
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 24 November 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Speaker's Ruling: Unparliamentary Language

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed, I wish to remark on the standards that I expect in debates in the Chamber. Let me say before I make my ruling that I will not take any points of order on this issue, and I do not want Members to raise bogus points of order to try to get at the basis of that ruling.

In making my ruling, I want to refer to points of order that were raised during last week's sitting on the use of unparliamentary language. Two points of order referred to remarks made by Mr Mervyn Storey and his use of the terms "hypocrisy" and "hypocrite", and I am aware that, on a previous occasion, those terms have been ruled to be unparliamentary.

"Unparliamentary language" means different things in different places and to different Members at different times. In some places, the list of words and phrases deemed to be unparliamentary runs to several pages, but it would not be helpful for us to adopt such an approach here.

I know that it sometimes strikes Members as odd that some words and phrases are deemed unparliamentary while others are permitted as being part of the cut and thrust of debate. The context in which particular words are used can affect their meaning, making them more, or less, acceptable to those to whom they refer.

It is for those reasons that, from now on, I intend to take a different approach to the language that will or will not be permitted in the Chamber. Rather than making judgements on the basis of particular words or phrases that have been ruled to be unparliamentary here or elsewhere, I will judge Members' remarks against standards of courtesy, good temper and moderation. Those are what I consider to be the standards of parliamentary debate, and the Assembly and the people

who elected it would be better served if its Members were to adhere to those high standards. In making my judgements, I will consider the nature of Members' remarks and the context in which they were made.

I have acknowledged that, at times, Members will wish to express their views forcefully and engage in robust debate. That is acceptable. However, what is not acceptable is where the tone or nature of remarks becomes so ill tempered and bad mannered that they are closer to discourtesy and disorder than to debate. When that happens, I will interrupt Members and ask them to moderate their remarks. If Members refuse such requests from the Chair, they will be asked to resume their seats, and I may rule that they should not be called to speak in the Chamber for some time on any debate. Remarks made from a seated position will be treated in exactly the same way. As always, the Chair's ruling on such matters will not be open to challenge.

I will now speak directly to the Whips of political parties. Whips have a huge responsibility to discipline their groups and individual Members. I do not want to see Whips rising to defend a Member whom they know to have crossed the line. Whips have a huge responsibility for instilling discipline in their Members and groups. If the Whips are not prepared to do that, the Chair will do it. I want to make it clear, once and for all, where Whips' responsibility lies for representing their groups in the Chamber. It is not only the responsibility of the Chair to instil discipline in the House; there is also a huge responsibility on the Whips of the various political parties.

On other occasions, as in the past, Members may make remarks or allegations that fall so far short of the standards that I have outlined that I will ask them to withdraw them. I sincerely hope that Members do not place themselves and the Chair in that position. Where they do so, I hope that they will see the merit of respecting the ruling of the Chair and withdraw their remarks, as some Members have done in recent months.

With regard to the specific points of order raised last week about Mr Storey's use of the words "hypocrite" and "hypocrisy", I have examined the Official Report and, in my view, Mr Storey could and should have expressed his views in a more moderate way. I trust that he will take this morning's ruling on board and temper his future remarks accordingly.

Indeed, I ask all Members to study my remarks when they are published in the Official Report, to reflect on them, and to take account of them when they exercise the privilege and the responsibility of speaking in the Chamber.

We shall now proceed with today's business. I will not take any points of order. However, I intend to say more on the subject at the meeting of the Business Committee this afternoon.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Swine Flu

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that he wishes to make a statement on swine flu.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I take this opportunity to provide an update for Members on recent developments in the swine flu pandemic.

In the past few weeks, levels of flu-like illness across the UK appear to be on the decrease. In Northern Ireland, GP consultation rates have decreased again from about 226 to 106 per 100,000 of the population but remain higher than in previous years. Rates for flu-like illness are particularly high in the 0-4 year age group.

To date, there have been 1,285 confirmed swine flu cases and some 555 hospitalised cases in Northern Ireland. Sadly, there have been 13 deaths. Although the recent decrease in figures is encouraging, we cannot afford to be complacent. The fall in consultation rates suggests that our preparations and plans are working.

I take this opportunity to highlight the tremendous work of health and social care staff, GPs and everyone who has been involved in preparing for and responding to this pandemic. I know at first hand the huge efforts that have been made by those working in health who are dealing with the considerable pressure on services as a result of the swine flu pandemic. Those efforts are continuing, and I thank everyone for their commitment and dedication.

At departmental level, I continue to participate on a weekly basis with Health Ministers from across the UK as part of four-nations meetings. I also take part in Cabinet Office meetings with ministerial colleagues from across the UK Government. My Department also remains in regular contact with officials in the Republic of Ireland to share information and knowledge about the pandemic. I will be meeting Mary Harney tomorrow to further discuss the swine flu pandemic as part of the North/South Ministerial Council meeting.

The frequency and volume of those meetings is considerable and reflects the seriousness with which I and other UK Ministers are taking the global health threat. In fact, it is because of the significant level of planning and time that has been invested in the issue that my Department, health and social care services and GPs have been so well prepared to deal with the pandemic.

We still cannot predict how the virus may evolve, whether the pandemic has peaked or whether flu levels

will rise again in the weeks ahead. Previous pandemics have taught us that there may be further waves in future months — possibly up to a year later — and they may be more severe.

Since my last statement to the Assembly there has been notable and significant progress in rolling out the vaccine to priority groups. The swine flu vaccination programme started on 21 October and was targeted at patients in clinical at-risk groups, front line health and social care workers and household contacts of immunocompromised individuals. It was also targeted at pregnant women, who are four times more likely to develop serious complications from swine flu and up to five times more likely to need to go to hospital. To date, almost 7,000 pregnant women and over 20,000 front line health and social care workers have been vaccinated. By mid-December the vaccine will have been offered to around 500,000 people in the initial priority groups in Northern Ireland.

Urgent arrangements were also put in place to offer the vaccine to children with complex needs and severe learning disability. Around 2,100 pupils in special schools have now received their vaccination. Children with special needs and underlying physical health conditions who are not in special schools have been offered the vaccine, as have some staff in special schools for children with severe learning disabilities who provide personal care for pupils.

Around 220,000 doses of vaccine have been distributed to GPs so far. Further vaccine shipments are being delivered on a weekly basis. The uptake of the vaccine among priority groups in Northern Ireland is very encouraging, and I welcome the fact that so many people have taken up the offer of the vaccine, particularly those who are at increased risk from the complications of swine flu.

Last week, I announced plans for the second phase of the vaccination programme. The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) advised the four Health Ministers that it would be reasonable to commence the next phase of the vaccination programme with children aged from six months to under five years. That is because that age group appears to be at greatest risk of serious illness from swine flu. Those very young children also have the highest rate of hospitalisation and must be protected. To date in Northern Ireland some 139 children in the nought-to-four age group have been hospitalised, and the majority did not have any underlying health condition. That total is around a quarter of all swine flu admissions to hospital in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is that group on which we wish the next phase of the vaccination campaign to focus.

I acknowledge once again the hard work of GPs and their staff in delivering the first phase so successfully and under very challenging circumstances. The agreement

reached to deliver the first phase of the programme was to ensure that they had sufficient funding to allow them to hold additional clinics and take on extra staff to deal with the increased pressure that they faced and continue to face. The vaccine remains our best protection against swine flu.

Negotiations with GPs about the second phase are being conducted at a national level and are still at an early stage. It will be important to have the negotiations concluded as soon as possible so that GP practices will be able to start vaccinating these children as soon as they have covered the first priority groups. That is expected to be completed by mid-December.

GPs have vast experience in immunising children against normal childhood diseases, and we hope to take the second phase forward as part of the routine childhood vaccination programme. Vaccinating children in GP practices provides families and children with a familiar setting and offers parents some flexibility as to when their children receive the vaccine.

We expect that parents will be invited to bring their children in for vaccination, if they wish to take up the offer. In addition, the JCVI has advised that the main carers for elderly or disabled people whose welfare may be at risk if their carer falls ill should be encouraged to take up the vaccine once all the priority groups have been vaccinated. We will discuss that advice with carers' organisations, including the matter of how to identify and verify the carers involved.

10.45 am

Last month, agreement was finally reached on funding for swine flu. That included help in meeting the £64 million estimated costs of swine flu, to which I contributed £32 million. The clarity around my budget has allowed me to relieve some of the financial pressures that face health and social care trusts. It also allowed me to reject a number of proposals from trusts that would have had a significant impact on front line services. We must be able to balance the books, and there is still some deficit to be accounted for. The recent decision to defer bowel cancer screening is an example of the difficult decisions that have to be made.

Although I will continue to prioritise front line services, significant pressures lie ahead, and I need continued support to protect health and social care services for everyone in Northern Ireland. The public have a major role to play in the pandemic; they can look after not only themselves but those with whom they come into contact by getting the vaccine when it is offered to them. That is the best way for people to be protected against swine flu.

As well as accepting the vaccine when it is offered to you or your child, simple but effective hygiene measures such as frequent hand washing can also help. Remember to cover your mouth with a tissue when

you cough or sneeze, and then put the tissue into a bin: catch it, bin it, kill it.

I wish to reassure the public that, for the vast majority of people, swine flu remains a relatively mild illness from which they will make a full recovery. Unfortunately, for some people, the symptoms are much more severe. For those people who are most at risk, the vaccine is the most important means of defence against swine flu. Protect yourself, protect those at risk and get the vaccine.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr Wells): It is reassuring and heartening to learn that the overall trend of the swine flu pandemic in Northern Ireland is downward. I join the Minister in paying tribute to the Health Service staff who are responsible for bringing the pandemic under a reasonable amount of control.

I am interested in the Minister's comments about the negotiations with GPs, which take place centrally in London. As he knows, I was concerned when the GPs demanded a payment of £5.15 for each vaccination. Most GPs are not taking on extra staff; they administer the vaccine as part of their normal surgery work. Perhaps they undertake additional work as a result, but they do not face additional expenditure. I am concerned that it is implicit in the Minister's comments that, in London, the British Medical Association (BMA) and other representatives of the medical profession seem to be negotiating for even more money for taking part in the second phase of the vaccination programme. In the difficult economic times that the Minister has outlined for the Health Service, enough is enough. The scale of payment that has already been agreed should not go any further. Will he provide more information on what is going on in London? Whatever results from those negotiations will be binding on Northern Ireland. The Health Service budget should not be asked to bear any more of the burden.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is important to recall that we have some way to go before we complete the vaccination of the priority groups. That is dependent on the supply from factories, and we anticipate that the vaccination of some 500,000 people in the first priority group will be completed by mid-December. When we have completed that, we will move to the second phase. The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation will advise what to do after the first priority group is dealt with.

A rate for the administration of each vaccine was agreed as a result of the negotiations on our behalf between the National Health Service and the BMA nationally. That rate was negotiated and accepted because GPs are carrying out a large part of the vaccinating.

Of the priority groups, GPs are vaccinating those aged between six months and 65 years, the household contacts of immunocompromised individuals and people aged 65 and over who are in the current seasonal flu vaccine programme. In phase two, I expect GPs also to vaccinate the six months-to-five years age group. That is a considerable workload, which is in addition to dealing with people who have swine flu.

GPs therefore need to take on extra staff, and we have allowed for moneys to enable them to do that and to deliver the vaccine quickly and effectively. It is not fair to say that GPs should do that as part of their ordinary workload. My experience of GP practices is that the extra workload is considerable. They work extra hours and bring in extra staff. Some Members are shaking their head, but they must allow for the fact that there are an extra 500,000 doses in the first phase of vaccination of priority one groups. A lot of effort goes into vaccinating half a million people.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. It is good to be updated regularly. Like the Minister and the Chairperson of the Health Committee, I want to focus on staff and carers in the health sector, because we have all worked together on this matter.

I am disappointed that carers for the elderly or disabled are still not seen as a priority for vaccination, although the Minister said in his statement that he will address that. How many people in priority groupings have turned down the vaccine?

The issue of money being paid to GPs for vaccinations is also a concern. After a previous ministerial statement, I raised the case of an elderly constituent who had to wait three weeks for an appointment to get her swine flu vaccination. Even with additional clinics in some GP practices, an elderly person with underlying health problems had to wait for three weeks.

The Minister mentioned £64 million for tackling swine flu. How much of that will be paid to GPs? Furthermore, are the negotiations being held up in England because GPs and the BMA are holding out for additional money?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is too early for me to say what the take-up rate is for the vaccine. However, we have been very encouraged by the take-up rate among, for example, pregnant women and children with learning disabilities and special needs. We have seen high take-up rates, much higher, I believe, than in England, for example.

The rate per dose is an extra that GPs are providing, and it involves extra work. The rate is negotiated centrally because it is a national negotiation. We in Northern Ireland pay national rates through the Health

Service, as do England, Scotland and Wales. That is how it is. A deal is a deal, and we adhere to whatever the deal is.

This is not a question of GPs and the BMA holding out for extra money. I do not think that that is the case at all. It is about the Health Service covering reasonable extra costs to let GPs carry out that work. GPs are best placed to do that. They have the patient lists, so can readily identify those in priority groups, write to them and bring them in for vaccination.

The swine flu outbreak began only in April, in Mexico, and it is, therefore, a novel virus. Since then, we have put a vaccine-manufacturing process into operation, and we are seeing the fruits of that as the vaccine comes out the factory door. However, there are still not enough vaccine doses to vaccinate everyone right now. Therefore, a number of GPs would be governed by the number of vaccine doses that they receive. That explains why there is prioritisation, and why GPs may be booking in patients several weeks ahead.

As I understand it, it is not that GPs are trying to do it all at a profit; far from it. This is a particularly busy time of the year, and swine flu has added a huge extra challenge to the Health Service and to GPs.

Mr Gardiner: Like my colleagues on the Health Committee, I pay tribute to the Health Minister for bringing the statement to the House and, yet again, keeping us abreast of what is happening with swine flu. I congratulate all Health Service staff who are administering the vaccine and protecting our citizens.

I am somewhat alarmed and disappointed that the Minister has already had to pay out £32 million in relation to swine flu. Does the Minister agree that his Budget should be exempt from any further reductions, so that the best health care can be provided to the citizens of Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Of course, I agree with the last sentiment. We had a debate in the House, but Members did not agree with me or Sam Gardiner, so the House voted for cuts to the Health Service. I paraphrase the old adage: be careful what you vote for. The fact is that I was entitled to bid for £64 million under the Budget settlement, and I did so, but I got only half of that amount. The Budget settlement did not manifest itself as far as health and social services are concerned, and we have already experienced the cut that the House voted for. I could talk about other parts of the Budget, but that is for another day.

The Health Service is stretching to meet the extra demand, which has increased by 9% this year, whereas the Budget has increased by only 0.5%. All of that will manifest itself over the coming months as Members see the consequences of not voting for a sufficient resource for the Health Service. Nevertheless, we are

on top of the swine flu pandemic, and we intend to keep on top of it.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas cuimsitheach a rinne sé ar maidin. I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement. The Minister has prioritised certain groups for vaccination, but he has not given the same degree of priority to carers. Will he think again and afford the highest priority to carers so that the people whom they care for can be assured of continued, unbroken care at this particularly difficult time?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can repeat only what I said in my statement, which is that the advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation is that children aged between six months and five years are the most vulnerable, and they are the most likely group to be hospitalised. We are examining the immunisation of carers as part of the second phase, because elderly, frail people or individuals who are unable to look after themselves would come to harm if they were to lose their carer to illness. However, the difficulty is identifying the carers. That is the discussion that we are having at the moment. When those discussions are complete, I will be in a position to take the next step.

Mr McCarthy: I too thank the Minister for his statement, but I must express some disappointment in the reduction — in fact, the cancellation — of the bowel cancer screening programme. Having said that, I note that the Minister has played a positive role in relation to the immunisation of children with special needs and children with learning difficulties. Has any consideration been given to bringing the swine flu immunisation programme to training centres that adults with special needs and adults with learning difficulties attend? I assure the Minister that it would be much better for those people to be vaccinated in an environment that is known to them, rather than in unfamiliar GP centres. Has the Minister given that any consideration?

11.00 am

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I remind Mr McCarthy that, at present, bowel cancer screening is, as I have said, deferred until April 2010. I am determined to introduce that screening because lives are at risk. No one was more disappointed than me that I was forced to take that step.

The swine flu virus is circulating widely in the community. Therefore, adults who have learning disabilities or special needs are vulnerable, regardless of whether they attend special schools. If someone has symptoms, the advice remains that the best thing that he or she can do is stay at home.

The vaccination programme will work its way through the entire population. I anticipate that everyone will be offered the vaccination, if necessary, as required. I want to reach that position. At present, there is not enough vaccine to go around. People who are most at risk have been prioritised. The decision to do that has been made jointly by the Health Ministers of the Governments of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, who work together to ensure that the same approach is taken in every UK region. We have taken advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maibh agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister clarify whether GP surgeries have made different arrangements for the swine flu vaccination and the normal, seasonal flu vaccination? Members have heard that that has created an additional burden. I have spoken to constituents who have received separate letters for their vaccinations. One week, they must go to their GPs to receive one vaccination; the next week, they must go back to receive the other. It is reasonable for Members to ask that question in view of what GPs and the BMA are trying to negotiate.

Finally, I want to point out that the House did not vote for health cuts: it voted for better efficiencies. Given the fact that some trusts spent £500,000 on tea and biscuits, it is churlish of the Minister to come to the House and lecture the Assembly on costs when he needs to get his own house in order on that issue.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I do not want to get into a budget argument. The Member voted for Health Service cuts. Bearing in mind that the Health Service, compared with that of England, is underfunded by £600 million; that it is required to find £700 million of efficiencies, four sevenths of which will not go back into services but must go towards ordinary costs; and that the budget deal that I secured for pandemic flu and the first £20 million of available money did not materialise, all in all, the Health Service continues to address need remarkably well.

The £500,000 to which the Member referred was spent, essentially, on tea and biscuits for staff throughout all trusts during two and a half years. There have been several major staff meetings, many of which I held. Those staff meetings were held during lunchtime, so staff gave up their lunch breaks to come along and gain understanding of changes, such as the merging of 19 trusts into six and four boards into one, the setting up of the new Public Health Agency and so on. Major reforms have occurred, such as the Agenda for Change. Members have asked numerous questions on that issue and are, therefore, familiar with staff's upset and uncertainty.

I understand that Ms Ní Chuilín does not approve of tea and biscuits for Health Service staff. However, even if tea and biscuits were no longer provided to anybody in the Health Service by management and staff were forced to pay £500,000 over two and a half years, it would certainly not solve the problem; nor does that address the fact that the Member voted blithely for Health Service cuts. Let me remind the House that Northern Ireland's Health Service is the only one in any UK region that faces cuts, despite it being the most poorly funded.

As regards the swine flu and seasonal flu vaccinations, we hoped and expected that seasonal flu vaccinations would be delivered first. However, one has overlaid the other. GPs are faced with that double challenge. In many cases, they can provide vaccinations for both types of flu on the same day to the same patient, but that is not always possible. It depends on the patient. Many will be able to receive both vaccinations on the same day. However, at other times, that will not be possible, not least because of the way that vaccine supplies have become available to us. The vaccine was ordered in May and was developed over the summer. Having gone through rigorous safety checks, it was made available to us from 21 October, only three or four weeks ago. That is how hard the Health Service and the GPs are working; yet the Member tells me that staff are not entitled to tea and biscuits when they give up their lunchtime to talk about a staff situation. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Easton: As the Minister is aware, I have been supportive of his strategy for swine flu. However, some concerns have arisen in recent weeks which I hope the Minister can address.

In my constituency, several pensioners who suffer from underlying medical conditions have been refused the swine flu injection. Will the Minister outline the strategy for pensioners who have such underlying issues? One of the pensioners has had two heart attacks. Will the Minister clear up that point for me? Did the GP concerned take the right decision? What can be done to alleviate the situation?

Last week, a worrying development occurred in Wales. Five patients developed resistance to Tamiflu. Will the Minister update us on that? Are there signs that the swine flu virus is mutating?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As far as the first part of Mr Easton's question is concerned, the priority groups are as I have laid out and, as I understand it, the individuals referred to should have been offered the swine flu vaccination. If the Member writes or speaks to me afterwards, I will look into that for him to ensure that the individuals concerned get what they are entitled to.

The development in Wales is worrying. In some areas, the virus appears to be mutating away from a form that can be combated by the Tamiflu antiviral drug. That was always a concern, and the vaccine manufacturer was concerned that the virus would mutate. That is why a broad-spectrum vaccine was chosen. There is no example of that development in Northern Ireland: we have no such cases. It has happened in Wales and in other parts of Europe, but numbers are very small, and I hope they will remain so.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his statement, and for his openness in keeping the public informed of the process. He says — I believe him — that there could be a second or third wave of this pandemic, and I wonder whether, on the next occasion, he is likely to have less trouble getting the money to pay for the vaccine.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I cannot predict the future with respect to resources for the Health Service. Everyone in the House knows the exact position. The Health Service cannot be maintained as it stands on the resources offered. That is a mathematical fact, and we have proved it to be so. It is wrong to complain that the Health Service in Northern Ireland can somehow fix itself through better management of its finances. One can clearly see that it is underfunded by hundreds of millions of pounds. That is one of my greatest concerns, and I will raise it frequently in this House, much to the annoyance of some Members.

Swine flu will return, and we will have to face each challenge as it comes. This is a major challenge. We still do not know the development pathway of the virus or to where it will travel, other than to say that it will mutate and return.

Dr McDonnell: Like others, I thank the Minister for his hard work in keeping abreast of a very difficult situation.

I declare a non-interest, because I am no longer practising medicine. I therefore do not have an axe to grind about money or anything else.

Ms S Ramsey: You still have an interest.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Dr McDonnell: I did not catch that remark, Mr Speaker. Was it to be taken seriously?

I also congratulate the Minister on his intense liaising with colleagues in Great Britain and in the Republic. It is difficult to set priorities, given that a limited supply of the vaccine is available, and Members should recognise that fact. Do the projections suggest when enough of the vaccine will be available for it to be offered freely to everyone, or is it too early to say?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A number of variables exists, not least the uptake of the vaccine, although so far that has been encouraging. It will be some time in the new year before the Department has enough supplies to offer the vaccine to everybody.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Flooding: Broadway Underpass

Mr Speaker: I inform Members that I have received notice from the Minister for Regional Development that he wishes to make a statement on the independent investigation into the flooding of Broadway underpass.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, following the completion of work that was recommended by the independent investigation into the flooding of the Broadway underpass on 16 August 2008, I wish to make a statement. The purpose of the statement is to present to the Assembly a brief summary of the work that has been implemented to gain an understanding of the flooding incident at Broadway underpass and to reduce the likelihood of a reoccurrence.

I intend to give a brief overview of the background; the recommendations in the independent investigation that have been implemented; the major cause of the flooding on 16 August 2008; and the work that has been undertaken collaboratively by the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) Rivers Agency and the contractor. I also wish to bring the House up to date on the work that has been completed on the ground, along with planned work that will reduce the risk of flood reoccurrence.

By way of background, Members will recall that I made a statement to the Assembly on 2 December 2008 after the completion of the independent investigation. At that time, although the Broadway underpass had been opened to traffic, the construction of the underpass and the surrounding infrastructure was not fully completed. Members will be aware that the M1/Westlink scheme was officially opened on 4 March 2009.

I do not intend to recap on the details of my previous statement, but it is worthwhile reminding Members of the three main recommendations that resulted from the independent investigation and the work that has subsequently been undertaken.

First, it was recommended that the banks of the Clowney river be raised to a design level of 500 mm above the one-in-100-year flood level. I had already advised Members that that had been completed before I made my statement to the Assembly last year.

Secondly, I advised that the contractor had implemented enhanced procedures relating to Met Office forecasts for severe weather warnings to ensure public safety. Since then, those procedures have been further enhanced by the installation of a permanent telemetry system, which acts as an early warning system and activates an alarm at high water levels.

Backup machinery and standby crews have been available at all times in case of an alarm activation. Routine daily inspections and cleaning of the screen were also introduced during the construction phase.

Thirdly, I reported that the hydraulic efficiency of the drainage system was to be assessed using a physical model of the system. I can confirm that that model has been completed by a specialist team, which Roads Service appointed in January 2009. A detailed physical model of the Broadway drainage system was constructed, and a computerised model was generated to replicate flow conditions between Broadway and the River Lagan. Extensive testing of various scenarios was undertaken to replicate the conditions of 16 August to establish the reasons why the system was unable to cope on that date, to investigate the capacity of the system and to make recommendations, where appropriate, for improvements. That modelling report was completed in October, and the results have allowed Roads Service, DARD's Rivers Agency and the contractor to gain a fuller understanding of what happened on 16 August 2008.

I will now briefly explain the findings of that modelling, including the major causes of the flooding. The modelling has shown that the culvert system upstream and downstream of the Broadway underpass had sufficient capacity to cope with the flows that occurred on 16 August 2008 without resulting in the flooding that we experienced. The modelling also showed that the major cause of the flooding was a partially blocked screen at the Clowney river inlet, which is located adjacent to the Park Centre. In addition, a section of embankment on the eastern side of the Clowney river was breached and washed away during the flooding event. Although the Broadway underpass had been opened, the embankment that was breached by the flooding was still under construction, because that section of the project was not yet complete. It is therefore clear that if the flows of August 2008 were to reoccur, now that the banks have been permanently constructed and the screen remains clear, out-of-channel flooding would not occur.

11.15 am

The modelling work demonstrated that the large box-like structure underneath Broadway where the two rivers meet, which is known as the overflow structure, operates efficiently at high flows and that the penstock valve was not a contributory factor in the flooding event. The modelling also concluded that a flow in the Clowney river equivalent to the design requirement of one in 100 years can be discharged through the system. The modelling exercise helped significantly in providing a clearer understanding of the drainage system from the River Lagan to Broadway.

The banks of the Clowney river, immediately upstream of the Broadway culvert, have recently been raised further to provide additional flood protection and enhance the efficiency of the system. It is evident that the river drainage system provided is compliant with the requirements of the Design, Build, Finance and Operate (DBFO) contract.

I am aware that the work undertaken by the Rivers Agency falls under the responsibility of my ministerial colleague Michelle Gildernew. With her indulgence, I will report on the positive work that it has undertaken to address the risk of debris blocking the Clowney river inlet screen. Upstream of Broadway, the Rivers Agency has implemented measures to intercept debris in the upper reaches of the Clowney river before it reaches the Broadway system. Modifications have also been made to the Clowney river inlet screen to make it more efficient and easier to clean. On reassuming responsibility from the contractor, the Rivers Agency introduced an enhanced regime of inspections and screen cleanings three times a week.

As the construction works are complete, the Rivers Agency now has responsibility for the Clowney and Blackstaff drainage system and for the early warning system at the Clowney river inlet. Procedures have been established for notification to the relevant authorities and for the appropriate response in the event that an alarm is triggered. That work and the associated procedures are designed to safeguard public safety in the unlikely event of a reoccurrence of flooding. The results of the assessment of the hydraulic efficiency of the Clowney and Blackstaff drainage system have increased the Rivers Agency's understanding of the flow regime and dynamics of the drainage system.

With regard to the old drainage system downstream from Broadway, a number of detailed surveys and inspections were undertaken between Broadway and the River Lagan. Most of that system was constructed in the 1960s and, therefore, was not designed to modern-day standards. The surveys identified a number of issues affecting the system's ability to discharge flows into the River Lagan. However, I am advised that the Rivers Agency, under the floods directive, is currently carrying out a Belfast flood risk study, which will look at all aspects of flood risk affecting Belfast. Information obtained from the modelling work will be used to inform that study and to help identify proposals to improve the overall drainage system. That may include further works to the Clowney river and the Blackstaff river that are outside the scope of the DBFO contract.

It is worth noting that the completion of the Belfast sewers project by NI Water will help improve the capacity of the downstream system, as Distillery Street and Glenmachan Street pumping stations, which

currently outlet into the Blackstaff south culvert and relief culvert respectively, will be diverted to the new pipeline. It would be remiss of me if I did not bring to the attention of Members the recent Northern Ireland Audit Office report on the procurement of that contract, which was published on 4 November 2009, and which made reference to the Broadway flooding incident. Members will understand that I am not in a position to comment on that report as it is a matter for the Public Accounts Committee. However, I assure Members that Roads Service is indemnified against damage and liability on that stretch of road, including the costs associated with damage as a result of the flooding incident.

