
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 2 November 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Speaker: The first item of business is the motion on the extension of the Committee Stage of the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 19 January 2010, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 03/09).

The Committee Stage of the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill began on 30 September 2009. Members will be aware that the Bill aims to ensure the continued provision of customer subsidy for Northern Ireland Water in the absence of funding through payments by customers. Under article 213(3) of the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, the Department for Regional Development (DRD) is required to make grants to Northern Ireland Water equal to the amount of discount provided to customers in the initial period.

The Order defines the initial period as three years from the coming into operation of the Order. The initial three-year period is the period during which the direct rule Administration intended to phase in charges for water and sewerage services, and it runs out on 31 March 2010. DRD states that it has no means to make grants to Northern Ireland Water after that date.

The Committee for Regional Development has taken evidence from the Consumer Council and Northern Ireland Water, both of which stated that they are content with the Bill. On 21 October 2009, the Minister for Regional Development and supporting officials gave evidence to the Committee on the principle of the Bill and the financial aspects of the deferral of water and sewerage charges. Although there is a fair degree of

uncertainty about the cost of further deferring water charges, the Minister estimated that it would be about £1 billion over the next three years, should the Executive decide to defer charges for that period. Therefore, significant financial implications for Northern Ireland arise from the deferral of water and sewerage charges, and the Bill creates the mechanism to implement any decision by the Executive to continue to defer such charges.

To date, DRD officials have been unable to provide further clarity on the cost of continual deferral, including the costs associated with the reclassification of Northern Ireland Water for public expenditure purposes, the basis for evaluating Northern Ireland Water's assets and the ongoing ability of Northern Ireland Water to reclaim its input VAT. The Committee was informed by DRD that the Department of Finance and Personnel had responsibility for negotiating with the Treasury on those issues, and DFP officials are to give evidence to the Committee on 11 November 2009. At that meeting, the Committee will seek clarity on what potential financial impacts ongoing deferral may have on the Northern Ireland block as a whole, DRD's budget and the budgets of other Departments.

I have stated before that, in approaching any Bill, the Committee is mindful of the need to progress business efficiently and effectively, while discharging its scrutiny responsibilities to the Assembly in a thorough and conscientious manner. As is common practice, the Committee published a public notice inviting written submissions on the Bill's clauses, and the Committee agreed to a two-week deadline for submissions to ensure that the Bill could pass through the Assembly and be in place by April 2010. The deadline for submissions was 23 October 2009, and one submission was received from NIPSA. The Committee will meet again this Wednesday, 4 November 2009, to consider NIPSA's submission on the way forward.

At the Committee meeting on 7 October 2009, members signed a motion seeking an extension to the Committee Stage until 19 January 2010. The Committee has stated its support for the principles of the Bill and will endeavour to report to the Assembly on the Bill as soon as possible. In the interim, I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 19 January 2010, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill [NIA Bill 03/09].

Town Centre Regeneration

Mr Speaker: Before we move to the next item on the Order Paper, which is the motion on the Committee for Social Development's report on the inquiry into town centre regeneration, I advise Members that certain matters relating to the draft Planning Policy Statement 5 are subject to judicial review. I understand that those matters concern the decision-making process under which draft PPS 5 was developed and adopted. Although the subject of the motion itself is not sub judice, I warn Members that sub judice rules apply to the matters related to the draft PPS 5 that are under review. Any reference to them should be avoided.

The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 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 Social Development (Mr Hamilton): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Social Development on its inquiry into town centre regeneration; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to implement the recommendations.

The Committee for Social Development began its inquiry into town centre regeneration around two years ago. It has been a significant undertaking, during which the Committee received and reviewed a great deal of evidence from councils, regeneration bodies and the Department. The Committee also made fact-finding visits to examples of regeneration best practice. Informed by those visits and by the evidence, the Committee deliberated at some length on its conclusions.

I thank the witnesses for their evidence and patience. I thank also the current and previous Committee staff for their assiduous hard work on the report and the current and previous members of the Committee for Social Development for their contribution to the inquiry. I am a bit of a johnny-come-lately to the inquiry: I waited for others to do the hard work, and I came along at the end and poached the goal.

Urban regeneration is a responsibility of the urban regeneration and community development group in the Department for Social Development, and it accounts for annual capital expenditure of tens of millions of pounds. The larger parts of that spend go to Belfast and Londonderry, and the remainder goes to the regeneration of our hub towns and smaller cities. Those towns and smaller cities form the heartland of Northern Ireland. They combine some of the most beautiful, historic and vibrant places with important economic, retail and population centres. Their regeneration, following historic underinvestment, and, in some cases, decline, is central to Northern Ireland's future well-being.

The Committee's inquiry into town centre regeneration cuts across a few Departments' responsibilities, but the Committee's recommendations are very clearly focused on the Department for Social Development. I therefore welcome the Minister for Social Development's presence in the Chamber.

Rather than listing all the recommendations in the Committee's report, I will highlight a few key elements of the inquiry. Just after the inquiry commenced, the Committee sought information from the Department on its overarching strategy for town centre regeneration. The Department advised the Committee of the difficulties that it had experienced in the development of that strategy, including the division of responsibilities across Departments, the disruptive impact of the suspension of the Assembly and the review of public administration.

Around 18 months after the original questions were posed, officials gave evidence to the Committee on the Department's internal stocktake on urban regeneration. They indicated that no strategic framework currently exists to determine the direction of the urban regeneration and community development group's policies and programmes. The Committee was surprised by that, and it was also surprised to learn that urban regeneration policymaking is not always evidence-based and that strong monitoring and evaluation structures were absent from policy development.

If there is no strategic framework, if policy is not always based on evidence and if monitoring and evaluation is weak or mediocre, is it surprising that stakeholders report dissatisfaction with town centre regeneration? Numerous witnesses to the inquiry indicated that town centre regeneration was haphazard and driven by issues. On the basis of careful consideration of evidence from stakeholders and the Department, the Committee formed the opinion that a characterisation of town centre regeneration as somewhat unco-ordinated appears somewhat accurate. The House will not be surprised that the Committee's key recommendations centre on that fact.

The Committee recommends that, before public administration is reformed, the Department should develop an overarching town centre regeneration strategy and that ways must be found to work with other Departments with overlapping responsibilities to implement that strategy. The Committee was recently encouraged by interdepartmental working led by DSD on the Including the Homeless strategy. It hopes that the same can-do attitude and approach will be applied by the Department to town centre regeneration and that the Minister will explore improved co-operative arrangements with other Departments or will consider alternative governance arrangements.

Like all Committees, the Committee for Social Development believes that monitoring and evaluation

must accompany all important policy objectives. Therefore, the Committee recommends that the Department bring forward its monitoring and evaluation framework, which it is understood to be developing. Committee members believe that town centre regeneration must be monitored to provide a guide for the implementation of policy and evaluated to identify good practice, waste and error. The Committee believes that town centre regeneration should be evaluated through a range of key performance indicators, including economic benefit, community cohesion, poverty, and improved access for disadvantaged and disabled groups.

In selecting organisations to deliver better town centre regeneration, witnesses said — the Committee agrees — that the post-RPA councils would be best placed and appropriately motivated to undertake that role, even if they are somewhat under-resourced. The Committee also feels that the councils' allocation of time and resources to town centre management bodies represents shrewd investment that will stimulate economic growth in our towns. Therefore, the Committee strongly recommends that councils take a lead role in the delivery of town centre regeneration and receive commensurate funding. It also recommends that that long-term support and seed funding should be provided for town centre management bodies, which might, in order to ensure good value for money, be required to cover more than one town.

The Committee spent some time considering the benefits of business improvement districts (BIDs), which already operate informally in Northern Ireland and could complement the town centre management bodies that I have mentioned. The Committee commends the Minister for her support of BIDs, and it urges her to bring forward proposals for their statutory introduction. Members have witnessed how run-down districts of urban neighbourhoods have been transformed by the efforts of BIDs or other town centre management bodies. The support that those bodies provide is practical and includes highly visible measures such as co-ordinated district-wide shopfront improvement schemes and evening economy promotions. The Committee believes that the delivery of such practical measures, with their tangible benefits for ordinary ratepayers, is how the Department will and should be judged.

12.15 pm

I anticipate that during the debate we will hear about many town centre regeneration projects undertaken by the Department; there have been many good projects. It may even be suggested that much of the evidence given to the Committee was based on a poorly informed perception of town centre regeneration. Perception, though not everything, is important. Recognising that and the difficult budgetary position that the Department and the Executive face, the Committee recommends the development of a town centre regeneration fund.

The Committee proposes not to boost expenditure on town centre regeneration — or, at least, not necessarily — but rather to provide a more transparent delivery mechanism for existing funds.

A town centre regeneration fund operates in Scotland and allows town centre stakeholders to bid for resources for capital projects. Projects must fit in with local development plans and be delivered by credible locally based organisations — usually councils but voluntary organisations can also apply. The projects are assessed by an independent panel, and allocations are spread so as to ensure that a fair share of development money goes to smaller towns. Crucially, the projects are rated, and the ratings are published. The Committee believes that a Northern Ireland town centre regeneration fund run along those lines could provide transparent engagement between the Department and key stakeholders and dispel the perception that town centre regeneration can be unco-ordinated and subject to geographical bias.

The inquiry was long, and it involved hard work; yet it has been informative. The Committee feels that town centre regeneration is important for the future of Northern Ireland and deserves an overarching strategy, monitoring, evaluation, appropriate resourcing and a delivery structure involving town centre management bodies that will sit well in large councils.

The inquiry was wide-ranging and touched on other important issues. I am sure that Committee members will want to discuss those issues during the debate. As Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, I commend the report on the inquiry into town centre regeneration to the House.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I commend and thank the Chairperson, the Committee and its staff, past and present, for their hard work and commitment in producing the report. I also thank all those who gave evidence to the Committee.

The development of an overarching policy for town centre regeneration is essential, and revised governance arrangements are necessary to ensure the effective delivery of such a policy. The review of public administration presents an opportunity for the Department to develop policy. Large post-RPA councils with properly constituted town centre management bodies can be the appropriate organisations to manage town centre regeneration. Some of the funding for town centre regeneration should be made through a town centre regeneration fund similar to that operating in Scotland.

Town centre regeneration policy and related planning controls act together to favour the facilitation of town centre or edge-of-centre developments. That should also apply to the important practical issues, such as pedestrianisation and parking facilities. The report identifies the terms of reference for town centre regeneration, which include the identification of

areas where the application of regeneration funding has failed to address disadvantage and poverty. The nature and effectiveness of engagement with local communities and other key stakeholders must be considered when developing and taking forward regeneration initiatives.

The lack of a town centre regeneration framework in the North has tended to leave room for opportunist development, rather than planned and researched regeneration. The Committee believes that it is important for an appropriate policy framework to be put in place prior to the advent of the review of public administration. Properly financed post-RPA councils, with the support of appropriate town centre bodies, could be the most effective delivery channels for town centre regeneration. The Committee believes that an overarching strategic framework for town centre regeneration should be developed and put in place before RPA. Control of town centre regeneration should be delegated to the enlarged councils and appropriately constituted town centre partnership bodies. Ring-fenced financial support must also be secured. The Assembly should also consider the provision of appropriate advisory support and liaison for councils.

The Department should publish key performance indicators and implement actions relating to those. Town centre regeneration key performance indicators should include indicators relating to economic activity, community cohesion, poverty, disadvantage and disability access.

The Department should clarify roles and responsibilities in relation to the provision of car-parking capacity and the control of parking charges. That is increasingly an issue in Newry, as the largest shopping centre there recently introduced parking charges. I have had a number of meetings about that issue over the last week. It is impacting on the local community, because that area, which already experienced gridlock, is becoming even more gridlocked. Unfortunately, that will get worse in the lead-up to Christmas. That is an issue that definitely needs to be looked at.

The Department should clarify roles in relation to the pedestrianisation of town centres and how that will impact on all stakeholders, including the visually impaired and the elderly. Another recommendation is that regeneration strategies should include access to decent and affordable housing.

As the Chairperson has stated, the report by the Committee for Social Development is very comprehensive. If implemented, it will be only beneficial and positive for all sections of our community. Therefore, I commend the report to the Assembly for approval.

Mr Armstrong: I am genuinely pleased to speak in support of the report. It is not so long ago that urban regeneration in Northern Ireland referred to little more

than the rebuilding of the latest town or city centre to have been the recipient of an IRA bomb aimed at a so-called economic target in a deliberate attempt to destroy the local economy. The past years have seen a welcome change, and policymakers have been able to shift their focus to ensuring that our much-neglected towns and cities receive the care and attention that they badly need to ensure that they are fit for purpose in the early twenty-first century.

The review of public administration offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to radically change the public policy landscape of Northern Ireland. Much of the focus has understandably been on new arrangements for local government, and I fully support the view of the Committee for Social Development that the new, so-called super-councils are appropriate organisations to manage town centre regeneration.

One of the weaknesses of the current arrangements is that functions are spread across Departments, most notably DSD, DRD and DOE. That does not make for quick decision-making. The more powers that are transferred to new councils, the better it will be. I am a long-standing supporter of devolution and believe that government is best delivered and at its most responsive when it is as close to the people as possible. It follows that local councillors, whether in Cookstown, Coleraine or Carrickfergus, are better placed to know the needs and wants of the communities that they serve than unelected civil servants who sit in offices in Belfast.

I have been amazed by some of the decisions that have been taken over the years regarding town centres in my constituency and elsewhere, particularly with the growth of out-of-town developments, which have a detrimental effect on town centres. To that end, I encourage the Minister of the Environment to publish Planning Policy Statement 5 as soon as possible, to give new councils the confidence to introduce and implement regeneration plans without fear of being faced with more new, damaging out-of-town developments.

The new councils will not only need the legal powers to make a difference; they will require sufficient funding to enable them to carry out town centre regeneration functions. That is a key point, because past experience tells us that bureaucracy's first instinct is to centralise power, not to give it up. One means of centralised Departments retaining power is for them to be seen to hand over powers to local councils but to then starve those councils of the funds necessary to deliver anything meaningful.

The Assembly has received a great deal of criticism from the media and the general public for not being responsive to the needs of the people of Northern Ireland and for being isolated "up there", remote and cushioned from the problems that ordinary people face in their daily lives. The report will bring practical

benefits to the shopping and working environment of our fellow citizens and will restore local accountability. I welcome the report, and I commend it to the House.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members not to stray into the area of decision-making under PPS 5, as far as that is possible.

Mr Burns: I speak as a member of the Committee for Social Development, and I declare that I am a member of Antrim Borough Council. I support the motion. I largely agree with the Chairperson of the Committee, and I thank him for providing the Assembly with a summary of the report. It is a lengthy document, and some Members may not yet be familiar with its contents.

Town centre regeneration is an important issue, and it has already been given a high priority by DSD and the local councils. We want to make our towns and villages better places in which to live and work and to visit. In my constituency of South Antrim, much work has been done on town centre regeneration. Master plans for places such as Crumlin and Randalstown have already been produced, and, a few weeks ago, I accompanied the Minister to the launch of the consultation on the plans for Antrim town.

The report makes 17 recommendations. I do not have time to comment on all of them, but I shall speak about the recommendations that I feel are most important. Other Members have already spoken on those matters, and I shall try not to repeat their contributions. The key recommendation is to introduce a better strategy framework to manage town centre regeneration. I agree 100% with that recommendation; it is an important step that must be taken. The phrase “joined-up government” is used for many issues, but it must become a reality in town centre regeneration. In the past, urban regeneration was not managed well. It is hard to carry it out when DOE, DRD, DSD and local councils are all doing different bits and pieces here and there.

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

The second recommendation is that the new super-councils must have greater responsibility. That goes hand in hand with the first recommendation. The framework must be put in place soon, before the transfer of responsibilities to the new super-councils under the RPA.

The Committee also recommends that the Department provide long-term core funding for town centre management partnerships; I strongly support that. Town centre management is funded from a variety of sources, but that does not provide the stability that is needed to plan ahead.

Undoubtedly, effective partnership management is vital for successful town centre regeneration. Money must be made available for that, and, to keep costs down, consideration should be given to giving partnership

teams responsibility for more than one town in each council area.

The report covers the issue of waste ground and vacant properties. Many villages and town centres have terrible blots on the landscape, and DSD should be able to vest land more quickly and more easily. Some of those sites would be ideal to kick off regeneration instead of sitting empty for years. I will not go into much detail, but anyone who knows Antrim town will know the Ulster Bar corner site, which was an eyesore for years. It is a superb development opportunity, and, in the near future, it will be turned into a library. That should have happened years ago.

12.30 pm

Secondly, I will say a few words on social and affordable housing. Decent affordable and social housing should be part of every town centre regeneration plan. Recently, housing has been debated in the Chamber many times in various forms. I want to make the point, once again, that town centre regeneration strategies must include social housing. Redevelopment of brownfield sites and the living over the shop (LOTS) scheme offer great opportunities to drive forward the new housing agenda.

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

Mr Burns: The recommendations will go a long way towards making towns and villages much more vital and vibrant.

Ms Lo: I support the motion. I also want to thank the staff and all those people who took part in the inquiry for their efforts. I very much endorse all the report’s recommendations and findings. I want to highlight a few of those recommendations.

Other Members have mentioned recommendation 1, which relates to the need for an overarching strategic framework for town centre regeneration to be developed and put in place before the transfer of responsibilities under RPA. Its importance must be reiterated. The report also recommends further that the Department develop proposals for either improved cross-departmental co-operation or alternative governance arrangements for town centre regeneration.

The Association of Town Centre Management informed the Committee that intervention in town centre regeneration has previously been driven by single issues, rather than an overarching strategic framework. I agree with the association that the lack of policy must, to a large extent, have hindered the growth of town centres. It appears that not only is an overall strategic framework absent, but there is a lack of interdepartmental co-operation, which has resulted in an ad hoc, piecemeal style of working.

Furthermore, the Department, in its evidence to the Committee, admitted that it has no strategic framework to steer its town centre regeneration policies and programmes. It also indicated that the division of responsibility for town centre regeneration between different Departments has caused problems and difficulties.

The Committee also heard from councils that town centre regeneration funding criteria and time frames were unclear. At times, funding is made available at the last minute before the end of the financial year. Having come from the voluntary sector, I certainly know what it is like when calls come from different Departments in February asking for bids to be made in order to use up departmental underspend. Often, projects are rushed through so that the funding that suddenly becomes available can be used. That is not good planning or value for money for the public purse. Without strategic and co-ordinated planning, monitoring of set targets and evaluation of outcome, town centre regeneration will not be effective.

The Committee saw examples of projects at Ballymun and the Dublin docklands in the South. Those huge and impressive projects have a vision to revitalise their entire areas and are supported by strategic planning and proper resources.

I also support the recommendation that the Department delegate control of town centre regeneration programmes to the enlarged councils and appropriately constituted town centre partnership bodies, so that they can focus on regenerating their own town centres.

The energy coming from the Dublin docklands regeneration project was inspirational. The relevant Departments and planners worked together, and that is how joined-up working should be.

Town centre regeneration must not be just an economic matter. I support the recommendation that the Department should set out a menu of town centre regeneration interventions designed to actively address inequality and exclusion and that that be delivered by a range of agencies working in concert.

I refer to the comments of Down District Council.

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

Ms Lo: It said that towns are segregated not only on a sectarian basis but on a social class as demarcated by housing. Many people from low-income families who live in housing estates in which there is poor public transport suffer not only economic disadvantage but physical isolation.

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

Mr Easton: I broadly welcome the recommendations of the inquiry into town centre regeneration. If the

report is effectively actioned, it has the potential to make real, positive change to town centres. In the time allocated, it is impossible to do justice to the report, which deserves to be comprehensively analysed. I will, therefore, highlight the critical matters of importance to today's debate from the five principal areas and 17 recommendations in the report. However, this is by no means an exhaustive examination of the critical matters before us.

We must look to the establishment of key performance indicators that afford us the opportunity to appraise our overall approach and to effectively invigorate and breathe new life into town centres. In that respect, we will look at markers of disadvantage, social debarment, and business and commercial interests in an equitable fashion to gauge and identify our progress.

We can utilise the window of opportunity that exists with the review of public administration to address governance and organisational procedures. Identified clearly is what has been termed joined-up government, which amounts to genuine cross-departmental engagement and buy-in that will roll back the barriers to policy development. It is now time to move from rhetoric to reality.

The Committee applied itself to looking at which organisations are best positioned to maximise the benefits of town centre regeneration. Its conclusion that enlarged councils are best placed to do that should be looked on favourably. The transfer of functions to the councils will require that comparable and adequate financial resources are provided to get the enhanced job done.

It is always beneficial to look at best practice elsewhere to examine what actually works. In that respect, the Scottish model of a town centre regeneration fund has many attractive features and has much to commend it. Specifically, it affords the opportunity to have short-term capital investment, in addition to ensuring openness and transparency in investment allocation.

Ring-fencing of financial support for councils to develop town centre regeneration gives the best financial arrangements for councils. Of course, additional services to councils in the form of advisory and liaison roles would complement that arrangement and should be advocated.

The Department has much to offer in respect of linking planning from the regional development plans with operational planning and master planning processes. I encourage the Department to use some blue-sky thinking to produce a vision of how natural assets such as rivers can be included in strategic planning processes.

Continuing in the vein of there being an imaginative and creative response from the Department, the Department should apply itself to the issue of decent and affordable social housing and should focus on how brownfield mixed developments can be best utilised to that end.

The issue of car parking is of the utmost importance, and the provision of adequate spaces is vital. The Department and other relevant Departments should explain their roles and responsibilities in a plain manner that can be easily understood. The issues of car park charges and car park capacity must be taken forward in a sympathetic manner that allows the potential of town centres to be maximised.

In conclusion, we all recognise the positive aspects of business improvement districts; much excellent work has been done in that regard, but there is much more to do. Recommendation 10 speaks specifically to the business improvement districts and includes a request for the Department to bring forward legislation to introduce statutory business improvement districts. I strongly support that approach. It is imperative that that recommendation is given due regard.

