
Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 4 May 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Notice taken that 10 Members were not present. House counted, and, there being fewer than 10 Members present, the Speaker ordered the Division Bells to be rung.

Upon 10 Members being present —

Private Members' Business

Over 60s Travel Pass

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

Mr Easton: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Regional Development to take steps alongside his counterparts from Westminster, the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament, to ensure that free travel passes issued in Northern Ireland for people over 60 can be used in all other parts of the United Kingdom.

The motion calls on the Minister for Regional Development to ensure that citizens here in Northern Ireland are able to use their free travel passes in other parts of the United Kingdom. That is only fair and makes economic sense.

Before getting into the basis of the motion, I want to highlight how we came to the system that we have in place. Free travel for senior citizens was introduced in Northern Ireland in October 2001. Shortly after that, in May 2002, free travel was extended to war-disabled pensioners. The scheme

was extended again in April 2004, allowing half fare for those with disabilities, including those registered as partially sighted; those refused a driving licence on medical grounds; those known to have learning disabilities; or those in receipt of either mobility component of disability living allowance. In 2008, the scheme was extended to all people over the age of 60, as opposed to over the age of 65. Senior citizens in Northern Ireland can travel freely to the Republic of Ireland and vice versa.

When devolution came to Scotland and Wales, owing to the wide variation in the level and availability of concessionary travel across Great Britain, legislation was enacted to devolve the issue in 2000. The Transport Act 2000, which extended to England and Wales, introduced a minimum concession of half-fare, off-peak local bus travel for pensioners and people with disabilities. In Scotland, legislation was introduced with comparable provisions for such groups, although the minimum level of concession was left to the local Minister's discretion. In 2002, the National Assembly for Wales introduced free, off-peak bus travel anywhere in Wales for pensioners and people with disabilities. In 2006, the Scottish Executive introduced free travel throughout Scotland for pensioners and people with disabilities. The Scottish Government, unlike Wales, decided to centralise the administration of the scheme and issue smart cards just like those that we have in Northern Ireland. In 2008, free local bus travel anywhere in England was introduced.

Before 2002, the Northern Ireland scheme was clearly more generous than that anywhere else in the United Kingdom. Since then, a system equivalent to free national travel has come into place, but some differences remain, in that the Northern Ireland scheme offers concessionary

travel on buses and trains, without time restrictions being applied. That is not the same as in Great Britain, where the scheme applies only to bus services.

On 7 December 2009, my party colleague George Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development whether there were any plans to extend the senior citizen SmartPass system to allow for free travel throughout the United Kingdom, as is the case in the Republic of Ireland. The Minister said that he had no plans to extend the scheme. The issue of free, UK-wide travel has been raised not only in this Chamber but in the National Assembly for Wales. In response to a question, the Deputy First Minister of Wales stated that he continued to work with other UK Administrations on the development of a UK-wide scheme. I fail to understand why the Minister for Regional Development has not looked into the possibilities, never mind the benefits, of seeing people from Northern Ireland who are entitled to free travel here have that entitlement extended to cover Great Britain, as has been the situation in the Republic of Ireland for some years. Are British citizens here being discriminated against?

In the 'Policy Review of the Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme', which was published in January 2007, there was no mention of the cost implications of extending the scheme across the British Isles. Why was that? Why were the cost implications ignored? We should encourage our citizens to travel to other parts of the United Kingdom. The tourism potential of our doing so would bring financial benefits to our economy.

In offering free travel and allowing its citizens to travel without cost on public services across the border and back, the Republic of Ireland is gaining the benefit from tourism. In sending our citizens abroad to spend money, as opposed to keeping them here in the United Kingdom, we are letting the Republic of Ireland gain that benefit. We should encourage our citizens to keep their money in our economy in the United Kingdom first and foremost rather than spend it abroad.

I call on the Minister to see that the scheme be rolled out across the United Kingdom and to make contact with his equivalents in Scotland, England and Wales to see how we go about doing that. I commend the motion to the House and encourage all Members to support it on the basis of equality and common sense.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The motion is to be welcomed and would be of benefit to people here who have occasion to travel in Britain. However, one of the difficulties with it is that travel schemes in Britain, particularly those in England, are administered through local authorities, and the people to whom the schemes apply can benefit only at certain times of the day when concessionary travel is applied, which is usually at off-peak times. The logistics of administering such a scheme could be put forward as a reason for not implementing it.

In my experience, going back a number of years to when pensions and social security benefits were paid by order book, people from Britain who visited the North were unable to cash their order books in post offices because they were for use in GB only and were designated as such. The order books that were issued here were designated NI, Isle of Man, Channel Islands and GB, so people from here who were visiting England could cash their order books. Therefore, administrative problems could be overcome, but it would take a commitment from all the parties involved to come to any sort of a consensus on the best way to do that.

Concessionary travel could be of great benefit to people from this area who travel to Britain. Many people here do not maximise their benefits. For example, pension credit is very much underclaimed. State pension levels here are derisory, and travel is expensive here and in Britain. A number of older people visit relatives regularly. Unfortunately, however, in many cases, they cannot do so as often as they would like due to the high costs involved.

The all-Ireland free travel scheme that was introduced in 2007 has proved to be highly successful. I know a number of older people who avail themselves of the scheme and find it extremely beneficial. I know a pensioner from the Newry area who used to travel to the Mahon tribunal in Dublin, which he found educational. The scheme certainly broadened his education as well as his travel.

The Minister for Regional Development and the Executive ought to be commended for reducing the age for senior citizens' free travel from 65 years to 60 years in 2008. That has given many older people — people who otherwise would never have had that opportunity because of the costs involved — the opportunity to

travel. Critics point the finger and decry the Assembly for not doing anything constructive. However, free travel for older people is a positive achievement, which I know is much appreciated by those who benefit from it.

Finally, I ask the Minister, who is positive and forward-thinking on those matters, to explore the best way to achieve a positive outcome in regard to the motion.

Mr Kinahan: I will be brief. The motion is an admirable idea. Pensioners or senior citizens deserve everything that the Assembly can give them. It needs to give them much more. The Pensioners' Manifesto makes various points. One issue is the tiny pension, which is not index-linked. We must try to move it in that direction.

I return to transport, which is the subject of the debate. The Assembly must give pensioners as much chance as possible to travel not just around Ireland but the UK as well. We must make that easy for them. Free bus or rail passes — whatever we can provide through that sort of scheme — that can be used throughout the rest of the UK will enable many older people to keep in contact with their families and give them a chance to enjoy life while they are elderly. It will give them freedom and will help them.

Throughout the debate, we must remember that transport needs to be accessible at the basic point of access — the step onto a bus or train. We must remember that, if we provide bus passes, we must also make transport easier to use. At the same time, it must be ensured that bus and rail services are linked by a hub-and-spoke system to all other forms of transport so that older people can move around the whole of the UK and Ireland easily.

If I may be forgiven for a second for a small touch of electioneering, I believe that my party's link with the Conservatives will allow it to have stronger influence on the choices that will be made. I hope that, through that link, we will be able to help the Minister to achieve the motion's aim. The Ulster Unionist Party supports the motion.

Mrs M Bradley: I thank the Member for bringing the motion to the Assembly. In line with my party's policy of supporting older people's rights, I have no difficulty whatsoever in supporting the motion. Furthermore, it has always been my party's wish to see the delivery of a blanket policy that would allow senior citizens the

freedom to travel throughout Great Britain and Ireland using their SmartPasses.

The topic has been broached with the First Minister and deputy First Minister through many tabled questions. I admit that in the current economic climate there are conceivable financial issues with the delivery of an extension of the SmartPass system. However, I believe that there would also be many benefits in pursuing the issue at hand.

We are all aware that we have an ageing population. Older people are living longer, more active lives. Older people know that the more active they are, the more likely they are to have a healthier lifestyle. Although the Assembly has an obligation to look after older people who have illnesses that are physically restrictive at onset, it also has an obligation to make life easier for older people who are still sufficiently able-bodied to live their lives as they wish. If that includes travelling locally, nationally or, indeed, internationally, then the Assembly must do all in its power to make that easier for them. Older people depend on their friends and families for support and companionship. Not all are lucky enough to have those people living close at hand. Many families are spread throughout the world, and, although the Internet has made the world a smaller place, many of us still prefer to see one another face to face.

10.45 am

As of 1 March 2010, a total of 205,318 Senior SmartPasses have been issued in Northern Ireland, which is an indication of the popularity of the scheme. If extended travel options were offered, there would be an even greater uptake. As my party's spokesperson on older people's issues, I welcome any additional beneficial enhancement of the current Senior SmartPass travel system. We must ensure that our older people are assisted in whatever way possible to make their later lives easier, more enjoyable and accessible. I support this important motion, but I also feel that we must commit to hold on to what we currently have. That must not be destroyed.

Mr G Robinson: Page 44 of the 2007 'Policy Review of the Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme' states:

"The Scheme targets several groups of people liable to or at risk of social exclusion and/or poverty... people with disabilities and...senior citizens."

It is obvious that the intention of the concessionary travel provision here is to target those who are among the most vulnerable in our society.

Those in possession of a Senior SmartPass can avail themselves of free travel in the Republic of Ireland, and the motion calls on the Minister to work with his counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales — perhaps through the use of east-west bodies — to ensure that all those over 60 who wish to visit family in the rest of the UK can use the bus and rail network free of charge there as they can here.

The concessionary travel scheme aims and the terminology used to outline them are revealing. They are for the benefit of those who are the most vulnerable and, therefore, are prioritised by the Minister's Department. Should the aim of the motion be successful, not only would the over 60s in Northern Ireland be able to avail themselves of free travel here and in the rest of the UK, but people from the rest of the UK would be entitled to the same concession here. Properly managed, that could be a great selling point, which could boost our tourist sector in off-peak periods.

I can already hear the Minister talking about the pressures that his budget would be under if the concessionary scheme were extended, and we acknowledge that to be the case. Therefore, perhaps he and his counterparts should examine a centrally funded scheme from Westminster, which would offer unanimity of entitlement and a single card for use across the UK. That would make both the scheme and the distribution of central funds easier to manage.

All Members want to help the most vulnerable in society, and the proposed extension of the scheme is one way in which that can be done. However, I would go further and suggest that the half-fare SmartPass for those with disabilities should also be made available on a UK-wide basis and that that type of SmartPass should also offer free travel. However, today I hope that, like me, all Members will fully support this inspirational motion.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Senior SmartPass system has many advantages, and generally promotes social inclusion. Therefore, today's motion, which aims to improve many aspects of social inclusion, is to be welcomed.

The Senior SmartPass scheme is a great respecter of those who have contributed so much throughout their life and provides respect and help to those who are more isolated. There are many social aspects of the system that must be respected, and those would be enhanced if the scheme were to be expanded.

The system has made an investment in the social capital of our society, and it can continue to do so. However, there are practicalities to address, such as the issue of common approach in GB, which my colleague Mickey Brady has already referred to; financial and administrative issues; and common approach with the rest of Ireland. Those are the details of the system. Overall, I appreciate the general principles of the motion and the approach that it is instigating. Therefore, I support the motion in a general sense. However, great work will have to be achieved on the details, and I look forward to what the Minister has to say about the way ahead. I appreciate the social inclusion aspect, and I hope that there will be improvements.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the motion. I declare an interest in that I have used the SmartPass in our jurisdiction, and it is very welcome. Senior citizens who have a SmartPass use it and enjoy it, which is what it is about. It gives them a good excuse to leave the comfort of their house, hop on a bus and meet their friends for coffee or tea. It gets them out, and it improves their health.

We debated the equality aspects of the SmartPass in the Chamber in 2007. At that time, senior ladies were regarded as pensioners at 60 years of age, although they had to wait a further five years to receive their SmartPass. Thankfully, the Minister, in his wisdom and good sense, was able to address that, and we now have equality. I remember saying that I was able to jump on a bus in Main Street, Kircubbin and go to Killarney for nothing. However, my wife had to jump on the bus, trail after me and pay for her ticket, which was neither right nor fair.

Mr Dallat: Does the Member agree that, although the SmartPass has a particular quality, it is totally dependent on the quality of the service available? Does he agree that the erosion of public transport, particularly in rural areas, means that the SmartPass is of no value whatsoever? Finally, does he agree that we need to co-ordinate public services so that people in rural areas can access main-line services such

as train and express bus services? Without that access, the SmartPass is of limited value.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for his contribution. Of course I agree with him.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCarthy: I will give way in a minute.

I represent a mainly rural area, so I see that all the time. People living out in the sticks, as they are called, are housebound and cannot simply jump on a bus. I agree entirely with what the Member said. Who knows, perhaps in the not-too-distant future those people will be able to get on a bus and enjoy the service.

Mr Weir: I am sure that the Member agrees that it is good that we now have sexual equality with regard to the cost of the scheme. The Member said that he travelled to Killarney for free but his wife had to trail behind him and pay for the trip. However, the Member had another option: his wife could have stayed at home, and it would have been a holiday for them both.

Mr McCarthy: When we have the opportunity to do so, my wife and I like to travel together. Unfortunately, in my case, that does not always happen. If the motion is passed, as I hope it will be, we will be able to jump on a bus in Main Street, Kircubbin and arrive in Main Street in Kilwinning in Scotland or places in England or Wales. I have no doubt that, in time, that will be the case.

We received information on the subject from Library Services, and I was disturbed to note that, when the Minister was asked questions on the matter in 2008, he said that he had no plans to discuss it with his counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales. I am disappointed by that. I hope that we will agree the motion and that the Minister will then, perhaps, take time to negotiate with his counterparts. I hope that we will have equality when it comes to travel across these islands.

Having a bus pass encourages senior citizens to leave the car at home, which, in turn, helps the environment. There are many benefits to be gained from the motion, and, on behalf of the Alliance Party and the Assembly's United Community, I fully support it.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion and encourage every Member to do likewise. Some time ago, the DUP first announced, through Dr

Paisley, the intention to allow free travel for the over 60s in Northern Ireland. That was met with a roar of approval, not only inside the Chamber but from outside and from my constituency in particular. My office was inundated with people asking when free travel would be introduced and how they could go about availing themselves of it. The number of SmartPass travel passes that all Members sign in our offices is a clear demonstration of the level of interest.

One of the first ladies to apply for a bus pass from my office received help from the staff to fill in the forms. Subsequently, she went on a trip to Banbridge, which, I am sure, is a keenly priced place to visit, and those who live there will be heartened to hear me say so. She returned with chocolates for the girls in the office to thank them for helping her to get the pass that enabled her to travel outside the area and have a good day out. Many people had been unable to do so, but now they can. That example demonstrates some of the advantages of using the bus service.

By the same token, local shop owners in the town told me that Saturday business had increased since the free bus passes came into operation, and elderly men and women with various accents are making purchases. That shows that people from all over the Province are taking advantage of the bus passes and coming to Newtownards to shop. I encourage people, on receiving their free bus pass to come to Newtownards to shop even more than they have in the past

The introduction of the passes has been an overwhelming success that has benefited all areas of the Province, and now is the time to take the initiative even further. Members of the older generation have not been blessed with opportunities to travel in earlier times, and they should be given that opportunity now. Recently, I read about two pensioners on average income. After paying for food, heating and the bare essentials, one was left with only £2 for the rest of the week, and the other was even worse off, with only 47p. There was no chance that they could pay for a bus anywhere. However, they could claim their free travel, buy a cup of tea and feel refreshed after a break, albeit only for a short time.

The ladies in my church love hearing the announcement of a bus tour, particularly one to the mainland. I know many people who want to

take advantage of such opportunities. For many, that bus tour is their holiday and their chance to spend time away. The extension of free travel to the mainland would greatly enhance the existing provision and increase the number of opportunities.

I am surprised at how skilled the members of our older generation are in computer technology. Their skills far exceed my own, and senior citizens often bring printouts from the Internet to my office. With that knowledge comes the power to do more and the confidence to go further, and older people are accessing every opportunity. It is no longer out of their reach to book a ferry crossing to the mainland and reserve a hotel for the night. The extension of free travel to the mainland will make a sufficient cost difference to enable some people to get away and enjoy breaks during their retirement.

Help the Aged has a section on its website that helps people to find the right break for them, and it has advisers who help people to get away. We can play our part in the Chamber today by supporting the motion and setting the wheels in motion. As we are a part of the UK, our free bus pass should extend to the rest of the UK, which is what the motion calls for. It calls for co-operation from our counterparts in extending to their constituents and ours the opportunity for affordable travel and breaks to which they should be entitled.

I am keen for cross-Assembly co-operation to enable members of the older generation to have a quality of life and experience that they may not be able to afford for themselves. I have been approached by many people asking whether they can use their bus pass to travel on the mainland. Now is the time to put in motion the process that will enable me to tell them that they can. All Members should be able to tell their constituents who are aged over 60 that they can book a ferry or plane and travel about at will to visit family and friends whom they have not seen in years or that they can visit Edinburgh Castle or Buckingham Palace at the same cost as going to Belfast Castle using a free bus pass — nothing. That is the situation that we are trying to achieve today.

I support the senior citizens, and I want them to have the chance to have a life. They should not be bound by financial constraints, because we are in a position to help. Therefore, I support the motion, and I congratulate my colleagues on

the thought that they put into the motion and on bringing it to the Chamber.

11.00 am

The Minister for Regional Development

(Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Members who tabled the motion and those who contributed to the debate. I note that Mr Shannon claimed responsibility on behalf of his former party leader for something that my Department has introduced. I hope that he will be as forthcoming in accepting responsibility on behalf of the DUP for the state of the roads on the Ards Peninsula. However, perhaps Members like to claim responsibility for only the good bits.

I am aware from correspondence that my Department receives from elected representatives and the public that the reciprocity of concessionary travel arrangements across these islands is an important issue for many people. Given the popularity of the all-Ireland free travel scheme for older people, which came online in 2007, it is understandable that people would want to see similar arrangements with the jurisdictions across the water.

The motion has policy and technical components, and the interplay between them is quite complex. Alex Easton and some other Members spoke about the differentials in the operation of the schemes here and across the water, and they alluded to some of the difficulties that are faced in attempting to make such arrangements. I know that Mr Easton provided some background to other schemes, but it might be helpful if I give some background to our current position.

As far as Britain is concerned, the concessionary fares policy is a devolved matter. Each jurisdiction has its own scheme, and, as a general rule, users may avail themselves of concessionary travel only in the country in which they live. Thus, the current position means that pass holders from England cannot travel free of charge in, for example, Scotland, and vice versa. However, there are minor exceptions. I understand that local arrangements are in place in some border areas, and, as a general rule, children get discounts, regardless of their place of residence.

Like the schemes in other jurisdictions, the North's concessionary fare scheme has changed and developed over time. It was established in 1978 under article 5 of the Transport Order 1977, with the intention of extending the existing

concessions available for public transport in Belfast to cover services throughout the North. Eligibility was restricted to residents in the North, and, at that time, free travel was introduced for the registered blind, and half-fare travel was introduced for senior citizens aged 65 and over, people in receipt of a regular disablement pension award and children between the ages of six and 16.