It is clear that a significant amount of work has been completed since my last statement on the matter in December 2008. That work has happened through the Roads Service, the Rivers Agency and the contractor working in close partnership and has enabled a swift conclusion to be brought to what is a complex issue. I take this opportunity to thank the Rivers Agency and the contractor, who, along with the Roads Service, agreed to an equal financial contribution to the cost of the modelling.

Members should note that the hydraulic design of the complex drainage system is not an exact science and that at Broadway, as in most river systems, there remains a risk, albeit low, of flooding in exceptional rainfall conditions. However, with the work that has been completed, I am confident that the risk to public safety at the Broadway underpass has been alleviated.

I am happy to take questions now.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): I thank the Minister for his statement and for the reassurance that the report provides.

The Minister said that information gained from the modelling work will be used to inform the flood risk study and to identify proposals that will improve the overall drainage system. He also said that that may include further works to the Clowney river and Blackstaff river that are outside the scope of the contract. Will there be any financial implications from that?

The Minister for Regional Development: The drainage study that I referred to is being undertaken by the Rivers Agency, and, in so far as the DBFO contract was involved, some work was done in relation to that and, in particular, on the Broadway junction and underpass.

If the Rivers Agency identifies a need for further work, either upstream from Broadway on the Clowney river or the Blackstaff river or downstream towards the River Lagan, it must do the costing and find the necessary resources.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the assurance that public safety will be safeguarded. However, I cannot help but notice what looks like a shifting of responsibility to the Rivers Agency. Is that an additional resource burden on DARD, or is it normal practice? Are the areas of responsibility for the DBFO contract clear?

The Minister for Regional Development: Yes, they are clear. The DBFO contract relates to the works on the Westlink and associated works. The associated works included immediate work on the rivers that flowed underneath the Broadway underpass. That work has been completed and has brought the infrastructure up to a standard higher than what would be expected. That was done under the stewardship of a three-way partnership between Roads Service, the contractor and the Rivers Agency.

The Rivers Agency is undertaking a Belfast drainage study, and any works that impact on that will fall to the Rivers Agency. Therefore, there has not been a shifting of the burden. The drainage study is ongoing and will identify how to implement better drainage systems. I said that the drainage system under Belfast was built in the 1960s and that it does not meet current standards, so, if the study identifies a need for further work, responsibility for that will fall to the Rivers Agency.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I was glad to hear the Minister mention the Audit Office's recent report on the procurement of the contract. I am glad to hear that Roads Service is indemnified against any damage and liability. Given that there is cross-departmental working between the Minister's Department, DARD and Roads Service, who will be responsible for the Clowney river?

The Minister for Regional Development: The Audit Office report is a matter for the Public Accounts Committee, of which the Member is Chairperson. However, the report clearly stated that Roads Service should be indemnified, which is the case under the contract for damage or clean-up.

After the contractor had completed the initial works, it decided to enhance the work on the banks of the Clowney river by installing a telemetry system as well as an early warning system. To prevent debris flowing down and gathering at the screen at the Broadway underpass, the Rivers Agency worked on that screen and on other screens upriver. Once the contracted work was finished, responsibility for that stretch of water and the accompanying infrastructure was handed over to the Rivers Agency, as the contract would have dictated. The Rivers Agency has now assumed responsibility for the Clowney river, the screen cleaning, the telemetry system and the early warning system.

Mr Dallat: The Minister said that there is still a risk of flooding, which we have to accept. God knows, we would believe that if we were living in Fermanagh.

The Minister knows that there has been a tendency to pass the buck from one Department to another. Given that the Rivers Agency, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and other parties will be involved in the future and that there is still a risk, who will have overall responsibility for ensuring that a similar incident does not happen?

The Minister for Regional Development: I do not accept the Member's comment about passing the buck. In the case of the Broadway underpass, the three parties involved came together. They worked with the Fire and Rescue Service and other agencies to deal with the flooding, and they then came together to address the causes of the flooding and provide some solutions. There was no buck passing; there was an equal sharing of responsibility between Roads Service, the Rivers Agency and the contractor. Should a similar incident occur, responsibility would be shared in the same manner.

A colleague of the Member's suggested that a super-agency be created to deal with such instances. In cases of flooding, we have pulled together Executive colleagues and the agencies responsible, because Roads Service is not responsible for rivers and the Rivers Agency is not responsible for roads. I do not know whether the Member thinks that Roads Service should have responsibility for rivers and that the Rivers Agency should have responsibility for roads, but we have the ability to pull together all the relevant agencies. I am not aware of any buck passing in this case or in any other recent cases of flooding that I have dealt with. It is all very well going for a headline saying that we should have an agency and suggesting that that would sort all the problems.

Mr Dallat: I only asked a question.

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister for Regional Development: I am trying to answer the question. The Member's question suggests that the agencies are not working together, and it asks who would have responsibility if something were to happen again. Responsibility will lie ultimately with the Executive. They will pull together the agencies under their authority and control so that any issues that arise can be dealt with. That has always been the case. One of Mr Dallat's colleagues suggested that the solution is to create a super-agency. The Executive are the super-agency, and they should, rightly, deal with the problem. The buck will stop with them.

Mr McCarthy: We do not need any more agencies, super or otherwise. We have plenty, but they need to do the job when required.

The Minister's statement says:

"the major cause of the flooding was a partially blocked screen at the Clowney Water inlet".

The statement also notes that modifications have been made to that inlet and that the Rivers Agency has introduced an enhanced inspection regime.

I know that the Rivers Agency is not part of the Minister's Department. However, what will happen if the Rivers Agency, for some reason or other, falls back on that inspection regime and does not carry out the screen cleaning three times a week? We will be back to square one. Although that agency is not part of the Minister's Department, that road, for which he is responsible, will be blocked and flooded again. Will the Minister guarantee that his Department will continue to negotiate with DARD to ensure that that work will be done?

The Minister for Regional Development: That work is being done already, and I am confident that it will continue. As well as introducing that inspection regime, we have installed a telemetry system that provides an early warning. If water levels in the Clowney river rise to a certain level, a warning is triggered that alerts agencies not that the system is overflowing but that a potential problem is building up. Not only has the Rivers Agency made a commitment that is being carried out through its work to ensure that the screens are unblocked, but more screens have been built further up the river to catch material that comes down so that it does not arrive at the Clowney river in the same volume that it did previously. In effect, three different measures are in place to prevent a reoccurrence.

Mr G Robinson: As someone who was almost caught up in the flooding of the Broadway underpass on 16 August 2008, I am pleased that so much work has been completed. It appears that, despite all the work, the problem may reoccur without regular cleaning of screens. What upstream measures have been taken to stop debris reaching the screens? Does the Minister believe that cleaning three times a week will be adequate to prevent further flooding?

Mr Speaker: Members should stop reading supplementary questions.

The Minister for Regional Development: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Rivers Agency has not only undertaken to carry out frequent inspections and cleaning of the screens but it has installed screens back up the river to catch material as it comes down. The agency will keep a close eye on inspecting those screens to ensure that there is no build-up of debris. The telemetry system has been installed so that, if, for whatever reason, water levels build up to a level that people consider a problem, an alarm will alert the agencies to that problem. A

response mechanism is built in to that alarm. Therefore, I believe that those measures are sufficient.

Of course, we cannot predict every outcome. Some Members said that there has been rain of biblical proportions in other parts of the country recently, and we can see what has happened down in Cork and Kerry, where dams have burst. Those measures have been put in place to prevent the flooding of the Broadway underpass, and they have been in place for some time. Given that we have been experiencing severe rain recently, those measures have been working. Furthermore, the inspection regimes have been working, and I anticipate that they will continue to work.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, and I hope that the works that are detailed in the report bring to an end the history of flooding in that general area. As I said in the past, there was a sigh of relief, certainly from my constituents in that area, that the underpass was there.

Mr Speaker: The Member should come to his question.

Mr F McCann: If the underpass had not flooded, houses would have been under four feet of water. As part of the overall report and works, will the wider area around the underpass be checked constantly to ensure that street drains and sewers do not flood? Flooding is a constant problem in that area at times of heavy rain.

11.30 am

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

The Minister for Regional Development: There is a clue in the name of the area adjacent to the underpass. The Bog Meadows is an area that is likely to flood. The Rivers Agency, Roads Service and NI Water are responsible for identifying areas that are flood hotspots, and they must ensure that all available measures to alleviate flooding are taken. The underpass is located in a low-lying area that has been subject to flooding, but the measures that we have taken in relation to the underpass will ensure that the water from the Clowney and Blackstaff rivers can get away. I hear what the Member has said; other parts of Belfast that have become flooding hotspots over many years should receive particular attention to ensure that flooding does not reoccur.

Mr Bresland: I thank the Minister for his statement. Can he inform the House of the cost of the independent investigation, and does he intend to recoup some of that money from the contractor?

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's clear understanding, which was confirmed by the Audit Office report, was that Roads Service was indemnified from damage and clean-up

costs and that those costs would be borne by the contractor. There was an onus on my Department to act in partnership with the Rivers Agency and the contractor to provide a degree of confidence. Roads Service had a responsibility to contribute to the investigation of the failure of such a major piece of infrastructure and to offer solutions. The Department contributed in that regard to the cost of the report. It paid for the report and contributed to the cost of building the model for the investigation, as did the Rivers Agency and the contractor.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his statement. The question that I was going to ask has already been answered, but it is important for everyone, because it is likely that these one-in-a-hundred-year events are probably going to happen more than once every 100 years.

Can the Department for Regional Development come up with a policy to let councils know where to get sandbags from? I know that sandbag provision varies from council to council, and that people do not know where to get sandbags. When the flooding starts, it is the first time that anyone thinks about where to get sand or sandbags to protect their homes.

The Minister for Regional Development: The Executive established a flooding hotline, which should act as a one-stop shop for people who have concerns about flooding and need answers, rather than ringing round three or four different agencies. People need to have some sense of what they are doing. In many cases, they get sandbags delivered when they believe that flooding is about to happen in their area, only to leave areas that are subject to flooding without sandbags. Professional judgements have to be made; those decisions should not be made by individual households or by people in a street. The hotline is there. It is a one-stop shop for people to make direct contact with the responsible agencies, and it will continue to be worked on.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Financial Provisions Bill

Final Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): I beg to move

That the Financial Provisions Bill [NIA 6/08] do now pass.

The Financial Provisions Bill was introduced to the Assembly on 23 February 2009 by the then Finance Minister, Nigel Dodds. It comprises six clauses and a schedule. I believe that the subsequent process of scrutiny and debate has been extremely productive.

First, I wish to record my gratitude to the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, who has explained that she cannot be here this morning, the former Chairperson and the members of the Committee for their work in considering the Bill in conjunction with the other Statutory Committees that have an interest in it. I also wish to thank all other Committees and Members for their contributions to the debates on the previous stages of the Bill's passage, and my officials, who made themselves available to the Committee to clear up the technical issues in the Bill.

The Bill is important and necessary legislation, the main purpose of which is to tidy up routine financial matters. It does not affect the overall quantum of the public expenditure of Northern Ireland.

Following scrutiny of the Bill at earlier stages, I tabled three amendments that Members endorsed at Consideration Stage. Two of the amendments related to powers to include expenditure incurred by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) for the purpose of promoting the interests of children and young persons and sustainable development. Those amendments relate to issues that are already the responsibility of OFMDFM, and the necessary funding has been secured until March 2011.

As Members are aware, the clause that relates to the costs of district rates collection has been removed. Members will recall that I advised the Assembly during Consideration Stage that it did not fulfil the purpose for which it was designed. The Bill now contains seven miscellaneous provisions that will require primary legislation.

I do not intend to spell out in any great detail what the Bill does or how; we have been over that ground previously. However, I will recap: in simple terms, the Bill contains provisions that confer absolute privilege on reports from the Comptroller and Auditor General; authorise expenditure by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) for consumer purposes and social economy enterprises; and authorise expenditure

by OFMDFM on children and young persons and sustainable development. The final provision in the Bill repeals the requirement to prepare finance accounts.

In short, the Bill provides for a number of routine, non-controversial amendments — I always hesitate to say “non-controversial” because it usually invites all kinds of controversy — to financial legislation or to regularise existing practices. I look forward to Members' support in ensuring that the Bill passes its Final Stage, and I commend the Bill to the House.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Weir): I speak on behalf of the Committee in the absence of the Chairperson, Jennifer McCann, who is unable to be here. I note, as an aside, that the Dispatch Box has been left on the opposite Benches. I do not know whether someone has made the unique error of confusing Fra McCann with Jennifer McCann. If so, I suspect that this is the only occasion on which that has happened.

Members will be aware that the main function of the Financial Provisions Bill is to tidy up routine financial matters and various technical and non-controversial issues, as the Minister outlined. The Bill was introduced by the Minister of Finance and Personnel on 23 February 2009 and referred to the Committee for Finance and Personnel after its Second Stage on 3 March 2009. We consulted the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Committee, all of which confirmed that they were content with the provisions of the Bill.

No submissions were received in response to the public notice that invited written evidence on the Bill. In addition, no issues were raised by Committee members during the clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill on 22 April 2009. The concerns that had been raised during a previous evidence session with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) officials had, by that stage, been addressed.

On 9 September 2009, the Minister notified the Committee of the proposed amendments to create statutory powers for OFMDFM to incur expenditure for the benefit of children and young people and sustainable development. The Committee received a full briefing from DFP officials on 23 September 2009. I record the Committee's gratitude to those officials who assisted with the scrutiny of the Bill.

During the debate at Consideration Stage, the Chairperson advised the House that Committee members had queried whether OFMDFM might also be required to have statutory powers to incur expenditure on assisting activities for the benefit of older people. Members of the Committee had written to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister about that. The Committee is

pleased to note, from the response received on 11 November 2009, that OFMDFM already holds the statutory authority for that expenditure. I thank the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assistance in obtaining that clarification.

On behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I formally support the Bill at its Final Stage.

Mr O'Loan: I also support the Bill. I thank the Minister for writing to me to address an issue that I had raised and for copying that letter to the Committee. The issue concerned the recognition of costs recovered in respect of rates collection as an important part of his Department's efficiency delivery plan. The Minister's proposed removal of clause 4 caused me concern, and I wondered whether it would have an impact on the efficiency delivery plan. His letter indicated that the withdrawal of clause 4 has not had, and will not have, an impact on the Department's efficiency delivery plan. One always reads between the lines of the Minister's letters as well as reading the lines, but I have no reason to believe that the Minister is attempting to pull the wool over my eyes. I accept and welcome his important assurance at face value, unless subsequent events prove the situation to be otherwise.

I will comment very briefly on some of the clauses. Clause 1 gives absolute privilege to reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General. One should always examine such clauses with vigilance, but I am sure that that absolute privilege will be used in the public interest. It will be good if the clause gives the Comptroller and Auditor General more freedom to put information into the public arena and to be open and transparent in respect of the matters that he or she is investigating. It would be wrong if absolute privilege were abused or used improperly, but I am sure that the person in that position will use it in an entirely responsible way.

I support clauses 2 and 3, which give the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment powers in relation to expenditure for consumer purposes and social economy enterprises respectively. New clauses 4 and 5 concern OFMDFM's powers in relation to expenditure for children and young persons and for sustainable development respectively. The Minister has given assurances that clauses 4 and 5 will not be a Trojan Horse to give power and financial resource to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister that have not been anticipated by the Committee. Although the wording of those clauses seems to be very wide-ranging, I welcome the Minister's written assurances, which are on the record.

I support the Bill.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have got off more lightly in today's debate than I did during

Consideration Stage. I thought that I would be here for only 10 minutes for that debate, but it lasted more than an hour. I thank Members for their contributions today. The fact that there has been so little comment at Final Stage indicates that the process has worked well. I understand the point that it is a technical Bill, and that fact does not always lead to great debate. I am sorry that we cannot replicate the excitement of last night, when Members felt compelled to stay in the Chamber and enjoy the debate until 9.00 pm.

I will make a couple of points in response to comments that Members have made, especially those of Mr O'Loan the Member for North Antrim. I am deeply hurt that he thinks that I would try to pull the wool over his eyes, write something between the lines, or be less than straightforward and transparent.

I wrote to him at that time to address the technical point that he raised. I wanted to be sure that I did not waffle, as the Member for Strangford accused me of doing, so I thought that it would be useful for me to write to Mr O'Loan about the issue.

11.45 am

Mr O'Loan raised two matters. The first was about the absolute privilege that is being given to the Comptroller and Auditor General. He pointed out that the reason for that is to allow the reports from that office to be as full as possible, and for the Comptroller and Auditor General to be able to put his finger on particular issues. The reason why that is included in this Bill is because we want to give power to the Comptroller and Auditor General to bring reports to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Of course, the Comptroller and Auditor General has always had those powers. They were not abused in the past, and there is no reason to believe that they will be abused in the future. The clause simply enables reports to the Assembly to have that same cover.

The extension of OFMDFM's powers relates to money that is already in place for sustainable development and for work with children and older people. The powers are normally given in Budget Acts; the Bill simply regularises that so that it does not have to be done on a regular basis. It is not an extension; it simply formalises powers that already exist, for which the Assembly normally votes on a regular basis in Budget Acts.

I thank Members for their contributions. I thank all those who worked on getting this Bill through the Assembly. On that note, I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Financial Provisions Bill [NIA 6/08] do now pass.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Report on the Inquiry into the Funding of the Arts in Northern Ireland

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes in which to propose the motion and 15 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure on its inquiry into the funding of the arts in Northern Ireland.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Molaim an rún. Before I comment on the substantive matter that is before the House, as Cathaoirleach, or Chairperson, of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I express my gratitude to all the individuals and organisations who contributed to the inquiry. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil. I extend my sincere thanks to the Committee secretariat for its work in arranging the evidence sessions for the inquiry and in drafting the report. I am particularly grateful to the Clerk of the Committee, Dr Kathryn Bell, and the entire team. In addition, I express our appreciation to the Assembly's Research and Library Services for the high-quality research and analysis that it provided to the Committee, and to Hansard for its patient and accurate reporting of the evidence sessions.

The Committee is grateful to all who provided written and oral evidence during the inquiry. I also thank each of my MLA colleagues on the Committee for their individual commitment to the inquiry and for the constructive and collective approach that they all adopted when trying to understand the dynamics of how the arts sector here is funded and how that funding could be improved. Furthermore, I state my appreciation to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Nelson McCausland, for his attendance this morning.

The arts are a key spending area for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL). However, in recent years, there has been growing concern about the relatively low level of arts funding here compared to other regions and jurisdictions. When undertaking its inquiry, the Committee sought to address a number of key questions: namely, how and to what level the arts are funded here by the public and private sectors; and when I say the private sector, I mean the good work being carried out by organisations such as Arts and Business, which try innovatively to secure support from the sector. The Committee also asked about the

impact of such funding on society and how the available funding is distributed across the various art forms. Of course, everyone wants a larger cake, but are the existing budget priorities correct?

The main findings of the inquiry are as follows: first, the Committee concluded that there is a lack of information about how much money the public sector invests in the arts. Research is required to ascertain how much money Departments other than the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure spend on promoting the arts. Secondly, the Committee came to the view that an interdepartmental approach is required to increase funding in the arts, because the social and economic benefits of the arts meet the objectives of a range of Departments, including the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). Thirdly, with respect to allocating existing funding, the Committee concluded that, given the impact of the community and voluntary arts on regenerating communities, and the fact that they provide people with opportunities to participate in arts activities, more money should be spent on them. Fourthly, the Committee was particularly concerned that arts groups in communities without an arts funding history should be proactively encouraged to access available moneys. To that end, the Committee recommends that the Arts Council's Start Up programme continues and develops.

I shall now examine some of the key findings in more detail. The Arts Council has produced per capita arts-spend figures for 2008-09. In this region, the spend is £7.58 per person, which is lower than in other regions. In the South of Ireland, the figure is €17.92; in Scotland, it is £14.04; in England, the figure is £8.47; and, in Wales, it is £10.10. However, the figure of £7.58 per person here covers only what the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure spends on promoting the arts. It does not include spending by other Departments or local government authorities. At present, an overall picture is simply not available.

The Committee came to the view that a baseline figure is required to capture the total spend on the arts by the public sector here, including all Departments and local councils. Local council spending varies considerably. The Committee, therefore, recommends that the Department undertakes the appropriate research and that the information gathered should be used by the Department and the Arts Council to obtain a wider understanding of who is funding the arts, where the funding is being targeted, and whether any areas are receiving little or no public funding.

As part of its inquiry, the Committee looked at how other regions have managed to increase arts funding. The Committee took evidence from An Chomhairle Ealaíon, the Irish Arts Council. In addition, we

undertook a study visit to Liverpool, which, in 2008, was the European capital of culture.

The Irish Arts Council told the Committee that the reasons put forward in the South for spending more on the arts were, to a great extent, economically motivated. It was recognised that the arts are an economic contributor to the creative industries and cultural tourism and play a role in attracting investors to locate in a particular region. Similarly, in Liverpool, the economic and tourism benefits of the arts were significant factors behind the city's successful bid to be the European capital of culture.

Furthermore, when the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure gave evidence to the Committee, he, too, recognised the many benefits of the arts in respect of their contribution to the cultural, social and economic lives of people here. He also referred to the creative industries, which, in 2007, employed 36,300 people in the North. That equates to 4.6% of the workforce, which demonstrates the significance of the creative sector.

Other organisations that contributed to the inquiry, perhaps notably the Forum for Local Government and the Arts, quoted the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, which stated, in March 2009, that the creative industries are predicted to be a major, high-growth contributor to the economy in the next five years. That organisation says that, on average, creative industries are set to grow by 4%, which is more than double the rate of the rest of the economy, and that the number of creative businesses will outstrip the financial sector by 2013. The Minister also made the point that the most prosperous economies are characterised by a strong creative sector.

Therefore, it is clearly recognised that funding the arts has many positive spin-offs for the economy. It is not just a question of funding the arts for art's sake, although I add that the arts are crucial for pursuing excellence in artistic terms, which is important and should not be understated either. Given the many benefits deriving from the arts, it is the Committee's view that all Departments should be looking at the ways in which they could fund arts-related activities and initiatives.

That was the view put forward by a range of arts organisations that gave evidence to the inquiry. They made the point that the work that they do meets the objectives of a variety of Departments. For example, ArtsEkta referred to the cultural diversity and section 75 work that it does through its programmes, yet it has found it difficult to secure funding from the racial equality unit in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) because the accepted and conventional notion is that funding for the arts should come from the Arts Council. Similarly, Féile an Phobail spoke about the social development

and community regeneration aspects of its festival, yet my understanding is that it has not received any support from the Department for Social Development.

The consensus from the arts organisations was that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure needs to set up an interdepartmental group to encourage other Departments to invest in the arts. That would reflect the fact that the arts have an impact on all areas of government.

In the greater scheme of things, DCAL has a relatively small budget, which, as the Minister will no doubt say, must be spread across a range of areas: the arts, sport, language, museums, libraries, and so on. Other Departments have much larger budgets, and a significant impact could be made if they were to spend even a quarter of a percent of their budget on arts-related activities. The Committee is fully aware that budgets are stretched. Therefore, we are not coming cap in hand simply to ask for more money for DCAL or the Arts Council. We are asking that other Departments look seriously at how funding arts-related projects can help them to meet their objectives.

Arts groups also made the point that a cross-departmental approach would help to raise the profile of the arts and to embed them in people's everyday lives. The Committee recognised that other Departments have done some good work in relation to the arts; notably the Re-imagining Communities programme, which was funded jointly by DCAL, the Department for Social Development, the Department of Education and other partners. However, we believe that, although such ad hoc projects have great value, a more co-ordinated cross-departmental approach is required.

12.00 noon

The Committee recommends that more money should be spent on community and voluntary arts, which have a significant impact on communities and individuals. Investment has real and tangible benefits, because it helps to provide opportunities that develop individuals' creative skills, which can greatly enhance their employability. Communities are brought together and change can occur through regeneration.

The importance of community arts was emphasised by a range of witnesses who gave evidence to the inquiry, and not only by those who are in the community arts sector. The Arts Council told the Committee that the growth in funding for the arts in the South of Ireland resulted from investment in the arts at grass-roots or community levels. In the 1980s, the Arts Council of Ireland undertook a capital development programme, which focused on every major town having its own arts centre. In its view, that led to a normalisation of spend on the arts, as the arts became embedded in people's everyday lives. We have seen a similar type of

investment in a number of towns in the North, and that has been welcome.

Similarly, Liverpool, in making its bid for European capital of culture, recognised the potential for investment in the arts to regenerate some of its most deprived communities and to create a sense of civic pride. The Committee, therefore, came to the view that if funding for the arts is to increase over time, DCAL needs to target its current investment in such a way as to embed the arts in people's everyday lives. People need to be able to see the benefits that being part of a creative-led society can bring to their daily lives in respect of employment opportunities, social and leisure activities, and their sense of community and cultural belonging. Investment in community arts plays a vital role in that process.

It is, therefore, fitting that the Committee has chosen to mark the launch of its report by hosting a musical event to showcase a range of local talent in the community arts sector. Performers from the traditional Irish music scene and musicians from the Ulster-Scots tradition will be joined by a fusion band incorporating Indian, African, Polish and Irish sounds. The event will take place at 1.15 pm in the Long Gallery, and I encourage all Members to attend. That invitation to attend is extended to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, if you can be weaned away from the Business Committee meeting, or whatever it is that you tend to be at during Tuesday lunchtimes. Those present will witness at first hand one of the key messages that we are aiming to get across in our report, which is that the arts have a vital role to play in building a shared and better future for all.

At this time of economic downturn, the Committee firmly believes that the arts are even more important for our society and should never be regarded as a soft touch or an easy target in any proposed cuts that might lie ahead.

Lord Browne: I am a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure.

In a survey that was carried out recently in the United States, it was interesting to note that 96% of those interviewed said that they were greatly inspired by various kinds of arts and that they valued arts highly in their lives. The survey also claimed that the majority of parents who were interviewed think that the teaching of arts is as important as the teaching of reading, maths, science, history and geography.

In the face of a changing global economy, economists believe that we will have to rely on innovation, ingenuity, creativity and analysis to have a competitive edge. Those are skills that can be gained and enhanced by engagement with the arts.

An article in an Education Resources Information Center journal states:

“The arts play an important role in human development, enhancing the growth of cognitive, emotional, and psychomotor pathways. Neuroscience research reveals the impressive impact of arts instruction, such as, music, drawing and physical activity, on students’ cognitive, social and emotional development.”

Although we all recognise the importance of the arts, we need to consider the implications of resources for the arts programme.

As part of the report on the Committee's inquiry into the funding of the arts in Northern Ireland, the Committee was interested in the comparison of funders between the government funders of the arts and in how Northern Ireland compared with Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland in the distribution of those budgets. Unfortunately, the Arts Council informed the inquiry that that type of information was not readily available.

The arts councils in each United Kingdom region, and in the Republic of Ireland, support artists and art organisations through Exchequer and lottery funds. However, the compilation of a breakdown across the various regions represents significant research because of issues of consistency and comparability among budgets and systems of clarification.

In his evidence to the inquiry, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure stated:

“It is important to understand and, where appropriate, learn from the funding-allocation process used by other organisations that provide public funding to the arts. However, every region is different and Northern Ireland, like other regions, has its own unique cultural demographic and social characteristics that are reflected in the allocation of funds to various art forms.”

That view was also expressed by the Assembly's Research and Library Services, which pointed out:

“different regions have their own leanings towards certain art forms, perhaps as a result of their cultural history”.

I agree with the Committee's conclusion:

“while this kind of comparative data across the regions would be of interest, it may not necessarily be required to assist public funders of the arts in Northern Ireland in allocating their budgets.”

It would be useful to compare in detail the funding of arts by the private and public sectors in each of those regions. Northern Ireland falls behind the other regions with respect to private-sector investment and sponsorship for the arts, and there is tremendous potential to generate more funding from trust foundations, businesses and philanthropic giving. There must also be better linkages and partnerships between the arts and the business communities. Community arts groups, in particular, require greater help from the business community, because many have very limited staff resources.

As I stated at the beginning of my contribution, the arts have much to offer to, and are an integral part of, our society. We in the public sector must offer as much support as possible. However, there is a responsibility

on the part of the arts community to ensure that the ratio of public-sector investment in the arts reduces in comparison to sponsorship and investment by the private sector. I call on the arts community to explore all means of private-sector investment and sponsorship.

Mr K Robinson: I declare an interest not only as a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, but as a member of Newtownabbey Borough Council, which invests widely in the arts and is about to open its new Theatre at the Mill on the site of Mossley Mill. I hope that Members will take the opportunity of visiting that venue.