I welcome the proposal for the Department to provide the long-term financial resource for town centre management partnerships. In recognition of the fact that enlarged councils will have many town centres within their remit, the Department and the councils must take a joined-up approach with the aim of establishing a value-for-money town centre structure that can deliver for the towns in the council areas.

There are many other important aspects in the report that I have not mentioned, not least the promotion of the night-time economy, the vesting of derelict property and vacant lots, pedestrianisation, and the improvement of shopfronts, all of which are commendable in their own right. It is important that the report on the inquiry is read and reread. There is much to gain, given the review of public administration and the window of opportunity that that affords. I commend the inquiry's findings to the House.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Committee Clerk and other Committee staff for providing the Committee with valuable backup during the course of the inquiry.

Although I understand that Belfast and Derry were excluded from the inquiry's terms of reference, as a city person, I believe that a separate inquiry is required to deal with the particular problems that exist in those cities, not least the sequential policy that was operated in Belfast by previous Social Development Ministers and that has been carried on by the current Minister. That policy has serious consequences for people living in north and west Belfast.

If the inquiry and the publication of the report do anything, I hope that they will lead to the proper resourcing and co-ordination of town centres. Many individuals and organisations that appeared before the Committee had, to the point of frustration, been promoting a more joined-up approach to the regeneration of town centres. Almost as one, they spoke of the difficulties

that they experienced in trying to hold together town centre structures and in lobbying for assistance — not always financial — and of how they came up against a wall of bureaucracy in the different Departments that they had to deal with. That is not a criticism of those individuals within Departments who tried to make a difference but who found it difficult to do so. We came across people who work locally, within DSD, and who have done sterling work, but, in many ways, they found it difficult working inside a box that did not exist.

I thank my colleague Claire McGill, who constantly reminded us of the plight of Strabane and the surrounding area. Perhaps those of us from the city are too focused on the many problems that we face to understand the wider problems faced by towns, and I learned from this inquiry that those problems are many. I believe that, if adopted by the Department and acted on, the report's 17 recommendations will go a long way towards overcoming many of the problems faced by town centres. The report gives some pointers on what the problems are and how they should be approached.

I believe that true partnership, which garners all opinions, is the only way forward. However, it has to be a meaningful partnership in which all Departments play a key role with other stakeholders. The partnership should not be built on a "them and us" basis, but on the basis of equality for each element of the partnership. Such a partnership needs to be properly resourced, and Departments must be upfront in allocating resources to town centre management partnerships.

The problem of derelict land in our towns must be tackled, which can help in the repopulating of town centres. Where it was piloted, the LOTS scheme played a part in that, but that has ground to a halt because of a lack of funding. New housing should be planned on derelict land or land that is owned by Departments, should promote mixed tenure housing and should be planned with new shopping developments. I do not believe that any Minister should announce proposed developments if they know that the money for them does not exist. Such announcements may gain column inches in the local press, but they do nothing for the morale and well-being of local towns, especially when towns are building those developments into their master plans.

We need to look again at the impact that out-of-town shopping centres have on town centres. It is wrong to say that they do not have a negative impact; the evidence is there for everyone to see.

12.45 pm

For generations, town centres were the hubs of community life, where everyone from miles around came to shop and socialise. The suggestion that the new councils will control town centre regeneration post-RPA may be a blessing, because that will put

responsibility into local hands. However, that can only be achieved if Departments commit to a proper funding mechanism that will ensure that plans, post-RPA, are successful.

In Committee, I raised the issue of Departments and utility companies carrying out work soon after public-realm work has been completed. In cities and towns throughout the North, there is a patchwork to be seen due to digging. There was a recent example in Commarket, Belfast, where public-realm work, which cost the Department for Social Development millions of pounds, was dug up by the Department for Regional Development days after completion. Such instances are serious problems and must be considered. Those responsible must have an idea of the work that needs to be carried out and should be able to include it in restructuring plans.

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

Mr F McCann: The vesting of derelict land should also be considered, because that can add to any future development of town centres. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Craig: Some of the remarks about Belfast and Londonderry have been interesting. The Committee began its inquiry into town centre regeneration on 11 October 2007. There were specific reasons for ensuring that the inquiry did not cover Belfast and Londonderry. Indeed, there was a belief that the two cities received the bulk of all funding for regeneration. The Committee set about its work and conducted extensive consultations with towns, many of which were well outside the two main cities. A common theme became apparent to all Committee members, and it was that there was no joined-up thinking or co-ordination by the Department in dealing with towns on a one-to-one basis.

I can speak from experience in my own town centre. Over the past 20 years, when Lisburn representatives sought assistance for town centre regeneration from the Department, they were told not to waste their time applying. We all recognise that during that time, the two main cities faced huge difficulties with regeneration. However, life has moved on, and I am glad that the report highlights a more co-ordinated and productive way forward for town centre regeneration throughout the Province. Many towns have draft plans in operation: Lisburn has issued its draft master plan for consultation. It is good to see the Department and the Minister driving forward those ideas.

I hope that the Minister will take on board the report's recommendations for moving towards a more formalised process for town centre regeneration. I can only plead with her to ensure that there is a more equitable way of distributing funding for town centre regeneration. The Committee has discussed how that can be done, and,

undoubtedly, the Minister has taken some of those ideas on board and will also have some ideas of her own on the issue.

It is good to see that the Committee, after almost two years, has finally produced its report. It contains many recommendations that will aid the development of proper strategies for all town centres in Northern Ireland.

Some town centres' master plans are further ahead than others. It will be interesting to see each town centre's master plan, but it will be much more interesting to see the extent to which the plans are implemented in the coming years. The proof of the pudding will be in how we move the strategy forward.

A long list of town centres in Northern Ireland has been neglected for many years; a lot of them for historical reasons. We all know about the need to regenerate the two main cities because of the destruction that was caused there in the past. However, destruction was caused in other town centres, including my own, which is in need of regeneration. The Minister has visited Lisburn and has witnessed those issues. I have no doubt that she will sympathise with the report's recommendations.

I commend the report.

Mr A Maginness: Like other colleagues, I welcome the report and congratulate the Committee, of which I am no longer a member, on its work.

The report is a timely and substantial piece of work that highlights the fact that, for many years, we have had an ad hoc approach to town centre development and regeneration. Evidence that was brought to the Committee's attention, particularly by the Association of Town Centre Management, showed that, in the past, intervention in town centre regeneration had been driven by single issues, as opposed to being the result of an overarching strategic framework. Other colleagues mentioned the lack of an overarching strategic framework. It is vital to put that in place; otherwise, we will not progress. Any ad hoc approach will get things wrong and waste scarce resources.

Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce said that the lack of a town centre regeneration framework in Northern Ireland had left room for opportunistic development.

We want co-ordinated development that is in the interests of the business community, the public, consumers and town centre dwellers. It is important to get that right. Therefore, the Committee is correct to put emphasis on that basic guiding principle. I hope that the Department is cognisant of that.

Hitherto, much emphasis has been on Belfast and Derry. It is time to concentrate on smaller towns throughout Northern Ireland. When I listen to 'The Flower of Sweet Strabane', I immediately think of our

colleague, my good friend Claire McGill, who represents West Tyrone and, in particular, the town of Strabane. She is right to emphasise the importance of such a friendly and interesting town, which I had the pleasure of visiting with the Committee. She is right to put emphasis on the development of the town centre; it is right that people with local interests emphasise the importance of local development. It is good for business and for local people, who will have a sense of identity and ownership. We should encourage that continually.

The report makes several practical suggestions. Recommendation 12 deals with car parking and car park charging, for which it is important to have a co-ordinated policy. There is no point in three Departments looking after all those issues; the new councils should do so, or DSD should do so in conjunction with the new councils.

Mr Storey: The report has attempted to reflect some of the issues that are linked to that point. Although the Member speaks of lovely Strabane, I have a prime interest in Ballymoney and Ballycastle, which have suffered as a result of pressure having been put on them by very successful town centres such as Ballymena. However, the issue is about who takes the lead, and that is a fundamental problem. It is all well and good to say that there should be collaboration, but efforts to regenerate town centres fall down because no one is prepared to take the lead responsibility for putting such co-ordination in place. That is the fundamental issue that must be resolved, and I hope that the report will stimulate debate on that point.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the Member's remarks. I believe that the Department for Social Development should exercise leadership, but others may believe that local councils should take the lead. Although that is a matter for political debate, we need leadership and co-ordination nonetheless. It is crazy to have the Department of the Environment, DRD and DSD fighting the bit out or being reluctant to cede something to one another.

Pedestrianisation must be reviewed carefully to conform to the real needs of shoppers and others who use town centres. It is also important to identify —

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: I am running out of time, so I must proceed.

It is also important to identify derelict sites and to have brownfield development. It is vital to have affordable mixed housing development in town centres so that we enliven them and put life back into them.

My colleague Mr Burns talked about flats over shops —

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

Mr A Maginness: That is a good idea, and it is one that we should develop. I have more to say, but my time has run out.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I was a member of the Committee for Social Development for part of 2007. I am no longer a member of that Committee, but I commend everyone who was involved in producing the report, which is substantial, running to approximately 500 pages.

We have, perhaps, been here before. In 1999, a report was commissioned that had 27 recommendations. I have identified a theme running through the Committee's new report, which Members referred to. That report contains 17 recommendations, but what will happen to them? The evidence in the report shows that when Committee members mentioned the previous document, Department for Social Development officials told them that a number of those 27 recommendations had been implemented. The point is that if the Committee members did not know that those recommendations had been implemented, perhaps there was something wrong with the way in which that happened. The new report provides us with an opportunity to implement all 17 recommendations. I have doubts about whether that will be possible, but the goodwill exists in the Department to do it.

Recommendation 1 of the report ties in with what I said about the 1999 report. Several Members mentioned an overarching strategy, and that recommendation asks that such a strategy be implemented before the RPA changes are made. Having looked at some of the evidence — not all of it, because, as I said, the report is a 500-page document — I wonder whether there should be a focus on and a priority given to a number of recommendations. My colleague Mickey Brady mentioned car parking, and that is definitely an issue in town centres; it is certainly the case in Strabane. There has been some liaison with car parking attendants, which has borne fruit.

1.00 pm

Mrs Long: I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council. The issues of car parking and pedestrianisation have been raised, but one of the issues for town centre management is that of accessibility. One of the difficulties of pedestrianisation is that those who hold blue badges often find city and town centres more difficult to access after that work has been done. Does the Member agree that that would have to be looked at carefully to ensure that everyone has access to the city centre in the fullest possible way?

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Member for her intervention, and I agree. I will return to my previous point: it is important that some of the key recommendations are taken forward.

Recommendations 7 and 8 of the Committee's report address the issues of poverty, disadvantage and inequality. I was interested to hear from some of the witnesses who appeared before the Committee that DSD officials carry out a form of assessment and evaluation of new jobs being created in town centres. That was in reference to a number of new jobs in Lisburn city centre and how they would have a positive effect in the Collin Glen ward. Plenty of work can be done to examine the effect on areas of disadvantage if jobs are created in the town centre.

Victoria Square was also referenced during the inquiry. I know that there was a different economic climate in 2007, but one witness, Mr McGrillen, said that a major initiative was being embarked on to link the jobs in Victoria Square to all the disadvantaged communities in the greater Belfast area. If that sort of work is being done, it is very helpful, and should be carried out in towns as well as cities.

I thank the DSD officials and members of the Committee for Social Development for having representation from Strabane at the Committee, and also for visiting Strabane to find out what has happened there. The Minister visited Strabane last week, and that was a good community engagement.

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

Mrs McGill: An opportunity may have been missed to deal, in an informal setting, with the master plan that Strabane has in place. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Dr Farry: It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak about the Committee's report as a non-member of that Committee. I take a strong interest in these matters. I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council and as a board member of Bangor and Holywood Town Centre Management.

It is important that we acknowledge the challenges facing town centres in Northern Ireland. We are all aware of the change in shopping patterns with the trend being towards out-of-town or edge-of-town shopping. That type of retail holds major attractions for people, including the ease of parking and the fact that they are able to shop in an enclosed framework away from the elements. That trend will remain in the future. The challenge is how we respond to that and revitalise our town centres.

It is unrealistic to try to turn the clock back to protect what we had in the past, or to try to restore that. We need to look at moving forward and doing things differently in our town centres.

I will highlight three elements. First, there must be a different type of retail that appeals to a different type of shopper. Secondly, there is the issue of bringing

people back into town centres to reside. That would bring a critical mass of people who would use those shops and other leisure facilities, therefore helping to sustain new economic activity.

There is also the issue of office development and how we can encourage businesses to relocate in town centres where there used to be shops. Leaving aside Planning Policy Statement 5, which we should not delve into at this stage, there are problems with planning. Planning policy often militates against town centres being competitive in office development and steers large developments towards Belfast and Derry. We are losing out on opportunities for back-office development. Brighton has redefined itself from being a seaside resort to a place where much back-office work for the City of London is conducted. Many towns on the edge of Belfast could follow that example.

I want to highlight a number of challenges. I welcome the commitment to the various master plans across Northern Ireland, but there is an issue about how those will be followed up. Given the tight budgetary conditions, will the money be available to address the various recommendations that come forward? We must also recognise that much of the responsibility for delivering on the ideas and master plans will fall on Departments other than DSD, which raises the issue of joined-up government once again.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: I will give way to my party colleague and then to Mrs Kelly.

Mrs Long: Does the Member agree that one point of concern is the master plans' standing in relation to planning in various areas? Much public money is expended on the master-planning exercise, but the Planning Service often considers applications on their individual merits rather than in the context of a master plan.

Dr Farry: That is a well-made point. It is important that the Planning Service engages fully in the development of the master plans. I will now give way to Mrs Kelly.

Mrs D Kelly: Given the limited window of opportunity for European Union funding, does the Member agree that all opportunities must be maximised? We must enable town centre management committees and councils to get help in drawing up applications, and the Department should help to set out where funding opportunities lie.

Dr Farry: That is another well-made point. I have been disappointed and concerned by the piecemeal approach to European funding over the past number of years. We have missed opportunities to create a lasting legacy on infrastructural improvement.

I also have concerns about the nature of the split of responsibilities among Departments. DSD has the lead role in overall urban regeneration policy, and I commend the Minister and her officials for the leadership that they have shown. However, the Planning Service, Roads Service and other Departments such as DETI and DARD also have responsibilities in this area, and it is sometimes difficult to tie things together. For example, in my constituency, the “front” development in Holywood has encountered problems in the transfer of ownership of a car park that involves DSD and DRD. That should have been a simple process, but it has been held up for years without meaningful explanation and has been a source of great frustration in the community.

Timescales are important to town centre regeneration. In Northern Ireland, bureaucracy sometimes stifles initiatives and discourages people from coming forward with ideas and bringing those ideas to fruition. We must streamline our bureaucracy as much as possible without throwing away any important scrutiny measures. We must ensure that decisions can be taken quickly and effectively and that we can seize the opportunities for regeneration in towns across Northern Ireland.

I went through almost my entire speech without mentioning Queen’s Parade in Bangor, but I commend the Minister for her actions on that project.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

I thank the Committee for Social Development for the substantial work that it has done in preparing the work on town centre regeneration and for the opportunity that that affords us to have a wider discussion on an important topic. Assembly colleagues will appreciate that, although I have read the report — I did so yesterday — I have not yet had time to consider fully the Committee’s recommendations. Therefore, I do not intend to comment on those in detail today. I will provide the Committee with a more detailed response in the coming weeks.

I will, however, take this opportunity to comment briefly on the main thrust of the report and on some of the comments made by Members during the debate.

My Department is leading a substantial process of change that will see the delivery of urban regeneration transfer to the 11 new councils in 2011. To help that process, I have tasked officials with creating a new overarching policy and strategy framework for urban regeneration that will be fit for purpose for that new world. That will take some time, but the framework will be ready for use by new councils in 2011. However, time does not permit any legislative changes that may flow from it to be built into DSD’s transfer of functions Bill, which will shortly make its way through the Assembly; future legislation will be required for any such changes.

My Department’s work is aimed at supporting our towns and cities, and the people who work, live and socialise in them. I want that work to continue to be as successful after 2011 as it has been over the past few years. I am mindful of the recent PricewaterhouseCoopers report, which was published on 12 October 2009, into the review of public administration. In that respect, I will do all that I can to ensure that proper resourcing transfers with the functions to the 11 new councils. It will be also vital to create suitable financial and governance arrangements and shared frameworks — much reference was made to the need for strategic frameworks — to underpin the future partnership working arrangements between DSD and post-RPA councils. As Members are only too well aware, although the operational delivery will reside with the councils, the strategy and policy will remain with the Department.

As the House will know, I have been one of the Ministers who is most enthusiastic about transferring central government functions to local government. I fully support a model of enhanced local government, whereby joined-up government can take place at a more local level. That will be challenging work in a period of significant change. However, I am satisfied that we can continue to deliver and also improve the effectiveness of future delivery.

I remain committed to ensuring that all that work will be taken forward with full public consultation and further engagement with the Committee for Social Development. I want the House to be aware and Members to fully appreciate that I am drawn to many of the Committee’s recommendations, such as the need to evaluate properly the impact of our interventions and the need to support councils in town centre management initiatives, perhaps building on the potential of business improvement districts. In fact, last Friday, on the margins of the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in environment sectoral format, I had an opportunity to talk to Minister Poots about that specific issue. I have also written to Minister Poots, to his predecessor, and to the Minister of Finance and Personnel about the value of business improvement districts.

I am particularly interested in the Committee’s proposal for a town centre regeneration fund, as currently exists in Scotland, and that idea may come into its own, particularly in the environment of the ever-tightening budgets that we now face.

Although I acknowledge the value of the Committee’s recommendations, a number of them, as Committee members have acknowledged, appear to fall outside my Department’s remit, albeit they concern areas that have close links to urban regeneration. The other Departments involved are the Department of the Environment, particularly its Planning Service; the Department for Regional Development; and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development,

because any town in which the population falls below the threshold of 4,500 is the responsibility of DARD. However, I fully appreciate that some towns fall between the two stools. There is, therefore, a need for further discussion, and I am glad that Minister Gildernew and I will discuss the matter.

Although I will highlight such areas in my fuller response to the Committee, I will discuss some matters now. The Committee Chairperson mentioned the monitoring and evaluation framework and the need for it to exist at regional level. I acknowledge fully the historic weaknesses that have existed in that area, and I have undertaken to ensure that the work that is ongoing between the Department of Finance and Personnel and NISRA is implemented and dovetails with the policy strategy framework.

1.15 pm

Mr Brady raised the issue of ad hoc development. That is an important area, and DSD is working on the master-planning exercise to address that. Sometimes, however, the reality is that much regeneration is relevant and is often predicated on private sector investors' willingness to support specific schemes. Therefore, a balanced approach is necessary. Mr Brady also mentioned car parking charges, which, although of interest to the Department and me, remains the responsibility of DRD. My understanding is that tariff setting will remain with DRD even after the responsibility for parking and regeneration moves to the new councils.

Mr Brady also raised other issues that concern Newry. I met representatives of the Newry Chamber of Commerce and Trade about two weeks ago, and I was happy to inform them that we are considering a master plan for the area, as well as public realm schemes for Hill Street and Monaghan Street.

Mr Armstrong and Mr Burns emphasised that local councils are best placed to drive forward regeneration. I agree wholeheartedly, and I was glad that the Committee pointed that out. Given that councils and councillors are best placed to identify local issues, regeneration should reside with local government. Mr Burns also discussed the new opportunities that councils have to spread the costs of town centre management across a number of towns. Indeed, I have local experience of those issues.

Ms Lo highlighted the difficulties of managing available money effectively. That is why I commissioned work on the overall policy framework and funded a huge increase in the work to create development master plans. That local work will provide a better starting point from which to make decisions to allow funding to be diverted to new schemes.

Mr Easton raised the issue of ring-fencing funding on transfer to councils. That issue is close to my heart because if councils are to deliver on the agenda in

question, they will need the resources to do so. He also emphasised the role that social and affordable housing has to play in town centre regeneration. Again, I do not resile from that viewpoint. I was very happy to secure and divert funding to LOTS schemes for town centre living. As Members will be aware, I see that as an issue of town centre regeneration. I was very happy to devolve that responsibility to local councils, and I was also very happy to ensure that the councils will be provided with additional finance in the meantime. I am sure that Mr Fra McCann will welcome that. In the meantime, I diverted those resources to ensure that all those towns that are exploring and pump-priming LOTS scheme will be able to do so.

Mr Fra McCann spoke about the critical issue of ensuring that public realm schemes are delivered effectively. He raised the very fair point that, quite often, utility providers come after work has been done and dig up the streets that we have put down very carefully. In that respect, there is a clear duty on the Utility Regulator to enter into direct discussions with the Department to ensure that that does not happen and that we have better synchronisation.

Councils also have a role to play in the public realm in that they have a very clear duty to ensure its cleanliness. Those maintenance regimes are ongoing, and I hope that councils pick up on that point.

Mr Craig reflected on DSD's change of approach in recent years to towns and cities, particularly Belfast and Derry.

In my time as Minister, I have supported significant investment in LOTS schemes and public realm schemes, and I have emphasised the need for preparatory work to be carried out, particularly on master planning and the whole public realm. Underpinning all that work is partnership with councils, businesses and the general community.

Mr Alban Maginness raised the issue of co-ordination. Mr Storey pointed out that somebody must take a lead. I foresee councils, with their new roles, as being central to that. At present, responsibility for policy and delivery lies with DSD; however, operations will transfer to councils.

Mrs McGill spoke about Strabane, where I was glad to be last Wednesday night. I had a useful meeting with local representatives and the local community. The issue of the Melvin bridge was raised, and I look forward to the council's economic appraisal's being delivered for my Department's adjudication. She raised the issue of master plans, which I will ask my officials to review. I will get back to the Member on that issue.