The next major development came in October 2001, when the Assembly introduced free travel for senior citizens. Shortly afterwards, in May 2002, the free travel scheme was extended to award disabled pensioners. At the same time, the electronic SmartPass system replaced the flash pass system. Since then, there have been two major changes. In April 2004, the scheme was extended through the introduction of half-fare concession for four categories of people with disabilities. More recently, in October 2008, we reduced the eligible age for senior free travel from 65 to 60. That brought the North into line with the equivalent schemes across the water where age eligibility is concerned. Interestingly, that is not reciprocated in the South, where the eligible age for senior free travel remains over 65.

As regards reciprocal arrangements, I pointed out that the concessionary fares policies in Britain and here are devolved to the individual jurisdictions. However, a clear willingness exists to consider issues that are concerned with the possible mutual recognition of schemes.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for giving way. Before he leaves that issue, I wish to ask him about the recent rumours that the SmartPass for senior citizens in Northern Ireland is under threat. Will the Minister give the Assembly a commitment today that there will be no interference with, or cutbacks to, that SmartPass?

The Minister for Regional Development:

I assure the Member that cutbacks to the scheme have not been on my agenda and nor will they be at any stage. I am not sure where those rumours have come from. In the run-up to an election, people often put out scare stories in the hope that they become accepted as fact. However, that rumour is certainly not true. I have never considered, nor will I consider, such cutbacks under my watch.

As regards the reciprocal arrangements, a clear willingness exists to consider issues on the possible mutual recognition of schemes.

Members will be aware that the Concessionary Bus Travel Act 2007, which dealt primarily with arrangements in England and Wales, also made a provision that would facilitate reciprocal arrangements between the various jurisdictions.

Members may also be aware that under the auspices of the British-Irish Council, my Department is exploring the potential for mutual recognition of concessionary fares for people with disabilities and older people across the eight Administrations. However, the work done so far in that forum, and other contact that my officials have had with officials in other jurisdictions, demonstrates that the issues that need to be addressed are more than merely legislative ones.

The most obvious issue is that reciprocal arrangements are likely to impose differing burdens on each jurisdiction. For example, a jurisdiction that attracts tourists will have more expense than one that does not. That issue is particularly relevant in the context of the British-Irish Council. Similarly, different schemes offer differing levels of concession. Our scheme, as Mr Easton said, is, arguably, the most generous, covering bus and rail travel, with no restrictions on the time of travel. In England, by way of contrast, the usual provision covers bus travel but not rail travel and is available only on off-peak services. Therefore, the risk is that those visiting here would have more favourable travel at a higher cost to us than our residents would have when travelling across the water. One way to deal with that problem would be for jurisdictions to pay for their residents wherever they roam. Clearly, the creation of some sort of clearing system would pose technological challenges, as it would have to deal separately with not only Scotland and Wales, but all the English local authorities and, of course, us.

Another way to deal with that would be to agree a standard concessionary arrangement, which would operate in all jurisdictions, for people travelling outside their jurisdiction of residence. However, that would also introduce an additional layer of complexity. Individual jurisdictions would have to operate two separate systems, one for visitors and one for residents. An alternative would be for the different jurisdictions to agree to standardise the concessionary arrangements so that there was a single arrangement for visitors and residents across all jurisdictions. However, it is difficult to envisage an agreement being reached across all jurisdictions. I suspect

it unlikely that a single standardised system would include rail travel, and, as far as the North is concerned, that would mean a reduction in our scheme.

The administration of concessionary schemes must be considered, as, again, there are clear differences between jurisdictions. Scotland and Wales administer and finance concessionary travel centrally through national schemes, as do we. However, in England, schemes are administered by local authorities. It is paramount that my Department can guarantee the financial integrity of the concessionary fare scheme, whatever form it may take. I expect that other jurisdictions want the same high standards.

As Members are aware, access here to the two schemes for people over 60 is carefully administered, and provision of service is linked to the use of a SmartPass. This is necessary to ensure that fraud is kept to a minimum and that the money available for concessionary fares is genuinely used for the purpose for which it is intended. When the all-island scheme was introduced, residents of the South were required to obtain SmartPasses so that the same high standards could be maintained. Those passes were issued by the authorities in the South. I am aware that consideration has been given to the development of a standard pass card in Britain that would be integrated transport smartcard organisation (ITSO) compliant. That could be linked to the development of integrated ticketing arrangements that would also be ITSO compliant. In the North, we are also considering how we might develop a fully integrated ticketing system for public transport. However, in doing so, we would have to take into account developments in the South, which is not committed to ITSO compliance.

Leaving aside the administrative issues, it is difficult to say what a reciprocal arrangement may cost, as we have no statistics for the number of visitors from across the water who are over the age of 60. It is difficult to guess how much use would be made of public transport if it were free. However, we do know that more than 200,000 visitors to the North from across the water are over the age of 55. If we assume that only half those visitors are over 60 and that each person uses £10 of free travel, which is the cost of a return journey between Belfast and Belfast International Airport, the annual cost of concessionary travel would quickly reach at least £1 million. Greater

numbers and an increased amount of travel would push that figure higher.

In common with concessionary fare schemes in other countries, ours was born of an expectation that the very young and the very old should receive discounted public transport costs, and was developed more or less piecemeal from that standpoint. In 2003, the Department felt that a more strategic approach was required and, to that end, the following objective was adopted. The scheme aims to:

“promote social inclusion by improving public transport accessibility through free and concessionary fares for members of the community who are most vulnerable, or liable to social exclusion.”

As part of the 2007-08 comprehensive spending review, I made bids for money to support five possible options for the extension of the concessionary fares scheme. Those options were free travel for the over 60s, free travel for disabled people, half-fare travel for young people aged 16 and 17, concessionary travel for long-term unemployed people returning to work, and the introduction of concessionary fares to community transport services. Ultimately, the Executive chose free travel for the over 60s.

I am also happy to state that, with assistance from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, concessionary fare equivalency is now available for elderly and disabled Community Transport members in rural areas.

Given the importance that I attach to our concessionary fare arrangements, I assure Members that my Department will continue to engage with those in other jurisdictions to consider whether there are options to create and extend reciprocal arrangements. However, if additional resources are made available to develop the concessionary fare scheme, the focus should be on those changes that were bid for in the comprehensive spending review. Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Easton: I thank the Members who contributed to the debate. I pay tribute to my colleague from Lagan Valley Jonathan Craig, who is ill and dearly wanted to take part in the debate.

I feel very strongly about the issue, as do my constituents. It is only right to extend the scheme to allow those who are eligible for free travel in Northern Ireland to enjoy its benefits across the United Kingdom. It is odd that citizens of Northern Ireland have been able to

enjoy the benefits of the scheme in the Republic of Ireland for some time but have not had the opportunity to enjoy its benefits in the rest of the United Kingdom. Sharing a land border with the Republic should not mean that our citizens are discriminated against when they travel to the mainland.

I appreciate that there are political arguments involved, but it makes sense to ensure that travel remains free across the British Isles for those who are eligible under the scheme. Why do we have a situation where people can travel across the border for free, and do so in another country, when they cannot enjoy the same benefits in their own country?

Northern Ireland has one of the most generous schemes in the UK, but given the number of people who travel across to Great Britain, I do not see a financial reason for not extending it. Such an extension could generate tourism and keep money within our own economy. At present, because of the saving that they will make on travel costs, the scheme encourages people to take their money across the border into the Irish Republic. We should be doing everything to keep money in our own economy, especially during these financial times. If people with SmartPasses travel to the mainland, they will need somewhere to stay, somewhere to eat, and somewhere to have a coffee or a drink and to enjoy themselves. The positive aspect of extending the scheme is that it will generate local income.

Mickey Brady welcomed the motion but contradicted himself slightly by saying that administrative problems were a reason not to expand the scheme for travel across the UK.

Mr Kinahan said that he wanted pensioners to have the right to free movement across the UK. He also said that he wanted a first-class transport system and he went into election mode. However, he forgot to mention that his Conservative Party friends are going to cut the block grant to Northern Ireland by £200 million and make cuts of £6 billion across the UK. I do not think that they will be supporting free travel for pensioners across the UK.

Mary Bradley supported the motion and said that she wanted a blanket policy on transport across the UK. She said that extending the scheme would be costly, but she also mentioned the benefits.

George Robinson said that he wanted the scheme to target the most vulnerable and that he wanted a central fund from Westminster to pay for it.

Billy Leonard welcomed the motion and said that he respected the current system. He also raised finance and administration issues.

Kieran McCarthy said that free transport helped to improve the lives of pensioners and that he wanted equality across the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

Jim Shannon mentioned that it was the DUP, through Dr Paisley, that first announced — in the Northern Ireland Assembly — the idea of free travel for the over 60s. He also said that free travel for the elderly was encouraging people to shop in Newtownards and to visit his constituency office.

The Minister, Conor Murphy, acknowledged the issue of free transport across the UK for the over 60s. He went over current policies on the issue and gave a guarantee on the future of the SmartPass in Northern Ireland. He also outlined the difficulties with extending the scheme, including the increase in administration, possible problems due to travel in different jurisdictions and a possible cost of £1 million. The Minister said that he would engage with representatives of other jurisdictions on the issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Regional Development to take steps alongside his counterparts from Westminster, the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament, to ensure that free travel passes issued in Northern Ireland for people over 60 can be used in all other parts of the United Kingdom.

11.15 am

Tidy Northern Ireland Day

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

Mr Kinahan: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to sponsor a Tidy Northern Ireland Day, and to work with councils to encourage local communities across Northern Ireland to get actively involved in tackling litter and improving their local areas.

We all know that we have a fantastic mixture of people in Northern Ireland — community groups, local schools or individuals — who help to clear up rubbish; they are the doers whom we should be praising. However, we all know that there is a large contingent of others who are lazy, idle and let the rest of Northern Ireland down. They are the litterbugs, the litter louts, the ill-disciplined and shameful members of Northern Ireland society.

They are the people who care about no one else. They let us all down, and probably let the rest of society down, perhaps moving on to other behaviour as bad as stoning ambulances and fire engines, and generally not fitting in with society. They are the polluters and parasites of society who believe that it is someone else's job to tidy up after them.

We are pushing for a Tidy Northern Ireland Day, sponsored by the Minister and the Department of the Environment. We thank them for all their hard work in many areas, but we need a Tidy Northern Ireland Day to start a co-ordinated plan, and we need leadership from the Department. Tidy Northern Ireland Day ties in with a tidy Northern Ireland national spring clean; let us adopt that each spring, just as nature does as it refreshes. Let us have a Tidy Northern Ireland Day, when schools, parents, families and community groups muck in to tidy up their patch.

I am sure that all of us, when canvassing and during our daily work, have witnessed the very worst, from the fag end thrown down on the pavement or out of a car, or, as in my case, eight fish and chip suppers flying out of the back

of a van in front of me — polystyrene boxes, brown paper bags and all the chips that had not been eaten. We move on to a mission hall in Newtownabbey that sold its land, the corner of which has become a dump that the new owner has yet to clear. We move to the youths at the weekends and in the evenings hiding behind bushes or in dark corners dropping their bottles, crisp and carrier bags, and leaving them for others to clear.

We move, on a much larger scale, to Lough Neagh and all the rubbish thrown into the rivers and dumped into the lough, which all washes up in a corner of Antrim. We move to the worst of all: the businesses in Mallusk that felt it to be all right to dump toxic waste into the Ballymartin river and the Six Mile Water. Those are just a few of the incidents in my patch, and I know that all Members will have similar, if not worse, in their own patches. It is a total disgrace; it is something that, I hope, we will start towards halting for ever by creating a Tidy NI Day.

Members will note that the motion states:

“work with councils to encourage local communities”.

For the next few moments, I will concentrate not on the communities but on the councils. How many Members, when asked to get litter cleared, cannot find out who owns the piece of land in question? I should have declared an interest at the outset as a councillor for South Antrim. How often do we struggle to find out who owns and is responsible for a wall with graffiti, a hedge or a broken fence?

Councils need a continually updated database with legal backing so that they know who owns or is responsible for everything. Such a database does not exist, and often, certainly in my council, it takes weeks and sometimes months to find out who owns a piece of land.

It is only then that we can identify who is responsible. Councils, the Housing Executive, Departments, schools and others have their responsibilities. They all clean up at different times in different ways and to different standards. By having a Tidy NI Day, we can start off with everything being clean at the beginning of spring, with every patch in a council area being tidied up.

My experience is that councils often do their budgets from the wrong angle. They budget on

how little they need to spend to adequately tidy their patch. In many cases, they fail to reach an adequate standard. Councils should plan to tidy up whole areas to a certain standard at the same time. A Tidy NI Day, as a spring clean, should be budgeted for accordingly. That means that councils must plan for an adequate Tidy NI Day, with skips, bags and tools made available, as well as the organisational co-ordination to pull the whole thing together. It is already there: I am not asking for a great deal of extra cost. The people and the organisation are there — it just needs the will that comes from the top.

We have excellent plans coming in the draft Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill. However, that will not work as well as it should until councils know who owns or is responsible for every piece of land.

Once again, I congratulate all those in society who give up their free time, pull together and help to tidy up. We should be cheering those people. The Ulster Unionist Party has consistently pushed for an organised tidy day and many other tidying initiatives. The 'Belfast Telegraph' should also be congratulated on its successful campaign. However, everything is disjointed. There are three big waste management groups; we could go on for much longer if we were to explore how much more they could do. Perhaps they could be linked into how we run a Tidy NI Day. We need an example, and we need the will. We wish to see a Tidy NI Day as described. If it works, it could tick all the boxes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr Boylan): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I apologise for being late for the debate. The Committee for the Environment has not specifically considered the merits of earmarking a day in the North to encourage local communities to get actively involved in tackling litter. However, during the Committee's discussions, members have recognised the potential of the draft Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill to contribute to the objectives of the motion. I will say a few words on behalf of the Committee and then as an MLA for Newry and Armagh.

Long before the current Minister indicated his intention to introduce the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill, the Committee was being lobbied by councils and councillors, community groups and members of the public about the need for legislation of that kind. On several

occasions, the Committee sought an answer from the Department on the possibility of such legislation being introduced. We were told of the existence of similar legislation elsewhere and how valuable it had been in enabling local authorities to take control and clean up their areas.

When, on 11 February 2010, the Department briefed the Committee on its policy proposals for such a Bill, members welcomed them enthusiastically and noted that their potential to address the cumulative impact of many seemingly smaller issues, such as litter, could make a significant improvement to the quality of life of our citizens. Members welcomed the fact that the draft Bill is designed to provide councils with sufficient flexibility to address their own local problems with a suite of measures specifically tailored for their area.

Litter can take on many forms, from chewing gum that is stuck on pavements and cigarette butts thrown out of car windows to packaging from fast food outlets and unwanted advertising leaflets placed on car windscreens. The Committee understands that the forthcoming Bill will enable local authorities to tackle the whole range of litter problems to improve their areas. In particular, members welcomed the fact that measures proposed in the draft Bill should be cost neutral and that the revenue from fixed-penalty notices will return to local authorities. That, in turn, should provide valuable resources for more innovative approaches to improving local areas. I envisage councils and communities, with powers such as those, taking much more pride in their local areas. That, in itself, should go a long way in encouraging them to get actively involved in tackling litter problems as called for by the motion.

I will now say a few words as MLA for Newry and Armagh. I support the motion and hope that today's debate and the introduction of the draft Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill will raise awareness and change attitudes and behaviour towards keeping our communities tidy. Armagh is not a major retail centre and largely promotes tourism through a local council-backed strategy. I have heard people who visit the island express great disappointment at the state of our towns and neighbourhoods. I am not specifically talking about town centres, because they are catered for; I am talking about areas that are off the beaten track and the back alleyways. It is very difficult, and people have expressed their disappointment.

Many people in my constituency have taken advantage of the recent dry spell of good weather and have been out walking and cycling. That has led to a number of complaints about the eyesore of dropped litter and the indiscriminate dumping of waste, especially along rural roads and in forestry areas. I support councils being given more flexibility to address their needs. Hopefully that will be addressed, not just through awareness of a Tidy NI Day, but by the introduction of the draft Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill.

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

It is important that local communities and residents' groups are given the tools to do the job. Words of support are well and good, but backing that up with real support is essential. I also pay tribute to the continuous initiatives being rolled out in schools to educate young people on how to dispose of litter properly. I think that the motion will complement the introduction of the draft Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Weir: We are often accused of talking rubbish in the House. Today, for once, that is literally true. The motion represents something that the House can unite around, so I will not risk the ire of the Benches opposite by trotting out the old joke about keeping Northern Ireland tidy by dropping your litter in the Republic of Ireland.

I thank the proposers of the motion for bringing it forward. It is a useful motion, but, in a sense, I regret that we have to debate the subject. Mr Kinahan gave examples, as we all can, of people throwing chip packets out and rubbish being dumped around the place. On an Executive, Assembly, local government or voluntary basis, the efforts that are made are worthwhile. However, they should not be necessary. People should show a sense, or a culture, of social responsibility. It is within our abilities, and should be within everyone's abilities, to look after their own rubbish and to dispose of it in an appropriate manner. It is not as if there is a lack of bins or a lack of opportunity to dispose of rubbish. It is the sheer laziness, and sometimes spitefulness, of people that leads to the problem.

I join in congratulating the work of the 'Belfast Telegraph' and the vast legion of people who operate on a voluntary basis and take part in a range of activities, whether community based or council led. The Chairperson of the Committee

said that a lot of schools have bought into the idea of looking after the environment and, in particular, cleaning up litter. Hopefully, lessons will be learned by young people. I would like to see them carry those lessons through for the rest of their lives.

There is no doubting the scourge of litter. One does not have to go any distance to be able to spot that. I grew up and still live close to the coastline of Northern Ireland. I have many happy memories of the beaches of north Down and the Ards Peninsula. When one sees bags of rubbish dumped indiscriminately on various parts of our coastline, it is a matter of deep regret. It is not simply bad for the environment; it is bad for the economy. As an economy, we look towards tourism, and, consequently, we do not want anything to spoil our environment.

The problem is not just on the coastline: a lot of estates and parts of our towns, cities and villages also suffer from the scourge of litter.

Last week, my colleague Alex Easton and I had the opportunity to go on a walkabout with a north Down community group and a number of statutory agencies to see the various actions that need to be taken. As part of that, we went into a field that backs onto an estate. It was both amazing and odd to see the range of rubbish that was carted about to be dumped there, and it showed clearly that there is a problem that needs to be tackled.

11.30 am

The principal role that the Department can play is enabler and facilitator. We are all aware that resources are tight, and I support the idea of sponsorship as outlined in the motion. However, I think it is less about allocating high levels of resources and more about giving a public lead. Principally, this is something that works best through a bottom-up approach. This will be given teeth, as the Chairperson indicated and I am sure the Minister will address, in the clear neighbourhood agenda, which moves beyond simply litter. That is very much at the heart of the problem, and we will come back to it at a later stage.

A lot can be done at local level. I take a slight issue with the proposer of the motion, who spoke about the target of having a litter-free day or a clean-up day. Each year, my council, through its budget, supports a spring clean week in which it co-ordinates local volunteers to help in

the clean-up. It strikes me that resources are not a big issue for councils and that it is more about willingness. Many good initiatives have been undertaken in north Down, Belfast and other areas.

