
Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 15 March 2010

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Deputy Speaker: I inform Members that the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill has received Royal Assent. The Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 became law on 12 March 2010.

Budget Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Deputy Speaker: I inform Members that the Budget Bill has received Royal Assent. The Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 became law on 12 March 2010.

Ministerial Statement

NI Water

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has received notice from the Minister for Regional Development that he wishes to make a statement.

The Minister for Regional Development

(Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My written statement on 12 March provided Members with a brief outline of the immediate actions that I took following receipt of the independent review team's report on procurement governance failures in NIW. I wanted to ensure that Members were informed about those important issues at the earliest possible opportunity. I am grateful to you, a LeasCheann Comhairle, for granting me the time to make a fuller statement.

An independent review team was jointly commissioned by the Department for Regional Development and NIW accounting officers, with my full agreement, to undertake a review of procurement governance issues in NIW. That followed an internal audit review within NIW relating to contracts approval. The findings of the internal audit highlighted a number of serious governance failures in relation to procurement activity within the company. The independent review team commenced work on 25 January and submitted its final report on 25 February 2010.

Following the completion of the review, I met the independent review team to hear from it about its findings at first hand. I will briefly give Members a flavour of some of the main findings by quoting directly from the report:

"The IRT has concluded that the failings noted in the Contracts Approval Internal Audit report represent a serious breakdown in the governance and control framework of NIW. The breakdown in the application of the governance and control

framework is a serious matter for those responsible and accountable, primarily the Board of NIW and the executives responsible for ensuring compliance ... the IRT is aware of a serious breakdown between the NIW Board and its CEO over the way the Contracts Approval Internal Audit report had been notified to the Shareholder without consideration by the NIW Board. The IRT has been advised by the Chair of NIW that, in his opinion, the CEO does not have the trust and confidence of the Board and that this position is now irreconcilable. The CEO advised the IRT of a breakdown in trust between himself and the NIW Board.

The IRT is concerned about the severe difficulty this situation causes in enabling the Shareholder and NIW to put in place the necessary remedial action plan to implement the recommendations of this review ... It is our view that this situation cannot be allowed to continue and appropriate action must be initiated by the DRD Accounting Officer to ensure that a proper governance and control environment is secured within the NIW as a matter of urgency. In our view this would be best secured by tasking the current CEO and NIW Sub-Accounting Officer to deliver the agreed action plan, supported as necessary by DRD."

On receiving the report and after considering its findings and recommendations, I wrote to all members of the board of NIW on 3 March, providing them with a copy of the report and expressing my grave concern at its content. I asked four of the board's non-executive directors — the chairman, Chris Mellor, and Ruth Thompson, John Ballard and Declan Gormley — to consider their positions in light of the findings or to make any written representations to me. The report praised the work of a fifth non-executive director, Don Price, to improve the audit committee in NIW, and I determined that he could stay on the board, subject to his agreement to a number of conditions. Subsequently, he agreed to comply with those, and I am glad that he will remain on the board.

I met the four other non-executive directors at their request to hear their perspective on the issues. Subsequently, each of them submitted written representations to me, and they all asked to remain on the NIW board. However, following consideration of the full range of evidence relevant to the issues in question, I reached a final decision to remove each of the four non-executive directors from the board with effect from 11 March. I wrote to each of them on that day to inform them of my decision.

I wrote to the two executive directors who are board members — the finance director, Ronan Larkin, and the director of asset management, George Butler — to inform them that I would consider their positions as board members following the outcome of a further investigation to be undertaken by the chief executive of NIW to determine which executives in the company should be held responsible for the failures in procurement governance and control. I have asked for that further work to be completed as quickly as possible.

The Department will now take action to appoint a number of new non-executive directors to the board of NIW on an interim basis, pending the outcome of a full public appointments process. The chief executive and accounting officer of NIW has already prepared an action plan to take forward those of the report's recommendations that fall to him. The Department will work with and support the chief executive in implementing the action plan.

I hope that all Members will join me in commending the DRD and NIW accounting officers for initiating the independent review so quickly after the issues came to light. I also commend the independent review team for completing its work so quickly and for providing clear recommendations, which provide a sound basis for putting the matter right and moving forward.

The firm action that I have taken to implement the report's recommendations will provide a strong basis for the company to establish appropriate governance arrangements and to move forward with the confidence of the whole community.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind all Members that this session is for questions on the Minister's statement.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): Many people must feel disappointed in the further erosion of Northern Ireland Water's ability to carry out the duties for which it was established. The Committee was concerned when the roles of the chairman and the chief executive were joined, and we made that point clear. I note that the report repeats that it was a DRD failure to allow that job sharing to take place. The report identifies a number of failings by DRD as a shareholder. What action will the Minister take to address some of those issues? Will

he assure the House that that will be done as swiftly as possible?

The Minister for Regional Development: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for his interest, and I look forward to engaging with him and the Committee later this afternoon, when we will talk through the issues. He raised the issue of the interim appointment of the chairperson as acting chief executive officer. He will know that that appointment was made on the basis of the resignation of the chief executive and was seen as a stopgap measure to fill the post and to ensure that the company was able to continue the progress that it was making.

The report is clear in saying that the Department was slow to act on a number of occasions, but it also states clearly that the blame for the failures that were investigated rested ultimately with the NI Water board and its executives. The report is specific on that point.

The Department responded promptly to the recommendations. As I said, we are seeking to appoint interim executives, and we await the completion of further work. We have not yet got the full picture; the chief executive officer's work is ongoing, and we fully support him in that. The consequences of that work will be dealt with appropriately by the company and the Department. The Department will also appoint one of our officials to the audit committee to ensure that there is tighter scrutiny of procurement and contract issues.

Once the interim appointments have been made, we will consider the longer-term situation and the future arrangements for the company. However, I assure the Chairperson, his Committee and other Members that we take the matters seriously, and I feel that I have acted promptly in dealing with them. This is clearly not the end of the matter. I am sure that the Member's Committee will continue to be interested in any further work required to deal with the issues that have arisen and to put matters right.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Miss McIlveen): I am sure that I am not the only Member who is astounded at what has happened in recent days with an organisation that still has to prove itself in the minds of many people. Will the Minister outline the direct implications of that incident on his Department? What costs, if any, have been

incurred by consumers as a result of that gross mismanagement?

The Minister for Regional Development: As I outlined to the Chairperson of the Committee, the Department will appoint someone to the NIW audit committee to ensure that it has a tighter scrutiny role. One of the conditions under which the remaining non-executive director is staying at NIW is that there will be a new and much more interactive relationship between the Department and NIW. We will also appoint interim commissioners and consider the future of the company and its relationship with the Department.

There is no evidence that there was any loss of money for consumers. However, where single-contract tenders were awarded, one cannot provide evidence that value for money was achieved. Where people are in competition for work, the implication is that that provides value for money. However, one cannot say with any certainty that those tenders were, indeed, value for money. We could not be sure of whether that was the case unless we went back over the process and retendered. That situation, therefore, leaves NIW in a vulnerable position. Clearly, single-contract tenders are appropriate in certain specified circumstances. However, the circumstances in which NIW operated them were not defensible. That left us with no option but to take appropriate action. However, we have no evidence to suggest that there was a loss of money to consumers as a result of that.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas a thug sé dúinn ar maidin. I thank the Minister for his statement and his answers to date. I am sure that all Members will commend the swift and decisive nature of the report. Indeed, the events of last Friday will provide people with a good understanding of what accountability means in real terms. Will the Minister consider all governance issues relating to the company as part of the review process?

The Minister for Regional Development: NIW has had a troubled history because of the nature of the situation in which it was set up. There was distrust regarding the intent of the direct rule Administration in creating it with respect to privatisation and water charging. The company, therefore, did not get off to a good start, and it has had a troubled history.

Given this latest episode, it is important to re-establish public confidence in the water and sewerage arrangements. I am prepared to examine all longer-term options for the company. Through the interim appointments, we want to ensure that NIW starts working properly again. We also want to ensure that we bring to light all outstanding issues through the further investigatory work that is being done and that we deal with the consequences of those issues and do not shirk any of them. I am, therefore, prepared to look at any and all options for future governance arrangements.

Mr Gallagher: In his statement, the Minister said that the matter is a serious one for those who are responsible and accountable.

It is also a very serious matter for many others, not least those who tendered for work with Northern Ireland Water in the past and the paying customers who have had to put up with its chaotic and shambolic billing arrangements. Will the Minister tell the House about some of those who have lost out on the contracts in question and what his Department estimates the potential liability to be? Furthermore, will he assure the House that the decision to dismiss the staff in question is watertight and that there can be no legal comeback for those concerned? Moreover, he said that a new tendering framework will be introduced in time. All Members want to know how soon that will be in place.

12.15 pm

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member asked three questions. Essentially no one else has lost out. The contracts were awarded on a single-tender basis with no other competitors involved. That is a problem in itself, because others were not asked to tender for the contracts in question. I agree with the Member that the issues are serious for those responsible and the community generally.

On the issue of future action, action has already been taken. The chief executive of Northern Ireland Water has been supported in conducting further enquiries, and his report is expected at the end of March. If action is required as a result of that report, it will be taken. A much tighter framework has also been put in place to ensure that the type of action in question is not repeated in the future.

In certain specific and rare circumstances, single-tender contracts can be appropriate,

but the investigation by the team that was appointed by the Department indicated that contracts were awarded in that manner on a regular basis. That is a matter of great concern, and the Department will be taking immediate actions to remedy that. In my statement, I said that the Department would be examining the longer-term governance arrangements because of the need to restore public confidence. I readily accept that the company has had a troubled history from its inception, and the Department wants to ensure that whatever action it takes provides future public confidence.

Mr B Wilson: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the report and particularly the speed with which it has been carried out. However, I am disappointed that it highlighted the lack of financial control in Northern Ireland Water. I have particular concerns about "Contractor A". Will the Minister say whether the contract with that contractor still exists, whether it is being reviewed, how long it has been in operation and what he intends to do about it?

The Minister for Regional Development: A copy of the report has been placed in the Assembly Library, and it is also available on the Department's website. I cannot provide the Member with the specific details of the contract that he referred to because a huge number of contracts have been and are continuing to be examined. If the Member has questions about a specific contract, I am happy to provide him with those details. However, a copy of the report is available for scrutiny in the locations that I identified.

Mr I McCrea: In his statement, the Minister referred to the further investigation that the chief executive of Northern Ireland Water will carry out into the activities of the executive directors of Northern Ireland Water "as quickly as possible", but is there a specific time frame for its completion? Furthermore, does the Minister feel that the actions undertaken by the non-executive directors of Northern Ireland Water are serious enough to warrant police investigation and for appropriate action to be taken thereafter?

The Minister for Regional Development: The chief executive of Northern Ireland is to complete his further work by the end of March. The Department expects a report from him in a couple of weeks on the ongoing investigatory work along with recommendations on how to

deal with individuals if they are found to be responsible or accountable.

Essentially, the issue is whether evidence exists of fraud. To date, there has not been any evidence of fraud, so there has not been a requirement to bring those matters to the attention of the PSNI. However, when evidence of potential fraud is uncovered, the Department and NIW have arrangements and guidelines in place on how to bring that to the attention of the appropriate authorities. If such evidence is uncovered in this case, those arrangements and guidelines will be followed.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome, as will the general public, his comments about exploring all options for governance.

As a follow-up to Mr McCrea's question, I ask whether the Minister will expand on the ongoing investigation into the executive directors and reassure the House that decisive and appropriate action will be taken by the chief executive of NI Water.

The Minister for Regional Development: As I said, the non-executive directors have been dealt with, but that is not the end of the matter. The report threw up substantial concerns about the governance and the proper scrutiny and management of contractual arrangements in NIW, and I acted in response to its recommendations. The report also recommends that the ongoing work of the chief executive be brought to a speedy conclusion. We have offered our full support to the chief executive and assured him that, whatever recommendations actions may be required as a result of that work, we will not shirk our responsibility.

We intend to give the appropriate support to the chief executive officer. That is important not only in the case of NIW but across all public sector bodies. The Government are a substantial spender of public money and provide a huge amount of business to local companies. It is important that there be transparency and a level playing field for everyone involved. The notion that it is more a matter of who people know rather than how they perform must be removed from the public sector. That sort of inquiry and the actions that follow from it may help to establish confidence not only in NIW but throughout the public sector.

Mr Hamilton: As a follow-up to the previous question about the executive directors of Northern Ireland Water, I ask the Minister to outline whether he or his Department paid bonuses or sought approval for the payment of bonuses to any of the executive directors of Northern Ireland Water during the past three years. If so, on what basis did that happen?

The Minister for Regional Development: People have been paid bonuses as part of their contract. However, the issues that we deal with in the statement have been brought to light over the past couple of months. The people whom I dismissed from the board will not receive any golden handshakes. If the further inquiry presents recommendations with regard to the executive directors, they will be implemented. That may affect the position of the people on the board and even, perhaps, their position in the company. As I said, bonuses were part of contractual arrangements over a number of years and are not necessarily reflective of the work that has been done over the past month or two.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his statement. The report identifies problems with the procurement processes. It states that the shareholder, the Department for Regional Development, had not been asked to approve the procurement. Does the Minister accept that his Department, as well as the board of Northern Ireland Water, failed in that respect? Does the episode not show that DRD's oversight of Northern Ireland Water is deficient? What steps will the Minister take to address the report's criticism of his Department?

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member knows that the relationship between the Department and the company is a formal one. The company has operational responsibility for day-to-day matters. The shareholder would not have been alerted to any contractual issues unless they had been brought specifically to its attention by the company, as was the case when the investigation was triggered, or by individuals. No information was brought to the Department's attention. Therefore, no red flag was signalled over the past number of years on those matters. However, when the chief executive brought the matter to the Department's attention, we asked him to conduct further work, which uncovered further evidence about this particular approach to contracts. Thereafter, the Department's accounting officer and the chief executive, as the accounting officer for the company, initiated

an independent inquiry, the consequence of which we are discussing today.

The Department's other failings were identified as the appointments of the chairperson and chief executive and the slowness to appoint further board members at a time when the independent review team was considering the funding of water and sewerage services. At that stage, we felt that appointing directors before the conclusion of the process would have been pre-emptive. The report contained some criticisms of that type, but it is very clear that the responsibility for procurement issues, which caused so much concern, lies firmly and squarely with the board.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's statement, and I share his frustration that, yet again, the water company has made an awful gaffe. He says that there will be no golden handshakes. He will remember that Katherine Bryan received £250,000. At that time, the chairman, who has now been sacked, assured the Committee that, from then on, everything would be rosy in the garden. At what stage will the Minister seriously consider taking the organisation back under the control of the Department rather than face embarrassments time and again?

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member suggests that it is an embarrassment. It would be much more embarrassing if we had not acted when we discovered ongoing issues of concern and had tried to put a lid on the matter and not investigate fully. I make no apology for bringing the matter to the public's attention, for the action that I have taken on board members and for any other action that may arise from the investigation.

Regardless of whether the matter is damaging to the NIW, the whole public sector and other government agencies in the longer term, it is important to apply scrutiny, and action must be taken against people who do not measure up to the appropriate levels of responsibility for running agencies or Departments. Regardless of whether that is deemed an ongoing embarrassment, I make no apology for that approach. It is right to deal with those issues in an open, transparent and upfront way and deal with the consequences.

Katherine Bryan, who was paid off, was an employee of the company. The board members who have been dismissed are not employees of the company. The bonuses — returning to

the question that Simon Hamilton asked — are dealt with on the same basis as those in the NICS, and no bonuses were paid to any company members this year.

The Member asked about the organisation's long-term future. As I said in response to Raymond McCartney, I am prepared to consider all options on the long-term future. Every option has implications. It is not simply a matter of deciding to return the agency to the Department's control; that, too, will have consequences. However, I want to ensure that we continue to make the necessary investment.

Regardless of the company's governance arrangements, no one can deny that the water and sewerage infrastructure has improved radically in the past number of years and that the investment, which was tested and was found to be necessary, has achieved results and provides the whole region with a much better water and sewerage infrastructure. That investment needs to continue and needs to be governed properly. We need to ensure that the agreed arrangements for the medium-to-longer term enable us to continue to make that investment properly. We must ensure that those who do business with the company feel confident that they are operating on a level playing field and in a way that provides proper scrutiny and accountability for the public, who, after all, pay for that investment.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am not a member of the Committee, but I have taken a keen interest in this matter because, for years, public perception has been that there is unaccountability in the public sector. I commend the Minister for what he has done.

The Committee for Employment and Learning has tabled a motion on public appointments for debate in the next couple of weeks. We need to consider how to open that process to more people rather than to the few.

The Minister told Ian McCrea that he hopes to have the chief executive's report by the end of the month. Does the Minister then intend to make a further statement to the Assembly so that Members can receive an update on this serious issue?

12.30 pm

The Minister for Regional Development: As the Member acknowledges, the report is due to the

Department at the end of the month. I presume that it will contain some recommendations from which actions and consequences may flow. I will consider any recommendations and decide what action to take, but I am more than happy, as I have been, to return to the Assembly and the Committee for Regional Development to share that information and to explain further what is going on at the company, the actions that we and the company's chief executive intend to take, and the longer-term consequences for the company. It is much better that that information be out in the public domain and be dealt with in an open, up front, honest and transparent way, rather than put a lid on it to limit the damage that has been caused.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he give details of the costs and terms of dismissing the four members of the board of Northern Ireland Water?

The Minister for Regional Development: There is no anticipated cost of dismissal. Tommy Gallagher asked about the legality of the process and sought assurances that the dismissals were handled properly. We have taken legal advice every step of the way, and we are sure of our ground. From my perspective, there is no cost of dismissal — I appointed those people to the board and I have dismissed them.

Ministerial Statement

Road Safety Strategy for Northern Ireland

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has received notice from the Minister of the Environment that he wishes to make a statement.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): First, I offer my sincere condolences to the families and friends of two people who were killed on the roads at the weekend: Angela McKee from Lisburn; and Mavis Rolston from Garvary in Enniskillen, who died in County Cavan. Those tragedies continue to remind us, if a reminder were ever needed, of the importance of the issues that we are about to discuss.

I wish to make a statement to inform Members formally that I am launching the consultation on a new road safety strategy. As Members know, the current road safety strategy was originally designed to run until 2012. However, as most of the measures in the strategy have been completed and its targets achieved, it was decided that a new strategy should be introduced by the end of this year.

In January 2010, I circulated a draft consultation paper to ministerial colleagues for consideration. After the Executive agreed its contents, which included commitments for several other ministerial colleagues, I sent the paper to the Committee for the Environment on 4 March 2010, informing it of my desire to move quickly to begin public consultation and of my intention to make this statement today, in which I am announcing the start of public consultation on preparing a new road safety strategy. The consultation period will begin tomorrow and run until 15 June 2010

The consultation document that will be publicly available tomorrow represents the work of a road safety strategy project board that comprises representatives from the main statutory stakeholders. My Department took the lead on the project, supported by senior representatives from the Department for Regional Development, the Department of Education and the Police Service. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was represented by the Fire and Rescue Service and the Ambulance Service. I thank the project board and ministerial colleagues for their unanimous support of and interest in the issue, as well as others who

contributed to and supported the work that has been done to date.

Before I get into the detail of the consultation, I should remind the House that when we are talking about casualties and statistics, each figure represents a life lost or a future damaged. Although I am sure that Members are only too aware of that, it is always important to keep it at the front of our minds.

The consultation starts tomorrow, but it is worth noting that considerable consultation has already gone into preparing the document. That fact is indicated in the document.

A number of workshops have been held with the statutory stakeholders and with other interested agencies and Departments to tap into the wide range of experience and expertise that is available and to consider as wide a range of ideas and proposals as possible. My officials also wrote to around 500 stakeholders and have received responses from, or engaged directly with, around 40 groups and organisations. We have spoken to 15 groups comprising 300 children and young people who are aged between five and 21, and we have issued over 2,000 questionnaires to those in the key 15- to 18-year-old age group. My Department's road safety education officers are working to get those questionnaires completed, and we have already started to see responses come back from that exercise.

For those Members who have not yet seen the consultation document, I will provide a brief summary of its contents. A safe systems approach has been adopted to preparing the paper. That approach considers roads, vehicles and road users together and seeks to ensure that each element takes account of the limitations or potential weaknesses in the other two. The paper starts by looking back at where we have come from with road safety in Northern Ireland and turns to look at how we can move forward to improve it in the future.

The paper sets out the key road safety challenges to be addressed over the lifetime of the new strategy. Those include continuing to reduce the number of road deaths and serious injuries; focusing specifically on improving safety on rural roads; working to protect young drivers and motorcyclists in particular; and reducing inappropriate and illegal road user behaviours, including speeding, drink- and drug-driving and careless and dangerous driving. Also

included are improving our knowledge of road safety problems and of how to solve them, and working within funding constraints and future uncertainties.

The paper highlights the main evidence, statistical analysis and research that were used in its preparation. It also reflects other strategies and consultations in Northern Ireland and elsewhere. The paper includes a vision for what I want to achieve, which is simply to position Northern Ireland among the safest countries in the world. Although Members may think that that is unrealistic or over-optimistic, I note that the document shows that in 2008, we would have been placed around sixth in the table of 27 EU countries ranked by fatalities for each million of the population. We should certainly be seeking to improve even further in the future.

It is important that we consider how we might most effectively deliver road safety in the future. For example, we should consider whether local authorities should become more involved and whether a strategy should be underpinned with lower-level local road safety plans. We should also ask whether we need wider involvement from stakeholders in both planning and advising on the way ahead for road safety. Those are important considerations.

The key road casualty reduction targets that are in the consultation paper will probably be of particular interest to Members and the public. The targets are due for achievement by 2020, and they will be measured against a baseline of average figures for the period from 2004 to 2008. As Members will be aware, such averages are used to prevent targets being based on a single particularly good or bad year.

The proposed targets are to reduce by at least 40% the numbers of people who are killed in road collisions; to reduce by at least 45% the number of people who are seriously injured in road collisions; to reduce by at least 55% the number of children aged between 0 and 15 who are killed or seriously injured in road collisions; and to reduce by at least 55% the number of young people aged between 16 and 24 who are killed or seriously injured in road collisions. The targets in the current strategy were to reduce road deaths and serious injuries by 33% and to reduce child road deaths and serious injuries by 50%.

The new targets are more challenging in two ways. First, the proposed actual percentage

reductions are higher, and, secondly, we are starting from reduced baselines. The average number of deaths and serious injuries that was used as a baseline for targets in the 2002 strategy was 1,748. The equivalent baseline for the new strategy is 1,236. The baseline for child deaths and serious injuries was 250 in 2002 strategy, and the baseline in the new strategy will be 128. In summary, therefore, there will be lower baselines and higher targets.

The document proposes introducing separate targets for reducing overall deaths and serious injuries. A new target is proposed for people who are aged between 16 and 24, and it is worth noting that we will be among the first countries to have such a target. If it is adopted, we will be the first country in the UK to have it. Indeed, the Republic of Ireland does not have such a target.

I also propose to include a range of performance indicators in our strategy for the first time. Those will not be classed as targets but will be used to measure progress. It is recognised good practice to have such indicators, and they will be particularly useful in helping to recognise emerging issues and to monitor and to understand developments in more depth than might otherwise be possible.