Mrs McGill also referred to the EDAW report, which was undertaken following departmental reorganisation in 1999-2000, and she stressed the need for it to be made clear when recommendations are

implemented. I reassure the House that I will make a clear response to the Committee on the accepted recommendations, along with a time frame for implementation.

Mrs Long made the point that regeneration must balance community needs with those of town centre users, particularly for people with disabilities. I acknowledge that that is a difficult issue that needs to be addressed better at policy level; during consultation with stakeholders, especially for public realm schemes; and at implementation level.

Dr Farry mentioned Queen's Parade in Bangor, where I am glad that progress is being made. I was pleased to visit Bangor some weeks ago. I think that I was asked two questions on Queen's Parade during today's debate. Dr Farry said that more of our towns and cities must come up with realistic uses. Mrs Long's point about the master plan's linking better into the wider planning context was well made. That is why I believe that we need better co-ordination and better input from the other Departments.

Mrs Dolores Kelly said that funding for the various schemes should be made available so that those involved in town centre regeneration are better informed. That goes back to the simple issue of the need for better communication, co-ordination and input by all the stakeholders and Departments involved.

The debate has been most useful and is one to which I have greatly enjoyed contributing. My officials were also happy to contribute. In fact, over the past two and a half years, I have visited Belfast, Derry and almost all the major towns in Northern Ireland that are at either the public realm consultation or implementation phase. They are probably at the draft master plan stage. We are now at the stage of introducing development briefs for the full master plan. The process can take a considerable time. I suppose that we are all asking for patience —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Minister draw her remarks to a close?

The Minister for Social Development: However, the direct involvement of central government, local government, the wider community and stakeholders is required.

Finally, I thank the Committee for its report. I will be more than happy to provide a full response to all its recommendations in the coming weeks.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): At the outset, I declare an interest as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council, as a director of the Carrickfergus Development Company and as a member of the steering group that is working on the Carrickfergus master plan with departmental officials.

On behalf of the Committee for Social Development, I thank, as always, the Minister and Members for their contributions to the debate. I also commend the Committee staff for their hard work during the lengthy inquiry.

The Committee for Social Development's inquiry into town centre regeneration has been a long journey, and I am pleased to be able to bring that journey to a conclusion. I hope that when stakeholders in towns and cities across Northern Ireland look back on the debate, they will see it as a watershed moment in which a better understanding of the issues was developed and further progress towards improvement began.

The members of the Social Development Committee are drawn from some of Northern Ireland's most picturesque, historic and economically important towns and cities, from Carrickfergus and Comber to Lisburn, Ards, Antrim, Cookstown, Newry and even Londonderry and Belfast. I must also mention Strabane, or I will fall out with some Members. Some of those towns and cities have benefitted from substantial capital investment by the Department.

The Committee believes that, along with that investment, the continuing validity and vibrancy of those towns and cities, particularly the ones that lie outside the main conurbations, is a tribute to the hard work, persistence and expertise of councils, town centre management partnerships and informal business improvement districts. The Committee considered a lot of evidence from those stakeholders, and it concluded that they need practical help for regeneration initiatives, a workable and inclusive delivery system that addresses issues such as perceived geographical bias, and, crucially, an appropriate level of financial investment and support.

One of the report's key recommendations is that the new councils are the right bodies to deliver town centre regeneration. The councils will need financial support for their additional duties, and they need town centre management partnerships or BIDs to help them. Although the Committee commends the Minister for her support for BIDs, it urges her to bring her proposals to the Executive before the onset of the review of public administration, which is about reducing bureaucracy and eliminating quangos. The Committee believes that BIDs, with their limited lifespan, delivery focus and local accountability, are far from typical quangos, and they should be actively encouraged under the RPA.

The Committee noted the frustration and confusion among councils and others with respect to the direction of regeneration policy. The Committee agrees that that is an unsatisfactory state of affairs, and, therefore, suggests that it be dealt with in two ways. First, an overarching strategy for town centre regeneration, married to master plans and backed up with a monitoring and evaluation framework, is an absolute necessity and

must be developed without further delay. Secondly, transparency and engagement must be improved. The Committee suggests that that be done through the town centre regeneration fund, which, like the Scottish version, should be competitive and have understandable criteria for success. Furthermore, care should be taken to ensure that there is an even and transparent distribution of expenditure across the whole of Northern Ireland.

Although the inquiry was long, it was useful and informative, and, by and large, Members' comments were also useful and informative. Mr Brady touched on many of the report's recommendations. He highlighted his experience with car parking issues and pedestrianisation in Newry, which are also bugbears throughout Northern Ireland, and he urged the Minister to clarify roles and responsibilities in that regard.

Billy Armstrong pointed out how the RPA presents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to devolve the control of town centre regeneration to the enlarged councils, thus delivering tangible benefits to ordinary people in towns and smaller cities.

Thomas Burns stressed the importance of joined-up government and the need to fund town centre management partnerships. He also referred to the importance of vesting and social housing as means to stimulate town centre regeneration.

Anna Lo mentioned the importance of having a strategic planning vision as the basis for town centre regeneration. She spoke about the inspirational leadership of regeneration activities in other jurisdictions, and she referred to economic and sectarian segregation in our town centres.

Alex Easton referred to the importance of adequate and ring-fenced financial support for the enlarged councils to deliver town centre regeneration. He called for blue-sky thinking, and he praised the enhanced openness and transparency of the Scottish town centre regeneration fund.

Fra McCann expressed the frustration of community organisations that are seeking funding to support town centre regeneration. He called for meaningful partnerships between Departments and stakeholders and the directing of resources to projects that will support town centres. He also referred to the report's final recommendation, which relates to the co-ordination of the work of utility companies.

1.30 pm

Jonathan Craig spoke of the historical unevenness of regeneration expenditure and asked the Minister to consider measures to address the issue. He reminded the House of the master plan process that is ongoing throughout the towns in Northern Ireland.

Alban Maginness highlighted the need for a co-ordinated development strategy, which he said was in

the interests of key stakeholders, including businesses and consumers. He reminded Members of the key roles of our small towns in the social and economic life of Northern Ireland. He called for leadership and co-ordination from the DRD, DOE and DSD in the resolution of key issues such as brownfield developments and pedestrianisation.

Claire McGill asked that the Committee follow the recommendations up to ensure implementation of the key issues; for example, car parking and pedestrianisation, which were recurrent themes. She also spoke about the importance of evaluating town centre regeneration in relation to providing jobs for deprived areas.

Stephen Farry referred to the challenges facing town centres in respect of retail offerings, customer profiles and the relocation of offices to town centres. He welcomed the master plan process but raised concerns about the delivery and financing of master plans. He also referred to the responsibilities of other Departments in town centre regeneration and the need to reduce bureaucracy.

The Minister commented on the change process that the Department is undergoing and indicated that she accepts the Committee's recommendations on the overarching strategy. She undertook to ensure good financial support and appropriate governance for the transfer of town centre regeneration to local councils. She promised full consultation and engagement with the Committee in that regard, and we welcome that. She expressed support for the town centre regeneration fund and business improvement districts and acknowledged historical weaknesses in the evaluation of regeneration. She referred to issues outside her direct control but accepted the key role of new councils in delivering town centre regeneration in the future and said that schemes such as the living over the shop scheme were important. She called on the Utility Regulator to help the Department for Social Development tackle the disruption caused by the utility companies in our towns and for closer co-ordination among all stakeholders. She concluded by saying that she will respond to the Committee's report in writing in due course. That is very welcome.

I commend to the House the Committee's report on the inquiry into town centre regeneration.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Social Development on its inquiry into town centre regeneration; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to implement the recommendations.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Child Abuse: Ryan Report

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

Mrs Hanna: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses grave concern at the findings of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse report (the Ryan report) published in May 2009 in the Republic of Ireland; considers that such neglect and abuse of children and young people's human rights must be subject to criminal law; recognises that children who were placed by state authorities in Northern Ireland in establishments or settings where they became victims of abuse are entitled to support and redress; calls on the Executive to commission an assessment of the extent of abuse and neglect in Northern Ireland, to liaise and work with the authorities in the Republic of Ireland and to report to the Assembly; calls on the Executive to provide funding to support helpline and counselling services which are now facing new demands; and further calls on the Executive to work, through the North/South Ministerial Council, to ensure that all-Ireland protections for children and vulnerable adults are in place as soon as possible.

On 20 May 2009, the Irish Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse published its report — some 2,500 pages — known as the Ryan report. The report has proved to be a watershed in recent Irish history.

The commission was set up in 1999 to investigate all forms of abuse of children in care in the Irish Republic from 1914, in particular allegations of physical, mental, emotional and sexual child abuse and cruelty in reformatory and industrial schools operated by Catholic religious orders, which were funded and supervised by the Irish Department of Education. There was, of course, abuse in homes other than those run by Catholic orders, but the focus today is on the Ryan report.

During that period, about 25,000 children passed through those institutions. Some 1,500 have come forward with allegations to the Ryan commission, and 1,090 men and women who reported having been abused as children in those institutions gave evidence to the commission. Abuse was reported regarding 216 schools and residential settings, including industrial and reformatory schools, children's homes, hospitals, national and secondary schools, day and residential special needs schools, foster care and a small number of other residential institutions, including laundries and hostels.

Significantly, the number of child inmates peaked in the early to mid-1940s, around the time when children's allowances were introduced. From the 1950s, increased wealth and other social welfare measures reduced the number of needy children. That shows that behind many of the family break-ups and other traumas that led to children being put into care were poverty and sheer economic necessity. We must never accept family breakdown, poverty, disadvantage, poor health and inadequate housing as reasons for ignoring the most vulnerable children, nor rest in our unrelenting assault on poverty and disadvantage, at home and abroad.

Because of the Ryan report, the history of Church and state in an independent twentieth-century Ireland has to be fundamentally reappraised. Ryan is the gravest indictment of the powerful and privileged in Church and state: the religious orders, the hierarchy, successive Governments and the Department of Education. Irish people today and for decades will ask how the horrors and terrors that have been documented were inflicted on innocent children who were placed by the state in the care of religious orders. It is a terrifying account of the shattered lives of generations of Irish children.

It is beyond belief to me, as a practising Catholic, that those who perpetrated the abuse had promised to uphold and practise the gospel of love. They betrayed congregations founded to serve the very noblest of ideals. As a Christian friend said, Church and state should, perhaps, be separated, because they could then keep a better eye on each other.

Some MLAs may ask what that has got to do with children who were in care in Northern Ireland. The relevant religious orders operated on an all-island basis, and there have been allegations against and criminal convictions of some of those who were supposed to be the primary protectors of children. That is why Ryan needs to be complemented and finalised by a postscript for Northern Ireland and why the Executive need to act now.

I welcome the sincere and long overdue apology made on behalf of the Irish state by an Taoiseach and his predecessor to the victims of childhood abuse for the state's collective failure to intervene, to detect their pain and to come to the rescue, and I acknowledge the Dáil motion, which was passed unanimously, welcoming the Ryan report and its recommendations and expressing the shame and humiliation of the state authorities.

I salute the remarkable and courageous people in the Gallery who were residents of institutions. Earlier today, they presented me and other Assembly Members with a petition that was signed by many thousands on behalf of their organisation, Justice for the Victims of

Institutional Abuse in Northern Ireland. I intend to lay that petition before the Assembly and Executive.

I mention Margaret in particular, because it was she who approached me after I tabled the motion. Margaret and her three siblings were placed in care with the Nazareth Sisters when their parents broke up. She was aged three, and she was kept there until the age of 11. I will read to the House a small part of what she has to say about those eight years:

“No love was ever displayed and that is so difficult and confusing for a young child who has just been separated from her family. We were treated like child slaves ... made to scrub the floors, windows and walls. It was just like something out of a Dickens book. We were just little children and we were on our hands and knees scrubbing floors. My whole life there was lived in fear — fear of the next beating, the next humiliation. I was made to feel worthless, that I was a bad person and I kept those beliefs with me my whole life.”

That is only one story; we know that many more remain untold. Margaret’s campaign and that of the other victims and survivors is for the recognition of children who were abused in Northern Ireland.

I welcome the fact that Cardinal Brady said that the Catholic Church will co-operate fully with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the PSNI on allegations of child abuse and that all relevant allegations that are held on the records of the North’s dioceses have been reported. The situation with the religious orders is more complex and unsatisfactory, because they operated independently. However, I am glad that they have now agreed to co-operate with the authorities on a complete review of all the allegations that they have on record.

I note and welcome the fact that the independent National Board for Safeguarding Children, which was established by the Catholic hierarchy, will examine the records of child abuse that are held by all dioceses and religious orders — records that form part of the Catholic Church’s safeguarding policy — and that the Church has given a commitment to transparency and to the principle of the paramountcy of the welfare of the child. The board is undertaking a complete review of the handling of every allegation of child abuse against clergy in every diocese in Ireland, and the result will be reported fully to the civil authorities in both jurisdictions.

From 1965 to today, around 5,200 diocesan priests, sisters and brothers of religious orders have been in ministry in Northern Ireland. To date, allegations of child abuse have been made against 81 of them.

Last week, a good priest from my diocese wrote to me to express his bewilderment and anguish at the revelations of the Ryan report. He asked how:

“a Christian Church could have contradicted so profoundly the fundamental Gospel principle of putting the care of the ‘little ones’ first! So much of what happened was simply evil and inhumane.

That it was tolerated or covered up or explained away for as long as it was is just as damning! As a priest, a Christian and a human being it fills me with revulsion and shame. It is also a total inversion of the ideals and mission of the generous and prophetic Irish founders of these Religious Orders. They gave up everything they had to care for children who had no opportunity at education. Where did their successors go so wrong?”

My SDLP colleagues will deal with the other relevant matters and the DUP amendment in their contributions to the debate. My colleague Mark Durkan will elaborate on the reasons why we cannot accept the amendment.

As President McAleese rightly said, those who perpetrated crimes against survivors, no matter how long ago, must be held to account in the courts. The inadequate compensation deal that was reached between the Irish Government and the religious —

1.45 pm

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

Mrs Hanna: Finally, we must never forget that children in care are the most vulnerable and at-risk in our society, a fact that continues to the present day. We must ensure that child protection protocols are in place and are rigorously monitored, so that the abuse that was revealed in the Ryan report will never happen again.

Miss McIlveen: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after “criminal law;” and insert

“and calls on the Executive to produce a report detailing measures for dealing with past abuse and ensuring that rigorous protections are in place for the future.”

When a report is produced that tells us that violence, rape and sexual molestation were endemic in Irish Roman Catholic-run industrial schools, we are justifiably shocked. When it is highlighted that the 800 or so perpetrators of such evil were not only charged with caring for children but were in a position of responsibility for religious and moral teaching, we can be rightly disgusted. When it transpires that the number of child victims of those vile and other violent and humiliating acts runs into thousands, we are truly horrified. For decades, thousands of boys and girls in the Irish Republic were terrorised, while government inspectors failed to stop the chronic beatings, rapes and humiliation. That is what was uncovered in the Ryan report.

The House has already heard from the proposer of the motion that the publication of the Ryan report followed a nine-year investigation that produced a 2,600 page report and made 20 recommendations. The report itself has been criticised for affording anonymity to the perpetrators of those terrible crimes, even to those who have been convicted of offences that were dealt with by the report. Shamefully, the Christian Brothers, who ran several boys’ institutions and were

deemed to have harboured serial child molesters and sadists on their staff, successfully sued the commission in 2004 to ensure that all of their members, dead or alive, remained unnamed in the report.

No criminal charges will follow as a result of the report, leaving victims such as John Walsh feeling “cheated and deceived” and leading him to comment after the publication of the report:

“I would have never opened my wounds if I’d known this was going to be the end result. It has devastated me and will devastate most victims because there is no criminal proceedings and no accountability whatsoever.”

Another victim Christine Buckley was severely beaten by a nun for trying to smuggle out a letter that detailed the abuse that she experienced, including her claim that she was forced by nuns to meet a paedophile. Other victims have described ritualised beatings with items that were designed to maximise pain. Such beatings sometimes took place in private, but they often occurred in front of staff, residents and other pupils. One victim described how he was forced to wrap his urine-stained sheets around his neck and parade in front of the other children as a punishment for wetting his bed. Furthermore, sexual abuse was reported by over half of those who testified before the commission.

A panel that was appointed by the Irish Government paid compensation to 12,000 abuse survivors on the condition that they surrender their right to sue either the Catholic Church or the state, and around 2,000 more claims are pending. Furthermore, Irish Roman Catholic leaders made a deal with the Government in 2001 that capped the Church’s contribution to a fraction of the final cost. However, some victims have stated that nothing, not even criminal convictions, would ever heal their psychological wounds.

The victims were sent to what were known as industrial schools run by the religious orders. We would know them today as child detention centres, and they were sent to those schools because they were orphaned, neglected or abandoned. They were the forgotten children and those who were the most susceptible to such cruel and horrific abuse, because no one was there to protect them. Their guardians were their abusers, and the state turned a blind eye to that abuse.

I fully support the desire behind the motion to see those who committed such evil brought to justice. It is truly an injustice that thousands suffered at the hands of those who were supposed to care for and protect them and that criminal proceedings have not followed the publication of the Ryan report.

I believe that all Members would want to express their horror and outrage at the abuse that was suffered by children in clerical and state institutions in whatever jurisdiction. We cannot begin to comprehend the fear

and vulnerability that the victims of that abuse experienced in settings where they should have received care and nurture. It is the most disturbing of betrayals.

The motion makes many requests, including a call for:

“the Executive to commission an assessment of the extent of abuse and neglect in Northern Ireland, to liaise and work with the authorities in the Republic of Ireland and to report to the Assembly”.

Although I believe that an assessment should be made of the scale of what occurred in Northern Ireland, it should not turn into an inquiry. Furthermore, we should recognise that the circumstances in Northern Ireland were very different to those in the Republic of Ireland.

The desire of victims for justice and acknowledgement is natural and important. I tabled the amendment because I remain seriously concerned that to follow the road of the Ryan inquiry would deny victims the kind of acknowledgement and justice that they most need. The lack of a focus on criminal prosecutions and the agreement to immunity from prosecution for those guilty of such abuse is the most fundamental flaw in the inquiry and not one that serves any of the victims. The Assembly should not move forward in a manner that denies natural justice and gives protection to those guilty of such crimes.

I am concerned that we do not move hastily to follow the example of an inquiry that has left many victims feeling let down and still seeking justice. We must start by considering what we already know about the scope of past abuse in Northern Ireland and the most effective mechanisms for addressing the needs of victims. I understand that much of the information held in the Catholic dioceses has been passed to the police and that any outstanding information is from Catholic orders that work on an international basis.

I am extremely sceptical about an inquiry, as it is highly unlikely that it will deliver anything for victims. First, it will tell us nothing that we do not already know. Secondly, the extent of clerical abuse in institutions in Northern Ireland is unlikely to be the same as that in the Irish Republic, given our much more regulated environment, the better child protection systems in Northern Ireland in general — particularly when compared to the Irish Republic — and the separation of Church and state. Thirdly, any inquiry is likely to be time-consuming and would draw in massive resources that would divert attention from the children and survivors of abuse who need help now.

The Ryan report took nine years to complete and was delayed by a year by the Christian Brothers’ court case on anonymity. I have no doubt that any such inquiry in Northern Ireland would be beset by similar problems.

Mr P Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Miss McIlveen: If the Member does not mind, I would like to continue.

I tabled the amendment to allow the Executive to assess the extent of the problem and to take action where required. Where the identified services are unable to cope, the sexual violence strategy provides a cross-departmental vehicle to address such issues. My primary concern is to ensure that the victims who need access to counselling and support can find that available. Therefore, it is important that we ensure that the current level of provision meets demand and that the victims are not left unsupported. I am aware that one outworking of the Ryan inquiry has been to provide counselling for victims of abuse, and that is also available to the victims in Northern Ireland.

It is equally important to ensure that current systems for protecting children now are as robust and as comprehensive as possible. The border can and does provide opportunities for those who wish to harm children, and it is essential to ensure that systems in both jurisdictions are effective. Our current child protection systems are much more stringent than those in the Irish Republic, and, although there has been progress on vetting and monitoring those guilty of abusing children, it is still imperative that the Irish Government put in place equivalent protection.

The request for a redress board in the SDLP's motion is unnecessary, given the availability of the criminal compensation scheme in Northern Ireland. The current 2009 scheme and the previous 2002 scheme allow for claims for sexual abuse to be considered where they would have been governed by previous legislation but were ruled out due to time limitation, and that covers incidents that occurred between 11 June 1968 and 30 June 1988. Victims should also be encouraged to pursue other civil remedies through the civil court system to seek legal redress for abuse from institutions and orders.

The primary point that we must learn from the examples of the Ryan report and the Ferns report is that we must ensure that such things never happen again. We must maintain a constant vigil and review repeatedly the strength of our child protection procedures, and that is where vital resources must be channelled. Although I have said that our child protection systems are better than those in the Irish Republic — I say that advisedly — we cannot rest on our laurels, because, to put it simply, no system is ever perfect.

I wholly support the victims of abuse in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic in their quest for justice and acknowledgement and to ensure that they receive the support, care and counselling that they require to cope with the horrors they have encountered. I feel that the motion as amended would afford the best framework for that to be achieved.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the proposers of the motion for securing the debate. It is highly important that we take a level-headed approach to the issues involved, because we are dealing with human beings — victims and survivors. I also want to place on record Sinn Féin's support for the campaign by victims and survivors and their families, who are calling for a full public inquiry into their treatment in institutions run by the Church and the state in the North, which was similar to the treatment that was highlighted in the Ryan report.

It is important that we consider the outcome for victims and survivors, because the Ryan report highlighted a lot of issues. People spoke about it for years, but the Ryan report formally brought to the fore the treatment that was handed out to children, some of whom were the most vulnerable in our society and whom we as a state, both North and South, had a duty to protect. We failed to do that.

Sinn Féin will oppose the DUP's amendment. What strikes me is that the Member who spoke previously believes that the motion denies victims the justice that they need. It must be put on record that it is the victims who are calling for the inquiry; I think that they know the justice that they need and want.