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

Mr Weir: It is through such partnership, voluntary action and co-ordination that we can all work together to tackle the problem. I support the motion.

Mr Dallat: The motion provides an excellent opportunity to bring the issue to the Floor of the Assembly, and I congratulate those who have done that. I do not want to be negative in any way, but I suggest that a Tidy Northern Ireland Day alone will not solve the problem. However, the debate at least gives us the opportunity to put forward other ideas. Every year, hundreds of thousands of pounds of ratepayers' money is squandered tidying up what other people have left behind. Those people do not have any respect for the environment or, as the research suggests, they are either lazy or simply do not care.

On a positive note, I must say that many local communities are now taking responsibility for themselves and have organised successful clean-ups. However, it should not be left to communities alone. Indeed, in some instances, the upsurge in litter cancels out their good work. Any organised campaign must involve local communities and needs the co-operation of statutory bodies and other government agencies. The Housing Executive certainly has a role to play. In Coleraine, schools and youth clubs are central to work on environmental issues. Local representatives need to support those organisations by going along to their events and backing them.

Litter has been the Cinderella subject for far too long, and it is time to give it centre stage. Members will have seen in the research papers that there is a wide variation in how councils approach the problem, including fixed penalties and so on. It might be a good idea for the Department to ask for regular returns from the 26 councils to establish where local councils are successful and where they seem to merely pay lip service to the problem. The Department should also give incentives to local councils that can be passed on to the local communities at the forefront of trying to make their environments better.

Excessive packaging is one of the most serious problems, although the Assembly may have no direct control over that. Anyone who bought an Easter egg recently would have been absolutely horrified by the amount of packaging for one commodity, which was used for no reason other than to sell as many as possible. Manufacturers should be made more responsible when they are marketing their products.

Local shops, particularly fast food outlets, have a direct responsibility to look after the environment, especially the area that fronts the shop. From my limited experience of travelling abroad, I know that that is exactly what happens in other countries. I see no reason why it should not happen here.

Every locality is spoilt by beer bottles, cans, blue bags and all the stuff that is the by-product of the off-licence trade. It is difficult to know what we can do about that. If those objects are allowed to remain, a very negative image is cast of the whole community, which is grossly unfair.

I support the motion. In protecting our environment, there is a role for the Minister and for each and every one of us. I used to live in a small town called Malin in north Donegal. Those who have been there know that every year thousands come from all over simply to see why that small village, which is no more than a hamlet, has won tidy town competitions at every level for years on end. For those annoyed that I single out Malin, let me also mention Broughshane outside Ballymena. That is another area that, through local initiatives, has managed to get itself onto the tourist map.

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

Mr Dallat: I have finished, thank you.

Mr McCarthy: I support the motion. I agree entirely with John Dallat when he says that one day might be useful. However, in my opinion, it will take at least half a dozen such days to overcome the problem. I do not think that we will ever overcome it completely, but we should make every effort to do so.

I agree with the proposer of the motion. Northern Ireland is probably the dirtiest place around. I do not like saying that, but we should admit it. However hard we try, we seem to be making little progress. I applaud the recent clean-up campaign by the 'Belfast Telegraph'. That was

first class and fine, but it would have to be repeated on a monthly or bimonthly basis to overcome the problem.

Education should be at the core of dealing with the problem. Teachers in primary and other schools do their best to instil in young people the importance of taking their litter home or using the bin. However, not so long ago, I was standing outside a primary school — I will not say which — when the kids were coming out of the building. One particular youngster, as soon as he came through the door, unwrapped a Mars bar and threw away the paper. You feel like — well, you cannot do these things, but there we go. That was a child who was leaving an educational institution.

I will give Members a suggestion that they could think about. I am happy to live on the edge of Strangford Lough, beside a promenade and a car park. In my porch, I keep a thing called a litter picker; I am sure that Members know what that is. On my morning walk to the promenade, I take the litter picker and spend five minutes walking and picking up litter and putting it in a nearby bin. It is handy to do that, and it gives me a bit of fresh air. Members could do the same wherever they live. I encourage each to equip himself with a litter picker and do that little bit for the environment. I am sure that people wonder what I am doing, but I do not care. One morning, while I was doing my exercise, I met a lady whom I had not seen for a long time. She said that she did not think that she would have seen me with a stick — she thought that I had a walking stick.

Ards Borough Council used to provide skips at strategic places, on the instruction of local councillors. That was an excellent scheme; a lot of people made use of the skips. For one reason or another — probably economic — that scheme was discontinued. The council decided that the civic amenity sites or civic recycling sites, as we now call them, that were scattered among the villages would do. However, that is not good enough for the people who live in the countryside or in small hamlets and who do not have a car or access to those facilities. Such a scheme costs money, but, if we want to look after our environment, we should be prepared to spend a wee bit extra. I hope that one day set aside will contribute to a better and tidier Northern Ireland.

Mr Ross: I thank the Members for bringing the motion to the Floor of the House. I noticed that Danny Kinahan congratulated the 'Belfast Telegraph'; he is probably the only Ulster Unionist who has anything good to say about the 'Belfast Telegraph' this morning. Many of his colleagues have been rubbishing everything that it has printed today.

The issue of illegal dumping gets a lot of time in this Chamber. However, the other side of dumping and rubbish is the sort of littering that we see on our streets, and it is good to have a discussion about that. Litter is a major concern. It has a massively negative impact on local communities. It can affect the quality of life and health of many individuals and communities. It can have an impact on attempts to attract investment into local areas. It can also have an impact on tourism, as we have heard from some of the contributions this morning. It is an issue that needs to be tackled. When we go around the country and see on our streets such things as chewing gum, beer bottles, soft drink cans and broken glass, which is a danger in itself, we recognise the need to tackle the problem.

Kieran McCarthy described Northern Ireland as the dirtiest place around. I would not go to quite those lengths in describing our country, but an effort needs to be made to tackle the issue. Danny Kinahan talked about the parasites and scumbags who are responsible for littering. Many people consciously throw away packets because they are too lazy to go to a bin. That is absolutely disgraceful. However, it is worth noting that, when people go to an area that has litter everywhere, it can, perhaps, make it easy for them to litter rather than walk a couple of hundred yards to a bin, because everybody else has done the same. That is the sort of behaviour that we need to tackle.

We can contrast Northern Ireland with other areas of the world. Those of us who have been fortunate enough to go to tourist areas in the United States will have seen gleaming streets. They will have noticed how clean and litter-free everything is. People who live in those areas take great pride in keeping their area tidy. We can learn from that. There is no reason why we cannot have the same pride and sense of ownership of our towns and local communities as some areas abroad do.

We need an attitude change. It is about how we make people think more about their actions.

The Chairperson of the Committee talked about how schools have a responsibility. I agree absolutely. Children are often the conscience of all of us: they will keep us right about littering and recycling. When they are taught about those subjects in school, they are very good at bringing that knowledge home with them.

I was somewhat surprised that Mr Kinahan concentrated on the role of government, particularly the recent Conservative campaign that features what David Cameron likes to call the big society. In that sense, we can buy into the notion that everybody in society is responsible for their actions. However, that individual responsibility has been lost somewhat. Rather than what government can do, it is about what individuals can do by taking responsibility for their actions. However, a mixture of approaches can be taken. We talked earlier about the big spring clean and some of the church groups, school groups and environmental groups that periodically go to beaches or town centres and pick up litter. Like others, I commend those who make that massive contribution.

11.45 am

On the other side, the Government can play a role, and the Minister of the Environment should be congratulated on bringing forward the draft Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill, which looks specifically at dealing with litter, such as abandoned trolleys that blight the environment and communities. The Government should also be congratulated on making it easier for local councils to deal with such matters and for allowing them to introduce heftier fines for those who litter. That is the sort of role that the Government should play.

I am not sure whether the motion means that there should be a financial contribution to sponsoring the event, but the present economic climate was mentioned and, if the Conservatives go ahead with their £200 million cuts specifically for Northern Ireland, deciding whether money would be best spent in sponsoring such a day will be very difficult because we will have to look at where money should be focused. Nevertheless, today's debate must be used to highlight Tidy Northern Ireland's work and the importance of ensuring that people assume responsibility for not littering the streets. I am not sure whether the Department will have the resources to sponsor the event, but it would be

a positive step if it were to associate itself with the day. Therefore, I support the motion.

Mr McDevitt: I, too, welcome the motion. I think that this is an important topic to debate here today. When debating motions such as this, it is always useful to look at the available evidence. Consequently, I pay tribute to Assembly Research and Library Services for the information pack that it prepared for the debate.

In the middle of the pack is the 'Northern Ireland Litter Survey 2009'. Most interestingly, when one looks at where litter problems occur in the region, they are most acute in rural areas. In fact, statistically speaking, the dirtiest place in Northern Ireland is the countryside. Mr Weir is not in the Chamber, but I take significant exception to his remarks about dumping rubbish from one part of Ireland in another part of Ireland. In this part of Ireland, we are all guilty of dumping our rubbish outside our towns and cities.

Although rural areas top the indices, they are followed by high-obstruction housing areas, including flats —

Mr Beggs: Perhaps litter costs more in rural areas because there are much larger areas to be tidied.

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

Mr McDevitt: I thank Mr Beggs for his contribution, which was fair comment. However, it is also indicative of the cultural and behavioural issue that is at the heart of the litter problem, because main and other retail areas and low-obstruction housing, including open-plan estates, are the tidiest parts of the region. Therefore, ironically, high-visibility public areas with reasonably high numbers of people end up being the cleanest.

Some of that, I am sure, is to do with the fact that Belfast City Council, which is home to a considerable proportion of retail and low-obstruction housing areas, tops the league table for fines, not by a modest or significant amount but by an outstanding amount. In fact, between 2004-05 and the last set of figures available to us, which was for 2008-09, Belfast City Council managed to dish out practically as many fixed penalty notices as the rest of the North of Ireland put together.

Undoubtedly, there is a question about policing, which we all support, but there is also a huge

cultural issue around educating people about their attitude to places that they do not consider to be their own, such as the field or the anonymous place that, when one is in a car, does not belong to anyone. That assertion stands up if one looks at litter types. Once again, the survey is very useful because it identifies the type of litter discarded in each area. In rural areas, 64% of pollution is caused by drink bottles. Confectionery is the next highest category, followed by takeaway waste. That contrasts radically with the litter profile in main retail areas, where the problem is with cigarette butts. The survey proves, therefore, that an awful lot of pollution in country areas is as a result of people chucking stuff randomly out of their car windows. Face it: no one will find rubbish that has been thrown into a ditch. It will not be seen. Of course, that ditch could be a waterway, and the material that is thrown away could be a non-biodegradable plastic that may lie there for 1,000 years, but we do not care. Therefore, I welcome the motion because, if it does nothing else, it brings attention to that.

I would like us to think about the regional policy and statutory opportunities that are created by debates such as today's; for example, the opportunity for a ban on plastic bags. Plastic bags are at their most polluting in a hedgerow, rather than in the middle of a town, where they will be picked up by an efficient town or city council cleansing service. They are not only going to lie in a hedgerow for decades or possibly longer, they are going to impact on its ecosystem. Like many of my colleagues, I will continue to ask when we will properly consider the opportunity of introducing a plastic bag ban for this region. On that topic, we should also look at aspects of legislation on packaging, particularly in respect of plastics, over which we have devolved responsibility. By reducing opportunities for pollution with non-biodegradables, we can begin to tackle the overall pollution problem. I support the motion and welcome the opportunity to speak on it.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I had not intended to speak in the debate, but the topic, like many others, is one about which nearly all of us have something to say. I support the motion, which asks for efforts to be made to encourage people to tackle litter, but extensive and hefty fines are the only way to solve the problem. To be honest, people do not really respond to much else.

Enniskillen in my area of Fermanagh won TidyTowns awards over several years, mainly because of the town itself. The countryside, where I live and farm, is an entirely different story. My and other farmers' calves have died because they consumed plastic bags. Fly-tipping also takes place in the least expected areas. Some fly-tippers have left material containing their names and addresses on my road, and I have visited them to ask whether I might leave it in their front garden. That is one way to catch people.

We should follow the example of the South by making it difficult to have plastic bags about at all. I am not sure that education does a lot of good. I caught people who had heard all the anti-litter messages recently at school, yet they chose either not to buy another bin or to do without one in their new house.

The dumping of gum on footpaths is also a big issue, and it is very costly for councils that try to remove it. Another issue is the quantity of cigarette butts being thrown outside shops that we expect tourists to use. Even those who work in our shops are guilty of that. Spitting should be made as illegal as improper dumping. It seems to be one of those cool habits that young cubs seem to hold on to for ever, but it is very unhygienic at any time. There is a need to encourage people to move away from all those practices, but that must be done by imposing fines. The idea that any other approach will work is nonsense.

Recycling and so on seem to be good enough for domestic waste, but the message has not yet reached business. Businesses such as the big multiples do not seem to have to recycle all of their rubbish; it can be sent to waste disposal plants. How tidy a place is and how it looks — the environment in our countryside and towns — is very important to tourism, and those are issues that can be looked at by all MLAs in their areas.

During the present economic downturn, we must think about the increasing rate at which many shops on our main streets are being shuttered because of the growth of multiples, lack of profit or high rates. If we do not do something about that, we will sleepwalk into a situation of not having a tourist product on those main streets. Tourists generally do not come to see the Tesco stores or the multiples of this world; in many instances, they come to see the picture postcard town centres. Enniskillen is one such

town. Many of our small towns, especially in the coastal area, are also in that vein. Places such as Tralee and Listowel in County Kerry have flower arrangements, and they maintain their areas in a completely different way. They get a return from the product, but we are in a chicken and egg situation. We do not seem to put in the same effort to make places as good as they could be, particularly for visitors. I suppose that it has to do with attitudes and money.

We need to present ourselves properly in every shop in every town, because that is very much part of the environment that people visit. Even how we speak to people will make a difference to how tourists view us.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): I welcome the debate on the request to sponsor a Tidy Northern Ireland Day, which will help to raise awareness of and tackle the problem of litter. The motion states:

"That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to sponsor a Tidy Northern Ireland Day, and to work with councils to encourage local communities across Northern Ireland to get actively involved in tackling litter and improving their local areas."

I fully support all initiatives, campaigns and events that will help to deal with the scourge of litter and create a more pleasant environment for everyone to enjoy. Indeed, I have taken part in activities that were aimed at that, and I am well aware of the excellent work that has been undertaken by many people who have been inspired to act to improve the state of their local area.

I am determined to deal with the litter problem in Northern Ireland. To help draw attention to litter problems, I took part in an event during the big spring clean campaign, which was organised by the 'Belfast Telegraph' and Tidy Northern Ireland. I was shocked by the amount of litter that we gathered during that event, which filled some 30 bags. What should have been a beautiful scenic open area for a local community to enjoy was completely spoiled by excessive litter, including ordinary, everyday household litter such as plastic bags, newspapers, magazines, plastic bottles, crisp bags, beer bottles and nappies. As I said, we gathered all sorts of material into 30 bags. That particular situation was even worse given that the area had been cleaned in the preceding weeks because there had been a concentration of activity.

People keep throwing litter down for others to come along and pick it up for them. In essence, we need to consider cultural changes. People need to rethink their actions and adopt a culture of pride in the area in which they live. The basic starting point is a simple one: we could all help by properly disposing of our litter, either by placing it in bins that have been provided or by taking it home. I know of a park that was recently opened in which no bins were provided because it was believed that greater tidiness could be achieved if people came prepared to take their litter home. Small, individual actions can make a difference to the neighbourhoods in which we live and to open spaces, which should be areas for communities to enjoy.

I understand that the response to the recent week-long big spring clean campaign, which was organised by the 'Belfast Telegraph' and Tidy Northern Ireland, was excellent, as more than 2,000 volunteers of all ages took part. It made a huge impact on the environment of their local areas. Therefore, I pay tribute to the local community groups and voluntary organisations such as Conservation Volunteers that take pride in their local areas and help to tackle the problems caused by the selfish and thoughtless actions of others.

Litter is not just an eyesore but is responsible for a range of other problems and is a considerable drain on resources. The sheer cost of dealing with litter is staggering. Some £100,000 a day is spent by local authorities in Northern Ireland to clean up after other people. That money could be much better used by councils to provide better leisure services and reduce the amount of money that is paid by ratepayers. That £100,000 could be used to build a new high-quality park every day in Northern Ireland. Such facilities would benefit the children of Northern Ireland. People need to get it into their head that properly disposing of litter creates considerable benefits not only financially for themselves but for the environment that they live in and for the marketability of Northern Ireland to tourists.

We cannot afford to have people continue to drop litter and waste.

12.00 noon

None of us wants to live in neighbourhoods that are affected by a poor quality local environment. It drives neighbourhoods down and encourages antisocial behaviour, and that is something that we need to address. Clean neighbourhoods also

attract more investment. They have a positive impact on health, well-being, confidence and civic pride, and they help to promote tourism.

I accept that a Tidy Northern Ireland Day would help to raise awareness of litter problems and the benefits that are to be gained by improving the quality of neighbourhoods and environments. However, my Department is in a somewhat difficult position in the current economic climate. I have to prioritise work areas to make best use of the Department's scarce resources. Last week, we had to announce the redeployment of a considerable number of staff within the Department to ensure that we can meet our budget requirements. We are faced with an economic downturn, and the Department has to find the money to meet the equal pay requirements. We will have to find additional resources relating to other government issues as well, and I suspect that we will face even greater challenges.

If Northern Ireland's Budget is cut by £200 million, and if the Department of Health is taken out of that, my budget will have a deficit of £6 million. If, as some claim, the Department of Education is also removed from the cuts, the Department of the Environment will have to find in its budget another 50% of that deficit, which will be up to £9 million. I assure the House that there is not £9 million available in the Department, and I think that to make such cuts would put us in a crisis situation in which we would not be able to deal with the European directives that we have to deal with. As a consequence of such cuts, Northern Ireland would face infraction proceedings by the European Union. In some instances, we can be penny wise and pound foolish, but I am laying it on the line: if we are being asked to make such cuts as our share of the £200 million cuts that are to be made in the incoming year, those are the consequences that we will face.

With regard to this particular issue, I thought it better that I applied my resources to the development of the draft Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill, which was not going ahead and which there were no resources identified for. That draft Bill will considerably strengthen the law available to district councils to deal not only with litter, but with a wide range of other environmental problems. The draft Bill will help councils to deal more effectively with litter in all its forms. Some Members mentioned chewing gum and cigarette butts; the draft Bill deals with

those forms of litter, as it does with fast food and drinks containers and wrapping paper, which become eyesores when deposited illegally. They lead to dirty and unhealthy streets and unsightly local environments.

Someone mentioned rural areas. I know well what it is like to live and own property in a rural area. I often find my fields littered with bottles. In the first instance, one has to ask why so many people drive along the road drinking alcohol and proceed to throw their bottles out of car windows. There is an issue there about litter, but there is also an issue about the consumption of alcohol. It may be the passengers who are drinking, but if they have a considerable amount of alcohol in their systems and they distract the driver, that can have an impact on the safety of other road users.

The draft Bill will also allow for the greater use of on-the-spot fixed penalties to deal with offenders as an alternative to prosecution. Fixed penalties are a more efficient way of dealing with low-level environmental offences such as littering, and if used properly, they provide an effective deterrent and avoid the cost of court action.