As part of a new strategy, I propose that we consider measuring and reporting on certain matters on an ongoing basis. Those are: the number of people who are killed in road collisions in rural areas; novice driver casualties within six, 12 and 18 months of their passing their driving test; the number of car occupants killed who were not wearing a seat belt; and the rates of road users, including cyclists, pedestrians and motorcyclists, killed or seriously injured for each million kilometres travelled. The document includes more than 170 proposed action measures that will help us to achieve those challenging targets. The action measures have all been agreed by the road safety strategy project board and the Departments to which commitments will fall.

The measures that are proposed in the document include undertaking an audit of road safety education services and resources to ensure that they address today's road safety issues appropriately; developing and implementing an updated and improved programme of measures to influence young people's attitudes and behaviours; reassessing and improving the way

that novice drivers first learn to drive and/or ride, are tested and continue to learn throughout their life; and extending the use of driver remedial courses and making greater use of educational interventions for errant road users.

The following measures have also been proposed: introducing graduated penalties for certain offences; undertaking a review of speed limits on upper-tier rural roads; considering the applicability of urban speed reduction initiatives and assessing the potential for wider introduction of 20 mph limits in residential and other urban areas where there is a significant presence of vulnerable road users. The proposals also include adopting the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) speed limit enforcement guidelines and setting up an active-travel forum that includes a range of stakeholders to consider a broad strategic approach to active travel; setting up a motorcycling forum that includes a range of stakeholders to consider an inclusive and strategic approach to motorcycling; and focusing on better retrieval and extrication of casualties based on collaborative working between the fire and rescue services on both sides of the border and the community and voluntary sector.

I should mention two issues in more detail, the first of which is graduated driver licensing (GDL). I remain very concerned about the unacceptably high number of young and novice drivers who are involved in fatal and serious collisions on our roads each year. We need to improve how we train and test drivers to ensure that they are safe and competent. Evidence of graduated driver licensing systems in other countries supports the view that moderating the risk exposure of novice drivers while they gain crucial additional experience can reduce the likelihood that they will be involved in a collision.

I will, therefore, shortly consult on detailed options for how we might amend the existing 45 mph speed restriction on learner and restricted drivers and introduce a new system of graduated driver licensing to replace the R-driver scheme. Such a GDL scheme may include measures such as raising or lowering the age of qualification for a provisional or full licence, setting minimum learning periods, allowing learner drivers to drive on motorways and/or dual carriageways and post-test restrictions on passengers. It may also include night-time curfews, increasing the duration of the current 12-month restricted period and introducing an

offence-free period. I look forward to in-depth considerations of those issues at that time.

For the purposes of the consultation that we are discussing, I simply wish to seek views on the broad principles of improving the competencies of our novice drivers and of minimising the risks that they face. There has been much debate about drink driving and the blood:alcohol limit. Consultation on that has already been carried out. Work is progressing to allow for appropriate legislation to be made and for necessary equipment to be sourced and approved. That work will allow the limit to be reduced and random breath testing and appropriate new penalties to be introduced.

12.45 pm

At the same time as the consultation paper is issued, I will make available a number of supporting documents. The research that was conducted to support the development of the new strategy will be available online, along with a profile of current road safety issues. Further research will be added as it is completed, and reports will be updated as appropriate throughout the consultation as new data becomes available.

Therefore, a toolkit will be available to help people to consider and comment on the proposals. The information will also help people to come up with new ideas and to propose and support any ideas that they already have.

We are all aware of the financial context in which the consultation will be issued and within which the strategy will be implemented in its early years. Although that should not be a block to saving lives, it cannot be ignored. We should always remember the human cost, but it is also worth reminding ourselves of the financial cost of road casualties. The consultation paper shows that over the life of the current strategy up until 2008, it is estimated that prevention of all road casualties in Northern Ireland would have saved around £2.9 billion. The financial value of the road casualties that were prevented was £951 million, and when figures are available for 2009, that figure will rise to well over £1 billion. That helps us to understand the quantum of possible savings that could be made in Northern Ireland in the future through the reduction of road casualties.

Every death and serious injury is one too many, and the only acceptable level of road accidents

is none. I want the road safety strategy to drive society to do everything in its power to strive for that. Almost every day, I hear stories of devastation, lives lost and futures ruined. I listen to the grief borne by families, friends and communities. We must all do our very best to prevent more families from suffering the tragedy of such shattered lives.

I am happy to take Members' questions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to ask questions to the Minister's statement.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mrs D Kelly): On behalf of the Committee, I welcome the Minister's road safety strategy consultation and look forward to playing a full and constructive role in ensuring that the strategy delivers significant reductions in fatalities and casualties on the roads.

As the Committee awaited the strategy, it asked a range of stakeholders how road deaths and injuries could be reduced. Problems in rural areas were identified as a key concern, and, as we all know, many of the most horrific accidents occur on country roads. Therefore, I am pleased that the Minister has recognised the importance of addressing road safety in rural areas by including a number of measures that are aimed at improving the situation. However, does the Minister not think that if his actions in rural areas are to be taken seriously, there should be a target specifically focused on reducing road fatalities and casualties in rural areas?

The Minister of the Environment: I thank the Member for highlighting the issue of rural areas. Between 2003 and 2008, 560 deaths and 3,733 serious injuries occurred on rural roads, which account for 72% of deaths and 55% of serious injuries. The measures proposed in the new strategy will seek to address the behaviours that contribute to the high level of deaths and serious injuries in rural areas. In addition, measures will specifically target road safety in rural areas, not least the proposals to consider speed limits on upper-tier rural roads and to target road policing resources towards high-risk locations, particularly in rural areas.

We will also consider the erection of road safety cameras at locations in rural areas where a considerable number of accidents take place and, to that end, identify locations where there appears to be a build-up of accidents. Through such measures, we hope to drive down the awful

statistics for rural road accidents, all of which involve a human life.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement on what is an important matter. The issue was originally raised by my colleague Mr Ross. The graduated driving licence, where it operates, tends to comprise a combination of measures. Will the consultation contain individual questions on each option or will a combination of measures be offered?

The Minister of the Environment: The consultation will contain individual questions. The information will be collated, and we will consider what can be delivered. We do not anticipate taking forward every issue, but we need to look at what we can bring together to greatest effect and introduce that at the earliest opportunity to reduce the number of deaths and serious injuries that involve the 17-year-old to 24-year-old category, which accounts for 11% of drivers, but almost 40% of road deaths. We are deeply dissatisfied with those figures and will continue to seek to drive them down.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr Boylan): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, offer my condolences to those who were killed over the weekend. Does the Minister intend to work with mobile phone and insurance companies to see what they can bring to the strategy, and to see what we can learn from other jurisdictions, particularly Sweden's Vision Zero initiative?

The Minister of the Environment: I am keen to work with insurance companies in particular. Monitors can be placed in cars to identify speed at all times. An insurance company could then quickly know whether someone was driving at inappropriate speeds, and withdraw the insurance. A series of steps can be taken to challenge driver behaviour. It is in the interest of insurance companies to work closely with us to deliver this strategy, because it will drive down their costs as well as drive down the awful record of road deaths and injuries.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the Minister's decision to conduct the consultation earlier than anticipated. I declare an interest as a councillor, a member of Carrickfergus road safety committee, and a father of two teenage drivers. The Minister suggested that councils may have a role to play in road safety in the future. Does he agree that it is important that the community and voluntary sector, and individuals who show a commitment

to road safety, are also kept on board so that their expertise can be used to improve road safety locally?

The Minister of the Environment: Yes, absolutely. Many people are interested in road safety, and we want to encourage such interest further. We want to make full use of our resources, so the more voluntary assistance, the better. It is critical that we seek to get as many people as possible involved in getting the message out, and moving to local authority community planning will provide us with a significant opportunity to develop that.

Mr Lunn: I may be touching on the same point as Mr Beggs. The Minister mentioned a figure of £2.9 billion. That contrasts with the roughly £150,000 that it cost to run the Road Safety Council and the various road safety committees. Is there a place for such bodies, given that the actions of his Department, and, to be fair, more particularly his predecessor, have resulted in reducing the number of committees from 18 to about seven?

The Minister of the Environment: That issue was highlighted after several reports were critical of the value for money that was being delivered. Only 12% of the £170,000 was invested in the front line, and the rest was spent on administration. That money has not gone, and we want it to be delivered to front line services rather than to administration.

Over the lifetime of the strategy, some £2.9 billion could have been saved. That we saved £950 million demonstrates how other Departments can provide considerable help to, for example, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Better road safety measures resulted in more than £100 million of savings each year, much of which benefited the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Over the next several years, we can reduce the number of deaths and serious injuries on our roads. On a human level, quite a number of families will avoid the grief that they would have experienced had those road accidents occurred. We can also save the Executive and some elements of the private sector, such as insurance companies, considerable amounts of money, because hospitals will not have to provide many months of treatment and rehabilitation to people who have been seriously injured on the roads. The cost of that treatment

is huge, as are the benefits of reducing the number of injuries and deaths on our roads.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the progress that has been made on the drink-driving issue and graduated driver licensing. Areas in the world that operate GDL have already seen significant decreases in the number of road deaths. Although the system has been highly successful, it has not been particularly popular with younger drivers. What steps does the Minister intend to take to ensure that younger people are included in the consultation process and that the rationale for some of the measures that are being discussed are explained to them?

Although the Department of the Environment takes the lead role in road safety issues, has the Minister had any discussions with his Executive colleagues about speed limits? Has he had any discussions with the PSNI about average-speed cameras, which seem to have a dramatic impact?

The Minister of the Environment: We issued 2,000 questionnaires on GDL to young people. We also consulted directly with over 300 people in the children and young people's unit. We will continue to seek information from young people and keep them as well informed as possible about our ideas to make the roads safer for them. This morning, I attended the launch of a PSNI scheme, in association with the colleges and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), on the modification of cars. Single accidents have resulted in multiple fatalities because of modifications that left vehicles in an unsafe and unroadworthy condition.

We must continue to work with our young people in all those areas. A couple of weeks ago, I attended a function in Dungannon, at which people from the Ambulance Service, the Fire and Rescue Service, the PSNI, doctors and hospital staff explained what happened as a result of an accident. It was an extremely moving experience. A number of the individuals who spoke had lost loved ones in accidents. We must keep hammering through the message, particularly to our young people, that driving can present them with additional opportunities in life, but not driving safely may shorten their lives or leave them permanently injured. We must encourage our young people to heed that message.

1.00 pm

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. I particularly welcome his focus on rural roads and his comments about road safety cameras. Does he agree that the Frosses Road in north Antrim should be considered for the installation of road safety cameras and average-speed cameras? What action is he considering to take to tackle the attitudes, behaviour and culture of people, particularly in rural areas, who drive to their local pubs and drive home again after consuming alcohol? Finally, does he commend rural pub owners who regularly organise transport for customers who are under the influence to ensure that they get home safely?

The Minister of the Environment: I do not decide where speed cameras are located. However, the Frosses Road has an appalling record. Indeed, at the weekend, members of my family were travelling to a sports event in Ballymoney, and I warned them about the number of incidents that have taken place on that road.

As regards people driving to and from pubs, there is nothing wrong with that, as long as they do not consume alcohol at the pub. I welcome the designated driver initiative that was taken in association with Coca-Cola. That offered drivers up to three free soft drinks while they were out for the evening. However, we need to keep pressing home the message that the only level of alcohol that is truly acceptable in a person's system is zero.

We are seeking to pursue new figures, and we need to have the technique, which the Department for Transport in the UK is delivering, for proper and appropriate testing. That will lead to the situation in which people will be unable to drink at all when they go out because the figures will be so low. We need to get to that stage, because drink driving is still one of the key factors in the number of incidents on our roads that lead to death or injury.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the Minister's statement and his commitment to reducing deaths and serious injuries on our roads. The Minister referred to the launch of Project Evo, in which he took part this morning, and to the road safety event in Dungannon. Does he agree that the Police Service, the Fire and Rescue Service, the Ambulance Service and local doctors, are making a serious effort to tackle road safety

and get the message across to young people about the effects that drink driving and driving at fast speeds can have on people's lives?

The Minister of the Environment: A whole series of things have led to a major contribution in the reduction of road deaths. In fact, in the 1970s, which coincided with the worst period of the Troubles, we had the highest number of road deaths on our roads. At one stage, more than 300 people were being killed on our roads every year, and those figures have been driven down to just over 100, which is still unacceptable.

There are a number of reasons involved. First, cars are much safer now; they have much better braking systems and impact systems, and they are being designed with accidents and road safety in mind. Secondly, roads have improved; and there can be no doubt that if the road between Ballymena and Ballymoney were entirely a motorway, it would be safer. The same case will apply when the Dungannon to Ballygawley road becomes a motorway. There will be fewer accidents involving loss of life on those roads. Improvements have been made, and we will also benefit from the road improvements that are being made.

The bottom line is that driver behaviour on our roads is crucial. It may be suitable to drive on a motorway at 70 mph, and it may be wholly unsuitable to drive on a rural road at 50 mph. It depends on the circumstances in which one is driving. People need to realise that it is not worth risking their lives or the lives of others by overtaking a row of vehicles that is sitting behind a slow-moving vehicle, or whatever. It is fundamentally important that people get the message that driver error is the cause of most accidents. The roads are not the cause, although better roads would lead to fewer crashes. Driver error is the single biggest component in all accidents that involve death and injury.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's statement. I see that many of the measures proposed are outside the control of the Minister of the Environment and within the remit of the Department for Regional Development (DRD) in particular. Will the Minister inform the House what discussions and guarantees he has received from Conor Murphy that those aspects of the new strategy will be delivered?

The Minister of the Environment: The strategy was not drawn up in isolation from other

Departments. I have already put on record my appreciation for the work of senior officials in DRD who helped us to draw up the strategy, and I do so again. The strategy is about all of us working together to introduce measures that will help make Northern Ireland a better and safer place. We should seek to do that in all that we do, regardless of what Department is taking the lead, and we need to support other Departments that are delivering. In this instance, my Department has the lead on road safety and DRD has the lead on roads. We will work closely together to ensure that we can deliver on the strategy.

Last year, more than 100 people lost their lives on our roads. By the time that the new strategy is implemented, we want to see that number halved. More than 1,000 people were injured on our roads, and we want to see that number halved. We want to drive down the number of people who enter our hospitals from 1,000 to 450. A reduced requirement to provide long-term care and the associated savings that admitting 550 fewer people in hospital will bring will be a big help to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I have no doubt that all the Departments involved will work closely together to ensure that we can deliver on the strategy.

Mr McCartney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas sin, agus go n-éirí an bóthar leis an obair atá sé a dhéanamh. I thank the Minister for his statement, and I wish him well in his work on the strategy. The Committee for Regional Development, of which I am a member, has a particular interest in the strategy, and we will be supportive. I note that 2,000 questionnaires were issued to young people, and I particularly welcome the emphasis that has been placed on young people in the consultation. Will the Minister ensure that innovative media and forums are used to get the message across to young people? The TV advertisements are good and impressive, but young people may not be as switched on to television as they are to other media and forums. What consideration will he give to that? Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Minister of the Environment: It is vital that we use every method at our disposal to get the message through to young people. We are, therefore, happy to use whatever medium that takes. We may advertise in cinemas or on the Internet. We will seek to get the message

across and drive it home in a range of ways. We must encourage our young people to pay attention and heed advice.

The Department's recent advertisements may not be as shocking as some previous advertisements, but they are driving home the message of mothers who have lost their child. That message is very powerful and emotive. Those mothers are real human beings who have gone through the tragedy of losing their son. I trust that, as they listen to that message, other young men will tell themselves that they do not want to put their mother through what those mothers on TV have gone through.

Mr Bell: I welcome the Minister's positive statement that the focus will be kept on drug-driving. Does he accept that there is a problem in Strangford with young people taking cocaine, ecstasy, the gateway drug cannabis and, worst of all, the death drug crystal meth?

Can the Minister ensure that the focus on drug-driving will be kept to the fore, just as the focus on drink-driving is to the fore, and that young people will be made aware in advance that if they drive to and from parties and take drugs and medications, such as Valium, illegally, they will face severe penalties with regard to their driving careers?

The Minister of the Environment: Absolutely. Of course, alcohol is also a drug, although that is not talked about too much. Anything that either slows down or speeds up people's system to an abnormal level will distort their ability to carry out functions such as driving. It is, therefore, critical that the focus continues to be kept on drug-driving, so that when police see someone who is driving erratically, but there is no evidence that that person has taken alcohol, they have a series of methods by which to ascertain whether the individual has taken drugs. That is more difficult to determine and, ultimately, it may require that the person is taken to the police station for a blood test.

I have no doubt that police are being trained well in that regard. That will continue to be the case. As technologies advance, we will be able to pursue that more vigorously. I am sure that the number of deaths that are caused by drug-driving will not be allowed to creep upwards. Indeed, that number must be driven downwards.

Committee Business

Report on the Inquiry into the Dioxin Contamination Incident

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 15 minutes to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other speakers will have five minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Paisley Jnr): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on its inquiry into the dioxin contamination incident of December 2008; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in liaison with Executive colleagues, to bring forward a timetable for implementing the recommendations contained in the report.

At 7.00 pm on 6 December 2008, authorities in the Republic of Ireland, with support from the highest level of government there, calmly announced on news bulletins that all Irish pork and pork products would be recalled from markets due to the discovery of dioxins in pork and pigs that had been fed with contaminated foodstuffs.

That announcement was made without any contact with Northern Ireland authorities at senior political or official level. Indeed, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development discovered the incident some two and a half hours later when she watched the RTÉ news.

The outcome of the announcement was the near collapse of the pig industry; losses of almost £15 million to the agrifood sector; a continuing legacy of financial burden on people who work in that sector; and a real kick in the teeth to consumers.

The fact that the inquiry is one of four that have been conducted into the incident — two in the Republic of Ireland and two in Northern Ireland — is indicative of the seriousness of the incident and its outcome. I am pleased that the Committee's report into the dioxin incident is the first report from a Northern Ireland perspective to be published. I hope that during the course of the debate, Members will endorse the Committee's findings and the conclusions

at which it has arrived. I believe that it is a touchstone report.

I also want to thank the Agriculture Minister for the Executive response to the report, which the Committee received on the afternoon of Friday 12 March 2010 and which recognises and agrees with the report's findings and recommendations. Obviously, the Executive must await the outcome of the MacKenzie review, to which the Committee contributed, before they finalise their position. I am pleased that the MacKenzie review team is now being asked to consider the recommendations in the Committee's report, which is before the House.

I will not go into great detail on every recommendation that is made in the report. I am sure that during the course of the debate, colleagues from my Committee and other Members will want to comment on some, if not all, of the recommendations. Suffice to say that it was a very detailed examination of the matter and of the roles played by the four organisations that were considered by the Committee to have been central to the incident from the sectoral perspective, namely the two agriculture Departments and the two food safety organisations in Northern Ireland and the Republic.

1.15 pm

During the inquiry, the Committee became aware that others played a role, including the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), and an even more substantial number of organisations in the Republic of Ireland, including the source of the contaminated foodstuffs and the local county council. That led the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to conclude that there were a:

"myriad of agencies responsible for food safety".

That conclusion was also evident to our Committee. That led to a great deal of confusion in the industry.

Although the Departments and agencies might appreciate their individual roles and responsibilities, the industry and sectors that they serve do not. That was evidenced on Monday 8 December 2008, when farmers arrived at abattoirs with their stock, only to be told that it could not be taken. The main criticism from producers and processors was

that they did not know who was in charge and they did not know whom to turn to for advice. That was exacerbated to a certain extent in the House, with two different Ministers talking about two separate areas of responsibility for the same issue. Although I totally understand the delegation and sharing of those responsibilities, it was as confusing for the consumer as it was for the farmer. It was perceived as a disjointed approach, and not what our industry needed at a time of confusion. We needed clear, strategic and consistent messages from the Executive. I note and appreciate that the Executive have accepted that finding and the subsequent recommendation.

It is particularly pleasing to note that the Executive will take on board the Committee's criticisms in respect of the very apparent breakdown of communications from the outset of the incident. However, it was not the breakdown of communications locally that really mattered. George Bernard Shaw once stated:

"The problem with communication ... is the illusion that it has been accomplished."

The authorities in the Republic of Ireland must have a keen sense of imagination, because their conclusion was that communication between them and the authorities here in Northern Ireland was timely and informative. That is a fallacy. Their communication consisted of an e-mail from a mid-level official late on a Friday afternoon that did not provide any detail; the announcement of the withdrawal of foodstuffs on a Saturday evening without discussion with any senior individuals in Northern Ireland, despite being aware that some 9,000 pigs are exported to Northern Ireland each week; and allowing the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to find out about the recall on the RTÉ evening news. That was despite the holding of ministerial meetings, which included no less a figure than the Taoiseach, during the lead-up to the announcement.

The Food Safety Authority of Ireland contacted the Food Standards Agency in London, completely ignoring the agency in Northern Ireland, which found out about the developing situation two days later. To cap it all, our Minister contacted her counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, quite appropriately, on 17 December regarding the eligibility of processors in Northern Ireland for compensation, but did not get a formal response until 23 January

2009 at a North/South Ministerial Council meeting — and those are examples that led the inter-agency review team in the Republic to conclude that communication was both timely and informative?

Mr Bell: The Member rightly raised some serious matters. Will he inform the House how the report affects cross-border relations?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development: I hope that that question will be answered by the end of the debate. However, if the incident is supposed to represent an example of good cross-border communication, it is a poor one. Anyone who reads the Committee's report will see that we speak with uniformity in our anger at the way in which communication was handled between the jurisdiction in the Republic of Ireland and our own jurisdiction. It sent out a bad signal and was a bad example of how two jurisdictions should communicate over an issue of mutual benefit. That tells its own story. No doubt, during the course of the debate, Members from all sides of the House will have their own points to make on that issue.

Other communication problems are detailed in the report, not all of which are directed at the authorities in the Republic. We have our own problems, and I am pleased that the Department recognised those and has given an undertaking in the Executive response to review communication processes.

No one in the House wants the farcical situation of a government Minister hearing about a serious incident on the news again. It is unfortunate that the authorities in the Republic do not recognise that there is a problem. The fact that a problem exists needs to be reinforced, particularly if the development of all-island strategies is to continue and, most importantly, the Northern Ireland industry is to put its faith in such strategies.

I will comment on the aid package that is provided in the Republic and by the Executive. I thank the Executive for the clarity on levels of hardship payments, although the figures in the report were provided by the Department. I am also mindful that the Executive provided a significant level of moneys at a time when they faced severe fiscal constraints. However, the Committee is critical of the time that it took to compile the package, and there are gaps about those who are eligible to receive payments.

We must ensure that that does not reoccur should there be a dioxin incident or a similar occurrence in the future. I hope that a lesson has been learned.

I thank the Committee staff for their diligence, expertise and exacting approach, not least the Committee Clerk, Mr Paul Carlisle. I believe that our report is a touchstone report. It clearly sets a high standard for reports that are produced by a devolved Assembly. It also sets out challenging roles for government officials, in this jurisdiction and in our neighbouring one, to recognise their responsibilities. It far outstrips other reports that have been produced to date on the dioxin contamination incident, and it will set the tone for future reports. I look forward to the report being read and its contents being properly deliberated and delivered on.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I pay tribute to everyone who was involved in compiling the inquiry report and to everyone who gave evidence or contributed in any way. I also want to show my appreciation to the Chairperson for guiding us through the report in a diligent manner.

