
Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 11 May 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Sunbeds Bill: First Stage

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I beg to introduce the Sunbeds Bill [NIA 18/09], which is a Bill to make provision about the use or supply of tanning devices that use ultraviolet radiation; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

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

Committee Business

Unsolicited Services (Trade and Business Directories) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr A Maginness): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 1 October 2010, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Unsolicited Services (Trade and Business Directories) Bill [NIA Bill 12/09].

I inform the House that it is unlikely that the Committee will require the entire duration of the extension period to consider the Bill. However, given the Committee's considerable workload, the extension until 1 October is being requested at this stage as a precautionary measure.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 1 October 2010, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Unsolicited Services (Trade and Business Directories) Bill [NIA Bill 12/09].

Corporation Tax: Economic Reform Group Report

Mr Speaker: This item on the Order Paper is a joint motion from the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. 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 in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr A Maginness): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the report from the Northern Ireland Economic Reform Group on the case for a reduced rate of corporation tax in Northern Ireland.

I welcome the opportunity to debate the issue, which is of great importance to the Assembly and our economy. In addition, I thank Ms Jennifer McCann, the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, for agreeing to co-sponsor the debate. In due course, Ms McCann will make the winding-up speech on the motion. There has been good co-operation between the Committees on a number of related matters, for which I am also grateful to Ms McCann.

The Northern Ireland Economic Reform Group's report is important and timely. It is important that we open up debate on the issue, which has been skirted around for years. In 2006, the proposal to reduce corporation tax was a very lively issue, and there was considerable debate on the matter among politicians, economists and those interested in public affairs. It is a pity that, in 2007, the new Assembly did not deal with the issue more aggressively, perhaps by getting concessions from the British Government. However, that is history, and we are where we are. It is now time to discuss the issue.

As I said yesterday in the debate on credit unions, we are on the cusp of the formation of a new Government at Westminster. Therefore, it is timely for Northern Ireland parties to press important issues with any incoming Government, and the proposal to reduce corporation tax is one issue to which any new Government should give considerable consideration. The Assembly

should approach the issue seriously and in a concerted fashion.

That said, this is a take-note debate, and, although I personally favour a reduction in corporation tax, as Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I think it is fair to say that the Committee has not taken a collective view on the matter. Nevertheless, I detect strong support within the Committee for a reduction in corporation tax. I place the matter in that context because I am not trying to tie the Committee to a particular view, although it is sympathetic to the proposal.

I welcome the Economic Reform Group's report, which is well researched. Everyone should read it thoroughly, because it is based on expert examination and analysis of the issue. As part of the UK, Northern Ireland is in a unique position, because it has a land border with another EU member state — the Irish Republic. Therefore, in the UK context, there is a strong argument that Northern Ireland is a special case, which, in effect, is what the report says. The Irish Republic has a very low rate of corporation tax, which has enabled it to develop its economy in a way that we have not been able to. Therein lies a lesson.

The report makes the case that Northern Ireland has the lowest average wages and productivity. That chimes with the Barnett report, which outlined the state of our economy and its productivity. Government support for business is higher here than in any other UK region, and traditional economic development policy will not turn Northern Ireland into a self-sufficient economy. Despite a generous subsidy and state support for business here, the economy has not made that turn. The step change towards which we must all work has not taken place.

It is important to note that the European Union will begin to reduce ceilings for state aid and may not permit it at all after 2013. The report states:

"forecasts are that future job growth may well be under half that of recent decades."

It also points out that public expenditure in Northern Ireland,

"is equivalent to 74% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP)"

and that the British taxpayer subsidises Northern Ireland to the tune of £9 billion

annually. The report further makes the case that, in future, the Northern Ireland private sector needs to be strengthened to achieve a more “balanced economy”. It points out that:

“Without radical change it seems inevitable that NI will remain the UK’s poorest region”.

It states that EU subsidies were “of minimal importance” in the success of the Republic of Ireland’s economy and that reduction in corporation tax is:

“The only policy ... that can dramatically accelerate economic growth over a short timescale ... The Republic of Ireland has shown that this works, and many other small nations are now following Ireland’s lead.”

That contains an important lesson for us all. How can Invest NI incentivise profitable firms to invest here, where corporation tax is at 28%, when just a few miles down the road those same companies can avail themselves of corporation tax at less than half that — 12.5%? That is a stark question for any potential investor coming to Northern Ireland and one with which we must grapple.

The theory is that reduced corporation tax will lead to increased investment by companies, which will lead to a growth in the number of better-paid jobs. That will in turn result in more revenue from income tax and VAT, less unemployment and decreased dependency on benefits. It is clear that real, tangible incentives have to be offered to companies, and the report suggests that a reduction in corporation tax is essential. It is important to note that we can do this within the context of EU law. In the light of the Azores case, we can create the situation that would allow the transfer of tax-varying powers in relation to corporation tax. It is taken for granted that that decision would have to be ratified by the European authorities; however, we could then address the issue of how we repay that tax reduction to, in essence, the central Exchequer. That is a big question and one that I am certain many Members will ask.

The report has identified approximately £200 million to be repaid to the Exchequer — a fairly significant amount of money. Nonetheless, the net benefit over subsequent years would be such that the report envisages we could make up for that. Of all the issues to be addressed, repayment is the thorniest, but there are ways and means of getting round it. We should

tackle that issue head-on. If we look at it, deal with it and debate it, we can achieve an acceptable outcome. The prize is to reinvent and restructure our economy to ensure that it is fit for the twenty-first century and that it will provide more and better jobs and transform the way we live. In conclusion, I ask the House to support the motion.

10.45 am

Mr Hamilton: I support the motion, and I do so in a rare glimpse of harmony in the Chamber. That harmony has come about as a result of the many reasons that the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment put forward— *[Interruption.]* Yes, indeed, a rare glimpse. I may do my best to eradicate that in the next few minutes.

We all share the goal of wanting our economy to develop, grow and improve. Sometimes, there are divergences of view on how that objective can best be achieved, but, in the past, seeking a reduction in Northern Ireland’s rate of corporation tax has united parties, and it should continue to do so in the House. There are several reasons why we are united on the issue, not least those touched on by the Committee Chairperson. Significantly, among those reasons is the argument about the size of Northern Ireland’s public sector, which was raised, foolishly perhaps, by some during the election campaign. In raising that issue, others quickly realised that it was not to do with the size of our public sector but the size of our private sector.

We do not need to concentrate on reducing the size of our public sector per se but on increasing the size of our private sector. We cannot reduce the public sector and expect the private sector to grow automatically and fill that gap. The private sector needs a kick-start to grow to the levels to which we want it to grow so that it can sustain the economy much better than it currently does. There are few better ways to do that than the primer of a reduction in corporation tax.

Why do we say that we want to reduce corporation tax? It is not to give companies the benefit of a lower tax burden; it is about the benefit to everyone in Northern Ireland. Our economy would grow, the wages for those employed in the private sector would increase, and, thus, the standard of living in Northern Ireland would rise. If companies are attracted to Northern Ireland, not only will it make Northern

Ireland a better place in which to invest but it will make it a better place to visit. Above all, we do not want to sit here in Northern Ireland as the sick man in the United Kingdom and continue to take ever-increasing subventions. The harsh reality is that most regions of the United Kingdom depend on subventions, but everyone in Northern Ireland should have the shared goal of making more of a contribution, paying more of their way and better bridging the gap in productivity between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

Our primary focus for a reduction in corporation tax should be to grow a dynamic, vibrant, high tech-focused economy that would benefit everybody in Northern Ireland. Although we do not want to continue as a case that is always seeking special treatment, there is a special case in Northern Ireland, as was mentioned by the Committee Chairperson. We are the only part of the United Kingdom that has a land border with another EU state with a much lower rate of corporation tax than Northern Ireland companies face. The Committee Chairperson made the point that a company a few miles over the border can benefit from a 12.5% rate of corporation tax, but, if it were up here, it would have to pay much more. Many of the skilled people whom we are creating in Northern Ireland's workforce are going across the border and benefiting the exchequer down there.

Northern Ireland is so far behind other regions of the United Kingdom because of what it has had to endure over the past 30 to 40 years. Previous measures did not achieve the goal and did not close the gap, so we need to do something radically different. People in Northern Ireland can do and will continue to do what we have previously done. We achieved some success in doing what we can do with the levers that are in our control. We can improve our education system, enhance the skills base in our country, improve our infrastructure to make it world-class and control business costs where we can do that. However, by continuing to do that, we will not make the necessary step change in our economy. We need that big change, and we need to reduce corporation tax. It will not be easily achieved, and it will not be without consequence.

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

Mr Hamilton: The House should unite on trying to achieve that goal, which will radically improve our economy.

Mr Speaker: I call Ms Jennifer McCann.

Ms J McCann: I am making the winding-up speech on the debate, so I think that other Members may wish to speak first.

Mr Speaker: I call Mitchel McLaughlin.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): He is still writing his speech.

Mr McLaughlin: I am still writing my speech. I, too, support the motion. It is useful to refer to the period before restoration of this institution when there was all-party agreement on the need to rebalance the economy and to adopt measures such as a more competitive corporation tax regime as the absolutely essential means of achieving that.

An all-party delegation met Mr Brown in his then role as Chancellor and again in his role as Prime Minister. That delegation and the negotiations achieved certain assurances on funding arrangements, especially on the strategic investment fund, over a number of years. Nevertheless, the only response that we got on the corporation tax argument was that we would get the Varney review. However, to no one's particular surprise, it effectively supported the Treasury position, which was to maintain the status quo on arrangements such as tax-varying powers or corporation tax, which, in effect, is a tax-varying arrangement.

The Economic Reform Group took on Varney's arguments, and that is important for a number of reasons, particularly because it has taken the Treasury's arguments as represented by Varney, challenged them in a systemic and robust fashion and addressed each of the arguments that Varney, on behalf of the Treasury, had advanced in his reports. Varney relied on data directly drawn from the Treasury, and those data and statistics provided unintended opportunities. It is important to record our appreciation and thanks for the work done by the Economic Reform Group, which was led by Sir George Quigley, Mike Smyth and their team of fellow economists, because they have done us all, and particularly this Assembly, proud.

The Member who spoke previously addressed the fact that early progress was made in establishing common ground between the

parties on the need to rebalance the economy. Indeed, I must acknowledge that the mover of the motion also referred to that. If anything, that common ground has been strengthened. Clearly, the global economic implications of the downturn have directly impacted on that number one priority, but the question remains whether we ever had the tools to achieve that objective. It was the correct objective to rebalance the economy and grow the private sector to its legitimate and intended role and function in the economy, but not if the cost is downsizing or taking any kind of punitive approach to the public sector. The question of whether we have the tools is something that the Assembly must now begin to address. The alternative is that we simply preside over a cake that diminishes each time the Westminster authorities decide to impose cuts. We have already been through that experience twice in the Budget period, and that is quite sufficient.

Our starting position was that the block grant was inadequate because it was not calculated on the basis of need. The situation has worsened, and the pressures that are beginning to emerge in our public sector mean that the issue must be addressed as a matter of urgency. I strongly endorse the proposal —

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

Mr McLaughlin: However, it must lead towards an action programme. I urge all parties to come together to develop the proposal and address the matter with the Treasury on an all-party basis. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Cree: I thank the Chairpersons of the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment for jointly tabling the motion. The motion must be placed in the context of the ongoing economic and debt problems in the euro zone, particularly in Greece. Given the increasingly volatile markets and the emergency measures worth £430 billion that have been agreed by EU Finance Ministers, the potential ramifications of not reducing the UK's national debt are extremely high. To avoid further economic and monetary difficulties, we must reduce government spending and make government more efficient. That means that Northern Ireland will have a reduction in the block grant in this financial year or the next. We cannot escape from that fact.

The Northern Ireland Economic Reform Group's report indicates that the UK has an unbalanced economy, and it is, therefore, evident that Northern Ireland must grow its private sector. That fact is agreed by every party in the Assembly, and, in a changed fiscal climate, the need to grow our private sector will become even greater. As the report suggests, from next year, we will also contend with EU regulations reducing the maximum amount of grant aid that Invest Northern Ireland can give to private firms, thus shifting one of the basic cornerstones of our economic policy.