Ms Ruane: The interests and needs of survivors and victims must be paramount, and the Assembly and Executive must do all in their power to ensure that the needs of survivors are met. I am sure that the Member agrees that the issue of institutional child abuse is a deep injustice that affected the entire island of Ireland, and I find it bizarre that the amendment seeks to oppose liaising with the Government in the South of Ireland. I join my party colleagues in giving our support and paying tribute to the survivors who have spoken out, because we understand the courage that it takes to speak out in difficult and traumatic circumstances.

Ms S Ramsey: I agree with the Member's comments. I know that she is speaking as a private Member but I hope that, in her role as a Minister, she will take forward some of those issues in the Executive. I know that she will do that.

The Ryan report exposed a regime of fear that ruled on the dark side of Irish society. We must recognise that it is only because of the courage of the victims and survivors in speaking out that we are able to look at the horror that children and teenagers face. There must be full accountability for that. People cannot expect to get away with the treatment that they handed out to some children. There also needs to be a full national approach to the issue from the Department of Health. I know that the junior Minister will speak on behalf of the Executive, and I think that he will cover some of the things that should be covered by the Health Minister. We must recognise that there is a need to have in place

systems and treatment for the victims and survivors across the whole island so that society and the institutions of government do not fail those people.

I acknowledge the courage of victims and survivors, and I welcome those who are present today. A number of us met them earlier when they handed in a petition. You are more than welcome. You say that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. According to the rulings, conventions and practices outlined in the 'Northern Ireland Assembly Companion' it is not normal practice to refer to visitors in the Public Gallery. I ask the Member to refrain from doing so.

Ms S Ramsey: I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker, but there should be some latitude given, as it happens all the time. I am not questioning your ruling, but Members refer to visitors in the Public Gallery all the time; that may be something that the Assembly should look at. I take on board what you have said.

2.00 pm

A full and rigorous inquiry is needed on the issues that Members have raised in the debate. We should not lose sight of the fact that the NIO must be held accountable for part of the issue, and it strikes me that the sooner policing and justice is devolved into local hands, the better. We will then be able to deal with issues such as criminal compensation, which was mentioned by the previous Member who spoke. I appeal that today's debate be forwarded to the Secretary of State and the NIO so that they are aware of the feelings and views of the Assembly and can provide a response. We can only take the matter so far; the NIO has a responsibility for some of the issues.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Ramsey: I am conscious of the fact that I have only 35 seconds left to speak. It is a pity that we have only this amount of time.

I will finish with the words of the campaigning group:

"We as victims of a harsh and cruel regime over many years in children's homes have recently come together as one, united in our quest for justice. We are hoping that the motion tabled that day will have the support of all the parties to further our case for justice. Our hopes are that our voices will be heard and that we shall be given the same recognition, as victims of institutional abuse"

— in the Twenty-six Counties. Today is another forum for their voices to be heard, so I support the motion.

Mr Beggs: The publication of the Ryan report was a dark day for the Government of the Republic of Ireland and for the Catholic Church. The horrors and grief that the report uncovered shocked not only people in Northern Ireland but everyone in the Republic of Ireland and people throughout the world. However, the report confirmed what countless victims, participants in abuse and silent observers already knew. Sexual, physical and mental abuse was endemic in the industrial school

system that operated in the Republic of Ireland for many decades.

I thank the Members who tabled the motion. It is unfortunate that the issue of abuse in the Roman Catholic Church and the Irish state is still a delicate topic and that many wish that it would be forgotten and brushed under the carpet. That must not be allowed to happen; we must ensure that it is fully exposed, that lessons are learned and that it is prevented from happening in the future.

For the majority of their lives, most victims of institutional abuse have been ignored and shunned, and the crimes against them have been denied. Although the number of victims in Northern Ireland may be fewer, the pain and suffering of individual victims is the same, their desire for justice is the same, and their need for support is the same.

Across western Europe in the second half of the previous century, the public's expectation of what the state should do and the protection that it should offer to its most vulnerable citizens changed for the better. However, in many instances, those protections failed or were wilfully ignored and abused. Due, in many ways, to the influence of the Catholic Church on education, many of the changes in the Republic of Ireland were only skin-deep. There, the nineteenth century institutions, which were operating in the twentieth century, were weakly regulated, leaving the door open for cowardly wickedness and the abuse of innocence.

However, we cannot be complacent in Northern Ireland, although different circumstances and regulatory frameworks have existed here for many decades. Here, following the Kincora inquiry, major changes were made to child protection systems. Protection of children and vulnerable adults (POCVA) regulations have operated for some time, and the new safeguarding regulation is in place. There is evidence that abuse took place, and, for the sake of victims and society, we must ensure that it can never happen again in Northern Ireland.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

It is correct that the issue requires a multi-departmental approach. It is primarily an issue for the Northern Ireland Office, which is responsible for policing and justice and criminal law, to protect children in Northern Ireland. I welcome the statements that the Minister of Health made concerning the considerable and ongoing engagement at official level.

Mr Storey: A second reference has been made to the NIO's role in policing and justice. Will the Member accept that the issue is to ensure that people are made amenable for their awful deeds? Unfortunately, however, the Ryan report involved a negotiated agreement whereby people would be granted immunity and no prosecution

would be carried out. That is not the criminal justice system that we want in Northern Ireland.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am not aware that the Ryan report has any legal standing in Northern Ireland. Our legal justice system has standing here. I hope that the debate and the report's publication encourage more victims to come forward and give evidence so that perpetrators are held to account and are brought before the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland.

The issue can be addressed in a practical way in the North/South Ministerial Council. Some matters that are addressed by the Council are questionable; child protection issues, however, are legitimate. I know that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will encourage closer monitoring of those issues as changes occur in the Republic of Ireland. It is to be hoped that the Republic will learn from the changes that have occurred throughout decades in Northern Ireland.

I welcome the recent introduction of the vetting and barring scheme's safeguards in Northern Ireland. Employers face potential fines of up to £5,000 if they even fail to report an employee who harms, or poses a risk of harm to, children and vulnerable adults. I also welcome OFMDFM's route map for the protection of children and young people. Major changes have occurred in Northern Ireland.

I hope that the enormity and weight of evidence in the Ryan report will encourage change in the Republic of Ireland. To date, the Republic's child protection system has been antiquated. It has been unable to change that. It needs to change its Constitution fundamentally. I hope that the report will be a major building block in taking that forward so that the Republic's child protection system will match that of the United Kingdom, which has one of the highest levels of protection anywhere in the world. I hope that that hurdle will be overcome.

It is important to note that the Northern Ireland Office and the Court Service have primacy in those matters and will take them forward. The issue is a major legacy from the past.

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

Mr Beggs: I hope that those matters are raised and dealt with at Westminster so that the Northern Ireland Assembly will not have to pay anything. It is a pity that certain Members do not attend Westminster.

Mr McCarthy: I thank Carmel Hanna and her colleagues for bringing this serious matter to the Floor of the Assembly.

The Alliance Party and the United Community group in the Assembly are absolutely shocked and appalled by the contents of the Ryan report. We condemn all

those people who had any hand or part in treating those vulnerable young people in the manner that the report describes.

Although I have not read all the report, I have read, heard and seen enough to be able to express my utter disgust and, indeed, to be reviled by its contents. It is almost unbelievable that adult human beings could inflict such disgusting behaviour on little children who, though no fault of their own, were placed in care. Instead of receiving care, love, trust, affection and, indeed, education — as any child should expect to receive — the opposite was the case.

I simply cannot understand how that depraved behaviour was allowed to go on for so long. Surely not all adults in those institutions were monsters. Why did the ordinary guardian or teacher not see what was happening and put an end to it earlier, thus saving many young people from that horrible experience?

It is unthinkable that most of the abuse occurred in so-called religious institutions. Among the issues that are raised in Christian teaching is the principle that, if anyone should offend or hurt one of God's little ones, it would be better for that person to put a millstone around his or her neck and be thrown into the sea. That is how seriously the matter ought to have been treated.

How many of the adults who had positions of responsibility in those institutions adhered to that teaching? They simply ignored it. They ought to be thoroughly and utterly ashamed. However, my information is that not all institutions on this island had a culture of cruelty and abuse. We must acknowledge the good work done by caring people who looked after children at that time. They did it properly and in the way that was expected of them.

The motion states:

“children who were placed by state authorities in Northern Ireland in establishments or settings where they became victims of abuse are entitled to support and redress”.

The Executive should carry out an investigation and report to the Assembly. Of course, we all support such an investigation.

We know that abuse occurred throughout the Twenty-six Counties, so there is good reason to say that it occurred in Northern Ireland, too. The victims concerned deserve an investigation and the same support as those in the Republic. After attending the petition handover on the steps of the Building today, I know that the same thing has happened in Northern Ireland, to the shame of those who are responsible.

Some Assembly colleagues, including my party leader David Ford, have asked the Minister questions. The Minister responded by stating that the statutory framework requires that allegations of child abuse must be reported immediately to the PSNI and social

services for investigation. The Minister also said that vetting procedures are as tight as can be and that further legislation is in the pipeline for a safeguarding board for Northern Ireland, which I am sure that we all support. Therefore, progress is being made. However, I am not aware of what the Minister or the Executive have in mind regarding past goings-on in children's institutions in Northern Ireland.

It appears that abuse took place in the various institutions throughout Northern Ireland during the period that the Ryan report covers, from as far back as 1935 and 1944 to more latterly. People affected here during that period are now coming forward. It took nine years to complete the Ryan report, which has some 2,600 pages and more than 100 recommendations. Let the motion, which I hope that the Assembly agrees, be the signal to the Executive to quickly establish a proper investigation.

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

Mr McCarthy: The victims have suffered in silence for such a long time. They deserve to have their story told and to see justice. We must ensure that the like never happens again. I support the motion.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Shannon: I am sure that I am not the only one in the Chamber who has felt the chills of what has taken place on reading the report. I found it hard to read of the abuse of 30,000 vulnerable children in the Republic through the institution of the Catholic Church and the subsequent cover-up. At first, I felt anger and then sorrow at the thought of so many adults now struggling to deal with hateful childhood memories after being put into so-called care and how that has affected their relationships up to 50 years later.

As I read the subsequent newspaper reports, I saw that more than the memories of those who suffered abuse have been tainted by the Catholic Church. Many have had to rethink their position and, at times, even their very faith. The report's repercussions are far-reaching and wide and have shaken the Catholic Church to its foundations.

I know that all institutions have potential difficulties and that, unfortunately, certain things slip between the cracks. However, that is not the case in this situation; rather, the abuse was known and hidden. There must be repercussions for the perpetrators and some form of closure for the victims of the abuse.

I read a report in one of the national papers about a man who had moved to Australia but who came back to the Republic to tell of his abuse at the hands of caregivers in an institution. His stomach-churning account was bad enough. However, even worse was that his wounds were ripped open for the report only to

learn that no one was to be held accountable and that no criminal proceedings were to be held, which made him question why he had bothered to stir up his memories in the first place. That is why investigations must be subject to criminal proceedings. People who have knowingly and purposely carried out or covered up abuse must be held accountable, no matter how long ago the events happened. The Assembly must push for that.

As I stand here, I am aware that hundreds of people outside the Chamber are calling for justice and for us as their Assembly Members to ensure that this is not repeated in Northern Ireland. We must have a structure for dealing with past abuse and a framework that ensures that such abuse does not continue in the future.

2.15 pm

Through my constituency work, I hear of individual cases, and whenever I do, I am chilled and hot at the same time. I am chilled, because I cannot comprehend the evil that allows men and women to abuse the vulnerable in any way, and I am hot with anger that that kind of thing happens at all.

When I read in the report of the sheer scale and magnitude of the abuse, I felt sick to the very pit of my stomach. My heart went out both to all those who had been abused and to those parents who were deemed unfit and had their children taken off them and put into the care system. The number of victims of the horrific abuse cannot be quantified, and its effects are rippling through many countries all over the world. I am sure that this shake-up will give many other victims the courage to speak out about what they have suffered.

It is imperative that procedures are in place to ensure that victims in the Republic of Ireland can be put into a support network and can get psychological assistance. Those procedures must also deal with the spillover into Northern Ireland.

It is important that there be some form of accountability in every institution. Sitting in my church and listening to the announcements on child protection seminars and rules and regulations, I am happy that checks and measures are now in place, even in non-governmental bodies. Such checks are essential and must be carried on.

No one is above the law of the land. No one deserves absolution from crimes, unless they are absolved through the courts. No one should ever again suffer in silence and not know where to go for help.

I have read many blogs and reports commenting on the Ryan report, and time and time again, one thing is made abundantly clear: the time for defending your own has passed. I believe that that time has long gone.

It does not matter what country someone comes from, whether it is the Republic of Ireland or Northern Ireland, and it does not matter what religion someone is, Protestant or Catholic. The report has disgusted us

all equally. I am positive that, for the first time ever, Members are united in their sense of righteous anger against those who perpetrated the abuse, those who covered it up and those who facilitated the continuance of such a disgrace against humanity.

I know that I have the full support of my constituency and that of every right-thinking Member in the Chamber. I support fully the calls for criminal justice, a report, and a system in the Province to deal with any issues that arise.

As we all know, a society is known by how it treats its vulnerable people. In Northern Ireland, we are determined to do the right thing by our people and to put in place firm checks so that we will never again lose generations to institutional abuse.

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

Mr Shannon: We have heard those lost generations, and we have mourned for them. We will act; that is our promise.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion, and I thank the Members who tabled it. Tá muid fíorbhuíoch daoibh. I commend the victims and survivors of abuse for their great courage in raising the issue. Tá daoine ó na grúpaí sin linn inniu, agus cuirim fáilte mhór rompu.

I do not recognise the childproofed picture of child protection in the North that the Member who moved the amendment painted. The fact is that youngsters, sometimes as young as three years old, were sent by courts and other systems into unregulated or unaccountable institutions. That in itself is the stuff of nightmares.

I have read the Ryan report, and it is a shameful tale of abuse, over decades, against children in institutions. There is no doubt that the litany of crime, beatings and rape also happened in institutions in this part of Ireland. It happened throughout Irish society and in all sectors of society, North and South.

One in four people suffers from abuse or knows someone who has been abused. In many cases, the truth of childhood abuse emerges only when the victims have grown up. Sometimes that is triggered by flashback or other remembrance, and the effects can be devastating. Victims need support, care, understanding and love. Most of all, victims need to be believed, especially if the abuser denies any wrongdoing. Victims and survivors need, as a minimum, acknowledgement of the great injustice that has been done to them.

Many people in families have suffered from abuse. I know how deeply hurtful and traumatic that can be, especially if a perpetrator refuses or fails to face up to their responsibilities. There is a huge onus on abusers to face up to their responsibilities.

No one should have to deal with abuse or its consequences in isolation. Everyone needs someone to talk to, and anyone listening to the debate who is affected by these issues should talk to someone.

There is a collective need for society to stand together and support individual victims of abuse and their families. Child protection services need to be strengthened. There are not enough social workers, counsellors or other front line staff. Service providers must be properly resourced, all of us need to be educated, and our children need to be empowered and protected.

We have a lot to do to right the wrongs. If we are to truly cherish all the children of the nation equally, societal change is needed. A just society needs decency, fairness and equality alongside accountability and transparency. I commend the motion.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to make my contribution to this important debate. I thank the Members who tabled the motion for bringing it before the House. The motion correctly challenges us all in Northern Ireland to examine the potential role of the religious orders and, potentially, the state in abuse here.

The findings of the Ryan report were shocking and depressing. The systematic and institutional abuse of minors in educational institutions was disgraceful. The report highlighted that, for a period in the twentieth century, the relationship between the Catholic Church and the state in the Republic of Ireland was, at best, largely dysfunctional. The report was long overdue, but I hope that it can begin to not only heal the wounds of the victims, but ensure that such systematic abuse never happens again.

It is worth pointing out that, in Northern Ireland, we have an entirely different regulatory system that has undergone considerable reform and progression in the last 30 to 40 years. I welcome that difference. However, we cannot be complacent. Personal testimonies remind us that people in institutions in Northern Ireland had terrible abuse inflicted on them. Such instances of abuse should, first and foremost, be investigated by the PSNI and the Court Service. Like my colleague Roy Beggs, I encourage anyone with allegations to report them to the police so that proper investigations can be undertaken.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that all investigations must go back to when the abuse started?

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

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his intervention. I can see problems in the investigations, but I agree that all allegations should be rigorously pursued by the PSNI.

My colleague Roy Beggs was right to highlight that this is a cross-departmental issue that also involves the

Northern Ireland Office. The Executive must take seriously the legacy from decades of abuse. We must ensure that any action taken is backed up by adequate services and resources. Those who have endured suffering, in some cases for many years, can no longer be ignored.

I welcome junior Minister Newton's presence in the Chamber. It is important that OFMDFM recognises that it has a lead role in co-ordinating any Executive response to the findings of the Ryan report.

The debate is important and concerns a legacy issue. I am confident that the protections in Northern Ireland are the best available and I am assured that they are under constant review.

However, we must ensure that people who have suffered in the past are no longer left to do so in silence. The motion raises issues that go to the core of society and asks searching questions about the institutions and organisations that many of us took for granted. Societies are often judged on how they treat members of society who have been abused. However, societies are also judged on their sense of justice and ability to achieve it. We must change failing practices and make progressive reform. For those reasons, the Assembly must take the motion extremely seriously. Unfortunately, some debates in the House become meaningless; that should not happen in this case. I support the motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr Wells): This is an emotive and difficult issue. I will speak briefly. Although Mr Newton, who is a junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, will respond to the debate, he will do so on behalf of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. That fact emerged only this morning. The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, of which I am Chairperson, has not considered the Ryan report or the motion. Therefore, I will not take a more substantive role in the debate.

Mr Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is Question Time, after which Mark Durkan will be the next Member to speak. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.30 pm.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Pupil Emotional Health and Well-being Programme

1. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Education what results have been achieved to date as a result of the pupil emotional health and well-being joint programme with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. (AQO 274/10)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Tá clár um fholláine agus leas mothúchánach daltaí á fhorbairt ag mo Roinn — a dhíreofar ar earnáil na hiarbhunscolaíochta i dtosach — i gcomhpháirtíocht le réimse leathan de pháirtithe leasmhara tábhachtacha, lena n-áirítear an Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí.

My Department is developing the pupil emotional health and well-being programme, with an initial focus on the post-primary sector, in partnership with a broad range of key stakeholders, including the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Five working groups are in place that will examine the following aspects: self-assessment by schools of their approach to emotional health and well-being; the training and support of teachers and other school staff on the issue of emotional health; identification of existing good practice in schools, and its dissemination; mapping of existing services and sources of support available to schools, and sharing of that information; and preparation of new guidance for schools on the management of critical incidents, and a review of our current arrangements to support schools when an incident occurs.

A definition of what is meant by pupils' emotional health and well-being has been agreed. Research has been commissioned to evaluate tools that schools might use to audit all activities that contribute to promoting positive emotional health. Discussions are in hand about building on an existing directory of services for children and young people, and moving it to a web-based facility that schools can access. Along with our partners, we will host an event this month to review what we have achieved so far and, perhaps more importantly, to determine how we deliver the products to schools in time for the next school year.

Mr Irwin: Will the Minister elaborate on the implementation of the programme and give some

examples of the activities that will be offered to primary and post-primary pupils?

The Minister of Education: First, the Member will be aware that we have a counselling service in post-primary schools, which some 220 schools make use of every week. Since September 2009, following a public tendering process, three organisations have provided the service. The new contracts have been awarded to New Life Counselling, Counselling for Youth and Familyworks.

The counselling support that is provided conforms to current best practice and professional standards for schools-based counselling. Furthermore, the programme will consider the prevention of suicide and self-harm, the Bamford review and the mental-health action plan. Clearly, equipping young people with a positive outlook on life and the skills to be emotionally resilient will also make a less direct contribution to other strategies such as the children's strategy; Hidden Harm, which helps children of drug and alcohol abusers; and the tackling violence at home strategy. It is fitting that we are debating the Ryan report today.

Mr D Bradley: An bhféadfainn a fhiafraí den Aire an raibh aon chomhoibriú idir a Roinn féin agus an Roinn Sláinte nuair a bhí an plean gníomhaíochta ar an uathachas á phleanáil? An mbeidh aon pháirt ag a Roinn i gcur i gcrích an phlean sin?

What level of co-operation took place between the Minister's Department and the Department of Health, Social Service and Public Safety in formulating the autism action plan? Will her Department be involved in the outworking of that plan? Go raibh Maith agat.

The Minister of Education: As the Member may be aware, an all-Ireland conference on autism will take place soon. My Department works with the Department of Education and Science in the South, and the Health Departments, North and South. The original question was specifically about the pupil emotional health and well-being programme. I will forward details of the autism conference to the Member and look forward to his participation in it.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her detailed answer to the question, in which she highlighted some of the positive strategies, which are to be welcomed. What outcome will the programme have once it is established and up and running?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. Glacfaidh gach iarbhunscóil leis go bhfuil ról ríthábhachtach aici maidir le cothú folláine agus leas mothúchánach a cuid daltaí.

All post-primary schools accept that they have a unique and significant role to play in the promotion of the emotional health and well-being of their pupils. We

expect those schools to sign up to a shared, agreed understanding of pupil emotional health and well-being; to audit their practices across a range of activities in the school; to identify the activities that can contribute to the promotion of pupil emotional health and well-being; to evaluate honestly their practice; and to identify how they can improve, as well as what further practice could and should be introduced.

We expect that all post-primary schools will prepare a plan as part of the school development plan, developed in partnership with the school community — staff, pupils and parents — that will set out how pupil emotional health and well-being will be promoted, and how the effectiveness of the plan will be evaluated. They will also be able to access information about evidence-based good practice and community-based services available to support pupils, both inside and outside the school. We also expect that they will be prepared to deal with any critical incident and will have appropriate support in order to do so.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister explain why there is a reluctance to use the term “mental health”? Given that some 20% of our young people suffer from mental health problems in schools, why is her Department reluctant to take the lead on that issue?