I also envisage a future benefit in councils' linking up with other bodies that engage in issuing fixed penalties. If the castigated "redcoats" who are so effective in improving traffic control in towns could be as effective at controlling litter, that option would be worth considering. They might not make themselves any more popular, but they could make the place much cleaner.

The Bill will also allow for the greater use of on-the-spot fixed penalties to deal with offenders as an alternative to prosecution. The fixed penalty is £50, but the proposals in the Bill increase that to £75 and allow my Department to set the minimum and maximum levels. District councils will have the flexibility to set amounts locally, subject to the upper and lower limits, but if a council does not specify an amount, the fixed penalty will be £75.

The Bill is not only about litter. It proposes a wide range of measures and a proper toolkit of powers to help district councils to deal with many of the problems that lead to poor quality local environments. The issues covered by the Bill include fly-posting and graffiti, dog fouling and dog control, noise nuisance, statutory nuisance, gating orders, abandoned and nuisance vehicles and even abandoned shopping trolleys. The new legislation will make a real difference.

It is stronger and tougher than the existing legislation, and it is a significant and important development in the ongoing campaign to improve the environmental quality of our local neighbourhoods, towns, cities and rural areas.

A full consultation exercise on the draft Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill ended recently, and we are analysing the responses. I aim to introduce the Bill to the Assembly before the summer recess.

I reiterate that I fully support any initiative that would help to clean up our cities, towns and countryside. However, as I said earlier, the economic position is such that I do not have the funds available to sponsor the initiative that is outlined in the motion. I have sought to work closely with Tidy Northern Ireland and to encourage the private sector to support that organisation. We all know about the considerable amount of waste, particularly within a radius of a mile and a half or two miles of chip shops and other fast food outlets. I encourage such businesses to become involved. We can proactively go forward with the community, businesses, the Government and bodies such as Conservation Volunteers and Tidy Northern Ireland. Together we can tackle the problem of the blight of litter in our areas, and we can create cleaner and better neighbourhoods for all our people.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council. My colleague Danny Kinahan highlighted that nature undergoes renewal in the spring. It is an opportune time for us as a community to take structured action to try to improve the environment and to right some of the wrongs to which members of the public have contributed. I hope that we can use the occasion to try to educate future generations, as well as adults, because I suspect that most of the offenders are adults, on how they are endangering our environment.

There was some discussion during the debate about whether we should have a Tidy Northern Ireland day or week, and there was an agreement that people would be supportive of the motion. The idea of introducing a day is merely to give an increased focus to the issue. It would mean that the 'Belfast Telegraph', which has run an excellent campaign this spring, would not be alone in reflecting people's concerns about their local community and how litter has been destroying it. We would draw in the wider media,

so that the message could be transmitted to an even wider audience.

The issue will not be overcome in a day. The problem is ongoing, and it will last for a number of years. However, in the spring, there is a particular need to take action before the grass cutters shred the plastic and smash the bottles that have been abandoned in our green spaces. Therefore, it is a useful time to take action and to highlight the issue in the media.

My colleague Danny Kinahan contrasted doers — local groups and schools that involve themselves actively in trying to right the wrong — and people who throw material out of their car, with no regard for their neighbours and local community. We all have an obligation to shift the balance so that more people become doers and take responsibility.

Gerry McHugh mentioned fines. If we are to shift the balance and have a more responsible community, fines will play a part in achieving that. However, education will play the biggest part. How we educate more and more people about the importance of protecting the environment and taking litter home to dispose it of responsibly will be imperative. Furthermore, community pressure will build, and peer pressure will be applied. The community will report people who are irresponsible and destroying our community.

Cathal Boylan, the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, rightly pointed out that the Committee, on which I serve, has been lobbied for some time on the draft Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill. I am content that the draft Bill has been published, and I thank the Minister and his Department for doing that. The legislation has been delayed for too long in Northern Ireland. Powers have existed elsewhere for a number of years that have allowed local authorities to address concerns through the issuing of fixed penalty notices, and so on, which deal efficiently with people who offend. I appreciate the fact that the Department and the Minister have published the draft Bill. I hope that it will become law before too long.

I have worked alongside a number of groups in my constituency on litter clean-ups. They are a useful tool by which every community can improve its neighbourhood. Not only do they enhance the environment but they bring out the best in people. Litter clean-ups involve young

people and educate them. As a result, when they become adults, they will be doers rather than the louts to whom Members referred who desecrate the countryside and have no regard for their fellow citizens.

I speak in particular about the Monkstown area, where I once assisted Monkstown Community School's youth group in a tidy-up. Those young people took a clear lead and showed that they were taking responsibility for their area. They invited local adults and residents to assist, but guess what? The young people did the work. It is important that young people be praised when they are proactive in trying to better their community.

As other Members said, there are a number of benefits to be derived from tidying up areas and dealing with litter. The environment benefits, a better sense of community is created, and Northern Ireland's appearance is improved. Cleaning up neighbourhoods will assist the tourism industry, which is becoming increasingly important to us. It will also assist the agriculture industry, which tries to market the idea that good food is in Northern Ireland's nature. It is important that we present a clean and tidy environment to reinforce that message and to assist the agriculture community in its exports, which are an important feature of local production.

Peer pressure needs to be applied to people who drop litter. Occasionally, that means that one must speak to someone who has dropped litter. Although it is not nice to have to do that, it has to be done. It may mean taking down someone's number plate. It may mean reporting and fining people. As Conall McDevitt said, Belfast City Council seems to be taking a lead. Our other councils may be able to learn a lesson from Belfast City Council and try to identify good practice so that more people can be held to account. Therefore, on one side, there will be a carrot, which will be a positive, educational message. On the other side, there will be a stick to enforce the message by issuing penalties to those who abuse the local environment.

The cost of cleaning our streets is some £28 million a year. In my constituency, more than £600,000 is spent in Carrickfergus, more than £300,000 in Larne, and more than £900,000 in Newtownabbey. That adds up to a huge amount of ratepayers' money that should not have to be spent. If everyone were to dispose of litter

properly, it would not be on the streets, and the streets would not need to be cleaned as frequently. Money could be saved. I am certain that ratepayers would appreciate having that money in their pockets. Alternatively, it could be better spent on other worthwhile projects.

12.15 pm

The motion calls on the Department to take the lead on the issue. I appreciate that these are difficult financial times for the Department, and, in tabling the motion, neither I nor my colleague is calling for the Department to make a huge amount of money available. Instead, we want it to provide leadership, which I am sure is already being given and into which local councils can have more buy-in. Councils know the local community context, they look after the waste and street cleaning in their areas, and they, too, can have an enhanced role. However, ultimately, the issue will be addressed only through the involvement of local communities and if those communities take responsibility for their areas. The route that should be followed is one where the Department takes a lead and where local councils also take a local lead and involve the local community.

I also welcome the draft Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill, which the Minister mentioned. It will provide a more efficient system of fixed penalty notices that will make it easier and less expensive for those who are abusing the environment to be brought to account.

Much mention has been made of the anti-litter campaign that the 'Belfast Telegraph' is running. We ought to give due credit to the 'Belfast Telegraph' for that. Many Members, such as Danny Kinahan, Peter Weir, Kieran McCarthy and, indeed, the Minister, rightly praised that campaign. The 'Belfast Telegraph' has shown good leadership in tackling the matter.

In my constituency of East Antrim, some of the beauty spots have been desecrated, and people have dumped sofas, chairs and general rubbish close to the reservoirs that feed water to our homes. We must come down with a very heavy stick on those who are littering in that way, and we must have the community's support and the information to allow us to do that.

John Dallat and other Members rightly mentioned the difficulties with the packaging that is used for items such as Easter eggs and fast food.

Local pride was also highlighted, and, as Alastair Ross indicated, when people visit Europe or the United States, they can see that that is important. It gives people a positive experience, and we must get to that point. Alastair almost supported the concept of a bigger society, and I take that as a compliment to the direction that my party is going. However, I do not want to politicise this issue.

I thank the Minister for his support, and I urge him to take a further lead on the issue to enable greater community involvement. That will allow us to improve our community, our environment and the tourism and agriculture industries that we all rely on so much.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to sponsor a Tidy Northern Ireland Day, and to work with councils to encourage local communities across Northern Ireland to get actively involved in tackling litter and improving their local areas.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item of business is Question Time. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.30 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.18 pm.

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

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to inform Members that questions 1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11 and 13 have been withdrawn.

Musical Instruments for Bands Scheme

2. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding the Arts Council will allocate to the musical instruments for bands scheme in the current financial year.

(AQO 1135/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure

(Mr McCausland): The Arts Council has set an initial budget of £80,000 for the musical instruments for bands scheme in the 2010-11 financial year. However, I have been able to make an additional £120,000 available for the scheme. That will increase the funding available to £200,000, which was the sum allocated last year. The scheme reopened for applications on 30 April and will close on 3 June. The Arts Council has indicated that funding decisions will be made by the end of July.

Mr G Robinson: What is the Minister's assessment of the importance of the marching bands sector in the cultural life of Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

The marching bands sector is the largest community arts sector in Northern Ireland, with an estimated 20,000 participants. It has much to offer in terms of musical excellence, musical education and cultural tourism. It has the ability to develop into a viable creative industry with benefits for wider society. I have been having discussions with marching band representatives to consider a more strategic approach to assist the future development of the sector, and I am hopeful that that will be productive.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister know whether the funding stretches to band uniforms, and does he accept that marching bands have a

tradition right across the many communities in the North?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

The funding available through the Arts Council is specifically for musical instruments and, therefore, does not include uniforms. Funding is also available for tuition through the Ulster-Scots Agency. The focus is on instruments, tuition and improving musical ability. The Member is right to say that bands in Northern Ireland have a wide variety of backgrounds. When we have completed our work, 20,000 participants may be an underestimate. However, there is a wide range and a wide diversity from across the community.

Physical Activity

3. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether his Department has any plans to encourage its staff to participate in sport and physical activity, including the adoption of the Bike 2 Work scheme.

(AQO 1136/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I welcome the Member's interest in efforts to encourage participation in sport and physical activity and the reference to the Bike 2 Work scheme. As Minister with responsibility for sport and recreation in Northern Ireland, I make efforts to encourage participation in sport and physical activity. That is a matter of deep concern, which is why, in my foreword to 'Sport Matters: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation', I identified the need to halt the evident decline in adult participation as a key early priority for Sport Matters. With that in mind, my Department has developed an action plan, framed around Health and Safety Executive management standards, aimed at improving health and well-being in the workplace. DCAL staff are also encouraged to avail themselves of Health Works, an initiative run by the Northern Ireland Civil Service Sports Association that promotes health and well-being in the workplace.

The Bike 2 Work scheme was piloted by the Department for Regional Development (DRD). I understand that DRD is currently evaluating the pilot, with the aim of publishing the results in time for Bike 2 Work week in June. My Department will await the outcome of the DRD evaluation before considering adoption of the scheme.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Minister for his answer, and I am encouraged to hear that, on the outcome of the evaluation, he is minded — he may not have used those exact words — to look at the Bike 2 Work scheme. That is very welcome. Perhaps he can take another lead from the Minister for Regional Development and initiate Irish classes in his Department.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

On the first point, I do not know whether the Member is a mind reader, but I said very clearly that, when the evaluation is completed, we will certainly consider the scheme carefully and sympathetically.

On the Member's second point, she will be well aware that we are developing a strategy for minority languages to cover both the Irish language and the Ulster-Scots language. The strategy will be forthcoming in due course.

Lord Browne: The Minister referred to the Sport Matters strategy. What is the latest position regarding the launch and implementation of that vital strategy?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I intend to launch the strategy formally at the Sport Matters monitoring group's first meeting, which is scheduled to take place on 13 May.

Mr McDevitt: I am sure that the Minister is aware that I own a bike purchased under the Bike 2 Work scheme, and I use it to commute to and from here regularly. Will the Minister join me on the Bike 2 Work scheme in June and possibly encourage other Belfast MLAs to use their bikes rather than their cars to travel here?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I can assure the Member of my commitment to physical exercise. I spent eight hours yesterday out walking and found it very refreshing and helpful. Over the summer months, I will be doing a great deal of walking, although perhaps not in the manner that the Member would encourage. Nevertheless, walking is my preferred means of exercise.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Community Facilities

5. **Mr Bell** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of how better use could be made of public-owned facilities

within the community such as schools' sporting facilities. (AQO 1138/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Responsibility for determining how better use can be made of public-owned facilities in the community, such as schools' sporting facilities, rests in the first instance with the owners and operators of such venues. In my view, however, better use of sports facilities is best achieved through local partnerships and arrangements among schools, sports organisations, local community organisations and councils, which have responsibility for recreational development in their own areas.

Northern Ireland already has some good examples of such partnerships and arrangements, such as the dual-use sports facility scheme at St Patrick's High School in Keady and the Waterworks multi-sport facility in north Belfast, which specifically sets out to serve local schools and the local community. 'Sport Matters: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation, 2009-2019', although it acknowledges local examples of good practice, nevertheless identifies a substantial need for both improving community use of existing sports facilities, including those in schools, and addressing design and condition deficiencies in many areas. That is one of the issues that I will be considering as part of the implementation of Sport Matters.

In the case of community use of school sports facilities, I have requested a meeting with the Minister of Education, Caitríona Ruane, to discuss ways in which we might jointly improve collaboration in the delivery of sports facilities for schools and the community. A date for such a meeting was recently set but postponed at the request of the Department of Education. I am hopeful that the meeting will be rearranged in the near future.

Mr Bell: That being the case, when will that meeting occur? Surely urgency is of the essence. Secondly, what does the Minister hope to achieve by holding such a meeting?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I recently received a letter from the Minister of Education, in which she agreed to my request for a meeting. In her reply, she advised that she would be in contact shortly to agree a date for that meeting. As I indicated in my previous answer, the meeting was postponed at the Department of Education's request, but

I hope that it can be rearranged in the near future. Primarily, I want to ensure that we start genuinely delivering on the commitments made in Sport Matters on co-ordination and sharing of resources. I want to encourage a greater partnership approach to the development of sports and PE facilities among my Department, sports organisations and the education sector. Ultimately, I also want agreement on how we can encourage more shared use of sports and PE facilities across Northern Ireland in order to encourage greater participation by the community at large as well as young people and schoolchildren.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am heartened by the Minister's answer. I am sure that he is well aware that some communities are crying out for access to those facilities, some of which are state-of-the-art. Will the Minister outline whether any funding opportunities are available? I am aware that the cost of insurance is sometimes put up, thereby preventing communities from accessing such facilities. If funding is available, we could get together and collectively sort out those issues.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As I indicated, we will set up an implementation or monitoring group, however one wants to describe it, to take forward the implementation of the Sport Matters strategy. I am sure that all sorts of issues will emerge in the course of that group's work. We want to ensure that facilities, where those exist, are available generally. If there is an issue about insurance, I am sure that that will be looked at. One of the key points is that there is no point in having partnerships and working groups unless there is a proper cross-departmental approach. That means that everybody must bring something significant to the table in respect of resources.

Mrs M Bradley: I welcome the Minister's thinking on the issue. Making use of schools in that way is a good idea. However, I share Sue's concerns. People who come in to use school facilities must share responsibility for any damage that occurs on the premises, because schools do not have a lot of money and cannot afford to pay big money in order to repair such damage. Using schools in that way is a great idea, but a rule must be put in place to ensure that people who use school facilities are equal partners who share responsibility for everything.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In a sense, we are discussing the issue as though it might happen, but it is already happening. Some schools are open to the public, and communities are using their facilities. That is obviously working satisfactorily, because I have not heard any complaints in that regard from either users or schools. A number of schools are on track for completion and will be open for community use in the near future. We must get the right arrangements in place and look at examples of good practice. If the arrangement between a particular school and the wider community is working well, we must learn why that is successful and then replicate it in other areas. Everybody agrees that that is important. Let us move ahead and implement that as soon as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 6, 7 and 8 have been withdrawn.

Arts Funding

9. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what additional financial support his Department will provide for the arts sector.

(AQO 1142/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am pleased to note that the Arts Council's revenue budget for 2010-11 has increased from its 2009-2010 opening position of £15.2 million to £15.5 million. I was disappointed that the Arts Council's anticipated budget decreased after the Executive's review of 2010-11 spending plans. However, the Arts Council's opening capital allocation for 2010-11 has also increased significantly to £16.5 million, compared with the previously indicated budget figure of £9.6 million. Although I am aware that arts organisations will be disappointed that the previously indicated revenue allocation was revised, I stress that the focus going forward must be on prioritisation, efficiency and effectiveness to ensure the best possible use of the funding available.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response. I am sure that every Member agrees that it is important that we support our creative industries. However, I do not think that we support them enough. Will the Minister outline the difference between funding for community arts and professional arts?

2.45 pm

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I pick up on a point that the Member made in her question: the creative industries are one of the most important areas for my Department, and we have been looking at how Governments in other countries and regions address the need to develop the creative industries. For Northern Ireland, that is an area of real growth potential for the future. However, society in general and even the political world have not yet come to understand the potential that is there.

The Arts Council sets aside particular funding programmes that are open to community and professional arts organisations. Sometimes there are grey areas, because a community arts organisation may employ a professional artist on a particular project. Therefore, it is very difficult to demarcate how much funding goes to one or other sector or which programmes are set up for one or other sector. There is also a grey area as to where the voluntary sector stops and the community sector starts. However, those issues are somewhat secondary. All sectors — professional, voluntary and community — are important, and all are part of the arts infrastructure in Northern Ireland.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. How has the Department responded thus far to the recommendations of the inquiry that was carried out by the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The inquiry into the arts sector in Northern Ireland is valuable and contains a tremendous amount of information. One of the real values of the Committee is that it brings forward a substantial amount of information on a range of issues, as with its report on a museums policy, which the Department is responding to. There are some things that the Department and the Committee will agree on and others that we may disagree on. However, I value all the work that is done by the Committee, because it helps to inform all that we do. There were recommendations that the Committee did not make which, I thought, it might have, but we will take on board the recommendations that were made. That is an ongoing process.

Mr Kinahan: How does the Minister plan to use the extra funding to promote excellence in the arts?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Whether it is in the arts or in sport, the two important things are participation and performance, which means access and excellence. It is not a case of one or the other; we recognise the importance of both. A broad base of participation is necessary to bring people through and enable them to achieve their potential and achieve excellence. Therefore, we support participation and performance through funding from the Arts Council for high-achieving professionals and through the implementation of its programmes. The Member is right to emphasise excellence, although others may place the emphasis on access. We see the two as fitting together.

Irish Language Strategy

10. **Mr Leonard** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the current status of his Department's proposals for a strategy to enhance and promote the Irish language.

(AQO 1143/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since coming into office at the beginning of July 2009, I have given special attention to the development of a regional or minority languages strategy. I am currently engaged in correspondence with the Minister of Education on the issue, and it is my intention to bring a draft strategy to the Executive in the near future, which can then go out to consultation.