We all remember the devastation that the foot-and-mouth epidemic caused to the agriculture and tourism industries. The pork contamination incident was on a much smaller scale, but it is a chilling reminder that we cannot take the issue of animal feedstuff lightly because there will always be a kickback if shortcuts are taken on animal feedstuff.

I appreciate the Executive's review, and they will make recommendations on the roles and responsibilities of the relevant bodies, which should result in streamlined processes. Everyone will welcome the fact that the review will also identify barriers to good communication. A plethora of bodies was involved in the incident on both sides of the border. Too many bodies and Departments were involved in dealing with the incident. In such circumstances, there will always be an element of confusion about who takes ownership of particular matters.

There are also cross-border issues. Too many processes are being duplicated, particularly within the remit of the Food Standards Agency. We need to consider the possibility of one agency dealing with all the food standards issues on the island of Ireland. That is common sense, and it would mean that, in the event of an incident such as dioxin contamination,

there would be greater clarity about who has responsibility for what.

During the Committee's discussions on the crisis, a lot of people were of the view that a partitionist approach had been taken, particularly with regard to the way that the South of Ireland communicated and fed information in the first 48 hours. This is just the Committee's opinion, but it felt that the authorities in the South of Ireland were very slow to pass information to our Minister in the Six Counties. The Chairperson has already dealt with communication, and it is a disgrace that the Minister in the North, Michelle Gildernew, had to learn of the incident from a television programme. That is not acceptable.

There was talk that information had to go to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and to the member state first and foremost. However, it does not take a lot of effort to cc someone into an e-mail to let them know what is happening, even if it is not clear how serious the incident is. PCB (polychlorinated biphenyls) contamination is a serious issue. There had not been an outbreak for a considerable time — not since the setting up of the Food Standards Agency, I believe. It was a serious incident, and other Ministers should have been informed. The Committee was very critical of that lack of communication. Fair enough, there were reasons for it, which I touched on earlier. Some people did not know who had responsibility for what. I hope that lessons have been learnt.

Some members thought that the Department was slow to provide the aid package. I commend the Minister for putting the aid package together; it was difficult because of the complexities involved and because of the North/South issue. I commend the Minister for getting the package that she got from the Executive. We must remember that the Minister had to make a case to the Executive, so we must give credit where credit is due. The aid package should work on an all-island basis, just like everything to do with agriculture and fishing. There should be no competitive disadvantage; that is not in the interests of the island's economy.

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

Mr W Clarke: There was discussion about a proportionate response. It was important to take the actions that were taken, because that

safeguarded our industry, which is the most important thing. We need only look at the dioxins contamination incident in Belgium to see how important it was to take action. That incident nearly destroyed the Belgian economy.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Elliott):

I thank all those who gave evidence to the Committee, as well as the Committee Clerk and Committee staff who worked tirelessly to move the process forward for the Committee. I also thank the departmental officials for the assistance and information that they provided to us.

The report is much too complex for us to absorb everything in it at this stage and to offer it as evidence today. The issues involved are hugely controversial, to say the least. In some instances, the report shows the difficulties that exist with some aspects of cross-border working. That is unfortunate because, in an incident such as the dioxins incident, we would have expected cross-border working to have happened much more quickly, to have been much more relaxed and to have been much more beneficial for us.

1.30 pm

We in the Ulster Unionist Party strive to protect farmers and the industry at all times. It is unfortunate that, on some occasions during the incident, the farming community was put on the back burner and was left almost to fend for itself. In the days immediately following the incident, I suggested to senior officials from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development that the Department try to get the stock off farms and produce an aid package to get our products back on the European and world markets. Those departmental officials totally opposed my suggestions and refused to act on them.

I appreciate that, in the longer term, the Department came up with a package and an opportunity to take stock off farms. However, that can be compared with how the Administration in the Republic dealt with the situation there. Stock was taken off farms, and the products that were in storage were disposed of quickly. Farmers there were able to get their pork and beef products in particular back on to the markets very quickly, and they were able to say that their products were clean and that all the products that had possibly been contaminated had been taken out of the

system. The fact that they were able to do that quickly left producers in Northern Ireland very much on the back foot. It meant that a number of our customers, particularly those throughout Europe, asked why the Republic of Ireland was able to market its products as being clear and officially free of contamination but we were unable to do so. That is very unfortunate.

I question strongly how the feed product, which was where the dioxin problem started, was able to get on to farms and be fed to animals here. I understand that it was a farm quality assured product. I declare an interest, as I am involved in the farm quality assurance scheme in Northern Ireland. Our meal dockets are checked annually, so I cannot understand how such a product slipped through the system, how it was possible that it was fed to animals in Northern Ireland and how it met official farm quality assured standards. That should not have been allowed to happen.

It is unfortunate that, by the end of the process, a number of farmers had still not received reasonable compensation or aid for the milk and slurry that they had to dispose of. I know of two dairy farmers who did not get any aid package for the milk that they had to dump. That cost those people an awful lot of money, and I understand that some of them were left on the verge of financial collapse simply because the aid package did not extend to them. I appreciate that an aid package was put in place, but the farming community feel that it did not extend far enough. A number of farmers had to hire slurry storage to store potentially contaminated slurry.

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

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development: Those farmers did not get any aid or support to do that.

Mr Burns: As a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I support the motion. I endorse wholeheartedly the findings of the inquiry into the dioxin contamination incident of December 2008, and I call for a speedy introduction of the report's recommendations. I thank all those who provided written submissions to the inquiry and all those who gave oral evidence to the Committee.

The incident was nothing short of a disaster, and a lot of damage was done. Therefore, we must make the necessary changes quickly to

protect the Northern Ireland agriculture industry. The report makes many recommendations, but, given that those who conducted the extensive investigation considered practically every e-mail that was sent and every phone call that was made, time does not permit me to go into every point in detail. However, I will say a few words about the recommendations that I think are the most important.

It was absolutely clear that the single biggest weakness in the system was the line of communication. I do not wish to dwell on that point too much, but the fact that our Minister learned about the scare on the RTÉ news was completely disgraceful. The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the South has a lot to answer for. However, even though its behaviour in that instance left a lot to be desired, we cannot overlook the positive work and co-operation that has taken place in dealing with other issues in the past. I, therefore, hope that that was a one-off and that there will be greater and more efficient co-operation on agriculture on an all-island basis in the future.

Good communication at all levels of the industry is vital in a time of crisis. Therefore, DARD must review and overhaul its communication process, and the incident management team must be set up as quickly as possible. It is they who should assume responsibility for communicating a single, clear and consistent message and for creating an early warning strategy. Furthermore, the number of agencies that are responsible for food safety in Northern Ireland must be streamlined. Too many agencies have their own specific roles and do their own thing. Most of the time, the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing, and that is just not good enough, because we must be ready for other similar incidents that might happen tomorrow.

The aid package that was put together was simply not good enough. The compensation was nowhere near what was required, and it certainly did not help the beef and dairy sectors or other associated businesses. However, there is still time to review that, and I urge the Minister and the Executive to do so immediately.

The report is not about placing blame, but there were certainly people who got things wrong, and they know who they are. Although no damage was done to public health, there was certainly no happy ending. The extent of the damage to the industry and the fact that the pig sector has

struggled to recover are clear evidence of that. Lessons must be learned, and such a badly managed crisis must not be allowed to happen again.

Mr Ford: I welcome the publication of the report, and I congratulate not only the Committee Chairperson but Committee members and staff on the detail that they have managed to consider and on the quality of the report. I trust that that quality will ensure that the report is read. Sometimes, the thicker a report is, the less it gets noticed. I, therefore, hope that those who have responsibility for looking to the report will take notice of it.

The key issues that have been highlighted are the difficulties that we experience because of the relative simplicity of cross-border trade, the poor communications between the two jurisdictions and, as others said, the multiplicity of agencies with different levels of responsibility for either public health or animal health. There is no doubt that communication between the two jurisdictions was not as good as it should have been. It is not unreasonable to say that, on this occasion, communications from DAFF in Dublin to DARD in Belfast were extremely poor and were not nearly as speedy as they should have been.

I will digress for a moment: compare the approach that was taken to the dioxin scare with the approach that was taken to foot-and-mouth disease on this island and the adjacent island a few years ago. When the problem of foot-and-mouth disease first arose in this jurisdiction, the necessary communications went from Bríd Rodgers to Joe Walsh, and there was full contact between them. When foot-and-mouth disease spread into the areas of south Armagh and north Louth, wherein it had the potential to impact on cross-border trade, it was dealt with because there was a determination and a keenness to co-operate. We should say to the DARD officials that the co-operation started at this end, and it is sad that their counterparts in Dublin were unable to reciprocate by co-operating during the dioxin contamination. We will have to see whether the lessons to which the report referred have been learned and whether new practices will ensure better co-ordination and communication between the two jurisdictions. The officials who are listening to the debate are exclusively from DARD, but their Dublin counterparts should also listen to what is being said, because lessons must be learned.

There is no doubt that, as a result of the action taken on both sides of the border, public health was protected. We should be grateful that there was nothing like the level of scare that BSE created at different times. Nonetheless, a huge problem was created for a small number of people in the food production industry, and a rather smaller problem was created for a rather larger number of people. Efforts were made to provide compensation, but we must take an interest in the fact that the cost to the small number of farmers and processors has not been adequately addressed by the compensation package. Real issues remain in connection with the necessity of co-operation between Belfast and Dublin and the nature of their relationship with the EU institutions. To ensure that that issue will be addressed properly should a similar situation occur in the future, the problems must be resolved.

The multiplicity of agencies with responsibility for food safety in the two jurisdictions, whether at a human, animal or production process level, is also a major issue. It has not been fully established how those agencies should co-ordinate their activities and whether they could be reduced in number to ensure a better understanding of what is happening in every part of the island. It is part of the general lesson that sometimes applies here about the need for more joined-up government, better co-operation between different Departments and improved ways of ensuring that action is taken as speedily as it ought to be.

If nothing else, I hope that the Minister will be able to assure the House that she is taking that lesson on board and will ensure that the same problems that arose during the incident will not recur. I trust that she will not have to watch RTE to find out about an issue of significant concern to farmers in Northern Ireland.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. As a member of the Agriculture Committee and a farmer in my constituency of Newry and Armagh, I am aware that the incident caused great concern to the farmers who were unfortunate enough to have animals affected by the dioxin contamination.

We all remember the headlines in December 2008 when the pig industry was plunged into crisis. The pictures of pork being cleared from the shelves were beamed across national television, and those involved in the promotion

of Northern Ireland pork products were extremely downcast at that time. It was a dark day for the pig industry and one that will not be forgotten for a long time. The Committee of which I am a member has taken the issue extremely seriously, and its report into the incident is the result of a great deal of research and discussion with the many agencies and bodies involved in managing the crisis.

The safety of the public is the number one concern, and I share the view contained in the report that the largest contributor to the crisis, apart from the factory that produced the contaminated meal, was the failure of the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the Republic immediately to contact our Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to inform it of the impending crisis. Indeed, the fact that we learned of the incident from the television news was totally ridiculous and unacceptable. Some 9,000 pigs are exported from the Republic to Northern Ireland each week, and farmers here had received the contaminated feed. Those two facts were well known to the Irish authorities.

1.45 pm

The animal health and welfare strategy in operation between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland was shown to be inadequate in the worst possible way. We had a situation in which confusion and indecision reigned. Quick and decisive action, backed up by firm and up-to-date information, would have gone a long way to reassuring the public.

The cost of the incident to the pig industry here is thought to be in the region of £10 million and has come at a time when the agriculture industry is already tightening its belt to remain competitive and viable. That is not to mention the cost to our dairy and beef sectors. In my constituency, one dairy farmer had to dump his milk for two months. The value of that milk was more than £20,000, which was a great loss to the farmer, and, as yet, he has not received any compensation. The Republic has, in effect, washed its hands of the impact that the crisis has had on the industry in Northern Ireland, and that is totally unacceptable.

I share the view that the Executive aid package could have been expanded to better target those considered to be ineligible for aid, even though they were directly affected and had to dispose of retail materials, milk and other products at

significant losses. There are lessons to be learned from the incident, and, for the sake of the industry, I hope that they can be learned quickly.

The Committee heard from many of the bodies tasked with food safety and industry regulation. More co-ordination is required so that, in the case of any future incidents, action taken is proportionate to protect public health. The potential impact on the industry must also be more carefully considered. I welcome the report and hope that its recommendations can be implemented without delay.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and I support the motion. The report contains many points that I agree with, and I also agree with many points that have been raised in the debate. I want to concentrate on two issues.

First, it emerged during the inquiry that there was a huge dependence — an overdependence, in my opinion — placed on the Central Science Laboratory, which is based in York. All the testing for Britain and Ireland has to go through that lab. Given the importance of agriculture in Ireland, compared with its importance in Britain, there is room for both jurisdictions to see whether they can develop a central science lab based on this island, North or South. Agriculture is of massive importance to the island's economy.

Secondly, I want to talk about co-operation between the North and the South or rather the lack of co-operation between DARD and DAFF. The Committee heard evidence from DAFF officials on two occasions, in Dublin and in the Senate Chamber here. From them we heard an awful lot about their obligation and duty to adhere to EU law and domestic law. We heard how they contacted Brussels and learned what they did domestically in the Twenty-six Counties and what relationships they had with London. One would think that they had never heard of the Good Friday Agreement. One would think that they had never heard of an agreement reached on this island in 1998 that placed duties and responsibilities on the Southern authorities in their relationship with their Northern counterparts. It indicated to me just how partitionism —

Mr Shannon: Will the Member give way?

Mr Doherty: Yes, of course.

Mr Shannon: During an evidence session to the Committee as part of the inquiry, the Chairperson said:

“To paraphrase a member, they behaved like a bunch of Free Staters.”

To which the member replied: “That is what they are.”

Mr Doherty: That is true; well pointed out. With your help, I will develop that point.

It was clear that the officials had no sense of their duties and responsibilities to the North. As the picture emerged — perhaps events had not come to an absolute conclusion — the situation with respect to dioxin contamination was, potentially, developing into a very serious one. Officials never once thought to contact, formally or informally, their Northern counterparts. A huge lesson needs to be learned, and perhaps we need to create a Hillsborough agreement mark II that will bring the Dublin authorities to the table and make them realise that, given the importance of agriculture in the North and the South to the whole economy, their responsibilities are not only for agriculture in the Twenty-six Counties but the whole island. I recommend that the House accepts the report, and I ask it to consider the possibility of a Hillsborough agreement mark II for the Dublin Government.

Mr Shannon: For the record, I was not a member of the Agriculture Committee when the debacle started. Nonetheless, it affected me greatly. I declare an interest as a pork retailer who sells bacon, sausages and cooked ham.

I remember clearly the Sunday afternoon when the story unfolded. One of my customers phoned me to ask whether I had heard the news. I had not. I watched the 24-hour news channel and, within an hour, another four pork suppliers from the Strangford area, which I represent, had contacted me about the same issue. They were concerned that they could not gain access to a departmental official and were unsure about what to do with their products then and the following morning. As the hours ticked by, a real crisis was unfolding, and it was difficult to find information, guidelines and help on the 24-hour news channel.

At that time, I was very critical of the Department, and that is on the record. However, during the Committee’s inquiry, it became clear where the problems lay. As I said to Pat earlier,

the Chairperson contended that the officials from the Republic:

“behaved like a bunch of Free Staters.”

Moreover, when those officials gave evidence to the Committee, I thought that they:

“hedged their bets and batted carefully for their own side.”

Other members agreed with that.

The officials from the Republic and from the Food Safety Authority of Ireland were clear about the origin of the problems. They did not notify our Department in time and did not let us know what was going on. Therefore, I commend the recommendation on page 6 of the report, which refers to the early warning system that we need to put in place. That early warning system must consist of more than simply letting departmental officials know, and it is critical to the management of potential future incidents.

I want to comment on the recommendation on the aid package. Given my contacts in the industry, I know of some suppliers who had literally hundreds of thousands of pounds of product sitting around. They did not know what would happen to it. Some people’s compensation issues have not yet been sorted out, and I know that the report contains a recommendation about that. I want the aid package that is recommended on page 8 of the report to be implemented. As of today, 15 March 2010, some people are waiting for compensation. The money that they deserve should be passed on to them.

My third point is about consumer confidence and public safety. During the Committee’s inquiry, a scientist who gave evidence said that, unless someone had eaten the contaminated pork for breakfast, lunch, dinner and supper for a year, there would be no difficulties. It would be like asking me to eat 50 bacon butties or a wee bit more for breakfast. I could not do that; it would be impossible. Even you could not do that, Francie — I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. When we talk about consumer confidence, public safety and the scares about products that were put about, it is important to put things into perspective. I am concerned about that.

I hope that, as a result of the report, we will ensure that an early warning system and provision for aid will be put in place and that outstanding compensation moneys will be paid.

We must establish a better working relationship with our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland on economic issues that are as important for them as they are for us and for the confidence of the industry in Northern Ireland, which produces the very best products. We must ensure that those issues are taken care of. I commend the report and support the motion.

Mr Savage: I sit on the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, which prepared and produced the inquiry report. I declare an interest.

The pork dioxin contamination scare occurred in December 2008 and resulted in pork being removed from shop shelves, as, in the end, it could not be sold because of health concerns. The scare caused major damage to and difficulty for the pork industry in Northern Ireland. It could not have come at a worse time, as shops and supermarkets were stocking up for Christmas and the new year.

The most concerning aspect, other than the public health fears, was the abject failure of the Government of the Republic of Ireland to advise our Executive and, in particular, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development of the potential seriousness of the incident in a timely manner. In the report's findings and recommendations, the Committee noted that the Minister found out about the total recall of Irish pork and pork products:

"by chance whilst watching a news programme in the late evening of Saturday, 6 December 2009."

That was simply unacceptable at a time when the pig industry here needed all the assistance that it could get north and south of the border. It is essential that early warning is given at the appropriate level. Time is of the essence, especially in cases such as the dioxin contamination incident, to allow the necessary actions to be taken. To that end, the report recommends that an early warning system be established that will:

"inform other Member States and regions who may be affected."

It also recommends that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development:

"should critically assess its communication lines and processes in order to prevent a repeat of those circumstances witnessed on Monday 8 December. This should focus on an assessment

of communication lines and processes to farm businesses and industry processors, as these are providing ongoing advice in respect of the incident."

Like the Committee, I find it most concerning that the pork recall was ordered yet not communicated to DARD. That meant that, on Monday 8 December 2008, the Department and other local agencies here were not in a position to provide clear decisions and instructions to stakeholders during a crucial period.

Although I accept that no one came out of the incident with much glory, I commend the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her actions at that time. To her credit, she did her utmost to keep the House and the Agriculture Committee up to date with a rapidly developing situation. It is clear that there are many lessons to be learned from the incident. I trust that those lessons have been learned and that we will not find ourselves in a similar position ever again.

Such events may happen from time to time in Northern Ireland and many other places, but the key issue is communication. Lines of communications must be kept open. Our Minister and her staff are to be commended for the way that they handled that difficult situation. I hope that such incidents, minimal as their effect may potentially be, never happen again.

2.00 pm

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the report and commend the Committee, officials and those associated with its production for their efforts in bringing it to this point.

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

Food safety is absolutely paramount for consumers and it is crucial to confidence in the industry. All available evidence suggests that that particular dioxin incident occurred as a consequence of contaminated fuel being used in the oil-fired burner that generated the heat to dry the feed at the company; a failure by the feed business operator to identify hazards associated with that flame dryer; and the risk of contaminated feed if, as appears to have been the case, contaminated fuel was used. Necessary measures must be put in place to address that.

Another issue of concern is the fact that contaminated fuel reached the business in

the first instance. That indicates that the oil that was purchased by and supplied to the feed business operator was clearly not fit for purpose. I understand that the gardaí are investigating how that occurred. The fact that contaminated oil may have reached a food business operator suggests that there were deficiencies in the oversight and control of oil and waste oil importation, distribution and sale. That needs to be addressed to prevent any recurrence of such a situation, in the interests of the industry, and more importantly, in the interests of food safety and food standards.

There are a couple of main issues that I want to raise. One is the fact that the aid package was inadequate to compensate farmers for their loss. My colleague Mr Elliott mentioned costs associated with slurry storage. The other issue was the poor communications that were in place. In situations such as the dioxin contamination incident, communications are of utmost importance in ensuring that people are aware of any potential risk to health in the food chain, so that it can be acted on as soon as possible.

As Mr Shannon indicated, it appears that any such early warning system was not in place. If it was, it clearly did not work. Communications failed utterly. That is clear from the fact that our Minister found out about the incident through a news programme late in the evening of Saturday 6 December, when restrictions appear to have been placed on Northern Irish farms on 5 December. Further statements were made on 7 and 8 December by our Agriculture Minister and Health Minister, whereas the news had broken on the rest of the island on 4 December. That appears to me to be a very substantial deficiency. When we are all working to harmonise standards in the best interests of consumers and all people on this island, that situation should not have occurred.

I do not want to see a recurrence of that situation under any circumstances. We are supposed to be working under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement. There should be good working relationships between both parts of the island, and among Departments in both parts of the island. This is a classic case of that failing. As elected Members, we need to be more aware of how the situation should improve to prevent against such incidents. We need a new communications system put in place between DARD and DAFF, we need to be apprised of that,

and we need to hear about better co-ordination among all the agencies, North and South, which were associated with that particular dioxin contamination incident.

In conclusion, I support the report. I hope that its recommendations will be adopted so that we can have better standards and lines of communication to underpin consumers' confidence in the industry.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew):

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My Executive colleagues and I welcome the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development's report on the inquiry into the dioxin contaminated feed incident. I congratulate the Committee on the work that it has done to produce what I believe is a very useful report. I will deal with the report's recommendations and respond to issues that were raised in the debate. Before that, I will make some general comments about the dioxin incident.

The dioxin incident was a contamination of animal feed. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is the competent authority on animal feed matters except medicated animal feeds and processed animal protein. Therefore, the FSA had lead policy responsibility for making decisions on the safety of the pork and beef that entered the food chain. That included the need to keep out of the food chain animals in which the levels of dioxins were above those that are set out in EU legislation.

DARD is responsible for the enforcement and implementation of animal feed legislation. It had a lead role in dealing with the consequences of the FSA's decisions and the impact that they had on our producers. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has a corresponding role in dealing with the impact of those decisions on the pork and beef processing sectors. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was also involved, given its link with the FSA. DOE and NIEA were responsible for dealing with the environmental consequences of the incident. All that means that dealing with the incident was a cross-cutting issue that required close co-operation and co-ordination across the Executive.

The incident affected the whole food chain, from feed operators and suppliers to farmers, processors, retailers and, of course, consumers. Its impact spread to several sectors of the

agrifood industry. As well as affecting domestic markets, the incident affected exports to seven countries, which required regular liaison with representative bodies such as the UFU, the Meat Exporters' Association and the Pork and Bacon Forum. There was also regular engagement with DAFF, DEFRA and the European Commission.