The Minister of Education: It is accepted in society that we all have mental health: there is positive mental health, and there is poor mental health. My Department is not reluctant to use the term “mental health”. We want to contribute to the positive mental health of all our young people. The terminology that we use is “emotional health and well-being”. We try to ensure that our young people have the resilience to deal with the issues that they are faced with. We also try to put child protection measures in place and to deal with issues around bullying, suicide and self-harm, along with many other issues in our society.

Irish-medium Schools

2. **Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister of Education to outline the reasons for the delay in appointing a project manager for the building of Irish-medium schools which are on her Department's capital build scheme, namely (i) Bunscoil an Iúir, Newry; (ii) Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh, Strabane; (iii) Gaelscoil Éadaoin Mhóir in the Derry City Council area; and (vi) Gaelscoil Uí Néill, Coalisland; and to indicate when a project manager will be appointed. (AQO 275/10)

The Minister of Education: Is bunscóileanna faoi chothabháil stáit iad Bunscoil an Iúir, Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh agus Gaelscoil Uí Néill, a bhfuil cóiríocht shealadach faoi bhun gnáthchaighdeán acu faoi láthair. Aithníonn mo Roinn, mar sin, an riachtanas le hinfheistíocht caipitil a chur sna scoileanna sin. Tá

foirne bainistíochta tionscadail do na scoileanna a gcur ar bun trí mholtaí mo Roinne sa chreat um sheirbhísí gairmiúla.

Bunscoil an Iúir, Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh, Gaelscoil Éadaoin Mhóir and Gaelscoil Uí Néill are grant-maintained primary schools that are housed in temporary and substandard accommodation. My Department has recognised the need for capital investment in those schools, and project management teams are being procured through my Department's new professional services framework. This is the first occasion on which project management teams have been procured for this sector through that framework. It took considerable time to develop the competition documentation and to decide on the make-up of the evaluation panel.

Several large projects that have been issued through the framework have required considerable input from my Department's technical advisers. I am pleased to report that the competition documentation will be issued to the market by the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) this week. Following assessment of the bids, the project management team will be in place by the end of December 2009.

Mrs Hanna: I thank the Minister for her answer. The delay has caused a lot of disappointment. Will the Minister comment on the procurement process, and will she ensure that there are no further delays and that there is a definitive timescale?

The Minister of Education: As I explained, CPD will issue the competition documentation to the market this week. I reiterate that this is the first time that the method has been used for Irish-language schools, and that is to be welcomed. The time allowed for the competition returns is three weeks, and that will be followed by assessment of the bids by an evaluation panel. It is good that schools that did not get their fair share in the past will now get the buildings that they deserve and need.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann-Comhairle. What criteria are used for the establishment of new schools?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. Tá beartas ginearálta ag an Roinn i dtaca le bunú scoileanna úra atá faoi chothabháil stáit.

The Department's general policy on the establishment of new grant-aided schools is based on a significant demand from parents, which means minimum intakes to each class of 15 pupils in an urban area, defined as Belfast and Derry, and 12 pupils in a rural area.

The Irish-medium sector is one of the fastest growing sectors in the North of Ireland, and it has huge benefits for children who learn bilingually. I pay tribute to Irish-medium schools for the wonderful work that they have done for children in their care.

North/South Co-operation

3. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on North/South co-operation on education. (AQO 276/10)

The Minister of Education: Tá dul chun cinn suntasach déanta ag an gComhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas ar réimse ceisteanna oideachais ar fud an oileáin.

The North/South Ministerial Council has made significant progress on a range of educational issues across the island of Ireland. The joint working group on educational underachievement is addressing issues such as numeracy in the primary and post-primary sectors, good practice in literacy and numeracy in disadvantaged areas, good practice in Traveller and newcomer education, and improving pupil attendance at schools.

There has also been significant improvement in the provision of education services to children and young people with special educational needs. For example, the centre of excellence for autism in Middletown carries out an important research and information role and offers a menu of training courses relating to autistic spectrum disorders. An autism conference will take place in Armagh later this month to showcase good practice in providing support to children with autism, parents and professionals. We have introduced practical measures to assist teachers in the North of Ireland to obtain the Irish-language qualifications that they need to teach in schools in the South. We have tackled school leadership development issues, and a joint research project on how to attract teachers to the position of headship will be completed in the near future.

Information on teachers' pensions will soon be available to assist teachers who wish to transfer between the North and the South to work. It is important that we remove all obstacles to mobility. A framework for a joint programme of North/South educational exchanges is being developed, and the North/South exchange consortium will continue its good work in the meantime. The Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (Scotens) gives educators the chance to engage in open, critical and constructive analysis of current issues in education. I was delighted to address its seventh annual conference last month in Malahide, i mBaile Átha Cliath, to hear at first hand about the range of activities supported by Scotens.

Mr Dallat: That is a convincing list of activities, but I press the Minister to tell us what new projects her Department has proposed since the North/South Ministerial Council meeting on 6 July, specifically in relation to newcomer children from other European countries.

The Minister of Education: As the Member will be aware, an all-island conference was held near Dundalk

to launch a multidisciplinary diversity pack for every primary school on the island of Ireland. Representatives from schools that have a significant number of newcomer children spoke to the conference and to the last North/South Ministerial Council meeting at the Middletown centre for excellence in Armagh, and there was a useful sharing of good practice.

We are learning from the South of Ireland's Traveller education strategy, and we have established the Traveller education strategy group, which is jointly chaired by Dr Robbie McVeigh and an Irish Traveller from the South of Ireland. Some very interesting work is being done. We held a good conference in Newry on the subject of ensuring that every Traveller child receives equality in our education system. Unfortunately, that was not the case in the past.

Mr Storey: Given Batt O'Keefe's decision to cut funding for Protestant secondary schools in the Irish Republic, the subsequent remarks made by the Church of Ireland Bishop of Cork, Paul Colton, that those cuts made the Irish Republic a hostile place for the children of the Protestant minority, and the fact she always tells the House how important equality is to her, what representation has the Northern Ireland Minister of Education made to the Minister in the Irish Republic to ensure equality of treatment?

2.45 pm

The Minister of Education: First, I reiterate that all sectors throughout the island of Ireland should be treated in a fair and equal manner. The Member will be aware that, here, in this part of Ireland, I am engaging with all Churches and education sectors to ensure equality for all sectors. Perhaps the Member would like to write to the Minister in the South of Ireland. I believe that all sectors should be treated fairly across the island of Ireland.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the Minister's reply, but I find it unsatisfactory. What specific representations has she made here to support the view of, among others, the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, the Most Rev Dr John Neill, that Protestant schools in the Republic of Ireland face a funding crisis as a direct result of the policies pursued by the Government in the Republic?

The Minister of Education: As I have said, I believe, and have stated clearly at all times, that all sectors should be treated in an equal and fair manner. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ministerial Meetings

4. **Mr McFarland** asked the Minister of Education to detail any discussions she had with other political

parties during the week beginning 12 October 2009. (AQO 277/10)

The Minister of Education: Ní raibh aon phlé agam le páirtithe polaitíochta eile le linn na seachtaine dar tús an 12 Deireadh Fómhair 2009.

I had no discussions with other political parties during the week commencing 12 October 2009.

Mr McFarland: I thank the Minister for her reply. Does she believe that the transfer procedure solution can be found without her or Sinn Féin meeting the other parties to discuss the issue? Will she give the House a commitment today that she and Sinn Féin will meet other parties to discuss the issue and to find a solution to the transfer issue?

The Minister of Education: As the Member will be aware, I have spent a huge amount of time during the past two years in discussions with all the education sectors and political parties. I brought my proposals to the Executive on a number of occasions. Indeed, the Member's party, together with the DUP, refused even to discuss them.

Mr Storey: Not true.

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: I had to take action. I am the Minister of Education for all children, not just a small minority. I have to ensure that all our children are treated with equality and with respect. The 11-plus is gone; it will not come back, nor will there be any alternative exam that would put children through the ordeal of sitting two one-hour tests. There is no need to test children. It does not happen in the rest of Ireland at 10 years of age; it does not happen in England, Scotland or Wales; and it does not happen throughout Europe and the United States — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: Therefore, we need to move to a situation in which all our children are treated with equality, have opportunities for education and receive the education to which they are entitled, without having to sit two one-hour tests.

Those who clamour for the return of the 11-plus or for an alternative test should consider carefully how such tests affect children in working-class communities, be they nationalist or republican, loyalist or unionist, or newcomer children. I will tell Members how it affects them: it discriminates against them. It is not possible to test children at 10 years of age without discriminating against those communities. Thankfully, we now have transfer 2010, and the vast majority of children will move to post-primary education on the bases of equality, fairness and good international practice.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will not take points of order during Question Time. The Member may raise a point of order after Question Time.

Mr P Ramsey: Will the Minister confirm again that she is open to an agreed solution on the transfer procedure? If so, will she confirm that she will meet with the education spokespersons of the parties that are represented in the Chamber?

The Minister of Education: It is interesting that the SDLP appears to be departing from a 40-year policy of opposition to academic selection. The UUP, along with its colleagues in the DUP, previously refused even to discuss the transfer procedure at the Executive table. I took action that will be to the benefit of all our children and young people.

We are creating a system that is based on equality and on making sure that every child gets a fair chance. I will continue to do that.

If the SDLP has departed from its policy, it should explain why to its electorate. Perhaps the SDLP should question why it is linking up with a party that actively supports academic selection. The Tory Party, which is in coalition — although I do not know what the right word for it is — with the UUP, is opposed to academic selection and has put that opposition on record. The electorate would be interested to hear answers to those questions.

Mr Lunn: The Minister will be aware that there are ongoing talks among four other parties that are represented in this Chamber. Three or four meetings have been held, and her party has been invited to send a representative to each of those talks. In the spirit of trying to find an agreed solution, would she not consider it worthwhile to at least allow a representative of her party to attend those talks, which are non-binding?

The Minister of Education: I made it clear that I have had meetings on many occasions with all the different political parties about transfer 2010. I brought the issue to the Executive, and I stated already that they refused to discuss it. The place for policy formation is in the Executive and in the Education Committee. We had the bizarre situation in which the Committee could not agree consensus proposals, but the very people who sat in the Committee and could not agree then went into another room and thought that they could sit down and deal with the issue. The Committee has failed to deal with the issue.

Some members of that working group said that they needed more time. I bring to their attention a ‘News Letter’ article dated Tuesday 8 September 1964. That headline article read: “Moves soon to replace qualifying”. It detailed how the Ulster Government were:

“moving fast to find a satisfactory replacement for the controversial 11-plus examination.”

Let us not waste any more time on this issue. The key task is to bring forward fair proposals, and we have done that through transfer 2010. Children will not have to go through the hoop of doing two traumatic one-hour tests to decide whether they get into a school. Those days are gone.

Educational Standards

5. **Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education how area-based planning and the entitlement framework will improve educational standards. (AQO 278/10)

The Minister of Education: Creidim go daingean gur dóchúil go mbainfidh daoine óga a gcumas iomlán amach má bhíonn deis acu cúrsaí a dhéanamh a bhfuil suim acu iontu; cúrsaí a spreagann iad agus a sholáthraítear trí theagasc ardchaighdeáin. Ón mbliain 2013 ar aghaidh, nuair a bheas an creat teidlíochta ina cheanglas reachtach, beidh fáil ag gach duine óg ar réimse níos leithne cúrsaí.

I believe firmly that young people are much more likely to achieve to their full potential when they have the opportunity to follow courses that interest and motivate them and that are delivered through quality teaching. From 2013, when the entitlement framework will become a legislative requirement, all our young people will have access to a broader and better-balanced range of courses. Pupils from age 14 onwards will be able to access courses in which they have an interest or that are of value and lead to qualifications that allow them to progress and contribute to society.

To deliver that, we need to plan for the delivery of the entitlement framework on an area basis to ensure that each area has a pattern of quality, sustainable provision that provides equality of opportunity and maximises the impact of the available resources. The recent post-primary area-based planning exercise, which concluded in July 2009, provides us with valuable insights into how a collective approach to planning can enhance the quality of education in a local area. My Department will draw on the lessons learned to improve standards.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I am sure that the Minister was encouraged by the all-Ireland perspective that the two unionist parties displayed when asking earlier questions. I thank her for her answer. Will she elaborate on how the area-based planning process will work under the education and skills authority (ESA)?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin.

There will be a number of key components in the process, including the use of asset-management information and area plans. For the first time ever, all

the different education sectors are sitting down together and planning. As Members will know, there were five working groups and a central group. All sectors worked on that process.

The ESA will prepare area plans, strategic investment plans and project-level appraisals. The education sectors and planning groups — including sectoral support bodies — will be represented on those groups and they will advise the education and skills authority on aspects of planning. The ESA may also consult directly with others in preparing plans.

Once ESA has a complete draft plan for an area, it will consult publicly. Following that exercise, ESA will submit the post-consultation area plan to the Department for approval. Strategic investment plans and project appraisals above certain levels will also require the Department's approval.

Aithneofar scéimeanna infheistíochta do cheantar mar chuid den phróiseas sin. Investment schemes for areas will be identified as part of that process.

Mrs D Kelly: Given that the amount of progress achieved for area-based planning has been patchy, will the Minister tell the House how parents are choosing post-primary schools for their children?

Mr Speaker: The Member should not be reading her supplementary question.

Mrs D Kelly: Well, I am not the only Member who does, but —

Mr Speaker: This time you are the only one caught. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs D Kelly: The story of my life: sorry, Mr Speaker.

However, how will parents know which schools will be up and running with the entitlement framework in 2013?

The Minister of Education: First, the work on area-based planning is not patchy: it is the most significant work ever done in our post-primary sector. As I have said, for the first time, all the sectors are sitting down together to plan on a strategic basis. We have seen the problem when that has not happened: new schools built that are now empty and taxpayers' money squandered. Thankfully, that will not happen now.

I have written to every post-primary school in relation to the 2013 entitlement framework. My Department is in touch with the area learning communities and we have established very clearly that all policies and programmes brought forward by schools will adhere to the entitlement framework, which will be a statutory duty by 2013. I am pleased with the progress, but I want more work to be done. I would like to pay tribute to Adeline Dinsmore, Joe Martin and the five chairpersons throughout the North of Ireland who did tremendous

work in a very short time on area-based planning, and I look forward to further work.

Mr McCallister: What criteria will the Minister set for ESA in respect of area-based planning? Will she ensure that those criteria take into account the impact that they could have on rural communities and areas?

The Minister of Education: Sin ceist an-mhaith.

That is a good question and a very important one. I thank the Member for South Down for it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: The Member will be aware that my colleague Michelle Gildernew is working on a rural White Paper, which is important for all Executive Departments, on every aspect of policy.

The Member knows that my Department has looked at the issue of rurality. As I said earlier, the criteria for rural schools differ from those for urban schools. That is in recognition of the important role of rural schools. Of course, I am working with those criteria in respect of the entitlement framework and area-based planning. The ESA chief executive designate, Gavin Boyd, and its chairperson designate, Sean Hogan, are involved in all aspects, so that we have a seamless crossover once the authority is established in January.

Integrated Schools: Admissions

6. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Education how many children were declined their first choice of a place at an integrated school for the 2009-2010 academic year. (AQO 279/10)

The Minister of Education: Léiríonnna figiúirí ó na boird oideachais agus leabharlainne nár éirigh le 496 páiste áit a fháil sa gcéad scoil imeasctha a ba rogha leo don bhliain acadúil 2009-2010.

In total, 3,166 children made first-preference applications to integrated schools; 2,760 were accepted. Of the children and young people who applied, 84% were admitted to their first-preference choice: 496 children — 16% — were not.

3.00 pm

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Belfast Metropolitan College

1. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why the efficiency review of the Belfast Metropolitan College has not been published. (AQO 289/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The efficiency review of the Belfast Metropolitan College has not yet been published because the consultants are making a number of final amendments to the draft report to ensure that their findings and recommendations are valid, complete and accurate. When the final version has been received, the report will be published on my Department's website.

Mr Speaker: Before calling Michelle McIlveen to ask a supplementary question, I warn Members who try to speak from a seated position that they should not do so. During questions to the Minister of Education, Members continually tried to speak from a sedentary position.

Miss McIlveen: In light of the problems surrounding the review, in the absence of key permanent staff such as a chairperson, chief executive, financial director and assistant financial director and following the Department's decision to withdraw a substantial amount of funding from the college, will the Minister consider a full reassessment of major capital projects for the college, particularly given that the previous viability assessment for such projects was based on information that was gathered in 2004?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department is reviewing the capital programmes for all colleges, because, in recent years, there has been a substantial building programme. We react to estate plans from each college and determine what we can fund. Of course, colleges fund some projects from their own resources. The Member will be aware that a recent PAC report stated that all colleges should hold 10% of their funds in reserve.

Money has not been evenly spread among colleges because the new colleges are an amalgamation of various former colleges. My Department has drawn up a proposal to reduce the surpluses. That process has already started and will be completed by next year. In effect, we have put in place plans to bring the colleges' surpluses down to within 10%. As a result, Belfast Metropolitan College has commissioned a major new campus in the Titanic Quarter on which work has already started. The new campus is designed to replace two existing ones, at College Square North and at Brunswick Street, and that is an exciting proposal.

The Member will be aware that other estate issues in the Belfast area have yet to be resolved, and I am happy to make her aware of any proposals that the college makes to me in respect of those.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Has Belfast Metropolitan College brought forward any proposals or have departmental officials had any discussions with the college on the downgrading of courses or classes at any other Belfast campus?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: There is, perhaps, a misunderstanding among colleagues about the Department's role in such issues. The colleges determine which courses they will run. Each year, the Department approves funding for annual college development plans, but it does not dictate to each college which courses to run and where. Nevertheless, the Department sets certain policy targets and objectives, and it asks the colleges to implement them. If the Member has issues with specific courses at specific locations — he would not be in a unique position because other Members have written to me about such problems — he should bring them to my attention, and I will ensure that he receives a prompt and accurate reply.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister outline the institution's financial health?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: One purpose of the review was to address issues concerning the college's finances. Under the regulations, the Department was able to send people into the college to examine its finances. The Member will be aware that the chief executive who was in place in the immediate past was ill for quite a long time during a period of major change. That was in addition to other issues. I am pleased to say that a new chief executive is in post. I pay tribute to Raymond Mullan who acted up in recent months and took on a very difficult job last year. I put on record my appreciation of his work.

The steps that are being taken will ensure the financial success of the college. One of our responsibilities is to ensure that each college is successful financially. Measures are put in place, and we monitor the situation. The boards of individual colleges also have a responsibility in that respect. The chief executive of each college is an accounting officer, as is the permanent secretary of my Department. The chief executives are the accounting officers for the funds that my Department provides to colleges. That link exists, and, where we consider that there are difficulties, we can intervene, as we did in that case. I hope that that intervention will prove successful. As I said to the Member for Strangford earlier, the report will be published on the Department's website as soon as those other issues are resolved.

South Eastern Regional College: Ballyboley Campus

2. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps his Department is taking to ensure that a suitable range of night courses are available at the Ballyboley campus of the South Eastern Regional College, to meet the needs of adult learners.

(AQO 290/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As I have said, further education colleges are responsible

for determining the nature and timetabling of provision offered at each of their campuses, based on local demand. I am advised that the South Eastern Regional College has recently held two open days, produced a mini-prospectus and conducted extensive market research to encourage adult enrolments at Ballyboley campus. As a result, enrolments have almost tripled, although most of the increase is for classes held during the day.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. It is good that, of the first four questions, Strangford is mentioned in three. Strangford is to the fore again.

I thank the Minister for his update. Ballyboley campus is doing exceptionally well. Are the additional classes designed to help people retrain and obtain employment, or are they for those who are educationally disadvantaged and need help and support?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department's curriculum policy has been developed to ensure that, through the curriculum offered, the further education colleges achieve an appropriate balance between provision that strengthens economic and workforce development and enhances social cohesion and that which enhances individuals' skills and learning. As part of that, colleges are required to increase the proportion of their provision that is on the national database of accredited qualifications. Members understand why that should be. We place no restrictions on the type of non-accredited courses that colleges can deliver. However, at present the level of resource for non-accredited courses during the current academic year is projected to fund many enrolments.

There is a mixture of courses and a balance to be achieved. I will ask the college to provide me with the details, and I will pass them to the Member. My understanding is that, for whatever reason, the demand is for courses held during the day. The pattern is that courses held in the evenings tend to be of a recreational nature, whereas those held during the day tend to be more economically relevant. In this case, there is a balance. I cannot give the Member the precise details of that balance, but I will write to him to provide that information.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In line with the Programme for Government commitment on social inclusion, has the Minister held discussions with the colleges on concessionary fees?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member knows that that issue is ongoing. I have had copious correspondence on that with Members over the last couple of years. We have attempted to widen the pool of students who attract financial support. The latest addition to that is anyone who qualifies for rates relief, which opened up things even more. My Department provides resources to colleges for hardship funds, and other sources of funding are also available.

The solution to this problem lies in the national review that is taking place. There are also developments in Europe that hold the key to a solution. We got caught up on the hook of not being able to discriminate in favour of people because of their age just as we are equally not supposed to discriminate unfavourably against people because of their age. As a result, that has been a doctrine of unintended consequences. Therefore, we have all got into a position that none of us wants to be in.

There is a way out of this problem somewhere down the line. In the meantime, however, we have tried to broaden the base from which people can draw additional resources to help them, because it is in our interest to see the colleges used to their maximum. For reasons more related to the economic situation, however, there has been a substantial increase in the number of students attending further education colleges this year.

Mr McCarthy: I am delighted that the Member for West Belfast has taken a real interest in Ballyboley. I am sure that she knows where Ballyboley is, and I thank her very much for her contribution.