I recognise that the review of Invest Northern Ireland is attempting to address some of those issues and that we must also have a full range of measures to support all businesses in Northern Ireland, especially those which are small and medium-sized. However, I can understand the Northern Ireland Economic Reform Group's report when it states that:

"The only policy we know of that can dramatically accelerate economic growth over a short timescale is a reduction in corporation tax."

The fact that an annual allocation of £150 million worth of grants has not managed to raise GDP per capita here much above 80% of the UK average illustrates clearly that point.

If the power to reduce corporation tax is devolved to Northern Ireland, the Executive will have a difficult decision to make. As the report highlights, the Azores ruling means that the Executive would have to bear the full fiscal consequences of introducing their own tax rate and would not be compensated by national authorities for a loss of tax revenue. The Northern Ireland Economic Reform Group suggests that the cost to the Executive could be as much as £200 million if we were to bring corporation tax into line with the Republic of Ireland's rate of 12.5%, which, in reality, is the genuinely competitive level. However, that must be balanced with the potential of reaching a break-even point after only six years, after which the block grant would be subsidised by corporation tax revenue. The Treasury would also be content, as the difference between tax take and public spending in Northern Ireland would be reduced. We must also remember that the Republic of Ireland never suffered a loss in revenue, due, in many circumstances, to a reduction in tax evasion.

We must never forget the real reason why a reduction in corporation tax would be beneficial to Northern Ireland. At the last count, some 53,000 people were recorded as unemployed here, and those are individuals and families who have been hit by the current recession as well as the long-term unemployed. We owe it to the people of Northern Ireland to do all that we can to give them every economic opportunity in the future.

The Northern Ireland Economic Reform Group calculates that a reduction in corporation tax could create an extra 2,100 high value-added jobs per annum in Northern Ireland, with knock-on employment in the wider economy. Although I recognise that there are concerns about current levels of FDI and that we must further examine the issue of company displacement and ensure that we have a raft of policies to help both FDI and small and medium-sized businesses, we cannot lose sight of the prize of creating new jobs. We have an extremely well-educated population and an improving infrastructure, but we must be able to attract the investment that will create the outward-looking, exporting economy that all Members want.

11.00 am

Mr Neeson: I welcome the debate. Once again, it shows the co-operation between the two Committees. Alasdair McDonnell and I attended the launch of the report on 10 February 2010, and I am pleased to say that corporation tax is back on the political agenda. It was a major issue during the recent election campaign and featured in many parties' manifestos.

The report was carried out by the Economic Reform Group, which involves the most respected economists, accountants and businessmen in Northern Ireland. The report puts the economy at the top of the political agenda, and it must be considered in tandem with the recent report by Professor Richard Barnett. It used a tax model of the Northern Ireland economy to estimate the impact of the reduced rate.

There are some key points to note: the model was based on one that was developed by the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland (ERINI) and which was updated by the regional forecasts, and the estimates for additional investment are based on new evidence on the flow of inward investment into small countries with differing rates of corporation tax. That model shows that all small countries with

low rates of tax attract large numbers of new companies. The model calculates the impact of low tax on existing companies and the impact of overall tax revenues, including the revenue lost due to the reduction in tax and the revenue gained due to high levels of economic activity. According to the report, total tax revenues fall initially, but, subsequently, they build up rapidly, with break-even point coming after six years.

The report must also be considered in conjunction with the Varney report, which the Assembly debated previously. The Economic Reform Group report destroys many of the arguments that Varney put forward. One of the key benefits that the report outlines is that Northern Ireland would have a much larger private sector, including 90,000 extra jobs over 20 years. Many of those jobs would have salary levels that were well above the average for Northern Ireland, and unemployment should fall much further than would otherwise be the case. The report brings into consideration the argument about Northern Ireland's overdependence on the public sector. That is a big issue to be considered. During the present political stalemate, that issue must be brought to the fore by elected politicians in Northern Ireland.

Part of the report states that public spending in Northern Ireland should be reduced by about £200 million a year. Although that sounds large, it is only 2.5% of spending on public services, and it is less than the average underspend in recent years. The experience of the Republic of Ireland in reducing corporation tax rates in the past decade was that there was no reduction in revenue.

One of the key implications of the reduction in corporation tax is that the Assembly should have tax-varying powers. I have argued for such powers in the Assembly since 1998. I argued for them in the negotiations that took place between 1996 and 1998, and I do not accept the arguments of pessimists that they would affect the subvention from the Barnett formula. Realistically, Wales is going along the same lines —

Mr Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close.

Mr Neeson: The Welsh Assembly Government argue that they should have tax-varying powers.

Mr Simpson: I will be brief. I welcome ERG's report on the case for a reduction in the rate of corporation tax in the Province. If nothing else,

the report has generated some fresh interest in the matter, and I am glad that we are having this debate today.

As a committed unionist, I want to see our nation making its way out of the current economic recession as quickly as possible, and I want to ensure that Northern Ireland plays its full part in that. My party manifesto addresses that vital area, and it rightly suggests that the growth of the private sector is key to economic success. The manifesto draws attention to the UK's high level of corporation tax, which can range from 21% to 28%, depending on the level of profits, and states that it:

"should be substantially reduced to kick-start economic growth."

It is a complex subject, and many obstacles will need to be considered. However, a strong case can be put forward for a reduction in corporation tax in Northern Ireland, not to line the pockets of business executives, but to help to attract the high quality inward investment that is much needed. Such a reduction is not, and never has been, a silver bullet, but it would provide us with a useful additional lever. Let us face it: there are few economic and financial levers available to the Executive and the Assembly.

Our economic and financial difficulties are also more acute than those in the rest of the country. As the report indicates, unless something radical is done, Northern Ireland will remain the UK's poorest region. Unlike the rest of the UK, we have suffered from more than three decades of terrorism, during which the heart of our economy was ripped to shreds. Unlike the rest of the UK, we share a land border with another EU state in which, as we all know, the rate of corporation tax stands at 12.5%. A reduction in corporation tax to that level would be a considerable help in our efforts to regenerate our wealth-creating manufacturing base.

I realise that some will regard such an arrangement as highly political. After all, it would knock Northern Ireland out of kilter with the rest of the UK and harmonise it with the Irish Republic. If nothing else, that could be a temporary arrangement. If we cannot achieve an indefinite reduction, a temporary one over several years would help to kick-start the whole economy. If it helps to generate employment, attract investment and encourage wealth creation, surely it is worth trying.

It is not a new issue. Sir David Varney examined the matter in 2007, when he rejected a reduction on a number of grounds, one being that the block grant would have to be cut. Any such cut remains totally unacceptable, and it would defeat the whole purpose of the exercise. There may be obstacles, and I suspect that the Minister of Finance and Personnel will draw our attention to some of them. Nevertheless, where there is a will, there is a way. The ERG report has provoked a fresh debate, which can only be good. I support the motion.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Those who contribute to today's debate will probably welcome the Economic Reform Group's report unanimously. The group appeared before the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and most Committee members felt that its report made sense. It is now 10 years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, and although we have relative political stability in the institutions in the North of Ireland, the focus must now turn to economic development and prosperity.

Yet here, as a region of Britain, wage levels and productivity levels have remained relatively low. Despite high levels of grant assistance to businesses, we still do not have levels of productivity that come anywhere near what is defined as being prosperous in comparison with the South of Ireland and the rest of Britain.

Other Members have gone over the details of the report and how a reduction in the level of corporation tax will impact. I know that some unionists have concerns about how it will affect the block grant, but through considering the attempts to form a Government in Britain over the past couple of days and the debate about cuts and the way in which we are so dependent on the block grant that we get from the British Government, it becomes clear that having some sort of control over policy on corporation tax would give us control over developing the economy, particularly the private sector.

Other areas need to be considered on an all-Ireland basis, not just in regard to corporation tax. VAT rates, for example, create an impediment to people doing business on both sides of the border. An all-Ireland study was carried out on the economies of both jurisdictions a number of years ago. Some of the ideas arising from that included trying to co-operate on all-Ireland skills, the road

infrastructure, education and research and development. That would bring prosperity to everyone in the North and the South, no matter what our political differences are. Therefore, it makes sense to co-operate. It does not make sense to have two different levels of corporation tax on the island of Ireland.

We have the political will to implement the change in corporation tax here in the North in the time ahead, and we will see how the Executive push the issue forward with the British Government to try to get it implemented. Overall, that is where we are on this issue, and we are united in wanting to see the private sector growing — though not at the expense of the public sector — and more prosperity, particularly for productivity levels and higher paid jobs.

Mr Campbell: I also welcome the take-note debate, which provides an opportunity for each of us to spell out our views in broad terms. Many people have spoken of the advantages that Northern Ireland could gain from a reduction in corporation tax. There are a number of problems, and Sean Neeson outlined one or two of them, albeit from a slightly different perspective from my own. It is not a one-way street. There is a cost implication attached to it.

I welcome the report and think that we should do significant further research on the issue, but it appears to be the case that around £200 million per annum will either have to be found or reduced from the block grant over a period of five or six years before we begin to see the benefits that will undoubtedly flow, as appears to be the case in the Irish Republic. That effectively means that, at a time when economic stringencies are most acute, we will have to find approximately £1 billion over the next five or six years to pay for the jam that will come tomorrow. That is not in any way to diminish the concept, which has significant value, but we need to be clear about the implications.

We have also just heard some of the political implications. It is very clear that there are those who want to see a corporation tax of 12.5% because it would harmonise with the Irish Republic. For that reason, I would prefer to see a 10% tax, which would make us more competitive than the Irish Republic, or something similar. We are, and must be, aware of those who are trying to make this an economic argument that is carefully attached to

a political argument. We must be very careful about that, and I urge caution for that reason.

11.15 am

We must try to ensure that we produce prosperity. A number of Members, including Mr Neeson, mentioned the political uncertainty that exists at the moment. One thing is certain: whatever Government emerges either today, tomorrow or whenever — the Government that may be comprised over the next day or two is not a Government of Britain, it is a Government of the United Kingdom — there will still be some economic realities that we cannot run away from.

One such reality, which has been the case for generations, is that the United Kingdom's economic powerhouse is based around the south-east of England. That is a fact that we cannot ignore, and it is one that causes resentment not only in Northern Ireland but in the north-east of England, the north-west of England, and in Scotland and Wales. Whatever the composition of the Government that is about to emerge, the time is coming for those of us who represent those regions and who see the south-east of England as a powerhouse that sucks in a wealth of industry, job creation and IT resources to address that issue. All that economic prosperity has been concentrated in a very small part of the United Kingdom to the detriment of many regions across the rest of the UK. The MPs who represent all those regions ought to be able to work much more closely to ensure that the economic prosperity that exists, and that will exist in the UK over coming years, is more evenly spread and that Northern Ireland gets its fair share. We must try to ensure that there is a more properly balanced economy throughout a nation of 60 million people. If we do that, we will be doing a service for everybody in the United Kingdom but particularly those in Northern Ireland, who want us to take advantage of whatever situation emerges for the greater good for all the people here.

Mr McNarry: The prospect of a minority Government, a two-party coalition or a rainbow multi-party gathering is waiting to be settled in London today. Somewhere over the rainbow, Sinn Féin's president has circulated a message calling for a united approach on the economy here. In my mind, that is a bit rich and hypocritical, given that his party is abstaining from the national Parliament in its hour of need. Nevertheless, let us not lose sight of the impact

and importance of the motion. It is all the more important that the House supports it today.

There is a great deal to commend in the Northern Ireland Economic Reform Group's case for a reduced rate of corporation tax, which has taken forward this debate and others on such a reduction here. One of its most important features is the realism that it introduces into what has hitherto been little more than an emotive headline-grabbing mantra. The report puts the introduction of a reduced corporation tax in Northern Ireland firmly in the hard-fact context of European Union competition rules, Treasury clawbacks and the need for economic policy delivery by the Northern Ireland Assembly. The report also brings to the fore the urgency of the need to address the issue, given that EU state aid rules may prevent Northern Ireland from offering grant-based attractions or inward investment from 2013 onwards.

Ceilings on those types of investment grants and government subsidies will begin to reduce from 2011 and may stand at zero by 2013. Oxford Economics has computed that the potential number of jobs generated from such methods would reduce from 13,000 a year at present to between 5,000 and 7,000 a year by 2015. Therefore, reform of corporation tax is not a theoretical discussion in the House; it is one of urgent necessity.