Having finished my commercial, I want to concur with the points that have been made by previous contributors to today's debate. I also pay tribute to the sterling work that was carried out by the Committee staff in handling an onerous burden and completing an undertaking that many believed could not be accomplished.

12.15 pm

I wish to bring to the attention of the House the manner in which the Committee approached the daunting task of completing the inquiry. It exhibited diligence, rigour, a marked degree of understanding and, most importantly, good humour, which made the lengthy process of the inquiry worthwhile. I hope that the House will acknowledge all that by supporting the Committee's motion.

I will focus my comments on the issue of funding cycles. We are all aware of the traditional funding regimes that Departments are required to operate. Those annual cycles have much to commend them in the way that they allow for the scrutiny of public funds. However, pages 13 and 14 of the Committee's report indicate that the groups that operate within the arts sector are faced with fundamental difficulties.

Many people would welcome the opportunity to develop projects — in most instances, worthwhile projects — well beyond the current three-year cycle, perhaps up to a five-year plan. However, the restraints of the departmental accounting process are not conducive to that, since it is based on the annual budget. Arts bodies indicated that such an extension would enable them not only to develop plans for festivals and other activities but to retain staff and attract key performers. Perhaps that sense of stability would then be reflected in increased participation and enhanced attendance figures, with a consequent rise in income generation and a decrease in bids for public funding in the long term.

The Arts Council finds that its room for flexibility is severely restricted, although it attempts to address the issues to which I referred by admitting three-year clients. The Lyric Theatre's evidence refers to that fact. Paragraph 51 states:

"We are part of a three-year funding programme with the Arts Council, but it is three-year funding in name only, because the Arts Council is wholly reliant on funding from the Department that is provided on a yearly basis."

Generally, that is the problem with funding cycles.

The timing of funding is another issue. At paragraph 52, the Arts Council refers to the problem:

"Often, our funding decisions are not confirmed until February."

I remind Members that the end of the financial year is March. The Department attempted to give three-year indicative funding, but the fact is that everyone is locked into an annual funding scenario.

The Committee recognises the fact that that sense of frustration is accepted by all witnesses who gave evidence with regard to longer funding cycles. We would like DCAL and the Arts Council to work together to ensure that decisions on budgets are taken as early as possible. Indeed, recommendation 6 reflects those concerns and states:

"We recommend DCAL and the Arts Council work together so that budgets for coming years can be finalised in the January ahead of the new financial year in April, so that arts organisations are given as much prior notice as possible of their funding position."

I urge the House to support the report in its entirety and to pay particular attention to the matter of funding cycles. I am pleased to see that the Minister is in the Chamber and is listening to Committee members' speeches. I hope that he and his Department will note what has been said.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht thábhachtach seo.

I wish to focus my remarks on the balance of funding between community and voluntary arts groups and professional organisations, as outlined in recommendations 7 and 8 of the report. The relationship between community arts and professional arts is interesting, and the Committee heard about that relationship during its inquiry into the funding of the arts.

There is general agreement that there is a healthy interdependence between the community and the professional sector. Indeed, some warm and cordial comments were made from several quarters. Voluntary Arts Ireland pointed out that the big beasts of the jungle and the insects are totally reliant on each other. The Ulster Orchestra told us that it aims to be a classical symphony orchestra with excellent access and outreach. The Arts Council believes that the distinctions between the various branches of the arts, including the voluntary and professional sectors, have lost most of their definition and significance and that many practitioners would no longer recognise themselves as belonging to fixed categories of artistic practice.

The Arts Council told the Committee that the community sector delivers with a high level of professionalism and that high-calibre professional artists work in various community contexts. It is good to see that healthy respect between those two important sectors in the arts. We hope that that will continue, because, at the end of the day, the continuum of arts provision is interdependent, and no one sector functions in isolation to another.

The amateur, community and voluntary sectors are the nursery of the arts. Those sectors nurture the new talent that will fulfil professional roles in the future, whether in music, song, dance, drama, literature or the visual arts. The nurturing of young talent can, of course, be encouraged through young people's experience of the polished performances of great poets, dramatists, novelists, painters and professional artists in general.

The work of community arts goes beyond the nurture of future talent. It can help a community to view itself in a different light and to relate better to its neighbours, raise community self-esteem and cohesion, lift the spirits through laughter and humour, increase local pride through local achievement and, indeed, pose hard questions that need to be addressed within the community.

One could say that the professional sector fulfils a similar role, but on a bigger canvas — or, if you prefer, on a bigger stage. Both are of equal value in the context in which they work, and both perform important roles for their various constituencies, but they are interrelated and interdependent, and need to work in a spirit of mutual respect and co-operation.

In the course of the inquiry, the Committee examined the levels of funding that the Arts Council provides for community and voluntary groups, but the entente was not so cordiale when it came to the issue of funding. The voluntary sector claims that it receives only 9% of the Arts Council budget, whereas the Arts Council claims that that sector receives 20%. The reason for that difference is that many professional organisations contribute to community drama, and the Arts Council counts that as part of its contribution.

The Committee takes the view that the primary providers of community arts are those groups that are solely dedicated to delivering community arts on the ground, and that the funding of community arts should be assessed on the basis of the funding of those groups. On that basis, 9% of the Arts Council's funds go to community and voluntary providers. The Committee's view is that that figure is not acceptable, and we recommend that the Arts Council should raise the contribution that it makes to community and voluntary arts groups to ensure their sustainability and the sustainability of community arts on the ground.

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

Mr D Bradley: Finally, I congratulate both sectors for the work that they do in bringing the arts to our people. We congratulate them on the high standards that they have achieved, and look forward to enjoying the fruits of their labour again in the future. Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the Chairman and other members of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, of which I am also a member, on the presentation of the inquiry findings.

The report is a serious attempt to ensure that all people engaged in any of the many and varied arts activities throughout Northern Ireland have equal access to appropriate funding. Like other members of the Committee, I put on record my thanks to the Committee Clerk and all staff, including the Assembly's Research and Library Services, the Hansard staff and anyone who helped to produce the report. I also sincerely thank all those groups that, either through oral or written effort, contributed to our deliberations. I sincerely hope that the 14 recommendations made by our Committee will be acted on so as to make and sustain a lively arts sector right across Northern Ireland.

I also thank all those groups that we met on visits to their territory for taking time to show us and to explain the work that they were engaged in. I thoroughly enjoyed the presentations, particularly that from the Belfast Community Circus.

The day of our visit was brilliantly sunny, and, after watching performances inside, we moved to the cobbled stones of the Cathedral Quarter for some acrobatic stunts. Passers-by looked on in amazement, and, as usual, our Chairman, Mr McElduff, became physically involved. At one point, I thought that we were going to lose him. Pictures of what happened that day are on the Assembly website for all to see.

Everyone in the arts needs our support, and we continue to be fully behind them, regardless of their art form. We need such performances to brighten up what is, at times, a rather dull and dreary existence. We support the Arts Council and all other groups that distribute funding throughout Northern Ireland in their important roles.

The report shows, and it has been mentioned in the debate, that we lag seriously behind all other regions when it comes to funding for the arts. As detailed in chapter 1, per capita spending on the arts in Northern Ireland is £7.58, whereas a whopping €17.92 per capita is spent in the South of Ireland, which probably equates to double the amount. The jurisdictions are different, but I do not understand why there should be

such a wide gap between the funding of people involved in arts in Northern Ireland and those in the rest of the island.

Also in chapter 1, figures provided by the Arts Council show huge differences in the per capita spend of Northern Irish councils. A huge gap exists between the per capita amount of £28.94 that is spent by Belfast City Council, which, as I said earlier, is the richest council in Northern Ireland, and the mere 37p per capita that Magherafelt District Council spends. Even the smallest council, Moyle District Council, invests £7.97 per capita in its arts provision. I hope that the new councils will step up to the mark after the RPA.

The Arts Council of Ireland acknowledges the economic benefit that its provision of high funding brings to the region. It has supported the arts in enticing visitors and tourists to watch local films and to listen to local music in clubs, pubs and on the streets. Culture is one of the pieces of the jigsaw needed to attract and retain inward investment.

I am delighted that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Mr Nelson McCausland, is present for the debate. In his contribution to the Committee meeting on 2 July 2009, he said:

“continued investment in the arts and in people in the creative sector generally will make an important contribution to economic recovery ... It is clear that there is much support for the arts sector and a genuine desire to ensure that appropriate levels of funding are allocated to the arts ... It is also apparent that there is widespread recognition of the many benefits to be gained from such funding.”

I hope that the Minister will continue to make such positive comments in support of the arts throughout Northern Ireland. Indeed, the —

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

Mr McCarthy: Oh gosh. There is so much to say because it is such an interesting subject.

I hope that the Minister will continue to support the arts, and I encourage everyone to join the Committee in the Long Gallery for the sing-song and presentation.

Mr T Clarke: I join other Committee members in thanking and complimenting the Committee Clerk and Committee staff for their work in producing the report. It has been a useful exercise that has unravelled some of the concerns and brought to light many issues. It is worth noting that not many Committee members have spoken about the same subject. Sensibly, we divided the issues between us and considered them separately. That approach proved more useful than having a repetitive debate.

I concentrated on the issue of transparency. There has been a feeling that arts funding is not transparent. People fill in applications for funding, but there is no appeal mechanism or transparency. It has almost got to

the stage at which people believe that they have to come from some form of academic background to fill in the forms, and that should not be the case. People from the voluntary sector apply for funding, and the process should be simple and transparent for everyone.

Therefore, I want a mechanism that allows unsuccessful applicants to find out where they failed. Such a mechanism would avoid the possibility of their not applying when another opportunity arises. There is money to be spent, and the voluntary sector is missing out if it does not continue to apply for that money. It is about transparency and feedback; feedback would encourage people to apply.

Even before the close of an application process, a workshop would be useful. That would ensure that people's application forms contain positive elements that are directed at funding opportunities.

I commend the report to the House.

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

The sitting was suspended at 12.26 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will speak about the necessity for the Arts Council to consider its role in deprived areas.

When Members talk about the regeneration of deprived communities, we tend to focus on physical upgrading, the renovation of houses and the general tidying-up of the built environment. The Department for Social Development is therefore seen as the one with the most significant role or primary responsibility.

I believe that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has an even greater contribution to make towards helping to build vibrant sporting, cultural and artistic facilities and foundations to address the social, emotional and even spiritual needs of people who feel abandoned by the rest of society.

Take sport, for example. Local football teams, hurling teams and boxing clubs in relatively poor areas can make a great contribution to the profile of their communities and to the self-esteem and pride of their people. Look at what they have done in Belfast, for example.

Sport is not for everyone. The Arts Council must therefore consider how it can and must contribute to the cultural and artistic condition of areas where that is most needed. The arts do not belong to an elite group in society, despite the continuing perception that that is the case: they belong to all people.

Throughout the years, we have enjoyed the artistic excellence of individuals, groups and associations from every background — some less well off and some more well off — such as traditional musicians. Recently, we met Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Eireann, a voluntary association that promotes Irish traditional music, song and dance throughout the world, crossing all religious and political boundaries. A community's reputation for excellence in traditional music — such as County Clare and other parts of Ireland — is a great morale booster when money is scarce.

Similarly, drama groups and players bring credit to and are a source of pride in their communities. Recently, we met Gary Mitchell, who is a playwright from Rathcoole. He would welcome the Arts Council's support to develop his talent and, through his plays, to promote a fairer perception of the place from which he came.

The Bogside Artists have brought the world's attention to that enclave, which had been a byword for want. The Irish language has been a major element in raising and changing the profile of the Falls Road, for example. The Gaeltacht Quarter is testimony to the power of culture to motivate people who might otherwise sit idly by and lick their wounds.

The Arts Council must be made fully aware that people whose quiet and diligent work to raise the cultural and artistic awareness and content of their own and other people's lives in areas of social need are priceless. The Department for Social Development can build and renovate houses: the Arts Council must help to renovate and build people's morale in deprived areas.

Miss McIlveen: At the outset, I want to reiterate Members' thanks to the Committee Clerk and her staff for the work that they have done to prepare the report. In many ways, I feel a little fraudulent for even contributing to the debate, as the report was, essentially, completed before I joined the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure in September 2009. Nevertheless, I welcome the report and the Committee's clear intention to choose it as a topic for inquiry.

Obstacles were discovered during the deliberations, as the Chairperson highlighted. The greatest of those was the lack of information on how much the public sector, excepting DCAL, invests in the arts. Without that information, it is impossible to ascertain the per capita funding figures. The Minister is also concerned about the lack of clarity. Without that information, the report can merely scratch the surface.

One of the Committee's primary concerns is the number of arts groups that are community-based and have no history of receiving arts funding. The Committee and my party desire to ensure that those groups are proactively targeted and encouraged to access available moneys.

As is highlighted in the report, the Committee heard evidence from groups that found it difficult to access funding. Unfortunately, their experiences are not uncommon. There are groups across Northern Ireland that are unaware of the Arts Council's role. A perception exists that the Arts Council is interested only in:

“more upmarket projects, not the grass roots.”

The Arts Council needs to rectify that situation. This debate is not an opportunity for me to batter the Arts Council, and that is not my intention. However, the Arts Council should reassess how it interacts with groups on the ground.

The definition of “art” is incredibly broad. It encompasses a broad and diverse range of activities, yet the uninitiated regard it merely as meaning paintings, sculptures in a gallery, ballet or opera. In Northern Ireland, there are some 700 to 800 bands, which equates to approximately 20,000 musicians, who meet at least once a week to practise and perform. I speak of brass bands, marching bands and pipe bands. To many, what they do is not art, and until recently they received no funding for tuition or instruments. It is the most geographically diverse and socially cohesive range of organisations providing exposure to the arts in Northern Ireland, yet that community

generally feels that its music, performance and achievements are largely ignored.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the talent in my village, Ballygowan — also the home village of the Deputy Chairperson — which is home to the Ballygowan Flute Band and the Ravara Pipe Band. Their achievements are significant. Across Northern Ireland, there are world-class flute, pipe and brass bands. Bandmasters give of their time freely and without recognition. They channel youthful energy and creativity into something useful, which involves structured learning and instils discipline, social pride and a sense of responsibility. Surely that is volunteering at its best. I encourage the Arts Council to take the opportunity to meet directly with those groups to see at first hand the talent that exists and the great work that they do.

Another example of an organisation that receives no funding is the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster. Again, thousands of young people throughout Northern Ireland participate in dramas and organise events and festivals in a rural setting. It is my understanding that one of the Ulster Unionist Members is a product of that organisation, and that is without its receiving funding.

The Committee also received representation from the Ulster-Scots Community Network. Its contribution highlighted the need for the Arts Council to play a much more proactive, strategic role in identifying groups that need funding. For many groups, one of the main difficulties is their lack of capacity or ability to make applications. I have experienced that at first hand in my constituency. Some groups are entirely funding-focused — they draft in experts in completing application forms — yet there are others that do exceptional work at the coalface but are unable to present their projects using the latest jargon that is required to tick the boxes. Those groups need our help.

I welcome the fact that the Arts Council has decided to continue the Start Up programme, which was designed to give support and aid to local organisations. One of the Committee's recommendations to the Arts Council is to increase its budget for that programme and target groups that have received little or no previous assistance.

The Arts Council needs to demonstrate that it represents value for money; that it is delivering on its objectives; that it is continually reviewing those objectives; and that it is getting directly to the grass roots, where assistance is desperately needed.

Mr Kinahan: I am pleased to be able to speak in the debate. I declare an interest: I work in the art world. I congratulate the Committee, the Department and everyone involved in the arts in Northern Ireland. There is a mass of work that goes on, and a lot of it is done for free. We should, therefore, be congratulating

everyone involved. The arts play a vital role in society. Consider the ancient Greeks and Romans: art was very much a part of those great societies. Therefore, it is important to have and promote good art.

I welcome my colleague's comments about the need for business to invest in art. That is essential, and we must encourage everyone to get involved in the arts and to look at novel ways of helping, whether it be through European funding, tax breaks or other methods. I thank the organisations that do that at the moment.

I reiterate my colleague's comment about the cycle of funding. We must ensure that funding for the arts is smooth, that it keeps going and that it can be relied on. However, more importantly, there must be a great deal of funding for all levels of the arts. Although we are in the middle of the credit crunch, we must try to hold on to funding and improve it where possible.

When I briefly scanned the report — I am not a member of the Committee — I noticed that one thing was missing: the word "excellence". Excellence must be promoted at all levels of art, but there must be a system at every level to promote it throughout society. I will give two examples of excellence in the picture world. On entering the Senate Chamber, one sees the portrait by William Conor on the left. His master once caught him drawing on a wall, but, instead of punishing him, he sent him to have drawing lessons. His teacher realised how good an artist he was and promoted that.

The second example is John Luke. Had it not been for shipbuilding and the other industries here, we might never have had John Luke, who was a painter at Harland and Wolff. He painted fantastic murals in the City Hall and other buildings. He was so fastidious that, if he had got to the bathroom ahead of someone else, he would have spent an hour there ensuring that every little bit was clean, tidy, neat and perfect. He also aimed for excellence.

Every area of the arts needs finance. There needs to be excellence in the arts, and we need support from and for everybody.

Mr P J Bradley: Like Michelle McIlveen, I joined the Committee after all the work on the report had been carried out, so my comments will be brief. I also pay tribute to the Committee, Dr Bell and her staff for producing the report. Although I was not involved in the Committee's inquiry, the country boy is coming out in me, and I have a few comments to make.

I note the excerpts of evidence presented under the heading:

"Difficulties in measuring economic and social benefits".

The view is expressed that is difficult to make value judgements about how effective a play is. Another comment claims that measuring the exact impact of community events is a grey area. I do not believe that

we should generalise on matters of benefit to the community. Perhaps the views expressed in the report are those of urban dwellers. I, therefore, cannot question those comments and must accept that those witnesses were speaking from experience. However, had the question about what benefits artistic groups bring to communities been put to those with rural interests, I am certain that the answer would have been different. Just as Michelle McIlveen did, I will qualify my thinking by being a little bit parochial for a minute.

I am from the parish of Burren, which is a semi-rural area that is approximately equidistant from Warrenpoint and Newry. Since 1912, the area has had an active dramatic society known far and near as the Burren Dramatic Society. Were it 40-plus years ago, I would probably be declaring an interest as a member of that group. The group's twice- or thrice-yearly productions are eagerly awaited, and its plays are watched by full houses and run for four or five nights at a time. I agree with the observation in the report that benefits derived from some activities are more likely to be seen at local and community level, rather than providing an overreaching regional benefit. That backs up what I believe.

A long-time Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, the legendary Tip O'Neill, once declared that all politics is local. The same line of thinking can certainly be applied to the many artistic groups that bring great value to their local communities, particularly in rural areas, which is a point that Francie Brolly also touched on. Their commendable work should never be sidelined or overlooked —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close, please.

Mr P J Bradley: They should be encouraged.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr P J Bradley: That cannot be right. It must be two Members' speaking times added into one.

Their commendable work should never be sidelined or overlooked, and they should be encouraged by everyone, from the Minister down, to continue with that sterling work.

Perhaps someone can check the clocks for the next day.

2.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry about that.

Mr McCarthy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I could be wrong, but I think that the clock was not reset after Mr Kinahan spoke. Therefore, two Members spoke within five minutes. In my opinion, P J is entitled to extra time.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You are absolutely right, and I have apologised for that. If Mr Bradley wishes to finish his speech, he is more than welcome.

Mr McCartney: In keeping with the debate, Mr Bradley is rejecting an encore. He is very modest.

Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuil mé sásta an deis seo a bheith agam labhairt sa díospóireacht ar thuairisc an Choiste. Ba mhaith liom fosta mo bhuíochas a ghabháil le foireann an Choiste as an obair a rinne siad ar an tuairisc seo.

I want to preface my remarks by thanking the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson for steering the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure through its inquiry. I echo the comments made by the Chairperson and other Committee members in thanking the Committee Clerk and her staff for their professionalism, dedication and, on many occasions, patience as we were going through the report.

The inquiry into the funding of the arts was one that allowed the Committee an insight into those who are involved in the arts world, be they administrators, participants or practitioners. We got an excellent and first-hand insight into the extent of the work that is being carried out by many groups, organisations and individuals to bring the arts and their direct impact on the social and cultural fabric to every part of the North.

The Minister is here, and he may find it ironic that, although he was part author of the report, he is now its recipient. I am sure that that irony is not lost on him. I acknowledge the support of the Minister's Department and the Arts Council for projects in Derry; in particular, I will highlight Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin, the Waterside Theatre and the Playhouse. Those organisations and institutions have had a wider impact than is sometimes expected, when people have a narrow definition of the arts. That impact is felt across the social and cultural fabric of the city and beyond. The emphasis should be on ensuring the continuation of those types of projects.

It is worth acknowledging that many of the people who gave evidence to the inquiry attended the Committee's event in the Great Hall. There is no doubt that, in many ways, the report could have gone unnoticed. However, the initiative that was taken by the Committee and its staff and the presence of the media at that event might mean that the completed report will get a wider audience.

It is important to point out that many people who gave evidence to the Committee, particularly those from the community arts field, said that funding was an issue for them. We were all enriched by their acknowledgement that funding is not everything, but it is an add-on that allows groups to bring a sense of stability and sustainability to a project. From my experience in Derry, I have seen the benefit of

community arts organisations, which do not fit into the narrow definition of the arts, and I know the impact that they have in areas that are plagued by deprivation and in which there is antisocial behaviour.

The report looked at trying to ensure that, when coming up with funding opportunities, the emphasis is not put on just one Department. The European Union and some of its Peace programmes were identified as possible sources of funding in the future. The Arts Council must be proactive — that is not to say that it is not — in assisting groups to find pathways to funding through European programmes. It must also ensure that its excellent Start Up programme proactively seeks out those well-established groups that do not always come to the Arts Council's door or that of other funders. Some Committee members have pointed out to organisations that funding opportunities do exist but are sometimes just not taken.

There has to be some recognition of the voluntary arts sector. The report commends and acknowledges the work of that sector, and Committee members spoke about its contribution. The sector provides excellent opportunities for many people who would not see themselves as part of the art world. The sector does a great job.

The fourth recommendation in the report is that the Minister should establish an interdepartmental group to look at how other Departments could fund the arts. Our Committee knows that funding of the arts should not be restricted to a single Department.

To finish off —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please do.

Mr McCartney: Further to Danny Kinahan's point, I was once caught drawing on a wall, but I was sent to detention. I often wondered if I was a loss to the art world. Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I invite opinion on that.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McCausland): I thank the Chairperson and the Committee for the useful research on the arts sector that they undertook in the preparation of their report. As has been indicated, I am in a somewhat unusual position: I was a member of the Committee up until the end of June, left it on 1 July and returned on 2 July in a different role to make a presentation. I obviously had such affection for the Committee that I could not stay away.

Having engaged a substantial number and a wide variety of stakeholders, the Committee has produced a report that provides an interesting insight into how the sector views current funding and support. It validates our approach in many areas and offers helpful direction on where budgets and efforts might best

be extended or targeted in the future. I am confident that the body of evidence gathered will become a valuable resource for my Department and for the wider creative sector. I am keen to weigh up the findings of the report in the context of significant work that has already been undertaken to develop the arts sector. I want to continue to build on our existing infrastructure, services and expertise. I also want to take some time to consider some of the different positions and views that the research has uncovered.

Budgetary pressures also need to be taken into account when we consider how best to implement the Committee's recommendations. I note that the Committee has not recommended an increase in central government funding for the arts. Instead, it recommends that existing budgets may need to be reassessed, and I noted the Chairperson's use of the word "prioritisation".

There are two key issues with regard to the arts: access and excellence. Many Members have raised the issue of access, and I will return to it later. Excellence is also important, and Danny Kinahan was right to highlight that. Those two themes should influence our thinking about arts infrastructure and funding.

The arts are a key sector and a key spending area for DCAL. I am conscious of the importance of the creative sector to society in promoting well-being, developing culture, generating economic growth and contributing to maturity and legacy, particularly given the unique history and backdrop of our country.

Recent capital projects funded by DCAL, such as the Grand Opera House extension in Belfast, the Playhouse refurbishment in Londonderry, major film productions and the successful transfer of funding to councils for the community festivals fund, play an important role in building our cultural wealth, educating us and assuring our place on the international stage. Many of the Committee's recommendations focus on the needs and expectations of community and voluntary arts organisations. My Department and its arm's-length bodies will continue to help to support organisations and individuals in finding appropriate funding and maximising value for money. The Arts Council's successful Start Up programme has proved an excellent model for assisting in areas that receive low levels of funding and for providing seed funding and support for small organisations.

We should also not overlook the contribution of our central venues and their services to those who are most in need. For instance, the Grand Opera House in Belfast records high attendance rates from those in the top 10 socially deprived areas and continues to undertake initiatives to reach out to the most disadvantaged groups in society.

I support the further development of the community sector with the aim of promoting greater consistency and a partnership approach. I agree that the community arts and voluntary arts sectors could benefit from additional support to build on their existing success.

I will pick up on a few points that Members raised. Michelle McIlveen mentioned bands. On Saturday, I attended a special convention in Lurgan that was organised by the Confederation of Ulster Bands and the Community Convention and Development Company. It brought together people from marching bands across Northern Ireland, and I found it to be a vibrant and inspiring movement that is intent on improving relationships, developing a positive vision and building confidence. Government must recognise the potential to learn from such organisations in developing access and excellence and cementing cultural identity.

Around 20,000 people learn music week-by-week through those bands; that figure was quoted earlier. Many of those people reach a high standard of excellence. Recently, I had the opportunity to attend a concert in the Waterfront Hall by one of those bands. The band's repertoire of local and international music was extensive, and the quality of music was extremely high. Those bands provide the access and excellence that I mentioned earlier. It would be remiss of me not to point out that, at this year's World Pipe Band Championships, 31 of the 62 prizes — exactly half — were won by bands and performers from Northern Ireland. In grade 1, Canada finished first, Northern Ireland was second, the Republic of Ireland was third, and Scotland came in a poor fourth. That is a testimony to the high quality of that sector of band music.

I will pick up on P J Bradley's earlier point about rural communities. I took the opportunity to meet the Young Farmers' Clubs, which run a considerable programme of artistic activities, including drama. We discussed, together with the Arts Council, how that body might obtain additional support to develop the arts in rural communities. Some Members have referred to community-based drama. A wide range of community arts activities should be supported and encouraged.

I am grateful that the Committee allowed me to share the report with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. I have received preliminary comments from Arts Council staff on the report's recommendations. DCAL and the Arts Council will carry out further analysis of the final report, and I intend to consult Northern Ireland Screen in the context of its important contribution to funding the arts. A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of attending the set of a film that is being made at Castle Ward. I was impressed by the potential to develop our creative industries in that field. I had not been fully aware of the tremendous opportunity that it offers. Northern Ireland has the

necessary skills base, combined with many other positive assets, to encourage film production in Northern Ireland.

The Arts Council has an excellent track record in supporting community arts. It has worked extensively with partners to increase opportunities for participation at grass-roots level. It is also worth remembering that it has a wider remit and provides support to professional, creative and presenting organisations and individual artists. The calibration of an appropriate balance across the spectrum of arts activity in Northern Ireland is central to the work of the Arts Council, which has indicated that, in accordance with the Committee's recommendations, it will continue to promote European funding and private investment for the arts and to advocate the needs of the arts sector as a whole. Recommendation 14 states that the Arts Council should establish an appeals process. I can report that it has operated an appeals process for a number of years, and the details are available on its website.

2.30 pm

How do we move forward? Government funding for the arts is not only about more money being provided; how we spend the available money is equally important. Private sector involvement in the arts can result in mutually beneficial relationships, as is demonstrated by the work of Arts and Business Northern Ireland. I have spoken to that organisation about the encouragement and development of private sector funding and will continue to do so. We can do more in that field if we work more strategically, and I am keen to work with Arts and Business Northern Ireland, and I know that it reciprocates that ambition.

We also need to grow our audiences, contribute to the understanding of what art means and make the arts relevant by embedding them in our everyday lives. There is hardly an aspect of our lives that the arts do not touch, from design and planning to music, dance and the distinctiveness of our cultures. Everyone has artistic interests, but not everyone associates those interests with an interest in the arts.