I thank the Minister for his efforts in tripling the applications for daytime courses, but we want to see an increase in applications for night-time courses. The Minister mentioned recreation and arts and crafts courses, which not only educate the local population —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member come to his question?

Mr McCarthy: What can the Minister do to triple the number of applications for night-time courses?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As I indicated, in fairness to the college, it has been making a big effort. It produced a prospectus and went out and promoted courses locally. The majority of new students have been taking daytime courses. The college will have to continue its marketing activities locally. However, it is at least producing a result, and we have to be grateful for that, thank the college for that and encourage it to do even more. With the support of the Member for West Belfast, how can the college possibly fail?

Mr McClarty: Given their immense popularity, will the Minister outline the situation in respect of non-economic, non-vocational courses?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member for Strangford, who asked the substantive question, is now getting virtually international interest in Ballyboley. It is obviously becoming a centre of great learning, which is what we want it to be.

Although we have, in the main, encouraged courses with an economic element, a significant proportion of resources is still available for recreational and similar courses. The college is the responsible authority for promoting itself locally. No Department is best placed to micromanage such a situation. Local people must

have a major say in how that is done, because they know the territory and the local demands.

The South Eastern Regional College was quick off the mark in responding to the economic downturn, which is a subject that we will be returning to in a moment in another question. There has been a substantial capital build, and we are encouraging as many people as possible to use those facilities for such purposes. With the widespread support that we have, I am confident that we shall succeed.

Further Education: Engineering

3. **Mr Craig** I apologise for getting in between all those Strangford people. Question 3, Mr Speaker.

The Question was as follows:

To ask the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he can provide an assurance that technical colleges will prioritise and support the training of potential employees in high-tech engineering, such as polymer and biochemical engineering. (AQO 291/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am happy to give the Member such an assurance. My Department sets the broad strategic framework for the further education sector in Northern Ireland and channels its funding accordingly. For example, one of the Department's public service agreement targets is to increase the proportion of college provision that is in Northern Ireland's priority skills areas, one of which is manufacturing engineering.

Under the further education funding model, colleges receive weighted funding for delivering such provision. Consequently, further education colleges offer a wide range of subjects in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) to prepare their students for employment in the hi-tech engineering sector.

Initiatives include collaboration with Northern Ireland university partners to develop and deliver training for local SMEs; full-time programmes in renewable energy, energy efficiency and sustainable construction; and the development of industry-linked foundation degree programmes in STEM subject areas through the innovation fund. The Department also supports the delivery of a polymer technician apprenticeship programme. The South Eastern Regional College delivers a course in polymer processing and materials and is working to develop a composite materials apprenticeship.

3.15 pm

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for his reply. I spent 15 years in polymer engineering, and I know that it is an important area for the future of the aircraft industry, which we are proud to have in Northern Ireland. Biochemistry is another field of engineering in which

we can continue to compete in the world market; we can compete against low-cost manufacturing economies. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that people are trained to have the expertise to work in those industries? It is particularly important that those people are trained in readiness for the day in the near future when those industries take off.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I agree with the Member's comments on that issue. There are a number of initiatives in the sector. The Member will probably have heard of the Connected programme — a major open source software initiative — which includes the polymer technician programme. That allows a college to have access to a substantial reservoir of research and other information, which would short-circuit many individual research programmes that each college would have to undertake. Students and colleges can access Connected, and it allows the colleges to engage with private sector companies with a view to solving the problems of those companies. They also have the backup of the Connected research facility. I support the Member's comments, and I believe that the colleges are keen for delivery of their services via that mechanism.

Dr McDonnell: On a similar vein, will the Minister outline his assessment — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: I remind Members to ensure that their mobile phones are switched off.

Dr McDonnell: I apologise for that, Mr Speaker.

Will the Minister outline his and his Department's assessment of the independent review of economic policy from the perspective of the further education sector, particularly on the question of innovation in firms and the delivery of skills to encourage inward investment?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member has devoted much time and energy to this subject, and he will be aware that we are moving into a time in which, because of European changes, grants for economic development will be unavailable to government. Northern Ireland's main selling points, as was pointed out by the recently appointed economic envoy, Declan Kelly, are the skills of its workforce. That will be our major incentive as we try to attract industry and businesses into Northern Ireland.

The further education sector is ideally placed, and we have invested heavily in it. On completion of the current investment programme, we will have one of the most up-to-date and sophisticated estates in any part of these islands. The colleges fully recognise the importance of training people for business and giving them the required skills. We have been working with the economic envoy to ensure that any specifications that are requested by incoming investors or people who want to collaborate or enter into partnerships are

met. We will endeavour to ensure that such people are provided. If they are not, we can tailor bespoke training for individual companies, and the colleges are prepared to do that. The opportunity is there, and the colleges have the initiative and expertise to deliver it through their lecturers and other dedicated people. The further education sector is a wonderful asset.

Mr B McCrea: I am a chemical engineer, and I am delighted that there are career opportunities outside politics.

Will the Minister outline what happened to the numbers of students taking priority skills courses?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: With respect to higher education, the STEM review concluded that the number of students participating in such courses has dropped over the years. However, the Department now believes that through a combination of different initiatives that trend is beginning to change. We now have the STEM review report, and we also have the recent MATRIX report. I believe that all the strategies are now in place. Furthermore, both Queen's University and the University of Ulster received awards last week. Queen's University was awarded an enterprise award, and both universities also received excellent ratings in last year's RAE exercise.

With respect to the further education sector, the Department is continually in contact with that sector and is continually pushing courses with a professional and technical element.

As I said in response to Dr McDonnell's supplementary question, the attitudes in our further and higher education sectors today are very different to the attitudes of a few years ago. Indeed, I think that Dr McDonnell would agree that there has been a huge change in the past decade. The days of the ivory tower are gone. There is now a concentration on all levels, from degree level to the technicians who make business work. It is not all about research, however important that may be. Mr McCrea can be confident that the Department has in place the necessary policies and the necessary people to deliver them in our further and higher education sectors.

Universities

4. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the results of any research his Department has commissioned into the reasons why students opt to study at universities in Northern Ireland or at universities elsewhere. (AQO 292/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Perhaps we should have a Question Time specifically for the Strangford constituency in future.

In June 2008, my Department published research led by Professor Bob Osborne, and it examined the factors associated with the decision-making processes of local school-leavers who were seeking entry into higher education. The most important reason cited in determining pupil's preferred choice was that the student considered a particular institution to be the best place to undertake their chosen course, while issues of reputation and location were also important to the respondents. In addition, the research concluded that the evidence points towards the fact that the bulk of those who leave Northern Ireland do so because they want to leave.

I also commissioned a Northern Ireland-specific report as part of the UK-wide Futuretrack study, which included the reasons given by Northern Ireland higher education applicants for institutional choices. Over half of those who chose to study outside Northern Ireland cited the fact that they wanted to study away from home, which compares with almost half of those who chose to study in Northern Ireland stating that they wanted to continue to live at home.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his reply. It is very good to see the Minister in place following the Halloween recess and the brilliantly successful Ulster Unionist annual party conference. The highlight of that conference was the Minister's "Take no nonsense" address, a vein in which I am sure he will want to continue.

Will the Minister outline the progress that has been made with the C'Mon Over campaign? Will he also outline what statistics he has for both sections of the community opting to study in either Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I can supply some figures. The total numbers of school-leavers from Protestant and Catholic communities leaving to study in Great Britain are very similar. In 2006-07, 1,137 Protestant and 1,105 Catholic school-leavers chose to study in institutions in Great Britain, while, in 2007-08, 1,142 Protestant and 1,060 Catholic school-leavers chose that route. However, one element is omitted from those figures: if we examine the total number of Northern Ireland-domiciled students studying in the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain, it is likely that there are now more students from a Catholic background choosing to study outside Northern Ireland.

The number of students leaving Northern Ireland has dropped from one third of all students 10 years ago to just below one quarter of all students today. I hope that that trend continues in the future.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given the economic benefits of international experience, what does the Minister judge to be the benefits of Northern Ireland students acquiring their third-level education outside Northern Ireland and bringing that

experience back? What specific measures has his Department put in place to attract students who choose to study in other parts of the United Kingdom or in the Republic of Ireland to come back here and make a life for themselves and to attract students from there to do likewise?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In many respects, it is good that students choose to go to different institutions here and elsewhere, and there are many practical reasons involved. First, some students may wish to study a particular course that is not available here. Secondly, many of them may want an away-from-home experience, and those who come from the greater Belfast area may not consider that they are going away from home if they go to Queen's University or the University of Ulster at Jordanstown, as they would be attending local universities.

We have no plans to encourage people to go away to study. In fact, the trend is moving in the opposite direction; student numbers are rising. However, because the number of students that we can fund is limited, the research was designed to find out whether people were leaving due to a chill factor or because of choice. The answer was that they left because of choice.

With regard to getting those students who studied outside Northern Ireland back, I agree entirely with the Member that it is a very valuable group of people. I have commissioned the C'Mon Over campaign, which has held a series of events at universities in Great Britain, and I will be attending an event in Dublin this month. Through that campaign, we promote Northern Ireland to the students, many of whom have come from here. I assure the Member that that has proved positive, and we have had a significant number of successes in bringing people back. The percentage of those coming back is rising, and, although the current economic downturn has slowed it to some extent — economic opportunity is one of the biggest issues — I believe that the strategy and the trajectory of what we are trying to achieve are correct.

Ms Purvis: The C'Mon Over campaign is designed to attract students to return after they have finished their education elsewhere. Has the Minister found any evidence to suggest that the students most reluctant to come home are those who have been through integrated education or those who are lesbian, gay or bisexual?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I do not have an answer to that question. The statistics that I rely on are compiled nationally, and I do not believe that they are broken down in that fashion. Also, I have no anecdotal evidence one way or the other, and, unless the Member can provide me with some information, I am not able to answer her question.

South Eastern Regional College: Capital Investment

5. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the level of capital investment in the South Eastern Regional College during the last two years. (AQO 293/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: There has been a significant investment in all of the main campuses of the South Eastern Regional College. Three major projects, with a capital value of £62 million, are spread over six campuses. Newcastle and the first phase of Downpatrick were opened earlier this year, and Bangor, Newtownards, Ballynahinch, Lisburn and the second phase of Downpatrick will be delivered by October 2011. A mix of conventional procurement and public-private partnership is being used to deliver the projects.

Mr Speaker: That ends Question Time. We now return to the motion —

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you undertake to review the Question Time session held with the Minister of Education? Many sides of the House are concerned that she consistently fails to answer or address the questions posed to her. That leads to background noise in the Chamber, and I am mindful of your earlier comments about that. I remind the House that all Ministers have a duty to come to the House for Question Time and to give proper and full answers to the questions posed.

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: I have some sympathy with the Member, but, as I have often said in the House, it is not my job to get involved in, or sit in judgement on, the way in which any Minister might answer a question. There are a number of avenues open to the Member through which he might resolve the issue of Ministers answering questions.

Mr Boylan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During Question Time to the Minister of Education, a Member of the House, from a seated position, shouted either "get up" or "hurry up" while the Minister was sifting through her notes to respond to a question. Will you make a ruling on whether that is appropriate behaviour in the Chamber? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker: I already said during Question Time that it is absolutely wrong for any Member to try to speak from a seated position. There were quite a number of Members in the House during Education Question Time who were, I believe deliberately, shouting from a sedentary position. I have ruled in the past, and will certainly rule in the future, that that is something that I will not tolerate in the House, irrespective of who the Minister might be. When a Minister has the Floor, the Minister should be entitled to the Floor without interruption.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Child Abuse: Ryan Report

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly expresses grave concern at the findings of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse report (the Ryan report) published in May 2009 in the Republic of Ireland; considers that such neglect and abuse of children and young people's human rights must be subject to criminal law; recognises that children who were placed by state authorities in Northern Ireland in establishments or settings where they became victims of abuse are entitled to support and redress; calls on the Executive to commission an assessment of the extent of abuse and neglect in Northern Ireland, to liaise and work with the authorities in the Republic of Ireland and to report to the Assembly; calls on the Executive to provide funding to support helpline and counselling services which are now facing new demands; and further calls on the Executive to work, through the North/South Ministerial Council, to ensure that all-Ireland protections for children and vulnerable adults are in place as soon as possible. — *[Mrs Hanna.]*

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "criminal law;" and insert:

"and calls on the Executive to produce a report detailing measures for dealing with past abuse and ensuring that rigorous protections are in place for the future." — *[Miss McIlveen.]*

Mr Durkan: This has been an important debate, and an emotive debate in some ways, for very understandable reasons. A debate of this length, with contributions necessarily truncated — I know that many other Members wanted to make, and had prepared, further contributions — cannot do justice to the issues with which it is concerned. Although it cannot do justice to the issue, through the debate, we can seek justice for the victims of the systematic abuse and neglect that has already been outlined by others.

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

I ask the DUP not to put its amendment to the vote. Jim Shannon said that we in the Chamber are united today in righteous anger. We could best show that we are united in righteous anger if we do not divide on the issue. The Ryan report was the subject of a unanimous resolution in the Dáil, and we believe that the motion should receive unanimous support in this House today. Not that the motion disposes of the issue in any way, but it properly frames an approach through which this very important issue can be addressed.

The DUP amendment would remove those parts of the motion that acknowledge the role of state authorities in placing children in establishments and settings where they ended up suffering neglect and abuse. It would remove the statement that the victims are entitled to support and redress, which would mean that the Executive would not be charged with commissioning an assessment of the extent of abuse and neglect in Northern Ireland, and would remove those references to working with

authorities in the South, both in relation to past issues and to promote future protections.

We ask the DUP to park its amendment and to support the main motion. I listened to what the proposer of the amendment, Michelle McIlveen, said. She seemed to present our motion as simply calling for a rerun of the Ryan report here. However, our motion makes it very clear that such neglect and abuse of children and young people's human rights must be subject to criminal law. We are not talking about any immunities such as were part of the way in which the Ryan inquiry was conducted. We specifically did not frame the motion to call for a public inquiry, because we know that different parties have different views on those issues. We wanted it to be a motion that could attract consensus and could allow unanimity in the House on the basis of which the Executive could take things forward, working, in light of the understanding gained from the Ryan report, with the Southern authorities and with others in these islands.

The nature of the abuse that people in care settings suffered has been well demonstrated by the Ryan report: it needed to be, because we hear continually from the victims of abuse in those homes that they were not believed. They were evaded, avoided and denied, and they were left to carry their suffering in silence. No matter what age we are, we all still have an inner child, but the victims of systematic, institutional abuse are left with their inner child still lonely, afraid and hurt so long as any part of the system refuses to believe them or fails to acknowledge, declare and assert what happened to them. The system should be broadcasting and amplifying what happened to those children as a way of ensuring that it will not happen again.

Mr P Ramsey: The Member made the point that the state placed the children into homes and establishments and failed them because it did not provide inspections and regulations in those establishments. Therefore, we now have a responsibility to provide support and services to victims of abuse. I think that the Member will agree with those comments.

Mr Durkan: I certainly do. Children were often put into those institutions and homes by the state, which left the institutions unregulated or under-regulated. As some Members said, the relationship between those institutions and the state may not have been the same here as that which existed in the South, but it was the same in some cases. There was a complete lapse of responsibility on the part of state authorities to ensure that due and proper care was given to children. It is simply not good enough to hide behind the assumption that, on the basis of their mission statements as religious orders, the institutions were providing due care. It is not good enough now, and it was not good enough then.

Unfortunately, it seems that some people in those orders took the words "suffer little children" to be the

sum total of what the gospel required from them and almost that they had to impose that by way of instruction. The full quotation is:

“Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me; for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”

Unfortunately, those little children were asked to suffer hell on earth. They were put there, often at the disposal of the state. They were supposed to be there under the care of the Church or religious orders, and they suffered systematic neglect and abuse.

Michelle McIlveen of the DUP said that an entitlement to support or redress was not needed here. The redress that she said is available is available only to victims of sexual abuse, and we know that the victims who have come forward received many forms of abuse.

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

Mr Durkan: They suffered physical, emotional and psychological abuse, as well as, shamefully, sexual abuse.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle . Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

I support the motion, but Sinn Féin does not support the amendment because it ignores the all-Ireland nature of the issue. The reason that we are having the debate today is because the Ryan report stopped at the border but the abuse did not.

In essence, the motion is modest. It asks for support for a commission to carry out an assessment, and it asks the Executive to liaise and work with the authorities in the Twenty-six Counties. It asks the Executive to provide funding services, such as a helpline, and to work with the all-Ireland ministerial council. Whatever one's personal view on a public inquiry, the motion makes no mention of one, as was stated when the amendment was proposed.

When the Ryan commission published its findings in May 2009, my party colleague Padraig McLochlainn, who sits on Donegal County Council, described it as “Ireland's greatest shame.” Other nations have their own stains on their history, but this is, without doubt, Ireland's legacy. It is our great shame. The nation that sought to cherish all its children cast aside its most vulnerable people. Those children, who were put into care by the state, were abandoned into institutions where abuse was endemic. They were thrown to the mercy of sexual predators and abusers. The Churches, the authorities and the public turned a blind eye.

The horrors that have been exposed by the Ryan report are a damning indictment of Irish society and of that period in Irish history. I believe that we all knew that abuse went on in those institutions. However, the Ryan report lays that abuse bare as never before. It has cut through the national consciousness like a knife.

Of course, in recent years, particularly after the Kincora scandal, stricter guidelines have been put in place to try to prevent any repeat of such abuse. The Criminal Justice Order 2008 put in place new public-protection arrangements to help to protect children and vulnerable adults and to manage the risk that is posed by offenders. It also provided for tough new indeterminate sentences for dangerous, violent and sexual offences.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she agree that the Government failed those children by not adequately regulating and inspecting children's homes; that the abuse was not confined to Catholic-managed children's homes — it was endemic in all children's homes; and that there must now be a North/South dimension to child protection and to putting vetting procedures in place?

Ms Anderson: I absolutely agree with that. The experiences of many of the people whom we are dealing with show that the abuse was not confined to those particular institutions.

The North/South Ministerial Council has intensified work and co-operation on child protection. However, an all-Ireland child-protection register must be established. NIO and Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform officials who are looking at co-operation in dealing with sex offenders must try to expedite that issue as quickly as possible.

In October 2009, the new vetting and barring scheme was introduced to target employers who fail to report an employee who harms or poses a risk of harm to children and vulnerable adults.

Although the measures that I have spoken about are welcome, we must remain vigilant. Unfortunately, we know that as we sit here in the Chamber, children are still being abused. The vast majority of those children are being abused in their own family homes by people whom they know. The shame of child abuse is far from being a legacy issue. Necessary steps must be taken by the Executive and those who have responsibility in the NIO to protect children and to ensure that the mess that we have inherited will never, ever happen again.

If ever there was a case for establishing a justice Department, it is this case, in particular, among many others. On the face of it, the debate may appear to be historical, but, for the victims, it is absolutely not. They live with and struggle with that abuse every day of their lives. Tragically, some can struggle no longer and choose to end their lives, such is the anguish and pain that they face.

Earlier, I said that the Ryan report was a damning indictment of that time in Irish history. It is also a damning indictment of the partition of our country. Despite the fact that many of those institutions exist throughout Ireland, the Ryan report stopped at the

border. For victims in the North, there was no redress. There was no truth recovery and precious little support.

I have had the humbling privilege of working with victims of child abuse whose dignity and strength continues to inspire me and many others while their pain and suffering pull at our heartstrings.

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

Ms Anderson: As you will know from your experience, Mr Deputy Speaker, the report has touched me and many people in Derry dearly. Therefore, I ask Members to support the motion and to reflect again on the amendment. I hope that we can unite in the Chamber on that important and sensitive issue.

3.45 pm

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Newton): I thank the Members who brought forward the motion. I am grateful to have the opportunity to respond to the debate on behalf of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, who is unavailable.

The Ryan report confirmed what had been publicly suspected for a very long time: that widespread abuse of children was perpetrated largely by members of Roman Catholic religious orders in institutions in the Irish Republic over many decades. Nevertheless, the stark findings of the commission make for disturbing reading, and the scale of the problem has been shocking.

We should all share the grave concerns of the commission's findings, which are reflected in the motion before us. There have been calls for a Ryan-type inquiry in Northern Ireland, and I understand that a petition was received here today containing thousands of signatures calling for such an inquiry.

From the outset, I wish to say that any victim of child abuse in any institution, be it educational, a children's home or in the juvenile justice system in Northern Ireland, has our full sympathy and support. It is unacceptable that those victims were not afforded the care, love and protection that they deserved and required as children.

The emphasis in the motion — namely that such abuse and neglect must be subject to criminal law — is to be welcomed. We do not support the suggestion that perpetrators of what are criminal offences against children should have their anonymity protected by an inquiry. The protection of children now and in the future demands that those matters be subject to a full investigation by the police and to criminal proceedings. Only by that means can information about abusers be shared as part of vetting checks should they seek to gain access to children in an employed or volunteering capacity now or in future. That is why victims should come forward to the police to have their allegations investigated. If they have not already done so, they must

do so now. That will be a significant step in identifying the scale of the problem.

Members should be aware that the calls for redress are not purely about financial compensation; victims have other needs, such as advice and counselling. It is perhaps not widely known that the Roman Catholic Church funds a counselling service that is available to victims in Northern Ireland. The operation of that service is entirely independent of the Church. However, much more must be done.

It is also imperative that those in charge of running institutions take a greater role in working with the PSNI and other statutory bodies in identifying where the abuse took place, who the victims are, and what compensation and help they require.

Although allegations of abuse in residential settings were not restricted to Catholic-run institutions, it is important to note that, historically, the nature of the relationship between the state and the Roman Catholic Church in Northern Ireland was very different from that in the Republic of Ireland.

We have also benefitted from the findings of inquiries into abuse at institutions here, such as the Kincora inquiry, which led directly to the improved scrutiny of services and the development of a strong regulatory framework in Northern Ireland that is comparable to the rest of the UK.