My party has made the reduction of corporation tax a central part of its economic strategy and has proposed the creation of a Northern Ireland-wide enterprise zone. The fundamental issue behind both those policies is the need to incentivise and to grow the Northern Ireland private sector. That cannot happen overnight. Indeed, we see it happening over a 20-year transition period, especially given the current international and global economic climate. Reconfiguring our economy to a private enterprise base would create the additional benefits of increasing the tax take, from increased employment in the private sector and from company taxation; reducing welfare and, therefore, benefit dependency; and creating a more diverse and employable labour market.

The reduction of corporation tax is a business-driven solution that is based on how business really works and thinks and on the psychology of entrepreneurs. It would be part of providing an enabling framework so that people could grow new businesses, which would, in turn,

provide new and much needed employment opportunities for people here. However, it is not the only element in creating a business-friendly environment that will encourage an enterprise-driven, private sector, job-creating climate. There are other important building blocks. For example, the creative industry sector, which we fully support.

We also need to develop a new, enabling culture in the government machine, rather than the risk-averse gatekeeper culture that exists at present. We must reduce red tape and incentivise our small and medium-sized businesses to grow and to expand into new markets. While recognising that we must reduce the national debt, we must identify that Northern Ireland has been historically underfunded. All Members must be prepared for potential changes to the Barnett formula. We must protect what we have but also be equipped to make an effective case for Northern Ireland's needs.

I support the motion and commend it to the House. I commend also the need for new realism and urgency in this important matter.

Mr O'Loan: I welcome this take-note debate. However, implicit in taking note of the report is support for its principle that a reduction in corporation tax would be a desirable measure to attract greatly increased levels of foreign direct investment into Northern Ireland. I very much support that principle.

The Economic Reform Group deserves to be taken very seriously. The group of seven consists of economists, taxation experts and business specialists who are well known to us and have standing and authority in these matters. Therefore, the report deserves to be taken very seriously. It presents a very carefully worked argument set in the context of a new approach to regional policy. Essentially, the report says that current regional policy has failed. It sets out, as many others have done, that under the Azores judgement, there is no insurmountable barrier to a reduction in corporation tax here. Indeed, the Azores judgement is beneficial, because it sets out the terms in which a region of an EU member state can have a differential rate of income tax.

In December 2007, the report of the first Varney review elaborated, in 120 pages, what it had probably already concluded before a line was written: Northern Ireland should not have a reduced rate of corporation tax. However, even

that report points out clearly that there is no insurmountable obstacle to the introduction of a lower rate of corporation tax here. I understand that Gibraltar and the Basque region have availed themselves of that option, as defined in the Azores judgement. I believe that that measure would work for Northern Ireland.

It is worth noting that despite the very serious fiscal pressures on it, which have required very substantial tax increases and spending cuts, the Republic of Ireland has made the deliberate choice to protect its lower rate of corporation tax, because it knows the long-term importance of that measure to its economy. In 2007, Northern Ireland obtained \$1 billion of foreign direct investment. In the same year, the Republic of Ireland attracted \$27 billion.

The Finance Minister, whom I welcome to the debate, has expressed concerns about the cost of the measure to the Northern Ireland block. A figure of £200 million has been quoted, and I would be interested to know whether the Minister can quote the actual contribution in corporation tax from Northern Ireland given the present state of our economy. That would be a useful figure.

I do not want to play any party political games on the issue. It is too serious for that. The Minister makes a serious point: there is a cost to be borne. However, that is not an overwhelming point. There will be a cost, which I understand to be obligatory under the Azores ruling and which would be particularly difficult at a time of financial stringency. The report does not ignore that point. When the report's authors came before the Finance Committee, they were perfectly prepared to elaborate on how that issue would be addressed.

The key argument is that the policy will pay for itself in a remarkably short time by increasing the corporation tax base and greatly increasing contributions from other taxes, such as income tax and VAT. It will also reduce benefits by reducing unemployment and reducing the number of people who are economically inactive.

Mr McLaughlin: I have a fairly straightforward query. Does the Member agree that if we had the opportunity to reduce the level of corporation tax, reducing it to 10% — as suggested by the DUP spokesperson Gregory Campbell — would have consequences for the payback period and the immediate financial impact?

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added on to his time.

Mr O'Loan: As we know, the authors of the report are not specific on the level at which corporation tax should be set. That is a matter for intense discussion, debate and analysis among ourselves as we proceed. With regard to the hit to our block grant, we have the option, which I think we would use, to phase in a reduction in corporation tax. We are the authors of how we would implement the measure.

The Varney report referred to the fears of effects on other parts of the UK; artificial shifts in company finances, which could be dealt with; and the demand for an equivalent measure in other regions, particularly Scotland. Scotland is very different from Northern Ireland. Recent figures showed that we have three stock-market-quoted companies, whereas Scotland has 160 or 170. It is far from obvious that Scotland would want to avail itself of the same measure, because the cost to its economy would be much greater.

This is not the only measure needed to improve our economy. We have other things to do as well. I have often wondered why we have no spontaneous growth when we have such good companies, but in small quantity.

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

Mr O'Loan: This is the single measure that will create the critical mass that we need for our economy to take off.

Mr Moutray: Like others today, I welcome the report from the Northern Ireland Economic Reform Group on the case for a reduced rate of corporation tax in Northern Ireland. The report is timely, and I am glad that it has at least engendered further debate on the issue, given the financial strain that corporation tax is placing on local businesses. Indeed, it deters and discourages potential growth in the UK, which has a particularly negative impact on Northern Ireland.

My party has been vocal about the need for a reduction in corporation tax in Northern Ireland. Our Enterprise and Finance Ministers lobbied hard on the issue when devolution was restored three years ago, which was when Sir David Varney conducted his investigation into the matter.

My party's recent election manifesto clearly states that we want to see an achievable scheme to reduce corporation tax in Northern Ireland. It is broadly accepted by the House that we need to become much more competitive internationally and that we need to encourage businesses. A reduction in corporation tax would assist greatly.

It goes without saying that the UK as a whole suffers from high levels of corporation tax and regulation. It is my belief, and that of my party, that that should be substantially reduced, particularly in Northern Ireland, to kick-start economic growth.

11.30 am

We have a strong case for a reduction in corporation tax that is specific to Northern Ireland, because we are the only part of the UK that has a land border with another EU state. Ultimately, that acts as a restraint and is often a key determining factor in whether businesses locate here. Northern Ireland warrants special treatment, not only because of the land border, but because of the economic problems that we endured over the past 40 years of the Troubles. Moreover, we are emerging from an economic recession.

It has been said that such a reduction in corporation tax could mean hundreds of millions of pounds being slashed from Government spending and given to business executives. That would simply not be acceptable. My party has made clear its proposal to cut corporation tax. However, we must ensure that that does not involve a compensating reduction in the block grant.

I am under no illusions, and I know that achieving a reduction will not be easy. I am sure that the Finance Minister will refer to that later. However, it is vital that the whole House, along with our newly elected MPs, lobby as one on the matter. Although a reduction of corporation tax would be beneficial, particularly in attracting international investment, it would not fully solve the economic problems that we and many other countries are experiencing. However, it would award us some economic leverage over our counterparts.

For the reasons that I outlined, a strong argument can be made for a temporary cut. The potential benefits of even a temporary measure would be long lasting and significant, and we

must look beyond the short term. The prize could be the growth of local businesses and top international inward investment, with all the benefits to society that would flow from that.

A potential cut in the rate of corporation tax has been a recurring theme since David Varney's involvement some three years ago. I welcome the fact that it is back on the table; the time is right to negotiate and lobby for such a change. Our Executive, and particularly the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, are doing sterling work to declare Northern Ireland open for business. Such a reduction, even on a temporary basis, would provide Northern Ireland with extra leverage and a competitive advantage. I support the motion.

Dr McDonnell: I warmly welcome the report from the Northern Ireland Economic Reform Group, some of whose members are in the Public Gallery today. I am glad that they are with us for the debate, because I want to thank them for the amount of time and energy that they committed to bringing the report before us.

The report is invaluable, because it triggers and has triggered much discussion, not only on corporation tax but on what we should do about the economy. Today's debate is about supporting the broad principle rather than dissecting the detail, much of which other Members made useful mention. I am heartened that all Members who spoke, from all sides of the Chamber, were broadly in support of that principle.

The biggest challenge that faces the Assembly and Executive is how we pump-prime the economy and ensure that we build a robust, wealth-creating private sector. If we face that challenge, we will be recognised politically as having been successful. If not, we will be perceived to have failed our public politically. A decision to reduce corporation tax does not imply that such a reduction must be introduced in a single shock wave. It can be phased in sensitively and in a controlled way.

A reduction would have knock-on effects on other aspects of the Budget. On the positive side, however, it would create hope and, economically speaking, provide light at the end of the tunnel. Our unique circumstances mean that we would have to forgo only a small amount of tax loss as a result of the change, because our current tax base with regard to corporation tax is small. The great benefit that would flow

from a reduction would not be limited to the tax implications. A reduction would send out a loud and clear message to the business community and to the global economy that Northern Ireland is open for and means business. The message would be that the Assembly means business and intends to get to grips with creating a more robust private sector.

As I said, others have already made many of the key points, and I will not waste time repeating them. However, a decision to reduce corporation tax here would be the starting gun for a major economic revival, particularly in the private sector. It would send a loud and clear signal to the private sector here that the parties in this Assembly are pro-business and intent on supporting a private sector that creates wealth, jobs and taxes to support our social programme.

Many things have been said, but I want to highlight some issues. It has been suggested that we could create 90,000 extra jobs over 20 years. That would represent a massive job creation programme. A little bit of that would be very welcome in Fermanagh at the moment. Significantly, we could reduce unemployment over that period. In the longer term, we could generate substantial tax income because even though we might forego a small amount of corporation tax, we would be generating extra income tax, extra national insurance contributions and extra VAT. We could reduce our dependency on the block grant by over £1 billion within 20 years. We could even reduce public spending by £200 million, or 2.5% per annum of our block grant.

I feel that this is a golden opportunity. The Treasury fudged it last time and had Mr Varney kill it off with a degree of kindness. We have to get our teeth into the corporation tax issue now. We have to make it work, and we have to create a united front in the Assembly to tackle it. It is the tip of an iceberg, and, as I said earlier, tackling it means that we are open for business and open to do all sorts of things.

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

Dr McDonnell: I urge colleagues to support the motion.

Dr Farry: I support the motion. It must be recognised that the economy across the United Kingdom is unbalanced. Only three of the 12

recognised UK regions are net contributors to the Treasury, and of the other nine, Northern Ireland is the most dependent on the fiscal transfers of the subvention. That is a form of market failure, and the situation is much more acute than is the case for many of our international competitors. Having an unbalanced economy has consequences for the UK, in the form of increased living costs and traffic congestion in the south-east and lack of opportunities in the other regions.

Northern Ireland's situation is the most critical of the nine dependent regions. We have a land border with the Republic of Ireland, which puts us in a particular competitive situation with it, given the nature of investment that we are able to attract to our economy. We welcome the investment that there has been in Northern Ireland over the past decades, which has provided crucial employment for many people. Equally, we must be straight with ourselves. The nature of that investment has been different than that which went to the Republic of Ireland. Our investment has been in lower-productivity ventures and has resulted in lower wages than the norm. By contrast, many well-regarded international brands have gone into the Republic of Ireland, such as Intel and Google, which are at the cutting edge of the new economy of the twenty-first century.

A lot of good economic policy is being conducted in Northern Ireland, and there is no doubt that the Executive have continued to make that their top priority. Although we may quibble about its details, that policy will, to a certain extent, make a difference to people's lives. However, we must be frank. Despite the good work that has been done over the past number of years by the predecessor regimes in Northern Ireland, we have not seen any convergence of the productivity gap across the UK.

Our productivity level has stuck stubbornly at around 80%. Sir David Varney recognised in his report that that situation is not likely to change, even if his recommendations are followed. That reflects the underlying complacency in the Treasury, which seems to accept and justify having an unbalanced UK economy. Given the arguments that I have made so far and the costs for the UK as a whole, I do not believe that that situation is justifiable: it is out of step with what is happening elsewhere.