I will relate two anecdotes in that regard. I attended an event recently at which the Arts Council had a stand. A lady approached the stand, whereupon an Arts Council representative asked her whether she was interested in the arts. The lady, whom I would respectfully describe as middle-aged and from middle Ulster, replied: "Not really." I wondered what the answer might have been if the question had been asked in a slightly different way. The problem is the one that I just identified: often, people are doing artistic things but do not recognise them as art.

We need to work on that and engage with communities that have not been reached in order to build audiences. Danny Kinahan mentioned John Luke, an artist from

my constituency of North Belfast. I attended an event some years ago in the Ulster Museum to which people were brought from the Duncairn area of north Belfast to see some of Luke's paintings. Those people were senior citizens who had lived most of their lives just a few streets away from where John Luke lived; some of them were, perhaps, from the same street. They were not aware that an artist of major repute had come from their community. They were not aware of his work, and it was a revelation to them. When opportunities such as that can be found to form links between communities and the arts, the likelihood of those people engaging thereafter with the arts is increased, and they see it as being relevant to them. Engagement and audience growth is important.

As I noted, my Department and its arm's-length bodies will consider the report in greater detail in the context of our current budget and priorities, and we will assess how the report can be used to inform future planning for funding of the arts. My Department will provide a formal response to the Committee's report in due course.

The issue of an interdepartmental group was raised in the debate. My one caveat would be that there is little point in having a group unless other Departments are keen to bring money to the table. I urge caution given that, in the past year, the Department of Education cut some welcome funding that had previously gone to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland for a traditional arts programme. The traditional arts organisations that were previously funded had to find money from other Arts Council streams. If we are to have an inter-departmental group, people will have to bring their money to the table.

I agree with the Members who spoke about the economic and tourism benefits of the arts and their contribution to our cultural, social and economic life. If 4.6 % of the workforce is now employed in the creative industries, there is considerable potential for growth. That is why it is important to engage hard-to-reach communities with the arts, because the creative industries will be involved in providing increased work opportunities.

The shared and better future agenda is one of my priorities, and I welcome the fact that the Chairperson referred to it. It is based on equity, diversity and interdependence, and those principles underpin anything that we will do in the future.

Comparisons were made with Scotland and Wales. I visited Scotland and spoke to representatives of its Arts Council, Scottish Arts and Business and its Minister for Culture to get their insights and perspectives. Having met the Welsh Heritage Minister at the British-Irish Council, I will visit Wales in the not-too-distant future.

Kieran McCarthy referred to each council's spend, which is an important point. We need to ask why some councils spend a lot more than others and what motivates them to do so. Northern Ireland is renowned for its reputation in participatory arts and their contribution to the local communities in which they are rooted. I hope that Northern Ireland will continue to be seen as a place that puts great emphasis on cultural identity and artistic merit as a means to nurture, develop and inspire ourselves and others.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is clear from the debate that, whether from small community-based arts groups, local government representation or professional theatre companies, the breadth of experience and expertise that was made available to the Committee during its inquiry was invaluable. That helped enormously in the preparation of our report. A diverse range of groups had input to the process, and I trust that when they study the report in full, they will be able to see their contributions reflected therein.

I am grateful to members of the Committee and Members beyond the Committee who contributed to the debate. That was particularly welcome. It is important that I record the Committee's appreciation of the participation of Jim Shannon and Pat Ramsey, who are former members of the Committee. Michelle McIlveen and P J Bradley mentioned that they joined the action towards the end of the inquiry. Jim, Pat and the Minister, who was more radical as a member of the Committee than he is as the Minister, all made an important contribution to the inquiry.

Economic realities have changed even during the inquiry. During these difficult economic times, we must be innovative in our approach to the arts. It is clear that there is huge potential for the arts to help to rejuvenate the economy. As opposed to being a burden, the arts can make a contribution to the economy in giving people the diverse skills that they will need for the job market as we move forward.

If the potential of the arts to contribute to our society is to be fully realised, we need a commitment across all Departments to examine ways in which they can help funding of the arts. That strong message came from the inquiry.

Wallace Browne referred to a survey in the United States that showed that people value learning about the arts as much as they value science and maths. He also said that the creative skills that people gain by participating in the arts are exactly what will be required in the new global economy and job market.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his kind comments about my contribution to the Committee's work. Unfortunately, I was not able to be involved in

the debate from the start, but Wallace Browne's comments were particularly concerned with help for the community. Those who need help do not always necessarily need educational help; they also need help with their health. Does the Member agree that people with health issues will be helped as a result of the inquiry into the arts? The arts can lead to better health, a better lifestyle and social commitment.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: I agree. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should invest in the arts because of the contribution that the arts make to health in our community, either to mental health or to physical health and well-being. It should not always be dismissed. It is difficult to make that argument because of pressures on the health budget, but the argument deserves to be made. I thank the Member for doing so.

I wonder whether Jim would be available to return to the Committee. Perhaps we could get him back if there was a transfer market.

Wallace Browne also mentioned that our level of private sector investment lags behind that in other regions. There is great potential for more funding to come from the business and community sectors here. Arts and Business NI have work to do to continue development in this area. Ken Robinson highlighted the importance of annual funding being agreed as early as possible in advance of the new financial year. Ken also referred to the importance of longer funding cycles and said that those would benefit organisations and assist their forward planning, staff retention and stability.

Dominic Bradley said that there is a healthy interdependence between the community arts sector and the professional arts sector; their interests are not always exclusive of each other. He said that both sectors are crucial and that both play a major role in enhancing communities' self-esteem, local pride and cohesion. Dominic said that the Committee believes that dedicated community arts organisations need more funding. He said that their receipt of only 9% of total Arts Council funding is too low, although I understand that that figure is disputed.

Kieran McCarthy said that equal access to funding is hugely important. He said that funding gaps exist within our councils and local government authorities as well as between regions. He highlighted that culture is important in attracting inward investment and contributing to economic recovery. Trevor Clarke said that there is a great need for transparency in the Arts Council's funding process. He said that unsuccessful applicants should be given feedback on why they were unsuccessful. That would place them in a more informed position and encourage them to apply again in the future.

Mr McCarthy: We listened to a group from Larne during the inquiry. Although that group needed funding for its particular art, it was not even aware that it could access funding through its local council or the Arts Council.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Committee made discoveries of that kind, and, indeed, we heard a similar story when we visited the Ullans Centre in Ballymoney. People did not seem to know where they could get help, so perhaps we need to be more proactive in getting the word out.

Trevor Clarke also said that it would be valuable to have workshops to give groups advice on making applications. Francie Brolly said that regeneration is not just about the physical and built environment. He said that DCAL and the Arts Council also have a vital role to play in renovating and building the morale of the poor. He said that the arts belong to everyone regardless of their background, whether rich or poor, and that the arts are key to the self-esteem and pride of people who live in areas of social deprivation.

Michelle McIlveen noted the Committee's recommendation that the Arts Council should proactively target groups that have no history of arts funding, which emphasises the point that Kieran McCarthy made in his intervention. Michelle reminded us that the Committee recommended that the Arts Council should continue with the Start Up programme. She also referred to the 20,000 people who are members of bands, including marching bands. She pointed out that those people are engaged in community arts and are, therefore, meritorious of funding.

Danny Kinahan said that the arts have a vital role to play in society. He said that investment from the business sector is essential and should be fostered and encouraged, and he emphasised the importance of funding levels and cycles. He said that, along with the Committee's recommendations, a system must be in place to promote excellence in the arts. Danny emphasised the word "excellence", because he feels that it did not appear often enough in the Committee's report.

P J Bradley's contribution was cut short because of a malfunctioning clock, but he had sufficient time to laud projects in the Burren area of County Down. I salute P J for his contribution and for highlighting all the good things that happen in south Down.

2.45 pm

P J Bradley also said that there was difficulty with measuring the social and economic impact of the arts. He said that the positive impacts of the arts can be seen at first hand in rural areas. For example, amateur drama companies can create real benefits at local level. I am very aware of that, given that I come from Carrickmore in County Tyrone, where the Mid Ulster

Drama Festival is particularly strong and vibrant. We were brought up on a diet that consisted of going to the theatre in Carrickmore nine nights in a row. Indeed, Liam Neeson and others graced the stage of the Patrician Hall in Carrickmore.

On one occasion, the Slemish Players from Ballymena came to the theatre on a Wednesday and the Gorey players from Wexford came on the Thursday. When the Gorey players arrived in Carrickmore, they asked the car park attendant whether the previous night's play had been any good. The car park attendant said that there had been a tremendous unity of lighting and pace in the play. *[Laughter.]* Mervyn Storey will have a lot to live up to in Carrickmore if he comes to the amateur drama stage; even our car park attendants know their drama. I think that that is important. *[Laughter.]*

Raymond McCartney referred to European funding. He said that, in the time ahead, the Arts Council will have an opportunity to be proactive in sourcing additional funding via the European Union. In fairness to the Arts Council, I know that it is well aware of that. He also mentioned the importance of establishing a cross-departmental group, and he encouraged the Arts Council to be more proactive in bringing in groups that have not accessed funding previously —

Ms Anderson: What about the Stand up for Derry campaign?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: That was not mentioned in the debate. Nonetheless, it is an interesting point. Raymond McCartney also emphasised the importance of the voluntary sector.

I am grateful to the Minister for attending this debate and for participating actively in it. I also thank him for participating in Committee meetings before he took up his current role. He pointed out that the report amounts to valuable research for his Department. He said that a balance between excellence and access must be struck and that his Department and the Arts Council will consider the report within existing budgetary pressures. I expected him to say that and to point out the financial constraints that exist, and he did so. He also said that he supports the development of the community and voluntary sector and that he will continue with further scrutiny of best practice elsewhere.

Although the debate represents the end of the Committee's inquiry into funding of the arts here, it does not signal the end of our interest in the matter. The Committee looks forward to receiving the Minister's formal response to the report in the very near future and to finding out how he intends to deal with the Committee's recommendations.

We hope that the report has helped to highlight the contribution that the arts can and do make to our society. However, if their impact is to be realised fully, more work is needed. In particular, a cross-departmental approach will be required. I commend the report to the House and ask Members to support the motion. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We can safely assume that the car park attendants in Carrickmore do not wear red coats or hand out fines.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: Absolutely not.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure on its inquiry into the funding of the arts in Northern Ireland.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Childcare Vouchers

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 the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. I remind Members that we will have to break for Question Time at 3.00 pm.

Mr Shannon: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the proposed axing of the childcare vouchers scheme; recognises that the loss of these vouchers could have a significant detrimental impact on working parents in Northern Ireland; supports the Employers for Childcare campaign; and calls on the Prime Minister to continue this scheme and to give consideration to the enhancement of Government support for working parents.

The issue has touched a great many people, and every elected representative here has been contacted by constituents about it.

As I listened to Gordon Brown's keynote speech to the Labour Party conference in Brighton, I was anxious to hear his plans for turning the UK economy around. I wondered how the Province would be affected and how Gordon Brown would be able to finance all the promises that he was making. At no stage did I expect his promises to come at the expense of our children and our economy.

I was heartened, slightly, to hear him promise to focus on childcare provision through a commitment to deliver free childcare places for 250,000 two-year-olds in England. However, he promised no places for the rest of the UK, and he failed to point out that the 250,000 places will come at a cost to the 340,000 working parents throughout the United Kingdom who avail themselves of the childcare voucher scheme.

I was contacted by the ChildcareSOS campaign, which gave me an insight into what the reform will mean in practice. It made several points: the childcare voucher scheme operates on the basis that parents are offered the opportunity to pay for childcare tax free, providing that their employer is a member of the scheme. That saves working parents who pay the basic rate of tax approximately £900 a year and those who pay a high rate approximately £1,200 a year. In Northern Ireland, 10,000 working parents avail themselves of the scheme, so the proposal will affect many people in every Member's constituency. The childcare voucher scheme is critical, because offsetting the cost of childcare makes it feasible for both parents, and even single mothers, to return to work and to contribute to society. It ensures that parents do not work solely to pay for childcare.

According to Gordon Brown, the rationale for his surprise decision was to redirect money to where it is needed most: to help disadvantaged children to access high-quality childcare. However, on closer inspection, a number of consequences need further consideration, and that is why I seek support for the motion. The decision to abolish tax relief on childcare vouchers was made only a few hours before Mr Brown's speech. Who declares a new policy two hours before a speech? I am not sure whether anybody here does that, and I hope that none of our Ministers ever would.

Mr Storey: I would not be so sure.

Mr Shannon: Perhaps so; I stand ready to be corrected, although I am not aware of any such instance.

Mr Brown did not consult any of the devolved Administrations about the policy reform. He did not ask for opinions from Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales. That cannot be tolerated, and I am sure that any discussion with my DUP colleagues or others in the Assembly would have left Gordon Brown in no doubt about how vital the voucher scheme is to all classes in Northern Ireland, particularly now that we know that the 250,000 places are for two-year-old children in England only.

He will disadvantage 10,000 children in Northern Ireland to help 250,000 children in England. I am not against 250,000 children in England being advantaged, but I am against 10,000 children here being disadvantaged. The places will be available for up to 10 hours a week, which will not accommodate the majority of parents who require childcare to enable them to work.

Tha everage feemily haes maer than jist a twau-year-ou l waen, en ther er nae allowancis fer lurger feemilees. Jisteefekation fer tha refoarm is tha heich heed yin's — tha Prime Meenistar — assershun that a voucher scheem firstly benefuts aw theim oan heich incums. Hooiver, efter lukkin intae tha tak-up o' chiel vouchers, it wus fun that tha maist which is 60 % o' users o' tha scheem wur bottom rate taxpayers. It's tha middle incum tha herd wroucht feemilees whau er jist abin tha threshoul o' meens-tested benefuts that er set tae loas oot maist. Agaen, this is anither crafty tax oan tha woarkin cless, an yin which canny keep gaun oan.

The average family does not have only one two-year-old child, but there are no allowances for larger families. The justification for the reform is the Prime Minister's assertion that the childcare voucher scheme primarily benefits those on a high income. However, research into the take-up of childcare vouchers found that the majority — 60% — of scheme users are basic rate taxpayers. The middle band of people on means-tested benefits is set to lose out most. The reform is another stealth tax on the working class, and it cannot be sustained.

In 2005, Gordon Brown created the present childcare voucher scheme when he was Chancellor. Despite being its creator, he now wants to do away with it. To ensure that the scheme benefits those who are most in need, it could be capped at a certain level of income. The reform is likely to have a greater impact on women, who bear the main childcare responsibilities, and thus it will increase the gender pay gap. Indeed, the proposal will hit young women hardest. Unless they are helped by their employers, who will no longer receive tax relief, they will not be able to pay for childcare. If there is no benefit to employers, the likelihood that they will replace the voucher scheme with something similar is negligible.

No consideration has been given to how much the local economy benefits from both parents being able to work. The decision will force many families into a position in which one parent has to stay at home. Therefore, the Government will lose out on tax and National Insurance contributions from salaries. Again, there is a real loss to the economy. The social security benefits system may come under strain, and the local economy will lose the skills and experience of key employees. That will create a domino effect throughout the entire system.

Even were the Prime Minister to extend the scheme to the Province, a two-hour placement is of no use to any working parent. Let us examine why it is of no use to the working parent here. I think especially of those living in rural areas of my constituency who work in the Civil Service, which is a major employer. It takes people who live in Portavogie, for example, more than an hour to get to work in Belfast and more than an hour to get home. The scheme would simply cover people's travel time, and by the time that a full-time childcare place were taken out of their wages, it would not be worth their while to work. Right away, 10,000 families in Northern Ireland would be disadvantaged directly, and that is not acceptable.

The proposed removal of the childcare voucher scheme is not addressing the welfare reform policy and is not encouraging people to get back into the workplace. For those who do return to the workplace, it is not encouraging the use of fully qualified childminders. We will find that more 14- and 15-year-olds are left to care fully for younger brothers and sisters. That is not what we are trying to achieve, and it has serious implications for child safety. We are also faced with older parents taking responsibility for young, active children for extended times, which also has serious implications. Again, there is a knock-on effect.

There are also implications for the quality of childcare that parents will be able to afford. Research has proved that employees with inadequate childcare are more likely to be late for work, absent or distracted on the job than parents who are confident about their

children's care arrangements. That is a practical consideration: if people are worried about where their children are and what they are doing, they are not concentrating on their work. Employees may be forced to spend less time at work owing to the need to handle childcare concerns. The proposed removal of the voucher scheme will have consequences for the quality of childcare that parents can access.

The voucher scheme is also an important source of income for nurseries and childminders in Northern Ireland. I know of one nursery in a rural area that was hoping to run an after-school scheme, with funding to facilitate childcare voucher users who wanted their children to partake in a homework club. That would not be possible under the proposed new scheme. I am sure that that situation is mirrored across the Province, as other Members may confirm when they get the opportunity.

At present, employers also save money. In the past 12 months alone, parents and employers in Northern Ireland saved £4 million. That £4 million helped to create jobs and boost the economy. It is absolutely unacceptable that the Prime Minister wants to take that money away and put it in the Treasury coffers.

Just last week in the Chamber, we debated the UK Child Poverty Bill, with its aim of eradicating child poverty in the Province by 2020. That is a very good idea in thought and focus, and a target for which to aim. However, when we consider what Gordon Brown wants to do, we must wonder whether that target is achievable. A major aspect of ending child poverty is parents' ability to bring income to the home. That can be done only if the children are cared for, allowing parents to work and bring home enough cash to make a difference, not simply enough cash to pay the childminder.

There is no doubt that the proposed scheme is laudable, but it cannot replace the existing scheme. We cannot allow that to happen without playing our part. All Members will have received an e-mail today from Employers for Children's ChildcareSOS campaign. Attached to the e-mail are letters that Employers for Children has drafted to the Prime Minister and to David Cameron; that is, the man who is in office and the man who may be in office, although the polls are showing that they are much closer in popularity than they have been for a long time. I ask Members to sign those letters and send them off. David Ford has suggested that letters should also be sent to Nick Clegg. Yes, send them to Nick Clegg as well. It is highly unlikely that he will become Prime Minister after the next general election, but he has influence. Members should send a letter to all those in positions of power. Gordon Brown appears to have backtracked, but it has been a very watery back track at best — he must have had his wellies on — and David Cameron's response

has not been what we would have hoped for. I ask that we leave them in no doubt over the Province's feeling and response.

Gordon Brown has attempted to portray himself as robbing from the rich to give to the poor — a modern-day Robin Hood. He has been likened to Robin Hood, and I can almost picture him wearing green and with a bow and arrow. However, he has taken money from the people who need it most. He is reducing a system, and it is unacceptable for that to happen.

There are 340,000 working families in the UK, including 10,000 in Northern Ireland, and since 2005 —

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

Mr Shannon: Since 2005, more than 600,000 parents have availed themselves of the scheme.

I urge Members to support the motion. I know that we will have a consensus of opinion in the Chamber, and I look forward to everybody's contribution.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member called to speak will be Ms Sue Ramsey.

The debate stood suspended.

3.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Irish-Language Strategy

1. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide an update on the development of a strategy to promote and enhance the Irish language. (AQO 432/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McCausland): My officials provided an update on the issue to the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee on 22 October. Since taking up office at the beginning of July, I have been actively considering the issue surrounding the enhancement and development of the Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture and the enhancement, protection and development of the Irish language. I have also been taking into account the position of other regional or minority languages across the United Kingdom, especially in Scotland, which has close parallels to Northern Ireland, albeit with some differences, in respect of regional and minority languages. I intend to bring a paper to the Executive in the near future on the high-level principles on which the indigenous or regional minority languages strategy might be based.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response. Will he elaborate on what he means by the phrase "near future"? Will he provide us with a timescale for bringing that paper to the Executive? The promotion of languages, including Irish, Welsh and Scots Gàidhlig, through legislation and other government strategies, was discussed at the recent British-Irish Council meeting in Jersey. Does the Minister accept that he and his Department, because of their deliberate go-slow, obstructionist approach to the promotion of the Irish language, are out of step with the Administrations in Wales and Scotland?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: One of the difficulties with bringing proposals to the Executive is that, sometimes, after being brought to the Executive, they seem to fall into the ether. I refer in particular to the sports strategy, which I brought forward and which has, I think, been sitting in the office of the deputy First Minister for quite a long time. Therefore it is almost impossible to provide a timescale for getting things through to the Executive.

The answer to his third question is no.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister assure the Assembly that equal respect and funding will be given to the Ulster-Scots language?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I could answer yes, but I want to go a little further than that. In my view, the key principle has to be a shared and better future based on equity, diversity and interdependence. It is recognised that there is linguistic diversity in Northern Ireland, because there are two minority languages; Ulster Scots and Irish. There are also their attendant cultures. I want to see those elements of linguistic diversity taken forward on the basis of equity. That was the position taken by my predecessor, and it is one that I intend to follow.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gan aon amhras tá an Chairt Eorpach um Teangacha Réigiúnacha nó Mionlaigh ar cheann de na gléasanna is tábhachtaí dá bhfuil againn anseo leis na teangacha dúchais a chur chun cinn agus a chaomhnú. Ní raibh aon chur isteach fós ón Tuaisceart sa tríú tuairisc thréimhseach de chuid coiste na saineolaithe. Arbh fhéidir leis an Aire a mhíniú don Teach seo cad chuige nach raibh aon chur isteach ag an Tuaisceart sa tuairisc sin? Cén chnámh spairne atá ag cur baic ar ionchur an Tuaiscirt?

One of the most important mechanisms for the protection of indigenous languages here is the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. However, there has not been any input from Northern Ireland into the third periodic report by the committee of experts. In response to a question for written answer, the Minister told me that that was because of disagreements.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should come to a question.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Minister outline the nature of those disagreements and tell the House when it can hope to have agreement on the issue? Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am not sure whether that was a question or a thesis. However, I will assume that it was a question.

The Northern Ireland input into the UK's third periodical report on regional and minority languages was not agreed in time to present to the committee of experts. It was not agreed by the deputy First Minister and did not proceed to an Executive meeting.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office issued the UK report on 26 May. That included the Northern Ireland Office input in relation to Ulster Scots and Irish but was without the Northern Ireland Executive's input. If and when that input is agreed it will be sent to the Council of Europe as a supplement to the United Kingdom report.

I met representatives of the committee of experts on 21 September. We had a frank and open discussion that I found to be useful, and it was a positive and constructive meeting. The representatives asked me about those matters and I gave a forthright explanation of my assessment of the current situation.

My understanding is that the report is meant to be just that: a report on what has been done during the period on which the document is reporting. It is not meant to be a prophecy. Some of the issues to which the Member alludes may, in some way, relate to those two different perspectives.

Ulster-Scots Agency

2. **Mr Dodds** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what recent discussions he has had with the chief executive of the Ulster-Scots Agency regarding its future work programme. (AQO 433/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since my appointment as Minister, I have met the chief executive of the Ulster-Scots Agency on two separate occasions: on 10 July 2009 and on 24 September 2009. Those meetings were called to discuss various issues relating to the agency's future work programme.

In October 2009, the Ulster-Scots Agency presented its draft 2010 business plan to my Department and the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in the Irish Republic for consideration. A draft business plan is to be presented to the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in language body sectoral format on 2 December 2009.

Mr Dodds: I am grateful to my honourable friend for his answer. In light of the Minister's experience of the Ulster-Scots Agency, does he regard it as being entirely fit for the purposes for which it was created?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: During my time as Minister and before, many individuals and groups within the Ulster-Scots community have expressed concerns to me about the internal and external operation of the Ulster-Scots Agency. Concerns have also been raised by the Northern Ireland Audit Office, and I share those concerns.

The agency is a body that uses public funds, and I want that money to be used in an efficient and effective way. It is essential that the Ulster-Scots Agency uses the resources allocated to it effectively and for the benefit of the community. It must also deliver value for money, because that is what is best for the community that it serves.

It is clear that there are issues regarding the strategic direction of the agency and issues around its governance and administrative processes. I am aware of the issues, and I will be taking steps to try to address them.

I am determined to ensure that the Ulster-Scots Agency is fit for purpose and provides value for money. That is good for the community that the agency serves, and that view is shared by Minister Ó Cuív in relation to both the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister state whether the Ulster-Scots Agency's strategy is specifically aimed at promoting the Ulster-Scots language, or is it aimed at promoting the wider Ulster-Scots heritage and culture?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The remit of the Ulster-Scots Agency, as originally set out in legislation, covers both the Ulster-Scots language and Ulster-Scots culture. Both aspects should be within the remit of the Ulster-Scots Agency.

Townland Names

3. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how his Department is promoting the use of townland and other place names. (AQO 434/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I note that the question refers not only to townland names but to other place names, and I welcome that. We need to consider the importance of minor place names, as well as townland names, as part of the rich fabric of our shared cultural heritage. There is no formal Executive policy on townland names, and my Department does not have lead responsibility for legislation, strategy development or promotion of that issue.

In 2001, the Northern Ireland Assembly debated a motion that called on each Department to adopt a policy of using and promoting names in all government correspondence and official documents. That motion gained cross-party support and was agreed unanimously. My Department uses townland names in responses when such information is used in correspondence to it.

Mrs McGill: I thank the Minister for his response. I note that he said that his Department does not have lead responsibility to take the matter forward. Is his Department reluctant to do that? It would seem to be the natural home for the promotion of that type of cultural and heritage project, and I would welcome it taking a lead. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The matter spreads across a number of Departments and is not solely the remit of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Indeed, our relationship to it is probably more tangential than that of some other Departments. However, I have indicated that I see townland names and all other place names as part of the rich fabric of our shared cultural heritage. Around 98% of townland names are of Irish/Gaelic origin and around 2% are of

Ulster Scots and English origin. However, the percentage of minor place names that come from a non-Gaelic origin is considerably higher. Therefore, that area has relevance for both the Irish and Ulster-Scots languages and is meritorious of study. However, the broader issue of place names, in particular townland names, is not the sole responsibility of my Department, and it will not be taken as such.

Miss McIlveen: In many respects the Minister has answered my question. However, I want him to clarify his and his Department's position on townland and other place names.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There is no agreed Executive policy on the use of townland names. It is not a priority for my Department, and there are no direct departmental funds available for it. However, if the Northern Ireland Executive decide to develop that policy area, responsibility for taking the matter forward will be cross-departmental. It is not a matter purely for my Department, and other Departments will have their part to play.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer, but it is simply not good enough. The Minister recognised that, in 2001, the Assembly unanimously agreed a motion to promote townland names, and he acknowledged that that has not been carried out.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could we have your question please?

Mr McCarthy: How long can the Minister and his Department step back from carrying out the profound wish of the Assembly in 2001? He referred to Minister Ó Cuív. Minister Ó Cuív agreed to provide £50,000 a year for the next three years to promote place names in conjunction with Queen's University —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Come to the question, please.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister has failed to provide equal funding.

3.15 pm

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I can repeat only what I already said, which obviously did not register with Mr McCarthy. There is no agreed Executive policy on the use of townland names; however, if the Executive were to decide to develop such a policy, it should be noted that the responsibility for taking it forward would be a cross-departmental one. It is not purely a matter for my Department; others will have to play their part as well.

Mr McFarland: The Minister is responsible for culture. In the Assembly and elsewhere, there is enthusiasm for the use of local townland and place names. I cannot quite understand why he does not see that some sort of lead from his Department on the

cultural aspect of that could make a substantial contribution to a shared future.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have no difficulty in recognising the cultural significance of place names in all their variety, including major townland names and minor place names. They form part of our shared cultural heritage and there is potential to do some work in that field to promote a shared and better future. It is an illustration of shared cultural heritage, as place names can be seen to have an input from the Irish language, the English language, the Ulster-Scots language and, indeed, from other languages. Indeed, they contribute to our cultural wealth, which can be supported in various ways, but there are those who want to go much further in that regard, and when we go there, it is certainly outside the remit of my Department.

Football: Amateur Clubs

4. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding schemes are available to amateur football clubs. (AQO 435/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland, including the distribution of funding. Amateur football clubs are eligible to apply to Sport NI for funding on the same basis as any other type of sports club. Those clubs can therefore apply to a range of club-based funding schemes that are operated by Sport NI, including a new Awards for Sport scheme, which recently opened for applications.