Members will be aware that the Ryan report took 10 years and cost tens of millions of euros to complete. At its conclusion, we are not aware of any prosecutions being taken forward, and information about persons who abused children remains confidential to the inquiry.

As a consequence of the report, a redress board was set up to make fair and reasonable awards to persons who were abused as children while resident in industrial schools, reformatories and other institutions that were subject to state regulation or inspection in the Republic of Ireland. The board, which is wholly independent, considers applications for redress. Those are treated in the strictest confidence, and the board conducts all hearings in private. The board will apply only to those who were placed in institutions in the Republic of Ireland.

Dr W McCrea: Can the junior Minister tell the folks who are being asked to come forward to the PSNI — and they should come forward — that the Assembly gives clear assurances and direction that, as far as we are concerned, anyone who has been involved in criminal activity against and abuse of children will have no cover whatever and should face the full rigours of the law?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I touched on that in my speech, and I will come to it again later.

A substantial regulatory framework is in place in Northern Ireland that deals with children in health and social care services. It covers institutions and the workforce, and its primary intention is to safeguard children so that abuse does not happen in the first place.

By the end of November, the Minister of Health will publish a report that sets out regulatory arrangements for those areas for which he is responsible. He will ask each of his Executive colleagues to prepare and publish a report, in the same timescale, setting out what arrangements to safeguard children, legislative or otherwise, are in place in their areas of policy responsibility. Safeguarding children is the responsibility of every Department and every Minister.

I want to highlight that a very wide range of initiatives and developments is being taken forward across the Departments and agencies to protect children and to respond when children have been abused. Therefore, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in partnership with the NSPCC, took the lead in co-ordinating the development of 'Safeguarding Children: A cross-departmental statement on the protection of children and young people'.

That report was published on 30 June in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Court Service. It brings existing and proposed safeguarding initiatives together in one document. The report provides a baseline for the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, which is led by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. It also provides a clear route map for professionals and government bodies to ensure that rigorous protections are in place for the future.

In my role as junior Minister in OFMDFM, junior Minister Kelly and I are joint chairpersons of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. That subcommittee has identified safeguarding children, including support for parents, families and carers, as one of its six key priorities. In further recognition of the seriousness of the issues that the Ryan report raised and the operation of the redress board, Ministers will consider the matter at the subcommittee's next meeting.

However, the Minister of Health has advised me that the House can be assured that overall child protection arrangements in Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the UK, are more stringent than in most other countries. Those arrangements are being strengthened further by the implementation of the arrangements set out in the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (Northern Ireland) Order 2007.

As part of the North/South Ministerial Council, we are working with our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland to strengthen child protection on a cross-border basis. The Minister of Health welcomes the Irish Government's recent post-Ryan proposals on information

sharing. The Minister has written to his ministerial colleague in the Irish Republic seeking clarification and to ask whether that will extend to sharing information with agencies in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCarthy: I am concerned that there may be a cut-off point, as there is in any investigation. Can the Minister assure Members that all accusations will be investigated completely, regardless of the length of time that has passed since the abuse happened?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): The Member made that point in a previous intervention, and I will make sure that it is reiterated to the Minister of Health.

Although the Department of Health is focused inevitably on children, much of the debate needs to be about adults who pose a risk to children. That includes looking at the role of the police, vetting agencies, criminal prosecution services, public protection arrangements, and the exchange of information about sex offenders moving between the Irish Republic and the UK. Those are areas that fall overwhelmingly within the NIO's domain.

The motion focuses on the abuse of children by non-family members. The context of the Executive's work is one in which child protection is, and will continue to be, overwhelmingly about the abuse of children within the family. Neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse of children are overwhelmingly perpetrated by a close relative or family friend. Over the past five years, referrals of children to social services in Northern Ireland have increased by 24%. That partly reflects much better reporting and inter-agency working.

The matters raised in the debate are complex and difficult, cut across reserved and non-reserved matters and fall under the responsibility of several Ministers and Departments. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, the way forward will need to be carefully considered. It will be important to identify key actions on how to move forward, including how best to identify the scale of the problem. I anticipate further discussions over coming weeks.

As I am responding on behalf of the Health Minister, who is taking the lead on the issue on behalf of the Executive, I will ensure that a copy of the Hansard report of the debate is sent to him for his consideration.

Mr Storey: I am conscious of the hurt, betrayal, suffering and wounding of so many people in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. We must ensure that we give the issue the importance that it deserves. Although the debate has done that, I have concerns about elements of the contributions of some Members who tried to use the debate for political purposes. Some Members have tried to link the debate with the devolution of policing and justice; I fail to see the relevance of that to the motion. Those comments

should be discarded; we ought to focus on what happened and how redress can be achieved.

We must all face facts: it is only the absence of a proper investigation in Northern Ireland that has meant that we have not had anything like the public revelations and outcries that have been witnessed elsewhere, particularly in the Irish Republic. Do we really believe that the border, which some Members referred to, insulated us from the abuse of children? Some might try to argue that that could have been the case.

In the past, it was argued that the old Stormont Government being unionist controlled meant that there was greater oversight and a much stricter environment for care homes and other such institutions to operate in. It is my view that the precise opposite would have been the case; it seems highly likely that the sensitivity of the relationship between the old Stormont Government and the Roman Catholic Church would have meant that there was a greater reluctance to interfere.

I am a member of the Independent Orange Institution, which, as Members may recall, raised the issue of convent laundries in 1903. That led to the split in Orangeism. Therefore, we must bear in mind the historical context of debates on the issue. None of us should be foolish enough to think that we were immune from all the misery and brutality that took place in the Republic because of a line on the map; we were not.

Mr P Ramsey: Does the Member agree with the call in the SDLP motion for the Executive to commission a report on the extent of the abuse? Does he also agree with our call for the Executive to provide funding for services and support for the victims? Will his party support that call?

4.00 pm

Mr Storey: We have lost focus on some elements of today's debate. Those who were responsible must be held to account. I am worried that yet another report will lead to a huge diversion from that responsibility.

This point may highlight the matter for the Member: we must remember that the Roman Catholic Church is organised on an all-Ireland basis. It recognises no ecclesiastical border, and some of its dioceses straddle the border. As an institution, it has transferred personnel between jurisdictions after allegations of wrongdoing. Therefore, as I said during an intervention earlier, and as my honourable friend Rev William McCrea said, we need to ensure that nobody in the House attempts to avoid making those who carried out terrible atrocities take responsibility for their actions. The Ryan report offered immunity and whitewashed the issue of bringing people to court.

Mr Durkan: The motion does not call for Ryan-style immunity or suchlike but clearly addresses the issue of criminal justice. The Member's aversion to any report or assessment in the North means that the overall picture of abuse will be lost, and those who are

responsible for it will not be held to account. To put an onus on people to report to the PSNI is no solution to the structural abuse that took place.

Mr Storey: The Member mentions the issue of people reporting to the police. I welcome the fact that the Catholic authorities have, to some degree, made records available. However, there has been a perception that the Catholic authorities have been reluctant to be wholehearted, open, honest and transparent in bringing those matters to the police. Therefore, in order to make that happen, it is important —

Ms Anderson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, but the Member's time is up.

Mr Storey: I support the amendment.

Mr Attwood: I will begin by making a general point. People who have suffered institutional abuse, people who suffered in the Ballymurphy massacre and people who represent the families of the disappeared visited the Building today. I am sure that that coincidence is not lost on anyone. Although their circumstances differ, a common thread runs through their experiences. As Carmel Hanna said, given the brutality of their experiences, those people's dignified determination is remarkable. I have met all three groups in recent months, and I can affirm Carmel Hanna's comments about their remarkable nature.

I thank Carmel Hanna for proposing the motion. She argued with determination in the Chamber today, having previously argued in private that the Assembly debate the matter in order to bore into the scale of the issue in the North. That is at the heart of her motion. It tries to get a grip on the scale of the incidents and the scale of the response of the Chamber, and that of people outside it, to the experiences of far too many people.

Even at this late stage, I reiterate Mark Durkan's request that the DUP do not press its amendment. Indeed, I ask the party to consider withdrawing its amendment. I ask that because I believe that there is a tension in what DUP Members have said this afternoon.

Jim Shannon rightly said that what happened was a disgrace against humanity, and I agree. However, does it not arise from that statement, given that that is the measure against which to judge institutional abuse, that we should measure the scale of that abuse? We cannot say that such abuse is a disgrace against humanity yet not know its scale in this part of Ireland. That is why the SDLP argues that an assessment should be made of how far and wide the abuse was over the years.

Mr Storey: If that is the case, and I accept that such abuse is repugnant to us all and that it makes us physically sick to think of what went on, should not the first port of call be the institutions and organisations that were responsible for those actions?

Mr Attwood: I will come back to that point when I reply to what UUP Members said.

My second point is this: Michelle McIlveen said that an inquiry or an assessment will reveal:

“nothing that we do not already know”.

If we asked people in the North whether they knew everything before the broadcast of the ‘Spotlight’ report, they would say no; if we asked people in the North whether they knew everything before the petition was presented here today or before the victims made their comments in the media, they would say no; and if we asked people in the North whether the scale of abuse was known before the victims took up their campaign, they would say no.

Since it is self-evident that we cannot assert here today that everything that needs to be known is known, there is an obligation on us to take the preliminary step by way of an assessment to determine what the level of abuse might have been. Therefore I contend that there is a tension and a contradiction in what DUP Members said. On one hand, they described the abuse as an offence against humanity; on the other, they said that there is nothing that we do not know. I ask the DUP Members to consider that further.

I welcome the comments of the two Ulster Unionist Members who spoke in support of the motion. They recognised what is inherent in the motion: that an assessment of the scale of abuse is not an alternative to a criminal investigation leading to criminal prosecutions of those alleged to be guilty. In fact, the evidence from the South confirms that there is no contradiction, for although some people sought redress through the courts, many more came forward in an inquiry to determine the nature, scale and experience of abuse over many decades.

I say to DUP Members that the motion, and all the contributions from other Members, makes the point that the criminal law must have its day but that it is not inconsistent or contradictory to have a parallel assessment process that could lead to an inquiry. I also endorse the comments of the deputy leader of the Ulster Unionist Party:

“the Executive must take seriously the legacy from decades of abuse.”

That is why our motion lays down four mechanisms to assess the level of abuse, how to respond to the legacy of abuse and how to deal with the issue in future.

I listened attentively to the junior Minister Mr Newton, but I was disappointed in his explanation of how the Executive and OFMDFM deal with those who are subject to abuse today. People who were abused as children are now in their 50s, 60s and 70s, and we must deal with the legacy that they have inherited. In the wake of recent publicity about the Ryan report and the fact that people are beginning to speak up, there is probably a need for a dedicated response to deal with the spike in the number of people who require counselling and support.

I welcome the junior Minister’s statement that the Executive and OFMDFM will consider a way forward. Although, as he said, criminal prosecutions may be a significant step in determining the scale of the problem, they are not the sole determinant. Whatever legal cases do or do not reveal, there is an obligation to make an assessment, based on empirical evidence, of what happened over the past 40 or 50 years. That assessment should determine the Assembly’s response.

I acknowledge the Alliance Party for making a point that is sometimes missed. Given the tone of one or two comments from the Benches opposite, it is a point that could have been missed today. As the Alliance Party pointed out, to acknowledge that abuse took place in far too many places is different from claiming that a culture of abuse existed throughout the institutional life of this island, including in the Catholic Church. It is important to do all that is necessary to determine the scale of abuse, but it is also necessary to confirm and affirm that many institutions responded positively and properly to the needs of children in care.

I found the introduction of the devolution of justice into the debate somewhat incongruous. That it is an important issue is self-evident, and I have made that point on several occasions. However, the debate should have focused strictly and solely on the needs of victims and not on the needs of any one Assembly party, whether that is the SDLP, Sinn Féin or a unionist party.

When it comes to the nature of the debate, the DUP is not on that different a page from the SDLP, Sinn Féin, the Alliance Party or the Ulster Unionists. I sense that one or two DUP Members may have been trying to develop wider arguments; I ask them to suspend those arguments today.

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

Mr Attwood: Today, I ask the DUP to stand for the victims and with those who need justice.

Question, That the amendment be made, *put and negated.*

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses grave concern at the findings of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse report (the Ryan report) published in May 2009 in the Republic of Ireland; considers that such neglect and abuse of children and young people’s human rights must be subject to criminal law; recognises that children who were placed by state authorities in Northern Ireland in establishments or settings where they became victims of abuse are entitled to support and redress; calls on the Executive to commission an assessment of the extent of abuse and neglect in Northern Ireland, to liaise and work with the authorities in the Republic of Ireland and to report to the Assembly; calls on the Executive to provide funding to support helpline and counselling services which are now facing new demands; and further calls on the Executive to work, through the North/South Ministerial Council, to ensure that all-Ireland protections for children and vulnerable adults are in place as soon as possible.

Persecution of Christians in Orissa State

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 are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Moutray: I beg to move

That this Assembly condemns the violent persecution of Christians in Orissa state, India; calls for the immediate ending of this religious persecution; and further calls on Her Majesty's Government to press the Indian authorities to ensure the safety and religious freedom of Christians throughout India.

The principle of civil and religious liberty is one that we, as a society, ought to hold dear. We know what it is like for people to be targeted and killed solely on the grounds of their faith. Our bitter experience is such that we, of all people, should make our voices heard when there is clear unmistakable evidence of religious persecution. Events in Orissa state deserve our attention, and those who have been victims of the waves of persecution deserve our support.

4.15 pm

Christianity in India has a history of almost 2,000 years, and the indigenous Christian community stretches back to the sub-apostolic era. However, it has not always been easy for Christians in India. Orissa state, in particular, has a long history of violence against Christians, emanating from Hindu extremists in particular. In 1969, one such Hindu extremist began a Hindu religious centre in Orissa that was dedicated to countering the work of Christian missionaries and converting tribal people to Hinduism. On 23 August 2008, that person was shot dead by Maoists, as admitted by Maoist leaders and the Orissa state police. Nevertheless, Hindu extremists used the incident to unleash an unprecedented wave of attacks against Christians. Those attacks left an estimated 120 people dead and many more injured.

Within 30 minutes of the village of Rudangia being attacked, for example, Hindu extremists had set fire to 74 houses. They were armed with axes, machetes and home-made guns, and the local population was utterly defenceless. The 230 families living in Rudangia were displaced and became numbered among more than 50,000 Indian Christians who lost their homes during the orgy of violence. One Sunday after church, a mob of some 800 people came to the village of Kandhamal and attacked the Christians there. A few days later, the women of the church came together to fast and pray about the recent persecution in their village. As they began to pray, a group of about 20 to 25 people attacked again by throwing large stones at the women's prayer meeting.

More than 54,000 people have been displaced throughout Orissa state. Some 4,500 houses, more than 300 villages, and more than 250 churches have been destroyed. The wave of anti-Christian attacks started in Orissa, but it quickly spread to at least seven other states in India. Interestingly, the European Union has described it as a "massacre" of Christians. The Prime Minister of India, Dr Singh, called it a "national shame". Life for many Christians in India remains bleak.

Dr Sajan George, president of the Global Council of Indian Christians, says that Hindu extremist groups have been reconverting Christians by force. According to Dr George, evidence has been collected and given to the authorities, but the police and other Government authorities are simply doing nothing about it. More than 4,000 people are still living in relief camps, and many thousands have been unable to return to their villages for fear of death or forcible conversion to Hinduism. Dr John Dayal, a member of the National Integration Council said:

"there was no assurance forthcoming as to when these internally displaced persons, refugees in their homeland, can return home without being forced at gunpoint ... to become Hindus."

There is a massive lack of food supplies in the area, virtually no shelter, and the area simmers with the fear of further violence. Federal soldiers are maintaining peace, but Christians wonder what will happen when the army leaves; it is obvious that the army will not stay indefinitely. Many people feel that the local constabulary did little to protect them during the outbreaks of violence in 2008. Fear is the other reason why people cannot go home. Local Christians have spoken about being afraid to go into the fields to till the ground. Unable to till their fields or to return to their houses and cut off from schooling and attending the local markets, the Christians are dependent on the little help that they receive from outside.

Many people cannot even repair their houses. The Indian Government have allocated 20,000 rupees for rebuilding the partially destroyed houses, but, during recent months, most of that money has been spent on food and medical needs.

The violence in Orissa and other states came at a time when many Christians felt that Hindu fundamentalism was on the rise. Fundamentalism itself is not necessarily bad if it is about applying the teachings of one's faith to oneself and one's life. Where religious fundamentalism results in religious study and piety, it is positive and beneficial. However, when it displays itself in violence, murder and death, it is destructive.

The goal of Hindu extremists is to make India a pure Hindu nation. There are an estimated 25 million Christians in India, comprising roughly 2.3% of the population, with 80.6% Hindu and 13.4% Muslim. The goal of a Hindu state that is free from the supposed taint of others enjoying civil and religious liberty is to

be condemned. It is something that we in the Assembly should condemn. The Christians in the state of Orissa are depending on the outside world for help and support in their struggle simply to live according to their beliefs in the land of their birth. We should not forget them, and we should not let them down.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I listened to Mr Moutray's contribution, and I can see similarities between the events in Orissa and the events that have plagued Ireland over many centuries: sectarianism, division and colonialism.

India's history down through the centuries is a sad story of colonialism, in this case as a result of British rule, and interference in the local affairs of Indian states. Since India obtained freedom in the late 1940s, it has suffered religious and political division and partition between India and Pakistan, all of which have resulted in greatly troubled life for the people of India, which is one of the largest democracies, if not the largest, in the world.

How do we, as a small society and a small Assembly, assist those people to come away from what has been happening on their doorsteps: the persecution of Christians; Hindus feeling that they have been greatly wronged too; and the assassination of some of their spiritual and political leaders? How do we assist them in their journey towards that much-lamented phrase "reconciliation"? Even in our own society, we have failed to reach that point; we are still, politically, a deeply divided society. A healthy division in politics drives forward debate and makes a healthy contribution to daily life. However, we have an abnormality in politics in this part of the world that appears to me, as an observer of what is happening in India, to be somewhat similar to that in India. We have to correct it here before we start lecturing other states on how to run their affairs.

It is clear that there has been great wrongdoing in Orissa. Hundreds, if not thousands, have died; Christians have been driven from their homes; and there has been large-scale looting and burning. The Hindus and the small Muslim population in that part of the world also report great wrongs having been done to them.

The message that should come from this Assembly today is that, in order to resolve the problems in that part of the world, there must be dialogue. It must not just be around-the-table chat, but serious engagement between the leaders of the Christian and Hindu communities and the small Muslim community there. They need to sit down and deal with the issues that are of concern. As we have learned in this part of the world, we must sit around the table and make peace with our enemies, because we do not need to make peace with our friends. That is the first, difficult step in any journey towards peacemaking, whether here or on the Indian subcontinent.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. I will return to his comments when I conclude the debate, but where does civil and religious liberty come into Sinn Féin's thinking when it comes to explaining the activities that go on in places such as Orissa, rather than sitting down and talking to its enemies? Where is the right to worship God, according to the dictate of one's conscience, without being subjected to some of the horrendous scenes that have been documented in the publication that I have in front of me?

Mr O'Dowd: I am not, in any way, defending the actions of anyone who is involved in violence in Orissa. What is going on in that part of the world is wrong. However, I am several thousand miles away from that state. We are relying on media reports, although I accept that there is a comprehensive UN report that clearly states that there is persecution of Christians. The Hindu population also claim to be persecuted. Some of their religious and political leaders have been assassinated, so they believe that a great wrong has been done to them.

The way forward is dialogue, which is the start of the journey of healing. Of course the Christian faith should be allowed to operate and its believers should be allowed to worship their God in the way in which they want. I am not in favour of any religion dominating any political state. I believe in the separation of church and state, whether that involves the Christian, Muslim or Hindu faiths. I have no wish to see any state dominated by any faith. Members should not be under any illusions: we are fully in favour of religious liberty, whether that is in India or here.

The message is as true today in this part of the world as it was 15 years ago when our peace process started: there are difficult decisions to be made at each stage of the journey. Unless people engage with one another, that journey will come to an abrupt end. That leads to the horrors that we have seen in Orissa and throughout our history.

I broadly support the motion. We will certainly not vote against it, but it is difficult for a small Assembly such as this to debate such an issue and hope to have an influence on it. If others can learn from our experience, that would be a useful start for them. However, I am not saying that they should just duplicate everything that we have done —

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

Mr O'Dowd: There will be nuances in their conflict that need to be resolved.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about this important motion. I thank and congratulate the Members who brought it forward. I very much regret the simplistic, anti-British, anti-colonial argument that was put forward by Mr O'Dowd.

He almost put the blame for the wrongs of the situation in Orissa on the British Empire. It is peculiar and warped logic to do so.

Like many other Members of the Assembly, I have received important information about this very important subject from a number of Northern Ireland-based groups, including the CLIO Trust. I am particularly grateful to Mr Eric Johnston and Mr George McKelvey for their assistance in providing detail about the ongoing violence against Christians in Orissa. It certainly made for harrowing reading as it detailed the ongoing violence that is directed against the state's Christian minority.

It is interesting that the Indian Constitution states that India is a country of justice, equality and liberty, where people have the freedom to worship and the right to pursue any religious belief. However, the situation in Orissa stands in stark contrast to those constitutional guarantees. Indeed, Amnesty International has, on a number of occasions, voiced very strong criticism of the Indian Government and the provincial authorities there for failing to defend the rights of the Christian minority in Orissa.

The extent and nature of the ongoing violence is well documented. In the past few years, there have been orchestrated attacks by groups that are aligned with Hindu nationalism. Hundreds of people from the Christian minority have been killed. Thousands of homes have been attacked, and 25,000 people displaced. Places of worship have also been systematically targeted, and in recent weeks a camp that provided shelter to Christian families was the target of a bomb attack. A spokesperson for the Catholic archdiocese described the attack as further evidence that Hindu fundamentalists do not want Christians to live in peace with their neighbours in Orissa.