Mr Leonard: Does the Minister accept that deadlines have been missed and that a vacuum has been created? There is a lot of mistrust and a sense that the issue has been put on the long finger. We may as well be asking how long a piece of string is. A strategy is needed to fill that vacuum. Does the Minister accept that giving a definite date today would be of some comfort to the Irish-language community?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There are two important elements in the strategy for both the Irish language and the Ulster-Scots language and culture: broadcasting and education. For any minority language or minority culture across the world — I have met people from minority language groups right across Europe — those are two key areas. We have commitments on an Irish-language broadcasting fund and an Ulster-Scots broadcasting fund. Therefore, the issue of broadcasting has been addressed to some extent. Broadcasting is, of course, a reserved matter.

The outstanding matter is education, which is why I said that we were in correspondence with the Minister of Education. Once that area is resolved, we will be able to bring the strategy forward. However, until that happens, there will be a difficulty. I would like to see progress on the education aspect of the strategy, which would enable me to bring it forward.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister indicate the likely cost of developing and implementing an Irish-language strategy? Would that cost be in addition to the £20 million that was approved for the Irish language at Hillsborough?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The position is very clear. My predecessor and I made it clear that, in bringing forward the strategy, it was our understanding that there will be no additional funding available to implement a minority languages strategy.

The funding for the Irish language to which the Member referred was a commitment from the Government in Westminster. That funding is separate from the Assembly, and we have no control over it. There used to be funding for an Irish-language broadcast fund that came directly from Westminster over a number of years, but the difference now is that we will also have funding for an Ulster-Scots broadcast fund. That is a new development, and it is something that people in that sector have called for over many years and we have finally achieved. We will also have a parallel situation within Northern Ireland Screen. Just as there will be a section that deals with the Irish language, there will be a section that deals with Ulster-Scots broadcasting.

As, I am sure, the Member will agree, it is important that we move towards cultural equality in Northern Ireland. We are moving in that direction, and I am sure that the Member will want to commend us for our efforts in that regard.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ar an chéad dul síos ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. Ba mhaith liom ceist a chur air i dtaobh, uimhir a haon, an fráma ó thaobh cúrsaí ama de; agus, uimhir a dó, na céimeanna a bheas an tAire ag glacadh i dtaobh gabháil i ngleic leis an comhairlí áitiúla agus leis na heagraíochtaí teanga. Chomh maith leis sin, ba mhaith liom ceist a chur air faoin mhuintir eile atá ag obair leis an teanga a chur chun tosaigh.

Will the Minister give us a time frame for the process so that we can know when it will be concluded and when a strategy will be in place? Will there be proper consultation with Irish-language organisations, the community and voluntary sector and the district councils, which have a valuable input into the promotion of the Irish language?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his questions. In answer to his first question, I refer him to one of my previous answers. We await a satisfactory response from the Minister of Education. That is one of the things that is holding us up. As soon as we get that, we will be able to address the process of putting the strategy to the Executive before putting it out to consultation.

We see consultation as a vital aspect of the strategy development process, and I will ensure that there is a full public consultation as part of that process. I am keen that the strategy is developed in a mature and reflective way, in which every voice is heard. However, I will be more impressed by the quality and detail of responses than by the generic quantity. It is quality that matters, not quantity.

The interdepartmental charter implementation group (ICIG), which has membership from all 11 Departments, the Court Service, the NIO and HM Revenue and Customs, has been consulted on and contributed to the formation of a framework draft strategy. The ICIG will remain a consultative forum throughout the strategy development process. However, we expect that consultation will be widespread and that that is an important element of the process.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 11 has been withdrawn.

Arts Funding

12. **Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of the balance struck by the Arts Council in funding community arts and professional arts as set out in its annual support for organisations programme 2010-11. (AQO 1145/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It is clear that in the current challenging financial environment the Arts Council has had difficult decisions to make about the annual support for organisations programme (ASOP). In the circumstances, however, I believe that the

council has struck a fair balance across the various arts sectors.

The Arts Council has allocated more than £2 million or 20% of the 2010-11 ASOP budget of £9.9 million to a range of community arts organisations. That is a £200,000 rise or an increase of roughly 10% on the 2009-2010 allocation to the community arts sector. The Arts Council also has other funding streams available to support community arts projects and activities. In quoting those figures, I note the point I made earlier that there is a difficulty in being very precise, because it is sometimes difficult to draw a line between voluntary arts and community arts.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Minister for his answer. However, given the popularity of community arts, particularly festivals, will he be more specific and tell us why so many community-based organisations have, in fact, suffered a reduction in funding?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I indicated that there was a small increase in the revenue budget for the Arts Council. The Arts Council has a wide range of areas to cover. A Member earlier raised a point about excellence, and sometimes that falls clearly in the area of the professional arts. We also want to have the access to which the Member opposite is referring.

Festival funding is, of course, devolved to local authorities, so they are the folk with responsibility for that. There is money from central government, but there is also equal input from local government. Therefore, we need to encourage all the players, all who can contribute and all the stakeholders, whether central government, local government or, indeed, the private sector, to increase as far as possible their support for the arts.

It is a financially difficult time. We therefore need to do all that we can to get every contributor. As I indicated, there is work to be done in some areas on festival and other funding, particularly arts funding, by some local authorities, who could, maybe, do a little bit more. We also need to work continually with the arts and business to draw in more funding from the private sector. Clearly, difficult decisions have to be made about the allocation of central government funding, and, if the Member would like to suggest that maybe the Department of Education or some other Department should hand over additional money for the arts, I would be more than happy to take it.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am sure that the Minister will join me in offering condolences to the family of the young man who died in tragic circumstances at the Kirkistown racecourse in my constituency on Saturday. We offer the family sympathy.

The Youth Action arts unit does enormous good work for some 450 young people. One of the catastrophes of the budget cutting or trimming back is that there is nothing for that group. It has been refused funding from the ASOP —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question, please.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister give those 450 people any encouragement that they will be catered for in some way despite that massive cut?

3.00 pm

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I join the Member in expressing sympathy to the family of the rider who was killed so tragically on Saturday.

It would be inappropriate for me to comment on why a particular organisation did or did not get funding for a project. However, if a group does not get funding through ASOP, it should look at the lottery funding that is available. Indeed, there are a number of different possible programmes.

At the end of the day, there is competition for funding; it is the same right across the United Kingdom. Not so long ago, I spoke to folk from the Arts Council in Scotland, who told me that the same issues apply there. Groups get funding for one year, but perhaps do not get it the following year because the process is competitive. We need to do all that we can to support the arts organisations and as many projects as we can, but I encourage the people who are involved to look at alternative sources of funding and at other Arts Council programmes.

Education

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 1 and 2 have been withdrawn. The Member is not in his place for Question 3. I call Mr Alastair Ross.

Schools: Newbuild Projects

4. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the capital review for newbuild schools. (AQO 1150/10)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Is tábhachtach go bhfuil an t-infheistiú in eastát an oideachais i gcomhréir leis an gcreat iomlán beartais agus go dtacaíonn sé leis an gcreat iomlán beartais, lena n-áirítear na dualgais reachtúla um chomhionannas agus um spriocdhíriú ar bhonn riachtanas cuspóireach. Lárnach dó seo atá Gach Scoil ina Scoil Mhaith, an curaclam athbhreithnithe, scoileanna inmharthana, an t-athbhreithniú ar an nGaelscolaíocht agus an creat teidlíochta.

It is critical that investment in the education estate is consistent with, and supportive of, the policy framework and that it adheres to the Department's statutory duties on equality and targeting on the basis of objective need. At the heart of that is Every School a Good School, the revised curriculum, sustainable schools, the Irish-medium review and the entitlement framework. I have commissioned a review of all capital projects to inform a more strategic approach to capital investment decisions and to the management of the schools estate. That will ensure that we put the right size and type of school in the right location so that the needs of children and young people can be met.

Since May 2007, 39 major capital school projects have been completed, representing an investment of over £253 million in our schools estate. A further 16 major capital school projects are on site, representing a further investment of over £252 million. In addition, 69 major capital school projects are at various stages in the planning process.

I want to build new schools, but, as the Member is aware, the Executive set the education budget. In my budget statement of 21 April 2010, I highlighted the challenging financial position that is faced. My Department has tough decisions to make, and I look forward to support from all parties when I make bids for additional funding during in-year monitoring rounds. I emphasise that I have not withdrawn funding for any school. However, currently, inevitably, and in future, finance will be limited and difficult decisions will have to be made. Given the challenges that we face, I am not in a position to give specific dates for the completion of the review or for future progress of any particular scheme.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to switch off their mobile phones.

Mr Ross: While canvassing over the past number of weeks, particularly in Newtownabbey, I have noticed that Whitehouse Primary School is one issue that has come up more than any other. Why did the Minister visit the site after the school was burned down and give assurances to a number of individuals at that school that it would be rebuilt, yet no progress has been made? When will she decide to rebuild that school so that the children who have no school can go back to having facilities of their own?

The Minister of Education: Is maith is eol dom na dúshláin atá roimh Whitehouse Primary School maidir lena riachtanais cóiríochta.

I am aware of the particular challenges that face Whitehouse Primary School through its accommodation needs. I visited that school and, indeed, others that suffered attacks. Departmental officials have worked closely with the school and the North Eastern Education and Library Board to progress the scheme. All capital schemes need to be examined relative to one another and in the context of a capital budget that is lower than that of 2009-2010.

Whitehouse Primary School is included in the review of all proposed major capital works projects, and, as I stated, officials are working to complete that process. It is essential that robust evidence is collated and that full consideration is given to each project before a decision is made. Although I recognise the challenging circumstances of that and many other cases, I am not in a position to give specific dates for the completion of the review or for the future progress of any particular schemes.

I recognise the expectations of parents and pupils at Whitehouse Primary School, and I acknowledge their disappointment that those expectations have not come to fruition in the short term. I look forward to Members' support, and that of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, when I bring proposals for future resources to the in-year monitoring process.

Mr Beggs: The Minister says much about equality, but she does not demonstrate it by her actions. Does she accept that Whitehouse Primary School serves an area of need? The children cannot even have their dinner at lunchtime; they must use the canteen at 11.30 am. When will her actions demonstrate equality?

The Minister of Education: All schools in our sector will be supported on the basis of equality. In the review that I am carrying out, equality and targeting on the basis of need are two of the priority criteria.

Mr A Maginness: I visited the school on Friday morning and saw at first hand the extremely stressful conditions under which the teachers and pupils have to operate. I also heard that the Minister gave an undertaking to the staff and parents that the school would be a top priority.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Members should ask a question.

Mr A Maginness: The Minister is reneging on her commitment to the school.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must come to his question.

Mr A Maginness: The community badly needs that school to be the top priority.

The Minister of Education: I do not know what the question is. The Member should not be playing politics with the situation. I visited the school, and I said that it, along with other schools, remains a priority. I also said that I am carrying out a review of all capital projects in light of the cut to my capital budget. I look forward to the support of all parties when I bring forward proposals to the Executive. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that it is good order to make all remarks through the Chair.

Mr Neeson: I share the concerns that have been expressed by other Members. I have received hundreds of e-mails and letters about the situation. Will the Minister explain why there are delays in reaching decisions on newbuilds in other areas of East Antrim, such as Corran Integrated Primary School in Larne and Woodburn Primary School?

The Minister of Education: I explained that I have less money for capital builds because of the Executive's Budget. I must ensure that the review of capital projects is based on equality, fairness and targeting on the basis of need. That is what I am doing, and that is what Members would expect me to do. I am examining all the capital projects and matching them against the relevant criteria. I will come to the House on completion of that process.

Artigarvan Primary School

5. **Mr Bresland** asked the Minister of Education what progress is being made on the replacement of Artigarvan Primary School, Strabane.

(AQO 1151/10)

The Minister of Education: D'aontaigh an Roinn le Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair gur chóir go n-athmheasfaí an scéim le haghaidh Artigarvan Primary School ó thaobh riachtanas na ndaltaí sa cheantar níos leithne de lena chinntiú go mbeidh cur chuige straitéiseach ann ar phleanáil.

To ensure a strategic approach to planning, the Department has agreed with the Western Education and Library Board that the scheme for Artigarvan Primary School should be reassessed in the context of the needs of pupils in the wider area. My Department awaits a response from the Western Education and Library Board.

Mr Bresland: In light of the review of current capital projects, we need to be reassured that the building work at Artigarvan Primary School will not be further delayed. The community's genuine concern is that the Minister is obsessed with the promotion of Irish-language schools and that those schools are being given priority and funding even when greater need exists elsewhere. Can she say how many Irish-language schools will be affected by the review of current capital projects?

The Minister of Education: It is regrettable that a Member attacks Irish-language schools. I hope that he is not saying that Irish-language schools and their pupils do not deserve equality. I treat all our school sectors on the basis of equality.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister of Education elaborate on why the board needs to consider the wider area in this matter?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an gceist sin. Sa timpeallacht gheilleagrach reatha, cinnteoidh an t-athbhreithniú go n-úsáidfear gach sócmhainn atá ar fáil chun na torthaí is fearr do pháistí agus an luach is fearr don cháiníocóirí a bhaint amach.

In the current economic climate, we need to ensure that available resources are used to secure the best outcomes for all children and the maximum value for the taxpayer. Therefore, it is important that we validate that the capital projects in which we invest are viable and

sustainable in the long term. The long-term enrolment calculation that will determine the size of a new Artigarvan primary school has shown a recent pattern of decline; there is also decline in enrolments at another local controlled school. The Department, therefore, is agreed with the Western Education and Library Board that it is timely to look at the wider-area picture in accordance with area-planning considerations and in view of the sustainable schools policy criteria.

Mr B McCrea: I want to press the Minister: does she not recognise the trauma that is experienced by children and teachers in schools that were promised newbuilds but which have had them taken away? It is outrageous. Those pupils will have left school before the Minister gets round to building new schools. She needs to get rid of the red tape in her Department and to start to make decisions.

The Minister of Education: No newbuilds have been taken away from any schools.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

School Inspections

7. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Education if she plans to review the schools inspection process in light of recent experience at Crumlin Integrated Primary School. (AQO 1153/10)

The Minister of Education: Creidim gur chóir go bhfaigheadh gach páiste oideachas ardchaighdeáin. Is é ról na cigireachta ná a chinntiú gurb amhlaidh an cás.

Every child should receive a high-quality education, and it is the inspectorate's role to help to ensure that that is the case. The inspectorate produces independent reports, and the Department takes appropriate action where necessary. Inspection processes are reviewed annually, and new models of inspection are piloted and consulted on with the relevant educational stakeholders. The inspectorate publishes a wide range of materials to support schools in becoming more self-evaluative in their work and in helping them to be confident and empowered and to demonstrate the good work that they do.

I considered much of the press coverage of recent adverse inspections to be sensational and offensive. It took no account of the feelings of the teachers, other staff and pupils in the

schools concerned. What those schools need is time, space and the appropriate support to address the important issues that were identified in the inspections.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her answer, although it did not really touch on the problem of publishing the report before the governors had had a chance. Keeping Crumlin Integrated Primary School in mind, does the Minister agree that we need a thorough review of a situation in which the Department, boards and inspectors call the shots but legal responsibility remains with the governors?

The Minister of Education: Cuirim an-luach ar fad ar an obair a dhéanann gobharnóirí scoile.

I greatly value the work of school governors, which is done voluntarily, and I appreciate that they give of their time unstintingly to support schools. I am assured by the education and library boards and by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools that the extensive training that they provide for governors enjoys high levels of attendance. However, there is a need for further training of governors, particularly in light of the new policies that we have brought forward, one of which is Every School a Good School.

3.15 pm

I know that the Member is not telling me that the Department should not take action where action is necessary. Governors tell me that their role is complex and demanding but ultimately rewarding. The Department recognises the significance of the responsibility carried by governors. Therefore, when a school receives a less than satisfactory inspection report, the Department may strengthen the management of the school through the appointment of additional governors.

The question is about a specific school, and I will not comment in the House about specific schools and inspection reports. This is not the place for that. Suffice it to say that my Department will work very closely with any of the schools in the formal intervention process. It is essential that the press understand the importance of that policy and not sensationalise it in the disgraceful way that they did.

Newbuild Projects

8. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister of Education how many newbuild projects will start in this financial year. (AQO 1154/10)

The Minister of Education: I intend to make maximum use of the funding available, which will be used to complete seven projects that are on site. The investment of £101 million in 2010-11 includes newbuild projects at the Belfast Boys' Model School, Grosvenor Grammar School, St Cecilia's College and St Mary's College in Derry, St Mary's Primary School in Portglenone, St Joseph's Primary School in Carryduff and Ballysillan Youth Club. In addition, seven major capital projects, with a projected total capital spend of £18.3 million in 2010-11, are under construction. They include Magherafelt High School, where £6.9 million will be invested in that year; Lisbellaw Primary School; and St Patrick's and St Brigid's Primary School in Ballycastle.

Is maith atá a fhios agam go ndéanann tógáil scoile nua difríocht shuntasach, ní amháin do pháistí agus do thuismitheoirí ach don phobal níos leithne fosta, agus bheadh súil agam go bhféadfainn roinnt tionscadal nua caipitil a fhógairt níos moille i mbliana.

I am acutely aware that the building of any new school makes a significant difference, not only to the children but to the teachers and the wider community. I hope to release a number of new capital projects later in the year. I want to build new schools, and I want more resources to do so. I look forward to support from the Education Committee and every party in the House when I bring forward new proposals.

Mr Storey: Aye, right.

The Minister of Education: I see that the Chairperson of the Education Committee is laughing at that. I hope that that does not mean that he will not support me when I do that. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. Order. I have already asked Members to make all their remarks through the Chair. I repeat that.

Mrs Bradley, I apologise for this.

Mrs M Bradley: I have had great concerns for many years, 10 and 11 years in some cases, about schools that should have been rebuilt a long time ago and are still not rebuilt. Will those

schools be given priority when the Minister gets around to building some new schools for our children?

The Minister of Education: It is a bit rich for the Member to say that no new schools have been built. I have talked about the 39 major capital builds that we have done since I came into office. That cost £250 million-odd. I have also talked about the 16 capital builds currently on site. I do not know what city the Member lives in, but she should look at the cranes where schools are being built in the city of Derry.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Ms J McCann: I feel that I am back in school and no one is listening to the teacher. No one is listening to you today, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Will the Minister outline the impact of having to find savings of £22 million on the 2010-11 capital build budget?

The Minister of Education: The capital build budget covers a range of areas. In addition to major new works, it includes youth projects, school transport, early years and minor works. The reduction of £22 million in our capital budget for schools will undoubtedly mean that not all projects will go ahead in the time frame planned.

Is tábhachtach go mbeidh ár n-infheistiú in eastát na scoileanna inmharthana inbhuanaithe san fhadtéarma agus go gcloífidh sé lenár ndualgais reachtúla um chomhionannas agus um spriodhíriú ar bhonn riachtanas cuspóireach.

It will be essential that our investment in the schools estate is viable and sustainable in the long term, and that it adheres to our statutory duties in relation to equality and targeting on the basis of need.

Ms Lo: Nine years ago, Lagan College was promised an extension to its building. Will the Minister confirm today whether that project will go ahead this year?

The Minister of Education: As I said in response to previous questions, we are doing everything that we can. I have visited Lagan College. It does very important work. It is a very important project, and I want to see it going ahead.