Of course, even when funding is available to football clubs, there can be issues about the capacity of the sport to access such moneys. In that respect, I always expect the Irish Football Association (IFA), as the governing body of football in Northern Ireland, to take the lead in building the necessary capacity throughout all levels of the game so that clubs are in a position to take full advantage of the opportunities that arise.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister for his reply. I am sure that he will agree that amateur football is the grass roots of the game in Northern Ireland, and, as he will know, the Strangford constituency is home to some of the best amateur clubs in Northern Ireland. Clubs such as Comber Rec, Ards Rangers and Killyleagh YC are at the forefront of the amateur game in Northern Ireland. The Minister spoke of the need to develop capacity. Does he believe that the IFA is in a position to offer the support and leadership that is required to develop the amateur game, and, indeed, football at all levels in Northern Ireland, to the standard that we all hope for?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I was trying to work out whether there was a connection

between the Strangford constituency and the list of clubs that were named; I think that there possibly was. I recognise that there have been some developments in the governance of the game and improvements in youth football and at grass-roots level in recent years, which were largely as a result of the demands that were placed on the IFA under the soccer strategy. However, progress needs to continue, and, indeed, should be accelerated. For example, the association could do more to ensure that football generally is punching its weight in accessing public funding.

Members will have seen the recent press articles highlighting the fact that football has been attracting less funding from existing schemes than other sports in recent years. That is largely a reflection of the lack of capacity within football clubs at all levels and is an area that the IFA could be doing more to develop. Members will also have seen the recent media reports that the association has had to make a substantial payout to its former chief executive for unfair dismissal. That will be the second time in less than 10 years that substantial payments have been made by the IFA to senior employees. Members will understand my concerns from the point of view of governance and accountability that that money could have been put to good use for the benefit of the game at all levels.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister will know that when I hear the phrase “amateur football” I think of Gaelic football. I know that Thierry Henry was trying to play Gaelic football last week.

Is the Minister’s Department considering the reopening of the Places for Sport programme for 2010-11? In the past, that programme has greatly helped football clubs at community level across the codes of GAA, rugby and soccer to develop their facilities. There is a cry for the reopening of that programme.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I welcome the Member’s endorsement of and support for the actions of a certain French footballer. I am sure that that will be noted widely.

There have been two rounds of the Places for Sport programme. I have looked carefully at the outcome, and I am making an evaluation of it. I have had further conversations with Sport NI, but no decisions have been made yet.

Mrs M Bradley: Is the practice of paying footballers to play the game a deterrent to the development of their clubs?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It depends on whether a club has the money to pay players. There is a place for amateur football and a place for professional football. It is outside my remit to dictate on that: those matters are for the IFA. It is

important that clubs have the money if they have promised to pay players.

Public Record Office

5. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what arrangements will be made by the Public Record Office for people researching their family ancestries during the closure, from September 2010 until May 2011, to relocate the office to the Titanic Quarter. (AQO 436/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: To minimise the disruption to researchers, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) has been working with Libraries NI to identify a suitable location in the greater Belfast area to relocate the self-service microfilm facility for the period of the closure. That will provide continued access to some of the most popular sources for genealogy and local history research, such as church registers.

PRONI has also taken steps to increase the volume and range of the material that is available online to researchers. In September 2009, the nineteenth-century street directories became available online, and additional resources for family history research are scheduled for completion in the coming months. Sources for genealogy are not restricted to PRONI, and a signposting pack is being compiled to provide guidance on alternative sources of information. That will be made available on the PRONI website, www.proni.gov.uk.

Therefore, a range of material will be available for researchers to work with while they are unable to access the PRONI premises at Balmoral Avenue. PRONI will also continue to provide a limited correspondence and telephone enquiry service for as long as possible.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the Minister's reply. He will be aware of the widespread concern that has been expressed about the temporary arrangements. Given the significant interest that people have in researching their ancestry, does the Minister have any plans to expand the service and to promote it on a more meaningful and positive basis, perhaps even on an international front?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The new premises for PRONI will enable it to provide a much more extensive and user-friendly service than at present. The Member referred specifically to genealogy, in which there is a worldwide interest, particularly from families around the world who have their ancestral roots in Northern Ireland. That area can be developed. It has the potential to assist our cultural tourism, because when people start genealogical searches elsewhere, there is always an incentive for them to visit the places

from which their ancestors came and to see what additional records are available in those locations.

Mr Kennedy: Cavemen.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for that unhelpful comment. *[Laughter.]*

There is work to be done on that area. It has huge potential, because tourism is a growth area and genealogy is a particularly fruitful area for growth.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his comments about the Public Record Office. I suggest that he consider relocating the facility to Ballymoney, given that the museum there has an excellent genealogy facility that can be found at www.ballymoneyancestry.com.

On a serious note, will the Minister give an assurance that there will be co-ordination between website facilities such as those that are provided at the Public Record Office and Ballymoney Museum? Given the number of visitors that the [ballymoneyancestry.com](http://www.ballymoneyancestry.com) website receives each week, there must be co-ordination across Departments to ensure that we maximise the benefit that the tourist potential of visitors coming to Northern Ireland can bring.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I welcome the Member's point about the potential for a more joined-up approach. If we are to maximise the potential of genealogical tourism and research, we need to make all the accessible information as widely available as possible and in a user-friendly way. Therefore, a more strategic approach can certainly be considered, and I commend that body in Ballymoney for its ongoing work in placing information about family and local history on the Internet.

Mrs D Kelly: The Minister gave a general outline of some of the benefits that the Public Record Office move to the Titanic Quarter will create. Will he give further details on what those benefits will be for the public? Will he also give the House some idea of how many hits the Public Record Office's website gets each month?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The storage arrangements at the current site are simply not suitable for the long-term preservation of Northern Ireland's irreplaceable records and archives, and spatial restrictions have limited facilities for researchers and visitors.

Locating the new Public Record Office in the Titanic Quarter will provide greater and easier access for current and future customers. The current site has been in use for quite a number of years, and the situation now is very different from that 37 years ago when the building that the Public Record Office is in was first used for that purpose. The current site is really not fit for purpose, and the new building will provide a much more user-friendly experience, an enhanced service,

state-of-the-art exhibition space and an Internet café. It is also adjacent to the Odyssey arena, approximately 10 minutes' walk from the city centre, close to major bus, road, sea and rail links and to the George Best Belfast City Airport. I do not have the number of hits that the Public Record Office's website receives, but I will forward that information to the Member.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I understand that this will be the second recent closure of the Public Record Office. The office obviously deals with matters other than genealogy. Why have the closures been happening?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There has been comment on and correspondence about the fact that PRONI may be closed for a maximum of eight months. The opening of a brand new, almost £30 million state-of-the-art Public Record Office will be highly significant in the cultural history of Northern Ireland. It is a major investment.

The estimated eight-month closure is based on the results of a pilot exercise that was carried out two years ago and on discussions with the removal contractors. Two years ago, there were approximately 14 linear kilometres of material to relocate. That is a very large amount of material. This time, 40 linear kilometres of material are to be transferred.

That amounts to millions of individual documents, many of them unique, priceless and irreplaceable. We carried out comparisons with institutions elsewhere. For example, Wiltshire and Swindon Archives closed for six months when it relocated, and PRONI is moving four times the amount of material that was involved in that move. Therefore, in comparison with other areas and institutions, and taking into account the advice that we have received from professionals in the field, the time frame seems reasonable. Officials from PRONI will ensure that the move is completed as quickly as possible, and the sooner the better. However, in the meantime, as I indicated earlier, every effort will be made to accommodate the substantial number of people who visit PRONI for genealogical research.

3.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Mr Hamilton: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During Question Time, Dominic Bradley asked a question initially in Irish, which he translated into English. In so doing, he took well in excess of one minute. Will you convey to the Speaker a request that guidance be issued to the effect that, if Members are intent on being as self-indulgent as Mr Bradley, they exercise the same brevity in asking their question that is expected of the rest of us?

Mr McElduff: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will deal with the initial point of order first, if you do not mind. Every Member is entitled to speak in the language of his or her choice. Those are the rules of the House.

Mr Hamilton: My point of order was not about the Member's choice of language; it was about the time that it took for him to ask the question in Irish and then to translate it into English. It took well in excess of one minute, but, if I were to take one minute to ask a question, you would, rightly, Mr Deputy Speaker, rule me out of order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind all Members that they should be brief and to the point when asking questions.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, some time ago, I asked the Speaker to investigate the practical feasibility and possibility of extending the availability of the headsets that the Speaker or Deputy Speaker and Clerks have access to. The Speaker was asked to look into that matter. No additional time would be required for translation if the headsets were available to all Members.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order.

Mr McElduff: I think that it is.

Mrs D Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I hope that it is a point of order.

Mrs D Kelly: During Question Time, Mr Hamilton gave quite a lengthy preamble to his question. Under Standing Orders, he has to ask a question.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do not intend to take any more points of order on this issue. The Speaker has consistently and frequently asked Members to be brief when asking their questions.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Childcare Vouchers

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the proposed axing of the childcare vouchers scheme; recognises that the loss of these vouchers could have a significant detrimental impact on working parents in Northern Ireland; supports the Employers for Childcare campaign; and calls on the Prime Minister to continue this scheme and to give consideration to the enhancement of Government support for working parents. — [Mr Shannon.]

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. My party supports the motion. I take the opportunity to commend Gem, I mean Jim, and the other signatories. Maybe he is a gem.

Mr Shannon: Sometimes.

Ms S Ramsey: I commend Jim on tabling the motion and securing the debate. I was in the process of trying to secure an all-party motion, but, fair play to Jim, he got there before me. Nevertheless, I am aware that most if not all parties are willing to support the motion. That shows that, when we work collectively as a team, we can address issues more quickly.

Mr Shannon: Although some Members may not have put their names to the motion, through their support today they make it an all-party motion. That is the important thing.

Ms S Ramsey: Absolutely. This is a campaign that all the parties are involved in, and fair play to Mr Shannon and his party colleagues for being quick off the mark. I give credit where it is due. I am trying to commend; I could have taken the huff and said that we would not support the motion.

I take the opportunity to commend the campaigning groups. Sometimes, we lose sight of the hard work that has been done before issues come before the Assembly. Groups have been highlighting this issue, keeping people up to date, informing people and generating a lot of public support. Fair play to them.

The proposal to axe the childcare voucher scheme, which was announced by the British Prime Minister, was a shock to many of us. As Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I have taken a keen and active interest in the matter. It struck me that decisions are made elsewhere that can impact negatively on our work.

Earlier, the proposer of the motion, Jim Shannon, highlighted the fact that the proposal was made at the Labour Party conference. There is speculation that the announcement was agreed only two hours prior to the conference. Where are the policy and its outworkings? What impact will that policy have on many people,

including working parents? It is important that society and politicians take a keen interest in the matter.

The result of the announcement will impact negatively on working parents. The British Prime Minister said:

“for all those mums and dads who struggle to juggle work and home, I am proud to announce today that by reforming tax relief we will by the end of the next parliament be able to give the parents of a quarter of a million two-year-olds free childcare for the first time.”

Although no one would disagree with that sentiment, its impact raises concern. It is OK to make that statement; however, as it turns out, on the ground, it offered just 10 hours of nursery provision each week for 250,000 children from low-income families and only in England. Once again, that sends out a clear message that children in our communities and constituencies are ignored by the British Government.

It just so happens that the Assembly will later debate the neglect of children and young people. It has had several debates on child poverty. Therefore, rather than making sweeping statements, it is important that the British Government put their hands in their pockets and give us millions of pounds for the public services that they have underfunded. Let the Assembly be the master of its own destiny and deal with poverty, neglect and similar issues, which it discusses daily.

The Assembly must send out the clear message that, if thousands of working parents, the majority of whom are women, and the people whom the Assembly wants to encourage into work through the Department for Employment and Learning, the majority of whom are in low-paid jobs, do not get help with childcare, they will be forced to stay out of work. The Assembly must get it right, especially for working parents, particularly working mothers.

I also want to mention the campaign. I had the good fortune to host our meeting with the group when it visited Parliament Buildings. By chance, I met the Minister of Finance and Personnel outside the meeting. He was unsure about what was happening. If announcements are made in England that will have a negative impact on society here, it is important that the Executive take note.

I ask Jim Shannon to contact the Minister of Finance and Personnel, or, indeed, maybe the Minister could be sent the Hansard report of the debate, so that Members can find out exactly what his Department is doing and whether it will be impacted in any way by Gordon Brown's recent announcement. I agree that his announcement to possibly pull back that proposal seems to be watered down. Therefore, it would be useful for the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) to update the Assembly on whether it is being proactive. In fairness to Sammy Wilson, he was still unsure of the impact of the announcement on people here.

I am conscious that my time is nearly up. Once again, I want to commend Jim — Gem — and the

campaign group. I encourage people to sign those letters and keep up the campaign; not only the community but ourselves as political representatives. We must inundate Gordon Brown with letters.

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

Ms S Ramsey: The Assembly must send the clear message that it wants the money that his Government failed to invest in our public services.

Mr McCallister: In common with other Members, I support the motion. I apologise to the House if I must leave before the end of the debate. It is certainly no disrespect to the House or to the debate's importance.

It appears that Gordon Brown made the announcement to scrap the existing tax break on employer-provided childcare vouchers at the Labour Party conference, without consultation with employers, working parents or the devolved Governments of the United Kingdom.

I have some sympathy with the reasons that the Prime Minister gave for scrapping the scheme. His intention to give free childcare to 250,000 low-income families in England for the first time is commendable. However, the actions that he intends to take to deliver that outcome are indefensible and will do untold damage to hard-working parents throughout the United Kingdom, especially in Northern Ireland. I note that the 250,000 free places referred to by the Prime Minister are, as Ms Ramsey mentioned, for England only. That means that the Prime Minister will be stripping some 10,000 working parents in Northern Ireland of their tax exemptions, without anyone else benefiting.

Secondly, Mr Brown's reason for scrapping the benefit — that it is badly targeted — suggests that middle-class families who can afford childcare are the main beneficiaries of the scheme. However, that ignores research which suggests that the majority of users of the scheme are basic-rate taxpayers. Middle-income, hard-working families who are just above the threshold for means-tested benefits will lose most. It is clear that the Prime Minister's argument is deeply flawed.

The vouchers are also of major benefit to local nurseries and child-minding groups in Northern Ireland. The flexibility of the current scheme means that parents can gain places for their children in nurseries close to their homes or places of work. If the Prime Minister goes ahead with his proposals, the ramifications of his actions will be far-reaching. Removing the benefit is likely to have a greater impact on women, who bear the main childcare responsibilities, and, therefore, it will potentially increase the gender pay gap. There is a danger that mothers will not return to work after maternity leave, which means that businesses will lose experienced employees. When one takes a step back, it becomes clear that the economy will lose out at a time when it can ill afford to lose any part of its workforce.

There is also a danger that families in which both parents work and who are just above the benefit threshold, will be forced to claim benefits if one parent drops out of employment to look after the children. Any savings that the Prime Minister hopes to make with this initiative could be lost due to extra benefit uptake. That will also put paid to the message that it pays to work. The Labour Party is again about to penalise people who want to provide for their families by suggesting to them that it will be more affordable to stay at home. That is bad for the economy, bad for families and bad for public finances.

There has been much speculation of late as to whether the Prime Minister will make a U-turn on this issue. There has been talk of raising the threshold to ensure that middle-income earners are not discriminated against. I would welcome such a decision by the Prime Minister; yet there has been no concrete evidence to back up those rumours.

I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. I want the Assembly to send a clear, strong and united message to the Labour Government that they have not taken into consideration the needs of Northern Ireland and that they are fundamentally wrong on this issue.

Mrs M Bradley: I support the motion. Too often, we find ourselves having to defend the retention of benefits that directly affect the vulnerable. In this case, a vulnerable group that is mostly forgotten about will be directly affected. I refer to the working poor.

In too many instances, the working poor are kept outside the benefit arena because they are working and attempting to make life better for their families and themselves. They are also helping to build the economy. However, for that, they are punished financially, and we see the Government chastise those who work. It becomes more and more apparent that the Government are not interested in encouraging parents to work.

We are told day and daily about how much inactive benefit recipients are costing the economy and how important it is that people with jobs continue to work so that the economy can be repaired and rejuvenated. However, many of my constituents who have concerns about the withdrawal of childcare vouchers have said that, if the scheme is withdrawn, one or both parents will either have to give up their employment or at least reduce their hours of work, which will equate to less money coming in, thus creating a poorer household.

3.45 pm

More importantly, if one parent leaves work, the likelihood is that the other parent's salary would still mean that the family could not claim for benefit assistance. However, if a single parent were to leave work, he or she would have to resort to benefits, and the income from those benefits would probably leave a

substantial gap between his or her salary and his or her benefit income.

Last week, the House unanimously supported a legislative consent motion on the UK Child Poverty Bill. However, just seven days later, we are discussing the withdrawal of childcare vouchers by the same Government who deemed child poverty to be a scourge on society. The Government are trying to allay the furore by stating that the removal of childcare vouchers will be phased over the next five years and that they will be replaced by a scheme extending free nursery places to more than 250,000 two-year-olds from low-income families. However, we must remember that that applies only in England and Wales. What about Northern Ireland? There are no guarantees for Northern Ireland that that money will be redirected into early-years education or other schemes. Therefore, we will be hit with a double whammy.

It has been reported — I have no doubt that this is accurate — that middle- or lower-income families benefit most from the scheme and that the hardest hit will probably be people such as nurses, whose only option will be to leave the Health Service. Local pressure groups have made their voices heard, and we need to support them.

My colleague and party leader, Mark Durkan, in his capacity as MP for Foyle, has tabled a ChildcareSOS motion in the run-up to the pre-Budget report. That motion was signed by 88 MPs and has been resubmitted to put pressure on the Government to stop their plan to cancel childcare vouchers.

We must not forget that the removal of the voucher system will adversely affect not only working parents but the many nurseries and childcare facilities that accept the children of working parents. In effect, it will create a “rob Peter to pay Paul” scenario. As a public representative, I am inundated each year with complaints from working parents whose children cannot get into a nursery class as most of those places are taken up by the children of parents who are in receipt of benefits. Although benefit-dependent families certainly need help, there must be equality in the treatment of all citizens. Working families all too often get left behind when financial aid packages are being distributed. The UK seems to be becoming more and more isolated in the EU, while other member countries seem to assist working families in order to maintain their economy base and encourage economic stimulation.

The abolition of vouchers is such a bad move that even the Labour Party's own MPs — in particular, the female MPs — are extremely worried about the withdrawal of the scheme and have apparently voiced their concerns privately to Gordon Brown.

I view the removal of the scheme as an attack on families, on women and, most shockingly, on children,

because the parents who either cannot afford childcare or who do not want to claim benefits will look for cheaper childcare. In fact, they may be forced to employ childminders who are not even registered, which would be a recipe for disaster. People who do not have family members who are able or, indeed, young enough to mind their children face a scary situation. Children and their needs are being sidelined on an agenda of proposed savings that will be exposed as a false economy.

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

Mrs M Bradley: I hope that there is a positive conclusion to this mess. The House must unite in its objections to the issue.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. You missed the boat, Mr McCrea.

Mrs M Bradley: I am sorry; my time is up.

Ms Lo: I support the motion and thank the Members who tabled it. The withdrawal of childcare vouchers is another of Gordon Brown's half-baked ideas. We need to send a strong message from this House saying that we oppose the proposal because it will not help our economy or our hard-working families.

Northern Ireland has the highest level of child poverty in the UK, and research has often shown that one way of getting out of poverty is to help parents get back to work. The proposal is not going to do that. Further, Northern Ireland does not have a childcare strategy; that is still sitting in OFMDFM as it debates who is going to be responsible for childcare in Northern Ireland. Also, we still do not have an early-years strategy to help young children.

For parents, there are enormous difficulties getting quality, accessible and affordable childcare. Therefore, why is anyone talking about trying to scrap a scheme that is working? Parents in Northern Ireland also have great difficulties getting registered childminders. There has been a decrease in the number of registered childminders rather than an increase. Scrapping childcare vouchers will hamper only the development of the childcare sector.

Axing the childcare voucher scheme will affect around 10,000 working parents here, most of whom are basic-rate tax payers and are not, as some people think, rich parents who can cream something off the system. Mostly, they are hard-working middle-income families that are just on the threshold for means-tested benefits. Those families are going to be caught in the dilemma between staying on at work to pay for childcare, paying enormous sums if they have a number of children, and giving up work and staying at home.

MPs at Westminster have raised the question of capping the childcare voucher system at a given level so that undue benefits do not go to parents on higher incomes. That is a much more sensible way of dealing with the issue, rather than having a blanket ban on the whole scheme.

Lord Morrow: I welcome the fact that the motion appears to have universal support in the House. That in itself sends out a powerful message on the issue.

There have been some startling headlines, in the local press and elsewhere, in relation to the matter. One paper carried the headline:

“100,000 will lose childcare vouchers; Middle class miss out despite Brown U-turn”.

It was reading headlines such as that and meeting those who came to Stormont — ironically, on the same day that Prime Minister Brown was here — that prompted Jim Shannon, Simon Hamilton and me to go forward with the motion.

As I said, I am thankful that the motion has met with universal support. Indeed, some Members said that had we not tabled the motion they would have done so themselves. Others said that it would have been better had it been tabled as an all-party motion; however, as the motion has received all-party support, I take that to mean the same thing.

One of the issues around childcare support is that, typically, a full-time place in a private day nursery costs approximately £650 a month. That is a fair slice from any pay packet or salary.

I suspect that, apart from a mortgage payment, £650 for private childcare will be largest outgoing for any family. Working-class families and those who earn just above the average salary can hardly afford such an outlay. They will welcome that the Assembly has taken that on board and is aware of the pressures and worries that are being inflicted on working-class families across Northern Ireland.

Alas, the Government of the day do not seem to care too much. Although this Assembly is often noted for its negative aspects, it can send a positive message to the whole community and Gordon Brown's Government by saying that it is united in its support for the retention of the childcare voucher scheme. However, can we be sure that Mr Brown is listening? He seems to speak with a forked tongue on the issue.

The scheme was introduced by the Labour Government and Mr Brown, so is it not ironic that he is the one putting it under threat? That policy is from a supposedly socialist Government who are allegedly looking after working-class people. All the parties in Northern Ireland are better skilled in looking after the working-class people of Northern Ireland than any Labour or Conservative Government. I hope that our

colleagues in the Ulster Unionist Party take cognisance of that, because they have hitched their wagon to the Conservative Party.

I was delighted that John McCallister was able to support the motion. I hope that he lets his new leader, Mr Cameron, know that the Conservative Party is at odds with its local wing here on the issue. I have my doubts about whether Mr McCallister's boss in London, Mr Cameron, will be too concerned about working-class families. However, we will leave that for another day and not fall out about it.

Mr McCallister: My party leader is Sir Reg Empey.

Lord Morrow: The Member can take it from me that he has two party leaders. I am sure that he will not let the issue go unnoticed by either Mr Cameron or Mr Empey, whoever he prefers, and will constantly bring to the attention of one of them the importance of retaining the childcare voucher scheme.

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

Lord Morrow: Yes, I will. The good news that we are sending from the Assembly is that we are totally united on the issue and want the retention of the childcare voucher scheme.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm tacaíocht a thabhairt don tairiscint seo inniu. As other Members have said, there is all-party support for the motion. We should, as best we can, try to keep party politics out of our discussion on the issue. As some Members said, the proposed ending of the childcare voucher scheme is another ill-conceived and ham-fisted proposal from Gordon Brown. He clearly has not thought out the ramifications of the policy and how it will impact on families. As has been said, the notion that families here will benefit from the redirection of money is wrong: the 250,000 free childcare places will be in England, so working parents in the North will not benefit from them.

Gordon Brown is feeling a lot of heat from his own party on the issue. Many Labour MPs and ex-Ministers are giving him a hard time about the policy and rightly so. We need to send out the message that the Assembly is totally opposed to abolishing childcare vouchers, because we were not even consulted. The proposal is a populist one from Gordon Brown to try to win the next election, and it has not been thought out properly. Gordon Brown is trying to bring in the proposal while telling us that he will regenerate the economy and create more jobs; yet parents, childcare providers and businesses are the three groups that will be most affected by the policy.

Parents, particularly mothers, will have to give up employment. That will widen the gender gap and bring

about more inequality for women, because parents will not both be able to work.

4.00pm

Businesses will suffer. Some of the material from the Employers for Childcare's vouchers campaign outlines that childcare vouchers are one of the most popular employee benefits in the country. In the current economic climate, businesses survive because people are in stable jobs. However, those people benefit from childcare vouchers and use them to place their children in childcare. The proposal will also affect childcare providers, because it will remove a key source of income from them. It will lead to unregulated practices, with people placing their kids in the care of unregistered and unqualified childcare providers. Gordon Brown has got it wrong for parents, employers and childcare providers.

As Jim Shannon, Sue Ramsey and other Members said, Gordon Brown must listen to the Assembly and reverse the decision. He must keep this sought-after benefit in place so that both parents can continue to work. As Lord Morrow said, it is a misconception that childcare vouchers are a middle-class benefit. They are not; people on lower incomes will suffer if they are scrapped.

Mrs I Robinson: Does the Member agree that if the Government were to stop benefits simply because they also reach middle- to upper-bracket earners, no one would receive those benefits? It is a bogus excuse.

Mr Butler: Yes; I agree entirely with the Member. The notion that other people will benefit is ill-conceived, and what Gordon Brown is trying to tell us is wrong. I hope that, in the coming days, Gordon Brown listens to the Assembly and its clear message that we want to retain childcare vouchers for parents and childcare providers and for businesses, which are trying to survive in the economic climate.

Miss McIlveen: At the stage of the debate when everyone is in agreement, there will be a certain amount of repetition. However, that does not mean that the points should not be stated over and over again.

When the Prime Minister first proposed to abolish the tax relief that employees receive for childcare, the public was, quite rightly, outraged. Given that the replacement for the scheme will not extend to Northern Ireland, that outrage was more acute here. At the Labour Party conference, the Prime Minister said that, in its place, the Government would provide free early education and childcare places for 250,000 two-year-olds in England. Incredibly, Gordon Brown is proposing to scrap a UK-wide scheme and replace it with a scheme that applies in England only. That represents a potential loss to the Northern Ireland economy of a minimum of £8 million.

As Members have said, the vouchers enable working parents to make significant savings on childcare costs. They can opt to receive up to £243 of their pay in vouchers each month before income tax and National Insurance is deducted. For many families, the receipt of that amount of childcare, which is free of income tax and National Insurance contributions, through the scheme is an important means to allow, primarily, mothers to work. Members who spoke previously said that we should not forget that, even in today's society, which talks so much about equality of the sexes, the biggest impact of the proposed scrapping of the tax relief will be on women and their ability to work.

A question must remain about whether the effect of the proposal amounts to indirect discrimination. Like other Members, I have been contacted by many constituents about the matter. One constituent, who has two very young children and benefits from the childcare vouchers, told me that if the scheme is withdrawn, it will be impossible for her and her husband to both continue to work. As my colleague Lord Morrow said, such a decision will be felt deeply here because of the recognised need for quality low-cost childcare places.

Fortunately, the Government appear to be back-peddalling, which is somewhat justified, given the anger that has been expressed. It seems incredible that it should ever have been contemplated in the first place, given the current economic crisis and the fact that such a measure would have had a negative effect on a significant section of the workforce.

Mr Shannon: Michelle McIlveen, Simon Hamilton and I wear different hats, as councillors on Ards Borough Council. Recently, council officers asked the council to endorse their opposition to the removal of childcare vouchers. That illustrates the depth of dismay and concern that exists in the Province on this issue.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Member of his comments, and I reiterate them. The only difficulty that I have with the Government's U-turn is that the soft words of Ed Balls on the subject seem only to hint at a partial compromise, by saying that it is good for the Treasury to listen. My guess is that it is more of an L-turn than a U-turn. It appears that it was more the threat of a further Back Bench revolt by more than 50 Labour MPs that has spurred things on. I doubt that the boast of closing the Tories' poll lead would last much longer if the Labour Party were once again to be seen in disarray.

Of course, we simply do not know who the Treasury is listening to, or whether Northern Ireland will continue to be left out of the reckoning when it comes to addressing the issue. We wait with bated breath to hear what the Chancellor will say in his pre-Budget speech on 9 December, but it is necessary for the Assembly to lend its voice to the protests against the current proposals to scrap the childcare voucher

scheme. I am proud to support the ChildcareSOS campaign, which is led by Employers for Childcare, and I am more than happy to support the motion.

Mr Attwood: I concur with Lord Morrow; there is universal support in the Chamber for the motion. I acknowledge Jim Shannon's contribution as the proposer of the motion. He has again demonstrated that he has a good feel for the public good and for the causes of anxiety in the wider community.

As a middle-aged parent of two children under four years of age, I have some appreciation of the need for childcare. I would miss the childcare benefit that I get as an MLA under the Assembly's childcare allowance scheme. However, given my income level and the fact that my wife and I are working parents, our benefit is so much less in the grand scheme of things than the benefit for those on much lower incomes, especially lone parents, of having the childcare allowance scheme.