Given the wide-ranging nature of the incident and the different roles and responsibilities of the bodies involved, it is right that we should review the incident and learn lessons for the future. I will highlight the positive and negative aspects of the way in which the incident was handled. On the positive side, an important factor in the handling of the incident was the joined-up and co-ordinated action of Departments, which was facilitated by the inter-departmental group that DARD set up and co-ordinated.

Once Dublin advised DARD of the incident, the Department acted quickly, using its animal movement and recording system, APHIS, to trace the premises that had potentially received contaminated material and to put in place restrictions to prevent animals moving off those premises and entering the food chain. That responsiveness was critical in maintaining consumer confidence and ensuring that our future reputation in the marketplace was not undermined.

There was frequent communication with affected farmers and the UFU throughout the incident, and DETI and Invest NI communicated frequently with processing interests. We worked effectively with the FSA and AFBI to identify the number of animals that could be legitimately removed from the cull and disposal scheme.

To put the matter into context, after the Twenty-six Counties ruled us out of its aid package at the end of January, the Executive decided at their meeting on 12 February to seek approval for an emergency support measure. We moved to obtain EU approval for the emergency support measure regulation, and the First Minister, the deputy First Minister, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I met the then commissioner, Mariann Fischer Boel, to lobby for approval for the measure. Once that approval and the related state-aid approval were obtained, we acted quickly to make hardship payments and to operate the cull and disposal scheme.

Members will be aware that every Department contributed to that and that we paid out as

quickly as possible. We faced other pressures in what was a difficult financial climate, but we still recognised the need to support producers. Indeed, I spoke very firmly at the Executive about the need to support our producers. The arrangements for testing were co-ordinated with AFBI. That worked well, and AFBI played a very important role by providing scientific advice throughout the incident.

However, there were also negatives, and many Members have mentioned them. The incident points to some areas where legislation could be strengthened. In contrast with cases of animal disease, there is no provision in EU legislation to prevent the movement or slaughter of animals affected by dioxins. That needs to be addressed at EU level, and my officials have already raised that matter with DEFRA. We encountered a difficulty in that the Department's legal vires did not apply because of the nature of the incident. The legislation that relates to the detention of contaminated feed also needs to be amended, and there is scope to improve the understanding of the science associated with the relationship between PCBs and dioxins.

The report of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development makes a number of very relevant and useful recommendations that will contribute to an improvement in the handling of any future incident. It is one of a number of review reports that have been completed recently. The FSA has reviewed its handling of the incident, and two reports have been completed by Dublin, one by the Oireachtas Joint Committee and another by an inter-agency group chaired by Professor Patrick Wall. The Executive have also commissioned a review of the handling of the incident, which is being carried out by Kenneth Mackenzie, who will report later this month. It is important to ensure that we take account of all those reports in our planning for any future emergency incident.

Part of the Committee report focuses on the need to streamline the number of statutory and other agencies that share responsibility for the production, processing and promotion of safe food. The Committee has suggested the establishment of an incident management group to ensure that a strategic approach is taken during any future incident. The Executive review will consider and make recommendations on that role, and the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of relevant bodies involved in the incident. It will also identify barriers to good communication

and management. The review team has been asked to consider that and other relevant recommendations in the Committee's report.

The report is critical of the failure of the Southern authorities to provide full and early information on the seriousness of the position that was developing in the South over 5 and 6 December 2008. I agree in principle with the Committee that the more warning we have about any incident, the better prepared we will be. I understand that the information that contaminated material had been sent to premises in the North was established only late on 4 December, and communicated to DARD on 5 December. At that time, there was no suggestion that feed had been contaminated with dioxins. On 5 December, DARD acted in a precautionary and proportionate way, given the information that we had, to restrict movements off the premises in the North that had been identified as having received contaminated material. It was only the following evening, when the DAFF Minister announced that dioxins had been detected, and that he was ordering a recall of pork products, that the full implications of the incident became apparent.

Many Members have mentioned the way in which I learned about this matter. I bring Members back to that Saturday evening. My baby was six weeks old at that time; I was at home watching TV with the children, watching Eoghan Quigg on 'The X Factor'. I will never forget it; I never want to go back to that time. We flicked over to the RTÉ news and I learned about the issue. That was the end of my weekend and my maternity leave, such as it was. I will not forget it in a hurry.

In accordance with the co-operative manner in which we work, it would have been appropriate for me to have been advised of the presence of dioxins in advance of the public announcement in Dublin. I am disappointed with that, and I made that clear to my counterpart in Dublin. However, I reiterate that I am content that the action that DARD took on the Friday in response to the notification that it received was appropriate.

The Executive review will make recommendations on communications, and, pending the report of that review and following discussions between Brendan Smith and me at a North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting, interim arrangements have been made between DARD and DAFF for the notification of any incident that

may have a potential impact on animal products in the food chain. Those measures build on the well-established arrangements for notification of animal disease emergencies and have recently been utilised in exchanging information on other potential food scares. For example, DARD was alerted early to the potential contamination of pig feed by selenium, and, just recently, about the finding of dioxins in a feed ingredient. In both cases, the findings did not identify any need for action. I understand that the FSA has developed early warning arrangements with the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, which are being formalised in a concordat.

2.15 pm

The Committee's report also comments on the perceived delay by the Executive in compiling an aid package. It requests that we review the scope to provide further assistance to businesses affected by the feeding of contaminated feed, or those that incurred costs through, for example, the disposal of slurry, milk and processed retail products.

The reference in the report to aid being limited to 25% of the direct verifiable cost, or 25% of the value of animals, is incorrect. The Executive made £9.6 million available for hardship payments and to meet the costs of a cull and disposal scheme. The Executive did not agree that the hardship payments should cover a specified percentage of losses. Although a small number of claims from processing companies remain to be dealt with, the cost of the cull and disposal scheme was met fully by the Executive, and hardship payments have been made of up to 70% of the eligible cost incurred by processors and producers.

On the point about delay, I should emphasise that, in the initial stages, the Executive were making representations to the Southern Government to allow producers and processors in the North to access their aid arrangements. Once it was formally confirmed at the end of January 2009 that the Government in the South were unable to do so, the Executive acted quickly to put an aid package in place and to obtain an exceptional support measure regulation and the associated state-aid approval from the European Commission.

I stress that the decision to provide £9.6 million was taken when the Executive were facing significant financial constraints and had reallocated resources to deal with

pressures arising from the economic downturn. The Executive did not seek to provide full compensation for the losses experienced by any business affected by the incident. Although the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has secured further state-aid approval to allow it to make payments for processed material destroyed outwith the cull and disposal scheme, there is no scope to make available further additional assistance.

I note the Committee's recommendation that we act jointly with the South to explore the potential for future joint applications to the EU for the authority to pay aid in the event of any further incident. Under state-aid rules, however, public funding in response to any emergency is possible only in an exceptional situation. The EU has commissioned work on the scope for a system of financial guarantees or insurance to be adopted to enable industry to reduce financial exposure to any future animal, food or feed emergency.

Funding for hardship payments to producers and processors was possible only by re-prioritising expenditure across all Departments. There can be no guarantee that it will be possible to provide similar support in the future. The onus of responsibility lies with the food business operators to provide safe and wholesome food and to exercise every due diligence. I am pleased to learn, therefore, that the livestock and feed sectors of the industry are working together to examine ways of strengthening controls and quality assurance arrangements.

I repeat that I welcome the Committee's report. The Executive are willing to work with the Committee to develop an action plan that addresses its recommendations. However, that would be best done after we have received and considered the report of the review that Kenneth Mackenzie has undertaken for the Executive. We should aim to have a fully joined-up and coherent action plan that addresses all the appropriate recommendations in the various reports.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development: December is a critical time for pig producers. They spend all year fattening their pigs to ensure that ham and pork products are available for the Christmas market and that people are able to celebrate with the foodstuff that they want. It is normally a time of financial rejoicing for producers, but on the morning of

7 December 2008, their joy was shattered. As Jim Shannon rightly stated, the industry was left overwhelmingly bewildered because it did not expect to wake up to the devastating news that pork products were being recalled. Families justifiably felt that their livelihoods had been stolen in a way that need not have happened.

Let us not beat about the bush: let us get right to the crux of the matter. The most critical contributory factor to our pig industry almost collapsing was the absence of appropriate communication from Ministers and authorities in the Republic of Ireland. It is a disgrace that not one but two Northern Ireland Ministers were not formally advised of the serious situation. It is a disgrace that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development learned of the crisis only from a news bulletin that was broadcast late on the Saturday evening. It is a disgrace that the inter-agency review group in the Republic of Ireland dismissed our concerns by claiming that communications were timely and informative, based on the fact that an e-mail was issued to a lowly official late on the Friday evening, followed by a second e-mail the next day.

It is also a disgrace that a meeting of the Government of the Republic of Ireland, which included the Taoiseach, the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the Minister for Health and Children and the Chief Medical Officer never considered it appropriate to contact any of their counterparts in the Northern Ireland Executive. Instead, they allowed the authorities in the Republic of Ireland to position themselves, their market and their food sector, and to take steps to protect and to move their industry forward.

Furthermore, it is a disgrace that the Agriculture Committee's evidence session in the Republic of Ireland was cold-shouldered and avoided by the authorities and the corresponding Ministry there. They took cold feet because when the Agriculture Committee is speaking with a united and unified voice, they are right to tremble. I assure the House that the Committee report points blame. One of my colleagues said that it does not, but the report states loudly and clearly that the authorities in the Republic of Ireland are guilty as charged. They had responsibilities that they completely failed to meet.

My views on the cynical positioning of government and industry in the Republic of Ireland are well known and are recorded in the Hansard minutes

of evidence that are appended to the Committee's report. However, it is evident to my colleagues on the Committee and to me that the authorities in the Republic of Ireland put their interests and their industry first, despite understanding the impact that the recall of pig meat would have on our industry in Northern Ireland. At the highest levels of government, they decided to proceed with the recall without informing the Northern Ireland Executive. In cross-examining a Mr Heraghty and a Mr Ryan from the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the Republic of Ireland, Mr Molloy quite rightly said:

"You were taking advantage of the time that you had so that your industry would be protected, and when the recall happened, the industry here was in second place."

I say a hearty "hear, hear" to that cross-examination, because it is absolutely correct. Our country and our industry were put in second place when the industry ought to have been working collectively to protect all.

The Republic of Ireland effectively told pig farmers and consumers in Northern Ireland, and our Minister, to go and get stuffed. They ignored us and tried to walk away. It is interesting that we are having the debate on the day on which the 'Belfast Telegraph' carries a poll about a united Ireland. The approach of the industry in the South to our industry says that that will be a mighty long day a-coming if that is its attitude to people in Northern Ireland. Perhaps we accepted too readily assurances from authorities in the Republic and from officials here that a collective approach was being taken to animal health matters. There were assurances that a fortress Ireland approach to animal health issues would secure our positions and our markets, but this incident absolutely decimates any confidence in the processes that were supposed to be in place, and it has put our industry, quite rightly, on alert status.

There is a saying that the stupid never forgive nor forget, the naive forgive and forget, and the wise forgive but do not forget. The Committee in this House is made up of all parties of this House, and it ain't stupid. It will not be naive, nor will it naively accept the assurances of the all-Ireland, all-island animal health strategy. It will, instead, demand evidence that that is being applied collectively. In time, we may show forgiveness for what has been done and for the inexcusable actions of the authorities in the Republic of Ireland to our industry, but I assure

the House and the authorities in the Republic of Ireland that we will not forget.

Our industry has lost £15 million. Family businesses have been destroyed, and some of them have been put right to the wall deliberately, so that competitive markets in the Republic of Ireland can advance their position. That is a disgrace, and it is something that the House will not forget easily.

We are all too painfully aware that because of the tightening of the economic belt, the Department here in Northern Ireland does not have the resources to pay out vast amounts of compensation, but I again call on the Executive to reassess the hardship scheme, with a view to helping all those who lost out through no fault of their own, and to do that expeditiously. I ask the House to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on its inquiry into the dioxin contamination incident of December 2008; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in liaison with Executive colleagues, to bring forward a timetable for implementing the recommendations contained in the report.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Education

Capital Projects

1. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Education to outline the position on her Department's review of all current major capital projects. (AQO 917/10)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Cuideoidh an t-athbhreithniú caipitil le cur chuige níos straitéisí a fhoirmiú do chinntí maidir le hinfheistíocht chaipitil agus do bhainistiú an eastáit scoile.

The capital review will inform a more strategic approach to capital investment decisions and the management of the schools estate. In the current economic climate, the review will ensure that available resources are used to secure the best outcomes for children and young people and maximum value for the taxpayer. In light of that, it is important that we validate that the capital projects in which we invest are viable in the long term.

I remind the Assembly of the consequences of instances when capital investment is not scrutinised and planned robustly. The newbuild Balmoral High School opened in 2002 at a capital cost of £7.4 million. It closed in August 2008. I remind the House that I was not the person who made the decision about the opening of that school. I want to ensure that such a situation does not arise again. Planning must be robust, and it is critically important that investment in the education estate is consistent with and supportive of the policy framework that the Department of Education (DE) has in place and that it adheres to our statutory duties to equality and targeting on the basis of need. At the heart of that is Every School a Good School; the revised curriculum; the sustainable schools policy; the Irish-medium review; and the entitlement framework. As area-based planning develops, those policies will drive the reshaping of our estate and the consequential investment plans.

Since I took up office in May 2007, 39 major capital school projects have been completed. That represents an investment of more than

£253 million in our schools estate. A further 16 major capital school projects are on site, which represents a further investment of more than £252 million. I am sure that Members will agree that that represents a substantial level of resources, which are being targeted at the reshaping and modernising of the schools estate to enhance the quality of provision for all our young people. It is imperative that we continue to meet their needs through a sound investment strategy.

I put on record my support for the Catholic sector for the process that it is carrying out at the moment. It is radical and forward thinking, and my Department will work closely with it on that process.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for her answer. What percentage of the Minister's capital spend will be used to finance existing commitments and how many new projects will be commenced in the incoming year? Was the Minister content with the budget allocation that she received this year?

The Minister of Education: Are Ministers ever content with the budget allocations that they receive? I welcome the Member's question about that issue. I would love to have more money and, if parties opposite or on this side of the House want to support me on that, I would very much welcome it. I will write to the Member at the appropriate time with the answers to the first part of his question.

Mr Storey: When will the Minister give us a detailed answer in the House about the criteria that will be used for the review? Some time ago, she told the House that the review would be swift and robust, and she continually comes to the House and repeats the same old mantra about policies that have not even been approved. In fact, the entitlement framework might not even come into existence in 2013, because the Minister is removing financial commitments in relation to the entitlement framework. Is it acceptable that Castle Tower School, which a special school in my constituency, has been waiting for years for a decision from the Minister, despite a commitment that she made in the House before Christmas that that project would move forward? The project is stuck in the process, where, I suspect, the Minister is trying to wangle money out to give to other sectors of education provision in Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Education: I have given detailed answers about criteria.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Considering that the £170 million that the Minister mentioned for capital schemes has been spent on existing costs, how much money does she have available for fresh newbuilds during the coming year?

The Minister of Education: The net capital budget for DE in 2010-11 is £169.3 million. At present, capital spending plans for 2010-11 have not been finalised. It is also important to note that DE's capital budget does not cover merely the construction of new schools; it also covers investment in transport; youth provision; early years provision; minor works, and several other capital requirements, such as professional design and project-management services. The budget for all capital works, which include each of those key areas of capital investment, is still under consideration.

I reiterate that I very much look forward to the House's support for my acquisition of any further money that may become available for capital investment.

Funding

2. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Education to outline the amount of funding that her Department earmarked for specific programmes or projects in each of the past four years. (AQO 918/10)

The Minister of Education: In addition to discretionary budgets for education and library boards; voluntary grammar schools; grant-maintained integrated schools; and other sponsored bodies, the amount of funding for specific programmes and projects in each of the past four years is as follows: in 2006-07, it was £158 million; in 2007-08, it was £181 million; in 2008-09, it was £200 million; and in 2009-2010, it was £186 million. For comparison purposes, the amounts relate to budgets that are set aside for such projects and programmes at the start of each financial year.

I measc na rudaí as a n-íocann na hacmhainní, tá seirbhísí ríomhaire do gach scoil faoi thionscnamh C2k, tacaíocht do pháistí leochaileacha agus daoine oga a dtéann an tOrdú um Leanáí i bhfeidhm orthu.

Those resources pay for, among other things, computer services for all schools under the C2k initiative; support for vulnerable children and young people who are impacted by the Children Order 1995; young people who have specific special needs, such as those who are deaf and partially sighted; furniture and equipment for newly built schools; provision of thousands of places in voluntary playgroups in order to ensure that parents of youngsters who are in their preschool year have choice; and a wide range of key policies that bring tangible results to children and young people, such as the extended schools programme.

One of my key priorities is to ensure that the education and skills authority (ESA) is established as soon as possible, so that the efficiencies that it is intended to deliver can be realised to the benefit of all children and young people.

Mr K Robinson: I am sure that the money that has been spent on the ESA already will be taken into account.

To protect front line services and to maximise schools' autonomy, will the Minister undertake to significantly reduce budgets that have been set aside for specific programmes and, perhaps, give the House an indication of the level of cuts that will be likely and the percentage that will come out of current expenditure?

The Minister of Education: As I have said to the House, I am doing everything that I can to minimise the impact on front line services. The ESA is one of the best ways to ensure that there is cohesiveness and consistency throughout the North of Ireland. As the Member will know, there are currently five different boards and many different organisations. It must be ensured that money is not spent on bureaucracy and administration as has happened previously.

Not all funding can be allocated to schools. I gave a few examples of where a cohesive policy is needed, such as provision of C2k and protection of children and young people. Obviously, child protection is a key area. Extended schools are another case in point. I agree with the Member that, of course, the more money that can be allocated to front line services, the better. The best way to do that is to establish the ESA as quickly as possible.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister outline how she plans to make the savings that are required by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP)?

The Minister of Education: I am in discussion with my senior officials on all aspects of the budget. Obviously, I will not go into detail on some of those savings because the Assembly is not the place for that discussion; that place is at the Executive. However, it is essential that the ESA is established so that the Department can ensure that it gets money to front line services.

Educational Underachievement

3. **Mr Leonard** asked the Minister of Education what her Department is doing to address underachievement in the education system. (AQO 919/10)

The Minister of Education: Educational underachievement occurs when performance is below what is expected, based on ability. Research on the impact of selection shows that preparing children for transfer tests distorted the curriculum and required teachers to adopt a narrow repertoire of teaching strategies, rather than fully developing literacy and numeracy through more engaging approaches set within a broad and balanced curriculum. Pupils not entered for tests received unequal or less attention than transfer test pupils, and some children had classroom experiences that not only failed to meet their needs as learners, but left them uninterested, demotivated and misunderstood as learners. I introduced transfer 2010 to put an end to those detrimental effects, particularly on our most disadvantaged young people.

Más fíor don fhianaise, ba chóir dá lán níos mó daoine óga in ann an scoil a fhágáil agus cúig ghrád GCSE A réalta go C ar a laghad acu, lena n-áirítear Béarla nó Gaeilge agus matamaitic, agus a fhágann an scoil agus na gráid sin acu faoi láthair.

Evidence suggests that many more young people should be able to leave school having achieved a level equivalent to at least five good GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English or Gaeilge and maths, than is currently the case. However, I am glad to report to the House that those figures have improved. In 2006, 12,000 young people left school without those qualifications; in 2007, that figure was 11,000; and, in 2008, that figure was 10,000. Therefore, we have made an improvement, but the numbers are still far too high and we cannot become complacent. Too often, underachievement is related to socio-

economic disadvantage and is compounded by poverty of aspiration. My focus is on tackling underachievement wherever it exists and on improving outcomes for all our young people.

In addition to transfer 2010, I am putting in place a range of interconnected policies aimed at ensuring that every child fulfils her or his potential: Every School a Good School; the revised curriculum; the literacy and numeracy strategy; the review of special educational needs and inclusion; the entitlement framework; the establishment of the education and skills authority; and the Achieving Derry and Achieving Belfast programmes. I am also working through the North/South Ministerial Council because underachievement is an issue of concern right across the island.

Mr Leonard: I thank the Minister for her answer. She made many points clustering around demotivation that we can all identify. Will she confirm the action taken by the Department when educational provision is found to be less than satisfactory?

The Minister of Education: Cuimsíonn ‘Gach Scoil ina Scoil Mhaith — Beartas um Fheabhsú Scoileanna’ próiseas foirmeálta idirghabhála do na scoileanna sin a mheas an Chigireacht Oideachais agus Oiliúna a bheith “uireasach” nó “míshásúil”.

Let me be clear. The Department will take action when provision is found to be less than satisfactory. Our first priority must always be the interests of young people. Every School a Good School, which is our policy for school improvement, includes a formal intervention process for those schools that are evaluated by the Education and Training Inspectorate as inadequate or unsatisfactory. The formal intervention process requires the boards working, when appropriate, with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and other sectoral support bodies as necessary to work with such schools. They should ensure that the school receives the support that it needs to address the areas for improvement identified by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).

The ETI will monitor the progress made by the school and report to the Department. The expectation is that, with support, schools will make the necessary improvements. However, if a school does not make sufficient progress, action will be taken to safeguard the education of its pupils. That will depend on

the circumstances of the school, and might include restructuring the governance, leadership and management of that school; merging the school with a neighbouring one; closing the school and reopening after a period with a new management team; or closure of the school. However, we cannot stand by, as direct rule Ministers did in the past, and allow generations of young people to leave school without minimum qualifications.

2.45 pm

Mr Bell: Does the Minister accept that, on the subject of educational achievement, our prep schools are responsible for educational excellence, and will she withdraw her proposal to take away prep school funding by September 2010, given that, in my constituency, it has been shown to cost an extra £5 million, it disadvantages the Protestant community, it affects children with special educational needs, and it has left children in prep schools traumatised and, indeed, terrorised?

The Minister of Education: I do not see the relevance of that question to the substantive question. We are talking about school improvement policy. I would welcome the Member's question at the appropriate moment.

Mr P Ramsey: In relation to underachievement, what GCSE grade does the Minister equate to a level of competency in literacy and numeracy, and what is the basis of that view?

The Minister of Education: The Department has different ways of measuring literacy and numeracy and what qualifications young people should have when leaving school. I outlined in my answer the improvements that have been made to date in relation to grades A* to C. I welcome those improvements, which mean that 1,000 extra young people are achieving those grades each year since I took office in 2007. That can have a significant advantage for those young people and for generations of people to come, but there are still far too many young people who are not getting the qualifications that they need, and my Department is working to ensure that there is much more equality in the system.

Islandmagee Primary Schools

4. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the time taken by

her Department in handling the agreed amalgamation of the primary schools in Islandmagee. (AQO 920/10)

The Minister of Education: Thit an rollú fadtéarma don bhunscoil atá beartaithe do Oileán Mhic Aodha go leibhéal atá go suntasach faoi bhun na hÍostairsí de 105 atá leagtha amach i mbeartas na Roinne um scoileanna inbhuanaithe i leith bunscoileanna tuaithe.

The long-term enrolment for the proposed new primary school in Islandmagee has declined to a level substantially below the minimum enrolment threshold of 105 outlined in the Department's sustainable schools policy for a sustainable rural primary school. Given the concerns regarding sustainability, my officials have asked the North Eastern Education and Library Board to consider provision in the wider area and provide the Department with a strategic view.