Mr Storey: Nine years.

Ms S Ramsey: Your Government were in charge and did not vote for it.

Mr Storey: Nine years.

Mr A Maskey: What have you done about it?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 9 and 10 have been withdrawn.

Mr Storey: Nine years.

Mr A Maskey: What have you done about it apart from mutter in the Chamber?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Some Members are going to force me into a situation that I do not want to get into. This is a final warning: there are to be no more remarks across the Floor.

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

Mr Deputy Speaker: There are no points of order during Question Time.

Ministerial Meetings

11. **Mr Bell** asked the Minister of Education to outline her policy on meeting representatives of education interest groups. (AQO 1157/10)

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My policy is to endeavour to meet as many groups with an educational interest as possible and as diary commitments permit.

Mr Bell: Will the Minister acknowledge that there is a democratic deficit in the South Eastern Education and Library Board? Those of us who were commissioners and followed the advice of the Minister's late colleague Michael Ferguson and did not impose the cuts were replaced by commissioners who earned £500 a day. Will the Minister confirm that she is still paying the commissioners £500 each a day? What is her policy to remove the democratic deficit and to put some local accountability back into education?

The Minister of Education: My policy is to bring forward the education and skills authority. I very much look forward to support from the Members opposite in that regard. The education and skills authority is about raising standards and getting money to the front line.

I pay tribute to my late colleague Michael Ferguson, who did tremendous work in education. I ask the Member not to try to score political points from the death of my colleague, who worked

with direct rule Ministers here. It is not nice that that was done in the House today.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Minister agree that £58,000 of the vast expenditure on those commissioners would be better spent on the I CAN early years centre in Ballynahinch? If that is not funded this year, 20 youngsters will be deprived of the speech and language therapy that they need and deserve. There is a queue of another 53 people who are waiting to get into that school.

The Minister of Education: The question was not about the I CAN early years centre, but, as it was raised, I will give an update to the Member. As he knows, I visited the I CAN early years centre. I have seen the invaluable work that it does for young children. The I CAN early years centre provides speech and language services to up to 20 preschool children and support for parents. In 2009-2010, the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust provided £80,000, with the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) providing £8,000, for the centre. The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust recently advised the education and library board that it could no longer contribute to the funding of the I CAN centre due to financial pressures.

I have written to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explore how providers of health and education services can continue to work together to ensure that the needs of children with speech, language and communication difficulties are met. The South Eastern Education and Library Board has a statutory responsibility to identify and to make provision for children with special educational needs. It is best placed to identify and to respond to local needs, and it is funded by my Department to do so.

In the current financial year, the block grant to the SEELB is £78.7 million. I have asked the South Eastern Education and Library Board to advise me of its strategy to meet the needs of all children in the board area with speech, language and communication difficulties in early years. I very much look forward to my meeting with Michael McGimpsey to discuss the funding of that centre by the Health Department and the board. Go raibh maith agat.

Free School Meals

12. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Education how she intends to fund the extension of entitlement to free school meals. (AQO 1158/10)

The Minister of Education: As part of the budget allocations for education services for 2010-11, I am delighted that I have been able to make available an additional £3 million to extend the free school meal criteria. Families with children in full-time nursery places and/or primary schools in receipt of working tax credit and with a taxable income below £16,190 will now be able to ensure that their children receive a nutritious meal in the middle of the day. That provision will be introduced on a phased basis over two years.

Má tá teaghlaigh i dteideal béilí saora scoile, tá siad i dteideal tairbhí eile, lena n-áirítear deontais éidí scoile, agus mholfaínn do gach teaghlach ísealioncaim a lánféidíocht a éiliú. Cuimsíonn an cistiú breise de £3 mhilliún gné bheag chun é seo a chumhdach.

Eligibility for free school meals also entitles families to other benefits, including school uniform grants. I encourage all lower income families to claim their full entitlement. According to our research, up to 20,000 children could be eligible for the new programme.

Ms S Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's answer and the additional money, and I take on board the fact that it will be a gateway to other benefits, including school uniform grants. Considering some of the earlier questions, will any of the money come through the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's Investing for Health strategy? Part of ensuring that young people get a better start in life is entitlement to free school meals at primary school. I am curious about whether the Health Department is stepping up to the mark through Investing for Health.

The Minister of Education: I am not aware of Health Department support for the programme. I brought forward the proposals as part of the budgetary process, which was a difficult one. Members will know that I am enormously interested in preschool and primary school education and, despite difficult times, I managed to get more money — £90 per child — into primary schools. We want to make sure that children are not disadvantaged at a young age, so that is good news. I would like

more money, and I will always fight for more resources to provide services at the point of need. Nevertheless, it is to be welcomed that up to 20,000 children will be eligible for free school meals over the next number of years. That is significant, and I look forward to it. It is important that health and education providers work together, whether on the I CAN early years centre or on other areas, and I look forward to working with my colleague in the Health Department.

Mr McDevitt: We all welcome the increased provision of free school meals. Does the Minister accept that there are children in deprived and vulnerable communities across the North who are suffering because of the 70% — more than £2 million — reduction in the community youth work budget? Does the Minister agree that she is robbing Peter to pay Paul?

The Minister of Education: Those statistics are totally inaccurate. I will send the Member correct figures. There is not a 70% reduction in the community youth work budget. The Member should be very careful before giving out wrong statistics.

GCSE Results

13. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister of Education what percentage of pupils attained at least five GCSE passes in each year since 2006-07. (AQO 1159/10)

The Minister of Education: The number of pupils who obtained at least five GCSEs or equivalent at grades A* to C has increased by seven percentage points, from 64% in 2006-07 to 71% in 2008-09. That is a direct result of our policies — Every School a Good School and transfer 2010 — and our changes to the curriculum.

Cé go léiríonn na figiúirí go bhfuil na leibhéil tearcghnóthachtála ag feabhsú, tá mé tiomanta do dhul i ngleic le tearcghnóthachtáil agus do thorthaí a fheabhsú do gach duine óg.

The figures indicate improving levels of achievement. We can never become complacent, and I am committed to tackling underachievement and to improving outcomes for all young people, which is why I am putting in place a range of policies that are aimed at ensuring that every child fulfils her or his potential. Nevertheless, it is good to see that an extra 1,500 young people

are staying on in post-primary schools after the age of 16.

3.30 pm

Mr P Maskey: I congratulate the Department of Education, the Minister and the many teachers involved in helping so many young people achieve five or more GCSEs. The figure that the Minister just quoted is fantastic. Are she and her Department putting in the work required to ensure that Every School a Good School will lead to the numbers continuing to increase year on year?

The Minister of Education: Absolutely. We are continuing with our policies and being very proactive. Thankfully, as a result of the revised curriculum in primary schools, we no longer have distortion in the curriculum there, so we are already seeing improvements. Gone are the days when some children sat at the front of the class and others at the back. The curriculum is no longer distorted.

We also have a new, much broader, more varied and stimulating post-primary curriculum — the entitlement framework. That is one of the reasons that we are seeing improvements. We are putting an enormous focus on literacy and numeracy, mathematics and English or Irish, depending on which language is the chosen medium for learning.

In 2008, around 10,000 children left school without having achieved at least five good GCSEs. In 2007, the figure was 11,000; in 2006, it was 12,000. Therefore, a welcome downward trend can be seen. However, as I said, we can never become complacent. My Department will not get complacent. We must achieve much higher numbers, because every child who leaves our schools without the necessary qualifications is a child who has not reached his or her full potential.

Employment and Learning

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 2, 4, 6 and 7 have been withdrawn.

Universities and Colleges: Advertising

1. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what budgetary controls are in place to ensure that universities and colleges

do not overspend on advertising and promotion literature. (AQO 1162/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): Spending on advertising and promotional literature covers items such as promotional literature to attract students and to promote an institution's facilities; advertising of staff vacancies; advertising of tenders and procurement opportunities; and the production of the annual prospectus and other corporate reports and material. Expenditure on those areas represents less than 1% of total spend in the higher education sector.

Higher education institutions have budgetary and financial control frameworks in place, within which the budgets for advertising and promotional literature, as well as other areas of expenditure, are controlled. The controls are subject to periodic review by an institution's internal auditor. Expenditure is also subject to review by the external auditor. Further education colleges operate a regular and comprehensive formal monitoring process.

Overall budgetary spend is approved by colleges' governing bodies. Spend in specific areas, including on advertising and promotion, is continually scrutinised at senior management level. Spend is also subject to the same audit reviews that are applied in the higher education sector.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his answer and for the figures that he provided. My question was posed by young people at a recent meeting of students. Does the Minister agree that, when it comes to advertising and promotion, greater emphasis should be placed on online and IT measures than on glossies, with their associated costs?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: First, we must obviously always be careful that public funds are spent on only their intended purposes. However, we must promote places in colleges and universities, and that requires the production of appropriate literature. If the Member is concerned about the production of over-elaborate or inappropriate material, I am happy to take that up with the relevant institution. I believe that sufficient safeguards are in place to ensure that colleges and universities constantly review such spending. As I said in my original answer, all such spending is subject to internal and external auditing.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister agree that if a wide range of courses is to be retained at our universities and colleges to the benefit of our economy, it is essential that we attract and retain sustainable numbers of our able young people?

Furthermore, does he accept that it will be a danger to the economy if quality local courses are not available? It is essential that young people are well informed and that as many of them as possible take up local opportunities and avoid the additional costs of travelling or living elsewhere.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I agree with the Member. Obviously, it is important that people have access to a wide range of courses. However, they need to know about them because courses continually change. Therefore, there has to be a means of communicating that. Obviously, it is cheaper to make the information available on the Internet than publishing literature, and so on. However, people need to make the effort to find out about the courses.

Members may recall the Department's C'mon Over campaign, which we have been running for some time. It was designed to try to encourage students to come back to study at our universities. It is important that colleges and universities do their business properly, effectively and in an attractive manner, otherwise students will not go to those institutions.

Graduate Unemployment

2. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps his Department has undertaken to address unemployment among new graduates. (AQO 1163/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Unemployment has been increasing as a result of the economic downturn. As part of that, it is expected that graduate unemployment has also risen. However, my Department has not yet been inundated by graduates seeking work or availing themselves of the opportunities that are offered through its programmes. That may well be attributed to the resilience or the transferability of the graduates' skill sets.

In addition to access to my Department's existing programmes and services for adults, I introduced a number of initiatives that are

specifically aimed at helping graduates to find employment. I trust that the Member will agree that that is an encouraging development.

Mr Armstrong: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he tell us whether he believes that the recession has artificially inflated the statistics for those who are not in education, employment or training?

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

It would be foolish to deny that the recession has had an impact. Job opportunities are fewer and, in such circumstances, competition for a diminishing number of posts is higher. The Member will be aware that, compared with two years ago, 32,000 more people in Northern Ireland are unemployed. That includes a number of graduates.

My Department has schemes, including the job introduction scheme, details of which are on the Department's website. The Member will also know that we are considering internships, and so on, to try to help graduates to find work. Sadly, not all of them are able to find the work for which they are best trained. Many of them have been resilient and have had to go into jobs for which they are overqualified. I am sure that we can all think of such examples in our own constituencies. Nevertheless, we are keeping close contact with that cohort, because many of those young people are the seedcorn of our economic development for the future and will always have to be monitored extremely closely.

Mr Bell: How many more people will be made unemployed as a result of the Minister and Mr Cameron's proposals to introduce a £200 million cut this financial year? How many more of our public sector teachers, doctors, nurses and physiotherapists is he planning to hand P45s come Friday morning?

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Anyone in the Chamber could have made a better effort than that. The fact is that the Member's party's Finance Minister has just led us through £376 million worth of cuts. Unless the Member is economically illiterate, the first paragraph that he will see if he reads his party's manifesto states that spending reductions are better and preferable to tax rises. I understand spending reductions to mean cuts.

Mr Bell: How many P45s?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. This is in danger of becoming a party political broadcast, which we will try to avoid.

Programme-led Apprenticeships

3. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he has reviewed the programme-led apprenticeships scheme and to outline the outcome.

(AQO 1164/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The programme-led apprenticeships scheme was introduced in September 2009 and has been the subject of continuous monitoring. That has meant that the staff who are involved in liaising with stakeholders have been able to identify issues of concern early and bring forward solutions for consideration. One specific problem identified through that process is that training organisations have been able to secure employer placements for around only 50% of the 2,798 participants on the programme. That has severely restricted participants' ability to gather the work-based evidence that is required to achieve the NVQ element of their apprenticeship framework.

The solution being considered is to increase the number of placement days allowed in the programme from one day a week to a maximum of three days a week, together with a more flexible use of block placements. There is evidence that that would increase the number of placements available, by making them more meaningful to employers as well as to participants.

Mr P Maskey: I thank the Minister for his reply. He accepts that there is a need to increase the figures, given the statistics that he has just quoted. Will he outline what consultation has taken place between the colleges and employers? Will the Minister regard it as a mistake if such consultation has not taken place?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: We dealt with that issue on a number of occasions in debates and in Question Time. Nobody doubts for one moment that the employer-led schemes are the best. There is common ground in the House on that. Last year, however, we were confronted with a situation where employers were not providing apprenticeships in the numbers that they had been in the past. We decided that the best measure that we

could take was to introduce the programme-led apprenticeships schemes. Young people have voted with their feet, and almost 3,000 are involved in those schemes.

We have been working very closely with employers and the sector skills councils to ensure that we do not undermine the employer-led apprenticeship model. We have had extensive discussions with the Department, the sector skills councils and training organisations, and it has been agreed that a more flexible approach to the employer placements that I have outlined will be adopted in respect of those young people who are on the programme-led apprenticeships programme. The changes will take place with immediate effect. I thank the Committee for its active contribution to dialogue on that important issue.

Ms Lo: The Minister will be aware that the Committee had a meeting with the programme's stakeholders. The employers were unhappy about extending the programme to two or three days a week, because, first, as the Minister said, it may undermine the employer-led programme; and, secondly, there is not enough work to justify taking people on, let alone extending their placements to two or three days. A while ago, departmental staff talked about extending the placements to the public sector and related agencies that are funded by the public sector.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member ask her question?

Ms Lo: What progress has been made on that issue?

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I understand what employers are saying, but the fact is that employers are not taking on apprentices in the numbers that we have been used to. Some of the bigger employers have slashed the number of people that they are taking on, and, last year, one very large employer did not take on any apprentices. We are, therefore, confronted with that dilemma, and we have had this debate before. A small group of employers continue to keep lobbying on the issue, but employers are simply not providing the places. Almost 3,000 young people have taken up programme-led apprenticeships. What were we to do with those young people? Were we to leave them there and give them nothing? That is the dilemma.

I have written to my Executive colleagues about extending the placements to the public sector, and, so far, I have had a positive response.

I believe that we will see the gradual involvement of apprentices with the public sector. However, I repeat that I fully accept and support the view that the employer-led scheme is the best, and we will get back to that situation as soon as we can. We are monitoring the scheme continuously, and we will have to decide very shortly what to do in the autumn, because it is fast approaching. Although people are continuing to lobby on the issue by extending the options from one day up to a maximum of three days, the feedback that we are getting is that it may lead to an increase in the number of placements. That is the result of our discussions with the organisations and the sector skills councils, and I remind Members that the sector skills councils are there to represent employers. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating, but, hitherto, we have said that it was too inflexible, so we have made it more flexible. We will have to see if that results in more work placements being found, because, at the end of the day, the key objective is to get people work placements so that they can deal with the NVQ element of their apprenticeship framework.

Mr A Maginness: I support the Minister in his replies. I think that he is going in the right direction in a situation wherein employers simply do not have additional capacity. Will the Minister encourage employers to think again, and will he continue to expand looking at the public service to see where programme-led apprenticeships can be taken up? Can he assure the House that he will continue along that path?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am happy to give that assurance. I agree with the Member: the public service has a huge responsibility in those matters. We understand the difficulties; however, without more placements people will not get the NVQ element of their apprenticeship framework. They will be able to come back to that when an opportunity arises, so it does not mean that it is lost for ever. However the answer is an emphatic yes.

NEETs

5. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline his Department's plans

to deal with the issue of young people not in education, employment or training.(AQO 1166/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Has question 5 been grouped with another question?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I apologise. I should have said that question 4 has been withdrawn, so we are now on question 5.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Young people not in education, employment or training are a high priority for me. That is why the Department is taking the lead and producing a scoping study, which is in the final editing stages and should be completed very soon. However, it is clear from this work that the issues affecting those young people are cross-departmental and multiagency in nature. For example, in 2007-08, some 80·1% of young people who left school in year 12 did not receive five GCSEs at grades A to C, including English and maths. That represented 8,046 young people of the 10,050 who left school. The need to improve educational attainment is a key component of any work to prevent young people from falling into inactivity; indeed, there is a strong argument for even earlier intervention. A wide range of provision is available depending on the needs of the individual; however, we are not complacent, and the development of a strategy will inform future provision.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for the interest that he and his Department have taken in apprenticeships for young people. How do Northern Ireland's figures for NEETs compare with those of the rest of the United Kingdom?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The fact is that, currently, Northern Ireland's figures are slightly better than those of the rest of the UK, although, as the Member will be aware, there are variations from region to region. Those figures are classified into bands according to the age groups to which they refer. As I understand it, Northern Ireland's situation is marginally less bad than that of the rest of the UK. However, I must point out that that makes little or no difference to me or to the Department. Certainly, it makes little or no difference to individuals who are confronted with the problems that arise from it.

There are many reasons for that. Although some people make lifestyle decisions to come back into the workforce or into a training situation, others are left in a much more vulnerable position.

That deals with family issues and break-ups. Of course, historically, as we know, there has been a correlation between rising unemployment and rising numbers of young people, in particular, who find themselves in that situation. It is a terrible waste. The Assembly and the Executive must address that effectively because when people have passed a certain age, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to get the basic skills that they need to have a worthwhile and meaningful career.

Mrs M Bradley: Many people who are not in education, employment or training may have learning difficulties or a history of disrupted schooling and difficult family backgrounds. Will the Minister tell the House what is being considered to address essential skills and pastoral care needs?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Work on essential skills is progressing. There is a Programme for Government target, which we are well on the way to achieving.

I believe that, during the past number of years, tens of thousands of people have acquired essential skills. In September 2009, we added ICT as a third essential skill. It is proving to be effective in getting people to come forward to participate in essential skills learning because — how shall I put it? — people do not feel embarrassed to go and learn about computers, although they may have difficulty with saying that they cannot read or write. That is proving effective at getting across barriers. Few processes in modern business and industry can take place without some use of ICT. We are working closely with the Union Learning Fund, which, during the past year, has been effective in getting more and more people, even those who are in their forties and fifties, to participate in those processes.

I am encouraged that we are beginning to see an upward trend in the number of participants and in the success to which that will lead. I will provide some statistics for the Member. The most recent data covers 16- to 24-year-olds. The proportion of those not in employment, government training schemes or full-time education in the period between October and December 2009 stands at 15%. That is a decrease of four percentage points from the figure for October to December 2008. It is the lowest rate of all UK regions for that particular quarter, the final quarter of 2009. It

is encouraging that we may, at last, be seeing a turn of the tide.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 6 and 7 have been withdrawn.

