
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 22 June 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last week, I made a point of order in respect of the time that it takes Ministers to respond to issues to which they are unable to respond in debates. I referred to the Minister for Regional Development's response to an Adjournment debate, because, after one month, he still had not answered points that I and other Members raised during the debate. Have you had time to reflect on Ministers' response times to debates in the Chamber, and are you in a position to make a ruling on that matter?

Mr Speaker: When the Member raised that issue, I said that I was grateful to him for doing so. I can say to the House that I have written to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on that issue. As I said previously, if a Minister leads the House to understand that he will reply to a particular Member or return to the House with a reply, I expect him or her to do so. I also indicated in my letter that there should be an appropriate timetable for a Minister to reply to a Member or to come back to the House to reply on a particular subject. I await a reply to that letter.

Mr Attwood: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I welcome the apparent tone of the letter that you sent to the First Minister and deputy First Minister. If it is followed through in practice and is precise, this might be a watershed moment when the accountability function of this Chamber is more fully asserted than it has been in the past. Have you indicated to the First Minister and deputy First Minister a timeline for Ministers' responses to points raised in the Chamber?

Mr Speaker: In my letter, I suggested at least 10 days for urgent or written questions, and that is what I am expecting. The spirit of Standing Orders indicates that it should be done in and around that time limit. We await a reply to my letter. If that reply is not satisfactory with regard to what we are trying to achieve in holding Ministers to account, I intend to take the matter up directly with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister.

Mr Attwood: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I note what you said about 10 days; however, given that a much shorter time frame is required for written questions, rather than giving Ministers the flexibility of having 10 days to reply, they could be given the flexibility of, say, up to 10 days but with the expectation of a much quicker response, especially for urgent matters. Such an approach was shown by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment last week when she made a commitment to answer certain matters overnight because she felt that they were relevant to the debate. That aside, I await the response from the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Having been trying to make points of order on Ministers' responsibilities to the House for months, I welcome the ruling. It appears that Speaker Hay has at last put a marker in the sand on this issue.

Mr Speaker: I have said that Ministers should reply in 10 days or thereabouts, but I hear what the Member is saying. Ministers know their responsibilities to the Assembly, and, if a Minister gives an undertaking to come back to the House on an issue, I expect that he or she should do so sooner rather than later.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Suspension of Standing Orders

Mr Cobain: I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 22 June 2009.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that this motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 22 June 2009.

Mr Speaker: As the motion has been agreed, today's sitting may go beyond 7.00 pm, if required.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Rathlin Island

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Regional Development that he wishes to make a statement on the draft Executive policy for Rathlin Island.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. My statement marks the development of a dedicated Executive policy for Rathlin Island across government here in the North and follows my written statement to the Assembly on 8 June 2009 and the public consultation on the draft policy that I launched on the island on 10 June 2009. My Department has taken the lead, with contributions from other Departments, local bodies and the islanders themselves.

For those Members who have not yet had the opportunity to visit the island and who may be unaware of its geography and history, I will give a brief verbal tour. Rathlin Island is six miles from Ballycastle and 16 miles west of the Mull of Kintyre and is the North's only inhabited offshore island. About eight miles long and less than one mile wide, the boot-shaped limestone and basalt island is famous not only for its natural beauty but for its wildlife, particularly the large seabird colonies at the west end of the island.

People have lived on Rathlin for over 7,000 years. There are Stone Age axe heads and arrow heads, Bronze Age graves and a magical Iron Age fort where a local chieftain fought foreign marauders to protect the islands. There are standing stones and ancient church sites, as well as Robert the Bruce's castle and cave, the remains of the MacDonnells' tower house and the landlord's manor house. There was a population of around 1,200 before the famine, but the number of people living on Rathlin has fallen, and the island now has a population of approximately 80, many of whose ancestors can be traced back there for hundreds of years.

In November 2007, I brought proposals to the Executive to develop a central government island policy for Rathlin. My Executive colleagues agreed that my Department should take the lead role in that work. The Department for Regional Development has regular involvement with Rathlin through the provision of the lifeline ferry service, which is crucial to the functioning of the island and to the life of the islanders. My Department also provides water and roads services.

To act as a voice for the islanders, the Rathlin Community Association was established in 1978, becoming the Rathlin Development and Community Association in 1986. Its main aims reflect those that we would all expect as citizens, no matter where we live: improving the quality of life for those living on

the island; ensuring that basic services and infrastructure are provided; and encouraging appropriate economic development.

My Department worked very closely with the association and sought to reflect those aims and the islanders' own strategic plan when developing government policy. We have been proactive in our approach. Senior officials in my Department have worked closely with the community association, and, with the support of my Executive colleagues, I have ensured that all relevant Departments and local bodies have identified senior officials to liaise on Rathlin issues. That group has worked collectively to address issues in a co-ordinated manner across government.

I have also met the islanders, and my discussions with them have convinced me of the need for a policy that recognises and addresses their unique circumstances. This policy has been adopted to reflect island circumstances and contains a number of strategic aims that will encourage community involvement, improve the provision of public services, and ensure conservation of the island's exceptional cultural and natural heritage.

However, we are not starting with a clean sheet. My Department has already made progress in improving the provision of public services for the islanders. A new, enhanced ferry service was launched on 1 July 2008, and improved road signage was erected for the ferry in Ballycastle. I have also increased the budget for road improvements from £100,000 to £250,000 over a three-year period. However, perhaps the biggest achievement for the islanders was the completion of the new 10 km sub-sea electricity cable, which runs from Ballycastle to Rathlin. I had the honour of formally switching it on in June last year. The new cable has provided a capacity and quality of supply to island customers that is now equivalent to that which we expect on the mainland.

Further work is ongoing across a range of issues. My ministerial colleague, Michael McGimpsey, visited the island on 22 August 2008 to discuss the islanders' concerns about health cover. He announced his intention to provide 24-hour nursing cover on the island, and in November 2008 a Ballycastle GP treated the islanders on their home turf. Officials from the Housing Executive and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development have also visited the island to discuss housing and agriculture issues.

The collaborative work between all relevant Departments and local bodies and the Rathlin Development and Community Association has resulted in a draft Rathlin Island policy. The proposed policy is at a relatively high level, but it seeks to acknowledge the aims and objectives of the islanders' plan and to find a balance between their legitimate needs, which are

reasonable and justifiable, and competing priorities. I see the policy as unique to Rathlin, deservedly so.

I acknowledge that there are implications for Departments and others in developing the policy. We must ensure that any general policies that have an impact are adapted to reflect the island's specific circumstances. The needs of the islanders differ from those on the mainland, and so it follows that it may not be easy to apply a mainstream policy to the island or, indeed, appropriate. Departments may, therefore, need to adapt or adjust policies and the use of resources to allow Rathlin equal treatment with other areas.

To implement the policy, we will need to develop an action plan, which will set out in detail how the policy will progress over a two-year term. As I have already said, Rathlin is famous not only for its natural beauty but for its wildlife. Those issues must be considered, along with the welfare of the islanders. We have already commenced a range of relevant impact assessments, which will intensify when the action plan is finalised. In order to monitor progress, I am proposing to establish and chair a forum, which will meet twice a year. It will include island representatives and senior officials from relevant Government Departments and local bodies and will review and refresh the plan to reflect changing circumstances.

Members have already been provided with a copy of the consultation document, and I will keep my ministerial colleagues and the Assembly informed as the policy development progresses. The consultation process has commenced and will conclude on 18 September. I look forward to receiving comments on my proposals. I look forward to working closely with the Rathlin islanders, and to a vibrant and sustainable future for Rathlin.

Mr Storey: I welcome the Minister's announcement about Rathlin Island. For some time we have been calling for a co-ordinated approach in the Executive and between Government Departments to ensuring that that most idyllic part of my North Antrim constituency is properly serviced and has access to Government Departments at the highest possible level.

The Minister referred to the new, enhanced ferry service. There are various rumours about that ferry service and what goes on in relation to its running. Now there is a rumour that the new catamaran that was to be in service by the first week in July may not be seaworthy until the middle of July, which would delay the introduction of the service. Given that we want to enhance the transport links between Ballycastle and Rathlin, it is vital that we continue to build a proper ferry service to the island.

12.15 pm

The consultation document has only four pages, and, if all Government policy publications had as few

pages, the environmental lobby would be happy. How will Departments allocate funding to the service? Will additional new funding be required?

The Minister for Regional Development: I travelled to Rathlin Island, as the Member did, the other week, and I heard nothing but praise for the improvements to the ferry service from the islanders and the people who were travelling. Concerns were raised and allegations were made about the awarding of the contract. My Department investigated those in conjunction with advice from the Comptroller and Auditor General. Some issues arose from that, and the Department dealt with them. The ferry operator and the captain told me that the new catamaran service required some testing to ensure that it is seaworthy. That may lead to its introduction being delayed by a week or two, but I do not think that that is a major cause of concern to the islanders.

From the reports that I have received, the islanders are greatly heartened by the substantially improved service that has been in place over the past year. That will have a significant impact not only on people visiting the island and the resulting economic benefits but on the islanders' ability to commute to the mainland.

It was recognised that, if Rathlin were treated simply as a part of Moyle District Council with a population of 80 people, it would suffer. The unique circumstances on Rathlin led to the Executive's desire for a policy that would ensure that a vibrant community was sustained on Rathlin and that people who continue to live on the island would be supported. That is an important feature of the Executive's policy, so Departments are required to think above and beyond what they would normally allocate to communities on the mainland.

My Department has increased its allocation to the island for roads maintenance, and I expect that, as a result of the policy, other Departments will look at Rathlin in a different light rather than simply allocating on the basis of population or other measures that Departments normally use when allocating resources. The Member will be aware that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety visited Rathlin and that he wishes to enhance the level of health cover to encourage people to remain on the island.

It is important to encourage families to stay on the island and to raise children there. The services that people on the mainland take for granted such as health cover and electricity supply must be given additional support to ensure that they are available for the islanders. I expect that, as a result of the policy and the action plan, all Departments will consider making allocations above and beyond normal. The Executive have expressed a desire to sustain a community on the island, and that requires Ministers to take additional action.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): I thank the Minister for his statement and for his interesting history lesson.

Mr Storey asked about the financial implications of the action plan. I am not sure what a two-year action plan can achieve for the long-term sustainability of Rathlin Island. The most important element of the statement is the proposal to establish a forum that will include representatives from Departments other than the Department for Regional Development. The action plan can work only with the co-operation of several Departments. Are all the Departments that will need to be involved totally committed to the policy?

The Minister for Regional Development: This is an Executive policy document that has gone to consultation. It has the approval of the Ministers on the Executive, and I expect that to be reflected by all Departments called upon to input into it. The policy document has been through the Executive; it was issued for consultation and has received full Executive support. I expect, given the nature of our discussions, that, when the consultation ends and we put forward a finalised policy document, the Executive will support it. If a Minister supports it, one expects his or her Department to act on any request that is made in relation to it.

As to the two-year time frame, a number of things must happen. There are pressing concerns with respect to housing, education, agriculture and health provision on the island. Two years is a short time, but, if the Chairperson of the Committee considers what has happened on the island since my first visit two years ago, he will understand that the atmosphere there is completely different. There is optimism about the future. Residents have gained an improved ferry service and an electricity connection, and a community facility has opened on the island. All those things happened over the last two years. If we can make progress on other pressing matters, the forum can develop a longer-term view of what is required for sustainable tourism, the environment and the protection of the island's heritage through long-term plans. The pressing need is to sustain the population: if it drops below a certain level, it will no longer be sustainable. The islanders want that issue addressed in the first instance. We have achieved much in the past two years, and I look forward to achieving much more in the next two.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement and the Minister's focus on Rathlin Island and its inhabitants since taking up office. I recognise the proposed forum as one that puts the islanders at the heart of that policy. As the policy progresses over the next two years, can lessons be learnt from other island communities off the Irish mainland?

The Minister for Regional Development:

Government have operated policies for a number of years in relation to islands that lie off the rest of the coast of Ireland. The islanders were keen to examine the experience of Inisheer, one of the Aran Islands, which is of a similar size and population to Rathlin. We have plans to take some of the islanders there and to discuss the operation of an island policy with the Minister responsible, Éamon Ó Cuív. Lessons can be learnt from elsewhere, and the islanders are aware of issues that affect other islands around the coast of Ireland. Where we can draw on those lessons, we are happy to do so.

Mr O’Loan: I welcome the statement, the consultation document and, in particular, its emphasis on the sustainability of the island. Sustainability makes us consider issues such as the physical environment, the wildlife and, above all, the people of the island. We must think about health, education, transport and the economy of the island. What promise does the Minister see the eventual action plan making towards a stable and, I hope, increasing population on the island? That is the key to the sustainability of the island.

The Minister for Regional Development: As I said in answer to previous questions, from my discussions with people on the island I have gathered that the key factor is to ensure that families stay and that children are born on the island.

Things that we take for granted — a regular electricity supply, a decent connection to the mainland through the ferry service, health cover, educational and community facilities — are all crucial to islanders and perhaps those who want to live on the island in making the choice to stay there. They are all taken for granted on the mainland, but they have a crucial significance for the island. Much of the focus on what needs to be done and what has been done over the last two years is about meeting those immediate needs. That will encourage people to stay and to come and live on the island. Getting the population up to a sustainable level is our immediate focus; then we can develop long-term plans.

There are opportunities. The electricity connection has provided opportunities for economic development on the island. The islanders can develop their own plans and sell electricity back to the grid through natural energy projects.

When I first visited the island, people were thinking about survival; they now think about the long term and consider ideas that will develop and enhance life on the island. It has become a better place in two years. The plans that we have put forward and the implementation of the action plan that will come out of them will continue to improve that prospect.

Mr McCarthy: I, too, welcome the Minister’s statement. I also welcome the fact that Government

have adopted a joined-up approach and that they are working in partnership with the Rathlin Development and Community Association to help people.

When free ferry transport was introduced from Strangford to Portaferry, which is at the tip of the Ards Peninsula, some people were concerned about the fact that not everyone would be able to benefit from it: thankfully, that issue was overcome. Will the Minister tell the House whether free ferry transport will be available not only to senior citizens who live on Rathlin Island but to visitors and tourists who use the ferry?

The Minister for Regional Development: Obviously, the Member is considering a visit to Rathlin Island.

Mr McCarthy: Absolutely.

The Minister for Regional Development: The Department contracts a private operator to provide the ferry service, for which islanders pay a certain rate. I am conscious of the point of order that was raised earlier about the length of time that it takes Ministers to reply to questions; therefore, I will endeavour to find out whether the policies for transport subsidies for pensioners and people aged 60 and over apply to that ferry service. The rate that islanders pay is an improvement on that which tourists pay to travel to and from the island.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Like others Members, I welcome the Minister’s statement. From listening to his potted history of the island from the Bruce to the boat, it is clear that he is enchanted by Rathlin, and we welcome that interest.

I seek clarification and expansion of a point that the Minister made in his statement. He indicated that all the relevant Departments and local bodies have identified senior officials who will liaise on Rathlin issues, and that is welcome. Does the Minister agree that the islanders need a lead departmental official to be a champion or tsar for Rathlin Island, to take matters forward and to be a point of contact for them?

The Minister said:

“Departments may therefore need to adapt or adjust policies and the use of resources to allow Rathlin equal treatment with other areas.”

Will the Minister indicate how likely that is and how extensive it would be? He must address the baggage in that sentence if he is to take forward the policy in that way. I look forward to hearing about the forum, and I hope that the Minister has an interesting and valuable time chairing it.

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member is correct: I have become enamoured with the island. Sometimes, I think that Rathlin is the only place in which I am still popular. Each time I go there, more officials accompany me; so, I think that my mood has permeated the Department. I do not think

that we will have any difficulty in identifying people in my Department who have a close working relationship with people on Rathlin and who will champion those issues.

I was not being vague when I said that Departments might have to go above and beyond what they are already doing. The Executive want to ensure that the island and its community are sustained. Given the Executive's approval of that policy, I hope that, if a service is not up to scratch, people will go above and beyond that which is required of them. Without being too prescriptive, the forum will identify services that are not providing as much as they could for the islanders, and we will seek to improve those services. Over the past two years, Departments have been proactive in their approach to the island. Thus far, they have recognised the unique circumstances on the island and the Executive's desire to ensure that the island's community is sustained, and they have been willing to take actions above and beyond those that are applied to the mainland in order to achieve that.

We have not encountered any resistance to date. If the implementation plan and the forum that oversees its roll-out encounters problems, I am sure that Ministers will discuss that at the Executive table to ensure that departmental officials' actions reflect their decisions.

12.30 pm

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement.

Last year, the RSPB invited me to visit the island because it is concerned about the protection of habitats. One strategic objective is to draw up a local biodiversity action plan. Who will be consulted and have an opportunity to partake in that action plan?

The Minister for Regional Development: The island is the subject of environmental interests. Through the RSPB site, the seabird colonies are of obvious value not only to the island but to western Europe generally. Moreover, the National Trust owns some land there and has been developing environmental policies. The forum that we propose to establish will be a useful vehicle to ensure that all interested parties, such as the islanders, other agencies that work on the island and the Departments, have an opportunity to discuss all those issues. Furthermore, the forum will facilitate a joined-up approach, provide an opportunity to discuss any issues of tension between people who wish to sustain a livelihood on the island and those who wish to protect the environment and heritage of the island, and achieve the correct balance for the future.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for the statement. The Minister mentioned a proposed visit to Inisheer, which is part of the wonderful Aran Islands off the coast of Galway. I presume that that visit will include

trips to Inishmore and Inishmaan, where J M Synge was inspired to write 'The Playboy of the Western World'.

Does the Minister agree that there is real merit in an arrangement through which all 18 occupied islands have a formal structure that enables them to develop tourism and, in as far as possible, become self-sustainable in the interests of tourism in Ireland as a whole?

The Minister for Regional Development: Inisheer was picked because of the similarity in population size, whereas Inishmore is a much bigger island that has a significantly larger population and tourism footfall than Rathlin. However, the islanders, the relevant Minister in the South, Éamon Ó Cuív, and I are keen to develop, improve and enhance the links between the Departments' policies for the islands. There is great potential in ensuring that all islands around our coast work together to obtain a better understanding of the issues that face them and to ensure that Departments respond properly to those issues.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Employment Bill

First Stage

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I beg to introduce the Employment Bill [NIA 9/08], which is a Bill to make provision about the enforcement of legislation relating to employment agencies and the minimum wage; to make provision about the membership of, and representation before, the Industrial Court; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: The Bill will now be printed and put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill

First Stage

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): I beg to introduce the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA 10/08], which is a Bill to make provision about the powers of district councils to enter into contracts and to acquire land otherwise than by agreement; to make provision in connection with the reorganisation of local government, including provision for controls on existing councils, for statutory transition committees and for the payment of severance allowances to councillors; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: The Bill will now be printed and put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

Diseases of Animals Bill

Consideration Stage

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): I regret that the Consideration Stage of the Diseases of Animals Bill will not be moved today. I am engaged in discussions with the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee and industry representatives on an amendment to clause 8 of the Bill. The amendment that I am proposing will establish a link between serious breaches of statutory biosecurity guidance and the withholding of compensation for the slaughter of animals. The Committee requires further time to consider the amendment and to consult interested parties. It is entirely appropriate that the Committee should be given time to do that and to reach a decision. I hope to be in a position to take forward the Bill's Consideration Stage after the summer recess. Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Statutory Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, the motion on Statutory Committee membership will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Danny Kinahan replace Mr John McCallister as a member of the Committee for Regional Development; that Mr Danny Kinahan replace Mr David McClarty as a member of the Committee for the Environment; and that Mr John McCallister replace Mr Tom Elliott as a member of the Committee for Education. — *[Mr Cobain.]*

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Inquiry into the Way Forward for Apprenticeships

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has allocated up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. In accordance with the Business Committee's agreement to allocate additional time to Committee Chairpersons when moving and making a winding-up speech on a motion on a Committee report, the proposer of the motion will have up to 15 minutes to propose and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

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

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Employment and Learning on its Inquiry into the Way Forward for Apprenticeships; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, to implement, as a matter of urgency, the recommendations contained therein.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Once again, I am delighted to present a report by the Employment and Learning Committee for debate in the Assembly. The Committee regards the report as extremely timely and very significant. It would be difficult to miss the fact that we are in a severe economic downturn. We are in the middle of a recession, with a number of painful consequences, including increasing unemployment and redundancies; low interest rates for savers; reduced availability of credit; home repossessions; and a host of other issues. It is important that businesses continue to invest in skills at this time. Since the beginning of the economic downturn, the number of apprentices being made redundant has grown each month, and the Committee is increasingly worried about that situation.

Unfortunately, at a time like this, many employers view investment in skills development as a luxury that they cannot afford. It is vital that we think further into the future and plan ahead for the global economy that will exist on the other side of the recession. The Committee sees the evolution of the current apprenticeships programme, ApprenticeshipsNI, as central to the development of our workforce and, as a consequence, our economy.

I wish to thank those who were involved in bringing the Committee's report to the Assembly today. I thank the witnesses, from a range of sectors, who presented extensive oral evidence to the Committee. They provided valuable insights into the current apprenticeships programme and their vision for its development into the kind of system that our economy needs. The Committee is grateful to those stakeholders for their contribution to the inquiry; they should be assured that the report is the start of an ongoing process. The

Committee intends to partner the Minister and his Department, along with the stakeholders, to make our apprenticeships world-class.

I particularly thank the departmental officials who gave so freely of their time and expertise to the Committee, and I look forward to continuing to work with them to move apprenticeships forward. I also thank the staff of Hansard and the Assembly's Research and Library Services for the role that they played in the completion of the report. Last, but not least, I thank the Committee staff for all their hard work during the Committee's inquiry.

Although the Committee's report makes a number of recommendations to the Minister and his Department, the members of the Committee believe that the other key function of the debate is to put the spotlight firmly on apprenticeships. We have all heard of apprenticeships, but do we really know what they are and how they work? The Committee's inquiry has highlighted the fact that employers, potential apprentices and the public at large share many misapprehensions and misperceptions about apprenticeships.

At its meeting on 19 November 2008, the Committee agreed to investigate how apprenticeship programmes need to evolve so that they can be more responsive to the skills requirements of the modern global economy. The Committee asked three fundamental questions in order to ascertain the way forward for apprenticeships. First, why do employers not take up apprenticeships in greater numbers? Secondly, why do apprenticeships lack status and profile? Finally, how can apprenticeships be better protected in the economic downturn?

A key issue for the inquiry to consider was the Minister's statement of Tuesday 11 November 2008. That statement concerned contingencies that would help apprentices who have been made redundant because of the recession. It is important to examine how the current apprenticeship system might evolve so that it can be more robust in the face of an economic downturn or recession and be more responsive to the global economy's fast-changing requirements for particular skills and skills pools. That approach would seek to take the position of apprentices to a new level that is beyond those contingencies. New contracts for Apprenticeships NI will be awarded in 2010, and in my view, that presents the ideal time in which to allow the Committee to partner the Department in shaping and informing the process.