It is right to focus on corporation tax as being the area where the potential exists to make a step change in our economy. We must move from a low-productivity, low-wage type of inward investment to a different type that focuses on higher-paid jobs and higher productivity. By doing that, Northern Ireland could stand on its own two feet. I do not want future generations to be continually dependent on fiscal transfer from the UK Treasury. It is important that we stand on our own two feet and that we are able to retain our young people by offering that type of job.

The challenge will be how to pay for that. I accept the implications of the Azores ruling, which means that the money will have to come out of the Northern Ireland block grant. Equally, we must recognise that we in Northern Ireland are already making decisions that are different from those in the rest of the UK; for example, the decision to defer water charges. That cost is not covered by the block grant, but we have made a choice to fund it locally. That creates a distortion, as would a lower rate of corporation tax. However, I believe that a move to lower the rate of corporation tax would be justifiable because of the wider economic benefits that would accrue.

We must also look at what will happen with state aid. As that winds down, the way that we invest money through Invest NI will have to be reviewed. Some resources may be freed up that could be better deployed in covering a lower rate of corporation tax. I am concerned that the DUP states that this may be a short-term measure. It must be for the long term.

Mr Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close.

Dr Farry: If we are trying to attract international investors, we must realise that they will want the certainty of a long period of investment, not something that benefits them for two or three years.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): I thank Members who have taken part in this worthwhile debate for doing so. There is fairly wide political consensus on the issue, although there are variations in each party's statement. Some, such as Mr Farry and Mr Cree, have accepted that there will be costs. Mr Farry suggested where the money to cover those costs may be found. However, the Ulster Unionist Party has not indicated where the money could be found, while others say that it should be a costless exercise. Some, such

as those in Sinn Féin, see the matter in the context of the wider devolution of fiscal powers. However, there seems to be consensus across the Assembly that a reduction in corporation tax would be helpful and pro-business and would help to grow the economy.

I do not want to pour cold water on the debate, but there is a need to bring some balance to it. I am not so sure that we have heard absolute balance in the arguments that have been put forward.

Ms Purvis: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will give way in a moment.

I accept that, in a five-minute speech, Members will focus on the strong points that they want to make rather than deal with some of the contrary points. I will give way to the Member, who I am sure will make one of those contrary points.

Ms Purvis: I thank the Minister for giving way. Unfortunately, I did not get a chance to participate in the debate. Does the Minister agree that a universal benefit to business in the form of an unconditional tax rebate could go into the back pockets of businesses and that, if conditions such as investment in research and development or job creation were placed on a reduction in corporation tax, that may lead to the expected growth that was mentioned by some during the debate?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will come to that point later on. The Member is right; however, as I will point out, that would create considerable difficulties and some opposition.

11.45 am

Based on the report, there seems to be consensus that a reduction in corporation tax will bring benefits to job delivery. On the face of it, no one can deny the fact that if companies can keep more of their profits, they may invest in Northern Ireland and create more jobs. That seems to be a fairly sound argument. However, no one apart from Mr McDonnell put a figure on the number of jobs that would be created. He spoke about the creation of some 90,000 jobs over the 11-year period.

The report outlines the creation of a number of jobs based on the most generous assumptions. For example, it mentions the multiplier effects

of a reduction in corporation tax. It refers to the multiplier effect of all the benefits but not the downward multiplier effects of some of the costs. Members have mentioned the costs in today's debate. For example, a loss of public sector jobs would reduce spending power. That is a downward multiplier effect, so it has to be accepted that there is a two-way movement.

I have not heard anyone query the assumption in the report, which examines the period from 2002 to 2009, that the world background will remain broadly neutral. We know that the world background is not broadly neutral because we are in the middle of one of our deepest recessions. Foreign investment is drying up, and not as much is available. The report also assumes that foreign direct investment (FDI) will be based on the 2002-09 figures. However, foreign direct investment fluctuates. Indeed, the report includes a graph that shows that foreign direct investment fluctuates quite considerably. In the recession, it has fallen by between 20% and 40%

Projecting from the past and assuming that job creation will be the same as in the 2002-09 period gives an unrealistic assumption of the job potential that will result from a reduction in corporation tax. It also assumes that the job gains will be distributed in much the same way as they were in the Irish Republic during the period in which it had the tax advantage. It is not a realistic assumption. Many of the job predictions are based on fairly generous assumptions. My Department wrote to the authors of the report about four weeks ago and raised a number of questions about the model's assumptions. We have not had a response to date, but I hope that we will get one.

That brings me to what Alban Maginness rightly identified as the "big question": how do we pay for it? Mr O'Loan asked how much we will have to pay. Corporation tax paid in Northern Ireland amounts to some £340 million to £520 million. The authors of the report assumed that it would be £200 million, and Varney assumed that it would be £300 million. The Treasury figure was given to Varney, and I imagine that the Treasury will want to attribute other costs. For example, trying to police the displacement of businesses and profits can be quite expensive. Will that be passed on in cost terms to Northern Ireland? The costs are fairly substantial.

Mr McDevitt: On the question of cost, we must start with the facts. The most relevant fact that we need to know is the current level of corporation tax in this region. What does the Minister expect to collect this year? Many of us assume that that is a rather small amount of money, although perhaps the Minister will correct me. Unless we know the answer to that question, we cannot begin to speculate about the true cost.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member must not have been listening to me. The report assumes that the level of corporation tax would be £200 million, and Varney assumes that it would be £300 million. It depends on the methodology used, but the lowest figure that I have is £340 million, and the highest figure is £520 million.

So, those are the figures for the tax take.

However, there is also the issue of what happens if small businesses decide to incorporate in order to benefit from the lower rate of corporation tax. That would increase the figure further. Therefore, the costs are substantial and will have to be borne by the Executive because of the Azores ruling, to which a number of Members have referred. That, in turn, creates an issue for the Executive. Members remember the angst created in the Chamber last year when we had to look at redistributing — not saving — £340 million.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No. I have given way enough and the Member has had his chance to speak. I want to get some of these points over.

There was considerable angst during the period when we had to examine the Budget. Next year, on top of potential spending cuts, should we have to redistribute money towards corporation tax reductions? Such reductions, as the Member for East Belfast pointed out, could be made in all kinds of ways. For example, should we give corporation tax reductions to banks — which are cutting jobs — because they are one of the biggest profit-earners in Northern Ireland? Should we refuse to give corporation tax reductions to existing firms in Northern Ireland? As the Member pointed out, if we are only going to reduce corporation tax to reward job creation, firms that simply maintain the current number of jobs will not qualify. Then, we will hear the

accusation, so often made in Northern Ireland, that indigenous industry is being ignored and that the Government are interested only in the glitzy firms from abroad. Do we allow corporation tax reductions on the basis of export potential?

All of those aspects require further administration and examination of the tax. When I was teaching economics, one of the points I often repeated from Adam Smith's famous canons of taxation was that, when collecting tax, there should be taxes that are easily administered. We do not want a huge cost-burden to be attached to the administration of tax.

I can see why the Member for East Belfast wanted to direct us down the path of making corporation tax reduction conditional, but that adds to the administrative burden. It also carries the implication that local firms may feel that they have not been properly dealt with.

The other issue is that when corporation tax is reduced, there is an immediate cost to the public purse but not necessarily an immediate benefit in job creation. Some Members have pointed that out. Mr Simpson, who has now left the Chamber, said that he did not want the difference going into the back pockets of executives or, presumably, shareholders. Unless we go down the route suggested by the Member for East Belfast and make corporation tax reduction very conditional, there is no guarantee that the money will not go, at least initially, to the shareholders. One may not get the job creation potential that many Members have talked about in the debate.

Therefore, a redistribution of money from jobs in the public sector to the pockets of shareholders in the private sector will not necessarily help to bring about the rebalancing of the economy that I and many others have publicly advocated. That is another issue that needs to be addressed.

Mr McDonnell and other Members said that a reduction in corporation tax will pay for itself quickly; but it will not, and the report indicates that. For the first six years, there will be a negative figure; then we will break even; and then we will recoup some of the money over the following five years.

It will take 11 years for the proposal to pay for itself. I understand that rebalancing the economy is not something that can be done with a click of the fingers; but it has to be accepted

that this proposal is not going to be the quick fix that some people have mentioned.

A number of Members have said that it is important that we now fight for this and that we go forward on a united front. Mr Neeson talked about bringing it to the fore and Mr Simpson said that where there is a will there is a way; however, there are considerable barriers with respect to deliverability. There is the barrier of the EU, although there is the Azores ruling. The EU Commission might not be too happy with the proposal, but the European Court would probably give permission for it. Her Majesty's Treasury will have to be convinced, and it will require legislation in Parliament. However, in a Parliament in which minority parties from Wales and Scotland will hold sway, I doubt very much whether it will be easy to put legislation such as this through without other areas of the United Kingdom demanding that they be given the same benefit and opportunities. If they do so, the competitive advantage that Members have talked about this proposal giving us will not necessarily emerge.

As for the way forward, I have no doubt this is a useful argument in which to engage as part of the economic debate. I simply want to try and bring balance to the debate on this issue. Through the Executive, we already have our economic strategy in place for Northern Ireland. If we are going to rebalance the economy in Northern Ireland then we do not want immediate and costly reductions in the block grant. I do not think that those who have argued, and argued very vociferously against me in this Chamber when it came to the Budget discussions last year, would thank me if we simply walked into this matter.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: We have a balanced economic strategy at present. We have to build up the infrastructure and ensure that we have the right people skills in Northern Ireland. That is the policy that we ought to stick with.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Ms J McCann): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank everybody for their contributions. The case for a reduced rate of corporation tax has been on the mind of the Assembly for some time. That has been the situation for almost three years now; first, through the Varney Review of Tax Policy and

subsequently through the Economic Reform Group report, which we are debating today.

One of the main benefits of the report is that it addresses some of the confusion arising from the Varney review, in that it moves the debate forward by clarifying a number of the legal issues and other barriers. Although there are still hurdles, I believe that the report advances the case.

Even prior to the restoration of devolution, the Committee on the Preparation for Government and the Committee on the Programme for Government had examined the issue in detail in 2006 and 2007. Their work demonstrated how, as Members have talked about already, the North has one of the least prosperous economies, with low productivity and low living standards being the key economic problems.

The work of those Committees highlighted the need to attract FDI companies in the high-productivity sectors and concluded that an approach involving more of the same — that is, marginal improvements to existing policy instruments — will fail to rebalance the economy. We need to be looking at measures that will rebalance the economy here; new measures, because it is clear that existing measures are not working. The inquiries by those Committees concluded that a competitive rate of corporation tax is an essential ingredient, together with measures in respect of infrastructure, education and skills, for enabling a step change in our local economy and for leading to sustainable economic growth.

12.00 noon

The independent review of economic policy, which reported in September last year, acknowledged that a reduced rate of corporation tax would increase the competitiveness of the North. However, it pointed out that the review was unable to consider the matter within its terms of reference. The case for a competitive rate of corporation tax received prominence in the manifestos of a number of the local parties in advance of last week's election. Therefore, I welcome this timely debate, which provides Members with the opportunity to explore the issue even further.

I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment for proposing the motion. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Committee for Finance

and Personnel take a continuing interest in corporation tax. We will take on board all the contributions that have been made by Members as we consider how best the matter can be taken forward.

Rather than simply going over the points that have been made, I will draw on some of the themes that have come out of the debate. Probably most important are the potential benefits of a competitive corporation tax rate. Undoubtedly, encouraging investment through larger FDI flows will have a positive impact on the local economy, particularly in respect of attracting the high value sectors, which offer better-paid jobs and export-led growth.

The Economic Reform Group has argued that reducing the rate of corporation tax would bring substantial benefits over a 20-year period — we have to consider the long term as well as the short term — including 90,000 extra jobs. It is clear that there is a cost in introducing that lower rate of corporation tax. However, as with all economic matters, results cannot simply be understood by considering the short term. Although total tax revenue would fall, the group suggests that that would be offset within a six-year period through additional revenues from income tax, National Insurance contributions and VAT. Therefore, reducing the rate of corporation tax must be given serious consideration.