STEM Subjects

8. Mr Bell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what progress has been made in promoting STEM subjects. (AQO 1169/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: A strong cadre of people who are skilled in STEM subjects is critical if the local economy is to meet its full potential. Since the publication of the independent report of the STEM review, which was received by Minister Ruane and I in September 2009, significant work has been undertaken to address its recommendations and promote STEM subjects.

For example, in my Department, a feasibility study into the possibility of providing a bursary and scholarship to those who study STEM subjects in further and higher education colleges in Northern Ireland is almost complete. The six further education colleges have engaged in a wide range of activities that is aimed specifically at increasing participation in STEM subjects, including an all-day event that took place on Saturday 1 May 2010 at W5, which I was pleased to attend.

The event, in conjunction with employers, included primary and secondary schools and focused on creating greater enthusiasm for STEM subjects as a cornerstone of economic growth.

Mr Bell: Given that we are agreed on the importance of science, technology, engineering and maths not only to be resilient in recession but to advance Northern Ireland's economy, how can the Minister explain his failure, as the number of graduates in those subjects has reduced under his watch? Does he accept that that failure will stultify the economy?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The decisions that people take on the courses that they pursue are voluntary; those who want to force others to take a particular degree will receive no support from me. People must be free to make their own choices.

The Department's approach is to make STEM subjects more attractive to students and others. We must bear in mind that the decisions made

by young people on the subjects that they study at 13 or 14 years of age often determine their ability to study different degrees when they go to university. That is why young people are encouraged to take STEM subjects long before they make the choice to go to university.

As the Member will be aware, one institution offers a bursary for students studying STEM subjects, and there is already some signs of an increased interest in those subjects. The STEM review and the campaign run by institutions, schools and bodies such as the Royal Society of Chemistry to attract more people to STEM subjects is undoubtedly the best method of promoting them: one must allow people to volunteer to participate rather than force them to do so. It does not work like that. I do not believe that anyone in the House would agree to draconian measures to force people in a direction that they did not wish to go.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his replies. Will he outline how reliant the STEM agenda is on changes in attitude to STEM subjects in our wider education system?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: That is the key: the culture must change. There was a tendency for people to enter universities and colleges and opt for what were deemed safe professions such as accountancy and law; however, in a changing world those professions are no longer as safe as they once were. Furthermore, millions of graduates in engineering and other fields are emanating from Asia, which is the new powerhouse of future development, and if we do not wake up to that we will miss out on our long-term competitiveness. We must provide encouragement in our schools and at other levels if we are to get the participation that we need to make it work.

One of the most successful schemes has been the Department's Step-Up programme at the University of Ulster, which encourages pupils from secondary schools in disadvantaged areas of Londonderry and Belfast to study science at university. The programme has been running successfully for eight years and actively involves the university, schools, local industry, hospitals and government agencies. I had the pleasure of going to a ceremony in Jordanstown in the autumn at which 80 young people who had been on the scheme were beginning their university courses, and I am looking closely at

whether that scheme can be expanded into new locations to ensure that more people can study STEM subjects.

4.00 pm

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given that approximately 12,000 students from the North are studying outside Northern Ireland, does the Minister agree that there is an opportunity to radically increase the number of students who are studying STEM subjects here? That would, in itself, require an uplift of the cap on the number of students. Will the Minister outline whether a case has been made to the Department of Finance and Personnel for an uplift of the MaSN cap? If so, what was the response?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member will be aware that what is nicknamed the MaSN cap is an expenditure control mechanism. It creates arbitrary decisions, because, clearly, MaSN is a means of controlling the number of people who are at university. Very roughly, every 1,000 students cost us an additional £8 million. In recent years, we have seen an increase in the number of students in higher education. I have told the universities that I am prepared to talk to them about the MaSN cap. Indeed, I have some proposals from the University of Ulster, as this matter applies to the Magee campus, for example. We are looking at how the cap is applied, and, indeed, I am always prepared to look at that. However, the CSR period for the next three years begins during the current financial year, and that will be our first opportunity to build something additional for this matter into future budgets and to make any significant change.

I am always open to looking at the situation, and I have said that consistently to the universities. We have reached the stage where roughly half our school leavers go into higher education. Therefore, we have achieved a level that is greater than anywhere else on these islands, especially as that level applies to people who are from disadvantaged backgrounds. That is a good story to tell for Northern Ireland.

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

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Primary Healthcare: Carrickmore

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately 10 minutes.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am grateful that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is in the Chamber. Perhaps the timing of the debate is not ideal, given that it is late on the Tuesday afternoon before the Thursday Westminster election. Nonetheless, I will make my case.

Carrickmore Health Centre is a four-GP practice that provides primary care services to almost 8,500 patients in a rural area in County Tyrone. The health centre is located approximately 15 miles from each of the larger towns of Omagh, Cookstown and Dungannon. The practice serves a wide geographical area that is relatively deprived. According to the 2005 NISRA multiple deprivation measure, the Termon ward, with the existing health centre at its centre, has a multiple deprivation measure of 190 out of 890. Additional trust services, such as midwifery, health visiting and district nursing, are provided from the premises.

As I understand it, the former Sperrin Lakeland Trust provided the current premises at a cost of around £140,000 in 1984. A bomb in 1985 caused major damage to the premises, and the health centre was refurbished and extended. When the initial premises were developed, there were two doctors, a treatment room nurse and three receptionists serving fewer than 6,000 patients, and they did that well. Currently, there are four doctors, two nurses, one healthcare assistant, a practice manager and six receptionists. Two health visitors, two visiting midwives and a district nursing team also provide services from the premises. The practice list has grown to almost 8,500 patients.

Significant developments in service provision have been undertaken by the practice in recent

years, such as chronic disease management clinics, minor surgery, health promotion and preventative services. I live in that community, and I am a patient of that practice: that may be an interest that I should declare. In my opinion, it is a very progressive health centre.

The changing face of secondary care services in the area has had a massive impact on the practice and its patients. When the current premises were developed, the practice was within 20 minutes of acute services at Tyrone County Hospital, Omagh, and the South Tyrone Hospital in Dungannon, and it was 35 minutes from the Mid-Ulster Hospital in Magherafelt. With the regrading of those facilities in recent years, patients of the practice are now further away from accessing acute services than perhaps anyone else in the region. There are tragic examples of the impact that that has had, although I will not indulge those today. However, it has undoubtedly resulted in an increased demand on the practice in Carrickmore to deliver additional services locally.

The current premises are rented from the Western Health and Social Care Trust, formerly the Sperrin Lakeland Trust. Inevitably, the trust has capital restrictions and priorities, and it is evident that the maintenance and development of trust-owned premises cannot respond to need to the extent that the GP-owned premises in the locality can. For example, last year, Dr Michael Herron, one of the GPs in the practice, told me that £5,000 per practice was provided to GP-owned premises in the trust area to upgrade infection control but not to trust-owned premises. Two-tier provision therefore applies in that trust area in that patients in trust-owned premises do not have the same entitlement to protection from infections such as MRSA and clostridium difficile. Inadequate maintenance and development has also resulted in more than 10 call-outs to the trust in the past year following failure of the electrical supply to the premises resulting in an inability to operate the computer system, emergency phone lines and emergency equipment until technicians arrived from Omagh. Countless problems such as those have been ongoing for many years now.

The practice has been applying to develop modern, fit-for-purpose premises to provide an enhanced range of services for the practice since 1996. In that time, numerous major cost-rent premises have been developed in areas such as Enniskillen and the Waterside

in Derry, which quite literally have hospitals on their doorstep. We believe that the needs of patients in mid-Tyrone and particularly in the Carrickmore area have been overlooked somewhat, despite what local people feel are the unique circumstances of the area with regard to secondary care access.

The practice engaged constructively with the then Western Board, most notably in 2003, when a business case was developed for additional accommodation at Carrickmore Health Centre, and in 2005, when a major health and care centre was prioritised for Carrickmore following extensive needs analysis for primary care in the Western Trust area. That was an important time, when there were public meetings in the area and consultations with the Western Board. People are extremely disappointed that it appears, following that, to have slipped in priority status.

Despite the challenges of the location, access to secondary care and premises, the Carrickmore practice has been highly successful. The practice has consistently achieved among the highest point scores in the new GMS contract since its inception. It also has piloted highly successful initiatives, such as teledermatology and teleneurology. It has contributed to the development of leading Western Trust services, such as the cardiac unit based at the Tyrone County Hospital and community cardiac services, and trust-wide protocols, such as the trust stroke protocol. All in all, the practice has won many regional healthcare awards and, generally, is perceived as a progressive health centre that is committed to achieving the best service for its patients. It believes that it can develop even higher standards of enhanced primary care provision in enhanced premises, and that is its objective and goal.

The practice doctors are fully aware of and understand the financial pressures and limitations facing the trust and the Department with respect to capital developments. They believe that it is sensible to invest in the practice and that it would be a false economy not to do so. As an MLA, I am aware that we all want the health budget slice of the cake to be much larger. At this time, the Health Department secures approximately 50% of the overall Budget for 12 Departments, and I support that. We believe strongly that the development of enhanced primary care premises for the Carrickmore practice population can be

achieved by using existing resources. That will provide the Department and the Western Trust with an opportunity to enhance service provision in primary care for patients in Carrickmore; alleviate some of the pressures that the trust faces in respect of secondary care by enhancing community provision; and help overcome some of the issues faced by patients because of the distance they must travel to the emergency and acute hospital services.

I am grateful to the Minister for acceding to a request to meet me, other public representatives, local GPs and community representatives from the west Tyrone area on Thursday 20 May. We hope to continue this dialogue at that meeting. I ask the Minister to give fair wind to our proposal. I invite him to visit the premises in Carrickmore, if he thinks that that will be helpful or necessary, so that he can see that they are not fit for purpose for the future. For a start, the building is too small. However, the new services that could be located there would certainly contribute to a health solution for a community that feels disenfranchised in that way. At the meeting, we will discuss possible options and solutions, one of which is the development of new premises under the cost-rent system to provide enhanced GP and community services.

I emphasise that the Carrickmore practice has been able to generate huge prescribing savings from its projected budget, amounting to more than £250,000 per annum. Facilitating a proportion of such savings in subsequent years to support new enhanced premises for the practice population would be an appropriate acknowledgement of patients' support for the efficient use of resources. In the absence of that funding, things will be very difficult in the future, especially as so much emphasis is placed on the importance of primary care. We are told that more than 90% of health transactions are carried out in a primary care setting. The population of that large rural area in mid-Tyrone has a number of options and solutions that it wishes to present to the Minister. I repeat my request to the Minister that he gives the fairest possible wind to the proposal. I hope that he does not rebut it with a prepared answer but gives serious consideration to the needs of people in that community.

I know that the doctors, staff and patients of that health centre, who are supported by public and community representatives, will be grateful to the Minister and Department for giving

thorough consideration to the unique healthcare needs of that area and for supporting them in their collective efforts to deliver a proper health service for that community. I hope that the Minister considers the proposal properly.

4.15 pm

Dr Deeny: Do I have five minutes in which to speak?

Mr Deputy Speaker: You have up to 10 minutes.

Dr Deeny: I reiterate Barry's comment that it is good of the Minister to be here. I declare an interest as a GP in the Carrickmore practice. However, I must speak on the issue, because I am the political representative of the patients of that practice and others in the area. I will try to refer to "the practice" and "the patients", as opposed to reflecting any personal interest.

Rather than going over what Barry said about the practice, I will simply say that it is well known as being one of high quality, for which I am thankful. The annual patient surveys confirm that, and Barry mentioned the high scores received by the practice and the new contract. I remember that, 15 years ago, we were bottom of the 59 practices in the Western Trust area when it came to prescribing. However, over the past number of years, we have been placed consistently in the top three. The scores apply to prescribing habits and, for example, to the cost per patient and per item. Generic prescribing has dramatically increased; more than 60% of our prescriptions are now generic. However, I have concerns, and I am glad that the Minister is here to hear them.

Nowadays, we rightly hear about patient choice. However, the practice has, for a variety of reasons, had to turn away patients. Each week, the number of applications ranges from six to 20, which was the highest number that I ever came across. Unfortunately, severely limited space means that we have no choice but to refuse some applicants. We refuse those who live furthest away from the practice centre, which is a pity. As primary care develops into the twenty-first century, we see no reason not to achieve a practice of 10,000 patients. However, we need the facilities to be able to do that.

The loss of acute services in the three adjacent hospitals resulted in increasing demands being made on the practice. It must be recognised that, at times, our patients and those from

other practices whose children attend the local schools use the health centre almost as though it were a miniature A&E department. In 2005, because those acute services had been earmarked for closure, we were told that it was a priority for Carrickmore to have a practice that was fit for the twenty-first century. In 2006, I received a letter from the head of primary care in the then Western Board. He stated:

“The Carrickmore health and care centre remains a high priority in the first phase of schemes to be included in the outline business case. We will do everything we can to push ahead with the Carrickmore scheme so that it is built as quickly as possible.”

That was the situation, as we thought, in 2006. We have had a long time to think about it, and the practice believes that that venture could be achieved using the existing resources.

I will talk more about cost, as I have some experience of the construction of new health centres across the water. A year or two back, a local paper mentioned that a new health centre was to be built in Fintona, and a figure of £15 million was bandied around. That would scare anybody off, never mind the Department. In November 2007, I took a group of people over to Scotland to look at hospitals. One of the places that we visited was Fort William, and the people were so excited about their new health centre that they asked us to come and see it. That centre has three practices and caters for 12,000 patients. In May 2007, it opened at a cost of £2.5 million. I saw what a wonderful and modern health centre it was. That was in 2007, which some might say was some years ago, but I heard this morning that costs for construction have gone down. Therefore, to think of the cost of modern day health centres in the tens of millions is wrong, when £2 million to £3 million would cover the cost of such a centre in Carrickmore.

We have been pleased with the prescribing savings in the practice, which are due to the professional commitment of staff and, more importantly, our patients' support, understanding and acceptance. We have been able to save a significant amount of money over the years through savings in prescribing. Those are savings to the healthcare budget and to the Department that could be channelled back into the practice and put towards the cost of developing modern and fit-for-purpose primary care premises for the twenty-first century. I

hope that the Minister and his Department acknowledge that. Many practices are not saving money but are costing the Department money. We are saving money from the Department's healthcare budget and have done so consistently for the past five years. It would be good to have that acknowledged, and an appropriate way to do so would be to reward the efforts of our patients by agreeing to provide us with a new health and care centre.

Those of us who are health professionals and work in the National Health Service are well aware of a major shift from secondary to primary care across all the countries. Those of us who work in community primary care are up for that challenge. Having modern primary care services for our patients and decreasing the demand on our secondary care services makes sense to me and to the vast majority of doctors, nurses and other health professionals in the community. However, it is impossible to do that without having the essential facilities and services in place in our communities. That is important in all areas right across the National Health Service but even more so in mid-Tyrone, where patients are further away from acute hospital services and depend more on their primary care services.

This morning, I met the chief executive of the Western Trust about another issue, along with the medical director, the director of mental health services and another senior director from the trust. I have a good working relationship with the new trust, and I sit as one of the commissioners on the new local commissioning group. That is something that I thought about. I did not take that position for personal benefit; the group is needed for our community.

I honestly believe that the health professionals in Carrickmore have unique problems and difficulties in providing modern day healthcare to our patient population. That provides us with a unique opportunity, which, I hope, the Minister and his Department will grab. That opportunity is to provide twenty-first century primary care services for patients while helping to ease the burden on secondary healthcare in the west. That is a big point, because there is already talk about people having difficulty getting hospital beds, although that is the case across the Health Service. The whole idea of moving care into the community is to look after people in their own home, if that is what they want, and to help our secondary care colleagues.

I will finish by asking the Minister to take on board all the points that have been raised and to accept the unique and difficult situation in which we find ourselves and the unique opportunity that that presents. I ask him to consider us favourably and to make the right decision for our many rural patients who feel that they and their health needs have been forgotten by the Department.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Unlike the previous two contributors, I do not live in Carrickmore, and I am not a patient at the practice that is the subject of the debate. However, I am an MLA for West Tyrone, and Carrickmore is in west Tyrone. I also have an interest as a member of the Health Committee.

The detail of the case was articulated by the two previous contributors. I want to focus on one aspect of what was said; namely, that that practice is in an area of deprivation. I understand from sitting on the Health Committee and from listening to the Minister and all the Budget debates that we have particular difficulties with finance. However, with regard to the point about the practice being in an area of deprivation, it is for the Assembly and, indeed, the Executive to keep in mind in all these discussions the issue of equality and equity across the North. Although we have a problem with finance and budgets — we all accept that — it is important that we keep equality as a baseline when considering where and how money is spent. The point was made by the previous contributors that the people in that area are, in their view, suffering disproportionately because the services there are, perhaps, not the same as those received in other areas. I repeat that I do not live in that area and am not a patient at that practice. However, in general terms, equality should underline all our considerations.

Not far from Carrickmore are areas such as Greencastle, Gortin and Plumbridge, which certainly have been disadvantaged with the change in provision at Omagh hospital. When considering these matters, it is important that we look at the full picture and at what may be provided in west Tyrone in the future. The issue of equality and what is provided in the rural west remain very much a live matter.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I am committed to developing and improving primary and community care services across Northern

Ireland. Such services are vital in helping to reduce the public's dependence on hospitals for treatment and care. Therefore, the points that were made about our change of direction in the Health Service very much accord with my strategic view. I have demonstrated that through a number of measures including, for example, the setting up of the Public Health Agency.

The first point of contact for someone who needs healthcare is often the primary and community care services, which are the cornerstone of our health and care services. A huge range of services are based in the community for people with long-term conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and strokes. Most importantly, that means that people can be treated closer to home and avoid unnecessary hospital admissions. Therefore, I very much support the drive towards primary care, which has been part of my strategic vision for health.

4.30 pm

New approaches to chronic disease management have been introduced in the Western Trust area's primary sector. Those include the development of patient education programmes and the employment of specialist community respiratory nurses. It is because of such initiatives that many more people can now benefit from services that are provided in their community, meaning less disruption to their daily lives.

My Department's primary and community care infrastructure programme aims to put in place a physical infrastructure that is integrated, modern and meets the health and care needs of local communities. The programme includes the development of a number of health and care centres across Northern Ireland that will bring health and social care professionals together under one roof and within skilled teams to provide a range of community-based services. That is the programme's focus. A new health and care centre for Carrickmore was originally planned to be a part of that programme. A health and care centre for Lisnaskea was selected as the Western Health and Social Care Trust's first priority. In 2008, I commissioned a capital priorities review, but a health and care centre for Carrickmore was not included in the Western Trust's top 12 priorities.

Demand for our services continues to grow at unprecedented levels, and the growing needs

of patients are placing greater pressures on the system. Despite that, my budget is being cut. I listened with interest to some of the remarks that were made about money, because I want to talk about money and specifically about the role that we all can play in finding money for the Health Service.