In May 2009, the Minister announced further contingencies for apprentices, focusing particularly on those who are on short-time working in the manufacturing and engineering sectors. In his response, the Minister may wish to elaborate on the Skillsafe scheme. That scheme was announced on the same day that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment announced the

short-term aid scheme for companies. Again, I believe that it is good to see such an example of joined-up Government, and the Committee commends both Ministers for that.

In September 2008, the Minister launched the all-age apprenticeships that the Committee advocated. Those will be a tremendous boost for our more mature students who want to learn new skills and to improve their employability. The Committee also commends the Minister for that.

In undertaking the inquiry, the Committee wanted to get to grips with the reason why so many employers, especially our small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which, as we are all aware, form the majority of our private sector, do not take on more apprentices. It was clear from the evidence that the Committee heard that all the stakeholders support apprenticeships and want them to succeed. All the stakeholders acknowledged that apprenticeships have an important role in providing a broad range of the technical, professional and employability skills that employers need.

There was a significant degree of agreement on the factors that are holding back employers and individuals taking up apprenticeships. Those factors are: expense; bureaucracy and excessive administration; perceived flaws in the funding mechanism; the duplication of inspection; problems with essential skills provision; a one-size-fits-all approach; and apprentices' travel costs and wage levels.

One particularly worrying factor that is holding back the evolution of apprenticeships is that they do not enjoy a high degree of status and are often seen as a second-choice career pathway when compared with the university route. That has often resulted in a failure to recruit the highest-calibre candidates to apprenticeships.

In its report, the Committee made recommendations for better marketing for and recruitment to apprenticeships, better ways of funding and providing more structured incentivisation, and alternatives to the existing forms of the administration and inspection of apprenticeships.

The Committee considered evidence on a variety of innovations that could provide useful ways forward for apprenticeships. Those included establishing centres of excellence; implementing areas of expansion, such as non-traditional, public-sector and technician apprenticeships; including quotas of apprentices in the workforce of employers as a prerequisite to their being awarded public-procurement contracts; making apprenticeships a clearly signposted and open-ended career pathway; shortening apprenticeships and the creation of fast-tracking where appropriate; broadening participation and widening access, with particular reference to all-age apprenticeships and the participation of existing and part-time staff in upskilling and re-skilling;

and highlighting the benefits, particularly for SMEs, of group training associations and apprenticeship training agencies. The Committee examined those ideas in the context of considering whether they would encourage greater SME participation in apprenticeships.

The Committee believes that particular attention must be paid to apprenticeship schemes in the construction industry. The Committee suggests that that sector would benefit greatly from the application of group training associations (GTAs) and a centre of excellence to provide greater consistency in training across the industry.

12.45 pm

The Committee examined the structure and position of the pre-apprenticeship programme and how it might be used to provide a safe haven in times of economic turbulence for apprentices who have been made redundant. It has become increasingly difficult to recruit enough apprentices in the key sectors of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). STEM subjects have seen a decline in uptake, from school students through to those in further and higher education colleges. However, it is the STEM sectors that drive the economy and which require the highest number of new and replacement staff to drive forward workforce and economic development.

Through its activities regarding STEM subjects, the Committee is aware that the number of entrants to the engineering sector needs to treble in the next few years to replace those who leave the industry or who are retiring, as well as to allow for expansion into new technologies. We need joined-up government to put in place strategies to allow us to meet future economic challenges. Education, training and the development of employability skills must be seamless from preschool through primary and secondary school, and beyond. Apprenticeships are a big part of making that happen.

A significant part of formulating the way forward for apprenticeships involved the Committee considering the respective roles of colleges, employers and employer groups. Evidence presented suggests that the future of apprenticeships lies in the hands of employers and employer groups. They should be the drivers of how apprenticeships should evolve. That approach should allow the disincentives for employers who take on apprentices to be addressed. In that way, too, the poor image of apprenticeships should be improved, because it will be in the direct interest of employers and employer groups to encourage the best candidates to enter apprenticeships.

Greater responsibility in directing the apprenticeships programme might also encourage employers to see apprenticeships less as a boom-time luxury and more as an ongoing investment. The colleges have shown that they can provide training solutions in response to

the needs of various sectors and individual employers. The Committee sees the colleges continuing to provide directed training and certification — roles at which they excel.

We are part of the global economy. We must catch up with and overtake our competitors by investing in and developing our workforce. We need not only to give people new skills but to build on their existing skills. The size and nature of our economy means that we should be aiming to create a highly skilled but flexible workforce that can respond easily to the needs of the global economy. The Committee is working hard with the Minister for Employment and Learning and his Department to put in place the appropriate infrastructure to achieve that.

Our best asset is our people. On that basis, the Committee urges educators, employers and Government to work together to ensure that we develop our people's skills and, as a consequence, our economic potential. Prosperity for our people is the surest way to secure our future. The Committee offers its recommendations from the inquiry to the Minister and his Department for their consideration. The Committee wants to continue the positive engagement and partnership that it has developed with the Minister and his Department over the past two years. Through discussion and agreement on this and other areas, we will, together, lay the foundations of our prosperity.

I commend the Committee's report on its 'Inquiry into the Way Forward for Apprenticeships' to the Assembly for its approval. Go raibh mile maith agat.

Mr Hilditch: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate and to thank everyone who was involved in producing the report, from Committee staff to officials, to those who gave evidence, from employers down to apprentices.

I must declare an interest: I have a son who has just finished the second year of his apprenticeship in plumbing. Already, he has moved to his fourth employer, having been made redundant on three occasions. If his current placement does not work out, he will have wasted three years of his life. He and his friends feel that they can take no more risks, and they have been exhausting every employment avenue. I am in contact with him almost daily as he and his friends are out on the streets trying to find employers.

I know that if I were in his position, I would have walked away a long time ago to try to find other employment. Indeed, some kids have not been as strong and have walked away. They could earn more money on night shifts stacking supermarket shelves than they could on a building site. I am thankful that my son's enthusiasm and drive is such that he virtually goes to strangers' doors begging to be given a chance.

It is not easy for teenagers to do that, and, thankfully, he started employment again last week.

I thank the Minister for coming along today. The Committee has placed apprenticeships very highly on its agenda, and I am aware that the Department is also keen to resolve matters. The Minister will have an opportunity to outline the help that is available to the hundreds of apprentices who are unemployed. He can tell us about the Department's efforts to ensure that apprentices are provided with the support, confidence and financial assistance that they so desperately need to enable them to finish their training and to prevent two or three years from being wasted.

The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has undoubtedly made a great deal of progress. It is to be commended for the Training for Success programme and the launch of Apprenticeships Northern Ireland. The Department should also be congratulated for reaching its target of having 10,000 persons in apprenticeship training one year early. However, the issues are a long way from being resolved completely. The construction, engineering and motor vehicle sectors have the most significant numbers of apprenticeship redundancies. It is understandable that the economic downturn has played a role in that decline; however, we must be ready for the upturn.

In previous discussions, we highlighted the need to attract investors to Northern Ireland. Therefore, we need to be ready to fill the vacancies on science, technology, education and mathematics courses, because those are the subjects that will drive the economy forward. Over the next six years, 1,353 recruits will be needed across all occupational areas just to replace the employees who are due to retire. An increase in the students who study STEM subjects will increase the number of STEM apprenticeships that are available, and that will help to lift recruitment levels. More professional and technical modules need to be offered as part of GCSE courses, and more publicity should be given to the wide range of STEM-related subjects that schools and colleges offer.

Some issues prevent employers and individuals from becoming involved in apprenticeship training. Many small and medium-sized enterprises do not offer apprenticeships. During an economic downturn, small businesses and individuals need to be given confidence in training programmes to ensure that they continue to invest their time and money. The reasons for some employers' reluctance to hire apprentices include direct cost, excessive administration, travel and wage costs and duplication of audits and inspections.

The Minister, his Department and the other relevant Departments need to raise the profile of apprenticeships. It is apparent that their titles do not hold great status,

and they are seen as a second-choice career path compared with the university route. However, many apprentices have reached management level in companies such as Bombardier Shorts, NIE and Phoenix Gas. Some students and companies are not aware of that fact. It is imperative that the success of previous apprentices is highlighted and used in future advertising campaigns to emphasise how apprenticeships can lead to rewarding careers.

The education sector has a role to play, and it must ensure that vocational and academic qualifications are viewed as being equally important. Vocational subjects must be made more appealing to students who are at GCSE level and beyond.

I am hopeful that the report's recommendations will form the basis of a consensus between the Committee, the Minister and the Department.

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

Mr Hilditch: Apprenticeships are undoubtedly the most appropriate way of developing a highly skilled, motivated and committed workforce for the Northern Ireland economy. I commend the report.

Mr McClarty: I support the motion, and I welcome the Committee's broad support for the action that the Minister has taken on apprentices. His approach is clearly working, and the Department's 2010 target of having 10,000 persons in apprenticeship training was met in February. That represents a 77% increase in two years.

New Labour's recession, however, has presented us with very challenging difficulties. Unfortunately, apprenticeship training has suffered as firms begin to tighten their purse strings. The intervention measures that the Minister introduced last year to allow apprentices who have been laid off as a result of the recession can be credited with the progress that they have made.

I thank the members of the Committee for Employment and Learning for the hard work that went into the report. I am confident that it will help the Minister and that he will give it due regard in the development of future policies. In reacting to any economic crisis and facilitating any economic opportunities, Government responses and businesses need to be flexible in their approach. I am, therefore, encouraged by the recommendations to make Apprenticeships NI for 2010 more employer-focused by giving employers and employer bodies more responsibility for the recruitment and running of apprenticeships, thereby encouraging the involvement of small and medium-sized enterprises. Encouraging more businesses to take part in apprenticeship schemes is crucial for their sustainability and for our economic recovery. Apprenticeships must be directed towards need.

I also welcome recommendations for the Department to engage with schools and employers to boost the status and perception of, and recruitment to, apprenticeships. We need to foster a more holistic approach to our economy and to the vital role that all sectors play. With that in mind, the employment of former apprentices who have reached management level in successful companies such as Bombardier and Northern Ireland Electricity is an excellent idea and illustrates apprenticeships as being an open-ended career pathway.

There are a number of encouraging figures in the report. It points out that 30% of staff in management grades at Bombardier started their careers as apprentices. That figure shows the value of apprenticeships to the company and to the apprentice. The development of an apprentice is a long-term investment by both parties, which has proven to reap long-term rewards.

The report makes a positive contribution to the approach of the Minister and the Executive to tackling the economic crisis and to the sustainability of our apprenticeship schemes. However, we must recognise that the Minister has taken decisive action and has been praised for his contingency arrangements for apprenticeships in Scotland and elsewhere. The ability to react to events will mean that the report will not be a wasted effort. I support the motion.

Mr Attwood: The substance of my comments will concentrate on recommendations 2, 6, 7 and 14 of the report. First, however, I want the Minister to confirm one thing. Mr Hilditch and Mr McClarty said that the target for the creation of 10,000 apprenticeships had been reached. Is it not more accurate to say that the target for the creation of 10,000 apprenticeships for people who are aged between 16 and 25, which was a target under the investment strategy, has been met only because of the welcome extension of apprenticeships to people who are aged 25 and above? It is my understanding that at least 3,000 of the 10,000 apprentices are in the latter category. Therefore, what Mr Hilditch and Mr McClarty said in that regard is not fully accurate.

Furthermore, will the Minister and his Department handle the issue of the minimum wage for apprenticeships correctly on this occasion? The Minister will be aware that in May 2008, the Committee's Training for Success report stated that a minimum rate of pay for apprenticeships should be introduced via contracting arrangements. The Minister will also be aware that, for some reason, his Department took that recommendation and said that the Low Pay Commission (LPC) had an issue with the review of remuneration for apprenticeships, and the Department would wish to consider the pay of Northern Ireland apprenticeships in the context of that report. However, that is not what the Committee recommended. It recommended that the Department, through its contracting arrangements,

introduce a minimum rate of pay. It did not recommend that the Department should wait for the Low Pay Commission but, rather, that the Department should take action on it.

That argument was proven when, in a subsequent letter to the Committee dated 16 June, the Department confirmed that the LPC review had not considered that matter and would do so in a future report. The letter further stated that that would not happen until the end of next year and, in the meantime, departmental officials would examine the issue to determine whether it could be addressed.

1.00 pm

I want an assurance that, this time, we will not have to wait for a year before hearing from the Department whether a minimum wage will be introduced into the contracting arrangements for apprenticeships. Given that we pay for apprenticeships, we should lay down requirements for minimum standards of pay.

Will the Minister urgently consider introducing legislation to enable apprenticeships to become part of public contracts? That should be done as part of a response to the recession and as part of a long-term strategy of embedding apprenticeships in the culture and work practices of Northern Ireland, which all Members want to happen. When the British Government announced their response to the recession recently, and I say this somewhat cautiously, they said that they would incorporate 1,000 apprenticeships into public contracts. Given that a much greater proportion of public funds in the North is spent on public contracts, can the Assembly not set a target of incorporating between, say, 200 and 400 apprenticeships over a certain number of years into public contracts for public projects? The Government in London have set that target, for which they presumably have legislative cover. Why, therefore, has a target not been set in the North?

I urge the Minister to deal with the issue of apprenticeships in the Health Service. Some 50% of the Assembly's Budget is spent on health provision. Unless the issue of high salaries for a high number of people in high places in the Health Service is addressed, public funds cannot be reconfigured to sustain recovery and develop good practice. That should form part of the long-term recovery of this part of the world and elsewhere. When reconfiguring the senior profile of the Health Service, including the number of senior officials and their salaries, an element of that should involve the movement of money from the top end to fund apprenticeships on the front line of health provision.

I urge the Minister to extend Skillsafe, which is a welcome initiative, to many other sectors of the economy in the long term. Last year, the Committee had to wait for nine months for the Department's response to its report on Training for Success. I ask the Minister to

ensure that that does not happen with the Committee's latest report.

Ms Lo: I support the motion, and I join other Members in thanking all the stakeholders and staff who took part in the inquiry.

I wish to highlight one of the report's key recommendations, which is the need to boost the status and perception of, as well as recruitment to, apprenticeships. I was speaking to the mother of a boy in fifth form at a grammar school. She was upset because her son wanted to embark on an apprenticeship to become an electrician, and she felt that that would be a waste of his talents. Apprenticeships do not enjoy a high status and are often regarded as a second-choice career pathway compared with the university route.

That perception has hampered the recruitment of the highest calibre of candidate to apprenticeships, as borne out by a recent survey of apprenticeships in Northern Ireland by the Education and Training Inspectorate. It showed that the level of recruitment in priority skill areas, such as computing, information and communication technology (ICT) and software engineering, is still lower than required. The survey also found that the majority of apprentices hold less than five GCSEs above grade C and, on entering the programmes, a significant minority has insufficient literacy or numeracy skills. The general public's perception of apprenticeships is that they are schemes that are somehow old-fashioned and best suited to those who are less academic and who would not be able to gain entry to university.

People believe that apprenticeships are limited to trades such as plumbing, construction or electrical work, which involve heavy work in dirty environments. The fact is that modern technology has replaced a lot of the manual work. For example, in the field of vehicle engineering, automotive apprentices must be highly computer competent in order to operate the diagnostic tools that are used in modern engineering. There is a clear and general lack of awareness of what a modern apprenticeship is and how it can be as open-ended a career path as going to university to gain professional qualifications.

A modern apprenticeship offers young people a rewarding career that leads to senior management positions or the chance of becoming entrepreneurs who run their own businesses. I do not doubt that the young man whom I mentioned will become an electrician, run his own company and probably do better than his young brothers and sisters.

In Germany and Japan, craftsmen, scientists and engineers have equal status with professionals. For example, when we visited the NIE apprentice-training site, we talked to young people who were extremely proud of gaining their trade in a specialised profession.

At the end of their apprenticeships, they are highly likely to get a good job and go on to a long-term career.

We push 50% of school-leavers into universities every year. Many end up with £12,000 or more of debt and degrees that do not qualify them for any jobs. We must rethink that approach. Must we push all of those people into universities? Is it not better that they gain a trade and vocational qualifications that provide them with a long-term career path? Therefore, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and the Department of Education must better promote apprenticeships and improve their image as a primary, first-choice career pathway to attract bright and motivated young people to embark on careers that are needed to rebuild our economy.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate, and I join my Committee colleagues in welcoming the completion of the inquiry and the publication of the report on the Committee's inquiry into the way forward for apprenticeships.

That inquiry focused on two key questions relating to why more employers do not provide apprenticeships and why apprentices lack the profile and status that they deserve. The report confirms that improving the prospects for apprenticeships directly relates to addressing those two areas. I welcome the insight and recommendations provided by the report.

The statistic that more than 1,500 apprentices have been made redundant since September last year is worrying. It is easy to brush over the figure and to blame the recession, without fully appreciating the real cost to the apprentice. However, it must be remembered that the young people involved have lost not only their jobs, but a valuable training platform. This devolved institution cannot allow the continuation of a situation in which apprentices are seen simply as casualties of the recession.

Apprentices in every trade are vital to the economy and should remain so in times of hardship and of booms. The report points out how important it is for employers to realise that investing in skills in times such as these ensures that, when growth gathers pace, we will have made an investment in the skills that will maintain the economy's forward push.

With that in mind, the employers and the Department, through ApprenticeshipsNI, face an important and difficult task. First, from the employers' perspective, a strong commitment to invest in apprentices is required. Secondly, from the Department's perspective, the apprenticeship scheme must be made less bureaucratic and more employer led.

Work must start now to address the shortfalls in the present system. Improvements that are made now, in

the midst of a difficult economic time, will pay off in the long term as our economy becomes more stable.

Making young students more aware of the opportunities that are available to them as an alternative to university must be a priority, and I welcome the fact that the report highlights the need to concentrate on publicising the efforts of apprentices who have been highly successful in order to adequately show just how important apprenticeships are to our economy. The Department must take the lead on that matter and ensure that information is made easily available through the media, so that young people are well informed about career choices.

As has been said, in top companies throughout the Province, many senior managers began their careers as apprentices, and I wholeheartedly agree that apprenticeships are a great foundation to climbing the career ladder in the enterprise sector.

I support the motion, and I hope that the Minister takes on board the many recommendations in the report to help to renew interest in apprenticeships and to ensure that Northern Ireland remains competitive in the marketplace long into the future.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá an-áthas orm cead a bheith agam labhairt sa díospóireacht seo inniu.

I glad to have an opportunity to speak on the motion on the Committee for Employment and Learning's report. Talking about apprenticeships and training is always difficult. Most importantly, an ethos must be developed whereby, rather than just getting training in further education colleges, young people believe that apprenticeships will result in employment.

The Committee's report outlines a number of concerns, and many stakeholders accept that the Minister has brought forward initiatives to address them, such as the Skillsafe programme, from which I hope something comes. Other initiatives, such as the contingency programme of foster companies, have not been successful, although I believe that that programme was not brought forward by the Minister.

There is a perception among many stakeholders that, in the next couple of years, when, I hope, we come out of the present economic downturn, there will be a skills shortage. I appreciate that, in the past, it has been difficult to predict the number of apprenticeships that are required. For example, many young people were encouraged to take up apprenticeships in the construction industry, but, as the Minister said, presently, there is probably not a single job being advertised for that industry. That sector has been badly hit during the economic downturn. When we come out of the recession, we do not want a situation in which there is a lack of skilled bricklayers, plumbers, plasterers etc.

There is also a perception, which several Members highlighted, that apprenticeships are not valued as a career path. Over the years, even a vocational career has been considered to be lesser than following an academic career path at university. Unfortunately, that is a result of the emphasis that is placed by the school system here on gaining academic qualifications, including the 11-plus transfer test. That emphasis means that young people here tend to follow careers in academic subjects, and they feel that apprenticeships do not have the same status. However, as the report points out, in other countries, apprenticeships enjoy equal status to other careers.

I appreciate that the Minister has an initiative to increase the number of apprentices by 2010; however, there are concerns.

For example, members received a letter from the Electrical Contractors' Association in which it expressed its concern that apprenticeships are training-led rather than employer-led, and it highlighted the need for an employer ethos. The association is concerned about the lack of partnership among further education colleges, the Department and the business sector to ensure that the outcome of apprenticeships is that people get jobs. In the past, there was debate about people going through college, taking up apprenticeships, being placed with employers but not getting jobs. They were used as cheap labour. They may have gained a qualification, but there was no job for them.

1.15 pm

The report outlines a number of areas that the Committee feels are of concern, such as the minimum wage. There is also a debate about the number of people who graduate from university and where they will find jobs. Therefore, we need to put an emphasis on getting more people into further education colleges and on working with the business sector. The Committee spoke to representatives from the engineering, retail and motor-vehicle sectors, and from the construction industry, about the development of a partnership among the Committee, the Minister and businesses so that, when we come out of the recession, our young people are trained and skilled.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I join my colleagues in supporting the presentation of the report and congratulate the Chairperson of the Committee for bringing it to the House today. I joined the Committee recently, and I have been greatly impressed by the work of the Minister, the Department and the stakeholders, and by the enthusiasm with which the Committee took on the challenge in a difficult economic situation. I pay tribute to all of them, and to the Committee staff, for the work in which they have been engaged in producing the report.

The House should take the report very seriously. From my experience of years of working with the further education sector, I know how hard it is to organise apprenticeship training because of the many problems and difficulties that are associated with it.

I was impressed when Sir Reg told the House in some detail, on 23 February 2009, what had happened to the 303 apprentices who have, so far, been made redundant. The Minister told us that 157 had been referred to the Careers Service for advice and further training; 51 were continuing their training under Training for Success, which may mean that they are working in a simulated work environment in a college or are fostered by another firm; 26 were continuing their training under Steps to Work, which means that they have placements with employers for one day a week and attend college for four days a week; 43 had found alternative employment, including continued apprenticeship training or a return to their previous employer; 16 had entered further education; and the remaining 10 apprentices had not maintained contact with the training supplier.

That answer bears out the proactivity of the Department and the Minister in addressing the adverse impacts of the economic downturn on the apprenticeship programme, which is so vital to skilling our young people to a level that will make them an important part of the equation for attracting inward investment and for building new businesses on a sound skills base. It is important that we consider apprentices' training and a skills base that will be attractive to employers who are thinking of setting up business and coming into the Province at a time such as this.

As Members have said, the target for apprentices in training was reached by the Department before the worst of the recession began to bite. That deserves to be commended. It is not a question of thinking about what we will do when the crisis arrives. The Department is to be commended for looking to the future and for laying the foundation on which prosperity can be built for the Province when the upturn occurs.

In September 2008, at the launch of ApprenticeshipsNI, the Department restated its commitment to having 10,000 apprentices trained by 2010. We know that that target has been reached.

As we go forward, a team effort is required; and the basis for that has been laid already by the Department, the Minister, the stakeholders, the Committee and the Assembly. That proactive approach will protect the considerable achievements of each person in the apprentice skilling area and is money well spent.

