

Substance abuse can blight the lives of not only individuals, but families and communities from across

Northern Ireland. That sentiment has been echoed by those Members who spoke in the debate. Both the Assembly and the Executive have acknowledged the seriousness of the problem and have committed, as a matter of urgency, to tackle not only the consequences of addiction and substance misuse, but the causes.

Addiction and substance misuse ruin lives. However, the impact of abusing drugs or alcohol does not end with the individual. Often, it can tear apart families and cause untold pain to parents, siblings, spouses and children.

Many sufferers and their families rely on centres such as the Hope Centre for essential support and help through those difficult times. Such organisations play a vital and valuable role in the community, and their hard work and commitment are to be commended.

The Hope Centre, in common with many organisations, depends on its volunteers to deliver the assistance and support that make a genuine difference to many people’s lives. The centre previously benefited from DSD’s decision to fund a three-year project to support volunteering.

In recognition of the value of volunteers, the Department for Social Development is developing a volunteering strategy for Northern Ireland. The strategy will aim to align activities throughout Government, the voluntary sector and other stakeholders to re-energise, and increase the levels of, volunteering.

Many key actions in the strategy fall to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and colleagues made particular mention of the Minister this evening. He asked me to state clearly that he is fully committed to delivering on the outcomes that are set out in the new cross-departmental strategic direction for alcohol and drugs. The strategy recognises that no one-size-fits-all approach can address the issue across Northern Ireland. Different issues, communities and people require different types of service and support.

Of the £6.5 million provided to DHSSPS for the implementation of the strategy in 2008-09, more than £5 million has been allocated to local projects, programmes, organisations and initiatives. That funding is in addition to the money made available through the Department’s mental-health services for the provision of dedicated alcohol and drug treatment services, which are available in a range of settings across Northern Ireland.

In addition, four drug and alcohol co-ordination teams were established in the health and social care board areas to work locally on the issue. It is the responsibility of each board and team to identify local needs relating to alcohol and drug misuse, and to ensure that services are in place to meet them.

In 2006, therefore, each team developed a local alcohol and drug action plan. To deliver on those action plans, the local teams tendered for organisations to provide the required services. The tendering process is used to ensure equality and transparency because more than one organisation is often capable of providing the service in each area.

I have been reliably informed that, during the initial tendering round in 2006, the Hope Centre successfully bid to provide community support services across the Northern Board area. However, that contract is due to expire in March 2009.

During 2008, each drug and alcohol co-ordination team reviewed its action plan to ensure that it continued to meet local need, deliver on the outcomes contained in the new strategic direction and provide value for money. After the review, a new tendering process was undertaken during the summer of 2008 for the delivery, beginning in April 2009, of the revised service specifications in the action plans.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety fully acknowledges the challenges that a tendering system poses to the voluntary and community sector. I understand that, after an assessment of the bids, the Hope Centre was, unfortunately, unsuccessful in its bid for the contract to provide community support services relating to substance misuse across the Northern Board area. The contract was awarded to a different provider.

The Northern board has confirmed to the Health Minister that the process undertaken has been robust and transparent and that all EU and UK regulations governing competitive tendering have been adhered to.

I assure Members that there has not been any reduction in the level of funding that is available from the Department of Health for alcohol and drugs services through the new strategic direction in the Northern board area or, indeed, across Northern Ireland.

Almost £5.2 million will be allocated in 2009-2010 to local action to prevent and address the harm related to alcohol and drugs misuse across Northern Ireland. The Northern board will receive around £1.25 million of that budget. In addition, the board has assured the Health Minister that no funded services to support people who misuse substances have been lost or discontinued. The Department of Health has also recently launched an integrated hidden harm action plan under the new strategy, which seeks to identify the needs of children and young people who have been born to, or are living with, substance misusing parents or carers.

The Hope Centre has not been successful in its bid for community support services, and I understand that the Northern board is in discussions with the Hope Centre about the opportunity to extend its family support programme for another year in order to support the work being undertaken on the hidden harm action plan.

There is the possibility of some funding being made available under that programme to enable the Hope Centre to continue that work, and discussions are ongoing.

I am happy to convey to the Health Minister the request made by Ian Paisley Jnr, and reiterated by other Members, for a meeting to discuss the way forward. I assure the Chamber that the Executive are fully committed to tackling this issue head on.

I jointly chair, with the other junior Minister, the ministerial subcommittee that is looking at the issue of vulnerable young people and children. Substance abuse, alcohol abuse, suicide risk and so on are areas that we are considering. We will seek to ensure that there is a co-ordinated approach on the issue across all Departments, as Mr Paisley Jnr said earlier. There is that need for co-ordination.

I am sure that Members agree that the only transparent, equitable and fair way to allocate limited resources is to allow all local organisations to tender for the provision of services at a local level. Unfortunately, it means that, from time to time, some good organisations miss out on those tendering processes. That is no reflection on the excellent work that the Hope Centre has undertaken in the past, and I hope, will continue to be able to undertake in the future. As a Minister, I am happy to work with MLAs from the area to see what can be done to ensure that that work continues.

I will convey their concerns to the appropriate Ministers.

Adjourned at 6.44 pm.