Mr Brady: Does the Member accept that on this issue, the British Government have demonstrated their ability to be both disingenuous and contradictory? With the introduction of employment and support allowance, lone parents in particular are being targeted and pressurised into going back to work. The rules relating to being at home to look after children of a certain age have changed. The age limit has dropped from 16 years to 12 years. It will reduce to 10 years and eventually to one year.

Mr Attwood: I appreciate the point that the Member makes, but those matters have been discussed previously in the House and, no doubt, will be in the future. I will address the point of contradiction in the Member's intervention shortly, but I will return to my speech.

Perhaps it was an unfortunate moment to ask for an intervention, but the critical point that I wanted to make is that as a working parent on a much better income than many working parents, I can appreciate, as other parents here and elsewhere can appreciate, the needs of those who are in receipt of childcare vouchers. As Members have properly outlined, there are thousands of people on much lower incomes than me and many others, who, if it were not for the availability of the scheme, would be putting their income and their ability to go to work in jeopardy.

We all know what the Member was getting at when he made his unfortunately timed intervention. It was a quite inappropriate intervention, given that there is unanimity in the Chamber on this issue. I hope that the Member will reflect on that. However, he made one accurate point, which is the contradictory position of the British Government. The British Government cannot, on the one hand, table legislation on targets to deal with child poverty until 2020 and at the same time propose to withdraw childcare vouchers. Offering people childcare support to help them to get back into

work is one of many mechanisms that need to be in place to deal with child poverty.

If the Member was correct, he was correct in only one regard, which is that there is a contradiction between the British Government's legislation on child poverty and their proposal to withdraw childcare vouchers. One cannot have it both ways; that sends out mixed messages and creates anxiety among working families and parents. The British Government should reflect on that.

However, there is a wider obligation on this Chamber, which may prove to be a deeper contradiction. If we are to deal with child poverty, and childcare vouchers are only one mechanism of that, in the next Budget or Programme for Government we must put in place resources and strategies to deal with childcare and child poverty, so as not to leave us open to the same charge of being contradictory as has been levelled at the British Government.

We must put meat on the bones of the childcare strategy. Ms Lo rightly pointed out that there is a lack of childminders in the North, and that has been amply demonstrated by organisations such as NICMA. A lack of childminders in the North means that there is a lack of people on whom working parents can spend childcare vouchers.

We have to fix that problem, and part of doing so is to put in place the now long-overdue childcare strategy. We have been promised that the strategy will come before the Assembly, and there is a ministerial subcommittee dealing with it, but we have not yet seen the meat on the bones of that strategy, which everyone endorses. Without that, we are failing working parents in the North by not ensuring that we have sufficient childcare provision and an adequate numbers of childminders.

The debate has been a healthy one, although it was unnecessary, wrong, absent-minded and foolish to try to introduce a discussion about wider issues.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. Many of the key points have been covered at this stage of the debate.

The comments from Lord Morrow about working-class parents were valuable. The motion refers to working parents, and having listened to the contribution from Mr Attwood, I have some sympathy with Gordon Brown in his intention. *[Interruption]*

Sorry, I just want to make this point. My colleague Paul Butler made the point that, rather than the problem being Gordon Brown's intention, the problem is the outworkings of his proposal. I could be wrong, but I believe that he wants any new scheme to be targeted at parents who will have serious difficulties if the childcare voucher scheme is axed.

As Mrs Robinson said, that does not mean that others cannot benefit. Mr Attwood underlined that it is working-class parents who will suffer serious problems. It will be detrimental in a big way for those people, particularly lone parents who have serious childcare problems.

4.15 pm

I wish to refer to two reports that were published in 2009. A Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister report on the gender equality strategy described childcare provision here as being the worst in western Europe. Therefore, there is a problem with childcare provision. A report titled 'Women Living in Disadvantaged Communities: Barriers to Participation', which was commissioned by the Women's Centres Regional Partnership, highlighted lack of childcare provision as the biggest single barrier to women's engagement in education, training and work.

I reiterate the comments that my party colleagues made about the outworking of the Prime Minister's intention to scrap the childcare vouchers scheme. Gordon Brown is wrong to propose the axing of that scheme. The ramifications and implications of his proposal have not been fully analysed. However, a message of cross-party support for the motion will be sent from the Chamber today. I commend Jim Shannon and his colleagues for bringing the motion to the House, and, as my colleague Sue Ramsey said, our party fully supports it.

Mary Bradley referred to the legislative consent motion on the Child Poverty Bill, which was debated in the Chamber on 16 November 2009 and about which we spoke at length. The contradictions are ironic, because there has been no consultation with the devolved institutions here on the matter. We must think of those who are most in need, and of working-class parents in particular. It is wrong that those people will lose out. I fully support the motion and the sentiments that have been expressed in the debate.

In January 2009, the 'Belfast Telegraph' quoted a study that calculated that it costs £9,227 a year to rear a child from birth to the age of 21.

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

Mrs McGill: How can working-class parents afford that? Furthermore, what if they have more than one child? That is a real problem. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mrs I Robinson: I support the motion and congratulate my colleagues for bringing it to the House today. The motion is timely and addresses an issue that is very important to our constituents. Scrapping the childcare vouchers scheme will directly affect families who are in the low-income bracket. Gordon Brown and, indeed, his predecessor, Tony Blair, have done

enough to destroy family life and the family unit in the United Kingdom without adding insult to injury. The realisation of the Prime Minister's intention to scrap the scheme would be utter folly, and it would have a devastating effect on low-income families.

The scheme was introduced in April 2005 to help parents to make a contribution to childcare through tax relief. Under the scheme, up to £55 a week, or £243 a month, goes towards paying for registered childcare. Although it is a tax-relief scheme, parents put aside up to £243 of their salary every month in exchange for electronic vouchers that are used to pay for childcare.

The scheme is a great help to the 340,000 working parents across the UK who benefit from it. The argument that the Labour Government sought to use to support scrapping the scheme was that it benefited the people who could afford it. However, the Government's own figures dispute that. They show that 92% of voucher users are from low and middle-income families. Therefore, the evidence supports the need for the scheme to be retained, given that it is doing what was intended, which is to help working parents.

As I said to the Member on the opposite Benches, if we are to use the Government's guidelines, no benefits would be paid out. That is because we would always be above the cut-off line that the guidelines suggest, meaning that middle-class and upper-class persons would be able to benefit. We must also remember that those parents probably contribute a great deal through the taxes that they pay. Therefore, I would not be seen to deny them their right to have that benefit if they are on a parallel to receive it.

When Gordon Brown first mooted scrapping the scheme, my office was inundated with queries. I am sure that many Members experienced something similar. I have never seen such a flurry of activity in my office than that in the aftermath of the realisation of what scrapping the scheme could mean to low-income families. I received many letters and phone calls, and parents came to the office with their children in buggies. There was literally a line of people at my constituency office in Newtownards. I wrote to the Prime Minister to voice my opposition to his very poor and ill-thought-out plan. I must say that I am still waiting for a reply. I can only assume that he was swamped by a deluge of mail from irate Members of Parliament, Members of the Assemblies across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and by the electorates of those bodies.

Today is a good day because we can see the depth of support for the motion across all parties in the Chamber. We can send a message to Gordon Brown saying that the situation is not acceptable. The Government should accept that they really have got this one wrong. They

will have to do a U-turn, just as they have had to do many times before.

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

Mrs I Robinson: I do not think that it is asking too much to ensure that low-income families in particular get the help that they need to get back to work, given that that is what this Government have been trying to achieve. They want to get people out of the benefit culture and back into the workplace.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): I apologise to the Members who proposed the motion for my absence for part of the deliberations this afternoon; I was involved with other duties in the House. However, as the Chairperson of the Education Committee, it is important that I put on record the steps that the Committee has taken since it was lobbied by Employers for Childcare. Indeed, many Members mentioned that. I pay tribute to the excellent way in which that organisation brought this matter to Members' attention. Those who have received the most up-to-date briefing from ChildcareSOS are indebted to that body for the way in which it has approached this issue.

The Education Committee considered the consequences of the Government's announcement to axe the childcare voucher scheme. Having received the Employers for Childcare campaign document, we asked the Department of Education for a detailed response to the issues that were raised. That process proves the value of this Assembly's Committee system. This issue is of importance to so many people and impinges on so many families, and a process was put in place that brought about a degree of clarity and allowed some useful information to be given.

The Department's response was useful, for it clarified the Government's plans while making the point that the Department of Education has no policy link to proposals for tax and benefits for parents and their employers. The Department would not have expected the proposals to have a direct impact on the number of preschool childcare places.

On that subject, the Department of Education emphasised that the Government's original announcement stated that the money generated from the change would be used to provide free childcare for families on lower incomes in England, which is a point that several Members made. In Northern Ireland, however, as Members also pointed out, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMFD) is taking the lead on work on access to childcare, and there will be public consultation on a new childcare strategy, which will apply to all nought- to 14-year-olds.

Of course, we are still waiting on the Department of Education's proposals for a strategy for nought- to six-year-olds, which is an issue for the House, because

we often aspire to having joined-up government and to ensuring that Departments' policies are linked. In this case, it is vital that the Department of Education, in consultation with other Departments, have a clear policy on dealing with all facets of childcare provision in Northern Ireland.

On 15 November 2008, the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families said that the United Kingdom Government were in "listening mode" over concerns about the abolition of tax relief for childcare vouchers, and Employers for Childcare has given that statement a cautious welcome.

Speaking as a Member, rather than as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, like other Members, I have been approached in my constituency office by parents who make an invaluable contribution to the Northern Ireland economy and who, despite all the challenges and difficulties, endeavour to provide for their children. I was surprised by how important those parents consider this issue to be. For them, the bottom line was that if childcare vouchers were not available, it would be increasingly difficult, if not nigh impossible, for them both to continue working.

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: The Member for Strangford gave an example of the benefit and coherence that such a scheme brings to family life.

I support the motion, and I am glad to have been able to speak on behalf of the Committee for Education.

Ms Purvis: I thank my colleagues in the DUP for tabling the motion. When we heard about the Government's plans to phase out the childcare voucher scheme, Sue Ramsey, Naomi Long and I drafted a cross-party motion along similar lines, so I am happy to support the motion.

I sincerely hope that the objective of the motion — to save the childcare voucher scheme — has already been achieved and that we are merely validating the Prime Minister's decision not to scrap such a valuable programme. Like others, I was shocked when the Prime Minister announced that he would end the childcare voucher scheme and redirect the resources to nursery provision for two-year-olds in England. When the Prime Minister was here some weeks ago, I raised the issue with him directly and, like Claire McGill, he was concerned that vouchers were being used in England and Wales for skiing lessons, ice-skating lessons and horse-riding lessons.

Ms S Ramsey: I know that that is an issue. However, we need to ask why those who are on benefits should be penalised rather than targeting those who are

allegedly making money on the scheme. I do not think that anyone would disagree with such an approach.

4.30 pm

Ms Purvis: I thank the Member for her intervention. I was going to come to that point. She is exactly right. Although any additional assistance for the parents of young children is to be welcomed, programmes for children in England cannot be introduced at the expense of those in Northern Ireland. Rather than robbing one programme to fund another, the Prime Minister should be supporting both.

The nursery provision that he was heralding in England, to which Members have referred, offers extremely valuable early childhood development services. I would like to see more of that in Northern Ireland, particularly in disadvantaged communities. However, we are not trading like for like. The types of nursery placements that the Prime Minister is proposing for two-year-olds for ten hours a week — essentially two hours a day — will offer a real boost to the children who participate in them and meaningful support for their families, but such programmes cannot possibly be classified as childcare. I struggle, as I am sure many others do, to think of any lucrative employment that any parent could secure at less than ten hours a week.

In Northern Ireland, we are in a particularly vulnerable position on the issue and cannot afford to lose childcare programmes in any form. We are already dealing with woefully inadequate childcare provision that is unable to meet current demand for services. The situation is getting worse: the number of childcare places is actually falling. Despite that, our Executive have been slow to move on the issue. We continue to wait for a national childcare strategy and for a Department that is willing to take responsibility for that critical issue. To lose childcare vouchers in such an environment would be a serious blow.

The evidence is irrefutable that the primary barrier to women's full participation in education and employment is childcare. As Claire McGill outlined, the impact on women from disadvantaged communities is particularly profound. Women who have children at home and who want to work cannot do so if they do not have access to appropriate, affordable, quality childcare; it is as simple as that.

The effect of this issue really knows no social or economic boundaries. The lack of appropriate childcare poses a major stress in many households. Childcare programmes must meet the needs of the families that they are supposed to support, and the childcare vouchers scheme is perfectly matched to meet the needs of those who use it. The Government's attempt to frame their decision to remove the scheme as an attempt to shift resources to low-income families is insincere. If the

Government were indeed committed to supporting the most vulnerable families, they would not be forcing single parents onto jobseeker's allowance on the one hand and taking away support for childcare on the other. It is either very poorly co-ordinated or very poorly thought-out policy, but the end result could easily be an impossible choice for many parents: hardship in work or hardship out of work. A large number of parents will have to decide whether they can actually afford to work simply because of the cost of childcare.

In Northern Ireland, we are paying the price for having marginalised the issue of childcare for so long. We have failed to fully appreciate its impact on our society and economy. If the recession brings anything good, perhaps it will be a better understanding of the support and flexibility that working families need, not only to pursue a career and raise a family but simply to make ends meet.

I am delighted by any investment in early childhood development, but diverting funds away from a successful and critical scheme to support working parents is not the way to do it. I support the motion.

Mr Hamilton: About halfway through the debate, Michelle McIlveen said that everything had more or less been said at that stage, so the chance of me saying anything different at this juncture is very limited. However, I welcome, as other Members have done, the widespread support for the motion that has been shown across the Chamber; unanimous support has been shown by Members on all sides today. I hope that that is some encouragement to those who would be most adversely affected by any change in tax relief or childcare vouchers. I hope that those people who fear the worst will see some encouragement in their representatives in the Northern Ireland Assembly speaking up for them with one voice.

I will touch on some of the broad themes that have been drawn out by Members' contributions. The first consistent theme relates to the nature of Gordon Brown's announcement. We all get bright ideas, and we get them in weird and wonderful places, but, after a while, we realise that they may not be as good as we had thought. However, most of us do not go to a party conference, which is being broadcast on national television, and blurt out the idea without any thought, background work or analysis. That appears to be what the Prime Minister has done in this instance.

Nobody will disagree with some of the motivation behind what he is saying. I think that there might be a hidden agenda to what he said, but, on the face of it, it is not a bad thing to try to amend policy and divert resources to offer free childcare for 10 hours a week for every two-year-old in England, but the unforeseen or foreseen consequences of that for others are widespread.

There will be consequences not only for people in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales; the scheme will not be much good for people in England if their child is not two years old. The scheme will not be much good to anyone who needs childcare or assistance with childcare for more than 10 hours a week, which is required in most cases. The scheme is not good for everybody in England, and it is certainly no good for people in Northern Ireland. There is a lot of opposition to the mechanism of the change and its consequences.

I do not entirely subscribe to the view that the Prime Minister did not do his homework. I think that an opportunity was seen in the run-up to an election to try to throw out a populist line, which, on the face of it, looked good but, in reality, was not. Members should factor in that the announcement was made at a Labour Party conference. It was an old-fashioned, outdated, soak-the-rich type of mantra that one would expect from socialists, and it was thrown out by the Prime Minister to try to pacify itchy, nervous members in his party.

The consequences, particularly for Northern Ireland, are widespread. As all Members who spoke in the debate have identified, the proposal will hit low-income families and low to middle-income families most severely. There is social division in Northern Ireland, but it is not as acute here as it is across the water. We have a broad swathe of individuals who fit into that low- to middle-income bracket, perhaps because of the predominance of the public sector in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is likely that the proposal will affect us more than it will affect others.

I want to stand up for those people in the low- to middle-income bracket, who always seem to be most adversely affected by changes in the tax system or whatever else. They always seem to bear the brunt. In relation to other policy areas, the Assembly has tried to stand up for those people and consider their incomes; when debating the rates system, for instance. It does no harm to stand up and say that those people have taken too big a hit through the years and that sometimes they need a bit of help. Childcare vouchers are one way in which they were getting help.

A lot of Members talked about the success of the existing scheme. In a country where the average childcare costs are about £600 a month, we have a scheme that allows an annual relief of around £1,200 for an individual or twice that amount for couples. We are not talking about a lot of money. If someone is spending an average of £600 a month on childcare, such an annual saving will not make a big dent, but it will make a big difference. It is not a massive amount of money, but it is a major contribution for many people.

Members have said that some 10,000 parents in Northern Ireland are availing themselves of the vouchers. The vouchers allow parents to get into the workplace

and make a contribution to society, because for many of those people, childcare is a key consideration.

Mr Attwood declared his interest as a middle-aged father of two children under four years of age, and I can declare my interest as a young father of two children under four years of age — *[Interruption.]* It must be the sleepless nights. *[Laughter.]* I know and appreciate that not everyone is as fortunate as my wife and me, in that our parents — the children's grandparents — are fit and active and able to help out. Not everyone is in that position: the grandparents may not be with us any more, or geography may have an impact. Childcare vouchers have allowed people without such support to get into work and make a contribution to society.

It is little wonder that fewer women are economically active here. There is a difference of some 5% between men and women's economic activity rates in Northern Ireland, even when we take into account the recent substantial changes in the labour market.

During today's debate, many Members have called for the creation of a childcare strategy. I do not want to get into the detail of that, and time does not permit it. However, the overall need for greater childcare in our country must be addressed, not least because of the imminent changes that will be made through the Welfare Reform Act 2009. I have been made aware of the impact that that legislation will have, particularly on single parents, through my work with the Committee for Social Development.

Childcare plays an important role in encouraging more people to get into the workforce and make a greater contribution to society. We cannot simply tell someone that they need to get a job or their benefits will be removed, without at least offering them some assistance to help them get into the workforce.

If the childcare voucher scheme is abolished there will obviously be an effect on business. Members have spoken of the £8 million contribution that childcare vouchers make to the economy. If those vouchers are lost, there will be an impact not only on the childcare industry, but on the businesses that the parents work for, which will lose experienced, valuable workers.

As Jim Shannon said, there will be an impact on the public sector. I can testify to that as well. It seems that an increasing number of officials in Ards Borough Council are women, as is the case with every organisation that I have met recently, and the loss of childcare vouchers could, therefore, have a devastating effect on workers in the public sector.

The whole point of our argument must be that we want people to work. We do not want people with skills and a contribution to make to society, having their skills and attributes underutilised. In many cases, those workers need assistance to utilise those skills. In terms of value for money, the childcare voucher

scheme has been a great help and stands the test of scrutiny. Instead of scrapping the scheme and replacing it with something that will only help a small proportion of parents in one region in the United Kingdom, the Prime Minister must wake up and see the benefit that his Government have brought to the whole kingdom through the scheme.

I hope that the much-rumoured U-turn — and we should look at the significance of some of the names attached to it — does happen. We have seen U-turns from the Government before, on issues such as the 10p tax row, and I hope that this one prevails.

In conclusion, I want to commend Employers for Childcare on its ChildcareSOS campaign. I know that that organisation is up for an award elsewhere this evening, and I am sure that it would very much like to win. However, I am sure that it would rather win this argument and retain childcare vouchers. Through the debate, and the widespread unanimous support that has been shown by Assembly Members, I hope that we can also make our contribution to winning that argument.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the proposed axing of the childcare vouchers scheme; recognises that the loss of these vouchers could have a significant detrimental impact on working parents in Northern Ireland; supports the Employers for Childcare campaign; and calls on the Prime Minister to continue this scheme and to give consideration to the enhancement of Government support for working parents.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Neglect of Children and Young People

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

Ms Purvis: I beg to move:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the level of neglect of children and young people; recognises the significant impact of neglect on the lives of children and young people; and calls on the Executive to give greater priority to tackling this issue through early intervention and prevention.

4.45 pm

I apologise in advance to Members because I may have to leave before the end of the debate. However, my colleague and Deputy Chairperson on the all-party Assembly group, Michelle McIlveen, will make the winding-up speech. I commend the members of the all-party group on children and young people who worked together to table this cross-party motion with the support of seven political parties. I thank Action for Children for its instrumental research, and its work on the motion in particular.

The motion expresses concern at the level of neglect of children and young people. Neglect is the persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and psychological needs, which can have serious consequences for that child's health or development. Neglect can take many forms, including a lack of appropriate food and clothing, an unsafe or insecure living environment, insufficient attention for medical needs, or the absence of the warmth, security and love that is necessary for emotional and psychological development. Those needs are fundamental and may appear simple, but neglect is a complex issue.

Neglect can be difficult to identify because it is often a symptom of other long-term or complicated problems in a family, rather than an easily recognisable incident or event. There is no single cause of neglect; a series of factors and family difficulties contribute to the situation. Neglect can be linked to depression, mental ill health, domestic violence, addiction and substance misuse, parents who are socially isolated, and the stress of poverty and deprivation. However, poverty and deprivation do not lead to neglect. Many families struggle with those pressures without the result of neglect. Poverty and deprivation can be factors in situations where neglect is present because they place additional stress on families who may be dealing with other problems that make it more difficult to cope.

Neglect knows no bounds. Like the problems it can be linked to, neglect is not limited by income, background, education or ethnicity. Families may face a crisis and need support to prevent those problems from impacting seriously on children. Neglect can be difficult to distinguish and, therefore, more difficult to address because it is often a part of complex family issues. Despite those complexities, it is critical for neglect to be addressed.

Neglected children are more likely to suffer problems that can cause long-term damage, such as emotional and mental-health problems, limited school attendance, and poor educational attainment and social skills, which can make it difficult for them to make and keep friends. Poor social skills can also make children more likely to experience bullying and isolation. If those situations are not dealt with, children who have experienced neglect will bring those problems with them into adulthood, where they can have a profound effect on their ability to participate fully in society.

Neglect is the primary reason for children being placed on the child protection register in Northern Ireland. In 2007-08, almost half of the children who are listed on the child protection register were there because of neglect — that is more than 1,000 children. However, that is not the complete picture. Because of its complexities, neglect is frequently under-reported and underestimated. Several studies have found higher incidents of neglect and abuse experienced by children in the general population than those of reported figures. Incidents of neglect appear to be on the increase, and recent research suggests that up to 10% of our children could be affected. Swift response and early intervention are critical in addressing and reversing that trend. Front line professional staff and public awareness play key roles in making that happen.

Recently, Action for Children surveyed almost 2,000 primary school, preschool, nursery and health professionals across the UK to gauge their understanding of child neglect and its causes. More than half of those surveyed said that being able to report less serious suspicions earlier would be helpful when dealing with suspected child neglect, and 44% said that clearer guidance from the Government or employers on when to intervene would make a difference. Because neglect can be hard to define, it can be difficult for professionals to identify the point at which to make a referral. It is therefore critical that front line staff receive the support, guidance and training that they need to allow them to recognise and feel comfortable intervening in the early stages of possible neglect, before a problem becomes serious.

Because the situations of families in which neglect is present are varied and complex, there is a need for a joined-up, multi-departmental approach. It is not just teachers and health visitors who come into contact

with those families, but all levels of government services and professionals.

Public awareness is critical, and Action for Children is to be commended for its recent campaign on the issue. In the case of Victoria Climbié in England — and we all remember that pretty smiling face in the photograph shown on TV — despite the number of professionals that that little girl had seen, it was ultimately a taxi driver who reported the neglect. Again, because of the complexities of neglect and the challenges in identifying when it begins, it is vital that our approach is a comprehensive one which leaves no proverbial stone unturned and no opportunity to tackle it unmet.

I am aware that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) have put together a number of statements and action plans related to neglect and the factors associated with neglect. Those include the Family Matters, Care Matters, Safeguarding Children and Lifetime Opportunities strategies, as well as the ever-anticipated strategy on cohesion, integration and sharing. I have read those that are available, and there is no doubt that they are very good strategies. I am particularly pleased to see the shift to early intervention, as it is both a more meaningful and a more cost-effective approach to a number of challenges that we face as a society.

What concerns me is not what is written, but what is implemented. Those policies look great on paper, but can look very different, and can even seem to disappear, when it comes to making them actually happen. I know that there are serious financial considerations, particularly for the Minister of Health, who is facing severe constraints, but what concerns me is that our attempts at efficiency savings now are going to turn into crisis not far down the road. Crises are always expensive.

I thank the Minister for his presence here today, and I commend him for his allocation of £20 million for services for children and families, but can that be enough? Failing to fully implement a number of those policies, which are designed to safeguard children and remove inequalities in our society, will mean that we will not address those issues until they are much more traumatic for those involved, and much more expensive for government Departments. I look forward to our discussion this afternoon on this very important issue, and to the Minister's remarks, and I commend the motion to the Members of the House.

Mr Easton: Children are our most valuable resource. Any investment in their future is money and time well spent. The return on our investment in young people, I venture to suggest, may well be in excess of any other return this House invests in finite resources in the future. In those terms, it is indeed money well spent.

We saw at the weekend the disgusting face of terror, which reminds us sadly that those involved in it are still out there — those in our society who are incapable of progress; those who would, indeed, neglect our children and condemn them to lives ruined by the evil of terrorism in the past. In repudiating those criminals who would, through terrorism, neglect the children of Northern Ireland, I underline the maxim that those who will not learn from history are destined to repeat it. Terrorism, as we know, has neglected a generation of our children. Let us redouble our efforts to ensure that this generation is not also neglected.

To put all of that into perspective, there are over 400,000 children in our society — we are talking about one in four people. We hear so often that people are our most valuable resource. Therefore, we must sit up and take note of a quarter of our people.

I pay tribute to the social workers who deal directly with young people who are the victims of abuse, whether physical, sexual, emotional or neglect. While this House rightly acknowledges shortcomings where they exist, and demands and ensures rectification, equally we must acknowledge that many dedicated social work professionals help children at the point of the individual need, and encourage and assist them through healing therapy to address the consequences of abuse and go on to fulfil their God-given potential.

Equally, we cannot turn away from the reality that, in 2007-08, 21,000 children were referred to social services a staggering 28,000 times. I pay tribute to the Police Service and social services, who, either together or separately carried out a staggering 2,300 child protection investigations under joint protocol procedures. I also acknowledge that 2,070 children on the child protection register each have their own tailored child protection plan. The benefits of the multidisciplinary process have been utilised to formulate a plan that is in the best interests of the young person.

We need a reality check, and, no matter how painful and distressing that reality is, we must act. When I say “distressing”, I mean it. A staggering 58%, or three out of five, of sexual offences were reported against teenagers. The agonising remainder of 42% of offences that were reported were against children under the age of 12. If that does not prompt action, nothing will.

The difficult fact is that six in every 100 young people will experience severe emotional maltreatment, and a similar proportion will experience a serious absence of care at home. We rightly recoil in horror at those who sexually abuse children, and I take on board the fact that one in 100 children will, sadly, experience sexual abuse from a partner or carer. Some three in every 100 of children will experience sexual abuse by some other relative. It is for those heroic — a term that I use deservedly and advisedly — survivors of sexual

and other abuse that we must ensure a comprehensive and appropriate social work service. They deserve it, and, assuredly, they must get no less.

Let us look at sense, get selfish and look to getting a return from our investment. I will set out the case for why investing in children is so wise. The negative reasons for doing that are crime, mental health, family breakdown, drug abuse and obesity — an issue that the House addressed last week. Is it acceptable that the United Kingdom is bottom of the heap compared to its European counterparts on each of those issues? The cost to the UK economy of addressing those issues will be a staggering £4 trillion over the next 20 years. A proper dual investment package that will aim at interventions, universal childcare and paid maternity leave will reduce that debt by £1.5 trillion. Is that not a prize worth striving for?

Not everything comes down to pounds, shillings and pence. This House must lift its game and recognise that the research base informs us that proper investment can actively promote the psychology and social well-being of children. That would be a legacy that the House could be proud of. I commend the motion to the House.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I apologise for the fact that I will have to leave the debate shortly to travel to Dublin on Committee business. I thank the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his attendance, and I ask him to ensure that a transcript of the debate is given to other Ministers. It is important that we focus not only on the health aspect of this issue, but on the aspects in which other Ministers and Departments have a role and a responsibility to play. I am proud to be one of the magnificent seven members of the all-party group who signed the motion. We did that to ensure that the Executive collectively and other Ministers play their parts to deal with the issue of neglect.