I support the motion, and it is hoped that, ultimately, the Province will be better because of the work of so many people on this initiative.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning and I support the motion. As other Members have done, I thank the officials and all others who have been involved in the production of the report.

Other Members have mentioned the questions that the Committee posed at the start of the inquiry. Our inquiry into the way forward for apprenticeships followed an inquiry that the Committee undertook into Training for Success. Good work has been done in both areas; even if do I say so, as a member of the Committee. A lot of work has been done on apprenticeships.

I commend the Minister and the Department for the initiatives, and I thank the Minister for attending today's debate. However, there is still work to be done on apprenticeships. Several Members who spoke referred to issues relating to funding and careers guidance. Training was not mentioned as much, but I want to touch on that issue.

Funding is a big issue. The Committee received evidence from several contributors during the inquiry, and funding was mentioned repeatedly: it was mentioned in relation to how apprentices were able to manage and it was mentioned in relation to employers. Members can read the report for themselves, but I was struck by the fact that NIE, with all that it has going for it, believes that the Department for Employment and Learning should subsidise apprentices to the tune of 50%, and that the money should be paid upfront. If that is how large companies feel, what must it be like for small and medium-sized enterprises? It must be difficult. I hope that I have got that right; I see that the officials are checking it.

Yesterday, I spoke to a young apprentice who had to give up his apprenticeship. I informed the Committee about other apprentices who had similar experiences. That apprentice had to get a lift from his home, which was in a rural area, to a bus stop, from which he got a bus to college. In the evenings, he had to get a bus back to his village and then get a lift home. There are added burdens in the rural west and in other rural areas. It is difficult; I cannot stress that enough. Funding has to be looked at.

Mr Attwood and my party colleague Paul Butler referred to the minimum wage. The Committee's report contains recommendations on the minimum wage. It is essential that that is looked at. Funding is a big issue.

The report contains 15 recommendations, of which six are key recommendations. Recommendation 11 relates to funding and recommends that the Department analyses the reasons why apprentices do not complete their courses. That is absolutely critical. There is no point in Departments, officials and everyone else working hard on that, and other issues, if that work is

not properly evaluated. I want to see that issue tackled, including with respect to the example that I mentioned earlier.

Do people from lower-income backgrounds depend too heavily on their parents or guardians to fund their participation in apprenticeship schemes? Why are infrastructure and transport arrangements not in place so that they can get to their places of work? Why are those who participate in apprenticeship schemes seeing those of their own age making quite a bit of money, while they must pay for something that is not always that rewarding, even in respect of the training that is provided?

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

Mrs McGill: I am aware that a Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) survey was carried out, the results of which, in the main, were fairly positive. However, the outcome was not completely positive and, after listening to young apprentices, my view is that their training must be evaluated.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I welcome the report of the Committee for Employment and Learning. It was the Committee's second inquiry into training programmes during the relatively short operating period of the professional and technical training provisions of Training for Success and, more recently, ApprenticeshipsNI. The Committee's undertaking of two such inquiries in such a short space of time signals the importance that it attaches to the training of our young people. In that respect, I wholeheartedly agree with the Committee, and I welcome the fresh input of the report, which will help to ensure that that provision is as good as possible. Of course, I will require a little time to consider the commentary and recommendations of the report and to provide a measured response. However, I am pleased to have the opportunity to make a few comments today.

The DETI apprenticeships survey that was carried out between November 2008 and January 2009, which was mentioned in the Committee's report and by the previous Member who spoke, speaks well, in general terms, about the training that is being provided to apprentices today. DETI reports that the quality of training provided by the supplier organisations is mostly good or better, with management similarly rated. It also reports that the majority of apprenticeships are achieving standards of work that are good to excellent, and that retention rates are good or better, in the main. I was also pleased to read that the majority of apprentices are well cared for and supported, with most enjoying their apprenticeship programme in an environment that is safe and secure. That is a welcome assessment of the opportunities that are being provided to our apprentices.

I have noted the Committee's assessment that ApprenticeshipsNI tends to be the choice of students with a limited number of options. I have also noted that apprenticeships do not enjoy a high status and are often viewed as a second-choice career pathway. Several Members, including the Committee Chairperson, have mentioned that issue during today's debate. A great deal of work must be done on the status issue, but that is not confined to apprenticeships, and there are many sectors of our industry in which the Department is working to ensure a recovery in status. Even in the IT sector, such work has had to be done.

We must communicate with our careers officers, our employers and others, because the student pathway through university is not the only appropriate route. We have probably already reached the national target for enrolment in universities that the Prime Minister set two years ago, including the target set for enrolments on the part of those from a disadvantaged background. I accept entirely that we have work to do, but there must be a collective effort by all of us. In many cases, it is a matter of what society deems appropriate and the public perceptions that exist. It is a pity that that view of the ApprenticeshipsNI programme exists because, as all Members know, apprenticeships are essential to the well-being of our economy and, in many cases, offer a pathway to a well-paid and interesting career.

As has been mentioned, many of the people who head our leading companies began their careers as apprentices. I will take stock of the messages that we are sending out about that provision to see whether we can do more in partnership with the Alliance of Sector Skills Councils to build on the successful marketing campaigns that have been run to date.

1.30 pm

Several Members mentioned the minimum wage. Part of the attractiveness of a scheme must be that apprentices earn a fair wage while they are in training. The Low Pay Commission has been tasked specifically with looking at apprentices' wages, and I am aware that its representatives were at Stormont a couple of weeks ago. However, that work is likely to take some time. In the interim, I have asked my officials to look at options, while remaining mindful of the economic climate. Mr Attwood, among others, mentioned the minimum wage, and I am happy to look at that issue, because it will be some time before the Low Pay Commission's report becomes available.

Mr Attwood: Bearing in mind that the Committee flagged up that issue a year ago and that it is being flagged up again now, and given that the Minister said that the Low Pay Commission will not report for at least a year, will he tell the House when he hopes to conclude his examination of the matter?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member will know that the Low Pay Commission has primacy in setting the minimum wage. We expected the report to be available more quickly and, therefore, it seemed inappropriate that I should try to second-guess it. However, it is precisely because of that extended timetable that I am prepared to look at the matter. I do not have a specific timescale in mind, but I assure the Member that the examination will not take very long. The opportunity exists to see whether we can introduce interim measures that may have to be altered later when the Low Pay Commission's report becomes available.

Next year, my Department will have the opportunity to review the way in which it procures training. To secure employer-led provision of the highest quality, we must become more flexible and respond to the individual needs of the occupational sectors; the needs of new investors in the Northern Ireland economy who need to tailor their training programmes for global markets; and the needs of employers who must maximise productivity and competitiveness. We have a lot of work to do. In doing that, the Department will expect its training providers to be innovative and flexible in how they deliver a high-quality product that meets customers' needs in a way that is time efficient and represents value for money.

For our part, we must, within the bounds of good governance, reduce any barriers of unnecessary bureaucracy and as the Committee report suggests, streamline key processes. Although we have all been saying for years that we must cut bureaucracy, in the correspondence that I receive and in statements made in the House, Members frequently ask for more monitoring and accountability, or for this or that commission to be set up. People tend, naturally, to want Government to do such things. I accept what the Committee says in the report because it is right: we must look at governance. However, once we start to move back from the coalface, issues will start to arise over whether money was spent properly, and who did what. In other words, a balance must be struck. Members frequently ask for more bureaucracy. The report is good, and I must commend the Committee on it. I accept that there are issues, and I assure the Committee that if we can find a way to reduce bureaucracy that is consistent with good governance, we will seek to do that.

I wish to comment on programme-led apprenticeships. I wish to announce that from 1 September 2009, my Department will launch a new programme-led, unwaged apprenticeship provision to cater for school-leavers who could previously have expected to have gained employment as apprentices at level 2 and, in time, to have progressed to level 3. That professional and technical training will run parallel to employer-led provision and

will enable 16- and 17-year-olds to gain a full apprenticeship qualification in a chosen skill area through a combination of simulated learning and a placement with an employer one a day a week.

The work placement is a fundamental element of the programme-led apprenticeship to ensure that the trainee can be assessed properly in a real working environment. It is crucial that sufficient placements are secured, and I will be calling on ministerial colleagues to work with their Departments to enable a sizeable proportion of those placements to be found within the public sector and to use procurement contracts to lever placements from within the public-sector supply chain. That ties in with one of the points that Mr Attwood and others made.

There is no doubt, given the size of the public sector, that it is not unreasonable to expect that it should play a role, particularly in these economic times. There are opportunities not only in the Health Service but right across the card, including my Department. I will be approaching ministerial colleagues to seek their support to allow us to move forward. One of the motivations for bringing the matter forward today is the fact that the school year will end in the next few days. Reference was made to the end of the university year, and I have something to say on that, but I will not be doing so today.

Some employer training organisations would prefer us not to go down this route, but the fact remains that large numbers of young people will be leaving school and we must find a path for them. Youth unemployment is already high in Northern Ireland, as it is throughout these islands, and it will grow even faster if we do not take measures to try to offset it. In addition to the public sector, I will also be looking for the third sector to provide placements. We must look right round to see what options are available for placements.

The placement issue is important. I know that it is difficult for employers, and we have been running into difficulties, particularly with having three- and four-day placements each week, but this will be a placement for one day a week. Everyone must play a part in trying to achieve placements. Although I am still expecting private-sector employers to play their part, as they have done for many years, the strategy will help to reduce the pressure on them alone to make that happen, and that is the general will in the Chamber. The strategy will propose targets for each of the three sectors.

Significant contributions were made during the debate, and I will try to pick up on a few matters in the time remaining. Mr Attwood raised the issue of the target for apprentices. We set a target that was not age-specific, but when the age was raised it contributed significantly to the achievement of the target. However, it will have to be revised in light of circumstances.

The Committee indicated that I was misadvised on the issue of foster employers. However, I have dealt

with a number of major employers who assured me that they were enthusiastic about the matter. Indeed, they said that they were willing to participate fully. However, it was not long before those employers were in difficulty themselves, and that has had an impact. Nevertheless, that situation has not affected anybody adversely, because if it was an option, it was taken up, and if it was not, it was not. However, I retain the hope that when things start to turn round for many of those employers, it may be of some help.

Mr Attwood raised the issue of the Health Service, and I have covered that in general terms. It goes without saying that due to the large number of people employed in the Health Service, and with the Health Service and the social-services sector accounting for 47% of our Budget, the Health Service will have a major contribution to make.

Although the procurement issue is primarily a matter for the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Finance Minister has indicated the achievement of apprenticeships for each £1 million or £2 million of expenditure, and has pointed out how that could help. That will be rolled out, and there is general support for it in the Chamber.

I will return to the status issue, because we all have to play a part in addressing that. There is no doubt that professional and technical workers are those who make business and industry work. There is a need for graduates, and I am sure that Anna Lo realises that, over their lifetimes, the earnings of graduates are substantially higher than those of non-graduates, despite the debt that they may accumulate at university. Part of the problem is that specific industries have image problems, and we have been trying to address that.

We should spend some time looking at how our Careers Service treats apprenticeships, but we all have a role to play. Professional and technical people oil the wheels that keep industry and commerce going. It is not all done by graduates; we need professional and technical people. The negative perception of apprenticeships starts in our schools, and perhaps the Careers Service needs to play a role by engaging on the issues specific to that. We may all need to do more to promote apprenticeships because I have absolutely no doubt that they are essential for the maintenance of a high-quality and high-productivity economy in our Province.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mr Newton): Like every other Member who has spoken, I thank all those from a broad range of backgrounds who generously gave their time to attend meetings of the Committee and give evidence. I also pay tribute to the Committee Clerk and his team. The report is in its eighth version, and I do not think that anyone in the Committee could have failed to be impressed by the diligence of the Clerk and his team.

Many months ago, we debated the problems with the Jobskills programme, and, thankfully, we have moved a long way from that programme and are now in an entirely different place. The Department is to be commended for the way in which it has addressed the issues.

I support the motion. I recognise that high-quality apprenticeship training and skill development is vital for the future economic well-being of our community. Quality provision of skills training will present opportunities to our future workforce. For some reason, as other Members have mentioned, our brightest and best school-leavers have rejected a professional and technical education in favour of academic education, yet many senior management positions in industry are held by those who started their careers as apprentices on the shop floor.

The Department for Employment and Learning must give serious consideration to the report, and I welcome the Minister's assurance that he will do so. Our young people deserve the best opportunities to develop their skills to the highest possible level under the skilled instruction of those who are expert in their field. I emphasise that tuition should be given by those who are expert in their field; I will return to that point later.

Apprenticeships should also allow the students to experience their profession outside the setting of a classroom and get a real and full understanding of their subject. However, in today's uncertain economic climate, more and more apprentices are being made redundant, with many facing difficulties in finding another employer. That has a detrimental effect on their futures, because many are unable to finish their apprenticeship qualifications, which leaves them frustrated and annoyed, with a feeling of underachievement.

1.45 pm

The statistics have been referred to. For example, we all know that since September 2008, more than 1,500 apprentices have been made redundant. There is an underlying need for those young people to find opportunities that will allow them to carry on their apprenticeships, and if a solution is not found, Northern Ireland's economy will suffer. The current economic outlook may not be as bright as we want it to be, but it will improve. Northern Ireland must have a fully trained and skilled workforce so that it can compete in the global market.

That is why the Committee for Employment and Learning calls on the Minister to offer greater protection to apprentices. All too often, we have seen employers cut costs by scrapping their apprenticeship programmes. Although that may do no harm to employers in the short term, a lack of a skilled workforce in the long term would mean that jobs that require skilled workers will not be taken up. People from foreign parts would be needed to provide that skilled labour.

More SMEs need to become involved in apprenticeship programmes, and I call on the Minister to encourage more such companies to take up the opportunity to offer apprenticeships to students. That can be achieved by forming skills training clusters, which was an initiative that the Federation of Small Businesses favoured in its evidence to the Committee, and/or by establishing centres of excellence and/or group training associations that would meet the needs of specific sectors.

Recommendation 13 of the Committee's report suggests strongly that the Minister examine all the issues that are connected to centres of excellence, with a view to proceeding towards the establishment of such facilities. That type of approach may help to increase the skills levels in the construction industry in particular. Indeed, the Committee Chairperson made that point. It might help to secure the tenure of apprentices in an economic downturn. Whatever the model or approach, the need is to ensure that the standard of training that is provided is of a high quality and can be benchmarked favourably against that which is provided in any other part of the world.

Mr David Hilditch declared an interest when outlining the difficulties that his son has experienced. The young man is with his fourth employer in trying to complete his apprenticeship. He is to be commended for his tenacity in seeking employers with whom to complete the apprenticeship. David emphasised the economy's need for the skills that are offered by STEM subjects, and he outlined the problems that are faced by small and medium-sized enterprises.

David McClarty paid tribute to the Minister; why would he not? No one could guess why that might be. I am sorry that David is not in the Chamber. In paying tribute to the Minister, he outlined the Government's responses and the need for employers and SMEs to be flexible. I think that every Committee member will agree with that.

Other Members emphasised promoting the status of apprenticeships by making use of people who have achieved high office, having started their careers as apprentices. The Committee perceives showing people who have been successful through the apprenticeship route as a way of addressing the status of apprenticeships.

Alex Attwood queried the numbers of apprenticeships, and he emphasised the wages that apprentices receive. He said that the wage should be at the minimum wage level in contracting arrangements, and I presume that he means the minimum wage level and above. He called for legislation to ensure that public contracts involve a quota of apprentices. Again, that issue is emphasised in the report. He specifically mentioned the need to have apprentices in the front line of the Health Service. I agree with him that the Minister's response to the report should not take nine months.

Anna Lo spoke from personal experience when she outlined a case on the status of apprenticeships. She said that that status was preventing young men and young women from taking up apprenticeships.

She highlighted the problems of numeracy and literacy; as it took evidence, the Committee heard about that from many employers. Many perceive apprenticeships as a sort of dirty employment, when in fact it is the opposite of that in many cases. Ms Lo cited the example of the automotive sector, which offers high-quality careers involving high-tech knowledge and skills. Ms Lo referred to the Committee's visit to the NIE apprenticeship centre and referred to the pride that apprentices in that employment took in their careers. One of the distinctive things about entering into an apprenticeship, not just with NIE but with any of the other organisations that offer apprenticeships and adopt a centre-of-excellence-type approach, is that there is a career pathway towards the apprenticeship.

William Irwin referred to the worrying statistic that 1,500 apprentices have been made redundant. He spoke of the need for investment to address that, and the need to cut red tape. He said that apprenticeship careers should be considered as an alternative to university.

Mr Paul Butler spoke of the need for employment and said that apprenticeships should not just be training places. I also emphasise that. We do not want to return apprenticeships to being training places. They must offer employment and a career opportunity. Mr Butler stressed the need to get it right for the future and referred to the construction sector's problem. He emphasised the importance of a career pathway, and the need for training to be employer-led as opposed to the ethos of the Jobskills programme.

Dr Robert Coulter supported the report and said that the House should take it seriously. He spoke from personal experience of the difficulties of organising apprenticeships. He stressed that the report is vital to the economy and to attracting inward investment to the Province. Like the Chairperson, he emphasised the need for a team effort. He recognised that the report represented a proactive approach.

Claire McGill got through her speech without mentioning Strabane, but she did mention "rural areas", so we should perhaps interpret that as referring to Strabane. She stressed the issue of funding and said that funding for apprentices in rural areas was a major problem. She outlined what one employer had indicated to her as being important, namely the methodology, rather than the amount, of the funding. She suggested that apprenticeships should be front-loaded, rather than the bulk of the money coming on completion of the apprenticeship. She stressed the importance of recommendation 11, the analysis of reasons for the non-completion of apprenticeships. I agree that that is a vital recommendation.

The Minister welcomed the report and described it as a "fresh input". He recognised the need to address the issue of status. He accepted entirely that university was not the only pathway to a career. He mentioned that many senior managers had progressed by way of apprenticeships. As so many Members have mentioned that, it is a point that must be taken up.

In response to an intervention from Mr Attwood, the Minister agreed to look at the minimum wage and recognised that the Low Pay Commission report was taking longer to emerge than he had anticipated. However, when pressed to give a time for that, he said that it would not be very long.

The Minister said that in future, training providers would be expected to be flexible and to offer high-quality training. He addressed the issue of red tape and recognised that Members frequently ask for that burden to be cut, in line with good governance.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for giving way. First, during my contribution, I overlooked the opportunity to acknowledge the work of the Committee, the Chairperson, the Deputy Chairperson — however long he remains in that post — and the staff.

On the issue of the introduction of minimum pay or, as the Member rightly pointed out, higher rates of pay for apprenticeships, is he concerned about the fact that there is a difference between real time and DEL time, and that DEL time is a lot longer than real time?

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for his intervention. Obviously, I want the minimum wage issue to be addressed as soon as possible.

The Minister's announcement caught many of us unawares. A few of his remarks gave me cause for concern. First, he indicated that he might introduce the proposal of simulated training. Secondly, he said that apprentices would spend one day a week with an employer. Thirdly, he said that he envisaged the programme lasting four years in total, with the final two years being employer-led, whereby the apprentice becomes a waged employee.

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

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mr Newton): That runs contrary to all the professional advice that employers offered to the Committee as evidence.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Employment and Learning on its Inquiry into the Way Forward for Apprenticeships; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, to implement, as a matter of urgency, the recommendations contained therein.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Egan Contractors

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

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development, in view of the adverse economic impact suffered by the employees of Egan contractors, to increase the budget allocation for decent homes and related programmes; and to ensure that future communication with contractors complies with Egan principles.

On 11 June 2009, the Committee for Social Development agreed that this motion should be tabled for debate. After receiving evidence from a number of Egan contractors on the impact of significant reductions in the Housing Executive's decent homes expenditure, the motion was agreed on 21 May 2009. Members of the Committee will set out the key difficulties and concerns and how those matters can be resolved. First, I will provide some background to the issue.

The Housing Executive estimated that in 2006, 23% of Housing Executive homes, unfortunately, did not yet meet the decent homes standard. To be a decent home, Housing Executive houses must, among other things, comply with the statutory fitness test that requires reasonably modern facilities, a WC that is appropriately located and a reasonable level of thermal comfort. Complying with that standard will clearly not make any Housing Executive home into a luxury home. Compliance with the decent homes standard merely represents an important basic milestone that all Members want to see achieved.

The Committee understands that the Savills report will show that significant improvements in Housing Executive stock have been achieved. However, it is understood that that report will indicate that around 11,000 Housing Executive homes still do not meet the decent homes standard, owing in some part to the inefficient heating systems.

The Committee has written to the Department to request access to the Savills report. I hope that the Minister will provide some detail on the impact of the decent homes programme today and clarify the way forward for Egan contractors and their employees.

2.00 pm

I will now discuss the Egan contractors themselves. In 1998, the construction task force, led by Sir John Egan, produced an influential report recommending

the development of longer-term relationships between the construction industry and key stakeholders such as the Government. Those longer-term arrangements were designed to deliver better quality and efficiency for the Government and provide enhanced security for contractors. The Housing Executive adopted the Egan recommendations, or principles, in 2000. At that time, the Housing Executive entered into achieving excellence contracts for all work including heating installation, external cyclical maintenance, kitchen and bathroom replacements and so on. The Department has advised the Committee that those contracts were designed to be long-term partnerships but that they included no absolute guarantee of work for contractors in any particular year.

I will move on to more recent events. Owing to difficulties in the property market, the Department experienced significant shortfalls in its housing budget in 2008-09. As the House is aware, the Department asked for additional support and for the Department of Finance and Personnel's agreement to move money around in an effort to keep the social housing development programme on track. The Department, like other Departments in monitoring rounds, did not receive all the money that it requested, the upshot of which was a substantial reduction in spending on decent homes work, which was provided by Egan contractors. In evidence to the Committee, Egan contractors described the impact of those sudden reductions in expenditure. At one stage, firms that had undertaken several million pounds worth of work a year asked their employees to do overtime. However, they abruptly laid those workers off.

The Committee is not suggesting that the Department breached its contracts with Egan firms, and it is not implying that any illegal activity has occurred. The Committee recognises that the actions of the Department and the Housing Executive may have been motivated by a desire to protect the public purse from unsustainable expense.

The Committee asks how the state of affairs with Egan contractors arose. The difficulties in funding the housing budget were well known in autumn 2008. Consequently, the Department made substantial bids in the December monitoring round. As the outcomes of monitoring rounds depend on many factors and are, therefore, never certain, one might conclude that, prior to December, the Department must have known about the potential difficulties in funding all housing maintenance programmes. Given that, the Committee has asked why the Department or the Housing Executive did not begin to reduce Egan contractors' work in late autumn. Furthermore, the Committee asked why the funding reductions were not communicated to the Egan contractors. That would have allowed the Egan contractors to plan for the

difficulties that they encountered and, crucially, would have allowed them to warn their workforce. No one wants to hear news of redundancy. However, if the employees of Egan contractors had been given more notice, they could have better arranged their finances or even sought alternative employment.