It has also been noted that a number of steps, some of which may prove difficult technically, are required before such a move can be made. However, despite their differences, the Varney review of tax policy in the North and the Economic Reform Group report agree that, technically, the rate of corporation tax could be reduced, provided that certain conditions are met. The Azores judgement of the European Court of Justice in 2006 laid the foundations to make that possible. Should the Executive decide to pursue that route, it would not be an impossible task, providing that support is garnered from the Westminster Government and the European Union.

As the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment outlined, a first step in the process of reducing the rate of corporation tax would be the requirement for corporation tax-varying powers to be devolved to the Assembly. Some Members spoke about tax-varying powers in general, but that is a

debate for another day. However, we need to be mindful that we may need to look at that issue in the near future. As was rightly highlighted by a number of Members, there will be implications for the block grant if the Executive decide to pursue that route. Although it is unclear what the amount may finally be, the Economic Reform Group estimates a reduction in the block grant of around 2%. However, it also highlights that, based on experience in the South of Ireland, there is the possibility that no tax revenue reduction would occur.

Those short-term costs must be weighed up against the potential long-term gains that could be made if the strategy were adopted. As I have mentioned, increased employment here will lead to increased revenues from income tax and National Insurance contributions, alongside a reduction in the number of the long-term unemployed. It is vital that we do not look at corporation tax in isolation but consider all the factors involved. Many Members have talked about the unemployment figures and how we can create employment opportunities and higher wages that will lead to a better quality of life for people. We need to keep that in view when we are looking at the issue.

There may also be scope to explore the possibilities of negotiating with the British Treasury a phased reduction in corporation tax because that may be one way through the pain that a decrease in the block grant would bring. Clearly, the Executive have an important role to play in all those considerations. The Programme for Government gives priority to developing an innovative and productive economy. There is no doubt that implementing the recommendations of the independent review of economic policy, which falls within the existing powers of the Assembly, will continue to be high on the Executive's agenda. However, there is an argument that the logic of devolution places an onus on the Executive to give serious consideration to the case for acquiring corporation tax-varying powers.

Although reducing the rate of corporation tax would be just one tool available to the Executive, it would be an important one. The Committee for Finance and Personnel wrote to the Minister to request specifically that he consider establishing an Executive subgroup to examine the matter in detail. Corporation tax is a complex subject, and I am grateful to Members for giving it careful consideration. It

is in the best interests of the local economy to explore all options that are open to us to make the North as competitive and attractive as possible to potential investors.

I welcome today's cross-party support for the need to place renewed emphasis on examining the case for corporation tax-varying powers. The important point to take from the debate is that we must maintain a united front. Most Members who spoke were in favour of and positive about the motion. Ahead of opening up discussions with the new British Government and in subsequent negotiations with the Treasury, that approach will put us on a good footing.

I thank the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and I hope that we can continue to explore ways in which to keep the issue of a competitive rate of corporation tax on the agenda. In their contributions, Members gave us much food for thought.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the report from the Northern Ireland Economic Reform Group on the case for a reduced rate of corporation tax in Northern Ireland.

Private Members' Business

Community Access to School Facilities

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

Lord Browne: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to bring forward a strategy to make the facilities of schools more available for use by local communities at evenings, weekends and during the summer holidays.

I am pleased to propose the motion. However, at the outset, I make it clear that I accept Mr McNarry's amendment. I know that he has worked hard to create his private Member's Bill, and, if a strategy is introduced now, schools will be well prepared when the Bill eventually becomes law. However, to date, there have been stumbling blocks, which I hope can be dealt with today so that real progress can be made on the Bill.

In the current economic climate, finding areas in which savings can be made without affecting the provision of services is one of the biggest challenges that the Assembly faces. One of the best methods of making those savings is to find ways to use the same facilities for different purposes. Such an opportunity exists with schools' facilities. We all know that for the majority of the year, particularly at weekends and during the long summer holidays, schools' facilities and playing fields lie idle. There appears to be no reason why those facilities should not be put to use, thus providing a place for communities to meet, be educated and participate in sport.

There are three areas on which a strategy would have an impact: improved community facilities; associated benefits for schools; and strategic investment targeting. It is no secret that Northern Ireland has some of the poorest community facilities in the United Kingdom. Those facilities, which range from community centres to leisure centres, have

suffered from years of underinvestment and poor maintenance. Many of them are coming to the end of their useful life. Many Members have served on councils, so they know the huge cost that would be involved to bring facilities up to modern standards. Therefore, if we want to be sure that communities have access to usable facilities, a strategy to open up schools' facilities is essential.

It needs to be recognised that not only is the taxpayer currently footing the bill to maintain community and school facilities that are often within a short walking distance of each other but we are paying huge amounts to keep our school classrooms and pitches empty over the summer. At the same time, we use public money to fund community sports and other facilities in their place. Even the Department recognises that there is only a marginal difference in the cost of opening up school facilities rather than keeping them closed. However, that would allow us to save vast sums each year on providing substitute facilities. It should be clear to most that the incurred cost of indemnifying schools outside core opening hours would be only a fraction of the cost required to run additional community facilities.

It is regrettable that Northern Ireland lags behind the rest of the UK in opening up its schools for use by the wider community. Although the extended schools programme has existed for years, it has not really had the desired impact on the ground. Indeed, last week, the House heard from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that only a few schools had really undertaken the task contained in the extended schools programme. There are reasons for that, and I am sure that Members will touch on them. However, a large number of the issues that have made many schools reluctant to open their facilities to the community focus on child protection and insurance. It seems that clear, direct and reassuring guidance from the Department is needed to give schools the confidence to know that opening to the community does not set them up for some sort of disaster.

We must not forget the benefits of this strategy for schools. If such a strategy were put in place, schools would be ideally positioned to benefit from increased co-operation and interaction with their communities as well as increased investment in the long term. It should be clear to most that genuine advances can be

made when schools work in partnership with their local communities. Doing that not only improves the provision that a school can make through understanding the needs of a particular community but, when schools become involved with communities, children become less likely to drop out of school and less likely to vandalise that school precisely because the school is seen as part of the community, not a place apart.

Mr McCarthy: I agree that the motion is important. However, I know of an instance in which schools were open to the community, but, unfortunately, those schools charged far too much. The community was not in a position to pay what they asked. I hope that we support the motion, but, if we do, does the Member agree with me that it is imperative that schools consider how much people can pay?

Lord Browne: I take the Member's point, and I hope to touch on that issue later. I believe that an increase in community use of schools would mean that the money that would otherwise have been spent on maintaining and servicing the decaying community centres would naturally follow. That money could then be used to improve the infrastructure of schools to the benefit of children and adults alike. Strategic investment in school facilities is vitally important for the future and would be the real success of the strategy. The Assembly would be remiss not to support and to bring forward immediately a strategy that simultaneously ensures that facilities are available for community use, that we receive value-for-money provision and that money invested in improving school facilities for communities also results in better classrooms and sports facilities for schoolchildren.

I am sure that the Minister is familiar with Malcolm Gladwell's much acclaimed book 'Outliers', in which he demonstrates that working-class children tend to fall behind their middle-class counterparts because they do not engage in academic activities over the summer holidays. It is regrettable that the Minister has not seen fit to develop a strategy that would promote activities for the whole community, including working-class children, in particular.

12.15 pm

It is also important for the Department to show leadership on the issue. It is unfortunate that the Department, having had many years to bring forward a strategy, has failed to do

so in any meaningful way. It is not enough to say that it is the responsibility of individual schools to organise. As I said, many schools look to the Department for clear guidance on child protection and insurance issues but receive no clear answers. Regardless of who is legally responsible for making school facilities available for community use, I urge the Minister to develop a strategy that every school can follow. The Department of Education has the opportunity to develop a comprehensive strategy that, most importantly, can be co-ordinated across all schools. That is something that individual schools acting alone cannot do. I am pleased to support the motion, as amended.

Mr McNarry: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"notes the private Member's Bill, Community Use of School Premises Bill, and the review being undertaken by the Minister of Education into community use of schools; and calls on the Minister of Education to bring forward, accordingly, a strategy to make the facilities of schools more available for use by local communities at evenings, weekends and during the summer holidays."

I thank Lord Browne for the generosity of his opening remarks; I much appreciate them. I laid a private Member's Bill, the Community Use of School Premises Bill, before the House on 13 November 2008. I presented my Bill to the Education Committee, which gave it a very warm reception. Subsequently, the Bill initiated a review by the Minister of Education of the community use of schools, which I welcomed. That review is ongoing, and I have, therefore, chosen not to progress the Bill at this stage. However, in the absence of progress, that option is still open to me.

I introduced a private Member's Bill because inadequate use is made of the massive potential resources of the schools estate in Northern Ireland, and the Department has failed to use its powers creatively to make better use of that public resource. The Bill aims to maximise the use of the schools estate across Northern Ireland outside the school day and the school term. The Bill would require school guardians to produce schemes providing for the use of their premises and facilities when they are not required for educational purposes.

The importance of the resource is reflected in the new fiscal climate in which charities and

community groups will face funding stress. That is the sad reality of a reduced fiscal position and reducing funding from Europe. They will need all the resources and help that they can get to facilitate a healthy society in Northern Ireland. Communities will also have to tackle some of the problems that they face in different ways, and the community use of schools is an innovative solution to a shortage of facilities. It is, therefore, of paramount importance that we unlock one of the greatest resources that local communities have but, at present, do not use.

The potential benefits in education, health, community spirit and support for vulnerable people are great. A PricewaterhouseCoopers study from 2003 found that opening school buildings to local groups engendered a sense of community ownership of the facilities to the extent — this is important — that they believe that levels of vandalism are often lower where schools are utilised by the community and there is a deep sense of pride in the community and in those facilities. Indoor and outdoor school facilities can be used for adult learning, youth activities, recreation, social services, healthcare and cultural and social activities. Communities know that. Those facilities are on their doorstep, and they want access to them. There are opportunities on our doorsteps to make our society bigger and better at a limited cost — important in this financial climate — to the taxpayer.

I met departmental officials and members of the task team who were carrying out the Minister's review last year, and I was pleased with the update that they gave me and the way in which they were approaching the review. However, I have heard nothing from the Department in response to the telephone calls that I made subsequently to ask how it was getting on or to my requests for updates on what it was doing. It is important that that point is transmitted to the House, because this is a community issue with a focus on the use of community facilities. I am pleased to see that the Minister is in her place, and I look forward to her response today on the proposal.

The Executive need more innovative ideas to get the most from the resources that they have. There is a great deal of potential in the proposal, and I know that it would be well supported in communities. That support and the subject of communities and their needs were communicated to me on the doorsteps during the recent election campaign.

I thank the Members led by Lord Browne for tabling the motion, and I hope that they will continue to support my efforts to have the Minister's review published. It would be regrettable if that were not the case, but, if it is, I hope that they will support my private Member's Bill. The Members who tabled the motion have opened the issue up for debate. The House is grateful for that, and the receiving public will acknowledge what is said in the House today.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion and Mr McNarry's amendment. The Member who moved the motion said that schools, by and large, are at the heart of all our communities. That is particularly the case in rural areas, where schools often act as community centres, as meeting points when anything goes wrong and as sports facilities that are used by the entire community. Indeed, all Members could cite examples of how that works in practice in their local area.

Those examples of schools' positive engagement with the community are set out under article 140 of the Education Reform Order 1989, which encourages schools to make their premises available:

"(when not required by or in connection with the school)".

Therefore, schools are encouraged to use their facilities for members of the community, and that provision was further enhanced when the extended schools programme was launched. That programme supports the highest-ranked socially disadvantaged schools, seeks to extend the school as the hub of the community and encourages engagement with neighbouring schools, government Departments, voluntary groups and community sector organisations to best meet the needs of young people.

When a school prepares its action plan under that programme it is required to consult the local community and assess whether there are particular needs that could be met by the school and the use of its premises. Obviously not all needs can be met, but schools are encouraged to meet them where possible. The extended schools programme has been developed over the past number of years, has maximised the use of the schools estate and has affirmed the role that schools play in our communities. However, that being said, examples have been

alluded to of schools that do not open their doors to the communities around them, and that must be addressed.