Mr Beggs: With due respect to the Minister, my question asked for her assessment on the length of time it has taken to build the new school. Does the Minister accept that the inordinate length of time taken in getting the process through departmental structures is causing problems, and that that delay and uncertainty may well have resulted in many children passing what would be their local primary school to travel out of the area to other schools? Does she, therefore, accept that the Department has a degree of responsibility, in that that delay may well have caused the numbers to decline, thus creating that uncertainty? Will the Minister carry out a survey of the number of children who are travelling out of Islandmagee to be schooled elsewhere?

The Minister of Education: I cannot take responsibility for previous Ministers; all I can do is take responsibility for what I am doing. I absolutely agree with the Member that the best scenario is where children do not bypass local schools and parents support their local schools, because that is the best way of building strong, cohesive, vibrant communities. The difficulty with the Islandmagee situation is that the original economic appraisal was based on a long-term enrolment of five class bases, or 116 to 145 pupils. However, enrolments at the existing school have declined year on year since 2004. As I said, the long-term enrolment at present for the proposed amalgamated school is 79 pupils — only three class bases. However, I absolutely

agree with the Member; it is important that all of us support our local schools.

Mr Neeson: I am obviously very disappointed about Islandmagee, but schools right across east Antrim are awaiting decisions. I am thinking of Woodburn Primary School in Carrick, Corran Integrated Primary School in Larne and Belfast High School in Newtownabbey. Can the Minister give me any indication of when decisions will be taken on those applications?

The Minister of Education: The education and skills authority, when established, will have full responsibility for bringing forward area-based plans, which will include the east Antrim area, but in the interim my Department will work closely with the school managing authorities to develop a more strategic approach to planning that is in the best interests of all young people in the area.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Unfortunately, amalgamations are a reality in today's society, due to changing demographics and an increase in the number of empty school desks. That applies at both primary and secondary levels. Will the Minister outline why the scheme for Islandmagee is being reviewed?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. As I explained, the original economic appraisal was based on a long-term enrolment of five class bases, or 116 to 145 pupils. Since 2004, the enrolments have declined year on year. There are now 79 pupils, or three class bases. That gives rise to concern about continued sustainability.

Preparatory Schools: Funding

5. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Education for an update on her Department's funding for preparatory schools. (AQO 921/10)

The Minister of Education: Tá 16 rannóg ullmhúcháin faoi láthair atá ceangailte le scoileanna gramadaí. Don bhliain airgeadais 2008-09, bhí 2,411 dalta ag freastal orthu, agus soláthraíodh cistiú de £1,896 milliún faoin fhoirmle choiteann maoinithe.

There are currently 16 preparatory departments attached to grammar schools. In the 2008-09 financial year, 2,411 funded pupils attended those schools, and the funding provided under the common funding formula amounted to

£1.896 million. In 2008-09, the respective fees for those preparatory departments ranged from £1,900 to £3,295 per pupil. Effectively, that is buying access to a preparatory department, thereby creating inequality.

It is inequitable to continue a situation in which public funding is provided to schools that accept only children whose parents can afford to pay those significant fees. As the Member will know, the report of the Independent Strategic Review of Education, which is known as the Bain report, was published in December 2006, prior to my coming into office. It highlighted the issue of funding for preparatory schools. One of the report's key recommendations was that the rationale for funding preparatory departments in grammar schools should be reviewed. George Bain stated:

"Equity must continue to be at heart of this distribution. For this reason, the part-funding of fee-charging preparatory departments in grammar schools is anomalous. This aspect of delegation subsidises provision that can only be accessed by children whose parents can pay the requisite fee. This would seem to be an inequitable use of public funds and counterintuitive in a funding system simultaneously managing the pressures of a high level of surplus capacity... The rationale for this aspect of schools-related current expenditure should be reviewed and its continuation considered with regard to equity and in the context of the significant pressures on the education budget."

In its document, 'Every Child an Equal Child', the Equality Commission stated that a key component of a quality education system is the provision of equality of access to good education. On its position on the funding of preparatory departments, the Equality Commission stated:

"Preparatory departments inherently do not provide equality of access as attendance is dependent on the parents/families ability to pay additional substantial costs."

My Department commissioned the Department of Finance and Personnel's business consultancy service to undertake a review of the funding and to provide a report of its findings. The report concluded that my Department should consider the withdrawal of funding to preparatory departments on the basis of equality of access. I must stress that the business consultancy service is under the Department of Finance and Personnel.

I decided that, before making a final decision on the matter, an equality impact assessment (EQIA) should be undertaken. That EQIA consultation closed on 4 March 2010, and I will consider the responses received before making my final decision.

Ms Lo: I sincerely thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. The Minister talked about equality. Many parents choose to send their children to preparatory schools because they are single-sex schools or because they have small classes, which are beneficial to children whose first language is not English and to those who have special or slight learning needs. Such provision is not available in mainstream schools. Even if the Minister is thinking along those lines, it is far too short notice for parents.

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

Ms Lo: Could I ask the Minister to reconsider and to perhaps think about phasing out that funding over a longer period so that parents can prepare better?

The Minister of Education: As I said, an equality impact assessment was carried out, and I will study the responses to that carefully. I consider it inequitable to continue with a situation in which public funding is provided to schools that accept only those children whose parents can afford to pay significant fees. I welcome the Member's concerns about those children of the 2,411 who attend prep schools for whom English is a second language. I ask the Member how equality can be ensured for the 70,000 children in the controlled sector and the children in the maintained sector. Funding must be allocated on the basis of equality, not on the basis of a parent's ability to pay £2,000 or £3,000 a child each year.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá ceist agam don Aire.

Is the Minister effectively telling principals of the grammar schools that are affected to close their prep schools, or can grammar schools choose to keep those units if they wish? The Minister's critics might argue that she continues to fund Irish-medium and integrated provision. Is there an issue with that?

The Minister of Education: I will answer the second question first. Is féidir le páiste ar

bith rochtain a fháil ar Ghaelscoil nó ar scoil imeasctha; níl ceangal orthu táille theagaisc a íoc leis an rochtain sin a fháil.

Any child can access an Irish-medium or integrated school, and they are not required to pay a tuition fee before doing so. The issue is about equality of access. Inherently, preparatory departments do not provide equality of access, because attendance is dependent on a parent's or a family's ability to pay substantial costs. It is not for my Department to decide on the closure of preparatory schools; it is a matter for the grammar schools. My job as Minister is to ensure equality for all children in the system.

Mr Gardiner: Does the Minister anticipate that her Department would make financial savings if prep schools were closed, or does she envisage additional costs coming from other Departments?

The Minister of Education: The review is being carried out on the basis of equality of access, not on financial grounds.

Dr McDonnell: What assessment has the Minister made of the associated knock-on costs of removing funding for preparatory schools? Will she detail what the costs might be for school funding, including those for replacing pupils in other schools, transportation to other schools where necessary, teacher redundancy costs and possible capital investment? A number of the schools that might have to take on children from preparatory schools are already full or falling down or are in considerable difficulty and do not have the capacity.

The Minister of Education: I reiterate that the Department of Education (DE) has no plans to close any preparatory schools, nor could it do so. That will be a matter for the grammar schools that have preparatory departments. The Department of Education will, of course, make provision for any children who wish to move to the publicly funded education system, and we will do that willingly. The Member said that some schools are already full, but we are in a time of demographic decline. It will be for parents, not DE, to choose to move their children. If some parents make that choice, DE will facilitate that and ensure that those children have a place.

Grammar School Admissions

6. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Education, following the Catholic Church's announcement

to end academic selection, whether she will assist those grammar schools seeking to move away from entrance tests. (AQO 922/10)

The Minister of Education: My officials and I are available to meet representatives of any grammar school that is seeking to move away from entrance tests. We will gladly provide the advice and assistance that we can to help schools to make that transition while ensuring that they continue to be centres of educational excellence in partnership with their fellow educationalists across the primary and post-primary sectors.

Academic selection is totally unnecessary. It is possible to have academic excellence without academic selection. Equality is the cornerstone of the new education system, and it is at the heart of all my policies. The Department's equality agenda includes the development of new arrangements to allow children to transfer to post-primary schools without the use of academic selection.

3.00 pm

Cuirim fáilte roimh an gcomhairliú ar an athbhreithniú ar sholáthar iarbhunscoile trasna na hearnála Caitlicí a sheol an Coimisiún d'Oideachas Caitliceach ar na mallaibh.

I welcome the consultation on the review of post-primary provision across the Catholic sector launched by the Commission for Catholic Education recently. That review opens the door for Catholic grammar schools to move away from the use of academic selection. My door is open to all grammar schools, from whatever section of the community they come, to talk about how they can join with the rest of us in creating a world-class education system for all young people.

Agriculture and Rural Development

Farm Modernisation Programme

1. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what lessons have been learnt and what changes in departmental practice are proposed to the operation of the farm modernisation programme following the difficulties experienced in tranche 1 of the programme. (AQO 931/10)

2. **Dr W McCrea** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what changes she is proposing to tranche 2 of the farm modernisation programme following representations made by the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. (AQO 932/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, George. Thanks a million for that nice wee delay. With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will answer questions 1 and 2 together.

As I indicated during the no-day-named motion debate on 8 March, and following on from my officials' presentation to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on 9 February, I have proposed a considerable number of changes for tranche 2 of the farm modernisation programme that will provide for a fair and practical scheme. In place of the first come, first served approach that was advocated by the industry for the first tranche, I intend to open tranche 2 for applications later this spring for a given period of approximately six weeks. There will be no queues, because applications will be received via a range of channels, such as online, by post or hand delivery. All applications received during that period will be assessed against four proposed additional selection criteria that will determine the allocation of the funding available under tranche 2. Those criteria have been scrutinised extensively, and I have made changes to their scoring to reflect those that the consultees wish to see. For example, I have stated that I want tranche 2 to target disadvantage in order to help smaller farm businesses that are working under poorer agriculture conditions. However, marks will now also be awarded to farm businesses in lowland areas under the land classification criterion.

The Agriculture and Rural Development Committee's representations reflected the widely expressed views that I should encourage young farmers to enter, or remain in, farming. In recognition of the fact that many of those young people are not yet the heads of their farm business, I have altered the scoring of the succession opportunity selection criterion so that a registered business member who is under 40 years of age will obtain the top score under that criterion.

I have asked officials to set up a steering group of industry representatives to consider the list of eligible items on the key degree of modernisation selection criterion for tranche 2. That steering group will address the Committee's request that additional items be included for the poultry, pig and fruit-growing sectors. As a result of those changes, and drawing on the lessons learnt from the first tranche, I hope that the operation of the second tranche programme will be enhanced significantly. However, I also hope to retain the better aspects of the first tranche with minimal bureaucracy in the simplified application form, procurement methodology assessment and claim processes, which the industry welcomed.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she outline what changes, if any, she proposes to introduce for tranche 2 of the farm modernisation programme following last week's debate in the House?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: During last week's debate, I said, clearly, that I wanted a fair and practical application process for tranche 2 funding, and that is still the case. As I said, and in response to a number of consultees who made the point about lowland farmers, I reviewed the criterion so that there are now 10 marks available for them. I am also looking at the modernisation banding and the manure efficiency technology subprogramme (METS), which was referred to in one of the amendments to last week's motion, and, we will, hopefully, get something opened up on those later this year. I have taken on board the views of the House, and those are being applied. I want to work closely with the farming industry, Members and the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development in developing my proposals.

Dr W McCrea: Having listened to last week's debate, the Minister will acknowledge that one of the changes over which the Committee had real concern was the discrimination against lowland farmers. The Committee does not want any farmer or any section of the farming community to be discriminated against. Will she heed the Committee's recommendation on that issue or continue on a confrontation course that will lead to challenge?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Member will accept that I am not confrontational by nature, and the

farm modernisation programme is certainly not sectarian or discriminatory. I have focused on the severely disadvantaged and disadvantaged areas because they suffer the most hardship, and there is a real need for modernisation.

The last social survey of farmers in 2002 showed that cattle and sheep farmers in the severely disadvantaged areas were predominantly Catholic, those in the disadvantaged areas were broadly split 50:50 between Catholics and Protestants, while the lowland farmers were predominantly Protestants. However, 70% of all agricultural land in the Six Counties is in less-favoured areas in which the farming environment is difficult and challenging and farms exist on the margins of viability. That is why I want to provide all the support that I can to help those farmers to modernise. It is a practical response to need and disadvantage.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister tell the House what engagement she has had with the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) regarding phase 2 of the funding? Will she assure the union that she has taken on board its many concerns?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I have met with farmers' unions and discussed my proposals with them. After last week's debate, I wrote to the UFU and asked it to re-engage in the process when the Department begins to develop its modernisation criteria. Unfortunately, it has advised me that it will not be able to do that.

I will continue to work with farmers' unions and other stakeholders. My key message in the Department has been about working in partnership. That is what I am doing.

Rural Isolation

3. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she intends to take to address rural isolation, particularly in terms of access to services and benefits. (AQO 933/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Shortly after taking up the post of Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, I asked departmental officials to examine the specific poverty and exclusion issues faced by rural dwellers. Following extensive research and consultation, the rural anti-poverty and social inclusion programme was developed, and interventions to address the key priorities

of the rural community, including fuel poverty, transport, community development and the rural challenge programme, were identified.

Under the assisted rural travel scheme, 6,000 rural dwellers have benefitted from concessionary fares using rural community transport partnerships. Furthermore, 90 letters of offer — each offering up to £5,000 assistance and totalling over £410,000 — have recently been issued to community and voluntary sector groups through the rural challenge programme to assist in dealing with localised rural exclusion and disadvantage. Moreover, a regional project has been established in conjunction with the Public Health Agency to maximise access to services, benefits and grants for rural dwellers, and 4,200 rural isolated households will benefit from visits from trained advisers and follow-up support. Those locally recruited and trained advisers will advise the households on locally available services and grants and benefit entitlements. The visits to households will take place in July and August 2010, and funding of £700,000 has been allocated to the project.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am curious to know how the initiatives outlined will practically correspond to, or work in conjunction with, those of the Public Health Agency. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As I said, 4,200 households across the 88 most deprived rural wards in the North will benefit from the regional project. It will involve collaboration with several Departments and agencies to ensure that the most vulnerable households, in the most deprived rural wards, are identified and receive visits from trained advisers. Thirteen lead organisations have been recruited to co-ordinate the project delivery across the North.

In simple terms, using local community knowledge, the households most in need will be identified, and trained advisers will visit, gain the confidence of householders and complete benefits and services checks. That is very important, given the level of benefit uptake. We know that there are many pensioners who are not accessing all the benefits to which they are entitled, many of whom live in rural households. We want to identify those people, advise them of their rights and ensure that they are getting the benefits to which they are entitled.

Mr Shannon: Minister, thank you for your response to the question about rural isolation. I am concerned about community transport, which is one of the issues that you referred to in your answer to the original question.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Will the Member please refer all his questions through the Chair?

Mr Shannon: I stand corrected, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Peninsula Community Transport operates within Ards Borough Council, and Down Community Transport operates within Down District Council. Under the review of public administration (RPA), there is some concern that community transport either will not continue at all or will not continue in the way in which it has in the past. Have you held any talks with those groups about those concerns?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: We are working very closely with the Department for Regional Development (DRD) to ensure that the roll-out of the assisted rural transport scheme works. We are all dying to know what the outcome of RPA will be and have been looking at it very carefully. If groups need a reconfiguration of boundaries, I presume that that will happen. The community transport projects all work very well in their areas and they also work well collaboratively and collectively. Whatever the future brings, I am sure that they will be well able for the challenge.

Mr Cree: The Programme for Government includes a commitment to address rural poverty and exclusion. Will the Minister detail any initiatives that have been undertaken that have had a genuine and positive impact on rural communities?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I will narrow my answer to that question by talking about one specific area. We have in place a range of measures to target poverty and social exclusion. Over the past few days, my Department's rural childcare programme has issued 20 letters of offer, to the value of £1.3 million, to organisations that aim to provide solutions to specific issues faced in rural areas around the delivery of and access to childcare services. That programme is the mechanism for giving rural parents the opportunity to get into training, employment or education. That is probably one of the best things that we can do to lift people out of poverty, increase their

choices and enable them to get into the workforce. There is a wide range of issues to deal with, but that is one that can help to address social exclusion and rural poverty.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin.

Will the Minister elaborate on how her Department defines rural isolation?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: We have worked very closely with stakeholders to develop projects to tackle poverty and social exclusion, and the isolation that results from that. We were asked to provide a rural challenge programme aimed at the community and voluntary sector to get to the heart of poverty, exclusion and disadvantage by equipping local groups with the necessary skills and funding to address the specific issues relevant to their areas.

Isolation can mean different things to different people, and we have taken a bottom-up approach to the issue to ensure that each area can identify problems. There is not a single catch-all definition. We have asked groups to look at the measures that we have put in place, and to use and apply them in their own areas.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member is not in his place to ask question 4.

Rural Development Programme

5. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an outline of progress on axis 3 of the rural development programme. (AQO 935/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Axis 3 of the rural development programme is being delivered on behalf of my Department by seven joint council clusters (JCC), each in partnership with a local action group. All JCCs have opened calls for applications under most measures and have approved 348 applications for grant aid worth £10 million. All those applications were assessed and recommended for approval by local action groups in line with the bottom-up ethos of the axis. My Department, in consultation with the JCC administration units, closely monitors progress and the applications that have been received.

A comprehensive review of the JCC implementation plan is planned after this financial year has ended. That will be undertaken in conjunction with the joint council committees and will examine the progress of implementation plans against their agreed targets. The outcome of the review will contribute to financial planning and to my setting of expenditure priorities in the Department.

3.15 pm

Officials have also engaged in a number of meetings with other Departments and agencies to ensure the ongoing strategic fit of the rural development programme with other funding streams. Moreover, I am aware that officials have been dealing with a number of ongoing issues, particularly in the grow area, but that they have now been largely satisfactorily addressed.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for her answer. Am I correct to say that 348 applications have been approved at a cost of £10 million? I think that I picked those figures up. Will the Minister tell the House the total number of applications that were received? Were all those applications approved? What proportion was approved?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Thus far, the joint council committees have approved 348 applications at a cost of £10 million. To date, £2.4 million has been spent under axis 3 of the programme, and projects that have been funded relate to farm diversification and to business creation and development measures. The majority of spend relates to capital grant projects. Axis 3 project spend is expected to accelerate in 2010-11 owing to the volume of letters of offer that have issued over the past four months.

Mr Bell: Given that axis 3 covers diversification into non-agriculture activities and seeks to encourage tourism, will the Minister assure us that she will liaise with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, which has identified Strangford as an area where the agriculture industry could move into promoting tourism?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Absolutely. We already work very closely with the Tourist Board. It is not often that Strangford is mentioned twice, so well done to both Members. The Tourist Board is considering areas and has signature projects. However, I want the tourism potential of axis

3 and the rural development programme to be invested in areas that might not necessarily have the same profile, such as the Sperrins. We want the money to be used in areas where the signature projects have not kicked in. Strangford has a fairly high profile. However, do not worry, because we will consider ways in which to improve the tourism infrastructure across the Six Counties.

Forestry Bill

6. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline progress on the Forestry Bill. (AQO 936/10)

8. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how the Forestry Bill will protect ancient woodland. (AQO 938/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will take questions 6 and 8 together.

After the introduction of the Forestry Bill to the Assembly on 29 June 2009, I secured Assembly agreement to the Bill's Second Stage on 15 September. The Bill then moved to Committee Stage, and on 5 October, the Assembly approved a motion to extend Committee Stage until 2 March 2010. The Committee invited written submissions from stakeholders, and a series of oral evidence sessions commenced on 3 November.

In light of feedback from those evidence sessions and from engagement with the Committee, the Department considered a number of possible amendments to the Bill. Officials attended an oral evidence scrutiny session with the Committee on 26 January and on five occasions during February. I have now obtained the Committee's agreement to all the Bill's clauses, subject to a number of amendments being agreed. However, the amendments do not affect the vision or purpose of the Bill. Committee Stage is now complete, and the Committee's finalised report, including the text of the agreed draft amendments, was laid before the Assembly on Tuesday 2 March. I am grateful to the Committee for its positive engagement with the Department on the Bill.

The Bill was always intended to protect ancient woodland by means of felling management plans to regulate the regeneration of ancient woodland sites. However, even with ancient woodland, some level of woodland management, which might include some felling, will always

be appropriate or necessary. Nevertheless, to make the Bill's intention clear, an amendment has been agreed that states that in the case of ancient woodland, any felling management plan shall have regard to the desirability of maintaining the special character of that woodland. Overall, I am very pleased with the Bill's progress so far. Consideration Stage will commence in April, and we expect to be able to complete the remaining legislative stages before the beginning of July.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her comprehensive response. Notwithstanding her replies so far, is she satisfied that the Bill provides the necessary powers to allow the forestry industry, through its various and diverse objectives, to make its contribution to issues such as climate change?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I believe that it can do that. The Bill outlines the Department's clear duty to promote forest expansion and sustainable forestry. Those are two key aims for the Department. The Bill includes a number of provisions through which the Department will seek to realise the full potential of our forests and the contribution that they can make to wider government objectives in areas such as tourism, sport, renewable energy, outdoor education and health and well-being.

The Bill includes a specific reference to climate change, and it will equip the Department with the necessary powers to promote and grant-aid new woodland creation with the associated climate change mitigation benefits. The provisions in the Bill give the Department the necessary powers to pursue all those important issues.

Ms Lo: Will the Minister encourage the restoration of ancient planted woodlands that are in private ownership?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Absolutely. We all have an interest in the protection of our ancient woodland, of which very little is left. The Bill will contain a provision to regulate the felling and regeneration of woodlands by means of a licence, which will compel forest owners to manage woodland in a sustainable manner, including the timing and extent of felling and the composition of regenerating woodlands. It is not appropriate to give absolute protection to ancient woodland, because there will

always be occasions when some level of felling is appropriate or, indeed, necessary to protect sustainability. However, the Bill will include an amendment to deal specifically with ancient woodland and to make it clear that the Department, in exercising the felling licensing system, will seek to protect the special character of the woodland.

Mr K Robinson: The Minister's response reveals the Bill's technical and all-encompassing nature. Does the Minister envisage that the Bill, once it is enacted, will help Northern Ireland to meet its annual commitment for new woodland, which, to date, her Department has not been good at achieving?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I recognise the challenges to meeting our public service agreement targets. I hope that the new grants regime that we have introduced will encourage people to plant new woodland and help, as I said in my previous answer, to mitigate some of the climate change targets, which will be equally challenging, not just for me and my Department, but for a number of Ministers in the Executive.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to switch off all electronic equipment. I call Mr Ian McCrea.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will be aware that I have, in the past, raised the issue of mountain biking in forests. Will she update the House on any progress that has been made on that, and whether it will form part of the Bill?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Although mountain biking is not specifically mentioned in the Bill, we plan to, as I said earlier, fully utilise our forests and maximise the contribution that they can make in meeting wider government objectives in areas such as tourism, sport and health and well-being. Mountain biking covers all those objectives.