As I said, the actions of the Department and the Housing Executive in this case did not break any laws. That said, the way in which the Egan contractors and their employees were treated was, as implied in the motion, a clear deviation from the spirit of the Egan principles. The motion, therefore, calls on the Minister to ensure that there is no repeat of this situation and that future communication between the relevant parties complies with the Egan principles.

The motion also calls on the Minister to increase the budget allocation for the decent homes programme. I have already set out why that programme is important. The Committee recognises the difficult Budget situation for the year ahead. Nonetheless, the Committee encourages the Minister to set achievable and sustainable targets for all elements of the housing programme, whether for newbuild, upgrading or refurbishment work.

The Committee, the Egan contractors and their employees await the outcome of the Savills report with great interest. The Committee believes that, dependent on that report, the Minister should seek additional support for the decent homes programme through the monitoring rounds.

I look forward to hearing Members' contributions to the debate and the Minister's response. I have been speaking as the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, but, as an ordinary Member, I want to say that meeting contractors on a constituency basis and hearing about problems that they have encountered has been difficult. Members of the public have also had great difficulties with their contracts for some time now. I support the motion.

Mr F McCann: Tá mé sásta labhairt ar an rún seo inniu. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate about the Egan contracts. My constituency office staff can attest to the impact that the situation is having, because they are being contacted daily by people who had been expecting improvement work to be carried out on their homes, only to find that many kitchen and heating replacements and other improvement works have been frozen, while planned cyclical maintenance programmes have also been suspended.

Changes to the procurement process, which were promised to provide a fairer and more efficient system, were meant to convince many local contractors to become involved in the Egan contracts process. Sir John Egan's report entitled 'Rethinking Construction' was published in 1998. In 2006, the Housing Executive

initiated a system based on the Egan approach, and, after the initial process, four contractors were awarded five contracts based on different Housing Executive areas. The Housing Executive agreed a package of predetermined rates and costs for Housing Executive contractors and suppliers. That was viewed by all involved as a positive partnership approach, and the contracts were to last for up to five years.

The contracts started to roll out in July 2008, the contractors having been told that £37 million a year would be available to replace 4,500 kitchens and for 9,500 homes to receive external maintenance, which is essential if houses are to meet the decent homes standard. The new programme was problematic from the beginning, and in October 2008 the Egan contractors were informed that they should roll out a new programme to begin in early 2009.

On 15 December 2008, however, the Minister for Social Development made her "smash and grab" speech, accusing her Executive colleagues of stealing her money. Her party colleagues were predicting that cyclical maintenance programmes, kitchen replacements and grants would be the first to suffer. Three days later, the Housing Executive formally announced that it would not go ahead with the Egan contracts at that time. Also, in that period, SDLP Members were advising tenants and affected homeowners to go to the DUP and Sinn Féin to register complaints that funding had been taken from the Minister, as though the fault lay with those two parties. However, they failed to mention that the Minister had handed back tens of millions of pounds to the central pot in the December monitoring round.

Although a number of schemes were reinstated —

Mr Attwood: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: You accused me last week of not giving way.

Mr Attwood: I know; a leopard takes time to change its spots.

If, on the Floor of the House, in the past two weeks, Sinn Féin has accepted the principle that unspent DSD moneys should be reallocated for housing need, including Egan contracts, why in December 2008 did it not accept the same principle? Why, in December 2008, when the Minister went to DFP to ask that unspent DSD moneys should be allocated to housing, did Sinn Féin not stand up straight and tall, back the Minister and get the money for the Egan contracts, rather than wait six months to change its mind?

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

Mr F McCann: Two members of the SDLP who are sitting on either side of the Minister are on the Committee. They know that I fully supported the

Committee's bid to support the Minister in securing additional funding and resources. I have also said that, during monitoring rounds, any money that becomes available should be directed towards the housing programme and the housing budget. I believe and I understand that there are difficulties, but we are not — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Remarks must be addressed through the Chair.

Mr F McCann: I understand some of the difficulties. We are talking about a general budget, not one that deals purely with social newbuilds. Although some schemes were reinstated in January 2009, the problem had resurfaced by March, when contractors were informed that there was little money to complete Egan contracts. The Minister informed representatives of Egan contractors that she would rather put roofs over people's heads than replace kitchens for others. In making that statement, however, she failed to take into account the serious condition of many kitchens that must be replaced on health and safety grounds.

Many of the schemes will be suspended, including external cyclical maintenance (ECM) contracts and grants. That will have a long-term effect and, by the end of this month, much of the money that had been available will no longer exist. The impact on housing standards will cost more in the long run, as properties inevitably continue to deteriorate. Cyclical maintenance is carried out over a 15-, 20- or 25-year period, dependent on the level of work, which ensures that houses are kept to the decent homes standard. The Minister's approach means that years of good work undertaken by the Housing Executive in ensuring appropriate standards of property maintenance will have been lost as decline starts to set in.

We have heard the pleas of Egan contractors at our Committee, and we find the Minister's argument that she is putting the construction industry back to work on newbuilds strange when 800 or more jobs may be lost in the construction sector. Two weeks ago in the Chamber, I quoted the British Chancellor, who in his pre-Budget speech stated that the upgrading of public housing to meet the decent homes standard should be prioritised in order to maintain employment in that sector of the construction industry. We have always supported the call for additional resources to be invested in all aspects of housing, not just social newbuilds.

The Minister is obviously ignoring large and important elements of the housing programme in instructing the Housing Executive to make those drastic cuts. She needs to revisit her budget to address the issue —

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

Mr F McCann: I thought that I had an extra minute. She needs to revisit her budget to address the provision of maintenance and heating and kitchen replacements.

Mr Kennedy: I wish to explain to the House, members of the Social Development Committee and the Minister that no formal representation will be made on the motion by the Ulster Unionist Party because our representative on the Committee, Mr William Armstrong, recently had an unfortunate accident and is incapacitated, as Members will be aware. I am sure that the House will take the opportunity to wish him a speedy recovery. As he is our sole representative on that Committee, it was not felt appropriate that anyone else should speak on this issue.

Mr Burns: I am happy to speak on the subject of social housing once again. I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development for bringing the motion before the House. I am glad to see social housing so high on the agenda. I only wish that it were being given such high priority by the Executive and the Finance Minister.

In previous weeks, we have debated the housing budget and how best to provide homes that are fit for the twenty-first century. Those were worthy debates, and many Members made very positive contributions. The Minister restated her commitment to meeting the targets set out in the Programme for Government. There is no doubt that all sides of the House are committed to providing the people of Northern Ireland with good social housing.

Everyone has a right to a roof over their heads and to a decent standard of housing. They deserve no less, and we must deliver that.

2.15 pm

We all know, however, that the housing budget falls well short of what is required. Every Department would like more money, but the situation with the Department for Social Development is different. The projected money from housing and land sales did not appear, and there is a big hole in the budget. Some Members are happy to criticise the Minister on any and every funding issue and want to paint a picture of the Department making cuts here, there and everywhere, even though they know that the Department is not properly funded.

The global economic downturn cannot be used as an excuse. Housing stock must be maintained and improved, and repairs carried out regardless. At the same time, we are all committed to the new building targets in the Programme for Government, and we now find that the money to meet those targets is a challenge for us all.

The debate is mainly about the budget allocation for decent homes and money for Egan contractors. The

standard of most Housing Executive houses is quite good. However, the Minister is best placed to outline the current state of the public housing stock.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that there is much public concern and anxiety that the Housing Executive will not be able to honour contracts that were allocated funding? Word is now getting out that, unfortunately, the Department will not be able to deliver, particularly for disabled people.

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

Mr Burns: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Work for Housing Executive tenants with a disability will be covered. That is a statutory obligation, and there is no question that that will not be covered.

Mr McCarthy: Excellent; thank you.

Mr Burns: A percentage of social housing falls short of what is required, and those properties will have to be brought up to standard. The Department and the Housing Executive are committed to doing that, and Egan contractors know that. I am sure, therefore, that Egan contractors had expected more work and more money.

What can the Department do if it does not have the money? We will not stop the newbuild programme. The arguments in favour of that programme were recently debated at length in the Chamber. Building social housing makes a positive contribution to the local economy. Therefore, if we want more money to be provided for decent homes and Egan contractors, we are back to the Department's bidding for more money at every monitoring round. If more money is forthcoming, I want it to be spent on fixing houses, new kitchens and bathrooms and so forth.

There must be new money. We must find a way to sort out the big problems with the social housing budget. It needs to be returned to a sure footing, because we cannot continue to wait for new handouts at every monitoring round. It is unreasonable to expect any Minister in any Department to manage his or her budget in that way.

Ms Lo: With the catastrophic drop in the receipts from housing and land sales, the Department for Social Development has been in crisis for the past year, depending on quarterly monitoring rounds to meet deficits in its programmes.

The Egan contract is a casualty of the Department's hand-to-mouth existence, as the Department does not have the ability to plan on a long-term and consistent basis. The Department for Social Development has to make priorities, and the Minister has made social housing her top priority. That is in keeping with the Programme for Government's PSA to build 10,000 houses by 2013.

A balance must be struck. Maintenance work is essential both to keep our stock in good order and to fulfil our obligation to the tenants of the 90,000 Housing Executive homes, who pay a total of £270 million rent a year. It has been suggested that the Housing Executive wasted an opportunity by increasing rent by only 1.95% compared with the 6.12% national average increase in 2009-2010. That is mostly covered by HM Treasury through housing benefits, and perhaps the Minister will comment on that.

The debate is quite timely in that the Savills report came out today. That report stated that we have the best stock in the UK, and the Housing Executive should be commended for keeping on top of repairs and maintenance. However, we need a full maintenance programme to enable the Housing Executive to sustain its excellent record. We must not forget that 17% of our housing stock fails the decent homes standard.

The anticipated drop from £40 million to £10 million in the Egan contract is too drastic. The Egan contractors have said that there are some 1,100 vacant Housing Executive properties that cannot be rented because minor repairs or major improvements need to be carried out. Those properties could be brought up to the required standards at a fraction of the cost of building new houses. It is obviously cheaper to renovate than to build new houses, and renovation can sustain jobs in the construction industry. Perhaps we need to consider spreading the housing budget to cover maintenance work rather than dedicating it solely to building new social housing.

Miss McIlveen: I support the motion. It addresses a wide-ranging issue that affects contractors in every constituency in Northern Ireland. Under the decent homes programme, Housing Executive houses are brought up to modern standards of fitness, structure, energy efficiency and facilities. In many ways, those are the minimum standards that we should seek to obtain. However, current circumstances have caused delays in the decent homes programme and other related programmes.

In 2006, the period for which we have the most up-to-date figures, almost one quarter of Housing Executive homes failed to meet the decent homes standard. That standard involves houses meeting the statutory fitness standard; being in a reasonable state of repair; having reasonably modern facilities; and providing a reasonable degree of thermal comfort. That all sounds perfectly adequate until one notes that the reference to reasonably modern facilities means that kitchens must be less than 20 years old and bathrooms less than 30 years old. It is a cause for concern if one quarter of houses does not reach that standard. That concern deepens if the schemes to address the problem have been placed in abeyance.

I hope that the House will forgive me for being parochial; numerous Housing Executive schemes in my constituency of Strangford were due to be carried out in this financial year but have instead been mothballed until funds are made available. That is particularly true in the Ards district, where schemes dotted around the entire district have been removed.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I wish to add to the concern that the Member expressed about the non-availability of Housing Executive grants. Does she share my concern that many people are being told that their applications are being cancelled, with the added difficulty that many of them have waited in a queue for a long time and now find themselves with cancelled applications? I ask the Minister to address that issue when she responds to the debate.

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

Miss McIlveen: I agree with Mr Kennedy's comments: the issues are the same across the Province, not just in my constituency of Strangford. However, I am concerned about schemes in the Ards district that have been removed because funds have simply dried up.

The multi-element improvement scheme in the West Winds estate in Newtownards will be delayed, which will affect 68 properties. That scheme involves the improvement of living and dining space, refurbishment of kitchens and bathrooms, and rewiring and installation of central heating. An external maintenance scheme concerning 170 properties in Greyabbey and Kircubbin has been put back indefinitely. A major improvement scheme in the Glen estate, in which 16 bungalows were to receive an additional bedroom among other improvement works, cannot proceed. In Newtownards, two kitchen schemes concerning 72 homes in the Scrabo and Bowtown estates are not proceeding. Furthermore, in my council area, 112 properties in Donaghadee, which were to benefit from replacement central heating — from coal fire to gas — will have to wait until an undefined date when the Housing Executive can afford to carry out the programme.

In addition to those matters, the first phase of environmental improvement being made to the Bowtown estate, which has been ongoing for the past year, has been suspended. I understand that that alone is a £1 million scheme.

The suspension of work affects not only the expectations of the residents in those diverse social housing areas where some of the work scheduled is required urgently; there is also the effect on the contractors and, in turn, their employees and subcontractors. At a time when fewer houses are being built given the catastrophic downturn in the housing market, the impact that the cancellation of work in the

social housing sector has on tradesmen in the building industry cannot be overestimated. Contractors are facing the prospect of laying staff off due to the shortfall in funding for the Egan contracts.

Mr McIntyre, the chief executive of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, stated that the shortfall in funds has been caused by the collapse in the housing market and that the blame does not lie at the feet of the Executive. Indeed, he specifically stated that it does not represent any lack of commitment on the part of the Government to support housing.

Sales accounted for £100 million of the Housing Executive's income two years ago, but it is anticipated that only £6 million will be garnered from that source in the forthcoming year. The Committee has been informed that the Minister has made newbuilds her first priority, which has resulted in the projected spend on Egan contracts of £37 million being slashed to just £10 million. Instead of vital works being carried out on 9,500 homes and more than 1,000 vacant properties in order to make them habitable, the proposal is to build 250 new social homes.

Funds are limited, and it is not for me to tell the Minister how to prioritise her budget, but, as the previous speaker, Ms Lo, said, a balance must be struck. I ask the Minister to look again at the programmes for the sake of people living in houses that are in need of repair and upgrade, for the workers relying on Egan contracts, and for the people on waiting lists, while there are houses simply waiting for repair.

Mr Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Molloy.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McNarry is not in his place for question 1.

Teacher Redundancy Regulations: EQIA

2. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Education whether she will ensure that a full equality impact assessment is carried out on the proposed teacher redundancy regulations. (AQO 3012/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): The Department carried out an eight-week consultation on the draft regulations and their equality screening. The closing date for responses was 15 May. The Department has completed its analysis of all responses to the consultation; a summary of those responses will shortly be published on its website. I am considering the views of the consultees, and I will bring forward proposals shortly.

Mr Burns: I declare an interest as a member of a board of governors. There has been quite a bit of concern about what form of redundancy package the teachers will receive. Will the Minister tell the Assembly what negotiations she has had with the unions about the proposed redundancies?

The Minister of Education: As I said, I am considering the outcome of the consultation. I will make a decision on the draft regulations and any outstanding equality duties in due course. I have had discussions with a wide range of parties, and with my officials. I was at all the trade union conferences, and this very important issue was one of the issues that were raised with me. I will listen, and have listened, carefully to the points made about equality duties.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister encourage schools to give newly qualified teachers more experience through subbing, instead of using teachers who have retired?

The Minister of Education: It is essential that young, newly qualified teachers who are unable to obtain permanent teaching posts are afforded the opportunity to gain the necessary experience through providing substitute cover. The Department has issued circulars exhorting employers to give preference to

newly qualified, and experienced non-retired, teachers who are seeking work. The Department also advised employers that retired teachers should be re-employed only to provide short-term cover where newly qualified, or experienced non-retired, teachers are unavailable.

In addition to the guidance issued by the Department, a number of measures help to restrict the level of re-employment of teachers who have retired prematurely. The rules of the teachers' pension scheme militate against the employment of retired teachers, in that such teachers may suffer a reduction in pension as a result of their earnings from teaching. Since April 2008, the compensating authorities have been responsible for the cost of any enhancement to pensions awarded to teachers who retire prematurely. That has resulted in a significant decline in the number of premature retirements, and the further amendments planned under the draft regulations on premature retirement compensation may bring about another reduction.

The level of central reimbursement for the employment of substitute teachers has been capped at point four of the main pay scale. That provides an incentive for schools to employ newly qualified teachers to provide substitute cover, as opposed to teachers who have retired prematurely and are more expensive. However, schools have the flexibility to employ teachers at a higher cost at a charge to their budget should they so desire. Recently, during the accountability reviews of the boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and grammar schools, I met principals and governors, and I urged them to give opportunities to newly qualified teachers.

Mr McCausland: Castle High School in north Belfast is one of a small number of schools due to close in the summer. Several of that school's teachers have given many years of good service, stretching as far as 30 years in some cases. They had hoped to be able to leave the school with the premature retirement package that had been indicated to them would be the case earlier in the year. The more recent figures that they have been given are lower. Will the Minister give special consideration to teachers in that particular position?

The Minister of Education: I do not want to comment on cases in individual schools. As the Member will know, I have met the principal of Castle High School on many occasions.

He has also raised those issues with me, as have many teachers and principals across our school system. My officials and the boards are working with Castle High School on a range of issues that are related to the closure of schools.

Ms Lo: Does the large number of teachers seeking early retirement reflect the demoralised state of their profession?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister of Education: I do not accept that the profession is demoralised. I believe that we have one of the most committed, dynamic teaching professions in all of Ireland and, indeed, throughout Europe. If people look at the teacher-training courses and applications to them, they will see how highly regarded teaching is as a profession. Teachers are very highly regarded by society, and I am delighted that we have such professional teachers working with our children.

We must ensure that we provide opportunities and training and that we look at how we nourish and protect our teachers. We must make sure that they have career opportunities. That is what my Department is looking at.

University Admissions

3. **Mr Bresland** asked the Minister of Education to outline the steps that her Department is taking to ensure that students from Northern Ireland will not be disadvantaged, during the intake of students to universities in the Republic of Ireland, as a result of the later release of their exam results. (AQO 3013/09)

The Minister of Education: Bhí inní mhór orm nuair a thuig mé go raibh próiseas á shocrú a d'fhéadfadh dul chun dochair dhaltaí A leibhéal a bhfuil iarratais curtha isteach acu chuig institiúidí ard-oideachais ó Dheas. I was concerned to learn that a process was being put in place that might have disadvantaged those A-level students who have applied to higher-education institutions in the South of Ireland. As soon as I became aware of that, I took immediate action to raise it with my counterpart, Batt O'Keeffe TD, the Minister for Education and Science. As a result, I have secured important assurances about the position of students from the North. In particular, I got confirmation that the higher-education bodies in the South will hold places to allow for offers to A-level applicants on merit.

The Minister has also written to me, stating that people here can:

“rest assured that applications for entry to higher education will continue to be based on merit, not geography”.

The Minister continued by stating that students from the North will not be disadvantaged by the later availability of GCE A-level results.

Although I would much prefer our students not to have been put in this position in the first place, I am pleased that my intervention has secured important

assurances from the higher-education bodies and from the Minister himself.

I have written to post-primary schools to advise them of those assurances and to indicate that I will continue to monitor the situation and to keep a very careful eye on the issue to ensure that our students continue to receive equal treatment with their counterparts in the rest of Ireland. I believe that this situation highlights the need for a more uniform North/South and east-west approach to the handling of university admissions.

I also want to thank publicly the people who have written to me from various schools welcoming my intervention in the matter.

Mr Bresland: I thank the Minister for her answer. Should discrimination become apparent, will she take further action?

The Minister of Education: I welcome the DUP's concern about the issue. I will certainly monitor developments very carefully, which is why I have written to all post-primary schools in the North of Ireland to outline the assurances that I have received. I and my officials will monitor very carefully any potential or actual discrimination. Obviously, we must protect the rights of citizens of Ireland — North, South, east and west — and I will ensure that our young people are not disadvantaged in any way.

Mr Attwood: I agree with the Minister about the need to have a uniform approach to university admissions on these islands. I also welcome the monitoring arrangement that she has put in place.

However, does she agree that the only way to be certain that students in the North will be treated equally to those in the South is to assess them at the same time as all other students who apply for a place on a particular course? As welcome as the reassurances that she has got appear to be, does she agree that, in the event of a squeeze on available places, they may fall short if the number of Southern students with the required grades for the relevant courses are offered places in advance of Northern students? Reassurances are not guarantees. Will the Minister assure the House that, in future, guarantees will be in place?

The Minister of Education: As I said, I have received assurances, and I will be monitoring the situation carefully, because I am keen to remove all obstacles to mobility for pupils from this part of Ireland. I will continue to raise any such issues with Batt O'Keeffe, my counterpart in the South of Ireland. I will monitor the situation carefully, but I am pleased that, for the first time, we have written assurances that young people from this part of the island will be treated fairly. Those assurances from the Minister in the South are helpful.

One of the reasons for having human rights and equality legislation on the island of Ireland and throughout Europe is to ensure that young people's rights are adhered to. If those rights are not adhered to, there are remedies. This year, I will carefully monitor that process, as will my officials.

Mr Beggs: The Minister highlighted the importance of university intakes being based on merit. Does she believe that, when Northern Ireland's examination results are published, our young people's achievements — not just the number of qualifications, but the fact that fewer children here leave school with no qualifications — will continue to exceed those in the rest of the United Kingdom and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland?

The Minister of Education: I am not sure that I can agree with the Member's comments. Some of our young people do very well, and I applaud them for that. However, Members know my position on our deeply divisive and unequal system. I want to ensure that all young people, not just a small percentage of them, have opportunities to fulfil their potential.

I much prefer the system in the South, because it is much fairer. It is fairer for a number of reasons, not least because young people there are not discriminated against at the point at which they transfer from primary to post-primary education. We may have academic excellence at points in our system, and I welcome that; however, we also have the greatest body of underachievement in Europe. We must deal with that problem, and must not pretend that it does not exist. We must celebrate our young people's achievements, but I do not have a crystal ball, so I do not know how they will do in the future. I am not Harry Potter and I do not have magic wand; I wish that I did. However, we can look at past performance, which causes me much concern.

GCSE Science: Triple Award

4. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Education what percentage of (a) grammar; and (b) non-grammar schools offer separate sciences (triple award) at GCSE. (AQO 3014/09)

The Minister of Education: Sa bhliain acadúil 2007-08 bhí cásanna de dhaltáí i mbliain 12 cláraithe do GCSE sna trí heolaíochtaí leithleacha i 73% de scoileanna gramadaí agus i 2% de scoileanna neamhghramadaí. Mar sin de, d'fhéadfaí a rá go bhfuil teastas triarach san eolaíocht á theagasc ag GCSE acu. In 2007-08, 73% of grammar schools and 2% of non-grammar schools had year 12 enrolments in all three separate sciences and, therefore, could be classed as offering triple-award science at GCSE. The data on which my answer is based relates to year 12 pupils who were enrolled in science examination courses.

That data did not include any cases in which a school offered a science subject for study but no pupils took up the subject.