4.30 pm

Last year's Amnesty International report highlighted the seriousness of the situation and stated that the attacks were led by supporters of Hindu nationalist organisations, which are reportedly allied to the BJP, part of Orissa's coalition. Those attacks included arson, looting, and sexual assaults on women. Police were found to be inactive or to be responding with excessive force in the face of sectarian violence against religious or linguistic minorities, according to Amnesty International. It is against that background that the Moderator of the Church of North India has called upon the state Governments and federal Governments to restore peace and order in Orissa.

Orissa is, indeed, a far-off part of the world. However, Northern Ireland communities are, rightly, concerned about the violence in that part of India, violence that denies religious freedom. What is more, a concern for fundamental human rights and democratic values

means that none of us is free to pass by on the other side, ignoring events in Orissa.

India is the world's largest democracy. It is heir to an ancient civilization that has benefited over centuries from a religious pluralism, an experience to which most of the world's greatest traditions have contributed. My speech should not be interpreted as an attack on India. Rather, it is a call for the Government of India to protect their nation's democratic values, not least religious freedom, and to ensure that India's international reputation as an important strategic ally and trading partner of the United Kingdom is not tarnished. We support the motion.

Mr Attwood: The SDLP will also support the motion. Although it is sometimes difficult to work through fully how what we say in the Chamber may impact on other parts of the world — on this or other issues — I welcome motions such as the one brought to the Floor today.

Imagine if it were the situation that the only business we debated was the strict business of government in the North. We would end up so introspective that we would lose scale and a sense of global affairs. Whether it is on the issue of what is happening in India or denials of human rights in other parts of the world, it is important that the Assembly, hopefully collectively, asserts its views about what is happening or may not be happening in other parts of the world. We may not be in a position to influence events disproportionately or at all, but the mere fact that we make the statement is important in its own right.

A look at our own recent history shows how the benign interest taken in our experience and our conflict by other countries helped us to move beyond that past experience and out of conflict. Although Northern Ireland and Ireland are not by any means the European Union or America, the principle is the same: benign statement and intervention can help move countries to a better place. In the broader perspective, that is why I welcome the motion.

However, I also think that Northern Ireland can make a unique contribution towards moving other conflicts to a better place. When Mary Robinson, the then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, was in Belfast in December 2000, she said that it was the human rights provisions of the Good Friday Agreement that were of most interest to the rest of the world — its human rights provisions. I do not wish to anticipate tomorrow's debate about a bill of rights for Northern Ireland, but, if we in this part of the world can get our heads around rights issues, particularly community and minority rights, we can contribute to debates in other parts of the world, including, potentially, India. If one looks at international experiences of minority and community rights in certain jurisdictions, one can see

that there is little in the way of international best practice, jurisprudence or codes and conventions.

In this part of the world, long before discussions about a bill of rights or the Good Friday Agreement, people wondered whether our experience of protecting minority and community rights, however they are defined, including religious denomination, could provide a lead in developing international best practice that might be applied to our conflict and others. In that spirit, I hope that today's debate will inform that on the motion that the Ulster Unionist Party has tabled for tomorrow.

Finally, John O'Dowd said rightly that dialogue is the essence of conflict resolution. I concur; who could not? However, in this part of the world, some dialogue has ended up with people being told what is happening and what is going to happen. That is neither dialogue nor talking; it is telling people. Therefore, we should not use our experiences, past and current, to confuse genuine dialogue with the appearance of dialogue.

Mr Ford: I also congratulate Stephen Moutray and his colleagues on securing the debate. I welcome the terms in which he tabled the motion, as it expresses the legitimate concerns that many people in Northern Ireland have about the situation in Orissa.

I am slightly — but only slightly — sympathetic to John O'Dowd's views. At times in this place, rather than looking at where we have come from, it can be a little bit too easy for us to lecture others. However, on this occasion, we can look back at and draw lessons from this society's experiences and, as we move forward, seek to assist others. Therefore, I will certainly support the motion, as will my colleagues, although, given what other Members said, I suspect that we are not heading for a Division. It is clear that, whatever might be said about differences of opinion or about how people react, in this place we can surely distinguish right from wrong. It is also clear that the small Christian minority in Orissa has been subjected to horrific wrongs.

Recently, I have been listening to a BBC CD set of recordings by Mark Tully, who was the BBC's distinguished India correspondent for the 40 or so years that he worked there. It is an absolutely fascinating set of tracks that covers snippets of the history of that vast country in all its diversity. At one stage, I heard positive points about India, which, as some Members said, is the world's largest democracy. That democracy not only suffered the difficulties that forced it to enter a state of emergency under Indira Gandhi's premiership, but it was able to emerge strengthened from that crisis. It is also a democracy in which power has changed between parties consistently and peacefully, which is relatively unusual in the Third World. Yet, at other times, Mark Tully's recordings talk about the difficulties

of communal tensions, principally between Hindus and Muslims, but also between Hindus and Sikhs and, as we are discussing, when Christians are the victims of what is going on with Hindu extremists.

Another factor that applies to the Indian story is that, although, in many senses, India has developed from a very poor society since independence just after the war, in many cases that development, which has come from education, has bypassed some states and some elements. That is particularly true in the villages, where people have simply not enjoyed the benefits of development and are therefore more likely to fall prey to the kind of communal tensions that we have seen there.

Taking account of that view of India, it is nonetheless right that the motion should concentrate on the particular difficulties being experienced by Christians. There is no doubt that Christians in Orissa have been blamed by Hindu extremists for activities that were almost certainly carried out by others with a Maoist doctrine. The Christian community has been a convenient whipping boy. That has added enormously to a general tension in the area, not to mention the detailed lists of atrocities that others have delivered: the murders not only of native Christians but of missionaries; the creation of refugees on a vast scale; and the destruction of homes, other properties and churches throughout Orissa. That is well documented, as was highlighted by Danny Kennedy, not just by the victims themselves but in reports from respected international organisations such as Amnesty International, which have taken a clear view of what is happening.

The Assembly can send out a clear message today, however limited its effects may be, that everyone has a right to freedom of opinion and to worship as they see fit. The motion is a simple call for that human right to the freedom to worship in peace. As Alex Attwood said earlier, however modest the effects of the motion may be, it is absolutely right that we should pass it. We should seek to learn the lessons that have arisen from our own history and assist others, as we have been assisted by others. In particular, we should stand by the Christians in Orissa, who have suffered so much.

Mrs I Robinson: I congratulate my colleagues on tabling the motion. I regret that Sinn Féin has resorted to type by appearing to blame the plight of Christians in Orissa state on the British Government's involvement in India many years ago. Sadly, the SDLP has taken a leaf out of that book and done the same.

I was first made aware of the plight of the Christians in Orissa by a constituent in Saintfield who was genuinely concerned for the welfare of Christians living there. My first action was to write to the Rt Hon David Miliband, the Foreign Secretary in London, pointing out the problems faced by Christians and asking him to make representations to the appropriate authorities to inquire

about what was being done to ensure that Christians were able to live freely in Orissa and to worship, as of right, in the faith that they hold dear.

My response was from Chris Bryant MP, Mr Miliband's deputy, and I wish to put it on record to encourage those who have raised the issue:

"Thank you for your letter of 20 August to the Foreign Secretary on behalf of your constituent... about the outbreaks of violence against Christians in Orissa State, India. I am replying as the Duty Minister."

Mr Bryant went on to say that he shared my constituent's concern about:

"the situation in Orissa following the outbreaks of violence last year. We have expressed our concerns directly to the Indian government and their representatives. Lord Malloch-Brown raised the matter with the Indian High Commissioner in London last October. He also discussed the situation with Anand Sharma, former Indian Minister of State for External Affairs, and Mohammed Qureshi, Chairman of the Indian Minorities Commission, when he visited New Delhi on 17 October.

Following the attacks and continuing tensions in the area, an EU delegation, which included a representative from the British High Commission in New Delhi, visited Orissa in December to assess the situation.

The delegation received assurances from the Orissa State Director General of Police that all measures had been taken to prevent and suppress any repetition of the violence that took place in August. The EU Presidency also wrote to the Indian government to reiterate EU concerns on this issue on 18 December.

Religious freedom and minority rights in India, including the attacks in Orissa, were discussed at the EU India Human Rights Dialogue on 27 February.

Whilst activity by the EU Human Rights Working Group was put on hold during the recent Indian elections, the Swedish Presidency is focussed on the issue and plans to do a follow-up visit to Orissa in the next couple of months."

He continued:

"We welcome the Indian government's efforts to protect communities, restore law and order, and the offer of compensation to victims including the disbursement of £140,000 to 35 families, who lost one of their kin to violence. The Indian government has also set up the central scheme of Assistance To Victims Of Terrorist And Communal Violence, which came into effect in April 2008, and aims to provide assistance to the next of kin of victims of terrorist, including militancy and insurgency and communal violence. Under the scheme, an amount of £4,000 is given to the next of kin of the deceased victims."

The concluding passage should be highlighted:

"The UK government will continue to urge the government of India to ensure that the perpetrators and inciters of the violence in Orissa are brought to justice, an appropriate level of compensation is received by the victims and the rights of minorities in India upheld."

4.45 pm

In another place, we can continue to raise the profile of this cause, and I reiterate my delight that my colleagues succeeded in having this motion debated. We will do everything that we can to highlight this issue.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion and congratulate my colleagues on securing the debate. Christianity is the third largest religion in India, although it is practised by only 2.3% of the population. Christian roots date back 2,000 years, and we still have missionaries who hear the call of God to evangelise and travel to India. Some of them are from my own church.

However, that once-accepting nation is now not so accepting of Christians, and there has been a marked rise in persecution. I am immensely shocked and appalled to read of the persecution that is taking place against Christians, especially in Orissa. I receive the 'Release International' magazine every month, which tells of persecuted Christians across the world. Persecution is taking place in many places but, today, we wish to focus on Orissa.

The Indian Prime Minister's statement on 3 December 2008 stated that violence was a national shame and that his Government had taken a firm stand to halt it. Violence against the Christian minorities has continued, and it is well over a year later. Therefore, his words of a year or so ago have, unfortunately, meant very little. The violence against the Christian minorities, which began on 24 August 2008 after the murder of a prominent Hindu nationalist leader, has continued and is becoming a way of life for the Christian community. That is unacceptable. That is not a normal way of life, and it is past time that our Government stepped in to speak for the oppressed.

The nummer o' Christian fowk wha hae tuk' shelter i 25 relief camps rin bae the state authorities hes ris' fae 12,000 tae 20,000 i yin montht las' yeir an' ris' bae neir 40,000 at wur driv' intae hidin' i the jungles. Efter things joined tae calm doon monie fowk went beck tae thair hames the mair at thair wur thoosans o' ithers wha hae bein displaced an' Amnesty International bes feart at the feck o' thaim wulnae bae fit tae gae hame.

The number of Christians who have taken shelter in 25 relief camps run by the state authorities rose from 12,000 to 20,000 within a month last year and has increased to approximately 40,000, including those who were driven into hiding in the jungles. After matters initially calmed down, many returned to their homes, although thousands are still displaced, and Amnesty International fears that most of them are unable to return home. According to camp residents, they face threats of violence and, in some cases, an ultimatum from supporters of Hindu nationalist organisations to convert to Hinduism if they want to return home. Civil and religious liberty means the opportunity to practise one's Christianity.

The attacks began in August last year and, within two months, led to the deaths of 25 people. Furthermore, it is suspected that more murders have been covered up. Thirty places of worship in one region were damaged,

and the suspected perpetrators were arrested only after immense pressure from opposition parties. The problems that were apparent in all those attacks were the lack of speed with which the police acted and their unwillingness to act.

I read one account of a pastor being injured, and it summed up the attitude of the police and, subsequently, the attitude of the Government who rule the police. The Sunday worship service of the Beersheba Church of God concluded at noon, as usual. Pastor Pavithra Kumar was approached by a young man enquiring about a boy, but the pastor said that he did not know the boy. The young man left and returned with 10 masked men who arrived on six bikes. They called the pastor out of the church and attacked him with wooden sticks, hockey sticks and their fists. The pastor tried to run back inside the church, and a woman from the church got caught up in the melee and sustained injuries. They closed the doors on their attackers. The men threatened the pastor and the believers from outside the church and left the scene. Pastor Pavithra was badly injured, especially on his hands, chest, back and head.

The pastor and the believers went to the Mastoori police station to file a complaint. The policeman in charge refused to file a report and said that the police had no knowledge of a church being run. However, after much persuasion, the police filed a complaint. That illustrates that the police were not willing or able to reply when they should have done so.

I am aware that the UK Government expressed concern to the Indian Government in 2008 and that representatives from the UK have been part of delegations that have gone to India. However, from the latest information that is coming from our missionaries on-site in India, we can see that the situation is far from that which is being painted by the Indian Government. Things are not changing for the good; they are getting steadily worse, with the main difference being that people are beginning to see the situation simply as the way things are. That is not how things are; not now, not ever. It is time for the UK Government to make a decisive move and ask for immediate action and change. For instance, the law in Orissa, which states that anyone who converts to Christianity must inform the authorities, earmarks people for persecution. It is those kinds of details that must be highlighted and changed.

It has become crystal clear that the Indian Government have to change and adopt a positive attitude to the Christians in their midst, and the time for them to do so has long since passed. International pressure must be applied. I support the motion, and I urge the House to do likewise.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Considering the traumatic circumstances that surrounded the creation of the Indian state, the country has been a remarkable example of

democratic tolerance and respect for difference. For the majority of India's modern existence, Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs and many more religions have lived together side by side in relative harmony and stability, and they still do. However, the developments in Orissa are extremely disturbing and should be treated with the utmost seriousness by the Indian authorities and the international community.

I thank the Members for tabling the motion. It is a reminder that we live in a global village, where events in distant countries impact upon us through the media, travel, business links, immigration and often through shared faith commitments and identities.

The area of Kandhamal in Orissa state has been the main focus for the outbreaks of violence against the region's Christian minority. It was there that the majority of people suffered and the greatest number of people were displaced. The Christian minority is no privileged elite. They are often landless or marginal landholders, and they are living in fear and feel unsafe and insecure.

Violence towards minority Christians has been occurring for some years. In December 2007, for instance, the Kandhamal district witnessed religious violence during which 37 Christians were killed and religious institutions destroyed. That willingness to murder is particularly disturbing, as is the determination to remove any Christian presence from the region through attacks on places of worship, hospitals and schools.

At the heart of the matter is a deep intolerance that is seen in the extremist nationalism of fundamentalist Hindu organisations. Rejecting India's long and noble tradition of religious tolerance, fundamentalist Hindus are targeting the minority faiths, including Christianity, in several regions of India.

Christianity is not a recent western export to India. Indeed, the first Indian Christian communities date to the fourth century, and Islam and Buddhism have likewise been part of Indian culture for centuries. Last Sunday, my own congregation in Clough celebrated its 350th anniversary, and it was from that congregation that the first Indian missionary was sent from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

In attacking religious diversity, Hindu fundamentalists are attacking India's culture and heritage. That is an opinion shared by the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, who has stated that the Orissa violence is "a national shame".

The fact that citizens are being deprived of life, liberty and property in modern India, the world's largest democracy, is a warning that India cannot take its democratic values for granted. Reports that the state Government and the local police have acted as bystanders while mobs attacked Orissa's Christian minority must add to our concerns.

The Christian community was wrongly accused of killing the deputy inspector-general of the police, who was a Hindu. Due to that accusation, the persecution of innocent Christians began, resulting in several hundred being killed, including pastors and church leaders, while properties, including missionary schools and hospitals, were obliterated.

I will not go into any more detail, because other Members have already done that. However, I will say that violence and persecution of any minority is wrong. I stand by the Christians of Orissa. It is right that we in the Assembly, with our history of so many suffering because of their religion, should bring the issue to the light of the Indian community in Northern Ireland, whom we treasure, and ask that true democracy prevail in India. I support the motion.

Mr Storey: At the outset, I thank all Members who have taken part in the debate today. It has been a useful debate, and I will come to individual contributions in a moment.

On several occasions, the Assembly has held important debates on the principles of civil and religious liberty and the freedom not only to hold individual religious views but to be able to freely and openly express such views. Members have not always agreed on those matters, but I think that we would all agree that, compared with some places in the world, we enjoy many privileges and freedoms that we should appreciate and never take for granted.

It has been claimed that there were more Christian martyrs in the twentieth century than in all of the previous centuries combined. That is a sobering thought and a frightening one. There are organisations that keep bringing us up to date with many places across the world — not just in India — where being a Christian is something that results in a person being either attacked or maligned. There are many sad examples of that, and the first decade of the twenty-first century shows no signs of bucking the trend of the twentieth century.

There are times when we feel that ignorance would be bliss on the issue, but we cannot close our eyes to what is going on in the world. It may be too painful for us to take in what is happening in places such as Orissa in eastern India, but we must not allow ourselves to turn a blind eye to the atrocities that are taking place there. That is why I welcome today's debate. In preparing for the debate, I was shocked to read some of the accounts and view some of the horrific photographic evidence of what has taken place in Orissa.

5.00 pm

Living in Northern Ireland, with its small population, we sometimes find it difficult to comprehend the scale of some worldwide events. Orissa has a population of almost 37 million. Around 94% are Hindu, and, over the years, the small Christian minority of 2% has suffered

from opposition and contempt. However, 2% amounts to around 900,000 people. Think about that: almost one million people harassed, victimised, imprisoned, tortured or murdered simply because of their faith and because they want, in conscience, to worship the God of heaven and to have personal faith and a trust in the person of Jesus Christ.

It has been mentioned that it was the murder of Orissa's Hindu nationalist icon and four of his disciples in the Kandhamal district in August 2008 that sparked off the latest round of attacks on Christian people and property. Although those murders were committed by Maoists, Christians have been blamed as the likely culprits because the murdered man had been very opposed to the Christian faith and the work of Christian missionaries. Over the years, groups of anti-Christian forces have unleashed a campaign of destruction, murder and genocide against Christians on a scale of depravity and hellish wickedness that is hard to take in, and other Members have referred to those incidents in some detail.

The Indian Government have, rightly, said that the violence in Orissa is "a national crime". That is to put it extremely mildly. However, the state Government have failed in their duty to protect their citizens, and we are right to highlight that fact in the House. Many have lost their homes and been forced to flee and live in refugee camps. Others have been murdered, and families have been shattered and broken apart. However, the law enforcement agencies are doing nothing to protect life and property.

The persecution is so great that some Christians simply give up and are pressurised into recanting their faith. However, when they decide to do so and when they return to their homes and to the Hindu religion, are they welcomed back with open arms? Not so. On the contrary, they are forced to eat cow manure and drink cow urine in a bizarre ceremony of humiliation, degradation and shame. Those acts cannot be allowed to continue. If the Orissa Government will not act, I appeal to the Indian Government to act and to act swiftly.

In the moments that remain, I will comment on Members' contributions. It is sad that we could not have had a contribution from the party opposite without reference being made to British colonialism. I am glad to see that Mr O'Dowd is still in the Chamber. It seems as though everything in the world is down to British rule. This is not the result of British colonialism but the result of people not being able to show respect to others of a different faith and a different perspective. I say to Mr O'Dowd and the House that it is for that reason that we in Northern Ireland suffered for 40 years and more. I remind the Member that people were murdered in their place of worship in Northern Ireland. The sole reason for that was not the absence of dialogue; the sole reason was sectarian hatred and an inability to respect those of a different faith and hue.

Mr O'Dowd: I do not lay all the blame at the door of British colonialism. However, it was not only me who said that divisions were caused in India — no less a man than Mahatma Gandhi pointed to Britain's role in perpetuating divisions in Indian society. Mr Storey refers to religious respect here, yet we have a Minister who has told the world that he will not set foot inside a Catholic chapel to attend a Catholic service. Is that respect?

Mr Storey: That is a civil and religious liberty. Mr O'Dowd needs an education. The Reformation brought people the right to make those choices. Before the Reformation, we lived in the Dark Ages, when people were made to go to a certain place of worship and were not allowed to read the word of God. I am quite happy to meet the Member at any time and give him a history lesson about the benefits of the reformed faith. I respect the views of the Minister who the Member referred to. Those are his personal views, which I support and with which I concur.

Danny Kennedy referred to the Indian Constitution. I think that that is a classic example of people putting on paper something that they are not prepared to put into practice. Mr Kennedy is right, and I commend him for drawing our attention to that.

Alex Attwood said that we in Northern Ireland set an example of international best practice. However, there are many other things that we in Northern Ireland could do that would represent better examples of coming together in this society. Northern Ireland is not perfect, and there is a huge number of problems that we still have to overcome, so I would be cautious about holding ourselves up as an example of best practice in respect of international affairs.

David Ford referred to Mark Tully's broadcasts. We would all do well to listen to the informative programmes that Mr Tully has produced. It was helpful that Mr Ford expressed the clear message that needs to be sent out today: the requirement for freedom to worship in peace. We need to treasure and value that freedom, which must be extended to everyone, because it is not solely the domain of those of the reformed faith. That freedom must be extended to all who wish to worship. They should be able to worship in the absence of violence.

I am indebted to my colleague Iris Robinson for her very important intervention and contribution to the debate. She has taken the matter to David Miliband, and it is good that the Foreign Office response has been placed on record today. I have no doubt that Iris, along with her Westminster colleagues, will continue to take the message expressed by this House to our Government. The issue must not only be recorded but effectively dealt with. I thank Iris for that. Jim Shannon outlined some of the harrowing detail of what is going on.

I conclude by referring to my colleague Dr Coulter, who reminded us of the contribution made by missionaries who have gone to the land of India. That Christian message can bring ultimate peace not only to India but to the Province that we love, because only that message can bring peace in man's heart between God and his neighbour.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly condemns the violent persecution of Christians in Orissa state, India; calls for the immediate ending of this religious persecution; and further calls on Her Majesty's Government to press the Indian authorities to ensure the safety and religious freedom of Christians throughout India.

Adjourned at 5.08 pm