I spoke to Dawson Stelfox from the Countryside Access and Activities Network on Friday 12 March 2010 about the issue of forests, and it was discussed informally at another event that I attended. It is something that is very close to my heart. I would like to see our woodlands being better utilised, not just for the creation of timber, attracting visitors or improving tourism, but for the betterment of the people who live in communities in and around forest land. I am anxious to make contact with district councils

and other bodies, because we cannot do that on our own. We have the forest land, but we need more partnership working, which I welcome. A number of good opportunities, such as the high ropes course at Tollymore Forest Park, will be available shortly. We just need to utilise them.

Townland Names

7. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will promote the use of townland names as an important part of rural identity. (AQO 937/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I am pleased to announce that my Department is moving to include townland names in the addresses of all DARD offices.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: That is a response to an initiative that was undertaken by the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure under the chairmanship of Mr McElduff. The Committee has long advocated the use of townland names and has asked all Departments, MLAs and the Assembly Commission to consider adopting their townland names as part of their official addresses. I recognise and value the historic, cultural and linguistic importance of townland names, particularly to the rural community. They are a significant part of our shared local heritage, and I am keen to support their promotion and preservation.

There has always been and continues to be a great association between people and places. A great number of townlands take their names from the people who have lived there, such as Ballyrobert, Ballynichol and Ballymurphy. Members might be interested to know that this place is in the townland of Ballymiscaw, which translates as the fort of the shadows.

I know that the Member, in his capacity as Committee Chairperson, has a keen interest in the matter of townland names. He may not want me to go this far, but he is no doubt keen to stress that the translation of his townland of Aghagogan — the field where giddy-headed people congregate — does not necessarily reflect the character of the people who live there today. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call "Bally" McElduff for a supplementary.

Mr McElduff: I am grateful to the Minister. I welcome her and her Department's proactive approach to highlighting and promoting townland names. She has covered everything that I intended to ask in my supplementary question. However, will the Minister contend that townland names and place names are equally as relevant to urban settings as they are to rural settings? Some Departments are hiding behind that fig leaf of an excuse.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I assure the Committee Chairperson that there is not a fig leaf big enough. *[Laughter.]* I have no hesitation in encouraging anyone to use and to promote the use of townland names. I hope that by including townland names in all DARD office addresses, which are rural in their nature but located in towns nonetheless, I am leading by example.

We can look to some good examples. Members might not know that if they look at the Google Earth map of Fermanagh, the townland names are visible. It is a bit of a shock to compare that map of Fermanagh to other counties that do not have the same coverage. Good work is being done. Fermanagh District Council and others have done a good job generally, but much more can be done. I want to see my Department playing its role as well. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the initiative that has been taken by the Minister and congratulate her on being the second Minister to take the issue on board. Her colleague the Minister of Education informed our Committee last week that her Department is going to use Rathgael House and other —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to come to his question.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister further twist the arm of or entice her other Executive colleagues to take the lead from her and Caitríona Ruane and implement what this Assembly voted for eight years ago. I am delighted that, eight years after the Assembly took a decision, some Executive Ministers are doing what they have been asked to do.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Member will be interested to know that I recently wrote to the Minister of Finance and Personnel about the place names project that Queen's University is developing

in the hope that I could, if not strong-arm him, then entice him into instructing his Department to look at how we can further protect and preserve townland names. We all have a shared interest, and that can only strengthen our cultural heritage. I encourage all my Executive colleagues to follow mine and Caitríona's lead.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire cén uair a bheidh seoltaí bhailte fearainn ar pháipéarachas na Roinne.

When can we hope to see townland names used on the Department's stationery?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: We will phase in the use of townland names as stationery is reprinted. I have already started to use townland names in the addresses of DARD offices. It will not be done overnight, but we will also look to enable people to put the name of their townland on DARD forms, and so on.

3.30 pm

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

Private Members' Business

Cafe Culture Society

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to bring forward legislation to enable the hospitality industry to create a cafe culture society similar to that in other European cities, towns and villages to help promote the tourism, leisure and hospitality industries. — [Mr McElduff.]

Motion not moved.

Preparatory Departments

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee previously agreed that, when two or more amendments have been selected, additional time may be allocated at the Speaker's discretion. As two amendments have been selected, up to one hour and 45 minutes will be allowed for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Miss McIlveen: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the Department of Education's decision to withdraw funding from the preparatory departments of grammar schools as demonstrated by the Department's budget proposals for 2010-11; believes that the consultation process undertaken by the Department does not meet with the Sedley requirements on the standards of proper consultation; considers that this proposal is contentious and should be considered by the full Executive; recognises the excellence in terms of attainment achieved by those pupils attending preparatory departments and the value for money that these departments represent in terms of funding by the Department of Education; further believes that the withdrawal of such funding would represent a false economy, suppress social mobility and restrict parental choice; and calls on the Minister of Education to reverse the decision.

I also indicate my intention to accept the SDLP's amendment.

It is another sad day in the life of the Assembly when we have to debate another unnecessary crisis that has been created by the Minister of Education. It is with some concern that I note that it appears that the Minister of Education seeks to undermine education provision for some 2,500 pupils for no reason other than some kind of ideological jihad.

On 7 January 2010, the Minister launched a consultation on the draft equality impact assessment on the proposal to withdraw funding from the 16 preparatory departments of grammar schools in Northern Ireland. That consultation was ostensibly based on the independent strategic review of education, which recommended that the rationale for funding preparatory departments in grammar schools should be reviewed. However, we know only too well that the Minister likes to pick and choose provisions from the Bain report to support and suit whatever her ideological aims may be.

It is all well and good for the Minister to carry out consultation; indeed, she is required to do so by law. However, the Minister needs to be aware that a consultation should not simply pay lip service to the law. I draw her attention to the Sedley requirements. They are named after Stephen Sedley QC, who submitted them in legal argument in the case of *R v Brent London Borough Council, ex parte Gunning* (1985). Mr Justice Hodgson's decision in that case, which has been reaffirmed in case after case, establishes a number of requirements that must be carried out to meet the standards of proper consultation. First, a consultation must take place before a decision is taken, and it should be capable of informing the decision to be taken. Secondly, true reasons must be given for the proposals in order that proper consultation can be given and a full response made. Thirdly, there must be adequate time given for the consultation in order that proper consideration can be given to it and to allow for a full response. Finally, the responses to the consultation must be thoroughly, fairly and appropriately considered before finalising any proposals.

I submit that the first of the Sedley requirements is not met because the Minister has already taken the decision to remove funding. That means that the consultation does not meet the fourth requirement of Sedley, because there is no chance of the responses being conscientiously considered by the Department.

In the amendment tabled by the Minister's party colleagues, we are asked to note:

"that the proposed withdrawal of funding from the preparatory departments of grammar schools was part of the package of efficiencies agreed by the Minister of Education following the outcome of the Budget 2007 process".

It is clear from the Minister's 2010-11 budget figures that she has factored in the removal of the funding to prep departments in her spending plans. That is proof, if it were needed, that the Minister has already decided to withdraw the funding. The consultation is merely a matter of going through the motions. Regardless of the equality issues surrounding the withdrawal, she is intent on pressing ahead. Comments made earlier by the Minister during Question Time reinforce that impression.

What is even more incredible is the limited scope of the consultation on the review of funding to the prep departments of grammar schools on which this EQIA is based. The consultation is limited to schools, whereas, in the opinion of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), it warranted a full consultation. I understand that NICCY was not even consulted on it. It seems that the Minister and her Department play fast and loose with the concept of consultation, but perhaps that should not surprise me.

Why is the Minister doing this? It is just clumsy, clichéd gesture politics. She believes that prep departments are elitist. She chooses to disregard the hard-working parents who continually make sacrifices for the betterment of their children. My office has been inundated, as I am sure those of all Members of the Assembly have been, with letters from distraught parents on this issue.

The effect of this decision is felt particularly in my constituency of Strangford, where the prep department of Regent House School is situated. Parents of the children in that prep department and of children in other prep departments across Northern Ireland do not fall neatly into the Sinn Féin stereotype of wealthy elites. They are hard-working parents who make sacrifices to give their children the best chance in life, in order that they can go to schools that produce good results and have reasonable class sizes. Those parents are tilers, joiners, greengrocers, digger-drivers and mechanics. They have

indicated that the decision not only takes away their choice of a non-denominational school for their children outside of the controlled primary, maintained or integrated sectors but, in some cases, removes the choice of sending their child to a single-sex school. I refer the Minister to article 44 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, which enshrines in law the right of parental choice:

"so far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure, pupils shall be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents."

Does the Minister care about the upheaval she is causing children and the distress she is causing parents? For what? It cannot be because it will save money. Those prep departments provide excellent teaching and learning environment at a cost of £808 per pupil to the taxpayer. The parents of the pupils pay the remainder of the fees. Compare that to the fully state-funded schools, where an average of around £2,911 is spent on each pupil. If the Minister believes that by removing funding from the prep departments we will save money, she is sadly mistaken. By removing that funding, she will put prep departments out of the reach of many parents who work hard to spend that bit extra to help their children. It will result in enrolment numbers falling; and the further they fall, the higher fees will climb. That will inevitably lead to a greater fall in enrolment and so on. It is obvious that prep departments will eventually close if the Minister does not reverse her decision, which will lead to a greater drain on the education budget. If all prep departments in Northern Ireland were to close, it could cost the education budget an additional £5.1 million, whereas it costs just £1.9 million to fund them. In this time of necessary cuts, how can the Minister justify that?

One of the most striking concerns is the complete lack of planning or transitional arrangements following the decision to remove funding. If prep departments close, how will the move to primary schools be managed? Has the Minister considered the implications of their closure in human costs? What will happen to the teachers? Are the primary schools that are local to those prep departments full? What about the specific impact on children in year 6 who are entering year 7 and intending to sit transfer tests? I know that the Minister is no

fan of those tests, but to add additional strain to those children is, frankly, cruel. However, the Minister intends to remove that funding in the forthcoming year. That gives parents no time to plan. That decision flies in the face of her earlier proposals on numeracy and literacy and early years provision.

The Minister has stated that she wants to invest more in primary education to tackle underachievement. However, figures cited in the review of funding show that prep departments represent good value for money. The report acknowledges that prep departments attained significantly higher results than primary schools in Key Stage 1 in English and maths in 2007-08. It points out that the percentage of pupils in prep departments attaining level 3 in English is more than double that of primary schools, and the results are similar in maths. That trend continues in results at Key Stage 2.

The Minister has indicated in answer to questions for written answer that, in her opinion, the decision to withdraw funding for prep departments does not fall under the list of duties outlined in section 2.4 of the ministerial code and that, therefore, she does not intend to bring the matter before her ministerial colleagues on the Executive. I challenge that opinion: it is a statutory obligation to bring matters to the Executive, and failure to do so could render any decision invalid and open to challenge. I also understand that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has written to the Minister to tell her that, since he believes it to be a contentious issue, the ministerial code requires her to bring it to the Executive. The Finance Minister made that clear during the recent Budget debate.

Given what I have said, I will not accept the amendment in the names of Mr O'Dowd and Mrs O'Neill. However, the SDLP's amendment provides a practical means to resolve the impasse by suggesting engagement by the Minister with key stakeholders.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we continue the debate, which could be lively, I remind Members of the Speaker's ruling that they should set the standards of debate that are expected in the House, namely courtesy, good temper and moderation. It is also important that Members speak through the Chair and that remarks are made through the Chair and not across the Chamber.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Could the Speaker rule why it was necessary for that reminder to be brought to the attention of the House in respect of this debate, particularly given that the Deputy Speaker is in the Speaker's position? I would like the Speaker to rule on the relevance of that matter to this debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has no right to challenge the Speaker's ruling. I drew attention to the Speaker's ruling because of the background commentary when the previous Member was speaking and because of attempts to communicate across the Chamber during this early stage of the debate, which seemed likely to continue. Therefore, I was giving clear direction on the Speaker's earlier statement when he drew attention to the fact that the debate was expected to be conducted with courtesy, good temper and moderation. I am simply giving direction that that is how we want the debate to continue.

3.45 pm

Mr O'Dowd: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "grammar schools" and insert

“; believes that primary schools provide an excellent opportunity for all children to begin their educational journey; notes that the proposed withdrawal of funding from the preparatory departments of grammar schools was part of the package of efficiencies agreed by the Minister of Education following the outcome of the Budget 2007 process; recognises that the proposal is in keeping with the recommendations of the report on the independent strategic review of education (Bain report, December 2006) and with the findings of the Department of Finance and Personnel's business consultancy service review of funding to preparatory departments of grammar schools (September 2009); and looks forward to the outcome of the equality impact assessment being undertaken by the Minister of Education to establish if the decision impacts on equality obligations.”

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I speak in favour of amendment No 1 and against the motion and the SDLP's amendment. It is strange that the House is united, or that a number of parties are united, around the motion. Last week, we witnessed severe rifts between the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party over the serious subject of policing and justice. Having listened to them last week, one would have believed that there was no chance of reconciliation. Alas, they have managed to bring

themselves together on this subject, and one has to ask why that is the case. They have not found a form of unity to tackle poverty or to deal with small rural or urban schools that face closure. Indeed, as I said, they could not find unity to tackle the serious subject of policing and justice, which concerns the safety of people in their home. Why, therefore, have they come together on the subject of prep schools? I ask the question genuinely. It is strange that the DUP, which stated that big house unionism is over, appears to be more than content to unite itself with the Ulster Unionist Party on an issue that is largely based on privilege.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will give way later.

I accept Miss McIlveen's argument that parents from a number of backgrounds send their children to prep schools and that such schools are not only for the great and the wealthy. However, the fact is that the prep schools will accept a child only if their parents hand over between £2,000 and £3,000 in that school year. That does not cover the other expenses that the family and the child incur throughout that educational year. Perhaps the parents do not protect privilege, but the prep departments certainly do.

During meetings of the Education Committee, I have asked senior representatives of the grammar schools how a parent would go about getting their child into a prep school. They gave me a list of ways, and I said that that was great. However, I asked them whether a child would get into a prep school if the parent turned up on the first day of the school term without the £2,000 or £3,000. The answer was no. We are being asked to fund or assist the funding of private education. Why are the parties on the opposite Benches united on that question?

I am sure that many people listening to the debate today will wonder what prep schools are. There may be none in their area, or perhaps none of their neighbours' children or their own children go to one. Those schools will have no relevance whatever to many people who are listening to this debate.

Mr Storey: The Member's attacks on what the Ulster Unionist Party and my party do in the House today have no relevance and are a total red herring. He is trying to politicise the issue, which is a shame on him and his party. Some

parents make sacrifices to send their children to prep schools. Will the Member tell those parents that they are wrong to make that choice for their children and that they should somehow discard that priority because it does not happen to suit the agenda of the party opposite, which has nothing to do with politics and more to do with ideology?

Mr O'Dowd: Far be it from me to break the news to the Member, but we are politicians. This is a political debating Chamber, and the Member's party was among those who tabled the motion. The Member can hardly accuse my good self of politicising the issue.

If parents wish to send their children to prep schools, I have no objection whatever to that. However, every time that the subject of grammar schools or prep schools is brought up, I question whether parents who make sacrifices to send their children to those schools are the only ones who make sacrifices and the only ones who are interested in their children's education. I am glad to say that the vast majority of parents I meet make sacrifices for their children and want the best education possible for them. The vast majority of parents I meet do not send their children to prep schools or grammar schools. Does that make them bad parents? It does not, so let us not apply the sacrifice argument to only one group of parents.

Miss McIlveen said that the Minister was involved in an ideological jihad — I think that that was the term that she used. Several reports on the subject in which the Minister had no involvement have been published. The Bain report, which is the main report on the subject, was produced before the Minister came into office. It refers to the funding of prep schools as being inequitable. Is that an ideological jihad? That other famous Department that is hardly renowned for its ideological jihads — the Department of Finance and Personnel — commissioned a report, which was published in September 2009. It stated that it was inequitable to continue funding prep schools. Therefore, do not point the finger across the Chamber and accuse the Minister, the Department or this party of being involved in some sort of jihad against prep schools. Independent reports into prep school funding have pointed up time and again that it should not continue and that it should be reviewed, and that is what the Minister has done.

That brings me to the consultation. The red herring that the proposal is not being properly consulted on brings me to the SDLP amendment. The proposal was highlighted in the Department of Education's Budget settlement in 2007, which was three years ago. The parties opposite and the party to my left voted for that Budget around the Executive table. The report was published.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will give way in a moment. Perhaps the SDLP Member is going to correct me, because his party voted against the Budget. Therefore, I will save him the bother. *[Interruption.]*

The Minister did not vote for it when she was sitting around the Executive table. The proposal has been sitting there since 2007, and, all of a sudden, some parties are now saying that they have not been consulted on it. However, what has really happened is that the prep schools and the grammar schools have asked the parties what they are doing about prep school funding, and they have had to put up their hands and say that it has been sitting there since 2007, it has been talked about since 2007, and now it is becoming a reality, and they have done absolutely nothing about it. I would be interested to know — perhaps the Minister will be able to tell us — whether any parties in the Chamber responded to the equality impact assessment on the withdrawal of funding, which has been going on since January. That is important.

Sinn Féin's amendment is a factual amendment. It sets out the historical context and origin of the proposal and what will happen next. It is not based on the belief system of my party or any other party in the Chamber, and there is no reason why the parties around the Chamber should not unite around it. We are awaiting the outcome of the equality impact assessment of the proposal to withdraw funding from the prep departments to see whether it will have an adverse effect on any category specified in the equality legislation.

It is worth nothing that there is no mention of equality in the SDLP amendment. If the motion goes through as amended by the SDLP, equality will have been scrubbed out of the history books. It raises the question: what is the SDLP's policy on education? What is the SDLP's policy on anything else for that matter? It appears to me that the SDLP has ripped up

its education policy and shredded it, because it is now in favour of academic selection and of funding prep departments, and it appears that it is now in favour of elitism. That party has told us that it is not prepared to accept an equality impact assessment of the proposal. Perhaps the SDLP will tell us exactly what its education policy is, because it appears that, since Christmas 2009, it has been thrown in the bin.

We await the outcome of the equality impact assessment of the proposal to withdraw funding for a very good reason: equality is a double-edged sword. It is not there to protect one section of society above another. It is there to ensure that equality is delivered through all decisions made by a Sinn Féin Minister, a DUP Minister or any other Minister. That is why it is important for the Assembly to await the full findings of the report before it comes to a position.

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after "attending preparatory departments" and insert

"and that the time frame for withdrawal of funding will have an adverse effect on their well-being; believes that the financial implications have not been adequately assessed; and calls on the Minister of Education to enter into discussions immediately with the schools' representatives with a view to determining a solution acceptable to the schools' authorities and the Department."

Tá áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht inniu, agus éirím le leasú uimhir a dó a mholadh. I thank the mover of the motion and others in the House for supporting our amendment. I am glad that Mr O'Dowd acknowledged that the SDLP voted against the Budget, although I note that he was willing, until corrected, to say that we voted in favour of it. The same could be said of his misrepresentation of other SDLP policies. He knows well that the SDLP has been against academic selection over the past 30 years, and he also knows well that academic selection has not been ended. It has been privatised in the form of a variety of tests, but, contrary to what his party's Minister of Education so often claims, it has not been ended.

Members must bear it in mind that the most important people to be considered in the debate are the children who are at the heart of the issue. Anything that we say here today or anything that we do should be guided by the best interests of those children in the short term and in the long term. I thank the parents

who contacted us to express their views and concerns in the lead-up to the debate.

More than 2,000 children — 2,426 to be precise — attend the 16 preparatory departments in Northern Ireland. As Members have heard, the Department of Education is seeking to change the way in which preparatory schools are funded. That move is largely in response to proposals that were made as a result of the independent strategic review of education, which is better known as the Bain review. Paragraph 6.50.5 of the report states:

“The rationale for funding preparatory departments in grammar schools should be reviewed.”

The SDLP is not against that review. For 2009-2010, each preparatory pupil will attract grant-aid funding of around £808. That accounts for approximately 30% of the teaching costs, and it compares with £2,020 that is allocated for each primary-school pupil. The total allocated to preparatory departments will be almost £2 million. The withdrawal of that funding could entail extra costs for the Department. At a time of huge pressure on existing budgets, that move could cost the Department something in the region of £3 million to £5 million per annum in direct costs, not to mention the costs associated with jobs; the impact on local communities; the impact on the schools involved; the possible need for newbuilds; and, of course, the impact that a sudden upheaval will have on the children concerned.

The Department's argument is that, on grounds of equality, the present situation is unsustainable. It says that, since not all parents can afford to send their children to a preparatory school, there is not equal access. The SDLP believes that, if change is required, it must be managed correctly and sensibly. Change can be brought about through proper consultation that involves all the stakeholders. However, the Department has tried to railroad the process rather than have a full consultation. Instead of a 12-week consultation, which is normal practice, the consultation was done in seven weeks. Many believed, as was stated earlier, that the consultation had a predetermined outcome and was, therefore, a farcical exercise.

My party and I are not convinced that the way in which the Department has gone about managing change in this instance is in the best interests of the children concerned or that it has followed best practice, as the motion indicates. Sudden change at this time will have a severe impact on

families who send their children to preparatory departments and on the children, who are wondering what the future holds for them. It is wrong for children, parents and teachers to experience that degree of anxiety.

4.00 pm

It is far from clear that the Department has carefully weighed the impact of that change on children's education, families' lives and, indeed, on its own departmental budgets. Many issues remain outstanding with regard to the short timescale that has been proposed by the Department. It will leave parents with limited time in which to consider their options and make alternative arrangements. Undoubtedly, that uncertainty leads to a great deal of anxiety for children, parents and teachers.

My party believes that careful consideration must be given to the extent to which children will be affected by the proposed changes in funding and how they can be accommodated in primary schools that are adjacent to their homes. As Members know, area-based planning, which would have helped deal with pupil placement and which should be more developed, has not been progressed to the extent that is necessary to deal with the relocation of a large number of pupils throughout a wide geographical area. One questions whether this is the appropriate time to withdraw funding from preparatory schools, given that the Department of Education's budget is under severe pressures to the extent of around £140 million.

Departmental officials have told the Education Committee that it will be extremely difficult for them to make savings without that having an impact on front line services. Surely a move that will place additional pressures on the Department's finances is ill-conceived at a time of difficult choices and dwindling budgets. The Department must explore fully the impact of that change on other sectors of the education system. Change must not be declared unilaterally. It must be agreed between the Department and schools over a reasonable and agreed time frame, and in a way that enables schools, teachers, parents and pupils to manage it in a systematic and orderly fashion, through dialogue with all stakeholders.

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

My party's amendment calls for that. It is reasonable and sensible under the

circumstances. I urge all Members of the House to support amendment No 2. Go raibh céad maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Elliott: I support the motion and, indeed, the SDLP's amendment. I am pleased that the SDLP has taken its position because that demonstrates clearly the isolated and unreasonable position that Sinn Féin has adopted on education issues in the Executive and the Assembly.

The decision to withdraw funding from preparatory departments throughout Northern Ireland is another clear example of the Education Minister's ideological crusade against certain, selected children in the community and education system. The previous speaker, Mr Bradley, stated that children are at the heart of the matter. He explained clearly that children will suffer, not us in the Assembly. We must put children first.