The revised curriculum provides opportunities to engage pupils in science from a young age. Through those opportunities, and as pupils see exciting and relevant career opportunities open to them through science, I expect to see an increase in the number of pupils who choose to study those subjects at key stage 4, sixth form and beyond.

My Department funds a number of major events relating to science, technology, engineering and mathematics that are designed to encourage young people to consider careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Last year, for the first time, we funded the all-Ireland BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition in Dublin. The exhibition is held annually to celebrate the achievements of young people in STEM. Each year, the exhibition is visited by thousands of young people.

I attended that event in 2008 and this year. I also hosted a reception at Stormont for the entrants from this part of the island to this year's competition. It was a great way to meet the students, and it gave me the chance to commend them personally for their innovation and enterprise, and also to encourage a greater number of schools to attend.

2.45 pm

STEM Experience events were held for the first time in 2009. They aim to promote a better understanding of STEM subjects and to show primary- and secondary-school students between the ages of 10 and 13 that STEM can be stimulating, engaging and fun. We also have the Sentinus Young Innovators, which is an annual competition aimed at primary and post-primary students, with the winners receiving prizes for their STEM projects and having the opportunity to represent this part of the island in major national and international competitions. The Irish Senior Science Olympiad, just in case Danny did not get that bit, which was held in Dublin this year, is another STEM competition in which students take part in science tests. The successful applicants represent Ireland in a worldwide competition.

I look forward to working with all my colleagues to make sure that science is seen as a stimulating and innovative subject.

Mr Elliott: That was a very comprehensive reply, although quite a bit of it was in some foreign language that I did not understand. To tell the truth, at times, the Minister makes almost as much sense speaking a language that I do not understand as one that I do.

Is it the Minister's assessment that grammar schools play a positive role in the strategically important objective of STEM subjects throughout GCSE level?

The Minister of Education: I spoke in two languages: Irish and English. I translated the Irish that I spoke.

Grammar schools play a very important role, as do secondary schools. When I was in Dublin at the all-Ireland BT Young Scientist and Technology exhibition, I saw many people from a range of schools: integrated, Catholic and state secondary schools; and grammar schools from both sectors. Therefore, grammar schools play an important role in the promotion of science, and secondary schools do so as well.

However, I would throw the question back to the Member: is it right that secondary schools suffer and bear the brunt of demographic decline? Those are the schools that are letting teachers go because of demographic decline, so it is more difficult for them to offer as broad a curriculum as grammar schools. I am considering how to manage enrolment numbers in a situation of demographic decline.

Let us be fair to all sectors. The Member's question was very loaded, but of course grammar schools play an important role, as do secondary schools.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am sure that the Minister would agree that it is somewhat surprising that a representative from Fermanagh is promoting grammar schools, given that rural secondary schools have been decimated in that area.

How do we support our secondary schools to ensure that they have an equal playing field in the delivery of science subjects?

The Minister of Education: That is an important question. One way in which we support our secondary schools is by the creation of a more equal process in relation to transfer 2010, so that secondary schools do not bear the brunt of demographic decline and the deeply unequal system. Transfer 2010 will create a much more level playing field, more equality in the system and more opportunities for all our schools.

Mrs Hanna: Does the Minister agree that cuts in funding to specialist schools, especially those specialising in science, further discourages people from taking up STEM subjects?

The Minister of Education: Funding has not been cut for STEM subjects; in fact, funding has been increased. If the Member is referring to specialist schools, 10 different schools were successful. We could either give funding to a small number of schools or to all 10 specialist schools that were successful.

I had a meeting with the principals and boards of the 10 specialist school, and there was unanimous agreement that we should be funding the range of specialists rather than the STEM subjects only.

Mr Shannon: Has consideration been given to allowing grammar schools and secondary schools to work in partnership in deciding at which location science classes will be offered? That will provide children who may otherwise not have been able to access science classes the opportunity to do so.

The Minister of Education: I think that the Member's question refers to the entitlement framework and area-based planning. I am on record as saying that it is important that schools in an area work together to make sure that they are working to a timetable that allows them to share resources.

Recently, I was in a post-primary school in Strangford that is taking that approach. We need to encourage that. That should be done not only in second-level schools; regional colleges also have a role to play. Some of the most innovative programmes involve post-14 and post-16 year olds. In those programmes, second-level schools and regional colleges get together for subjects such as engineering so that some young people take some of their classes in the regional colleges.

It is important that schools work together, but they must do so on the basis of equality and not merely because, for example, one layer of grammar schools is filling up and secondary schools are having to lay off teachers because they are bearing the brunt of demographic decline and their budgets are being affected by the inequality in the system.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Integrated Education

6. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the progress that she has made in encouraging and facilitating the development of integrated education during her term in office. (AQO 3016/09)

The Minister of Education: Glacaim go dáiríre le mo dhualgas reachtúil leis an oideachas comhtháite a spreagadh agus a éascú. I take seriously my statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education.

Since I became Minister of Education, the number of children who are attending integrated schools has increased from 17,600 to almost 19,400. I have approved development proposals to establish one new grant-maintained integrated post-primary college; transform three existing primary schools and one post-primary school to integrated status; establish one

integrated statutory nursery; and amend the statutory nursery provision at another grant-maintained integrated school from part-time to full-time.

My Department has approved 46 capital schemes for 24 schools in the grant-maintained integrated sector to the value of over £2.1 million. Vesting has also been completed at Roe Valley Integrated Primary School at a cost to the Department of almost £1.7 million. The Department has provided over £130 million in resource funding to grant-maintained integrated schools in the 2007-08 and 2008-09 financial years. My Department continues to fund the Council for Integrated Education to take forward the duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education; its budget for 2009-2010 is £579,000. My Department also provides funding to assist schools with the additional pressures of the early stages of transformation to integrated status, and this year's budget is £247,000.

Figures show that there are year 8 places available for 98% of first-preference applicants to integrated schools for the 2009-2010 school year. The total of 1,983 first-preference applications exceeds only slightly the 1,946 places available. That demonstrates my commitment and that of the Department of Education to the implementation and delivery of that statutory duty.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for that detailed answer. Does the Minister accept that there is a difference between supply and demand in the integrated sector? Opinion polls regularly show that the potential interest in integrated education far outstrips the supply. Further to that, will the Department proactively try to encourage the integrated option as being the more likely to sustain local provision of primary schools particularly, especially in small villages around Northern Ireland, when difficult decisions have to be made about the rationalisation of the schools estate?

The Minister of Education: As I said, 98% of first-preference applicants for the integrated post-primary sector were successful, and I welcome that. Obviously, however, 2% of the applicants did not get their first preference.

The issue that the Member raises is not specific to the integrated sector; it is also an issue in the Irish-medium sector. There are popular schools in all sectors and, unfortunately, not all children will receive a place in the school of their first choice.

In reply to the Member's second supplementary question, it is very important that we have integrated schools and that our current schools integrate in a much more strategic manner. Activities such as area-based planning, the entitlement framework and working together across all the sectors are very important and in some cases will lead to the outcome the Member has outlined.

Mr Storey: For how much longer will the Minister continue to come to the House and display double standards and doublespeak? In fulfilling her statutory duty, the Minister is actually fuelling the inequality in our education system. Because of the Belfast Agreement, her Department has a statutory duty to promote the Irish-medium and integrated sectors. Surely, given the Minister's commitment to equality, is it now time for her to abolish that statutory duty and treat all sectors in the Northern Ireland education system fairly, which is something that she preaches to us in this House daily that she wants to attain?

The Minister of Education: I do not accept the allegation of double standards. I have put children and equality at the centre of every policy and I will continue to do so. There is a statutory duty in relation to Irish-medium and integrated schools, and perhaps the Member should ask himself why that was necessary. There is an issue regarding the treatment of the Irish-medium sector by some Members, though, thankfully, it is only a small minority.

Members should be careful with the language they use. People in glass houses should not throw stones.

Mr Kennedy: Let me try this stone: does the Minister accept that one of the defining features of the voluntary grammar schools sector is the diversity of the religious and cultural backgrounds of its pupils? Furthermore, does she accept that such diversity is a good thing and should be encouraged rather than demolished, as she continually seeks to do?

The Minister of Education: It cannot be said that grammar schools are the only schools that are diverse. Indeed, some of the greatest diversity that I have seen is in our secondary schools, and there are a greater number of free school meals children and newcomer children in secondary schools compared to grammar schools. Indeed, there is a very good secondary school in the Member's own constituency that offers diversity; therefore it is surprising that he has asked that question.

There is more diversity in some grammar schools than others, but, by and large, the greatest diversity exists in our secondary schools.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. How will the Minister — más féidir léi an cheist a fhreagairt — fulfil the commitments of the Good Friday Agreement to integrated and Irish-medium education under the education and skill authority (ESA)?

The Minister of Education: As I do with all of the sectors, I take my duty in relation to the Irish-medium and integrated sectors very seriously. I am working with the chairpersons of the various organisations that represent the integrated sector: the education and

library boards; NICIE (the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education), which represents the integrated sector; Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, which represents the Irish-medium sector, and the youth sector. We meet on a regular basis and are having very good discussions about how we move forward with the ESA. Furthermore, I meet Gavin Boyd, the chief executive designate of the ESA, on a regular basis, and he, and the permanent and deputy secretaries of the Department, join me in all of the meetings with the review of public administration-affected organisations.

The Member will also be aware that the Department is examining all of the different arrangements under the ESA, and the Education Committee has carried out some very good work in relation to that. I look forward to continued work by, and engagement with, the Committee in relation to the ESA.

3.00 pm

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

University and College Research

1. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what progress is being made to increase the commercialisation of university and college research by 2010, in line with the Programme for Government target. (AQO 3024/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The Programme for Government target is to introduce a new programme to increase the commercialisation of university and college research by 2010. To that end, and in line with our commitment in the Programme for Government, the Department established a pilot programme in 2007, which is being reviewed to inform the implementation of a permanent programme by April 2010.

Over the past two years, the Connected programme between the further education sector and the universities has delivered six major sectoral initiatives and more than 200 projects with individual companies, as well as having received a highly prestigious UTV Business Eye award.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister, and I welcome the progress that he has reported. Although I welcome the commercialisation of research from our universities and colleges, in the light of proposed new academic plan at Queen's University Belfast does the Minister agree that a high value is, and will continue to be, placed on quality teaching and a great learning experience in our universities?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I understand the principal purpose of a university to be the provision of a good teaching environment. We fund universities to ensure that they provide a proper higher-education environment for the students of Northern Ireland, as well as being open to national and international students.

I must tell the honourable gentlemen that we have, of course, been keen to improve research funding for the universities. He will recall that, before Christmas, I approved a number of projects that were aimed at improving research co-operation throughout the island, and my Department has recently allocated an increase of 7.7% to its overall, mainstream, quality research funding for the forthcoming academic year. We are clearly committed to research, but it is obvious that, as the Member said, teaching is the prime purpose of a university.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle agus a Aire. Is the Minister content that all his Department's commitments and targets in the Programme for Government will be met?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: All I can say to the honourable Member is that we are working towards them. I have no reason to believe, at this stage, that they will not be met. However, there is always a risk that the research and commercialisation that we are aiming for might slow down in the current economic environment. That is the only caveat that I would add. Nevertheless, the Programme for Government is explicit, and we intend to achieve its targets.

Mr Cree: How might the Department use the 2008 research assessments to allocate research funding to the universities in the coming years?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department has sent letters of offer to both universities in the past few weeks in that regard. I have held back a small amount of research funding to enable me to exercise flexibility where I believe that an area of research is not being properly addressed. That said, the vast bulk of funding is being allocated, and, as I said, the increase to our overall, mainstream, quality research funding is 7.7% in the current comprehensive spending review period. That, together with the funding that I announced in December and January through Science Foundation Ireland, which conducts research in collaboration with several universities throughout the island, means that the university research funding position is much improved.

I am sure that Members will wish to ensure that our universities do not fall behind, as they did for many years, with regard to the amount of research that they do. The research assessment exercise (RAE) results that were announced some months ago were excellent for both universities. Therefore, we are moving

forward and improving our research base, which will be the genesis of many new jobs of the future.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the Minister's answer, and I am certain that most people would agree with an increase in research and in research commercialisation.

Nevertheless, is there an attempt by Government to reduce the funding for universities and to use commercialisation as a method of reducing the percentage that they give to universities?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Quite the reverse. Mainstream funding for universities has increased, including in the financial year that has just commenced. We will propose at least a 2% increase in the general fund and a significant increase in the research fund. However, I cannot address the comprehensive spending review period that will begin after 2011. We all know that we are moving into uncharted waters. Nevertheless, the Department has maintained an increasing flow of funds to our universities, which is consistent with the wishes of the House.

Queen's University Belfast/Stranmillis University College: Proposed Merger

2. **Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether both his Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel have received the business case for the proposed merger of Queen's University and Stranmillis University College; when it will be shared with the Assembly Committee; and whether the delay in producing a business case impacts on the viability of the merger proposal.

(AQO 3025/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: A final version of the business case for the proposed merger of Queen's University and Stranmillis University College has been submitted and is being considered by officials in my Department. The document has not yet been forwarded to the Department of Finance and Personnel. The business case will be made available to the Committee for Employment and Learning once it has received internal approval from my Department, subsequent approval from the Department of Finance and Personnel, and from me. The viability of the merger proposal is dependent on the business case meeting Her Majesty's Treasury's green book standards and other policy considerations, rather than on how long it has taken to be submitted.

Mrs Hanna: Was the Minister surprised at the lateness of the submission of the business plan? I do not know whether he can speculate about the reason for that, but would that matter cause him to have second thoughts about the merger?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The draft business case was submitted to my Department in the late autumn of last year. The Department has been examining it and talking to the consultants who have, in turn, been talking to their clients, and we have been challenging a number of issues. The Department did not consider that the draft business case, as submitted, was adequate to go forward with a recommendation to the Department of Finance and Personnel. Therefore, that process has resulted in the length of time that it has taken. However, I have made it clear on many occasions that it will take as long as it takes. As far as I am concerned, the process is clear: the business case has to be approved by my Department first; it then goes to DFP, before coming back to me for a policy assessment by my Department. That process takes whatever length of time is necessary. I cannot and will not hurry the process, and neither will I short-circuit any subsequent legislative processes that may emerge.

Mr Ross: I understand that, in many aspects, the business case did not meet the green book standards. I have been contacted by a number of constituents who have expressed concerns that, despite assurances from —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Ross, may we have your question please?

Mr Ross: Despite assurances from Stranmillis about the merger, Queen's University's new academic plan suggests that a number of academic staff could be made redundant — anywhere up to 150 staff. Will the Minister assure the House that, should the proposed merger go ahead, there will not be redundancies on a huge scale?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member is straying into a separate issue. However, I understand the relevance of that matter. It is not for me to give undertakings on behalf of Queen's University Belfast or anybody else. I have set out the process many times. I will not assess the proposal from a policy standpoint until a robust business case has been approved by my Department and by the Department of Finance and Personnel, at which time I will make an assessment.

The Member will also be aware that the Committee, and, if there is a positive recommendation, the entire House, will have an opportunity to debate all the issues to which he referred. I am, of course, aware of the particular immediacy of his point, but it is not my job to give assurances on behalf of Queen's University.

Mr McCallister: What stage has the study that St Mary's University College commissioned on strategic options reached?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: It seems that we are moving into another issue. All I can say on that is that, in addition to conversion funding, in the past academic year, I offered St Mary's some funding to carry out some strategic work. My understanding is

that that work is at an advanced stage. I have not had sight of a report; it has not been submitted to me, but I believe that the college is considering it. No doubt the college will make its own assessment, and if any matters arise from that, I have little doubt that they will be drawn to the attention of the House or the Committee in due course.

Apprenticeships: Company Uptake

3. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many companies have agreed to provide apprenticeships. (AQO 3026/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Apprenticeship training is delivered through some 50 training organisations, and there are now 1,256 apprentices in training. All those apprentices are employed. Although a small number of our larger employers run sizeable apprenticeship programmes each year, in general, apprentice numbers for each employer will be fewer than five, with over 3,000 employers involved.

Mr McKay: I thank the Minister for his answer. At the current time, many apprentices in many different industries, particularly in manufacturing and construction, are losing their jobs at a critical stage in their career development. What support will be given to those individuals?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am sorry that the Member was not available for all of the debate this morning. The House has debated apprenticeships on a number of occasions, and I know how important the subject is to many Members.

I introduced a scheme to try to cope with the situation. Through that scheme, apprentices in three designated areas can avail themselves of alternative options if their employment is terminated. If the apprentices are aged between 16 and 18 years old, it will involve their working in a simulated work environment; that is, they would be able to continue to work towards a qualification, but they would probably use a further education college as a base. They could also go on the Steps to Work programme to enable them to continue with some training. That means that that cover exists in those designated areas.

I also announced that from 8 June, through the Skillsafe initiative, apprentices who are put on short-term working can avail themselves of additional training that an outside supplier provides and that the Department pays for. They will also be given an allowance to make up for the wages that they lose. That option is now applicable. I also made an announcement this morning about programme-led apprenticeships that will apply from September. Those will deal with young people who are leaving school

and who may not be able to get employment as apprentices because of the current economic downturn.

Therefore, my Department is doing all that it can to help those apprentices, particularly as this is such a topical issue. I know that many Members are especially concerned that those young people do not lose the opportunity to retain and obtain qualifications, that time is not wasted, and that, if they have spent a couple of years working on apprenticeships and are then thrown out, that is not a lost period. We are trying to avoid that as far as possible. If there is a need to vary and expand the categories that are covered by those schemes, I will be happy to consider that.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for a very helpful response. Has the Minister's Department had any discussions with, for instance, the construction industry about those who will be looking for placements when they leave college in June? The construction industry is particularly important in the area that I represent, the Strangford area, and I suspect that that is the case in many other areas.

Will the Minister assure the House that discussions have taken place between his Department and the construction industry to ensure that people who leave college in June will have a placement in September?

3.15 pm

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I would love to be able to say that placements can be guaranteed, but the reality is that the economy faces severe problems, particularly in the construction industry. Not only is the Department in regular contact with the construction sector, it has the sector skills councils, the Construction Industry Training Board and a plethora of people looking at the issue.

If they visit their local job centres, Mr Shannon and other Members will know that the number of construction vacancies is practically nil. It is extremely difficult to get a placement in that sector. That is one reason why we introduced the alternative option for apprentices to have a simulated work environment. That is the best and closest substitute that the Department can provide currently, but the programme-led proposals will probably have at least a one-day placement.

I am conscious of the Member's interest in the matter, but we would be less than honest if we were to say that we could guarantee placements. Many employers are having great difficulty and that is why, as we discussed in an earlier debate, we are hoping to widen the programme out to involve the public sector, Departments and major public bodies to try to spread the load.

In addition, the Minister of Finance and Personnel is working on a scheme for construction projects in which so many apprenticeships will be deemed necessary for each £1 million worth of public contracts. We are

trying to address the issue, but it would be misleading to tell the Member that everything is sewn up and we can guarantee the placements. Placements are proving to be difficult to find, particularly in construction.

Mr Kennedy: What success has there been in increasing the number of women apprentices and older apprentices?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am pleased to say that we have enjoyed considerable success in that area. I think that we have the largest number of female apprentices ever and since apprentices from all ages started to be recruited, the number of older apprentices increased substantially. We can be happy that we are moving in the right direction in both those areas.

My main concern is that this is the end of the school year, and many young people will be coming out of school in the next few weeks. My proposal for programme-led apprenticeships is specifically designed to address the harsh economic environment. An apprentice has to be employed and, in many cases, it is not possible to employ apprentices through an employer-led scheme. Consequently, the Department must intervene and utilise the whole public sector. I shall approach ministerial colleagues for help on that issue. We have made significant progress in the areas of gender and age, and I know that the Committee for Employment and Learning welcomes that.

Training Allowances

4. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the joint proposal by his Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide training allowances to companies facing economic difficulties.

(AQO 3027/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: On 26 May 2009, I announced in the Assembly details of my Department's new Skillsafe provision. The Skillsafe scheme came into effect on 8 June 2009, and it focuses on apprentices who have been placed on short-time working in the manufacturing and engineering sectors. The scheme is intended to ensure that the apprentices' downtime is used effectively through the provision of accredited training, for which the apprentice will receive a training allowance.

Since going live on 8 June, 14 organisations have made enquiries to the Department using the assigned email address and the dedicated telephone number. Three applications are being made as a result of those enquiries. My Department worked closely with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure that the provision would implement any strategies that are being worked on by that Department.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he ensure that large and small companies will benefit from the scheme, and will he explain how the funding will be provided, bearing in mind that it involves both Departments?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member knows that the vast majority of our companies are small. It is part of the problem that many SMEs do not avail themselves of the opportunities to have apprentices. That is one of our biggest problems.

The financing of this scheme is in two components. In the first part, where an apprentice is put on short time, we will pay for a training provider to upskill that individual. The apprentice will still be employed by the employer on a contract, which will not be changed, but there will be short-time working. During the downtime, that person will be upskilled or enabled to complete the processes towards a qualification. We will pay the training provider, so that will be at no cost to the employer or the employee.

In the second part of the finance, we will pay a training allowance to the individual apprentice equivalent to the minimum wage and irrespective of the age of that apprentice. As the Member knows, the minimum wage is tiered; less is paid to younger people, more to those who reach a threshold. We will pay the threshold figure irrespective of the age of the apprentice. That will go directly to the employee, so the company will not be directly involved, but the training provider and the employee will be.

That is how the scheme will be financed, and I am confident that it is entirely consistent. We worked closely with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on this and we have a joined-up approach.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you for your answer, Minister. This is a useful initiative. Will the scheme be offered to businesses that continue to succeed during the recession? Those training allowances could build on the success of those firms, increase business and contribute to the creation of future jobs.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As I indicated at the time, we are working on that. I wanted phase two of the scheme to be rolled out to SMEs in particular.

The Member will realise that we can quantify with reasonable accuracy the number of apprentices who are around and the potential liabilities. I said in the debate at the time that between £6 million and £7 million would be the extent of our commitment. However, if we rolled it out to the whole of business and industry, we could be talking about tens of millions of pounds, perhaps £60 million or £80 million. Contrary to what some people think, that sort of money is not just lying around. I made a bid in the June monitoring round for additional assistance in the

rolling out of the scheme. The Executive will meet this week, and I will know then whether I will get a response.

I am encouraged that I can count on the 100% support of all these Members. If we get the resources, it will be my pleasure to return to the House and roll out the scheme to major businesses and to the small and medium-sized enterprise sector, which is where we want it to be. It is a very expensive process, and I need resources.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the commencement of the Skillsafe scheme. Will the Minister outline the reasons for his decision to concentrate on assisting manufacturing industry and, in particular, engineering and tradeable services?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: To us, it seemed the sector most vulnerable and facing the greatest number of redundancies. The Member knows that in his constituency and in others, companies such as F G Wilson, Wrightbus and Michelin, and a large number of other smaller manufacturing and engineering companies, up and down the Province, have been shedding labour. I have also indicated that we would look again at that classification if we could clearly establish the need. That is our starting point. Just as we indicated on apprenticeships that we designated three areas that we would consider, such as the automotive sector, we said that we would look at other areas if we felt it was necessary. That is our position at present. If there were clear evidence that that needs to be broadened, I would be prepared to look at it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn; Mr Ford is not in his place for question 6; Mr Dominic Bradley is not in his place for question 7; and question 8 has been withdrawn.