In recognition of the role that schools play in the community, Mr McNarry previously introduced a private Member's Bill that would make it compulsory for schools to make their premises available. That is a plausible aim, but there are implications that must be considered, and the Minister, in recognition of the principle behind Mr McNarry's Bill, undertook a review of the broader implications of opening our school doors to the wider community. All the issues associated with that, such as insurance, health and safety and the additional costs that schools may encounter, must be examined, and we hope to achieve that through the review.

I noticed from the Minister's answer to a question from another Member that she established a working group, which recently reported its findings to the Minister. We await the outcome of the review as quickly as possible, because, undoubtedly, we should continue to enhance the community use of school premises, which has implications not only for the Department of Education but a range of other Departments and for voluntary organisations. However, it is important that we are mindful of protecting the decisions of schools and of boards of governors, because, to date, anything that has happened to do with the opening up of school doors has been based on the decisions of boards of governors. When Members debated the ESA, we were keen to support and maintain autonomy for boards of governors, so we must also be mindful of that in this situation. By and large, Sinn Féin will support the motion.

Mr Dallat: I also thank those who tabled the motion, and I acknowledge Mr McNarry's contribution. This could be one of the most exciting things to have happened in the Assembly. I refer to the concept of community schools, which is well established in the Republic of Ireland and in parts of Britain. I understand that there are two or three such schools in the North.

Many years ago, I had the privilege of teaching in a community school, and I have happy memories of how that school operated, reached out into the wider community and embraced people who were past school age. In those days, the concept of lifelong learning was not part of

the educational vocabulary. It is, of course, part of it now, but we have yet to develop the means by which it can be delivered across every town and village in Northern Ireland. After-school activity is the one term that is used, but I like to think that it embraces much more than that.

Mr McNarry mentioned culture, adult education and so on. God knows that, here in the North, 250,000 people between the ages of 16 and 64 have the most basic literacy and numeracy skills. Those people should enjoy equality with everyone else. The community school offers that, and it is sad that, probably due more to direct rule than anything, it is more than 30 years since it was discussed seriously. Therefore, I look forward to the private Member's Bill on which Mr McNarry is working.

One aspect is the resources that are needed to deliver. Mrs O'Neill talked about boards of governors. I like to think that, when the community school concept is delivered, it will embrace the view that more people should be responsible for delivering it. It certainly would have to include more people than the school principal and the deputy. Someone with overall responsibility for delivering the additional required services would be needed. Indeed, boards of governors at many schools will need to consider how their school will survive in changing circumstances. For many schools, particularly rural ones, embracing the concept of the community school will save them from closure. I am aware of some good examples, one of which is in Kilrea, where that is a —

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dallat: Yes, of course.

Mr Storey: When the Member defines "community school", does he mean the retention of the school for a particular community, as is the case in our divided and segregated educational system, or does he mean a genuinely community school that does not have a bar across the door to certain children attending it?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Member for raising that. To be honest, I never see community as being anything other than the whole community. Indeed, a community school could not function on the basis of not including everyone. That

people could come together would be another advantage of such a concept.

Some people might see the extension of a school's opening hours as being about issues such as fitness. Those issues are, of course, important, given the levels of obesity, but the community school has to go further than that. It has to acknowledge that many people have dropped through the safety net of the existing school network and that they need that second chance to achieve their purpose in life.

12.30 pm

Of course, the demands of employers are changing rapidly, and people who felt that they had skills for life are no longer secure. Indeed, many are unemployed and frantically trying to develop new skills. The community school concept would meet their needs as well.

I feel committed to the subject. During my further education, I completed a diploma in community schools, which included a lot of research on how that concept operates successfully in the Republic and, in particular, in Britain. I appeal passionately to the Assembly and particularly the departmental officials who are listening to the debate to take the matter seriously. It is not just a matter for the Department of Education; it embraces other Departments as well. Following the motion, Mr McNarry's private Member's Bill and the support of the SDLP, which embraced the concept of community schools many years ago, I hope that the Assembly, sooner rather than later, will begin to deliver on the concept of lifelong learning.

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

The sitting was suspended at 12.31 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Lunn: I support the motion and the amendment. Mr McNarry was absolutely right to refer to his private Member's Bill, which was the starting point for the discussion in 2008. At that time, it was warmly received by the Education Committee. That is hardly a surprise, because the concept of extended use of school facilities by the wider community in the evenings and during the three months of school holidays is such sound common sense that it is a wonder that we did not adopt, or at least examine, it years ago.

The benefits are obvious, and Members who spoke previously — Mr McNarry in particular — made reference to the community benefit, to the plight of community groups and the voluntary sector, and to the health and social benefits. The obstacles, if any, appear to be based on the costs of staff coverage, caretaking and insurance. However, at a time of tight budgets and our inability to provide the community facilities that people demand and deserve, it seems to me that the opportunity to maximise the use of existing facilities as an alternative to building or upgrading is self-evidently cost effective, and that is the route that we should follow. As John Dallat mentioned, there is a major shared future aspect in respect of cross-community usage of school property, and in light of the renewed commitment by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to a shared future strategy, it is perhaps a chance for the Executive, and not just the Education Minister, to demonstrate that commitment. However, it is primarily the Education Minister's review and her response to the debate that we look forward to today.

I know that some boards of governors have reservations about the pure cost to schools of staffing and insurance, but it is surely possible to charge users in a sensible manner to cover the small amount of extra expense, and, if not, the Department of Education and other Departments should think about picking up the tab because of the community benefit, the shared future benefit and the major future capital savings.

As far as the insurance argument is concerned, any groups that use Government or council facilities are normally asked to provide their

own insurance, and I do not see why it should be any different in this case. However, even if there were an argument for extra costs to the Department or the schools, I really do not buy it. I am not privy to the Department's liability insurance arrangements, but the greater risk is surely already covered, and that is the risk involving children, where the duty of care is so much more onerous than that involving adults. Therefore, I really cannot see that the risk is much increased by adults using the facilities.

I hope that the Minister will address the issue urgently and seriously, because it has to be better value to use what we already have and to factor in community use to all replacement and newbuild schools for the future. I look forward to the Minister's response and am perfectly happy to support the motion and the amendment.

Miss McIlveen: I support the motion. Unsurprisingly, in this case, there has been broad agreement that opening up school facilities for community use is desirable in principle. Increasingly access to, and utilisation of, publicly funded facilities makes sense, particularly in the challenging current climate in which demands are many and resources are few. Adding value is a particularly apt term to use here, as extending access to school facilities to the local community not only represents an efficient and effective use of resources by increasing utilisation and reducing duplication but brings wider benefits.

As other Members have said, opening up our schools can assist in the promotion of good relations and a strong sense of community spirit. It can generate income for a school while still offering subsidised provision for the community. In many cases, recreation and leisure facilities are involved, and that helps to encourage physical activity. The Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee recently received numerous presentations focusing on the need to get more people to take more exercise. In general terms, sharing facilities through what has been described in some areas as dual-use schemes and similar arrangements represents a win-win scenario for schools and communities. This is especially so in smaller towns and villages in rural areas, which may lack the capacity for significant separate provision and where schools should be at the heart of the community.

Perhaps most uplifting of all is the case of Cortamlet, a controlled primary school close to the south Armagh border. Through funding drawn down by the SELB, the school now has a new multi-purpose hall and synthetic pitch, and has become a real hub for the small, isolated Protestant community in that very rural area. There are many more examples across Northern Ireland where schools have secured synthetic pitches to be shared with the local community. In my constituency of Strangford, West Winds Primary School in Newtownards has such a facility.

Existing facilities can be adapted and improved, but newbuilds have the greatest potential in that regard because community use can be factored in at the planning and design stage, with all potential stakeholders brought on board from the outset of a project to explore all possible opportunities. Although there are many mutual benefits to be realised, any associated costs must be factored into the arrangements, and some support may be required to ensure that schools do not suffer financial losses or be required to charge community users prohibitive rates, an issue that Mr McCarthy raised earlier.

In several schemes that I am aware of, the council, essentially, takes over responsibility for a facility from 5.00 pm, but many models of co-operation can be considered. An example can be found in Portaferry, where St Columba's College has a partnership with Ards Borough Council to provide gym equipment and facilities. The extended schools programme has also been highlighted by other Members. That has helped some schools to see their facilities in a more imaginative light and to forge new partnerships. There is much more potential to be realised in that area, and we have some way to go to catch up with what is happening in that regard in England.

Until now in Northern Ireland, such schemes have tended to be developed on an ad hoc basis as a result of initiatives taken at a local level, and, to date, much has depended on the vision, initiative and drive of particular principals or boards of governors as to whether a school wants to pick up the ball and run with it. Buy-in is crucial to the success of such projects, so we must tread carefully in intervening. Rather than trying to impose onerous obligations or to be prescriptive or restrictive about making school facilities available for community use, we should seek to encourage collaboration because, as

we find with so many issues, one size does not necessarily fit all.

It should be the role of the Minister and her Department, working with other agencies, to remove obstacles, provide incentives and create the circumstances under which such schemes will be regarded as desirable and viable in local areas. Good governance arrangements and strong relationships, underpinned by a partnership approach, are vital to such schemes being successfully developed and sustained. Increasing community use of school facilities is consistent with some other themes of our Administration, including joined-up government and community planning and, in education, area-based planning and delivery of the revised curriculum.

In conclusion, the type of approach under discussion has huge potential, and in encouraging schools and communities to embrace it as a way forward, we must ensure that they are supported and that every effort is made to minimise any potential for problems.

Mr Ross: We have brought agreement to the Chamber today on this issue. As is the case in such debates, it is often difficult to find something novel to say when speaking at this late stage. Lord Browne put the debate in context very well when he spoke about potential savings. Increasingly, as we debate issues in the House, we must look for value for taxpayers' money. We should always have done that, but it has now been placed in sharper focus. In the schools estate, many schools across the country are not used at night-time and sit idle during the summer months, and we identified that those facilities could be used not only to get value for money but to provide community benefits.

Members spoke about vandalism in the schools estate. Vandalism occurs in the summer, when no one is around and schools are sitting idle. The approach under discussion could help that situation. Through projects such as the extended schools programme or the use of schools for community benefit, assistance is given to schools so that their facilities can be used by communities.

It has also been said that the extended schools principle has not really taken off in Northern Ireland, and that is probably true. We may be able to point to a number of examples in our constituencies where schools are being used

by community groups or on an ad hoc basis. However, in comparison with other regions of the United Kingdom, it is clear that the principle has not taken off in Northern Ireland, and we must change that.

Schools should be seen less as buildings that are used only from 9 am to 4 pm and more as an important part of the community. In previous debates in the House on the importance of rural schools, it has often been said that they are more than just schools because they are at the heart of the community. Schools in rural areas are used by and for the community, and we must try to extend that across the rest of the country. We know that schools are already used for breakfast, after-school and homework clubs, but they should also be used at night-time by the local community for other activities. I said that Northern Ireland is the poor relation of the UK in respect of how schools are used. In England, half of primary schools are used for other activities aside from education, and a third of secondary schools are used for similar purposes. Northern Ireland, therefore, has some way to go.

Mr Dallat spoke about the need to open up schools for evening classes for adults. Adult learning, computer courses, which use the IT facilities that many schools have now, and arts and crafts can all play an important role in the community.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. He will be aware of the correspondence that we received today from the organisation that represents further and higher education colleges. Many of the activities to which the Member referred could easily be facilitated by that sector. Its colleges have the capacity and should be included in the proposals. The remit of what was proposed in Mr McNarry's Bill can, therefore, be extended.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for his intervention. He is absolutely right. Many further education colleges probably have even better facilities that are particularly suited to adult learning or adults who wish to take up a hobby or to learn something new. That should certainly be taken into consideration today. The Minister for Employment and Learning should also take note of that, because it is something on which he and the Minister of Education could collaborate.

Over the summer, many schools run summer schemes and open their sports facilities not

just to pupils but to the wider community. That is a common sense approach to take. I know that Mr McNarry's private Member's Bill has been stalled somewhat. It is frustrating for Mr McNarry and those of us who saw the Bill as a sensible way forward that there has not been any progress on it. I, therefore, congratulate my colleague Lord Browne for tabling the motion and reigniting the issue.