I thank Action for Children, the NSPCC and Barnardo's for the briefing paper that they provided for the debate, and I thank the Assembly's Research Services, which provided a comprehensive paper that highlighted some of the issues. We were provided with OFMDFM's children and young people's action plan, which states:

“An enjoyable childhood should be a reality for all, not just for some. Every child should grow up feeling safe”.

We should all support that, and, as a society, we must ensure that children are protected from harm. The action plan states that we should give:

“particular focus to those who are vulnerable or at risk”.

Although there is a commitment and policy in place at the top level — the Executive — there are still issues, and that is why we agreed to table the motion.

5.00 pm

We should all take on board the duty of protecting the most vulnerable, as should all Departments and Ministers. It does not fall to only one Minister, and I do not want to appear to be critical of just the Health Department. That Department has an important part to play, but so do all Ministers, because, as Mr Easton said, it is a question of investing for our future.

The document says:

“Every child has a right to grow up in a loving home with the support and care of their parents and we should help those families who need support to provide a stable environment for their children.”

Again, that is the responsibility of everyone, even at local government level and through the local community and voluntary sector. Dawn Purvis was right to mention the recent cases in England that received a lot of publicity here. There are a number of no-day-named motions, including one from me, seeking assurances that we will not be faced with similar tragedies.

In a recent press release, the Minister of Health said:

“reviews of child protection services were an essential measure to ensuring safe and effective services.”

The recent Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) reports highlighted some stark concerns. I do not want to appear to be negative across the board, because a lot of genuine good work is going on, and Alex Easton was right to highlight the positive work that is done by social services and others in the community.

The Minister said that the RQIA reports included some examples of good practice, but:

“reports have identified a number of deficits where expected standards were not being met during the time these reviews took place. This is clearly not acceptable.”

That shows why devolution can, should and will work. We have a local Minister who is aware of local needs and issues, which he deals with when they come up. I ask the Minister to keep Members updated on developments with regard to the concerns that the RQIA highlighted.

I am conscious that the Assembly is today debating a number of motions relating to children and young people, and I am very happy that they are getting all-party support. That sends out a clear message. I want to cover a lot of things, but I cannot do that in five minutes.

I wanted to raise the issue of neglect. I still have a concern, as I know other Members do. The RQIA raised the issue of unallocated cases —

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

Ms S Ramsey: I do not want to get into recent named cases, but there is an issue about neglect, and a parallel issue of unallocated cases. Let us not have a tragedy on our hands, and let us put resources and money into addressing the unallocated cases.

Mr Beggs: I want to thank Action for Children, which recently published a document entitled ‘Child Neglect: Experiences from the Frontline’, which was one of the catalysts for the debate. I also want to thank the NSPCC and Barnardo’s for their useful background supporting information.

According to Action for Children, neglect is an ongoing failure to meet a child’s basic needs, which are a secure environment, food and clothing, and feeling loved and safe. Neglect can have the most profound effect on a child’s development, and, ultimately, influence its future development and long-term expectations.

That was best illustrated for me about a year ago when I attended an Investing for Health conference, at which the Chief Medical Officer for Scotland was speaking. He had delivered the same message two days earlier to the entire Scottish Executive. When he said that, I knew that I needed to listen very carefully to what he was saying. He indicated that they were trying to remove health inequalities in Scotland, and had noticed that life expectancy was lower in areas of higher deprivation, but that the excess mortality levels were not explained by deprivation alone.

Of course, there are health issues involved, and smoking, excess alcohol and drugs are contributors. However, he made the point that neglect can also affect health in the long term. He provided several pieces of evidence, which I will touch upon briefly. He mentioned a study on hopelessness and risk of mortality by Everson et al in 1996. He discussed how the stress of neglect can cause thickened arteries and increased cortisol levels. He said that it could result in biological changes in body chemistry that can have long-term implications for a child or young person’s development.

Of his three fascinating conclusions on what would improve life expectancy in Scotland, one is to consistently support and nurture early life, which would provide the basis for successful social and physical development into adulthood. He illustrated clearly that neglect is a key feature that affects people’s long-term health and development.

Barnardo’s runs a similar programme to the YMCA-run Parents and Kids Together (PAKT), which aims to increase the bond between parents and children and to offer parents support and knowledge so that they can better understand their children’s needs. It is important that mothers are supported. Frequently, they need that support in many situations.

The NSPCC has indicated that there is a range of areas of neglect, and we all must look out for areas of neglect and try to assist. However, to assist someone who may be in need is a sensitive area.

In 2009, Demos published a study entitled 'Building Character', which states:

"Parents are the principal architects of a fairer society".

The study's key message is that although deprivation has a significant impact on a child's success, the crucial factor is parenting skills. It is difficult for the Government to intervene in that area. However, better steps can be taken.

The study also states:

"Character capabilities – application, self-regulation and empathy – make a vital contribution to life chances, mobility and opportunity... The development of these character capabilities is profoundly shaped by the experience of a child in the pre-school years."

Children's early years are, therefore, vital to their development. That is why parents must be supported during those years. I declare that I am a member of Horizon Sure Start, because, for some time, I have recognised the importance of that support and have tried to assist.

The study also recommends that goals should be to:

"Strengthen provision of *support and information* to parents to help them incubate character capabilities in their children; Focus support on *disadvantaged* children...ensure *quality control* and *value for money*",

of that expenditure through review.

Mrs M Bradley: There can be no doubt that the rate of child neglect is ever-increasing. Action for Children states in its research document dated 13 October 2009 that 11% of professionals who work with children have witnessed an increase in suspected cases of child neglect during the past year. However, an even more worrying statistic is that 19% of those professionals have been given no training or information about what to do in those situations.

When we consider child safety and protection in today's society, we automatically think about child abuse, whether it be of a sexual or physical nature. Given the recent media coverage of certain high-profile cases, that is unsurprising. According to recent surveys, child neglect is now the most likely reason for the application of a child protection plan.

Neglect can mean many things for the child or young person who suffers it. It can be demoralising, opinion-forming, and dangerous, as sufferers can develop self-harm habits during their formative years.

A child's life is a blessing. However, for some children, it is a burden. In such cases, it is essential that the proper strategy, structures and trained personnel are available to identify and assist sufferers.

I am concerned that the proper staffing structures, budgets and identification tools are not in place.

It is essential that appropriate training is put in place for the staff who deal with what is a stressful situation for both child and staff. Also, it is vital that the victims feel supported and safe in the knowledge that they will be helped along the road to recovery, rather than simply being removed from danger and left to flounder should they be nearing the age at which they must leave care.

The Programme for Government states that it is the Executive's goal to reduce by 20% the number of abused or neglected children who need to be placed on the child protection register. However, given the present economic situation and the fact that economic disaster was not factored into the Budget of the day, what will happen to that promise now?

Efficiency savings could have a catastrophic effect on children and young people who are neglected, in need or simply forgotten. Although I recognise that efficiency savings are a sore point for most of us in the House, a people-centred debate such as this should tug at the heart strings of the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I make no apologies for stating that. I hope that he will listen to and take heed of Members' appeals for the health budget to be exempt from efficiency savings and/or bolstered because of the pressures on it.

The neglect of children harbours the sad and blinkered outlook on life of those involved, and, in many cases, it can become a cycle that continues from generation to generation. However, that must stop, and we must help it to stop. The young people affected need help and guidance to acknowledge that what has happened to them is unacceptable, so that they can embark on adult life with a balanced view and an improved vision of what they can achieve.

Neglect often leads to behavioural problems, which, sadly, are prominent in both primary and secondary schools. It can also lead to eventual drug and substance abuse, bullying and isolation.

Often, disabled children are neglected, and that gives rise to a totally new set of problems. In our education system, special needs are always pushed aside through budgetary restrictions or, more worryingly, political stalemate.

Even if one child suffers from any of the various problems to which neglect can lead, that is one child too many. Children need to be loved, nurtured, cared for and shown compassion by example. They should not be tortured, forgotten or disbarred from any true and genuine affection. This is not somebody else's —

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mrs M Bradley: I am nearly finished; I will run out of time.

This is not somebody else's problem; it is a shared social problem. It requires a shared solution that spans the entire spectrum of government, because the neglect of children affects every Department.

I thank the Minister for being present today, and I now give way to Iris.

Mrs I Robinson: I thank the Member for giving way. She will have another minute to expound on her presentation. Does the Member agree that an area that requires urgent attention is that of teenage pregnancies? Many of those young girls have been abused or brought up in dysfunctional family units. They have no parenting skills, and a vicious circle is created when their children are subsequently abused.

Mrs M Bradley: I accept that.

Ms Lo: In the 1990s, I was a social worker in a family and childcare team. I also worked in Barnardo's with families and children and, therefore, I know its Parents and Children Together (PACT) programme well. In those days, social services were very much the poor relation and received only a small share of the overall budget for health and social services. I understand that the position may be getting worse because of the efficiency savings being demanded of the Department.

Nowadays, social workers often have huge caseloads and deal with serious cases of abuse and neglect of children on the child protection register. The many constraints put on social workers mean that their work is often limited to firefighting, rather than the adoption of a systemic approach to help problem families to improve their situations.

5.15 pm

It is often more difficult to detect child neglect than physical or sexual violence, which can be proven by clear medical evidence. Having said that, 49% of the children on the at-risk register in Northern Ireland were included on it because they were neglected. Very often, cases of child neglect are reported by teachers in schools and nurseries, health visitors or neighbours, because those are the people who see children on a regular basis.

There are many causes of neglect. From my experience, parents, regardless of whether they are rich or poor, usually have natural instincts to love and protect their young. I concur with Dawn's point that poverty does not drive parents to neglect their children. Often, when parents are absorbed in their needs or problems, they fail to put the needs of their children first, which is when neglect can occur.

Factors that can lead to neglect include alcohol or drug abuse, mental-health problems and domestic violence. However, neglect may also occur if young parents do not have the skills, knowledge or patience

to look after children, or if the parents themselves were neglected or abused in childhood.

I recall one very sad case that I worked on as a fairly new social worker. I had to take a two-year-old child into care after I discovered that his mother had been drunk in the house for five days. I went upstairs to lift the child out of his cot, only to discover that he was soaked in his own urine and dirt and that the bed clothes and mattress were dripping wet. I took the child downstairs and gave him some food. He was so hungry that he ate like an animal, and when I tried to clean up some food that he had spilt on the floor, he growled at me. After the child was placed in foster care, it was discovered that he had depression. I am talking about a two-year-old child who had developed depression because he was neglected.

The consequences are dire for children who are subjected to long-term neglect. It can cause physical and emotional health problems, poor school attendance, poor educational attainment, poor self-esteem, unemployment, and an increased likelihood to get involved in antisocial behaviour or even crime.

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

Ms Lo: Neglect not only causes an economic cost to society but a human cost to the victims who lose their potential to enjoy life and to contribute to society. We need to talk about the wider issue of prevention, and we must realise that parents are the problem and that children are the victims. Social issues such as deprivation, mental-health problems, alcohol and substance abuse, and domestic violence all need to be looked at.

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

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Eirim chun tachaiocht a thabhairt don mholadh seo.

I support the motion. Recently, Members in the Chamber rightly expressed their outrage at the historic abuse of children and young people in state and religious institutions here. However, the neglect and abuse of children is still going on.

Earlier this year, the press reported on a number of case management reviews, which health trusts carry out when a child dies, is seriously injured or is abused, or when neglect is suspected. One of the cases related to a 14-year-old boy who raped his 12-year-old sister. He was able to do so despite social services knowing that he had a history of sexual assaults. Another case concerned a three-year-old girl on the child protection register, who ended up in a coma after taking her mother's medication. Another case concerned a two-month-old baby, who died after falling asleep in her mother's arms. Around 45 health and social care professionals had been involved with that mother over

a two-year period. Another case involved a baby being seriously injured by his father, a man who had been convicted of the manslaughter of another of his children. Another case involved a child living in foster care being forced to scavenge for food in bins.

There have been other awful tragedies, such as the death of the mother and daughter, Madeline and Lauren O'Neill, or the death of the McGovern and McElhill family in a house fire in Omagh.

The Health Department has confirmed that the number of children referred to social services has risen by 24% in the past five years. That is an absolute scandal and is an alarming and concerning figure. The apparently deteriorating situation is underlined by Action for Children, which says that 11% of professionals working with children have seen an increase in suspected cases of child neglect in the past 12 months. However, almost one in five of those professionals has had no training or information on what to do in such cases.

In the North of Ireland, there are 2,071 children on the child protection register, with 665 children registered as suffering from neglect. I recognise what other Members have said: it is not just one Minister who can address that, and the Executive have adopted positive interventions, such as the children and young people action plan and strategy.

However, the statistics that I outlined demonstrate that more needs to be done and, in particular, that the failings identified by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child need to be addressed. Last year, that Committee criticised the British Government for failing to provide clarity regarding the amount of money that is being spent on children. Consequently, the Committee found that it was impossible to say whether the state was fulfilling children's economic, social and cultural rights.

More and better training is needed to assist professionals in their work, to make appropriate use of assessment to support neglected children and to ensure that appropriate decisions are made about when to intervene. I acknowledge the dedication of front line social workers, which has already been referred to. Social workers work in extremely difficult circumstances; morale is often low and there are problems around the retention of staff. The necessary support and resources must be put in place to help social workers to do their jobs.

Improving the context of children's lives is crucial. Addressing the issues of housing, childcare, benefits, substance misuse, mental health and domestic violence has the potential to reduce the likelihood of children being neglected.

Similarly, a bill of rights for the North offers the potential to establish an overarching legislative mechanism for the promotion and the protection of children's rights. A bill of rights would reflect internationally recognised children's rights standards and would provide the greatest possible protection for

children and young people. That is something that other parties should consider.

It is important to note that in our equality legislation, we already have a strong legislative basis on which to tackle neglect. For example, the NSPCC is lobbying for new laws to impose a positive duty of care to promote the welfare of children. That would mean that not only would those who abuse and neglect children face criminal prosecution —

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

Ms Anderson: New laws would also mean that there would be an expectation that the well-being of children would be actively promoted.

I would like us to take account of the Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) process, which should not be a procedural exercise. Section 75 should be used effectively to identify changes that can be introduced to assist those who are most in need. We must demonstrate, in a measurable way, how the EQIA process can bring about the changes that are called for in policies, practices and priorities.

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

Ms Anderson: I support the motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank the Members who spoke in the debate, specifically the Members from the all-party group on children and young people who were responsible for tabling the motion. I have been asked to respond on behalf of the Executive and, at the outset, I can say that I have no difficulty in supporting the motion.

As I speak, children are being neglected and are suffering experiences that will often shape their entire future and quality of life. Many victims of neglect are also condemned to visit the same experiences on their own children.

Highly committed staff in trusts and staff and volunteers in the voluntary and community sector are working with families in crisis. Those families are often overwhelmed by economic circumstances, physical and mental-health problems, dependence on alcohol or other substances, experiences of domestic or sexual violence or perhaps by personal tragedy.

More than 21,000 children are referred to social services in Northern Ireland every year. At any point, more than 2,500 children are in care and more than 2,000 are on the child protection register. More than 50% of children are on the child protection register because of neglect. However, those statistics tell us only part of the story about the number of families and children who need help.

In Northern Ireland, more than 100,000 children live in poverty, and 40,000 live in a family where there are substance misuse problems. At least 11,000

children are living daily with domestic violence, and two thirds of the 21,000 cases referred to social services require further assessment and action. Neglect is recorded as the primary reason for a third of the children on the child protection register. In 50% of cases, neglect is either the primary reason or a contributory reason for a child being put on the register.

Every year, more than 1,000 children have their names added to the child protection register, and more than 1,000 have their names removed from it. Every year, social services staff undertake more than 2,000 child protection investigations. There are also 1,800 initial child protection case conferences each year, not all of which end with registration.

The story behind those figures is that staff and volunteers are working tirelessly with families and children to meet their needs, often with a great deal of success. Those staff and volunteers have a vocation to help families in need and to protect children. Although it is unfair in many ways to single out any part of the workforce, I want to speak about social workers in our child protection and family intervention teams.

Last week, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority published a series of reports into those services, and I recommend that Members take the time to read them. Those reports will tell Members that, overwhelmingly, we have a well-qualified and dedicated workforce that does a very difficult job and that, overwhelmingly, they do it very well. Those social workers work with children and their families to help them to solve their problems and difficulties and to stay together.

However, there are also people who take the lead in protecting children by putting them on the child protection register or by placing them into care. In both cases, the staff involved must make difficult judgements based on the evidence before them. In the midst of those judgements are the children. Even in cases where children have been abused or neglected, there is often a strong bond between parent and child. If a parent suffers from an illness, a disability or substance dependence, the child can be deeply concerned for their well-being. Intervening in the wrong way at the wrong time can cause children more harm than good.

The issues are complex, and we require staff to make very difficult judgements on behalf of society. We all know that there is no magic wand to make the problems in the families concerned disappear. The majority of families involved simply need help with parenting, but there is no simple way of separating them from the few who pose a serious risk to their children. There is no simple diagnostic test to differentiate between those who will harm their children and those who will not. Social workers can only make assessments and balance risks. Overwhelmingly, they do that job very well, and we are fortunate to have the workforce that we do. Sometimes, terrible things happen, and it is human instinct to want to find someone to blame.

Too often in the recent past, social services have been seen as convenient scapegoats for the ills of society. Social services do not create the problems but are expected to deal with them. They should not be blamed when individuals in our community decide to behave in extreme, unpredictable, unreasonable and, sometimes, violent or abusive ways.

5.30 pm

Today's debate is not about how we respond to crisis; it is about taking a longer-term view and investing in the future fabric of our society so that fewer families reach crisis point and fewer children suffer harm. A growing body of research and evidence shows that prevention and early intervention help to save spending on dealing with the impact of later problems. Prevention and early intervention should and must be our long-term focus. Moreover, we must acknowledge and understand that protecting children from neglect often means helping to address the needs and problems of the vulnerable adults, usually their parents, who care for them.

Historically, services to families and children in Northern Ireland have been under-resourced by some 30% compared with those in other parts of the UK. Although I inherited that situation, demand for social services does not stop; in fact, it continues to grow. Over the past five years, the number of children who have been referred to social services has increased by 24%. Everyone knows that I have been warning the Assembly for the past two and a half years about the dangers of underfunding health and social care services. Governments across the world, including the UK Government, are experiencing extremely difficult times, as are the devolved Administrations in the UK.

If we are serious about using prevention and early intervention to protect children from neglect and to deliver wider benefits to society, we must prioritise services in that area. We must address broader structural issues such as child poverty, poor housing and poor educational outcomes for some children as well as issues such as mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, sexual violence and neglect. That is a difficult challenge for the Executive and the Assembly.

As Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I have already taken decisions to bolster services for those populations. In addition to providing mainstream health and social care services, my Department has put strategies in place to promote prevention and early intervention. Families Matter is a strategy to support parents in their role as first educators, primary care givers and, most significantly, role models to children and young people. It also helps parents to be confident and responsible and to help their children to reach their fullest potential. Care Matters outlines a cross-departmental strategic vision, which is led by my Department, for wide-ranging improvements in services to children and young people who are on the edge of care, in care or have left care.

The Hidden Harm action plan aims to address the harmful use of alcohol and drugs and to ensure that our services deal appropriately with the needs of adults and children. The suicide prevention strategy, Protect Life, aims to tackle that issue in the general population and has actions that are targeted at individuals and communities at most risk, particularly young males. Our domestic violence strategy is aimed at tackling violence at home, and our sexual violence strategy aims to reduce sexual violence and abuse. As Minister, I co-chair the interministerial group on domestic and sexual violence, which provides leadership and ensures joint working across the relevant Departments.

The Bamford review included almost 700 recommendations that, together, represent a composite vision for the reform and modernisation of law, policy and services for mental health and learning disability. In particular, mental health problems can compromise parents' capacity to care for their child. Amid the decision to prioritise and invest in services and strategies that address many factors that contribute to child neglect, my Department will by March 2010 have increased expenditure on family and children's services by 14% in two years. That sum includes some £20 million to underpin arrangements for the Families Matter and Care Matters strategies. My Department provides annual funding of £3.2 million to support the Protect Life strategy and a further £3.5 million for Lifeline, the 24/7 crisis response telephone line, and associated support services, which include counselling for children and young people.

I have allocated £87 million over the three-year comprehensive spending review (CSR) period in new investments in mental health and learning disability in support of the recommendations of the Bamford review. Those are just some examples of allocations that I have made to improve those services. Despite that, much more is needed. I can only imagine how much more difficult it is for the professionals who work in those services and for families and children who desperately need help and support.

The Assembly and the Executive must be mature about the difficult choices that we face. How we invest in and protect our children speaks volumes to the outside world about the type of Government that we are, the sort of a country that we are and what we hope to be in the future. We must look for opportunities when they arise and try to make things better.

One example that is worthy of consideration is the issue of dormant bank accounts, which is being investigated by the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I would like some of those funds to be channelled through faith-based organisations and voluntary and community groups to help vulnerable adults, families and children in need.

The debate has presented us with a useful opportunity to raise the important issue of neglect of children and young people. We all have a duty to ensure that children in Northern Ireland are protected from not only neglect but all forms of harm or abuse. That is an issue that should have an effect on policy priorities across a number of Departments, and I hope that it will be reflected in the current and future strategies and funding priorities of those Departments and Ministers. I hope that, collectively, we can find ways to translate the vote on the motion into actions that can genuinely make a difference to families and children across Northern Ireland.

Miss McIlveen: I would have been amazed had any Member objected to the purpose of the motion. It is heartening that the Assembly can once again join together with one voice to condemn what is happening to children and young people across Northern Ireland. I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate and the Minister for his attendance and his support for the motion.

Almost half of all children on the child protection register are there because of neglect. Approximately 1,000 children are on that register in Northern Ireland, as the Minister said, and those children have been severely enough neglected to require intervention and support. Too often, however, neglect is a category of child abuse that can remain hidden and unseen in comparison with physical or sexual abuse, but all the figures indicate that it is much more prevalent and is equally damaging to the children who suffer as a result.

Given that such a proportion of our children are at risk, this issue should attract greater attention. As we have heard, the children suffer in silence, and it is often information about neglect from concerned friends, teachers and neighbours that enables the statutory agencies to get involved.

It is of immense concern that, although the statistics quoted by Ms Purvis may be disturbing, the real figure could be much higher. Mr Easton quoted the staggering number of incidences of neglect, and Mrs Bradley expressed concern that child neglect is ever-growing. The difficulties surrounding the under-reporting of neglect have been identified by children's sector organisations, and a particular concern is the problem of finding a definition of neglect, given the myriad variables involved. That can inevitably result in cases of neglect falling through the net. Ms Lo made the point that neglect is difficult to detect, and, as Ms Purvis said, neglect is not limited by income, background, education or ethnicity; it crosses all sectors and boundaries. Mrs Bradley went on to make the disturbing observation that some children's lives are a burden to them, and she warned of the cyclical nature of child neglect, which the Minister reflected in his comments.

The consequences of neglect are probably as numerous as the types of neglect. However, it is evident that, in its most severe form, neglect can result in loss of life. As Members said, neglect can lead to a wide range of physical and mental health problems, as well as developmental problems and low educational attainment. Even if those difficulties affect a child only in its early life, the fundamental importance of development in those early years means that the child would be placed at a significant disadvantage and may never catch up with his or her peers.

Mr Beggs highlighted the fact that neglect is a key feature affecting health and long-term development. The most publicised recent case of neglect was that of baby Peter. That case illustrated the difficulty that professionals have in recognising and identifying neglect. Despite a level of disarray and chaos and a clear failure to provide for baby Peter's physical needs, no intervention was made to take him into care. If that had happened, it might have saved his life.

Recognising and acting on neglect may well save children's lives. Neglect on its own is a serious indicator of a failure to provide for children at the most basic level. That threatens their well-being and sometimes their life. It is an issue that requires further focus and strategy.

Ms Lo gave a personal example, based on her experiences as a social worker, of how a child of only two years of age suffered depression as a result of neglect. Ms Anderson listed a number of disturbing cases of neglect, but what was most alarming about them was that those cases occurred on our doorsteps. They did not occur in England, Wales or Scotland but were cases of neglect in Northern Ireland.

We heard some clear models of good practice throughout the debate, including Ms Lo's emphasis on good practice for addressing neglect with parents. Ms Purvis said:

"It is therefore critical that front line staff receive the support, guidance and training that they need to allow them to recognise and feel comfortable intervening in the early years of possible neglect, before a problem becomes serious."

She also highlighted the campaign run by Action for Children to create public awareness of the issue of neglect. I echo her condemnation of the need for that campaign.

Members, including the Minister, Mr Easton and Ms Ramsey, paid tribute to the dedicated social services professionals who work tirelessly with those who experience neglect and abuse. Ms Ramsey also voiced concern over the level of unallocated cases, which was highlighted in the RQIA report. She emphasised the need for early intervention and protection.

An example of such work is the Barnardo's Parent and Children Together project, which Mr Beggs mentioned. The project works with young mothers and

their children in a residential setting when neglect has clearly been identified. Its success has demonstrated that follow-up support in the community is absolutely necessary. It is essential that the level of service provision to address serious neglect be increased. Children who are experiencing serious neglect cannot afford to wait.

We heard how neglect can be linked to parental alcohol and drug misuse. There has been a recent focus on that through the DHSSPS Hidden Harm strategy and a recognition of the need for all agencies involved with people who are alcohol-dependent or drug-dependent to take account of whether they have children. We welcome that approach and emphasise the need for further services.

A number of policy and service responses have been suggested that could help the children most at risk of neglect. Those include developing a pilot programme of proven models of intensive family support, such as the nurse-family partnership or the Incredible Years programmes, which could specifically focus on those most vulnerable families. That could be developed under the forthcoming child poverty strategy and address the children most at risk, ensuring that children who experience neglect are seen as children in need under the terms of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and are provided with additional support and resources.

Other suggestions are to undertake a review of regional guidance and definitions of neglect from professionals, provided under the DHSSPS guidance 'Co-operating to Safeguard Children', and to ensure that the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people establishes a working group to co-ordinate policy and strategy on neglect.

Ms Purvis stated that she was not concerned about the policies themselves but about their proper implementation. Ms Ramsey further highlighted that. She said that the issue is not just an issue for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety but that the responsibility should be shared across Departments. It is a duty that we should all take on board.

I extend my gratitude and that of all members of the all-party Assembly group on children and young people to Action for Children for working so tirelessly on the issue to ensure that the matter is given just attention. I am also grateful for the assistance that Barnardo's and the NSPCC have given. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the level of neglect of children and young people; recognises the significant impact of neglect on the lives of children and young people; and calls on the Executive to give greater priority to tackling this issue through early intervention and prevention.

5.45 pm

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

A8 Dual Carriageway

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic for the Adjournment debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately five minutes.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for attending the debate and for listening to me speaking about the A8 again. I am pleased to have the chance to properly debate the choice of route for the A8. Before I do that, I wish to make it clear that Roads Service has been absolutely excellent to work with throughout my time as a councillor and during my brief time as an MLA. Roads Service always listens, and I hope that it will take on board what I will say today.

We need better roads, and we need key roads such as the A8. The A8 is a vital road to Larne for the haulage industry and for people going on holiday or travelling across the water. The things that I am asking for today should not cause any problems or delay for Larne. We are supposed to be getting people out of cars, and we want to improve our rail service, our park-and-ride facilities and the roads for cargo. We are in the middle of a credit crunch or whatever we call it — financial difficulties — and financial considerations should drive our decision.

Some Members might remember ‘The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy’, which is one of the BBC’s top 20 books. There is a scene which is relevant: the Vogon spaceships arrive at Earth and say that we are in the way of a galactic hyperspace route, the plans for which have been on show on planet Alpha Centauri for 50 years, and that the process will take only two minutes. That is what is at the back of people’s minds. It may be unfair, but they see the Government as bulldozing through — pardon the pun. They see a juggernaut that they did not really take seriously when it arrived initially. From the perspective of the rural community, the project is an urban juggernaut brought about by a blinkered set of urban decisions.

Look at the history of the A8. There was a study in the late 1990s, there were budget controls, and it was decided that the road would go through the centre of the village of Ballynure. Following a second set of studies in 2004, it was decided that the road should go

east. People who live in that area would have had that decision in mind. However, in 2008, the EU wanted us to have a key route. There was Irish money coming and a need for that key route, and suddenly it was decided to go via the west. The farmers were not ready for that.