Apprenticeships: Increased Uptake

9. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the progress made by his Department in meeting its targets for increasing the numbers in apprenticeship training. (AQO 3032/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As I stated in my response to question 3, the Department exceeded its target of having 10,000 apprentices in programmes by March 2010. The introduction of level 2 apprenticeships in September 2007 and all-age apprenticeships in September 2008 have made a significant impact this year. They have also provided the opportunity for those working reduced contracted hours to avail themselves of apprenticeships. That resulted in an increase in female participation, which now stands at 41% compared with the historical trend of 30%.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is he aware of any evidence that suggests that the extension into the 25-plus age group has displaced younger apprentices?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am not aware of any such evidence. Changing any process will involve some risk. Uptake has been so significant that pent-up demand clearly existed. As far as I am aware, there is no evidence to suggest that younger apprentices have been displaced. Of this year's intake, 2,900 — 49% — were aged 25 or over. Recruitment has increased overall; however, the percentage of under-25s applying is down, which is more than likely due to the recession. At this stage, there is no evidence to suggest that displacement has occurred and that the new competition is working against younger apprentices.

Mr Dallat: What advice is available to people seeking apprenticeships who wish to develop skills in sunrise rather than sunset industries?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I understand where the Member is coming from: our record in determining the difference between sunrise and sunset industries has been mixed. I regard many industries in this country as traditional, and I do not think that we should abandon them. We all saw where the dash to finance got us. Having a good broadly based range of skills is valuable.

One of the mechanisms that we must use is the Careers Service. It engages with schools and has facilities at jobs and benefit offices and at our new pilot schemes in high streets, where people can go to get advice. During today's debate on apprenticeships, Members discussed the image and status of apprenticeships. All of us have a role to play in trying to improve that image. We can do that by going into schools and by motivating employers to join with us in doing so. That will raise the status of apprenticeships in a positive way. I encourage people to avail themselves of the Careers Service.

3.30 pm

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Queen's University Belfast: Redundancies

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has received notice of a question for urgent oral answer under Standing Order 20A to the Minister for Employment and Learning.

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he intends to hold urgent discussions with Queen's University Belfast (QUB) in advance of this week's meeting of its senate, which may approve plans to make up to 300 staff redundant on the grounds of a possible 10% cut in Government funds from 2011-12, when no such information has been communicated to QUB by its primary Government funder, the Department for Employment and Learning.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I have no plans to meet Queen's University Belfast in advance of this week's meeting of its senate. However, senior officials in my Department received a high-level briefing on 18 June. I understand that if approved by the senate, the details of the academic and financial plan will be shared with the Committee for Employment and Learning at a special hearing immediately after the senate meeting.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for his attendance.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask that Members take their seats.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for his attendance.

According to leaked information, Queen's University is relying on what it calls "informed sources" that suggest that its funding from Government will be cut by 10% by 2011-12. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment spoke in the Assembly on behalf of the Department of Finance and Personnel and said twice last week that no such information had been given to Queen's. Last week, senior officials from the Department for Employment and Learning advised a Committee that no such information had been given to Queen's. It appears that Queen's intends to rely on those "informed sources" to make up to 300 people redundant under the scheme.

Given those facts, is it not appropriate for the Minister or his senior officials to advise Queen's that it has no grounds, on the information from the funding authority in the North, to propose up to 300 redundancies? Does he agree that, as those informed sources are not from the Government, it is highly questionable — to put it mildly — to proceed with those proposals?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Neither my Department nor I have provided any information to any higher education institution to the

effect that funding sources will be cut by 10% in years subsequent to 2011. I do not have such information; I simply do not yet know the outcome of the comprehensive spending review period for 2011-14.

People can speculate and consider what is happening to universities in England; however, our funding mechanism and funding choices are different from those made in England. Consequently, I cannot support or stand over any information that indicates a 10% cut after that date. The Chancellor's Budget statement signalled a national cut in capital expenditure after 2013. However, I am unaware of any basis for the assumption that there will be a 10% cut in general funding for either of our universities after 2011.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As the Minister knows, the Committee will hold an extra Committee meeting tomorrow to examine the issue. With that in mind, does the Minister agree that it would be better for Queen's to talk to him, the Department and the Committee rather than delay issues and allow them to leak to the press to cause confusion and concern? Does the Minister think that it does not bode well for the assurance that Queen's gave him and the Committee that jobs in Stranmillis would be safe in the event of a proposed merger?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I gave a factual answer to the question: I cannot predict the funding scenario. However, I know that the Committee is extremely concerned and that it has asked the vice chancellor and colleagues to visit it tomorrow. The Member will have an opportunity to question him then.

I am aware of the Stranmillis issue. Stranmillis is a teaching institution, and the leaked information appears to suggest a clear emphasis on research at the expense of teaching. Both are essential. The assurances given by Queen's to people at Stranmillis will form part of any judgement that we make on the advisability or desirability of a merger, assuming that the business case stands up. Therefore, we will have the opportunity to assess the matter ourselves. I have seen and heard comments in the press and elsewhere about the concerns that have been raised.

All that I can tell the Member is that Queen's University has not been given any information or indication that would lead it to take decisions on the basis of anything that we have said. As far as I am concerned, the primary purpose of, and the reason why we fund, a university is to provide higher education, primarily for students in Northern Ireland. That must mean a high-quality teaching environment.

Research is part of university life; it is part of economic development, and it is absolutely essential. I will not take away from that, and I have made it my

business to grow the amount of money that is available for research. However, that money is made available in addition to teaching; it is not, in my opinion, made available instead of teaching.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Egan Contractors

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development, in view of the adverse economic impact suffered by the employees of Egan contractors, to increase the budget allocation for decent homes and related programmes; and to ensure that future communication with contractors complies with Egan principles. —
[The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch).]

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to support the motion, which calls on the Minister for Social Development to increase the budget allocation for the decent homes programme and for related improvement and replacement grants.

This is an important issue, especially with regard to opportunities to increase employment, particularly in the construction industry. Another concern is that elderly people are affected by the unavailability of grants for homeowners and Housing Executive tenants. The situation is particularly difficult for homeowners who submitted grant applications some time ago and are being told that although they are entitled to a grant, there is no money available. A 78-year-old constituent of mine, who is entitled to disability living allowance and home repairs because of her disability, has been told, after two years, that the grant will not be payable. The doors and windows in the house are unsafe, yet my constituent is expected to continue to live there.

It is important that replacement grants, which would raise the standard of housing, particularly in rural areas, be continued. People have been turned down for those grants, with a standard letter from the Housing Executive simply saying that there is no money in the budget and that they are not entitled to the grant. Some people have gone to the expense of consulting architects and having plans drawn up, yet now they find that no grant is available and nor is there any recompense. We must examine that situation and ensure that people receive their entitlements.

Is the Department for Social Development not obliged to fund grant applications under article 36 of the Housing Order 2003 to improve and repair homes? The Egan contracts were one way to improve the contracting process and building partnership arrangements among suppliers, contractors and the Housing Executive. They ensured a better quality of contract, a steady supply of labour —

Mr A Maginness: The Member misunderstands the nature of the Egan contracts. They are not intended for grant aid for private homeowners, elderly or otherwise. The Egan contracts are directed largely towards

improvement and maintenance of Housing Executive properties. The Member's assumption is, therefore, incorrect and does not properly reflect the substance of the motion.

Mr Molloy: If the Member had waited, he would have realised that I was about to deal with the Egan contracts in particular. To someone who lives in a house that is in need of repair, it does not really matter whether the grant comes by way of the Egan contracts. The Department is refusing those people a grant and is telling them that the money to improve their homes is not available. The Egan contracts were one way to ensure that we had quality contracts, a steady supply of labour and guaranteed employment. They ensured the quality of repair and maintenance of Housing Executive properties. The contractors needed long-term contracts for continuity of supply and to keep employees in jobs so that they could carry out the contracts.

All those factors have to come together. Paddy McIntyre, the chief executive of the Housing Executive, has caused confusion by saying that, on the one hand, some contracts will continue but that, on the other, some contracts will be discontinued.

There is no guarantee for employers and contractors that they will have contracts next month or next year. Last year, right on the edge of Christmas, they found that contracts were stopped with no guarantee that they would be restarted. Only after lobbying by MLAs and others were those contracts restarted, and people got the repairs that they needed.

The Chancellor in his December statement, along with economists and advisers, highlighted that one of the best ways of trying to create employment and regenerate areas is through construction. If the Egan contracts are not put in place, there is no guarantee that those contractors will be able to maintain employment or create the necessary regeneration. The stop-start approach of the Department and the Housing Executive over the past 12 months has been unsteady for employers and has created insecurity for employees who are not able to plan ahead.

There are 1,150 vacant homes in the Housing Executive's stock that need to be repaired before they can be rented, but the Housing Executive is not dealing with that issue or making attempts to ensure a steady stream of labour.

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

Mr Molloy: The Minister is adding to the construction crisis by not guaranteeing those jobs.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. Every Member involved in constituency work is well aware of the Egan scheme, whereby workmanship and efficiency are guaranteed when contractors seek long-term

contracts and keep their end of the bargain. I have visited many homes in my constituency where kitchens that were over 20 years old have been replaced. Those kitchens were installed to a high standard, and are compact and well finished. I defy any contractor to do as good a job. Constituents have told me that the workers left their homes clean, tidy and in a fabulous state when the work was finished. The contractors deserve praise and recognition for that.

The Egan scheme is succeeding on that front. It seems to be working. When there are problems, the contractors come back within a reasonable period to see to them. That was the aim of the scheme when it was proposed some time ago. There have been teething problems; it was not all plain sailing, but a good system has been found that provides value for money and good workmanship. When the scheme was rolled out, it was recognised that the first year's programme would not be worth the full annual value because it had to allow for the running out of existing contracts.

Hooiniver, efter thon, hoosin schemes athwart the Province saen waark done bit bae bit tae bring hooses ap tae a guid stannart an' thon waarked weill 'til 12 Decemmer 2008 quhan the Hoosin Executive toul the fower contractors at thair wudnae bae onie stairts i Janwerry or Februrie 2009. Es A'hm shair ithers amang ye at waark oan the grun wur, I wus gat oantae bae contractors an' toul' quhat wus gaein oan, an' A wus scunnered at fundin' wud bae tuk fae a scheme at wus daein the business sae weill.

However, after that, housing estates throughout the Province saw work done in phases to bring homes to a decent standard. That was working well until 12 December 2008, when the Housing Executive notified the four contractors that there would be no new starts in January or February 2009. I was contacted by contractors who told me what was happening, as I am sure were other Members, and I was dismayed that funding was to be taken away from a scheme that is doing the business so effectively.

At that point, my colleague Nigel Dodds stepped in and offered some money. The contractors and suppliers were becoming concerned about the funding of the contracts in 2009 and 2010. It was emphasised to the Minister that those repair and maintenance contracts offered the best method of maintaining value-for-money employment for every pound spent. There was a concern that any additional funds that were obtained would not be ring-fenced for repair and maintenance contracts. I could go into further detail, but other Members have already done so.

Having read the information from the contractors, it seems clear that the way forward is not to end those contracts, but to continue with them in the interests of better use of funding and long-term value for money.

3.45 pm

I was given an illustration that seems to provide the best example of that. The full Northern Ireland Housing Executive programme should install 4,500 new kitchens and carry out external cyclical maintenance (ECM) work to 9,500 dwellings. The Housing Executive has 90,000 dwellings, and 4,500 kitchens per annum would take 20 years to complete. The Housing Executive estimates that the life of a kitchen is 15 to 20 years. The full programme, therefore, enables the Housing Executive only to stand still. However, ECM work at the above rate would be completed in a 10-year cycle.

Information that was recounted to me paints a clear picture, namely, that investment by the Department in the full programme would secure 800 jobs as well as complete kitchen replacement and planned maintenance to 9,500 homes. There are 1,150 vacant Housing Executive properties that cannot be rented because of minor repairs or major improvement works that need to be carried out. Those properties could be repaired at a fraction of the cost of a newbuild and still remain in public ownership.

According to the Ards district housing plan for 2009-2010, the Housing Executive schemes that will lose out this year are multi-element improvements for Newtownards, pre-adaptation repairs and environmental improvement. I have been involved with that environmental improvement scheme for about seven years, and it is still no further ahead. There are 200 houses in the improvement scheme, and 355 for planned maintenance. I am very much concerned about that.

I ask the Minister to take account of the contractors, suppliers and Housing Executive tenants who pay their rents weekly.

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

Mr Shannon: I have said before, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. There is a slight twist today: it is broken, and we ask the Minister to fix it.

Mr A Maginness: The assumption in the motion is that it would be non-partisan, non-party political, politically neutral and in support of the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, in her quest to gain new finance for the housing programme. That is the substance of the motion as far as I am concerned, and that is what the SDLP wants to see. However, some Members are exploiting the motion to criticise the Minister, and using the housing crisis to attack the Minister's approach to advancing newbuild social housing. The Minister stated clearly that that is a priority for her and her Department, as well as supporting the warm homes scheme and the supporting people programme. The Minister has, therefore, selected certain priorities in the context of a quite unsatisfactory

situation in which the Department is not given sufficient finance to do what it is mandated to do.

Clearly, housing finance is in crisis. That is not the fault of the Minister, DSD or the Housing Executive, but of the economic recession. There is a £100 million shortfall for housing this year, and probably next year, too. Housing is too important to be financed on a crisis-management basis. It needs to be put on a sound financial basis, and the Minister has repeatedly called for that. Housing cannot be drip-fed from the uncertainties of quarterly monitoring rounds. Therefore, I call on the House to support the Minister in her quest for new money for the total housing programme, which includes the Egan contracts. It is important that the Minister is supported in that.

The Minister must operate with the money that she has. She cannot magic new money, and she has had to select priorities, which are, as I said, based principally on newbuild. Is it better to build a new house or install a new kitchen?

That is a very simple proposition. The house building programme will help to stimulate the economy and get us out of recession by maintaining and increasing employment and construction. That is very important, and I agree with my colleague Thomas Burns that new money is essential.

Anna Lo pointed out that the Egan contracts are a casualty of the hand-to-mouth approach to the funding of housing. We need a non-partisan approach in which we ask the Department of Finance and Personnel to provide the funding that is crucial to the interests of all our people. It is difficult for us to support the motion when people on some Benches are criticising the Minister for Social Development. We cannot support a motion that is being used by some people as an opportunity to attack the Minister and her approach. The problem is not the Minister's approach; the problem is the lack of finance.

The £110 million that the re-phasing of the Royal Exchange project will bring to our Exchequer provides us with an opportunity. Can we not use that opportunity to advance housing? Can we not use that money usefully?

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

Mr A Maginness: That could help to remedy the problems that the motion has highlighted. I will abstain in the vote on the motion.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún, agus tá mé ag rá an méid sin ón tús.

I support the motion. Alban Maginness accused other MLAs of making political speeches. I cannot think of anywhere more appropriate to make a political speech than Parliament Buildings at Stormont. He also

asked whether it is better to build a new house or put in a new kitchen, but one Egan contractor has described that question as very unhelpful. Indeed, it merely echoes the statement that the Minister issued on 26 March, which effectively told employees that they could be laid off.

The motion is about helping the construction industry. Last summer, a number of MLAs, including some from the SDLP, attended various meetings in Toomebridge and Cookstown that were aimed at helping the construction industry. We spent a lot of time listening closely to the construction and property group, and an all-party group on the construction industry was formed in the Assembly. Both groups emphasise the importance of the Egan contracts being honoured.

A variety of Members outlined the context of the debate. The motion refers to the adverse economic impact that is suffered by the employees of Egan contractors when the Department stalls or reverses on commitments to carry out much-needed housing stock repairs. The construction industry needs greater certainty and greater stability, and Egan contractors are major employers who provide meaningful employment. Does the Minister appreciate the central importance of the construction industry to the rural economy, for example? The construction industry is of major importance west of the Bann.

I am aware of the importance of longer-term contracts for kitchen and bathroom replacements and other external maintenance work. We were told that the way forward was co-operation between the Housing Executive, contractors and suppliers at predetermined rates and costs.

This relates back to Alban Maginness's question, but I am struck by the fact that people have to decide whether it is best to build a new house or to install a new kitchen. I am also struck by the fact that 1,150 vacant Housing Executive properties cannot be rented because minor or major improvement works need to be carried out on them.

Therefore, I emphasise that there is an urgent need for the Department for Social Development and the Minister to recommit to that type of work. Does the Minister agree that upgrading public authority housing to meet the decent homes standard should be prioritised to maintain employment in the construction industry and to release more housing stock for rental? How much priority does the Minister attach to such improvement work? What priority does the Minister attach to creating opportunities for new employment and for the retention of jobs in the construction industry at this time?

I have a list of schemes that have been suspended in the Omagh District Council and Strabane District Council areas. That has caused great inconvenience to

local Housing Executive tenants and has created difficulty for major employers in the area.

Danny Kennedy intervened during Michelle McIlveen's contribution at the start of the debate, and the tone of what he said was followed up by Francie Molloy. They introduced a second, but related matter, which is the crisis that has arisen with Housing Executive repair, renovation and replacement grants. Later this week, I will meet senior Housing Executive officials in Omagh to try to change the situation whereby many applications are being closed or cancelled. I would like the Minister to provide some guidance on that in her response.

Mr O'Loan: I welcome the debate on this important issue, and I am pleased to be able participate in it. However, I do not altogether welcome its tone. I have spoken at great length to the Egan contractors; I understand their position well, and I am very sympathetic to it. They have made it clear to me that they do not want their interests to be used as a political football. However, if they are listening to the debate, I do not think that they will be at all pleased with many of the comments that have been made, and they will not regard them as being constructive in leading to assistance being given to them. Although Members need to be aware of that, many have not been.

The wording of the motion could have been interpreted positively. We all want to give assistance to the Egan contractors, and we want the Minister for Social Development to be in a position to be able to do that, but the issue is fundamentally about having the resources available. In that sense, the wording of the motion is not complete, but its sense could have been conveyed clearly by Members' contributions. Therefore, the debate has been handled in a number of unfortunate ways.

At the outset, Mr Hilditch referred to the principles that underlie the Egan process. The Committee provided a report to the Assembly today that states that the construction industry needs to replace competitive tendering with long-term relationships. It goes on to say that the whole Egan approach was intended to give the contractor more security and that the long-term partnership with contractors included no absolute guarantee of work in any particular year. Of course, that is true, but the whole concept was about having a long-term arrangement whereby contractors would know where they were going, the degree to which they would need to upskill their labour force, take on more labour, and invest in their machinery. Indeed, many of them have done that. All that requires a dependable flow of funds so that the understandings that the contractors have entered into with the Housing Executive can be realised, even if they are not contractually binding. Given the shortage of money, much of that has not happened.

Members will have received a news release from Mr Peter Wallace, who is the chief executive of the Contractors Insurance Guarantee Services Ltd.

I take that to be one particular firm. He presents himself as speaking for a number of contractors who are involved in construction schemes related to private-sector housing grants. I do not think that there is one body representing such a section of the construction industry, therefore it is unclear for whom he speaks. He argues that money should be transferred from newbuilds to housing grants. I am not aware that the Egan contractors were involved in that piece of correspondence, but if that is the case then I will be disappointed, because that was not the tone that they adopted with me. It is bad and unhelpful for one section of the industry to be vying with the other. I note that Mr Wallace states that funds are available, and perhaps some people honestly believe that. However, they must simply be told that funds are not available and that the genuine deficit of approximately £100 million in the housing budget this year presents a significant problem.

4.00 pm

The Minister has done much with her budget this year. Her investment in social housing, with some 1,750 housing starts, was on a level never seen before, and she provided major funding to the warm homes scheme. All that investment creates major contracts for which businesses throughout the construction industry have the opportunity to bid. The critique that was released did not reflect that.

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

Mr O'Loan: A shared approach should be adopted across the Assembly, including the Department of Finance and Personnel. In the long term, housing should be put on a secure and permanent financial footing.

Mr Attwood: I concur with my colleague Mr Declan O'Loan; I too have a concern about the colour of some comments made during the debate. I also agree with Mr O'Loan that, if we filter out the fog created by such comments, an essential opportunity faces the Assembly. We must shape up or, for want of a better phrase, shut up. I will explain what I mean by that.

Six months ago, affordable social housing was not fully acknowledged as a priority politically or operationally in or outside the Assembly. However, over the past six months, the sands have shifted. At a meeting of the Executive in December 2008, the DUP and Sinn Féin declined to endorse the recommendation from the DSD Committee and Minister that money from the non-housing budget be reallocated to housing, which was unfortunate. That missed opportunity must not be repeated now.

In the past six months, people have learned. In January 2009, Nigel Dodds said, in a graphic and elaborate way, that the failure to build affordable social housing had a disproportionate impact on the construction industry. Those were his words; not the Minister's or mine. At that moment, Nigel Dodds accepted that, contrary to what had happened in the previous month, unspent moneys from the DSD's budget could be reallocated to housing.

The DUP has a simple choice to make this month, next month and in the months until the September monitoring round: will it now live up to that principle and accept that the failure to build houses or deal with housing issues has a disproportionate effect on the construction industry? In September, will the DUP rectify the error that it made in January?

Sinn Féin has also begun to adjust its position: on behalf of his party, Fra McCann said that, if moneys become available from the Royal Exchange project, they should be reallocated to housing.

Is Sinn Féin prepared to tell its Ministers that it wants every penny farthing of the £110 million of unspent moneys, no small sum when it comes to quarterly returns, to be spent on social housing and on housing need in general? Such warm declarations cannot be made in the Assembly unless voting in the Executive is consistent with them. It is time to shape up or shut up.

Smyth and Bailey argued that the multiplier effect of newbuild housing would uplift the economy in general and would be the single best way to spend a taxpayer's pound in a recession-hit area. When that argument has not been proven in any other single stream of public funding in the Northern Ireland Budget, there are consequences that must be acknowledged by the Executive parties, including the DUP and Sinn Féin.

Therefore, rather than score political points, which I could do, the simple issue is that six months ago, the DUP and Sinn Féin turned their faces against the Minister's argument for social housing newbuild and social housing need in general. Six months later, we have the Smyth/Bailey report, the letter from Nigel Dodds, and the declaration from Sinn Féin about how quarterly returns should be spent on social housing. Will the DUP and Sinn Féin, at the Executive table this month —

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

Mr Attwood: Will the DUP and Sinn Féin, this month and in the months up to September, live with the inevitable and compelling conclusions and implications of those declarations? Time will tell.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate. I welcome the opportunity to respond to each of the contributions, not least because it permits me to clarify and to correct some of the issues. I will, of course, try to address all the questions and points that Members raised. I will study the Hansard report and write directly to any Member on issues that are not covered in my response.