Often, the Minister talks about putting children first. However, clearly, she has not given that the thought that it deserves. Perhaps, she has done so, but simply wants to continue with her own agenda. That highlights Sinn Féin's objectives as a political party and its "ourselves alone" mentality, which we have gotten used to in the political world. However, there is no reason why that should filter into children's education.

One founding principle of Western democratic society is choice. I am pleased that many parents can choose where to send their children to be educated. Parents who send their children to preparatory departments pay their taxes like everyone else. They deserve proper services from the Education Minister and the Department, and, indeed, from the Executive and the Assembly as a whole. They have a right to be recognised in that respect.

The proposal will cost the education system more money. I understand that each preparatory pupil attracts grant aid funding of around £800. I also understand that each primary school pupil in other education streams attracts around £2,000 of grant aid. Therefore, there is a shortfall of £1,200 for each pupil, which will have to be made up by the Department. I do not know why that is the case. I have heard other figures; for example, some schools in the Catholic maintained sector in the Western Education and Library Board area attract funding of around £7,000 for each pupil. Clearly, those

shortfalls will have to be made up by the Department and the boards.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. In relation to that point, it is quite clear that the report that was carried out does not have any analysis of the inequity of funding right across the educational sector. That raises the question of whether, instead of prep schools receiving only £800 for each pupil, they should now get all their funding and should be treated equitably within the educational system and the structure that we currently have.

Mr Elliott: I thank Mr Storey for his intervention — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. If there is any more noise from the Public Gallery, I will have it cleared.

Mr McNarry: Och, go away.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Does the Member wish to make a point?

Mr McNarry: I welcome the opportunity to say that this is a public debate. We invite the public into our House, and the public make an expression. I understand the rules and the regulations, and I understand why you have ticked them off. However, I hope that it is just a warning and that people can come into our House and express solidarity with people who look at that lot over there and want nothing to do with them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am carrying out the rules of the House. Does any Member wish to criticise me for doing that?

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I understand what took place. However, it was a sin in ignorance. When people come into the House they are not often warned that nobody can speak but the Members on the Floor, and that should be made clear. I know that it is difficult to say everything at once, but I do not think that you are short of speech, sir.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr Paisley, I only implement the rules. That is all.

Is there a point of order?

Mr O'Dowd: I am not going to question your ruling on the previous matter. However, I am going to question the comments of Mr McNarry. I do not know whether he attended a prep

school, but I know that he did not learn any manners wherever he went. Is it parliamentary to point over to Members of the House and refer to them as “that lot”? We are an elected parliamentary party in the Chamber. In fact, we carry a major mandate, contrary to what the gentleman in the corner has.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The rules of the House are clear about using proper names, and I am sure that Members will want to note that fact.

Mr McNarry: Further to that point of order, I thought that during that brief —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is the Member making a point of order?

Mr McNarry: Yes. On that point of order, I am asking whether, during that brief interlude in which you invited me to speak to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, you had, in effect, suspended the rules of the House to allow that to happen and my behaviour was, therefore, perfectly in order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We will move on. Please continue, Mr Elliott.

Mr Elliott: To get back to the point of business, I thank Mr Storey for his intervention as it highlights the issues surrounding the debate and the report that has come out. At times of financial restraint in the Assembly and the Executive, I would have thought that it would have been more prudent for the Education Minister to attempt to get a situation in which there were financial savings, instead of trying to create more of an impact on the Department that she is in charge of. In fact, Sinn Féin has claimed that the decision formed part of the Department's budget for 2007-2011. However, neither the Programme for Government nor the Budget document mentions preparatory departments. I am at a loss to understand how the Minister can make such a claim.

If the Minister genuinely cared for all children and genuinely believed the flawed conclusions of the Bain report, she would seek to remove prep school funding in a way that would cause the least disruption to children and the education system, instead of going about it in the way that she has. I am not sure about time, Mr Deputy Speaker, because things seem to have moved on.

The Ulster Unionist Party recognises that, since 1992, preparatory funding has been reviewed, and all funding streams periodically. The manner

in which the Minister has cut off that funding illustrates her real agenda: the agenda against choice in the education system in the Province; indeed, the Minister and her Department appear to be following a personal agenda.

Mr Lunn: I will choose my words with extreme care. I support the motion and the SDLP amendment. The Minister's proposed action is based on the review of funding by the business consultancy service (BCS). Paragraph 7.2 of its report states that it is:

“unable to draw any firm conclusions on the equity of the funding arrangements of preparatory departments compared to primary schools.”

In paragraph 7.4 of its report, the BCS concludes:

“The withdrawal of DE funding to preparatory departments is likely to have marginal impact on the education budget.”

It also states:

“the equity issue far outweighs the economic issue”.

Therefore we are back to paragraph 7.2.

I wonder how the BCS worked that out. Nobody knows yet what decision the parents of prep school children will make. However, if they transfer in large numbers to primary schools, it could cost the Department up to £5 million in increased funding, including the possibility of an increased premises factor funding if the accommodation is transferred back to the grammar school, to say nothing of redundancy, transport and other costs.

The withdrawal of funding is being proposed against a backdrop of extreme pressure on all aspects of public spending, and nowhere more so than on the education budget. No new schools are likely to commence being built in 2010-11, projects promised years ago are being pushed back due to lack of funds, the backlog of essential maintenance in the schools estate stands at about £240 million, and we will be spending only about £30 million on that in the incoming year. The Minister has even challenged the Education Committee to come up with proposed areas where savings could be made, presumably because she cannot identify them herself.

The transfer system is in chaos. Some 18 months' work went into the education and skills authority, which could have saved some money, but it now appears to lie in ruins. We have

the sustainable schools policy, Every School a Good School, area-based planning, the revised curriculum, early years provision, the entitlement framework, and Lord knows how many initiatives — some good and some not so good, but all time-consuming and confusing.

Morale in the education system is at an all-time low, and the bright spot in all of that is the continuing expertise and dedication of teachers trying to guide our youngsters to achieve their maximum potential. What does the Minister now throw into the mix? An attack on prep schools, which is, in my opinion, an attack on their associated grammar schools. There is no clear rationale for that action at this time. It is a denial of parental choice, and the conclusions of the BCS report do not stand up to scrutiny on any financial basis. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the reason is ideological. It is just a retaliation for the breakaway actions of the grammar schools, actions which, as the Minister knows, do not find favour with my party. However, we do not think that an attack on prep schools is the way to proceed.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: No. Imagine the predicament of a P5 or P6 pupil at a prep school whose parents have sacrificed many thousands of pounds to exercise their freedom of choice and are now faced with no alternative but to change their child's school at the beginning of their transfer year. That is a real possibility, because, as has already been said, not all parents who made that choice are especially well off. They chose prep schools for various reasons: geography; smaller class sizes; better pupil:teacher ratios; their religious and racial mix; and, in some cases, special needs requirements or even single-sex status.

4.15 pm

Given everything else that is going on and the resultant additional trauma that will be experienced by children who already face an uncertain transfer procedure, is it really reasonable for the Minister to introduce the proposal in a short timescale? Some of us do not approve of the present transfer situation, but it is a reality, and her proposal heaps confusion on confusion.

At the very least, the Minister's proposal to withdraw funding requires more discussion, as the SDLP amendment suggests. At best, the

Minister should reassess her priorities and put the matter on the back-burner, preferably for a long time. If she refuses, the ministerial code to which Michelle McIlveen referred will surely come into play.

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

Mr Lunn: I hope that the Minister has not already decided on a course of action, although that appears to be the case. I hope that she will see sense and withdraw the proposal. The Alliance Party will support the motion as amended by the SDLP.

Mr Craig: I support the motion and amendment No 2. Education is not just a topic for debate; it is crucial to the entire future of Northern Ireland. The Assembly is trying to move the economy forward to become a high-tech economy. If education fails, that entire Assembly strategy fails, yet here is another proposal from the Minister that will destroy one of the sectors in our education system that is succeeding. As pointed out in the Minister's report, that sector delivers high academic achievers. Perhaps that is why prep schools are now under attack. Are they under attack because they are too successful? Is it because parents in my constituency and others choose — I use the word "choose" carefully — to subsidise their children's education? Is that the crime of which they are guilty? Do the public really have wholly to fund every sector just so that everything is equal and right for everybody? That is not equality.

The Minister has no difficulty in making the public pay for other choices that parents make. I defend their right to make those choices. If parents want to send their children to Irish-medium schools, so be it. However, why is it that I and others must fully fund those sectors but the Minister deems it wrong to support a sector that we only partially fund to the tune of 30%? That is not equality — it is anything but.

I want to quote from the European Convention on Human Rights, a document from which the party opposite likes to quote all the time. The convention states that:

"the State shall respect the rights of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religions and philosophical convictions."

Therefore, under human rights legislation, if someone decides that it is right for them to

subsidise the education of their children, there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. What is the great difficulty with someone deciding to subsidise their children's education? Is it the Minister's ideological argument that we cannot allow the private subsidisation of anything? If that is the case, the entire House is in huge trouble, because the public purse cannot afford the full funding of everything in society.

I commend those parents who make the hard decision to subsidise their children's education. It is not always the wealthy who choose to do that: far from it. Many working-class parents go without foreign holidays, new cars and bigger houses so that their children get the best education possible. That is their choice and I commend them for making it. I have no doubt that it will benefit all in our society.

Many children in other schools are undoubtedly underachieving. However, early intervention and investment are the way to tackle that, not removing a successful part of the system. If we believe in parental choice, we have no right to enforce our ideological doctrines on others. Parents have rights.

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

Mr Craig: Young people should not be used as political pawns in a battle of educational philosophies. I support the motion and amendment No 2.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My colleague John O'Dowd made the point that, upon learning of the debate, some people asked: "What are prep schools?" It is important to state that they are fee-paying, private schools that are open only to those who can afford to pay. Sinn Féin completely opposes private education being subsidised from the public purse. We are interested in supporting all children to reach their full potential on the basis of equality, not on the basis of whether their parents can afford to pay. It is unfair to ask a parent to pay: why should any parent pay?

As parents, we want the best for our children; we want them to have a happy and fulfilling experience of education. Our primary schools provide an excellent opportunity for all children to begin their educational journey. At a time —

Mr Storey: I hear repeatedly that parents have to pay. Is it not a shame and a disgrace that

many primary and prep schools must pour thousands of pounds into our education system through parent-teacher associations because money is not made available? Therefore, the amount of money available in education is a huge issue.

Mrs O'Neill: To a certain extent, I agree with the Member. I hope that he is equally vocal in supporting additional money for all primary schools and not just a select few. We must be realistic. With thousands of empty school desks across the schools estate, it is important that primary schools are protected where possible and that empty desks are kept to a minimum to ensure the survival of all our local primary schools and their associated jobs. We do not have the luxury of speaking up for only a few schools. I am interested only in looking at all schools and educational provision for all children.

A few points must be reiterated. First, the proposed withdrawal of funding from schools' prep departments was part of a package of efficiencies agreed by the Minister of Education at the outcome of the Budget Bill 2007 debate. It is a bit rich for the parties on the opposite Benches to jump up and down today when they too signed up to that Budget process.

Mr Storey: That is nonsense.

Mrs O'Neill: It is not nonsense: it is absolute fact.

The proposal was in keeping with the recommendation in Bain's 'Independent Strategic Review of Education' report, which was published in December 2006 and again highlighted the issue of funding for prep department pupils. The report recommended that that expenditure:

"should be reviewed and its continuation considered with regard to equity and in the context of significant pressures on the education budget."

In taking that forward, the Department of Education commissioned the Department of Finance and Personnel's business consultancy service to undertake a review of funding to prep departments and to provide a report to the Department. That final report was provided in September 2009, and its findings again concluded that the Department should consider the withdrawal of funding to prep departments on the grounds of equality of access, which is the core issue here today.

The Minister has accepted the report's findings, but she has asked for an equality impact assessment (EQIA). Members are almost being presumptuous in having the debate, because the Minister has not laid out her plans for the way forward as a result of that EQIA, which concluded only at the beginning of March.

Equality of access is at the core of this debate. It has to be made clear that the Department is not closing prep schools; it proposes merely, on the back of the two reports and subject to an EQIA, not to fund those places. Any decision to close prep departments will be for parents and the schools.

Ms Lo: There are three prep schools in the controlled sector that, if the Department's funding were to be removed, would become independent schools and their existence would be called into question. Those schools would lose all of their status for receiving support from education and library boards.

Mrs O'Neill: That would be a decision for the board of governors of the school. The Department proposes merely to stop funding for the schools, not to close them. Closing them would be a decision for the boards of governors and the schools.

In proposing the motion, Michelle McIlveen said that the issue was contentious and should, therefore, be referred to the Executive. I remind the DUP that it is the First Minister and deputy First Minister who will decide what goes on the Executive table, not individual DUP Members.

My party colleague said that Sinn Féin will not be voting for the SDLP amendment, which states that the financial implications have not been adequately assessed. What about the financial implications of continuing to fund the education of some children to a greater extent than to that of others? Surely, the SDLP does not think that that is acceptable. It also makes me question whether the SDLP is succumbing to the DUP and UUP positions rather than having the courage of its convictions.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: No, I am coming to the end of my time now. Thank you.

The core point of the debate is that the argument is about equality of access. It is not an argument about finance; it is about equality,

which is the only one in which Sinn Féin is interested.

Lord Browne: I support the motion, and I support amendment No 2 as tabled by the SDLP. The Minister has made two key claims. First, she has claimed that her proposals will reduce costs and, secondly, that preparatory departments and prep schools are inequitable. The argument about costs needs to be put in context. We have heard already that the Department of Education spends £1.9 million a year in funding prep school pupils and that that covers 2,411 pupils at 16 institutions. It is interesting to note that in the Minister's constituency of South Down, one primary school — a Catholic-maintained primary school with less than a third of the pupils of all the prep schools put together — received £2.2 million last year alone.

Not only is the cost argument a false economy but prep school funding makes up a miniscule proportion of the Department's budget yet allows thousands of families the freedom of choice in educating their children.

Mr Spratt: Does the honourable Member agree that prep schools offer excellent value for money for the taxpayer? As we have heard already, a large proportion of the cost is borne by parents. Does he agree further that, if funding is cut, fees would increase and a substantial number of parents would be forced to move their children to primary schools? In my constituency of South Belfast, many primary schools are grossly oversubscribed already and that will have a knock-on effect on the Department. In the long term, it may well result in redundancies of teachers, which will also have a knock-on effect on the Department. The Minister has not costed that out.

Lord Browne: I thank the Member for adding to the opinion that the Minister's argument about cost is totally false. I accept that it will lead to the loss of jobs, not only of teachers but of ancillary staff, ground staff, domestic staff and so on. Indeed, it could result in the loss of contracts for local food companies and so on.

Mr Storey: No costings have been given on staff. At least 125 teaching staff could be affected, yet no costings have been made on that, and the Department has given no indication that it has given the matter serious consideration.

There is also the issue of the timescale for a proposed closure under the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.

4.30 pm

Lord Browne: I thank the Member for his intervention. I look forward to the Minister's explanation of the costings.

My second point is that the Minister claims that prep school funding is inequitable because it benefits a relatively small number of pupils who tend to be drawn primarily from one section of the community. However, let us consider the Minister's attitude to funding for Irish-medium schools. That funding benefits an even smaller number of pupils than prep school funding. Irish-medium schools receive almost five times as much funding as prep schools, despite having fewer pupils. If that is not the very definition of inequitable, I do not know what is. That exposes one thing: the Minister's decision is not based on costs, access or equality, but on her personal, obsessive and ideological crusade against grammar schools, coupled with her overtly sectarian approach to education.

The Minister chooses to put all her efforts into attacking and denying parental choice where that does not fit into her narrow and backward-facing ideology. Rather than working to improve educational standards, she chooses to take a sledgehammer to any parent who dares to dissent from her vision of an educational system where freedom of choice is reserved for only one section of the community.

Let me be clear: if the Minister's proposals go ahead, the only option that some families would have is for their children to attend either a state school, which is fully funded by the taxpayer, or an independent school, which the vast majority of people cannot afford. I do not believe that that is a choice. I, therefore, support the motion.

Mr Kinahan: I am extremely pleased to be able to speak in support of the motion and the SDLP's amendment. Like many other Members, I believe in choice and, more importantly, in freedom. The plan to cut funding is an attack on choice and privilege and is against any financial sense whatsoever. The plan will save very little. In fact, as we heard, it will cost much more. Really, the plan to cut funding is an attack on parents and children.

Mr McCarthy: I wish to draw the Member's attention to his remark that he is for privilege. Will he explain what he meant by that? We are here to try to ensure that every child has equality of opportunity, regardless of his or her background. Privilege should be out the window. Will the Member explain his remark?

Mr Kinahan: I said that the plan to cut funding is an attack on privilege. I did not say that I am for privilege.

The plan is a religious attack, a dogma. If Members look back through history, they will see that that is just one small step from the re-education that has taken place throughout history. Some Members may laugh, but the plan to cut funding is not far away from China's failed great leap forward, the various Soviet Union five-year and seven-year plans, and, even, the Nazis' burning of books. For Members who are much the same age as I am —

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for a Member of the House to refer to a departmental policy or the direction of a Department as being equivalent to Nazism?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that Members will moderate their language and ensure that they do not use words that cause offence to others.

Mr O'Dowd: Further to that point of order, I ask that the Deputy Speaker asks the Speaker to examine the use of that term in the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will certainly do that. Continue, Mr Kinahan.

Mr Kinahan: I referred to that Germanic side purely because of its attack on learning and its burning of books. The dogma that you are forcing on us today is just a small step away from that. I was just about to speak about the killing fields, where again there was re-education. Everywhere in history —
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should resume his seat. All remarks must be made through the Chair.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

All that we have heard today from Sinn Féin Members is dogma and attacks on the things that they do not like. Last week, the Ulster Unionists stood united against the devolution of policing and justice powers and the

dysfunctional Executive, mainly because of what is happening in education: it is not working. Sinn Féin will not bend to discuss matters or even start talking to the other parties in an attempt to find consensus.

Mr Weir: Does the Member agree with me that the Minister's proposal is not only ill-judged dogma, but very expensive dogma? It has been estimated that her policy may cost between £3 million and £5 million, which is money that the rest of the education budget can ill afford. Indeed, last week there was a debate on capital builds in my constituency, much of which has been delayed because of a supposed shortage of money. The problem is not just the impact that the decision will have on the prep school sector or the individual heartache and difficulties that it will cause for parents and children; it will mean negative ramifications throughout the entire education sector. That is why the Minister's stance is so ill judged and ill conceived.

Mr Kinahan: I agree entirely with what the Member has said. I was in England last weekend, listening to a presentation by one of the top headmasters there during which he spoke about how education must excite a child and make each child his or her own centre of excellence. Education also must teach each child to tolerate, respect and understand. What we have seen today in the Chamber is the complete opposite. The cutting of funding to preparatory schools is an effort to take schooling down — for those Members who remember their maths — to the lowest common denominator, the absolute basics. We must improve education for many, but we must strive for the highest common denominator, find what excites a child and choose the things that are best in society.

Mr Weir touched on the issue of cost, and we know that that is very small compared with the overall education budget. We also know that around 25% of children in Northern Ireland are not receiving a good education. We must examine the current system, choose from it what is excellent and use that in all our schools. My plea today to the Minister is not to destroy the preparatory schools, and for her to keep the funding in place. I support the motion and the SDLP amendment. I ask for the Minister to begin to talk to other Members and to look for consensus on the way forward.

Dr McDonnell: I will be as quick as I can. Time is running out for the debate and I will try to get to the heart of the matter as quickly as possible.

No other issue that I have come across has caused such an outcry, or caused me to receive so many e-mails over the past two to three weeks. Let us be clear about it: this issue appears to parents to have less to do with the welfare of children and — though it pains me say it, Minister — more to do with putting a party political view ahead of the interests of children. Any decision that impacts on the education of children should be taken only after a full consultation has been undertaken in the most robust fashion, so that all possible implications of that decision are outlined and understood.

Mr Ross: The House has already heard the economic, educational and libertarian arguments against the Minister's decision. The Member mentioned consultation. Does he agree that this is an issue that is novel, cross-cutting and contentious and, therefore, should be decided by the Executive? Does he also agree that if the Minister decides to go ahead with her proposal, against the wishes of the Executive, it could lead her into very difficult circumstances?

Dr McDonnell: I do not share the expertise that the intervener has about Executive matters. It is something of a mystery to me, and I am not quite sure how they do business there. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Dr McDonnell: However, if the Member believes that the Executive could sort out the issue, for God's sake let them do so.

The decision to withdraw funding immediately from the preparatory departments of grammar schools is another example of clumsy decision-making by the Department of Education. We tabled our amendment because we are deeply concerned at the way in which the decision was taken. We believe in equality and fairness, but we also believe that any decision about education and educational provision for our children should be taken after full consultation with all those involved. All the implications — educational, social, financial and others — should be thoroughly discussed and defined, within a reasonable time frame, before we make a decision and impose it.

Mr D Bradley: Does the Member agree that the Sinn Féin position is hypocritical? All teachers' salaries in fee-charging post-primary schools in the South are paid by the state, but not one Sinn Féin TD is on record in Dáil Éireann as calling for the withdrawal of that funding. So much for an Ireland of equals, when there is one policy for the South and a totally different one for the North.

Dr McDonnell: I thank Dominic for his intervention and accept his point.

As Members outlined, the decision was taken without consultation. We have enough problems in the education system to do us for some time. A series of things should be done, such as building new schools and amalgamating schools with falling numbers.

Crises are avoided when people with detailed knowledge of the issue are affected and brought into the decision-making process. Good, positive working partnerships produce progressive politics, which can benefit people and bring everybody with us.

Mr Bell: Will the Member give way?

Dr McDonnell: I will not be able to finish.

Mr Bell: Mr Deputy Speaker might give you an extra minute.

I agree with the idea of consensus. Does the Member agree that the Minister should listen to the advice of her own officials from the South Eastern Education and Library Board, who have told her that her proposals are unrealistic, unachievable, unworkable, will cost an extra £5 million, will affect children with special educational needs and will disadvantage the Protestant community?

Dr McDonnell: I will not pick on the Minister; I will pick on the issues. All Ministers could listen to all Members a bit better.

There has been a severe weakening in the Department's relationship with school representatives and parents over the transfer issue. The decision to withdraw funding from preparatory departments further compounds that and causes unnecessary hostility, suspicion and distrust. All that responsible parents want is the best for their children. Reform of early education is needed and must be done for the benefit of the children, not in the context

of a dogma or a mandatory position. We must negotiate, move and improve the situation.

Aside from the consultation, I suggest that parents, to a large extent, have a right for their children to complete their primary education at their existing schools. An increase in fees will mean that preparatory departments will close, and, in some cases, I am not sure that state schools will be able to cope. The Minister's proposals will severely disrupt 2,500 children.

We need a serious debate on whether the state should subsidise private schools. All Members across the Chamber may not agree with that, but we need to deal with that debate in its own context.

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

Dr McDonnell: In the current context, a unilateral and arbitrary decision has been taken without meaningful consultation.

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

Dr McDonnell: Parents and children are frightened and distressed.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat. Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis labhairt ar an tairiscint ar an mholadh cistiú a aistarraingt ó rannóga ullmhúcháin.