The world has become much more environmentally sensitive in the 11 years since the publication of the guidelines on how to deal with roads. We know more now than we did then about how important farms are to feed not just Northern Ireland but the entire world. Councils have biodiversity plans, and the planning section has a requirement to build on brownfield sites rather than on greenfield sites. We have changed, yet six routes for the A8 have been suggested, and all of them go through the countryside. Yes, they considered going through the middle of Ballynure village, but in my view they did not look at it properly.

Most of the Members who are present know Ballynure. The village is already divided by the A8. There is a single road, around which there is a great deal of space. A good designer could come up with a plan for a new road, of the right standard, through the middle of the village. There are a school, a church and some houses on one side, to the west. On the other side, there is another church, some shops and the main roads to Belfast through the country. At the far end, just outside the town, there are bus stops near the station. As I said, it is the key route to Larne. It has a speed limit of 40 mph, so it takes only three, four or five minutes to go through Ballynure. There is constant traffic, but it is always moving so there is very rarely a traffic jam. My point at the beginning was whether we should do the work at a time when we are short of money.

I ask for three things today. I want the Minister to consider whether the road could go through the centre of the village. I also want to see whether we can adopt the code of practice of the Ulster Farmers’ Union, which I mentioned last week and have with me, during work on the A8 and use it as an example for all other major road schemes. Finally, I ask the Minister to think about how public inquiries work in the long term. I will go into that matter in more depth later.

Last week, I hinted that the decision on the preferred route may not have been the correct one. The Minister said that he would consider the perspective of the Ulster Farmers’ Union, for which I am grateful. There was a public information day in May 2008, and we were told that everyone was written to. However, all eight of the farmers who are affected by the plans were not written to. The only way that they heard about the proposal was through advertisements. The original study recommended that the road should go through the middle of the village, and the second recommended that it should go east, so the farmers were happy and did not get involved. November 2008 was the first

time that they discovered that the route could go their way, by which time, it was too late. In August 2009, it was announced that the preferred route was to the west of Ballynure.

I raised the issue in the Committee for Regional Development and made lots of points, mainly about why the road would not go through the middle of the village. I was told that, for safety reasons, a road with a 70 mph speed limit was needed. If the road went through Ballynure, the speed limit would have to remain at 40 mph and there would be problems with cyclists, pedestrians and everything else. I was told that trying to put the whole road through the middle of Ballynure would be too noisy and would destroy the village's general characteristics. However, the road has already destroyed those characteristics. If a good road were designed and built through the middle of the village, it would do that village a great service. There could be underpasses and overpasses, and it could be done in a very slick way to improve the town.

We know that building a road through the centre of Ballynure is the cheapest route. However, what I suggest today is probably a slightly more expensive version of the cheapest route. The reply that I received stated that traffic lights and roundabouts will not be needed if the road is designed properly. If the designer was given the will and was told to design a route through the centre of the village that works, it would be possible.

One of the answers that I received regarding engineering stated that only one property in the village would need to be acquired but that it was better to go round Ballynure and through the countryside than buying one property. In October, in an answer to my colleague from South Antrim Mr Burns, it was revealed that four properties would have to be bought.

There are many matters to go through. If the designer was given the will to look again at the issue, it would be seen that there is plenty of width. It is possible to put the road through Ballynure and build underpasses and overpasses. That would be easier to live with. The Department stated that the traffic cannot be stopped going through the village because it is a major route and it has to be kept going. That is even more of a challenge. I still believe that it is possible, whether that is done half-and-half or over and under. It has been done in other parts of the world. The decision was made from an urban point of view, as if the countryside did not matter.

Eight farms are affected. Once the road is through them, it is there forever. The building of the road cannot be changed. The Sixmilewater provides valuable spawning for the dollaghan and other wildlife and plants. The problems with the work on the A4 demonstrate that it is not always easy. The Sixmilewater was badly

polluted twice in the past year. If the current route is the one that will be built, we need to get things absolutely right.

Two years ago, I went to Sheffield to see how an incinerator was installed. Liaison groups with local householders were created, and they met all the time. At the beginning, the householders were totally against the incinerator proposals. When they learned about how clean and non-risky the incinerator would be and about the benefits, they were happy. Many years later, those liaison groups still exist, and they meet the company to talk through their differences. We should adopt a similar arrangement to make it always possible to talk to farmers, fishermen, villagers and traders.

When the road at Toomebridge was being considered, local farmers produced a code of practice, which they handed to the Ulster Farmers' Union. I have copies of that, and I will forward them to the Minister and the Department after the debate, although I know that the Minister has a copy with him. The code of practice has been sitting for two years waiting for someone to agree on how to move forward. Although there is a great deal of good practice in the Roads Service and the Department, many things could be done better.

When building roads, there are obviously great environmental concerns to consider. That is why I mentioned setting up liaison groups. For example, there are concerns about whether cement or concrete gets into rivers, whether the Sustainable Drainage Systems (SUDS) strategy is applied properly or whether we monitor water quality. There are many more points to consider, but I will not go into them all here.

There are many good ideas in the code of practice, including having a liaison and lands officer to help with the communication with farmers and, if necessary, townspeople. That officer could explain the planning system, the vesting system and other relevant matters. There could also be a land agent to help people deal with compensation and valuations. We should remember that most people with whom the Department and its agencies will get involved do not know anything about the process. Consequently, they come to their politicians, who pass them on to other professionals. Therefore, a land agent would make life much better.

The public need to deal with other matters when a proposal has been made to put a road through the countryside. Those include what to do with animals, fencing, septic tanks and drains. However, I will not go into them all.

I admit that I am the new boy here. I arrived in June, and I was appointed to the Committee for Regional Development. I am grateful for that, and I thoroughly enjoy being there. Nevertheless, the first outside matter that came to me was farmers' worries about the A8 going through their land. I asked whether there was

any way to change the preferred route. One or two Committee members told me that, once the preferred route has been decided, that is it. Another told me that, once the public inquiry is in its final stage, the route can be changed. However, public inquiries are held after the preferred route has been chosen, the design finished and the bridges and everything else worked out. All the expense will have been incurred by that point. Surely that is the wrong time to have the public inquiry; all the decisions have been made and the Department would be unlikely to go back on them. Would it not be better to shift the timing of the public inquiry to just after the preferred route has been chosen, which is when most of the major decisions are made, or to split the inquiry into two parts, so that people can at least argue their case properly?

I thank the Minister for listening to me. I ask him and the Department to reconsider putting the preferred route through the centre of the town. I am talking only about changing part of the route, not all of it. I also ask them to put in place the Ulster Farmers' Union's code of practice in a way that works for the Department and the public. Finally, I ask the Minister to look at the timing of the public inquiry, because it seems as though the door has been closed until the end of the process. I am not trying to stop the road; I am trying to protect the countryside and farmers and to find a better choice.

Dr W McCrea: I thank Mr Kinahan for securing the debate. I raised the matter during the previous Department for Regional Development (DRD) Question Time and in the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, which is looking further into it.

As Members will be aware, I am not a late convert to opposing the preferred route for the A8. I have made my opinion known consistently to the senior DRD personnel who have been commissioned to progress the route. I have met a large number of local residents who are deeply affected by the Department's decision and who believe that they have a serious case that requires answering before there is any further expenditure on the promotion of the preferred option. I held a meeting at County Hall, Ballymena, at which the most senior DRD officials who are leading the project, as well as objectors, were present. A further meeting is planned with the team that provided the research on which the Department based its decision for the preferred A8 route.

6.00 pm

The residents have outlined serious flaws in the process; they believe that the Department started with a predetermined objective and that the report sought to confirm that end. That is nothing new; it has happened on other road projects. I have no doubt that the Department will strenuously deny that claim, but we intend to dig deeper to find the truth.

The objectors are not simply saying "not in my back yard"; they do not suffer from Nimbyism. They are not totally unwilling to accept the scheme in their backyards. In fact, they believe that the scheme is necessary, but they do not accept a scheme that destroys everything for which generations before them worked hard.

I would be gravely concerned about the impact on farms and farming families if the Department continues with the preferred route option. The Department for Regional Development gives little consideration to the agriculture industry when road schemes are being brought forward.

The economic development of Northern Ireland is very important, and the Government must take it seriously. However, the economic impact that the siting of roads has on the agriculture industry must not be overlooked. It is still Northern Ireland's primary industry, and, during this recession, it is worthy of acclaim, because farmers have risen to the challenge, and they have led the way by spending their own money on modernisation plans for farms and by building tanks to meet the European nitrates directive. Even in the midst of a recession, they are leading the way and helping local industry and the local economy. However, farmers and homeowners at Bruslee and Ballynure have been horrified by the Department's dismissive attitude to their concerns. Lip-service has been paid to the farming industry, but there is little proof that the Department has considered the detrimental effect that the preferred route will have on the community.

I have before me a file of objections lodged by angry and frustrated farming families who feel that they are not being listened to. The Department is willing to talk to those families only about accommodation works, yet it seems oblivious to the depth of feeling in the community.

My constituents and I are not against the A8, but we are against parts of the proposed route, namely at Bruslee and Ballynure. Farms are being raped, and the environmental damage will be irreparable if the Department does not listen. There is a demand for online upgrading of the route at Ballynure rather than the proposed Ballynure bypass. Indeed, houses and land were purchased some years ago for the purpose of providing a dualling scheme, but those plans seem to have been scrapped.

If the preferred route goes ahead, it will inevitably wipe out the homes and smallholdings that my constituents have enjoyed for years. I appeal to the Minister to give serious consideration to rejecting the preferred route and to speak to farmers. I believe that a suitable and appropriate scheme can be provided for the betterment of the whole community, including farming families.

Mr Burns: I am delighted to speak about the dualling of the A8. I thank my South Antrim colleagues Danny Kinahan for securing the Adjournment debate and William McCrea, who has raised the issue continually at the Agriculture Committee and has told us how the proposed road will devastate farm land. A dual carriageway will cut through farms, which will make the movement of cattle impossible. It is sad that land that farmers have worked for so long will be cut up. The announcement that the road will go through their land leaves them in a terrible position.

The matter is topical and extremely important for the people of South Antrim and East Antrim. However, the project has implications far beyond those constituencies. The thrust of the debate is about the concerns that the construction of the bypass will raise for the people of Ballynure, but the issue is not only local. Most if not all Members present will know that the A8 runs from the M2 at Glengormley to Larne. The route connects the port of Larne with Belfast and Dublin via the M2 and the M1. Therefore, it is strategically important and is a vital component in our regional development strategy.

Most Members will agree that the upgrading of the A8 is long overdue. About one third of the road is dualled already, and some sections have been upgraded at the Belfast and Larne ends. However, it is mostly a single carriageway between Ballynure and Larne. It is a good road, straight and well built, with climbing lanes and turning spaces at junctions. However, it is an extremely busy road, with huge volumes of heavy goods vehicle (HGV) traffic from Larne harbour, which means that typical speeds are lower than average. The high number of vehicles using the road every day puts it at almost full capacity for a single carriageway. It is clear that the project needs to be completed in full.

I understand that there has been some unease in Ballynure and Bruslee, and particular concern in Ballyclare, about the bypass. The chosen route will go to the west of Ballynure, but that is not the only option that was considered. Five other routes were rejected. Route B1 was the most expensive and would result in the greatest environmental impact. Route B3 was also rejected for environmental reasons because it would have damaged the Ballynure Water. Route B2 would demolish residential property, so it was ruled out. Routes B4 and B5 to the east of Ballyclare were non-starters because they would have removed much less HGV traffic from the village. That would have a purely economic return and defeat the point of the project, which is to deal with the HGV traffic that straddles the A8.

It is sad to say but, with a project of this scale, it is not easy to help everyone. The Department has made many efforts to consult as widely as possible. At the end of the day, the farmers will feel the awful brunt of

the new road that is being forced through. Every effort will be made to help them, but the underpasses that are being offered are not really satisfactory. Once a farm is divided, it is hard to operate on both sides of a dual carriageway.

Motorists and HGV drivers will feel great benefits. However, I ask the Minister to reconsider not all but some elements of the project. As Dr William McCrea said, we are not against the A8; we are for the A8. The problem is that the road will go through Ballynure, and we have the greatest sympathy for the farmers who will be affected by that.

Mr Ford: I welcome the fact that we are having this debate and congratulate my friend Danny Kinahan, the new boy in the constituency, on being so lucky in the ballot for Adjournment topics at such an early stage.

A major economic issue affects a number of routes into the port of Larne, such as the A36 from Ballymena and the A57 from Templepatrick, but the A8 from Belfast is the major route. Full account must be taken of the economic case for ensuring that there is free access to the port of Larne for goods vehicles. However, in the context of today's debate, the effects on road safety and environmental issues in and around Ballynure must be taken into account.

There is a major road safety problem. I was almost hit by somebody who was unable to see the indicator of my car when I was turning off the A8 in Ballynure, so I sympathise with the people who live in Ballynure and who have to put up with that type of risk frequently and, in some cases, more than once a day. Such problems arise because of the layout of the village and the fact that the school and church are on the opposite side of the A8 from the main part of the village. That creates difficulties for those who live there. Therefore, it is understandable that DRD considered moving the road away from the village, but, in doing so, it has done little to make things better, when one considers the detrimental cost that will affect local farms, important local businesses and the local environment, particularly in the region of the upper reaches of the Sixmilewater river.

Danny Kinahan outlined the history of this project, which has led to the current preferred route, and that does not need to be repeated. However, the point that Mr Kinahan made about the significant losses to eight farms and the potential detrimental effect that the building of the road at such a height will have on some houses as it goes over the lower parts of the valley has not been acknowledged.

Earlier today, I spoke to someone whose land, which is half a mile outside the village, is affected. Those who imagined that there will be some type of a bypass will not have imagined that it would have made such a sweep through open countryside and through

good farmland, the like of which we can ill afford to lose. Neither will those people have considered the detrimental effect that it will have on a significant number of farms, which will lose land to the route of the road. Another major issue is the farms that will be cut by the road. As William McCrea highlighted, the offer of accommodation works to deal with that issue is not an acceptable substitute.

I know that no farmer likes to lose land, but I suspect that most farmers who farm along main roads accept that, at times, a strip of land will be taken to widen that road. The loss of a 10-metre strip or even a 20-metre strip along the edge of the road is a loss, but it is one that can be accommodated and dealt with and one that leaves the basic structure of the farm intact. These are the same problems that others have raised in connection with the A5. The proposed route will lead to a complete severance of some farms, and the losses that those farms will incur will leave them with borderline viability.

There is also an environmental impact. I understand that there has been little consultation with the local angling community. On a number of occasions in the Chamber, we have heard about the pollution that the Sixmilewater river has suffered. The thought of raising other potential pollution sources in that part of its headwaters is distinctly worrying.

We have yet to hear why a solution cannot be found using the existing route, which was improved some years ago. Even if the bypass is built, it will leave a wide route that will sever the village. It would be better to put the road into a cutting on a four-lane basis and to put adequate connections over the top of it so that the people of Ballynure will be free from having a large, wide road going through the village, which will continue to be an environmental issue and a traffic hazard. Such a road will continue to carry a certain amount of traffic.

That is the sort of continuing issue that the current plans do not address. The people in the village will not necessarily get the best possible solution and neither will the farmers, who believe themselves to be suffering. The matter should be reconsidered by the Department.

Mr K Robinson: I declare an interest as a member of Newtownabbey Borough Council. We have heard other Members say that there is a conflict of interest in this situation.

There are two conflicting views, one of which is the agriculture view. Farmers whose land has been in the family for generations are concerned about their land being taken away and about the damage that may be caused to their land should the preferred route progress. On the other hand, organisations such as the Freight Transport Association and the Port of Larne

and construction employers are talking about the benefits that will flow from the construction of the road. They say that the road is a trans-European network route that will provide employment and help our freight industry, which is faced with a variety of problems.

The Minister's problem is that he has to try to find not only a preferred route, but one that can in some way accommodate those two conflicting interests. I do not envy him his task. I thank the Member for South Antrim Mr Kinahan for bringing this matter to the Floor of the Assembly, because it affects my constituents in East Antrim and my fellow citizens in Newtownabbey. Since first becoming a councillor in Newtownabbey in 1985, I have been seeking the dualling of the entire strategic A8 route.

6.15 pm

Previous contributors to the debate referred to the "itsy-bitsy" progress on the route throughout the years: a roundabout has been built here, a dualling has taken place there, and a climbing lane has been constructed somewhere else. Its progress reminds me of a children's fairy tale. Bits and pieces of the jigsaw are in place, but the job must now be completed. As many as possible of the conflicting interests should be brought on board, but I will leave it to the Minister and his departmental officials to work the oracle on that.

My reasons for seeking the vital upgrading of the A8 centre on road safety, economic necessity and quality of life. Over the years, the route has had an appalling record of death and serious injuries. The last major attempt to address that saw the introduction of climbing lanes adjacent to Ballynure, which improved safety levels. However, it failed to prevent the further loss of life and many collisions. The single carriageway stretch near Bruslee that other Members mentioned is, in fact, adjacent to Newtownabbey Borough Council's landfill site. That generates a great deal of cross-route traffic, and, recently, two workers from India, who were resident in Newtownabbey, were killed there, which brought desolation to their families.

The dualling of the remaining stretches of the A8 and the subsequent junction improvements, wherever they are eventually located, will address many of those preventable road safety issues. Dualling will also bring economic benefits to the whole of Northern Ireland. We must face the fact that, as we face the worst economic slump in a generation, we need to maximise any possible advantages.

As was mentioned, the port of Larne directly or indirectly provides a basic core unit for thousands of jobs: in the port, the transport industry, vehicle maintenance, distribution, agriculture and farming. Our foodstuffs are exported to Great Britain and onwards to the European Union via Larne. That port is

the premier roll-on/roll-off facility on this island, one of the reasons for which is its quick turnaround times for vessels. The port, therefore, requires the most modern road infrastructure possible to enable us to compete with our rivals across the UK and other ports in Ireland. The economic downturn in the South saved us from a serious threat to the ports of Larne and Belfast. Some Members, including the Minister, will know exactly what I mean.

The continuous thundering, by day and night throughout the year, of heavy freight lorries in close proximity to homes and businesses, does not improve anyone's quality of life; nor does it improve the sense of security for those who live adjacent to the existing route.

There is no doubt that the preferred route will impact on the farmland adjacent to it. However, the measure of that impact can be nullified. I ask the Minister to re-examine the preferred route to establish whether some way can be found to narrow the gap between the concerns of the landowners and the needs of the economy.

I am sure that there will be one-to-one discussions between departmental officials and landowners. However, as the Minister will have heard during the debate, there is some reticence about that being the best way to proceed. Something more than one-to-one discussions is required; a more coherent approach must be taken.

The worst-case scenario for everyone affected by the current proposals would be the suspension of the project. As I said, I have been working for the best part of 25 years with the aim of seeing the road completed.

I was pleasantly surprised when I heard that the Government of the Republic of Ireland were willing to donate money towards the project. However, I am concerned that, given their economic woes, we could lose that money at such a late stage.

Increasingly heavy lorries and heavier farm machines are using the A8, which means that not only are traffic volumes increasing daily, but a convoy system is now in evidence. If anyone has ever been caught in a convoy system, particularly on that road, with people trying to meet deadlines in Larne or distribution deadlines at the other end of the road —

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

Mr K Robinson: I will. Over the years, we have seen the fatal consequences of people taking a chance and pulling out of those convoys. I appeal to the Minister to re-examine the issue and consider the conflicting viewpoints that I outlined in my contribution.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to debate the

issues surrounding the A8. I thank the Member for raising the Adjournment topic, and other Members for their contributions. No doubt, as with any major infrastructure scheme, there is a variety of views and a range of concerns about the impact on the residents who live along the preferred route for the A8. I welcome the points that have been raised and I hope to address Members' concerns. However, I will examine the Hansard report and if any points have not been addressed, I will be happy to respond to Members in writing.

As Members said, the scheme to dual the remaining sections of the A8 between Belfast and Larne is identified in the investment strategy as one of the key milestones in working towards the goal of upgrading the key transport corridors that connect our major towns and cities to regional gateways, the Belfast metropolitan area and the road network in the South. In addition, the regional development strategy includes a priority to promote regional gateways such as Larne.

In July 2007, the Executive confirmed their acceptance, in principle, to take forward the A8 dualling alongside the A5 scheme, both of which, as Members have said, are being part funded by the Irish Government. The 14-kilometre section of the A8 under consideration runs between Coleman's Corner roundabout and the Ballyrickard Road on the outskirts of Larne. That section of the A8 forms part of the eastern seaboard key transport corridor and the Euroroute network. It is mainly rural in nature, although the existing road bisects the small settlement of Bruslee and the village of Ballynure.

Sections of the road carry traffic volumes of up to 17,000 vehicles a day, and the road suffers surges and flows at times that coincide with ferry arrivals and departures at the Port of Larne. The daily proportion of heavy goods vehicles on the road is also high. There have been 10 fatalities on that section of the A8 since 2004, with three fatalities in the village of Ballynure.

My Department's Roads Service and consultants have undertaken assessments to consider the route options in accordance with accepted best practice by using the guidance in the 'Design Manual for Roads and Bridges' as well as the transport assessment guidance introduced by the British Government's White Paper, 'A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone'. The five overarching objectives take account of the environment, safety, economy, accessibility and integration of the scheme, and they form the basis for those assessments.

The scheme assessments included the development of a traffic model that provided a forecast of future traffic volumes. That model demonstrated that, without improvement to that section of the A8, there would be a resulting impact on journey time reliability and the carriageway would be congested during peak periods.

The stage 1 assessment considered online and offline opportunities for improving the A8 along the whole route, including the options of dualling the existing road through the village of Ballynure and options for providing a bypass.

The option to expand and widen the existing road through Ballynure was fully assessed as part of the stage 1 assessment and was rejected for the principal reasons of increased severance from the village and poor economic performance. On engineering grounds, the impact of that option would have required the acquisition of one residential property at minimum. However, the required movements to the junction in the centre of Ballynure, the impact on private access arrangements for residential properties and businesses, and the need to incorporate disability-compliant pedestrian facilities and bus stops would have resulted in further significant impacts on properties. The construction required to dual the existing road in the centre of the village would have resulted in considerable traffic delay and disruption for residents during the construction phase.

With regard to environmental issues, the impact of the option to widen the existing road through the village would have resulted in an increase in traffic volumes through the village and, consequentially, an associated increase in noise levels. It would also have had a negative impact on the townscape of the village, adversely changing its general characteristics.

Another objective that was taken into consideration in respect of the route through Ballynure was the negative impact that it would have on communities, particularly in relation to severance for people in the village with access to vehicles and those who do not. There are churches on both sides of road, a primary school, a war memorial park to the west, and shops and a petrol station to the east. As Ballynure has expanded to the west and the east, the option to widen the road through the village would have resulted in a reduction in accessibility to community facilities because of greater difficulties in crossing the road.

The purpose of the scheme was to provide a high-speed route with a speed limit of 70 mph to reduce journey times, improve journey-time reliability and improve safety. The option to provide a 70 mph dual carriageway through Ballynure would represent a significant safety risk, given the number of properties that face the existing road and the presence of the Church Road junction in the middle of the village. Therefore, for safety reasons, a speed restriction of 40 mph would be required through the village. The implementation of such a restriction would also significantly reduce the economic benefits of the scheme.

In addition, even with a reduced speed limit, a dual carriageway with increased traffic passing through the

middle of the village was still considered a significant safety concern, as the road would pass through an urban environment, with pedestrians and cyclists in close proximity to the road, and there would be a significantly higher probability of road-traffic accidents.

The economic appraisal of road schemes is based on their overall economic performance, comparing costs to benefits over a 60-year assessment period. Although the option of going through the village would have been the lowest capital-cost option, the need to limit speed to 40 mph through the village and for a traffic-signal control junction or a roundabout in the centre of the village resulted in a poor overall economic performance. That meant that the option would not have delivered enough benefits — primarily journey time savings — to justify the capital expenditure.

In summary, the outcome of the stage-one assessment was that the option of dualling the existing road through the village performed substantially worse than bypass options on either side of the village when assessed against the Government's key objectives.

In November 2008, I announced the preferred corridors for the A8 scheme, which predominantly comprised online widening of the existing road, with the possibility of an online solution or bypass settlement at Bruslee, and the option of a bypass to the east or west of Ballynure. The stage-two assessment considered a range of route options at Bruslee and Ballynure. Four routes to the west and two routes to the east of Ballynure were developed within the stage-one corridors. The limited number of routes on the eastern side reflects the more restrictive geometric constraints on that side, and do not reflect any design preference.

The preferred route to the west of Ballynure was considered to perform best of all options economically assessed and had the least environmental impact compared to other routes. The preferred route would remove the greatest volume of traffic through Ballynure, while incorporating an all-movement junction at either side of the village to allow motorists to leave the A8 and use local services in the village without incurring a significant diversion. The reduction of traffic in Ballynure will create a safer environment in the village.

In addition, the preferred route around Ballynure does not require the demolition of any residential properties, although it will affect agricultural land and the land attached to some residential properties.

Public consultation and engagement with the public and key stakeholders has played a significant part in the development and subsequent announcement of the preferred route for the scheme. Roads Service has been, and remains, committed to engaging with local residents and landowners, to the extent that it undertook extensive one-to-one meetings during the

stage-two assessment process. Three formal public consultation events have also been held to date; the first two-day public consultation event in May 2008 was attended by more than 250 people. That event provided an introduction to the scheme, presented the environmental and engineering constraints and the assessment process and programme.

Following that, a further two-day public consultation event in November 2008 was attended by more than 350 people. That event provided an update on the work undertaken as part of the stage-one assessment process, and provided opportunities for the public to indicate a preference and provide comments. In August of this year, a two-day preferred-route exhibition was held, which was attended by more than 590 people. That event provided an update on the work undertaken, and presented the preferred route and junction strategy for the scheme.

In addition to the formal consultation events, Roads Service has had a considerable number of one-to-one consultation meetings with landowners to ensure that specific concerns or comments are considered during the assessment process.

Following the announcement of preferred corridors in November 2008, Roads Service and its consultants attempted to arrange one-to-one consultation meetings with every landowner who could be directly affected by any of the stage-one corridors. Since my announcement of the preferred route for the scheme in August 2009, Roads Service and its consultants have embarked upon a second round of one-to-one consultation meetings with those landowners affected by the preferred route. Those meetings are ongoing, and it is anticipated that they will be completed by the end of the year.

Roads Service will continue to liaise with those landowners throughout the next phase of the project, which will culminate in the publication of the draft orders for the scheme in mid-2011, and I anticipate that a subsequent public inquiry will be necessary. I note Mr Kinahan's remarks about the timing of a public inquiry. I accept what he said — that that comes at the end of a significant amount of work — but if, at a public inquiry stage, questions were asked that could not be answered because people had not undertaken detailed assessments and design, costings and access arrangements, perhaps the function of a public inquiry would be negated. There are arguments for and against. I am sure that the processes are rigorous and have been tried and tested many times.

I fully appreciate that there are concerns about the impact on farm businesses; however, with the exception of two sections, the 14-kilometre preferred route of the A8 is predominantly an online improvement scheme that will widen the existing road to dual carriageway standard. I appreciate that Members have expressed

general support for the scheme, with the exception of the two cases to which I referred. The first section of offline improvement, as I said, is around the hamlet of Bruslee, and the second section, of more significant length, is around the scheme to the west of Ballynure.

It is expected that a number of farms will be affected by those offline sections, with the new road passing through some farm enterprises. Roads Service has appointed an agricultural consultant to assess the scale of the impact on the affected farms, and it is committed to working with the farmers to ensure that access to the land is maintained and that the impact is mitigated, where possible, through accommodation works.

In summary, I advise Members that the preferred route for the scheme has been chosen as a result of a rigorous assessment and comparison of options. The scheme assessment was undertaken using the recommended guidance for the appraisal of road schemes, based on the Government's five overarching objectives for transport, which take into consideration the environment, safety, economy, accessibility and integration of the project.

6.30 pm

The resulting proposals will deliver the improvements to the road network that are outlined in the regional development strategy and in the investment strategy. Therefore, it is imperative that the project development continues in order to deliver a scheme that will greatly assist and promote the economic growth of the area, including the enhancement of the important links between the port of Larne and Belfast and onward to Dublin.

Having said that, I will ensure that the remarks that Members made in the debate will be taken into consideration by Roads Service and that, in addressing the issues of farmers and landowners in the area, every sympathy will be given to the issues that the works present to them. I am happy for Roads Service to consider the Ulster Farmers' Union's propositions and to engage with it on them. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Adjourned at 6.31 pm.