Members are aware that the sharp downturn in land and house sales has led to a £100 million shortfall in the housing budget for this year, which has affected all spending programmes, including maintenance. Unless more resources are allocated, the same problem will arise next year.

Difficult decisions have had to be made about the allocation of limited resources, with available funding directed to priority programmes and to existing commitments. My priority must be to protect vulnerable households. Therefore, first, in order to protect households facing fuel poverty, I have protected the budget for the warm homes scheme; secondly, to help people to live independently in the community rather than in institutions, I have protected Supporting People; and, thirdly, the newbuild programme has been protected to help people in acute housing stress and the homeless.

As Social Development Minister, I make no apologies for standing up for the most vulnerable, and I believe that the Committee for Social Development and the House should make the same call.

In addition, current market conditions are more suited than ever to increase investment in social housing in order to stimulate the economy, to protect jobs in the construction industry and, as my colleague Mr Attwood said, that view was verified in the recent report by the University of Ulster, which also pointed out that, in a failing market, the circumstances exist to secure excellent value for money in social newbuild. Sites cost less and construction work is increasingly keenly priced.

Members will be aware that, although my principal contention is that the shortfall in the housing budget must be made good — housing must be put on a proper financial footing — we must also extract the maximum possible return from the resources that we have. That is why I have taken a number of steps in the area of newbuild, such as building more on land that we already own and bringing in more private finance so that we get the maximum bang for our buck. I am taking a similar approach to housing maintenance.

Recently, I commissioned a leading property surveying firm, Savills, to carry out a major house condition survey of Northern Ireland Housing Executive stock and to advise on its overall maintenance strategy. A study of such depth is unprecedented. I recently

received Savills's report, and, although I am studying its findings and considering their implications for the Housing Executive, I am happy to share one or two of its headline conclusions with the House.

The Savills report concludes that Housing Executive stock is by far the best housing that it has ever seen or inspected throughout Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The Housing Executive has generally maintained its stock to a high standard. However, approximately 17% of the stock currently fails the decent homes plus standard, most significantly because of a lack of an efficient heating system in many properties — approximately 11,000, which represents 12% of the stock. That will have to be taken into account when determining future finding requirements.

Let me be clear about what I mean by failing to meet the decent homes plus standard. It does not mean that houses are falling down or that they are unfit. In fact, well under 1% of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive stock is unfit. Savills stresses that the maintenance standard that the Housing Executive has adopted to date is substantially above the decent homes plus standard, particularly with respect to the work that it has undertaken under its multi-element improvement programme.

Recent budget reductions clearly place additional pressure on delivery and maximising value for money, which must be an imperative when ensuring that the greatest output is achieved for a given budget. Budgets must be structured to reflect the Housing Executive's long-term investment strategy and plan, and the proposed re-tendering of a number of contracts this year provides an opportunity to explore the value-for-money benefits that various packaging options may present. At the same time, the Savills report suggests that the Housing Executive should also examine its overall works package, with a view to determining value-for-money options, especially in respect of whether to adopt an elemental versus a whole-house route under multi-element improvement contracts.

For ease of reference, what does that mean? For instance, when carrying out improvements in an estate, do we sweep through each house, changing every element in it, or do we only replace things that need to be replaced? Egan contractors are responsible for all revenue and planned maintenance work that the Housing Executive undertakes, including external cyclical maintenance; kitchen and bathroom replacements; room-heater replacements; and other minor maintenance work. In 2008, contractors were contracted into partnership-agreement work under Egan-type contracts, which are defined as being long-term partnerships with a contractor, with no absolute guarantee of a certain volume of work in any one year.

Earlier this year, I found an additional £10 million for Egan contractors and, so far in 2009-2010, the Housing Executive has allocated new Egan programme maintenance starts worth £16 million; £10 million for kitchen replacements and external cyclical maintenance, and £6 million for heating replacements. Incidentally, the Housing Executive has a maintenance budget of some £127 million this year.

4.15 pm

I accept that the Egan contractors had expected more work and a bigger share of the budget to come their way. However, they must accept that their situation is a result of the overall budget shortfall. The partnership agreements did not guarantee any work. Although I have to deal with the £100 million shortfall, it is fair to say that the programmes available to the Housing Executive's Egan contractors at present may not be what they originally anticipated. That situation is not specific to Egan contractors but to all in the construction industry, due to the downturn in the economic climate. The Egan contractors will, of course, be able to tender for work that will arise from the construction of properties under the social housing development programme.

I note with great disappointment that the response from some Egan contractors has been to call for a stop to the newbuild programme and for me to move those resources to the Housing Executive maintenance budget to increase the volume of Egan maintenance work. Let me make it clear that I will not be doing that. I will not rob Peter to pay Paul, or, in this case, rob the homeless and vulnerable throughout Northern Ireland to pay a particular group of contractors.

Nor will I accept responsibility for job losses. Those contractors set their own employment levels in 2008 during the downturn. I understand that the difficulties that they face, in some cases, result more from a loss of anticipated business in the South of Ireland than anything else. Indeed, my protection of the newbuild budget will sustain many existing jobs and create many new ones. In respect of the house-building sector of the construction industry, I am the only one building houses and supporting the sector. It is the social newbuild programme that will preserve skills and sustain construction apprenticeships.

Although it shows a lack of solidarity with other construction workers, the attitude of some Egan contractors in pursuing their interests is to be expected. More disappointing, however, is the attitude of some members of the Social Development Committee, though I acknowledge that there are some thoughtful Committee members and other Members of the House who want what is best for housing. I will refer to some of the comments.

David Hilditch referred to the Savills report. I received it only recently, and it could have major implications for Housing Executive maintenance strategy. When I have had the opportunity to consider the report, I will publish it. I simply despair at what Fra McCann said. He still thinks that I am giving money back. Yet again, that is absolute nonsense. I could spend every penny of my housing budget, including the £100 million, if the Executive decide to help. Anna Lo referred to the 1.95% rent increase.

That increase was in and around the rate of inflation. If Anna takes the view that I should hike the rents of low-income households above the rate of inflation, I am afraid that I cannot agree with that, because I have always to put the vulnerable first.

I say to Michelle McIlveen and Danny Kennedy: "Welcome to my world." Between them, in addition to funding of £20 million for Egan contractors, they want further funding for grants, multi-element improvements and yet more schemes. However, they know, as Members of the House know, that there is a £100 million shortfall.

Danny Kennedy, in particular, as well as Francie Molloy and Barry McElduff, referred to applications for improvement grants and grants in rural areas. I am having further discussions with the Housing Executive regarding that matter and will come back to the Members on it. Michelle McIlveen seemed to think that I have robbed the maintenance budget to fund extra newbuild. That is not the case. She is right about one thing: I want to provide as many houses as possible. Where it is economical to bring empty homes back into use, we will do so.

Many more issues were raised by Members, and I will come back to them in writing.

I appeal to Members to consider the central judgement call in this matter. In the absence of proper overall funding, should I protect the newbuild housing budget or transfer a substantial slice of it to the Egan contractors? That is a straightforward decision. There are record waiting lists, housing stress and homelessness. We desperately need more social houses, and there is an evidence base that tells us that housing investment is the best way to boost the economy and that now is the time to take advantage of market conditions.

As for maintenance, we have the best-maintained stock that experienced international surveyors Savills has ever seen, and unfitness levels are at well under 1% of the Housing Executive stock. Furthermore, Savills has suggested that the approach to multi-element improvements needs to be reconsidered. Therefore, the decision to protect the newbuild programme is correct. I remind Members that I have not taken money out of maintenance to put into newbuilds; I have merely protected the newbuild programme for which we had already budgeted.

At a time when there is a £100 million funding shortfall, Egan is not the only pressure point. In fact, it is not first in the queue, although I would like to fast-track the remaining heating replacements and conversions. We do not have adequate funding for renovation or repair grants, or for a wide range of improvement schemes. I would like to get redevelopment work under way in parts of north Belfast, if the money were available. Moreover, if I had the funds, I would be able to introduce the mortgage-rescue plan, for which we have done all the groundwork.

It all comes back to the same issue. I can bid in quarterly monitoring rounds and hope to get a few extra crumbs from the table; we can debate all manner of housing motions and wring our hands about the lack of funding for this or for that; and I will stretch every available pound to get the maximum possible from existing budgets —

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

The Minister for Social Development: However, the simple truth is that, collectively, we must put housing on a firm and realistic financial footing, once and for all. I ask all Members for their support in that endeavour.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): As you are aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, the Committee for Social Development does not usually table motions for plenary debate. Indeed, this is the first time that the Committee has done so during this mandate.

One might ask why the Committee for Social Development feels so strongly about this issue. The majority of Committee members accept that budget difficulties are inevitable, given the current economic downturn. Furthermore, most of them agree that hard decisions are required and that cherished and important projects might have to be cut back or temporarily set aside.

The Committee believes that the case of decent homes and the Egan contractors is special. The magnitude of the cutbacks planned for 2009-2010 and the abruptness of their imposition in late 2008 make the situation unique.

The Department has a duty to ensure that it does not spend money that it does not have. It must also ensure that it does not commit expenditure to work that it will not be able to finish. The Department has advised the Committee that it is acting cautiously by reducing funding for the decent homes programme and related schemes, and that it is doing so to safeguard the public purse.

The Egan contractors are critical of the Department's management of the undoubted funding challenges that

it faces. They felt that the Department had unreasonably exploited the terms of the contract, which allowed work to be significantly curtailed at short notice. The contractors also believed that the losers in this situation were their employees, who found themselves working overtime one day and laid off the next, as well as the tenants who are waiting for their homes to be refurbished.

The setback for the decent homes programme, the consequences for the Egan employees and the outrage expressed by those affected are the reasons why the Committee for Social Development tabled this important motion.

Fra McCann highlighted the key events leading to the present funding situation for Egan contractors and refuted previous assertions from the Minister that she is supporting the construction industry. Mr McCann also highlighted the job losses that have occurred in the construction industry.

Thomas Burns robustly set out the importance of adequate and sustainable funding for social housing, for both newbuilds and refurbishment work. He also called for new money for social housing.

Anna Lo highlighted the concerns among the general public that the Housing Executive will not be able to deliver on its commitments, particularly with respect to disabled housing. She indicated the importance of supporting all elements of the housing programme and raised a query in relation to Housing Executive rents and the funding of increases through housing benefit.

Michelle McIlveen spoke about the cutbacks in housing maintenance programmes in her constituency and indicated that that situation is reflected in constituencies throughout Northern Ireland. She also highlighted the effect of the suspension of the housing maintenance programmes on tenants, contractors and their employees.

Francie Molloy highlighted the need for long-term contracts to ensure the quality of maintenance programmes. He also called for clarity from the Housing Executive on the future of Egan contracts.

Jim Shannon spoke of the quality, workmanship and good value for money from Egan contractors. He also reminded the House of the recent history of funding for Egan contractors and the sudden reduction in financial support.

Alban Maginness advised the House of the Minister for Social Development's overall housing priority. He called on the House to support the Minister's quest to place housing on a sound financial footing and highlighted the opportunity provided by the delays in the Royal Exchange project.

Barry McElduff called on the Minister to urgently prioritise the upgrading of social housing. He spoke of the central importance of the construction industry to the rural economy, and questioned the Minister on issues pertaining to his own constituency.

Declan O'Loan highlighted the need for a long-term arrangement to support investment in housing. He called for a shared approach, by which a dependable flow of funds could be secured.

Alex Attwood reviewed the recent history of funding and reallocation to housing. He challenged Members to revise their priorities with respect to the funding of social housing and to adopt a new approach in the face of the new challenges and opportunities facing the housing budget.

In response, the Minister set out her priorities for the housing budget and called on the House to support her bid for additional resources. She shared with the House some of the findings of the Savills report, indicated that housing unfitness is at a very low level and spoke of some of the possible changes to housing maintenance packages in the future.

The Minister went on to set out the Housing Executive's spending plans for 2009-2010, and indicated that the cutbacks were caused by the economic recession. She advised that the social housing development programme will not be cut back to support Egan contractors as the social newbuild contracts will best support the construction industry. Finally, she responded to Members' comments, further highlighting the substantial shortfall in the housing budget.

On behalf of the Committee for Social Development I thank all the Members who have contributed to today's debate and I also thank the Minister for her response. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development, in view of the adverse economic impact suffered by the employees of Egan contractors, to increase the budget allocation for decent homes and related programmes; and to ensure that future communication with contractors complies with Egan principles.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Criminal Justice Inspection's Report on Section 75

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 in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McCartney: I beg to move

That this Assembly supports the recommendations published in the Criminal Justice Inspection's report on the impact of section 75 on the criminal justice system; and calls on the relevant agencies to implement the recommendations.

Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an rúin agus ar son na tuarascála tábhachtaí seo inniu. Tá mé an-sásta go bhfuil deis againn an t-ábhar tábhachtach seo atá os ár gcomhair inniu a phlé.

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

I thank Criminal Justice Inspection for compiling the report, and I welcome its recommendations on the implementation of section 75 in the various justice agencies.

4.30 pm

The purpose of the report is to contribute to the mainstreaming of equality and to place it at the heart of policies and practices in the justice system. It is about creating institutional reform and acknowledging the reality that the Assembly has a central role in providing leadership and guidance on that issue. Of course, that role would be further enhanced if there was a justice Department in place and, alongside it, a scrutiny Committee to ensure more local accountability and opportunities for scrutiny.

Section 75 requires organisations to ensure that equality and human rights are promoted in every aspect of their work. That is a legal obligation, but, until now, there has been limited commitment among the agencies to the implementation of section 75. The criminal justice agencies are not exempt from that process; indeed, they should have section 75 at their core and set the best standards possible. However, the report reveals that little equality data exist to tell us anything about how the justice system treats defendants, victims, prisoners or witnesses. That is a fundamental flaw, as it hinders our ability to monitor the implementation of existing law. That flaw, the lack of equality, needs to be addressed, and addressing it should be a priority.

The Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice states:

"If there is evidence of inequality there is an obligation on organisations to understand the reasons that have contributed to this situation."

I concur, because, without an acknowledgement of the problems of the past and a mechanism to understand them, organisations will continue to make the same mistakes, and we have seen that time and again. Therefore, there will be a continued failure to address inequalities, and that cannot be permitted to continue unchecked. That weakness is inherent in the criminal justice system.

The inspection's findings reveal inadequate information gathering, which hinders organisations' ability to meet their legal obligations, prevents them from identifying inequalities and their causes, and, furthermore, prevents corrective measures being applied. Accordingly, it slows change in our society and maintains the status quo of discrimination against sections of our communities and against society as a whole.

How can the agencies believe that they are meeting their legal obligations if they have no tools or systems to measure or identify inequality in their work? Examples of such inequalities in the justice sector can be found in the prison system, where the treatment of prisoners and the make-up of the workforce show the effects of inequality. Women and Catholics are under-represented in the workforce.

The report highlights other inequalities, particularly in the treatment of prisoners in custody. There is no need for me to go into statistics; if people read the report, they will understand my point. It is worth noting that the prison system is undertaking a review of equality of opportunities right across the sector, and it is vital that positive action be taken in the months ahead to address the shortfalls. Other justice agencies must carry out similar reviews to identify problems.

The premise of justice is that everyone is entitled to, and should receive, equality of treatment. Organisations must, therefore, strive to become more representative of all sections of our society. To achieve that, it is necessary for the agencies to consult the various sectors defined in section 75. Organisations have a legal requirement to consider the views of consultees. Such actions instil confidence in the community that the organisations serve. It is essential that the justice agencies now implement effective monitoring arrangements and begin collecting data that can be used to transform practices and policies. The report lays that out programmatically.

I welcome the report. It is worthwhile pursuing the commitment to review the procedures and the progress made after 18 months, and the Assembly, the new Department and the new scrutiny Committee should keep an eye on that. It is positive work, and it has been

met positively by the agencies, which have a desire to do this and should now be forced to do so.

Mr Moutray: I welcome being able to make a contribution on this important and topical issue. At the outset, I confirm my commitment and that of my party to the criminal justice system. My colleagues and I stand strong on the issue, and we say unequivocally that the people responsible for ill and evil in the Province should, and must, face the full rigour of the criminal justice system and pay for what they have done. My party supports the criminal justice system in its efforts to reduce crime and the fear of crime.

I have listened to Members across the House, and I have heard them cry and lament, which leads me to highlight the fact that it was not the Prison Service that put people in prison; it was the heinous crimes that they committed. Those people should be punished accordingly, no matter what their religion, and they should face the full rigours of the law whether they are Catholic, Protestant, any other religious persuasion or none. Everyone should be subject equally to the law and under the law.

I thank and commend all those who assist daily in implementing the rule of law. During the 30 years of the Troubles, 29 prison officers were murdered, largely at the hands of republican cowards. Many officers sustained injury, and they and their families were intimidated out of their homes. It is no coincidence, and it must be noted, that the three Members who signed and supported the motion have had personal experience of Her Majesty's Prison Service and, perhaps, do not come to the debate with the required sense of balance. However, those who work, and have worked, in the system do so in a volatile and unpredictable environment. It is important to speak well of them and of the professional and skilled manner in which they carry out their daily tasks. The report undermines the current workforce and their ability to carry out their jobs impartially.

I have read the findings of the report, and I have analysed the recommendations. To be honest, it is section 75 gone mad. It is important to highlight the fact that, should the report's recommendations be implemented, they will create enormous additional bureaucracy and red tape for our criminal justice system and for the people working in it. It will create a culture that will detract from the day-to-day activities of the employees, in that it will take up time and will take officers away from the front line to carry out more form filling, statistical research and processing of reports, thus hindering them from carrying out their normal daily duties.

Given the economic climate, is it not important for Members to be prudent and accountable with regard to the finance available to implement such recom-

mendations? I ask Members to cast their minds back and recall the expense of the Patten Report and its implications and costing. I contend that prison officers should be employed on merit alone. I am not interested in the religion of prison officers. I am concerned solely that they do their job professionally and to the best of their ability. Given the reasons that I have outlined, I make no apology for opposing the motion.

Mr Kennedy: My party is committed fully to equality before the law, and it is opposed to discrimination.

However, I wish to sound a note of caution on the embellishment of existing legislation and on interpreting it in a way that is not borne out by the facts. I shall explain what I mean by that in the context of the motion. The original intent was for section 75 to address historic grievances about employment, hence the widespread use of the phrase "equality of opportunity". Any notion of using section 75 as a bureaucratic device for monitoring issues regarding, for example, the prison population, seems entirely incompatible with the original intent of section 75. That comparatively narrow but historically accurate view of section 75 indicates that its inclusion in the report is highly questionable.

Paragraph 1.18 of the report quite rightly notes of section 75 that:

"There is no presumption that the aim should be equality of outcomes".

However, the next paragraph states that: "Outcomes are the ultimate test." Needless to say, the latter statement is inaccurate and appears to contradict the former. Equality before the law has nothing to do with equal outcomes. That is one disturbing feature of the Criminal Justice Inspection's (CJI) report, and it is important to place that on record before any analysis of its content.

Mr A Maginness: Does the Member not accept that the Prison Service's own report on those issues, particularly the application of section 75, represents a fair and accurate approach? That report states that there are disparities in the way in which prisoners are treated in relation to PREPS and adjudication. Is that not a fair and reasonable assessment by the Prison Service? It is not purely a bureaucratic exercise; it is a real outcome.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his intervention, but the more important point remains, namely that equality before the law has nothing to do with equal outcomes. It is also important to note that the positive comments in the report tend to be overlooked, especially when some with political agendas choose to ignore them and tend to exaggerate and over-egg any critical comments that the CJI may have made.

Much progress has already been made. Equity monitoring for those passing through custody suites is

now in place, and those results will be published later this year. The current consultation on a women's strategy shows that the criminal justice system as a whole is embracing new and better-targeted methods of consultation and engagement. Moreover, the Criminal Justice Inspection's recommendations that are relevant to individual criminal justice agencies have all been taken up.

The report referred to four system-specific and three agency-specific recommendations. An action plan has been published on the NIO website, which shows that two of those seven recommendations have already been implemented, and that clear plans and timescales are in place for the remainder. The plan includes the full range of actions in respect of the Northern Ireland Prison Service review, and similar actions are being taken by other criminal justice agencies, which are addressing recommendations that were directed at them in the report.

The Prison Service will shortly publish new standards on the application of the progressive regimes and earned privileges scheme in line with the requirements of the Criminal Justice Order (Northern Ireland) 2008.

Although it is important to note what is stated in the CJI report, it is also equally important, if not more so, to add that none of the agencies involved has been slow to react to the recommendations. It is further important to note that this is an ongoing process and that, although equality impact assessments and practices matter, they are only part of the overall administrative burden on the various criminal justice agencies.

4.45 pm

Finally, it is quite clear that the criminal justice system continues to fall short in its treatment of women. The absence of a purpose-built women's prison and of a proper facility for young female offenders is important as is, in a debate in which all the focus appears to be on the perpetrators of crime, the progress that is still to be made for victims of domestic violence. The Ulster Unionist Party notes the progress that has been made, but we shall not support the motion.

Mrs D Kelly: On behalf of the SDLP, I support the motion. I commend the Members who secured the debate. At the outset, I condemn the attacks that took place in the past few days on female members of prison staff. I hope that, if any injuries were sustained, the staff members will make a speedy recovery.

The CJI report contains recommendations for a number of agencies across the criminal justice sector. It is alarming to note that the NIO took over a year from the completion of the report to its publication. The prison service element of the criminal justice system has remained as one of the last dinosaurs of our troubled past. An overemphasis on security is less

relevant to today's prison systems than new approaches to dealing with prisoners. It is fundamental to the proper functioning of any proper criminal justice system that it is fair and equitable to all who come into contact with it. That is particularly important in the context of the North of Ireland, given the history of the conflict here.

In 2000, the criminal justice review noted that a core value and objective of the criminal justice system is that it should have the confidence of the community that it serves. Another is that it should treat people fairly and equitably, regardless of their background. Nine years on from the report that was published in 2000, today's report and others continue to highlight several concerns in employment practices. In three job competitions from 2004 to 2006 that the inspection examined, the number of Roman Catholic employees fell way short of being reflective of the general population. For example, only 14.2% of the appointees were Roman Catholic, and only 15.9% of applications came from the Roman Catholic community.

It is quite clear that the Northern Ireland Prison Service requires root-and-branch reform that is not dissimilar to Patten. Unfortunately, it is not only the case that not enough is being done to redress workforce imbalances but that Roman Catholic prisoners in some prisons, houses or accommodation are less favourably treated.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I am intrigued by the Member's comment that a type of reform similar to Patten is needed for prison officers. Is she suggesting that a severance scheme should be adopted that is similar to that which took place in the Royal Ulster Constabulary as a result of the Patten Report? As the Member will know, that scheme costs in excess of £50 million a year to implement.