I know that there have been issues about insurance, which has been a stumbling block. However, Mr Lunn, who probably knows more about insurance than most of us, said that that should not be a problem. I hope that the Minister is not using the issue of insurance as a stumbling block and that she will make every effort to try to find a way round any health and safety difficulties so that we can make full use of the schools estate and the wider community can benefit from that. I am happy to support the motion and the amendment.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I begin my contribution speaking as a member of the Education Committee. I want to inform the House of the Committee's involvement in the matter through its scrutiny of Mr McNarry's private Member's Bill on the community use of school premises. The Committee received a presentation from Mr McNarry on his Bill in September 2008 and commissioned a comprehensive briefing paper from the Department of Education on the specifics of the Bill. On receipt of that and an Assembly research paper on the Bill, the Committee heard again from Mr McNarry before concluding that although it agreed with the underlying intentions of the Bill to increase wider community access to school facilities outside the school day, it could not agree specific support for a number of reasons.

Those reasons include the fact that some 450 schools already benefit from extended schools funding that provides for a wide range of activities outside schools hours; the Department of Education's claim that most schools operate an open-door policy and already make provision for the use of their premises by the local community; the fact that the Bill's proposals could result in significant additional expenditure for schools, such as fuel, caretaking and insurance costs, as well as the Department of Education's concerns about health and safety in schools; and, finally, the Committee's concerns about whether school principals would

welcome the added bureaucracy that would be necessary to administer the mandatory schemes required in the Bill.

2.15 pm

The Committee concluded that a better way forward is for the Department to issue appropriate guidance to all schools that encourages the community use of school facilities. Such guidance would promote good practice, and consideration should be given to providing incentives for schools to make their premises available to the community.

Following the Committee's request to the Department of Education in May 2009 for a full updated position on community use of school premises in the context of Mr McNarry's private Member's Bill, the Minister of Education agreed to establish a small informal working group made up of educational stakeholders who would make suggestions and recommendations on how best to increase the use of school premises. In September 2009, the Committee suggested that Mr McNarry meet the chairperson of the working group, Ms Arthur, to receive an update on progress. He did that on 11 November 2009, and he received a further short progress note on the working group in early December 2009, which included details of its meetings and consultations with external agencies, such as community and voluntary groups. An initial draft report was to be ready in early 2010, and in mid-April 2010, the Committee reminded the Department that that was overdue and requested a progress update. The Committee has yet to receive that update.

I hope that that overview informs the debate and shows that the Committee for Education has been proactive in working with the Department of Education to increase wider community access to school facilities.

I turn now to my party's position on the issue. The SDLP believes that it is important to encourage and to facilitate the wider community use of school premises. Mr Dallat outlined in detail our support for the broader concept of the community school. We believe that it is better to achieve community use of schools through encouragement and incentivisation rather than by compulsion. That is one reason why we disagreed with the methodology employed in Mr McNarry's private Member's Bill, although we agreed with its general aim and direction.

We note that 45% of the schools estate is not in public ownership. As a consequence, the Department of Education has no statutory rights that would enable it to make those schools available for community use. It is worth noting that in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland, the emphasis is always on encouraging schools and removing obstacles rather than on compulsion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr D Bradley: We support the motion and the amendment and will vote accordingly.

Mr G Robinson: I am grateful to be able to support this important motion. As every Member knows, our young people and communities in Northern Ireland are telling us that they want and need more facilities for recreational and other purposes in the evenings, at weekends and at holiday times. I am convinced that that could, in some cases, cut back on antisocial behaviour.

Last year, in my Limavady constituency, I saw the perfect example of how schools can have top-class facilities that are also a community asset. Limavady Grammar School has a new all-weather sports pitch, which is available to the entire community during the evenings. That has been a very successful scheme, and it proves that co-operation benefits an entire community.

Schools are regarded as a community asset, so why should they be unavailable for community use when children are not at school? I firmly believe that there is an easy solution to what we are being told is a lack in the provision of services for young people and all other age groups in the community. Publicly owned buildings are lying empty and unused when the need for sporting facilities or venues for other community-based activities is at its greatest.

I appreciate that difficulties will be placed in the way of such a simple idea, and it is up to the Minister and her colleagues to overcome them. A school should be used and appreciated as an asset to a community and be available for use when required. In some cases, that multifunctional use may also reduce the need for local councils to build new recreational facilities using very tight budgets.

The motion is about a practical and effective way of providing facilities on a value-for-money basis through the use of existing resources.

I can only ask that all Members support the motion and show good sense so that we fully utilise our existing facilities and provide for a community need. I support the motion and the amendment.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. A Cheann Comhairle, tá mé iontach sásta deis a fháil le plé a dhéanamh ar an ngá le rochtain pobail ar áiseanna scoile a mhéadú taobh amuigh de ghnáthuaireanta na scoile. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht ar an gceist seo, nó aithním féin gur acmhainn thábhachtach pobail í áitreabh na scoile agus aontaím gurbh fhéidir agus gur chóir níos mó a dhéanamh le húsáid níos fearr a bhaint as na háiseanna seo.

I am very pleased to get the opportunity to debate with Members the need to increase community access to school facilities outside normal school hours. I welcome the opportunity to debate the issue, because I, too, recognise that school premises represent a significant public resource. I also agree that more could, and should, be done to make sure that we make better use of such facilities.

The 2008 private Member's Bill on the community use of schools premises highlighted that important issue. I was unable to support the Bill at that time, because it was entirely prescriptive. By putting a statutory requirement on schools, it would have meant an extra bureaucratic burden for schools, and, most notably, the proposals would have inevitably resulted in significant expenditure, which, set against competing priorities for education, the Department would have had considerable difficulty finding. In addition, it was not clear how the proposals in the Bill would add value to existing provision.

The Bill did not, therefore, represent an appropriate way forward. However, at that time, I underlined my ongoing commitment to increasing the community use of schools, and I indicated that my Department would look at alternative ways of achieving that. I will say more about the working group shortly.

Some schools often appear isolated from the community and are viewed as buildings that are designed to educate children and organised to deliver the curriculum. Keeping school buildings open and making facilities available for the community can help parents and the wider community to feel a connection to a school.

I want to see schools opening their gates and their doors to the local community. I want local communities to own their schools and, from that sense of ownership, to see their schools as hubs in the community that offer so much more than teaching and offer education in its widest sense. I want local schools to be at the heart of the community, and I want young people to see schools as theirs. I want young people to see schools as places that they should value and protect, not because they have to but because they want to. I want young people to be able to access school playing fields, playgrounds and equipment outside the school day.

Creidim go daingean gur chóir naisc níos láidre a chothú idir scoileanna agus na pobail ar a bhfreastalaíonn siad, agus tá fíis agam gur chóir go n-oibreodh scoileanna i gcomhpháirtíocht le muintir na háite.

I was at a school this morning — St Louise's Comprehensive College in Belfast — having a discussion about post-primary reform and equality in education. I can see the value of parents, teachers and young people in particular feeling that a school is theirs.

As we all know, communities can be a very positive influence on schools and vice versa. The benefits of engaging the community and, in particular, parents and families have long been recognised for the contribution that that can make to improving attitudes to education and raising standards. Parental involvement in a child's education impacts considerably on the child's engagement in school and on his or her educational outcomes. I am committed to promoting the wider use of school premises in an effort to serve the needs of the pupils in the schools, their parents, families and wider communities, and I want to see our young people empowered.

A key education policy for school improvement, Every School a Good School, highlights the importance of supporting and strengthening the links that many schools have made with their local communities. Maintaining clear links with a local community is recognised as an important attribute of any good school, and research evidence indicates that effective performance can be characterised through the existence of a range of indicators, including a school and its teachers being held in respect by parents and the local community, who, in turn, actively support the work of that school. Schools use

their involvement in particular programmes, for example, extended or specialist schools, effectively to meet the needs of communities and nearby schools.

The advantages of making school facilities available for wider community use outside the normal school day are, therefore, clearly evident, and it is already my Department's policy to encourage schools to do so, primarily through programmes such as extended schools. I was glad that I was able to maintain the funding levels for that important programme in 2010-11, and I was able to do so because of the contribution that those resources are making to overcoming barriers to learning in schools that serve some of the most disadvantaged communities. Almost 480 schools will once again benefit from £10 million funding in 2010-11 to provide a range of programmes that reflect and respond to the needs of their pupils and communities.

We also have two full-service pilot programmes, one in north Belfast and the other in west Belfast. Both are seeking to establish and maintain strong links not only between schools but between schools and the local communities, and across a range of statutory agencies, the business community, the voluntary and community sector and, crucially, parents. We will review those pilots, and use the findings to publish a strategy for further development of that concept.

Schools can offer opportunities for adult or family learning, leading to enhanced career or job prospects; opportunities for local people to avail themselves of social, arts and cultural activities; or sporting or recreational activities that may not be available elsewhere in the local area.

Má bhíonn caidreamh láidir éifeachtach idir scoileanna agus na daoine a bhfuil cónaí orthu sa cheantar, cuireann sé seo go mór le comhtháthú an phobail, rud a théann chun leas na sochaí i gcoitinne.

A strong and effective relationship between schools and those living in the local area aids community cohesion, which in turn benefits society as a whole. In the current economic climate, making the most effective use of school facilities also presents an opportunity to deliver real value for money, and by maximising existing school resources, the duplication of provision or unnecessary waste of funds can be avoided.

There are many excellent examples of community use of school premises, and many schools have been involved in that for many years. They are too numerous to mention in full, but I would like to choose some examples. One primary school offers a daily breakfast club, mini-rugby, modern dance and wrap-around childcare. The school is viewed as a vital hub for the community, with the principal having agreed arrangements with various local groups to use the school premises in the evenings to deliver healthy-living activities, adult ICT and traditional Irish music classes.

There is a post-primary school that serves local needs through the provision of accommodation for a GAA centre of excellence and for a local pipers' club. It also offers Saturday schools for local children of Polish or Lithuanian backgrounds, as well as Irish-language classes. There is a primary school that offers a range of activities, including a breakfast club, day care centre, a community support zone, and evening programmes, such as music, adult education classes and youth clubs. There is an Irish-medium school that offers the use of its facilities to a number of sports clubs, including a jujitsu club, which moved to the school after the closure of the local leisure centre. Various community groups or organisations, including Barnardo's and Irish dancers, use the school to host events, and cultural events are held there during Féile an Earraigh and Féile an Phobail.

2.30 pm

Sílím go bhfuil muid ar fad ar aon intinn faoi cé chomh fiúntach is a bheadh sé áiseanna scoile a dhéanamh níos inrochtana. Ach tá roinnt mhaith scoileanna go fóill nach gcuireann a gcuid áiseanna ar fáil d'úsáid an phobail i gcoitinne agus scoileanna a d'fhéadfadh a soláthar don phobal a mhéadú.

We all agree on the merits of making school facilities more accessible. However, there remain a substantial number of schools that either make little or no provision for the wider community use of their facilities or whose existing provision could be improved. Schools, when opening their doors to the community outside normal school hours, must consider many practical issues, such as insurance, health and safety, wear and tear, caretakers, and extra heating and lighting. Schools will incur additional expenditure as a result, and there are

issues about how to recoup those costs, but those obstacles are not insurmountable.

By drawing on the existing good practice of schools that engage with their community, and in recognition of the need to improve current levels of community provision in many other schools, my Department has sought further to promote the wider community use of school premises. As a first step in taking forward that important area of work, I agreed to establish a working group. The group was co-ordinated by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and comprised representatives of key educational stakeholders with expertise in that field: the education and library boards, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, the Council for Integrated Education, the Governing Bodies Association, the Youth Council and serving school principals and governors who were representative of all school sectors.

The group worked to terms of reference that included identifying the existing barriers to increasing the community use of schools and proposing workable and practical solutions to overcome those barriers in ways that would avoid placing unnecessary administrative or cost burdens on schools. The group was asked to produce a report to include examples of good or best practice that could be disseminated as guidance to schools. It was also asked to outline a set of recommendations to inform policy and operations with regard to enhancing the community use of school premises.

The working group has completed its task, and it presented its report to the Department in March 2010. The report identified good practice, case studies and related guidance, all of which aim to give encouragement, help and support to schools in dealing with the many practical issues that must be considered in making their facilities available for community use.

Cuimsíonn an tuairisc réimse leathan moltaí atá ceaptha chun cur leis an úsáid a bhaineann an pobal as scoileanna. Tá na moltaí á mbreathnú faoi láthair ag feidhmeannaigh sa Roinn chun praiticiúlacht na moltaí a mheas. Cuirfear an obair seo i gcrích roimh i bhfad.