I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion on the proposal to withdraw funding from preparatory departments. I want to set out the clear rationale for that proposal. I also want to provide an assurance that I will fully consider the views of respondents to the consultation on the proposed changes to the common funding formula for 2010-11 and the responses to the Department's equality impact assessment on the proposal before I reach a final decision. Members will be aware that the closing date for responses to the public consultation on the equality impact assessment was 4 March 2010. My Department is analysing those responses and will compile and publish a summary response document.

4.45 pm

John O'Dowd asked whether any parties responded to the proposals: none of them did. The UUP, the SDLP and the DUP did not respond.

Mr Shannon: I did.

The Minister of Education: Jim Shannon responded as an individual Member. The Alliance Party did not respond either. Members have been asking for consultation. We welcome consultation through the equality impact assessment, which is the place to record the full views of all the political parties. I want to put that point on record.

I welcome the SDLP's clarification that it has not departed from its 40-year-old policy on academic selection. It should tell that to its partner parties, the UUP and the DUP, on the working group that operates outside the Executive and the Assembly. They use the same argument against our policies on bringing equality to the transfer process through transfer 2010 by claiming that there has been insufficient consultation on the proposals and that change takes time. Change does take time, and far be it from me to give anyone a history lesson — I do not want to do that — but, in case Members do not know, prior to 1994, the state provided 50% of the funding to preparatory departments. In 1994, it provided 40%, and, in 1998, the figure was 30%. The Bain report was produced in 2006. Therefore, people who argue that there is not enough time or that change must be managed should study the history of the matter.

Mr Bell: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: No; I will not.

The same applies to the transfer argument. The UUP, the DUP and the SDLP got together to say that we need more time to manage change. Previously, I brought to the House a 'News Letter' article from 1964 that detailed how the Ulster Government were moving quickly to replace transfer tests. I was two years old at the time, and I am now 47. Therefore, the SDLP's arguments ring hollow.

We received a considerable number of responses to the public consultation, and I thank everyone who took the time to respond. At this stage, I am not in a position to make a final decision on the proposal because I want to consider carefully the analysis of the responses before reaching my decision.

Some Members opposite made comments about the Irish-medium sector. Any child can access an Irish-medium or integrated school and is not required to pay a tuition fee. That is what I, and the United Nations, mean by equality of access. Preparatory departments inherently

do not provide equality of access, because attendance is dependent on a parent's or family's ability to pay.

For Members' information, there are 16 preparatory departments in the North of Ireland. The annual fees for one child are: Methodist College costs £3,295, Victoria College costs £3,180, Campbell College costs £3,025, Bloomfield Collegiate costs £3,015, Belfast Royal Academy costs £2,960, Royal Belfast Academical Institution costs £2,850, Bangor Grammar costs £2,777, Wallace High School costs £2,750, Strathearn School costs £2,685, Sullivan Upper School costs £2,550; Dalriada School costs £2,513, Royal School Armagh costs £2,500, Friends' School costs £2,459, Down High School costs £2,300, Regent House School costs £2,200, and Glenlola Collegiate costs £1,900.

Each of those preparatory departments, which are attended by some 2,400 children, charges a fee to parents to allow their children access to the school. Those fees are substantial: in 2008-09, they ranged from £1,900 to £3,295 per pupil. That represents an average of £2,700 per pupil.

Níl rogha ag páistí nach féidir lena dtuismitheoirí na táillí a íoc cé acu ba mhian leo freastal ar rannóg ullmhúcháin nó nár mhian.

We have heard a lot about parental choice today. My colleague John O'Dowd made the point that the children of parents who are not in a position to pay those fees do not have a choice as to whether they wish to attend or have access to a preparatory department. That clearly creates inequality of access for children. I would have liked to have heard Members opposite talking about choice for all those children.

Mr Bell: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: No, I will not give way.

We have heard a lot from the Members opposite, but we have not heard about the choice for the 75,000 children in the controlled sector and the 78,000 children in the maintained sector.

The report of the independent strategic review of education, known as the Bain report, which was published in December 2006 — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Minister, please resume your seat.

Most Members have been very good up to now. I ask you to allow the Minister to be heard and to make no more remarks from a sedentary position.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The report of the independent strategic review of education, known as the Bain report, which was published in December 2006 — prior to my coming into office — considered the strategic planning and organisation of the schools estate and made a number of recommendations. One of that report's key recommendations was that the rationale for funding preparatory departments in grammar schools should be reviewed. I have a clear duty to consider all the recommendations in that report, and the recommendation on preparatory departments is no different. That is what I am doing now, because doing nothing is not an option.

In his report, Professor George Bain, referring to the distribution of the education budget, stated:

"Equity must continue to be at the heart of this distribution. For this reason, the part-funding of fee-charging preparatory departments in grammar schools is anomalous. This aspect of delegation subsidises provision that can only be accessed by children whose parents can pay the requisite fee. This would seem to be an inequitable use of public funds and counterintuitive in a funding system simultaneously managing the pressures of a high level of surplus capacity."

The issue of equity and equality of access was also highlighted by the Equality Commission in its document 'Every Child an Equal Child', which was published in 2008. It stated that a key component of a quality education system is the provision of equality of access to good education. In respect of its position on the funding of preparatory departments, the commission stated:

"Preparatory departments inherently do not provide equality of access as attendance is dependent on parents/families ability to pay additional substantial costs."

In light of the Bain report's recommendation, my Department commissioned the Department of Finance and Personnel's business consultancy service in January 2009 to undertake an independent review of that funding and to provide a report of its findings. The last time that I looked, the Minister of Finance and Personnel was from the party opposite. That

independent report, which was provided to me in September 2009, concluded:

"that funding provision that can only be accessed by children whose parents can pay the requisite fee is not consistent with the principle of equity in the distribution of resources. We have therefore recommended that DE consider the withdrawal of such funding."

Mr Bell: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister of Finance and Personnel has already made it clear to the Minister of Education that her proposals are novel and contentious. Is it in order that she mislead the House by trying to pretend that the Minister of Finance and Personnel is anything but against her proposals? He has told her in writing that he disagrees with her proposals and wants them brought to the Executive. Is it in order for her to deliberately mislead the House?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Bell, you have twice accused the Minister of misleading the House. I ask that you withdraw your remarks.

Mr Bell: I will not withdraw my remarks. The Minister of Finance and Personnel has given to her, in writing, the fact that he disagrees with her proposal and wants it brought to the Executive.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Bell, you are now challenging the authority of the Chair. I am giving you one last opportunity to withdraw your remarks.

Mr Bell: I cannot stand in the way of the truth.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. As the Member has refused to withdraw his remarks, I order him, under Standing Order 65, to withdraw immediately from the Chamber and its precincts for the remainder of today's sitting.

The Member withdrew from the Chamber.

The Minister of Education: Tá béim á cur ar chothromas arís agus arís eile, agus ní féidir neamhaird a thabhairt air.

Again and again the issue of equity of access has been highlighted. It cannot be ignored. However, before reaching a decision on the recommendation, I asked for an equality impact assessment to be undertaken to ensure that all aspects of equality are fully considered. I welcome the significant response to the public consultation exercise, which demonstrates that the views of those most affected by the

proposal have been sought and captured through the consultation process.

I wish to make a brief comment on Dominic Bradley's remarks. The EQIA consultation period was eight weeks: it began on 7 January and ended on 4 March, and is consistent with relevant requirements. Some Members questioned whether the consultation process meets the Sedley requirements on the standards of proper consultation. Those requirements state that consultation is undertaken when the proposals are still in a formative stage; that adequate information is given to enable consultees to respond properly; that adequate time is provided in which to respond; and that the decision-maker gives conscientious consideration to the response to the consultation.

I believe that the consultation adheres to those requirements, and I will not make a decision on the proposal until I have considered fully the responses to the consultation process. The number of responses received demonstrates that the process has successfully provided adequate time and information for consultees to respond.

I turn now to the issues raised in the motion. I am aware that some Members may feel that the proposal is contentious and should be considered by the Executive. I disagree. In many cases, although proposals to withdraw public funding will generate a degree of political and media attention, that does not deem them to be contentious. To continue subsidising what is largely private education, available only to a select number of children whose parents can pay the necessary fees, should be considered contentious.

Whether the decision is for the Executive or not, I would be seriously concerned if all matters that some Members deem contentious were to be brought before the Executive. It would render the Executive unworkable. The Executive should consider issues on an exception basis, not matters that are for an individual Minister to consider with meaningful consultation.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will the Minister read the ministerial code, which refers to issues that can be referred to the Executive and to her duties? To say otherwise, as she has said in the House today, is a misrepresentation of what the ministerial code requires the Minister to do.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, but I am sure that the Minister has been listening.

The Minister of Education: The inspectorate's view is that prep schools' attainment levels are not due to better teaching or management in preparatory departments, but are more likely due to other socio-economic factors. In 2007-08, only 0.24% of pupils attending preparatory departments were entitled to free school meals. It is likely that pupils attending preparatory departments would have achieved similar results in a primary school.

5.00 pm

Let us look at the pupil:teacher ratios: in maintained schools it is 20.5:1; in controlled schools it is 20.4:1; and in preparatory departments it is 16.9:1. Are the Members opposite saying that the 75,000 children in the controlled sector and the 78,000 children in the maintained sector do not deserve equality? If they are, then that is very serious. Some Members said that preparatory departments offer children greater social mobility. However, 66% of children who attend preparatory departments live in the top 25% of least-deprived wards, and 2% live in the 25% of most-deprived wards. From those measures, it appears that very few pupils from a socially deprived background attend preparatory departments.

As regards the financial implications of the proposal for the education budget, I have continually said — indeed, I said it in the House earlier — that this is a matter of equality of access; it is not a financial issue. There are sufficient primary schools with surplus places within the locality — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I have asked Members repeatedly not to make remarks across the Floor and to refer all comments through the Chair. I will insist on that until the end of the debate.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat. There are sufficient primary schools with surplus places within the locality of preparatory departments to allow access for all children regardless of their parents' ability to pay. That system ensures that all children are treated equally and provides parents with a choice of schools. My Department will make provision for all children who move to other primary schools; that is an important aspect of the equity issue.

The UN has been invoked on this matter. For the record, the United Nations met me, and spoke to me, about academic selection and article 2 of the first protocol of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Your time is up, Minister.

The Minister of Education: Article 2 of the first protocol of the European Convention on Human Rights protects the rights of parents to have their children educated.

Mr McDevitt: I thank my colleagues in the DUP, the UUP and the Alliance Party for supporting our amendment. The SDLP's intention is to try to focus today's debate on what we perceive to be the fundamental problem, which is a disregard for the due process that is necessary for proper policy to be formulated by the Executive. It is simply not the case that proper consultation has been conducted on this issue. It is simply not the case that this issue does not deserve or warrant proper Executive discussion.

I welcome a lot of what the Minister said. She has presented arguments that are worthy of further debate. The tragedy is that it has taken a motion to bring her to the House for that debate to begin. The Minister can respond to the motion in two ways. She can accept that there are legitimate arguments on both sides of the debate; that those arguments deserve to be better understood; that parents have the right to not have the rug pulled from underneath them in the middle of an academic year; and that children should be at the heart of everything that we do in the House.

When he moved our amendment, Dominic Bradley pointed out that process is not put in place simply to tick an equality agenda box. It is put there so that the interests of those who will be most affected by any policy can be best considered. It is particularly important that process is upheld when the interests in question are those of children. Equality of access is a fundamental and a foundation on which all good education should be built. The SDLP did not propose the amendment to make an ideological point. We did not propose the amendment to take another side in the debate. We proposed the amendment because equality of access deserves to be debated further in the House. We should treasure equality of access.

We should also have the courage to identify the barriers to real equality of access, particularly in primary schools in Northern Ireland. Those barriers are poverty, marginalisation, a legacy of the Troubles and poor parenting. However, the Minister and her Department, and the Assembly, have been distracted for the past four years by chasing headlines through making easy decisions, which win no political capital for the Minister or her party, rather than tackling the fundamental issues and barriers to equality of access to education for all.

I wish that we had spent the past three years debating not a failed exam but the fact that primary schools in this region are still not properly supported and the fact that we still do not put the resource that we should into early years and primary-school education for all our children.

We have not done that; we have done anything but that. We have chased clouds, we have had posturing and we have won headlines. What signal does that send to the children in the Gallery, those watching on the telly and those in working-class communities who deserve better from a Minister with a republican badge?

Dr McDonnell made an important point about the opportunity for progressive politics in the North of Ireland. That opportunity is suffocated by debates such as this; they suck the air out of any possibility of building consensus. We must understand that, in order to effect change, we must be willing to have argument. To have a good argument, we must be willing to consider compromise and consensus.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: No, I will not.

The Minister must know that change is not just a six-letter word. Change requires time, energy and effort.

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

Mr McDevitt: I thank you for your time.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call — *[Interruption.]*

I insist that all remarks be made through the Chair. I call Mr Paul Maskey to make a winding-up speech on amendment No 1.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I apologise for not being in the House at the start of the debate. However, what I have heard from other parties does not surprise me. The Minister has outlined that this is not a financial argument; it is about equality. What difference is there between a child who attends a prep school and one who attends an ordinary primary school, an Irish-language school or a school in any other sector in the North of Ireland? There is absolutely no difference except the financial one.

I am bewildered by SDLP Members who talk about equality. Not once does the word “equality” appear in the amendment that that party proposes. We have been lectured before by the SDLP on equality, and we have been lectured by Conall on that subject.

The amendment proposed by my party states that we should await:

“the outcome of the equality impact assessment being undertaken by the Minister of Education”.

That is an important point, and it is why Sinn Féin submitted the amendment.

What are the other parties in the Chamber scared of? Is it the outcome of that assessment? Are they afraid of the truth that could emerge from it? Is that the issue? Why do none of the other parties support my party's amendment? We have heard speeches from all the other parties, but their failure to support our amendment proves that none of them are working towards equality. They should be ashamed of themselves for that.

We have heard statistics being bandied around today. I heard it said that to teach a child through the medium of Irish costs five times more than teaching him through that of English. That is a lot of nonsense. I have not heard worse. Mervyn Storey must be plucking such figures out of the sky. If he was still at school, and if he handed that in as homework, he would have got very low marks.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr P Maskey: No, I will not.

The big issue is that, when you quote facts and figures, you usually have to do the research — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. When it is clear that a Member does not wish to give way, you must leave it at that.

Mr Storey: The Member is making allegations.

Mr P Maskey: They are not allegations; I am stating facts. When you quote facts and figures, you have to quote sources. The Member did not do that, and he had his chance to speak earlier in the debate. You are the DUP education spokesperson, so shame on you that you did not even take part in the consultation — you did not submit a consultation response. There are people present in the Public Gallery who have kids who are going to prep schools, and you did not even have the decency to take part in the prep school consultation, so shame on you. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: This is my final warning: remarks must be made through the Chair and in no other way.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The same has to be said of the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP Dominic Bradley, I believe, is the SDLP's education spokesperson, but did he take part in the consultation? I think not. That is a question that he has to answer. I am sure that he will respond to the e-mails that every Member received. He should explain to the people in the Public Gallery why he did not feel that it was right for him to take part in the consultation. So there you go.

Although I think that he did clarify his remarks, some of Danny Kinahan's comments seemed to suggest that the decision to withdraw funding is an attack on privilege. He then likened to Naziism some of the decisions that the Minister and the Department took. Nazis, when they were about, thought that they were privileged as well. Therefore, is Danny making a connection between Nazis and being privileged? That is what it sounds like to me, and that is not the signal that the Chamber or any Department should be sending out.

The issue is about parity of esteem and the amount of money that is spent per pupil. It is an important and emotive issue, because when you are putting your children through school, you do the right thing and try to send them to the right school.

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

Mr P Maskey: However, the Minister, as she has said on many occasions, is trying to make every

single school a good school, and that is what we are about.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to colleagues and other Members for taking part in the debate. We heard lots of rhetoric. I want to knock one point on the head; namely, Mr Maskey's comments about who took part in the public consultation. Dominic Bradley, Mervyn Storey and I are members of the Committee for Education, which is a Statutory Committee of the Assembly, and that is where we will be taking part in the consultation, as is right and proper.

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Briefly.

Mr McCartney: Is the Member's argument that if his party is represented on a Statutory Committee, it should not take part in, or be barred from being part of, a public consultation?

Mr McCallister: The Member is probably as aware as anyone is that the Minister will not even listen. She spoke about the importance of the public consultation and of listening, yet went on to say that it is not right for the public to subsidise education in prep schools. That very much sounds to me as if she has already made up her mind. It would not surprise many in the Chamber that she is against prep departments, and that is to discriminate against those who make and want to have the choice.

Mr McNarry: Does my colleague think that the Minister can reconcile between parental choice and parental rights? Moreover, does he think that, in the end, she will make that decision herself or pass it over to the United Nations?
[Laughter.]

Mr McCallister: I thank the Member for that useful intervention. It certainly sounded like the Minister was getting direct contact from the UN.

There is no justification for the decision. As Mr McDevitt said, we have so many issues to address in education.

5.15 pm

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for giving way. I hope that I will not take away too much from his time. Does he agree that the vile attack on prep schools goes right across the social strata and attacks Protestants and Roman Catholics, as well as the rich and the poor? Does he agree that there are people in the Public Gallery who

make a supreme financial sacrifice so that their children can go to those schools, which flies in the face of what the Minister said? Does the Member also agree that Minister Ruane is pursuing an ideology that flies in the face of all that is decent, moral and honest, and that can never be accepted?

Mr McCallister: I agree entirely with the Member.

The Minister laid out the costs that people pay for each of the prep schools throughout Northern Ireland. One has only to listen to the figures to realise the commitment that many of those parents have made. They have made that choice and have made sacrifices. As Mr Shannon rightly pointed out, the issue cuts right across all the divides in Northern Ireland.

One school in the constituency that the Minister and I represent is probably an example of integrated education at its finest, yet she opposes it. The consultation was flawed, as Miss McIlveen stated at the beginning of this debate. Mr O'Dowd said that it was somehow wrong for the DUP, the Ulster Unionists, the SDLP and the Alliance Party to be united on this issue because the UUP voted against the policing and justice proposals last week. The very reason why we voted against policing and justice is that the Minister of Education has failed on every single level. Some Members spoke about the failed policies. The Minister has failed to establish any form of consensus on any policy or movement forward. People are absolutely fed up with debating the issues with the Minister because she does not listen to them: she listens to some magical voice in the UN.

The Minister does not consult, which is why parents and teachers are demoralised with the leadership that the Minister gives to the education sector. That is the reason why we voted against policing and justice. The Executive are dysfunctional, and the Education Minister is the most obvious example of dysfunctionality.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: No. I have been fairly generous with my time and I have heard enough from Sinn Féin on this issue.

Mr O'Dowd talked about prep schools being largely privileged, and he acknowledged the sacrifices that some parents make. However, Sinn Féin's position is ideologically driven.

Most of the parties have accepted the SDLP amendment. Dominic Bradley spoke about different policies, the failures of the Minister and the withdrawal of funding, which will lead to the ludicrous situation of education costing more. If Down High School, a prep school in the constituency that the Minister and I represent, is closed, the surrounding schools will not be able to accommodate some of the children from that prep school. Where will the Minister send those children? Where is the parental choice? When the Minister speaks about equality, it means bringing everybody down; it is not about trying to raise standards or tackling poverty, deprivation and educational underachievement.

My colleague Mr Elliott spoke about how Sinn Féin is isolated in its position. It is encouraging to see such strong cross-party support. Sinn Féin criticised us for trying to work together to find a way forward on transfer. It poured scorn on that, as if there is something wrong with politicians from different parties trying to find a way to clear up a mess and a crisis that was created by the Minister of Education.

Mr Weir: Opponents of the motion indicated that they do not believe that the matter needs to be taken to the Executive or that it is perhaps a matter purely for OFMDFM. Does the Member agree that such failure to bring a controversial issue, pursuant to article 28(10) of a Northern Ireland Act, is the responsibility of the Education Minister? Does he also agree that if the Minister were to fail to bring that matter to the Executive, she would be acting without ministerial authority and would be on the road to court? The Minister has already admitted that the decision will create a financial burden, because she said that the matter is about equity rather than finance. However, adding court costs to the costs to the public purse would be another mistake on top of those that she is already making.

Mr McCallister: I agree with that, and that is the very reason why the issue should go to the Executive. It has been several years since the Executive discussed any education issues. Therefore, she should bring the matter to the Executive so that they can debate it and so that she can get Executive colleagues' views on this controversial issue.

Mr Lunn talked about the many failings in education. He spoke about the chaos with both the transfer test and the early years strategy. He asked about the strategy for

0- to 6-year-olds. We hear about educational underachievement, and we heard from Members around the Chamber that that strategy is one of the surest places from which to start tackling such underachievement. However, where is that strategy? It is nowhere to be seen, yet the only thing that the Minister can think about is attacking prep schools and parents who make a choice and huge sacrifices to send their children to prep schools. She quoted some figures on pupil:teacher ratios, but if we were to close all our prep schools, those figures would surely rise. She does not have the funding to close those schools. The inequality of the funding and the amount of funding that she puts towards Irish-medium education must be addressed. Indeed, Mr Craig made it clear that he did not have an issue with Irish-medium education, but he said that he wants to see equality pursued.

My colleague Mr Kinahan said that this is an attack on choice, and I firmly believe that. It is an attack on choice, and it is an attack on people who want to get their kids off to a good start. It is another form of —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr McCallister: It is another form of discrimination by Sinn Féin. We had it last week over the farm modernisation scheme from the Minister's colleague who is seated behind her —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr McCallister: — and we have it now today over —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Your time is up.

Mr McCallister: I support the motion as amended.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before putting the Question on amendment No 1, Members should note that, if that amendment is made, the Question will not be put on amendment No 2, as its purpose will have been overtaken by the decision on amendment No 1. If that is the outcome, I will proceed to put the Question on the motion as amended.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and negatived.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the Department of Education's decision to withdraw funding from the preparatory departments of grammar schools as demonstrated by the Department's budget proposals for 2010-11; believes that the consultation process undertaken by the Department does not meet with the Sedley requirements on the standards of proper consultation; considers that this proposal is contentious and should be considered by the full Executive; recognises the excellence in terms of attainment achieved by those pupils attending preparatory departments and that the time frame for withdrawal of funding will have an adverse effect on their well-being; believes that the financial implications have not been adequately assessed; and calls on the Minister of Education to enter into discussions immediately with the schools' representatives with a view to determining a solution acceptable to the schools' authorities and the Department.

Adjourned at 5.30 pm.

Written Ministerial Statements

The content of these written ministerial statements is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Regional Development

NI Water: Independent Review Team Report into Procurement Governance

Published at 9.00am on Friday 12 March 2010

The Minister for Regional Development

(Mr Murphy): I have recently received the report of an Independent Review Team which was examining procurement governance failures in NI Water.

The report finds that there has been a serious breakdown in the governance and control framework of NIW in relation to contract approvals, and that this is a serious matter for those responsible, namely the NIW Board and Executives responsible for ensuring compliance.

I will take firm action to implement the recommendations in the report. As part of this, I want to inform the Assembly that I am today dismissing four non-executive directors from the Board [Chris Mellor – the chairman, John Ballard, Ruth Thompson and Declan Gormley]. I have taken this step after a great deal of consideration of all the evidence in order to provide a firm basis for the company to establish governance arrangements, and to move forward with the confidence of the community.