Mrs D Kelly: Mechanisms must be put in place to make the Prison Service much more reflective of the community and which can gain the confidence of the community that it serves. Although some might say that there are no votes in looking after the rights of prisoners, whether they are on remand or have been sentenced, we can all surely agree that a society is judged on how it treats its prisoners. The purpose of imprisonment is not only to protect the community by depriving someone of their right to freedom as a punishment for crime but to rehabilitate the prisoner. The actions that the report recommends highlight ways to ensure fair and equitable treatment, and they must be implemented as a matter of urgency.

The SDLP was founded on the principals of equality and civil rights, and we will not shy from speaking up for those whose rights are being eroded by agencies or by individuals. Equality is not a sound bite for our party; difficult issues must be faced and resolved. It is essential to gather and analyse equality data, not only

to build a better future for all but, in the case of the criminal justice system, the analysis of accurate and timely data should better inform social policy so that it can also play its part in tackling the causes of crime.

It is regrettable that we have almost reached the beginning of the summer recess and we still have no date for the devolution of policing and justice.

This report, and other recent reports of both the Criminal Justice Inspection and the Prisoner Ombudsman, highlights the fact that much work needs to be done within the criminal justice system. I support the motion.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party will support the motion, though we have reservations about it. There are genuine issues to be addressed with respect to monitoring and diversity in the criminal justice system. However, it is important that we do not get too carried away by the situation before us.

I pay tribute to the work of the Criminal Justice Inspection for Northern Ireland. It has produced a large volume of reports over the past few years. It is one of the success stories of the criminal justice review and it has an important role to play in future in challenging the way things are done. Many of its recommendations have been well received right across the criminal justice system.

Let me place on record my reservations. It is important that we bear in mind the difference between a differential in outcome and the presence of inequality of opportunity or treatment. A differential can show that there is a problem with respect to equality. However, that is not always the case. There is not always a clear cause-and-effect situation in hand. Differentials may be the proof of a wider, structural problem in society, rather than a conscious decision to discriminate, directly or indirectly, by various actors within the system. It is important to bear that in mind.

I also wish to put on record my concern that we do not lose sight of the importance of merit and of the professional standards of people who work in the criminal justice system. To my mind, a professional individual should be capable of providing the same consistent, fair service to people, irrespective of his background or the background of the person he is dealing with. It is important that we recognise that. That is not to diminish the importance of the diversity in the workforce, but to stress the importance of proper professional standards in the way that people conduct themselves. That is the case with the respect to many professionals across Northern Ireland, including many who work in the criminal justice system.

I am worried and concerned about the suggestion that we need Protestant police officers to police Protestants and Catholic police officers to police Catholics, or that a similar situation might evolve in the prison system.

My next concern relates to the nature of monitoring. This is an important aspect of an equality system, and we need to collect data. However, it is important when we monitor that we reflect the proper diversity that we are dealing with in society, or in any subject population.

I read with some concern that the Northern Ireland Prison Service has gone down the line of using the residual method to try to work out from the background of prisoners whether they are Protestant or Catholic, if the prisoner has not already declared that up front. There is concern at the number of people who put themselves down as having other religious backgrounds. It is important that we recognise that Northern Ireland is a diverse society.

Even within our two main traditions, not every unionist is necessarily of a British or Protestant background, and the same applies to those who may be nationalist, Catholic or Irish. There is much more diversity within those populations, and there are those who have opted out. When we speak of religion, there are those who have a religious background and those who have opted to have none. That should be respected. Equally, a large population comes to our country from different parts of the world, and they can find themselves in the criminal justice system. So when we design programmes, it is important that we reflect the range of backgrounds that people have.

As to the motion, it is important that we have diversity within a workforce for a number of reasons. That is reflected in the wider practice right across Northern Ireland in the rest of employment. It is to reflect society as a whole in the working population and also to mirror the population that we are dealing with.

It is also important to bear in mind that equality of treatment is important to avoid tensions, whether there is a problem of community confidence in society as a whole, or tension within a particular situation. For example, in a prisoner population, there may be suggestions of differential treatment which can easily blow up and create wider problems.

Again, monitoring and fairness are important in that respect.

Mr Shannon: I oppose the motion. Some time ago, we sat through a similar debate under a different guise; that is, positive discrimination in the PSNI through the Patten Report. It seems that we are revisiting that topic in this debate.

It seems that through the motion, we are also to ensure that jobs are no longer awarded on fitness for purpose, but on religion. Members on the opposite Benches try to force the issue of segregation by boiling everything down to one's background. Being successful or unsuccessful depends on whether one was raised in the right church, chapel or mosque, or whatever the case may be.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I note what he said about recruitment to the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Does he accept that there is a difference between calling for diversity in the Police Service, which is an idea that all quarters in society have supported, and using a quota system as the mechanism to achieve that? The use of the quota system has been seen as unfair; however, its outcome, which is a more reflective workforce, has been seen as positive.

Mr Shannon: I am happy to see people, whether they are male or female, get jobs if, based on their experience and ability, they are the right people for those jobs.

What can I say that has not been said already about 50:50 recruitment, which was an act of segregation and blatant discrimination? The Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland has called on criminal justice organisations to place a greater emphasis on the promotion of equal opportunities among all sections of the community. In a statement, it said:

“The information we examined in relation to the Northern Ireland Prison Service for example identified a number of issues in relation to the ways in which prisoners were treated and the make up of the workforce.”

It further stated that, compared with Protestant prisoners, there was a disparity in the number of Roman Catholic prisoners who were on the highest level of progressive regimes and earned privilege schemes. It also said that the Prison Service's disciplinary staff were predominately male and Protestant.

Nowhere in the report does it mention the fact that Prison Service officers do a tremendous job, regardless of their religious background. It does not mention the danger that those people and their families face because they do their jobs to the letter of the law. For many years, the men and women who wore the uniform of the Prison Service were under immense pressure and danger. Indeed, that threat continues.

They often work with the very lowest that society has to offer, and they are forced to bring that danger home with them to their families. That often resulted in upheaval for their children, as they had to be rehoused after threats were made. In 2002, prison officers were put in further danger after their names were released.

Despite all the threats and murders — 29 prison officers were murdered during the Troubles — that institution remained constant in its provision of a service that was unpalatable to some. They faced abuse, threats and intimidation, yet they continued to do the right thing. To label the Prison Service as institutionally sectarian is further endangering those who serve in it and is an insult to anyone who has served in it. That is why I find the report hard to take and why I do not support the motion.

Being a prison officer is not a job for the boys; it is a job for those who can handle it, regardless of religious preference, sex or colour. To imply anything else is simply unfounded and untrue. Operational independence of the criminal justice system must not be compromised, even indirectly. Employing people for statistical purposes, rather than for their ability, is a recipe for disaster.

Given that, since 1998, the Northern Ireland justice system has been scrutinised more than any other in Europe, it is clear that there have been no underhanded moves and that no one has been excluded. If that were the case, it would have been flagged up in the past 10 or 11 years.

Cumbersome accountability measures are in place to ensure that there is, and can be, no funny business. I fail to see where the evidence of sectarianism lies and what the causes of concern are; however, I know that there will be cause for concern when we offer placements to those who simply tick all the right boxes on an equality form but who are not equipped to do their job.

Section 75 calls for equality, and I believe that that is in operation already. Equality in the Prison Service exists across the board for those who are able to do their jobs. That should be all that is needed.

5.00 pm

That being the case, I cannot in all conscience support a call for positive discrimination in the Prison Service. That suggests connotations of sectarianism in an institution that stands for excellence of bravery, excellence of service provision and parity of service to all those who break the law. There is no difference in the sentences handed out by the law, and there is no difference in the way that the Prison Service carries out the sentence. The inference that that is not the case will not be tolerated by those of us who are grateful for the duty and the sacrifice — in some cases, the ultimate sacrifice — to those who broke the law and paid their debt to society. I support the Prison Service and strongly oppose the motion.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat. Éirím chun tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

I support the motion. No politician who claims to embrace a shared and better future could argue that the Criminal Justice Inspection report is anything less than a damning indictment and an exposure of the inherent inequalities in the criminal justice system. The inspection found that Catholics are more likely to face prosecution and to be remanded in custody. It found that Catholics are more likely to be jailed at the end of the judicial process and, when in jail, are more likely to face discriminatory practices from the regime. All that confirms the Catholic nationalist population's belief in an inherent imbalance in the criminal justice system.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that, in the past, her party encouraged people to break the law and supported violence? Therefore, it is unlikely that members of her community upheld the law and joined the Prison Service. Indeed, the IRA killed members of the Prison Service. Does the Member not accept that those factors must be accounted for?

Ms Anderson: Those factors happened during the conflict. As people who are elected by the nationalist/republican community, we want to examine where we are now and where we want to get to. Yesterday's men and women can speak in the Chamber about this offence, which has been given to them by the Criminal Justice Inspection. They were told clearly about the problems in the prison system. It is up to the Member whether he chooses to ignore those problems and keep his head in the sand. We will provide leadership, lead from the front and take on board the views of people in the criminal justice system about the problems therein. We will work damn hard to address all those problems. If the Member chooses not to do so, the electorate will judge him and people like him.

That confirms the Catholic nationalist population's belief in the inherent bias in the criminal justice system. It is completely unacceptable that any Catholic, or any group of people, regardless of their religious denomination or without one, could face discrimination at any point of the judicial process. However, the report shows that in the North of Ireland, Lady Justice is far from blind. That needs to change. In the wake of the Colin Bell case, I said that a Patten Report for the Prison Service was required.

The Patten recommendations are addressing the policing situation, but the same diligence has never been applied to the Prison Service. There are still people working in the prison system who were there through the worst unrestrained behaviour of the hunger strikes: prison officers who degraded and tortured faceless and defenceless prisoners. That is a fact. What has been done to remove those who brutalised in the past? What has been done to prevent the routine abuse of power? Those issues need to be addressed.

It is only with the impending transfer of policing and justice powers that we can secure the kind of changes that are so desperately needed in the judicial system. For any remaining doubters, of which there are many in the Chamber, the inspection's report is proof of that.

In the meantime, the full implementation of the inspection's recommendations can begin the process of making our prisons and justice systems fit for purpose. The equality safeguards that are set down in section 75 have a fundamental part to play in every facet of life, but particularly in our prisons, which are often populated by vulnerable and disadvantaged people.

One governor whom I spoke to earlier this year described his jail as a dumping ground, full of people who should not be there.

Prisons are not places in which people should be dumped, forgotten about or abandoned to their fate at the hands of an unaccountable regime. Prisoners are entitled to the same equality protections that section 75 affords the rest of us.

I am grateful for the work that the Criminal Justice Inspection has done in producing its report, and I acknowledge the fact that some progress has already been made on the implementation of its recommendations. However, as the motion states, all the recommendations must be implemented, and the relevant agencies should take steps to ensure that that happens without delay. The inspection's report has confirmed the existence of shocking and extensive inequalities in our justice system and those should be rectified immediately. I support the motion.

Mr Weir: I speak with a rising sense of anger, having listened to some of the speeches that have been made. The previous speech, in particular, contained sufficient nonsense, shall we put it, to cover several cell walls.

The proposers of the motion, particularly the Member who spoke previously, have attempted to rewrite history. On the one hand, they talk about the brutalisation of prisoners and say that those responsible for that should be rooted out. They focus on everything that happened in the past, yet when the number of prison officers who were murdered is raised, or when the mysterious deterrent to people, particularly from the Catholic community, wanting to join the Prison Service is mentioned, they dismiss those as:

“factors that happened during the conflict.”

Throughout and beyond the Troubles, prison officers have been the targets of paramilitary attacks from both republicans and loyalists. That is not simply a vestige of the past; I am sure that many Members, throughout the current and previous Assembly mandates, have dealt with situations in which prison officers have been threatened and attacked and have, at times, had to move house. That, I believe, is at the heart of the differential in employment patterns in the Prison Service.

Mr Kennedy said that we should always strive for equality of opportunity. I believe that there is a system in place that allows that to be achieved. We should not strive for equality of outcome, because that completely denies the essence of equality of opportunity. The best man or woman — the best person from whatever background — should get the job. That is why I take grave exception to the reference that was made in some speeches, though not directly referred to in the motion, to the need for some sort of Patten mark II that

allows people to obtain employment on the basis of clear-cut discrimination. That is completely unacceptable in this society. It was wrong to do that in the case of the police, because the factors that led to the imbalances in the numbers of people employed in the police would have been taken care of over time, without the need for positive discrimination.

The image that is being presented is of poor, unfortunate prisoners being left in a dumping ground, as if prisons were some sort of children's home for the socially disadvantaged. The reality is that people are in prison because they committed a crime.

Mrs D Kelly: The reality is that more than 70% of the prison population are people with mental-health problems. That is not a Sinn Féin or an SDLP statistic; it is from independent research. The fact that society is not making resources available to tackle the blight of alcohol and drug abuse and improve mental health means that there are many people in prison who should not be there.

Mr Weir: Most mass murderers have mental-health problems of some description. There is a tendency to present prisons as a dumping ground, but people have committed and been found guilty of crimes against society and against other human beings. Getting drunk on a Saturday night is no excuse for committing a crime. Let us understand a little bit less and condemn a little bit more when discussing those in prison. People are in prison so that society can be protected, and prison officers often bear the brunt of criminal violence.

The image that many of us have — and I appreciate that perhaps others in the Chamber have more first-hand experience of prison than I — of the jolly japes from an old episode of ‘Porridge’ is not the reality of a prison officer's life. Inside and outside prison, they have been subject to great provocation and attacks, as have their families. The tone of the report and the motion is one of vilification of the Prison Service. We need to stand by the —

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I will accept the remarks from Mr Farry, who in his usual, measured, sit-on-the-fence way managed to support the motion with a degree of reservation. Unfortunately, I have only about a minute left, so I ask him to be brief.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for giving way. It is important that Members pay attention to what is in the report. Ms Anderson's remarks were completely out of context of what is in the report. The report is not a damning indictment of anyone; it pointed to a few problems around monitoring in the system that need to be addressed. It did not castigate any agency for blatant discrimination or suggest that that was going on in any quarter of the criminal justice system. It is important that that be recorded.

Mr Weir: I appreciate that some Members' remarks tend to be tangential to the report. Many people will ask whether the Assembly has taken leave of its senses. In debating a key criminal justice issue, are we discussing attacks on the elderly and vulnerable, the disgraceful attacks on the immigrant population, or are we looking at problems in the criminal justice system? No, we are navel-gazing at section 75 requirements.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please draw your remarks to a close.

Mr Weir: This is an attempt at Patten mark II, and I urge Members to oppose the motion.

Mr A Maginness: At the outset, let me say that the SDLP supports the motion and welcomes it, and we thank the proposers for bringing it to the House. The motion is characterised by a lack of political colour; there is no partisan element whatsoever.

The motion calls for the relevant agencies to implement the recommendations of the Criminal Justice Inspection's report. I ask Members opposite and Mr Kennedy what objections they have to any of those very moderate recommendations. The report recommends increasing monitoring and collecting more equality data; it recommends a consultative forum on criminal justice matters, which, I believe, has already been established. It also proposes a strategy for accelerating the creation of a reflective workforce across the system: not just in the prison system but across the justice system.

The report contains agency-specific recommendations that the Northern Ireland Prison Service publish the findings of its internal review in its internal monitoring figures. There is nothing terribly frightening in any of that. It recommends that the Probation Board for Northern Ireland take steps to extend appropriate section 75 monitoring across its various functions. It also proposes that the Youth Justice Agency take steps to begin to monitor across its three core areas. I cannot find anything in those recommendations to which anybody could take exception. I cannot understand the opposition of Members opposite and Mr Kennedy. Is there some prejudice or bias in the Criminal Justice Inspection? I think not. It is a highly respected body.

5.15 pm

Furthermore, many Members have concentrated on the Prison Service, which was the body that produced the report to which I referred, not the Criminal Justice Inspection. That report was produced by the Prison Service, which examined its internal workings and stated that there were disparities in how Catholic prisoners were treated in comparison with Protestant prisoners.

That report states that we must get to the bottom of that issue. Why do those disparities exist? Why is a Catholic prisoner more likely not to enjoy benefits and

privileges in the prison regime? Do any of the Members opposite have any answers to those questions? The Prison Service has no such answers. However, the Prison Service is saying that it found those problems, and it wants to establish why. That is a very sensible approach by the Prison Service, which has been endorsed by the Criminal Justice Inspection.

The report states that Catholic prisoners are more likely than Protestant prisoners to face adjudication proceedings in prison. The Prison Service has asked why that is the case, and acknowledges that it must focus on and explore that matter, and provide an explanation. Do Members opposite object to that?

Mr Kennedy: Does the Member accept that all those issues are being addressed? The difficulty is that when those issues are introduced into the political system and become political tools, so to speak, it is unhelpful to the overall debate. Does the Member accept that that is a valid reason for allowing progress to be made on all the issues, and for not politicising them?

Mr A Maginness: The motion does not politicise the issue. I reject that assertion. I said at the outset that the motion has no political colour whatsoever. The Member might find some political colour in it, but I cannot see it. The motion is phrased in the most neutral fashion. It is asking the Assembly to support the report's recommendations, and asking that they be implemented. Those recommendations will be implemented in any case because the NIO Minister Mr Goggins has said that he will implement them, in the main. Indeed, some of the recommendations have been implemented.

Therefore, I again ask Members opposite to outline the recommendations to which they are opposed, and why they are opposed to them. I have one final point about the make-up of the Prison Service. For historical reasons, the Prison Service is male and largely Protestant, and there is disparity. The Prison Service is saying that it must examine that disparity because it has to have a workforce that is more generally reflective of the population of Northern Ireland.

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

Mr A Maginness: That is what the Prison Service is saying, and that is a reasonable and sensible approach.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I again thank the Criminal Justice Inspection for publishing its report, and the Assembly's Research and Library Service for producing an excellent information pack.

Alban Maginness was correct to say that the motion was worded, perhaps naively on our part, in such a way as to allow every Member to support the report's recommendations. I cannot, for the life of me, understand where the fear is. However —

Lord Morrow: I was interested to hear the Member say that the motion was worded in a way that would attract wide support in the House. To what lengths did the proposers go to ascertain the views of those whom they now find opposed to the motion? Is it not a bit late in the day to say that the motion should have the full support of the House when no consultation was carried out on it? I am not aware of any consultation that was done to help to bring an agreed motion before the House. If I am wrong, I look forward to the Member telling me about that consultation.

Mr McCartney: What is the point in having a debate?

Lord Morrow: Let the Member answer.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will answer. That may be a fair point. When proposing motions that we hope will enjoy cross-party support, perhaps we should seek out the Whips and spokespeople and form an alliance. However, you tabled a motion on the RUC Reserve to the Business Office last week at the same time as you tabled a motion on the hunger strikes. That indicates that you are not open or approachable even at this stage. I will stand corrected if I have made a mistake, and, indeed, I would much prefer to be wrong than to be right in this instance.

If the motion does not enjoy full support in the House, so be it. We look forward to the recommendations of the Criminal Justice Inspection's report being implemented in full, as support for the work of the Criminal Justice Inspection is at the heart of the motion. The motion also acknowledges the importance of section 75. Not enough data are being collated, and the system is not sufficiently robust. I do not understand why people are so sensitive about the criminal justice system, but it should not be exempt from equality proofing.

Many Members said that the criminal justice system is not victim-friendly; we heard that people with mental-health difficulties are likely to go through the criminal justice system; we heard that Catholic men face more punishment in prison and that most prison employees are Protestant males. The data tell us those things, and corrections need to be made. The criminal justice system must be enhanced to ensure that everyone who is involved in it is treated equally.

I appreciate Stephen Moutray's directness in making it clear that his party would not support the motion. In contrast, it was almost as though Danny Kennedy sympathised with the proposers of the motion but had to say what his party told him to say this morning.

Mr Kennedy: She read. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. All remarks should be made through the Chair.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Danny said that he is committed to equality and that he is against discrimination, which must be welcomed.

Mr Kennedy: It says that on her page.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I heard you say it, and I wrote it down. It will be in the Hansard report, so I will repeat it: Danny said that he is committed to equality and that he is against discrimination. I will take it as read that, as its deputy leader, Danny Kennedy speaks on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party.

In an extremely helpful intervention, Alban Maginness said that the Criminal Justice Inspection's report indicates that the criminal justice system, particularly the prison system, has failed. Danny did not accept that; he said that differences were the reason for proposing the motion.

Dolores Kelly raised —

Mr Kennedy: Danny and so many other unionist Members were reticent in supporting the motion because although it seemed innocent enough, your colleague Ms Anderson painted a graphic picture of its detail. She gave a list of ills and levelled the usual accusations against the system.

It is for that reason —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should resume his seat. The cut and thrust of politics are very important to the House, but it has gone well beyond that. Please make your remarks through the Chair.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Danny, you must be psychic. You spoke before Martina Anderson, so, hello, I have heard enough from you for today.

As Dolores Kelly pointed out, it took more than a year for the prison system's report to be published. The whole overemphasis has always been on security.

With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, in the last few minutes, I wish to add that Michelle O'Neill and I visited Ash House at Hydebank and saw for ourselves the lack of equality where it should be applied properly and the differences between men and women, particularly young women. Again, the prison system will acknowledge that. Jim, you may also have acknowledged that. There are clear examples of that, but the prison system is keen to work with the Assembly to ensure that that does not happen.

Peter Weir's remarks were very disturbing. I am surprised at Peter. The Department of Health is now responsible for the healthcare of prisoners —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Ms Ní Chuilín, I am sure that if you speak through the Chair, others will follow your example.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am sorry, a LeasCheann Comhairle, you are absolutely right.

The Department of Health is now responsible for the healthcare of prisoners. With attitudes like Peter's,

prisoners will get the care that they need only if they deserve it, rather than as an entitlement. That is extremely worrying. That is why the report and the motion have been brought forward.

Stephen Farry made some helpful remarks. However, I disagree about the differential. You are either for equality and the implementation of section 75 or you are not.

Jim Shannon got quite rattled and annoyed, which is not like him, but I prefer not to go into that. Martina Anderson is 100% right: people need to lead by example and to lead from the front.

Lord Morrow: Like she did.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Like we all did, and we should all continue to do so. That is the rationale for bringing forward today's motion. The days when one place had full responsibility for policing and making laws have gone. We make legislation here. We are responsible, we are equality proofed, and we need to adhere to section 75. The laws that we pass are implemented in the courts, and they should be subject to section 75 and equality proofed. People who find themselves in the criminal justice system, such as those who have experienced domestic violence, prisoners and everyone else, need to enjoy the full implementation of section 75. Equality is for every citizen here, not just some.

I support the motion.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 31; Noes 26.

AYES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mrs M Bradley, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr A Maginness, Mr Molloy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McCartney and Ms S Ramsey.

NOES

Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr I McCrea, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Bresland and Mr T Clarke.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly supports the recommendations published in the Criminal Justice Inspection's report on the impact of section 75 on the criminal justice system; and calls on the relevant agencies to implement the recommendations.

Adjourned at 5.41 pm.