Health in Northern Ireland is underfunded by around £600 million per annum when compared with England, even though the need for health and social care services here is between 14% and 16% greater. As well as that, budget cuts are putting us under relentless strain. Two weeks ago, the already limited resources in my health budget were cut by £113 million, on top of my being asked to find £700 million in efficiencies over the next three years. This year alone, I am being asked to find £340 million in efficiencies. After adding up those sums and taking into consideration the fact that Health Service demand rose by 9% last year and 12% the year before while my budget increased by just over 1% in real terms, Members will have some idea of the challenges that our Health Service staff are facing.

It is very difficult. I am constantly being told about the need to be efficient. I have just left the Ulster Hospital, where efficiencies over the past three years have risen by approximately 18%. That is a huge gain, and credit is due to every member of staff in that hospital. However, they are working in a building that is falling down around them in places. It is difficult to be efficient when working in such conditions, and I accept that modern and efficient premises are needed.

We have to invest. In fact, we have to invest to save. Nevertheless, even with those gains in efficiencies — the Health Service overall has gained in efficiency by around 7% over the past two years — the challenge is still so great that Health Service staff continue to be stretched. Our doctors, nurses and health professionals are being stretched all the time. They deserve support from the House and the Executive, but they are not getting it.

Two weeks ago, the budget cuts were voted through by what I describe as the unholy alliance of the DUP, Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party. I note that Mrs McGill was part of that vote. She voted to cut almost £400 million from departmental budgets and specifically £113 million from the health budget, yet she

talks about equality and equity. Although the Health Service provides universal care for the population — we all need the Health Service routinely during our lives — the bulk of its use is by our older population and children. Most of the burden of health budget cuts will fall on older people and children. I have made that point repeatedly in the Chamber, in the Executive and in public. Where is the equality and equity in that? How can Mrs McGill see equality and equity in voting for those cuts? Her party, along with the DUP and the Alliance Party, voted to take £700 million in efficiencies out of the Health Service. When I asked the House to exempt the Health Service from budget cuts, the same unholy alliance voted to impose cuts on the Health Service. That is why I have to do things like capital reviews.

There is great demand on the Health Service. Kieran Deeny will know that, as a professional working in the Health Service. He will know at first hand how much harder life is for doctors, nurses and professionals in the Health Service and the need that there is for resource.

In December 2008, I announced over £58 million of capital investment for the Western Trust over three years. That was part of a larger planned investment in the trust over a 10-year period. As part of that development, major investment is going into Altnagelvin and into the south-west to the new hospital in Enniskillen, and I have plans for and am committed to building a new local hospital in Omagh. However, it is difficult for me to deliver these things when the Executive and the Assembly will not face up to the needs of the Health Service.

Mr McElduff said that we get 50% of the Budget and that he supports that. We do not get 50% of the Budget or anything like that. There is a wisdom that floats about as a criticism of the Health Service that says that we do, but we do not. We get 43% of the managed block. Members will be aware that the block grant comes in two parts: managed and unmanaged. Around half of that block comes to us, which is managed through the Executive. Around 43% of that block came to health before the devolution of justice. It is now much less than that.

Looking at the moneys that we have for health, one can see how the Treasury does its sums. The Treasury tells us how much money we need compared with England, which is used as a benchmark. It has allowed for health

to get £600 million per annum more than it actually gets to run the service and meet the challenges that Kieran Deeny and others have to meet. That money has been taken off for other Departments. I could name one other Department that is seriously underfunded. It is nothing like as underfunded as the Health Service, but it is underfunded.

It is how we cut up the cake here that is important. If we cut the cake, then we are in a position to deliver a Health Service that is comparable in resource to the rest of the UK. However, in saying that, I believe that the Health Service in Northern Ireland is first class. I have repeatedly been told by professionals that, if one has to be ill, Northern Ireland is a good place to be ill when compared with the rest of the UK. It is certainly a much better place to be ill than, for example, the Irish Republic, where one will pay for one's doctor, prescriptions, accident and emergency services and a stay in hospital.

Mrs McGill: Will the Minister clarify the significance of how we cut up the block grant here? Are we getting enough from the Treasury? Will the Minister confirm that, in his view, we are getting enough or that the block grant needs some adjustment? Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister's time is up, but I will give him a quick moment to respond.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. We always look for more money, but health gets a bad deal as the block grant is cut up here. Health has historically had and continues to have a bad deal. The decisions are made by the unholy alliance of Sinn Féin, the DUP and the Alliance Party. Look at other things: £20 million has been set aside for the development of the Irish language. That would pay for two health centres in Carrickmore, no problem, if that is what the Member wants to prioritise.

Adjourned at 4.39 pm.

Written Ministerial Statement

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

Oideachas

Suíomh Gréasáin Acmhainní Múinteora Sparklebox

*Arna fhoilsiú ag meán lae
Dé Máirt 4 Bealtaine 2010*

An tAire Oideachais (Ms Ruane): Beidh a fhios agaibh gur thug mé ráiteas don tionól ar an 8ú Feabhra 2010 faoin suíomh Gréasáin Acmhainní Múinteora Sparklebox. Ag an am sin, chuir mé in iúl do chomhaltaí go raibh inní orm faoi scoileanna ag úsáid an tsuímh Gréasáin Sparklebox, cionn is gur cuireadh an t-iarúinéir agus oibreoir i bpríosún ar 8ú Eanáir 2010 as íomhánna míghnéasacha de pháistí a bheith ina sheilbh agus á ndéanamh aige. Bhí sé cláraithe mar chiontóir gnéis agus ciontaíodh é cheana féin sa bhliain 2005. Chruthaigh sé an suíomh Gréasáin Sparklebox i mí Feabhra 2006 le hacmhainní in-íoslódáilte teagaisc a chur ar fáil saor in aisce. Bhí fáil ag scoileanna air trína gcórais C2k (soláthraíonn C2k seirbhís bhainistithe ICT do gach scoil anseo).

B'ábhar mór inní dom gur chuala C2k faoi chás Sparklebox den chéad uair i mí na Nollag, ach níor chuir siad bac le rochtain ar an suíomh Gréasáin ar líonra na scoileanna go dtí 1ú Feabhra. Dhírigh Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlaine Bhéal Feirste aird mo Roinne ar an cheist Déardaoin 28ú Eanáir, agus d'inis an Roinn dom Dé hAoine 29ú Eanáir. Chreid mé, agus creidim go fóill, gur chóir gur insíodh dom i bhfad níos luaithe. Cé is moite de cheist an ama, bhí mé ag iarraidh a chinntiú nach raibh an suíomh ina bhaol do pháistí.

Education

Sparklebox Teacher Resource Website

*Published at noon on
Tuesday 4 May 2010*

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): You will recall that on 8th February 2010 I made a statement to the Assembly about the Sparklebox Teacher Resource website. At that time I informed Members that I had concerns about use of the Sparklebox website by schools, as the former owner and operator had been jailed on 8th January 2010 for making and possessing indecent images of children. He was a registered sex offender, having previously been convicted in 2005. The Sparklebox website was created by him in February 2006 to provide free downloadable teaching resources. It was available to schools via their C2k systems (C2k provides a managed ICT service to all schools here).

I was greatly concerned to learn that C2k first knew about the Sparklebox issue in December, but did not block access to the website on the schools network until 1st February. The Belfast Education and Library Board brought the matter to my Department's attention on Thursday 28th January, and the Department informed me on Friday 29th January. It was, and still is my view, that I should have been informed much earlier. Beyond the timing issue, I was anxious to confirm that the site posed no threat to children.

Nuair a labhair mé libh i mí Feabhra dúirt mé go raibh mé ag iarraidh bheith cinnte de go mbeadh freagairtí ar chúinsí áirithe chás Sparklebox comhréireach agus tráthúil. D'ordaigh mé don Roinn dhá rud a dhéanamh. Ar an chéad dul síos, d'iarr mé orthu scríobh chuig Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair, ag éileamh air iniúchadh a dhéanamh ar an dóigh ar láimhseáil C2k an cás agus moltaí a dhéanamh. Chomh maith leis sin, d'iarr mé ar an Roinn athbhreithniú a dhéanamh lena dhearbhu cé acu a bhí a gcuid nósanna imeachta agus prótacal inmheánach féin láidir go leor.

Tá an dá athbhreithniú faighte agam agus chinntigh mé gur cuireadh cóipeanna díobh i Leabharlann an Tionóil agus ar shuíomh Gréasáin na Roinne. Ba mhian liom na príomhcheisteanna a sainaitníodh sa dá athbhreithniú a lua agus cuntas a thabhairt ar na bearta ba mhian liom a bheith i bhfeidhm le sábháilteacht na bpáistí inár scoileanna a chinntiú.

Is léir ó thuairisc Bhord an Iarthair go ndearna C2k measúnuithe ar shuíomh Gréasáin Sparklebox i mí na Nollag, nuair a cuireadh ciontú an úinéara in iúl dóibh agus ag an am sin, fuair siad nach raibh an suíomh ina bhaol do pháistí.

Is tábhachtach a thabhairt faoi deara gur cuireadh bac leis na codanna idirghníomhacha den suíomh trí líonra na scoileanna agus gur thug an suíomh rochtain ar acmhainní a bhí úsáideach do – agus a bhí in úsáid go forleathan ag – scoileanna. Ba é an cheist a bhí ann ná oiriúnacht rochtain leanúnach scoileanna ar shuíomh Gréasáin ar le duine é ar ciontaíodh as coir in aghaidh páistí é. Nuair a rinne C2k measúnú ar an suíomh agus nuair a mheas siad é a bheith oiriúnach do rochtain leanúnach scoileanna, bhí fócas acu ar ábhar an tsuímh. Coinnigh C2k an suíomh faoi athbhreithniú.

Aithníonn an tuairisc saincheisteanna a bhain le heolas a chomhroinnt le C2k agus moltar go ndéanann na comhlachais ábhartha in Éirinn nó sa Bhreatain athbhreithniú ar na socruithe reatha do thuairisciú agus do shreabhadh eolais ó agus chuig an Regional Broadband Consortia. Tacaím go hiomlán leis an mholadh seo nó tá mé cinnte dearfa de go bhfuil gá le feabhsú sa réimse seo.

When I came before you in February I said that I needed to be assured that responses to the particular situation surrounding Sparklebox were proportionate and timely. I instructed my Department to do two things. First, to write to the Chief Executive of the Western Education and Library Board, requiring him to investigate the manner in which the situation was handled by C2k and to make recommendations. Second, I wished the Department to carry out a review to determine if its own internal procedures and protocols were sufficiently robust.

I have now received both reviews and I have ensured that copies have been placed in the Assembly Library and on the Department's website. I now wish to detail the key issues identified by both reviews and to outline the actions that I want to see taken to ensure the safety of children within our schools.

It is clear from the Western Board report that C2k conducted assessments of the Sparklebox website in December, when it was notified of the then owner's conviction and at that time found that the site posed no risk to children.

It is important to note that the interactive parts of the site were blocked via the schools' network and that the site did provide access to resources that were of use to – and widely used by – schools. The question to be addressed was rather the appropriateness of continued access by schools to a website owned by a person who had been convicted of a crime against children. When C2k assessed the site and considered it to be suitable for continued access by schools, its focus was on content. C2k continued to keep the site under review.

The report points up issues around the sharing of information with C2k and recommends that the relevant bodies in Ireland and Britain conduct a review of current arrangements for the reporting and flow of information from and to the Regional Broadband Consortia. I fully endorse this recommendation as I am convinced that there is a need for improvement in this area.

Go deimhin, sula bhfuair mé tuairisc Bhord an Iarthair, scríobh mé chuig mo chomhghleacaithe i ndeisceart na hÉireann, i Sasana, in Albain agus sa Bhreatain Bheag, ag iarraidh orthu beart a ghlacadh le córais níos fearr a chur i bhfeidhm a chinnteoidh go nglacfar beart lena chur in iúl d'údaráis ábhartha chomh luath is a chiontaítear duine as cionta ábhartha. Glacadh rófhada gur cuireadh na ceisteanna faoi úinéir Sparklebox in iúl do C2k. Beidh mé ag iarraidh tacaíochta ó mo chomhghleacaithe sa Choiste Feidhmiúcháin, go háirithe ón Aire Sláinte agus ón Aire Cirt, le brú ar aghaidh le heolas a chomhroinnt ar bhealach níos fearr, a chuideoidh lenár gcuid páistí a chosaint.

Tá mé diongbháilte de go ndéanfaidh mo roinn féin a seacht ndícheall i dtaca le soiléire a thabhairt sa chumarsáid a dhéanann siad le scoileanna agus leis na comhlachais a thacaíonn leo. Mar sin de, eiseoidh muid treoir shoiléir agus prótacail shoiléire maidir le húsáid ábhar agus acmhainní sa seomra ranga ó shuíomhanna Gréasáin ar chuir C2k bac leo.

Ardaítear roinnt ceisteanna níos forleithne in athbhreithniú Bhord an Iarthair fosta, amhail an gá le straitéis chumarsáide a shonraíonn meicníocht réasúnta phraiticiúil tuairiscithe le haghaidh ceisteanna cosanta páistí chuig DE. Beidh mo chuid oifigeach ag oibriú le comhghleacaithe i Ranna agus in eagraíochtaí eile le teacht ar an bhealach is fearr chun tosaigh maidir leis na ceisteanna níos forleithne seo.

Beidh Bord an Iarthair ag éileamh ar C2k athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar a nósanna imeachta caighdeánacha oibríthe agus measúnaithe le déileáil le ceisteanna, ceisteanna cosanta páistí san áireamh, nach bhfuil mar chuid de ghnáthphróisis fhormhéadaithe C2k. Forbróidh an t-athbhreithniú seo nósanna imeachta soiléire ar an bhealach ar chóir do C2k dul i mbun cúrsaí bainistithe, comhairlithe agus cumarsáide, lena n-áirítear ceanglas gur chóir do Bhord Bainistíochta C2k comhairle a lorg ó na húdaráis ábhartha láithreach.

Indeed, in advance of taking receipt of the Western Board report, I had already written to my counterparts in the south of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales, calling for action to be taken to put in place better systems for ensuring that action is taken to inform relevant authorities as soon as someone is charged with relevant offences. It took too long for C2k to be notified of the issues surrounding Sparklebox's owner. I will be looking to my Executive colleagues, in particular the Health Minister and the Justice Minister, for support in continuing to push for better sharing of information that can help protect our children.

I am also determined that my own department will not be found wanting in the clarity of its communication with schools and the bodies that support them. We will therefore issue very clear guidance and protocols regarding the use in the classroom of materials and resources which have originated from websites blocked by C2k.

There are also some wider issues highlighted in the Western Board review, such as the need to develop a communications strategy detailing a sensible and practical reporting mechanism for child protection issues to DE. My officials will be working with colleagues in other Departments and organisations to chart the best way forward regarding these wider issues.

The Western Board will also require C2k to review its standard operating and assessment procedures to deal with issues, including child protection issues, which lie outside C2k's normal escalation processes. This review will develop clear procedures on how C2k should manage, consult and communicate, including a requirement that the C2k Management Board should seek immediate advice from the appropriate authorities.

Tá mé den tuairim gur chóir gur cuireadh in iúl don Roinn, agus domsa mar Aire, faoin cheist seo agus faoi na bearta réamhchúraim atá á nglacadh i bhfad níos luaithe ná mar ar cuireadh. Ní mór dúinn uile foghlaim ón eispéireas seo agus tá mé ag cur in iúl go soiléir go bhfuil mé ag dúil leis go dtabharfaidh gach eagraíocht a bhfuil baint acu le cúrsaí oideachais le fios don Roinn láithreach nuair a thagann aon cheisteanna nó ábhair imní chun solais a d'fhéadfaí tionchar réigiúnach bheith acu.

Ba mhaith liom díriú anois ar an athbhreithniú ar bhearta mo Roinne féin agus iad ag láimhseáil an eolais a fuair siad faoi Sparklebox. Rinneadh an t-athbhreithniú seo faoi stiúradh na Foirne Iniúchóireachta Inmheánaí.

Thaispeáin an t-athbhreithniú gur ghníomhaigh an Roinn go luath leis an chás a shoiléiriú agus gur ghlac siad bearta cuí a luaithe is a rinne Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlaine Bhéal Feirste teagmháil leo Déardaoin an 28ú Eanáir. Tá an Fhoireann Athbhreithnithe sásta go bhfuil an struchtúr sa Roinn le haghaidh soiléire ról agus freagrachtaí a chinntiú i gcúrsaí cumhdaigh, go bhfuil sé éifeachtach agus gur fheidhmigh sé go maith sa chás seo.

Freagróidh mé ar ball do Bhord an Iarthair faoina n-athbhreithniú agus beidh mé ag amharc ar an chás lena chinntiú go gcuirfear na moltaí ar fad i bhfeidhm. Chuige sin beidh mé ag iarraidh an t-eolas is déanaí ar an dul chun cinn a fháil ó mo Roinn ar bhonn rialta.

Ba mhaith liom a shonrú go soiléir – níl aon amhras ann ach go gcuireann ICT deiseanna iontacha ar fáil do dhaoine óga lena bheith ag foghlaim agus le sult a bhaint as an fhoghlaim. Is mar gheall air sin go bhfuil úsáid ICT ina croíchuid den churaclam athbhreithnithe agus tá fócas againn ar thacaíocht do dhaltáí lena scileanna ICT a fhorbairt.

Caithfidh muid iad a choinneáil slán ó gach dochar agus iad ag foghlaim. Beidh sé mar phríomhthosaíocht againn i gcónaí sábháilteacht agus leas na bpáistí agus na ndaoine óga a chinntiú, mar aon leis an tacaíocht a thugann muid do na múinteoirí agus ceannairí scoile agus iad ag oibriú leis na páistí agus na daoine óga a choinneáil slán.

I take the view that the Department, and I as Minister, should have been informed at a much earlier date about this issue and about the precautionary measures being taken. We must all learn from this experience and I am making clear my expectation that all education partners will advise the Department immediately when any issue or concern arises which may have a regional impact.

I want to turn now to the review of my own Department's actions in handling the information it received about Sparklebox. This review was carried out under the supervision of its Internal Audit Team.

The review indicated that when the Department was contacted by Belfast Education and Library Board on Thursday 28th January, it moved quickly to clarify the position and to take appropriate action. The Review Team is satisfied that the structure within the Department for ensuring clarity about roles and responsibilities in safeguarding matters is effective and worked well in the situation.

I will respond shortly to the Western Board about its review and I will be taking an active interest in the implementation of all of the recommendations. To this end I will be seeking regular updates from my Department on how matters are progressing.

Let me be clear – there is no doubt that ICT provides our young people with wonderful opportunities to learn and to enjoy learning. For that reason the use of ICT is a core part of our revised curriculum and our focus is on supporting pupils to develop their ICT skills.

We must also, however, keep them safe from harm while they learn. For me the key priority will always be the safety and wellbeing of our children and young people, and the support we provide to their teachers and school leaders in working to keep them safe.

Le gach rud atá foghlamtha againn ón chás seo agus na bearta atá glactha agam le baol an atarlaithe a ísliú, creidim go gcuirfidh an cás seo le cumas na múinteoirí chun páistí a choinneáil slán agus iad ag úsáid an idirlín ar scoil.

What has been learned from this situation and the steps I have taken to minimise the risk of recurrence will, I believe, make a real contribution to helping our teachers and to keeping our children safe when they are on-line in school.