A key focus of the report is on the need for joined-up and collaborative working on a strategic level, not only in my Department, but, as some Members said, across other Departments, agencies, district councils and external organisations. Several of the report's

recommendations fall outside my Department's remit and impact directly on the statutory functions of other Departments or their partner bodies. I will ask relevant ministerial colleagues to consider the report's recommendations, with a view to assessing any potential difficulties that those recommendations may create in the delivery of their core objectives. When that wider consultation has taken place and I have had the opportunity to consider all responses, I will be in a position to bring forward a strategy.

A one-size-fits-all approach cannot be taken to increasing community access to school facilities. Some schools may face complex and challenging issues. Increased access may involve a change of culture for many schools, but such a change will be worth it, because the end result will be worth it.

D'fhonn caidreamh idir pobail áitiúla agus scoileanna a neartú chun úsáid mhéadaithe a éascú, ní mór do na pobail féin ról gníomhach a imirt lena chinntiú go n-úsáidfear acmhainní go héifeachtúil agus go sábháilte.

I hope that the steps that my Department has taken in establishing the working group, the work carried out by its members and the further work required to ensure that the recommendations are viable and constructive demonstrate my its commitment to achieving the increased community use of schools. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: I apologise to Members for not being present for the debate after lunch: I was chairing a meeting of the all-party Assembly group on learning disability.

I thought it important to speak on the amendment proposed by my colleague Mr McNarry, if for no other reason than to demonstrate that Mr McNarry and I work very well together as a united team. There will be a lot of that in the future.

There is something that perhaps Mr McNarry cannot say himself, so I will say it for him: he was the person who first identified this area of opportunity. I listened attentively to Lord Browne, and it is the first time that I have had the chance to listen to one of his speeches in detail. The points that he made were well put and are gratefully received by Members on these Benches. He raised a number of key points, and I was particularly struck by his issue about "Outliers"; about where educational

achievement is found; and about how important it is to get people to engage in academic studies, particularly during the summer months. The Minister could usefully take those points on board.

It took the Minister 10 minutes to tell us what we already know. Her speech was a regurgitation of what we have heard in the past. The important question is: when will she publish the report of the review? Michelle O'Neill mentioned that that has been asked previously, but it was a surprise to discover that the report has been completed. I urge the Minister to bring it forward as a matter of alacrity. This is not a time for naval-gazing or for sitting on one's hands. There are some real issues to be addressed and the situation must be resolved.

I am struck by the key points that were outlined about the terms of reference given to the working group. The Minister asked the authors of the report to consider the barriers to implementation, how to overcome them in a cost-effective manner, and whether they could provide some good examples of best practice. I was somewhat surprised by the examples that she used. The Minister appears a little irked by the fact that someone else is trying to deal with that particular area. Hers seemed to be a rather one-sided approach. Surely, the whole idea is that these are community schools for all communities, including communities on this side of the House? It surprises me that a Minister who is so fixated with equality would not be even-handed in the examples that she brought forward.

I was also struck by the fact that the Minister said in her statement that one size does not fit all. On this side of the House, we agree that there is value in having different approaches. Indeed, it might be an argument that could be deployed in other areas of the education debate. Nevertheless, the most important point is that, in my constituency, and no doubt in others, I am struck by the huge potential of using schools to bring communities together, to engender a sense of community spirit, and to use that space effectively. There is some provision and direction in existing legislation to encourage that, but there is no specific provision to say that it must happen.

We need to find out how to address particular issues. I am mindful of the issue of caretakers, and about who will be around to look after the properties. There is a group called The Talent

Tribe in my constituency that does wonderful work in Poleglass and Twinbrook. It uses a school to teach people about art and drama. Sadly, it looks as if that facility is no longer available to the group. That brings home to me, on a personal basis, the very real lost opportunity.

The Minister has the opportunity to do something. She should recognise the contribution that Mr McNarry has made, as Lord Browne graciously indicated in his opening remarks. We are grateful to him for introducing the matter.

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

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister please do something about this very important issue?

Mr Storey: I add to the words of congratulation to my colleague Lord Browne for bringing the motion to the Assembly. It is an important issue. I also appreciate the words of Basil McCrea. The motion is in no way intended to circumnavigate the private Member's Bill that was put forward by David McNarry. We will be able to proceed with more clarity as a result of today's debate, although there has been more heat than light from the Minister, which is nothing new. The debate has reignited an important issue, and that is why Lord Browne wanted to bring the issue before the House.

Lord Browne, in his opening comments, and, indeed, other Members, referred to schools being at the heart of communities. That is easy to say, but we must admit, even in light of some of the figures that the Minister gave to the House today, that that is not always how it is seen by schools and communities. Work needs to be done with schools and communities to create a closer working relationship. I will come back to the issue of relationships in a moment or two.

Mr McNarry set out clearly the issues relating to his private Member's Bill. His words were a precursor to the Minister's confirmation that nothing has really been delivered. We have rhetoric, and we have reviews. Indeed, there are probably more reviews in the Department of Education than in any other Department. A review of capital build programmes has been going on since October 2009. The early years strategy goes on and on at a time of crisis for parents in relation to the availability of places in preschool education. However, as Mr McNarry

said, there has, unfortunately, been nothing new from the Department.

Michelle O'Neill raised the important issue of the protection of boards of governors. We need to pay attention to that and take clear guidance on it. In our various roles, we have all served, or serve, on the boards of governors of schools. The ESA Bill is dead, although some Members have not yet realised that it has had a funeral and seem to think that there will somehow be a resurrection if we lay hands upon it. We need to put that idea to bed once again. The ESA Bill contained a proposal to extend the remit of governors and to give them a sense of being community governors. As I mentioned to Dominic Bradley, we need to address how we define "community". Will governors serve all the community or, as is the case at the moment, unfortunately, only part of the community?

John Dallat spoke about after-school activities and raised the relevant issue of adult literacy. We have an ever-growing number of adults who are disenfranchised and distanced from the learning world, and a huge amount of work needs to be done in that regard. Trevor Lunn referred to common sense, but an individual once told me that common sense is not very common. That certainly seems to be the case, given the way in which the Minister has handled this issue and other issues that will increasingly come before the House in the coming weeks and months.

Mr Lunn also raised the issue of insurance, and as my colleague Alastair Ross said, he is well placed to discuss that. That is an issue for boards of governors and the authorities. We must address it practically, but none of the problems is insurmountable. Where there is a will, there is a way. However, from listening to what the Minister said today, I sense that there is little will.

2.45 pm

My colleague Michelle McIlveen referred to the "efficient, effective use of resources", and she gave examples of that. It is scandalous that local authorities are under huge pressure to provide facilities across Northern Ireland when some of those same facilities, and maybe those of a far higher standard, already exist in their areas.

We all desire collaboration between organisations. Let us face reality: there is little

collaboration between organisations such as the education and library boards, local councils and others. The public purse comes as a result of our being a part of the United Kingdom. We will remain part of the United Kingdom for many, many years to come. I have no doubt that my grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren will still be part of the United Kingdom. The money that comes from the British Exchequer needs to be used wisely and in a way that is to the benefit of the citizens of the United Kingdom. That is why we need not only the rhetoric of using better resources more efficiently but the delivery of the more effective and efficient use of resources.

When I intervened in his speech, my colleague Alastair Ross was discussing the provision of facilities in further and higher education colleges. That needs to be looked at, and I encourage Mr McNarry to consider that in his Bill.

Let me turn to the Minister. As Basil McCrea pointed out, the Minister yet again spent 10 minutes rehearsing all that we already know. We got that information through the press, the packs that were provided, our own research, and through the information that Dominic Bradley gave us on behalf of the Education Committee. The Minister has prevaricated because she does not want to deal with the issue. Let us consider the working group. It reported in March. Has the Education Committee ever heard tell of its report? Has it ever been informed that the report was given to the Minister? No. Is there a working relationship between the Minister and the Education Committee? No. Does the Minister want such a working relationship? She does so only when she asks us to beg the Finance Minister for more money on her behalf.

Here we have a Minister who tells the world that she wants to be inclusive. She tells the world that she wants equality and to ensure that all the children are provided for. What does she do when a practical issue that should not be contentious but that should unite the House, and that has already done so in the debate, is brought to her attention? She drags her feet. She prevaricates. She gets a report in March and she sits on it. She would have been better spending her time dealing with the report, because all the time that she spent in South Down was of no benefit to her in the election.

It is quite clear that this Minister —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member will resume his seat. I ask him to return to the subject of the motion.

Mr Storey: It is quite clear that this Minister, in dealing with the issue of how — *[Interruption.]* The Minister can sit and laugh and be dismissive, but I assure you that the despicable way in which she runs the Department of Education, not only on this but on every other issue, has caught up with her and will catch up with her. Although she may think that this is something to smirk about, it is not funny when there are serious issues that could be addressed if there was a bit of action from this Minister. Those issues include early years education and the provision of facilities for children by making sure that they have access to other facilities. If there was such action, we would await the outcome.

I welcome the fact that the Minister said that she will talk to other ministerial colleagues. There are issues that concern DEL and other Departments, and everybody needs an opportunity to see whether they can contribute to the delivery of something that is needed in our communities.

I support the motion.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the private Member's Bill, Community Use of School Premises Bill, and the review being undertaken by the Minister of Education into community use of schools; and calls on the Minister of Education to bring forward, accordingly, a strategy to make the facilities of schools more available for use by local communities at evenings, weekends and during the summer holidays.

3.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise the House that question 2 has been withdrawn.

Environment

Planning Service: Staffing

1. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of the Environment how many jobs are likely to be lost as a result of the redeployment of Planning Service staff. (AQO 1203/10)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): The Department and its Planning Service are experiencing a difficult financial position in 2010-11, with a shortfall in the Planning Service budget of more than £8 million. A report has been prepared on how the Planning Service can live within its opening budget allocation. That report identifies 271 posts that are now considered surplus on account of affordability. I have considered the report and released it to the Committee for the Environment, TUS and all staff in the Department.

Today, senior staff from the Department are commencing a series of face-to-face briefings with staff in each Planning Service office. Before the formal process of redeploying staff in the Planning Service can commence, a number of stages must be completed, including consultation with the Committee for the Environment, DFP's corporate HR division, the TUS, affected staff, and other Departments that will be importing DOE staff. Now that I have considered the report prepared by the Department, the process will gain momentum.

The Northern Ireland Civil Service should be able to manage the workforce reductions in the Planning Service without the need for redundancies. Surplus staff will be redeployed to other suitable posts either in the Department, in so far as possible, or in another Department. The NICS has available a range of measures that are being used as required to help to minimise or avoid the need for redundancies.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Along with other members of the Committee for the Environment, I witnessed

a presentation on this matter from Planning Service officials today. The picture that they and the trade union painted was of the Planning Service in crisis. We should be mindful that a fit-for-purpose Planning Service is needed if we are ever to get out of the present economic quagmire. Redeployments will undoubtedly lead to redundancies. Does the Minister recognise that a grave mistake has been made and that, in light of the fact that the decision will result in a Planning Service that is not fit for purpose and will lead to further crises affecting the economic recovery, the decision should be reviewed?

The Minister of the Environment: There is a difference between redeployments and redundancies, and, on Thursday 29 April, when Planning Service staff were protesting about redeployment, it was notable that 200 people in Quinn Insurance had just been told that they were to be made redundant. There is a considerable difference between redeployment and redundancy. My prompt action will, as far as possible, protect staff against redundancy and ensure that people who work in the Northern Ireland Civil Service remain in it with the pay and conditions that they currently enjoy. In very difficult circumstances for all concerned, that is positive for individuals.

Mr Dallat: Of course we accept that there is a difference between redeployment and redundancy, and I wish good luck to the Quinn Insurance people who are losing their jobs. Nevertheless, many people in the Planning Service obtained academic qualifications and have a vocation to do what they do. Given that they are to be redeployed, is the Minister sure that adequate resources remain to ensure that another Audit Office report will not describe the Planning Service as not fit for purpose?

The Minister of the Environment: The Audit Office report was carried out with the staff in place. Consequently, we are seeking to challenge how the Planning Service has been doing things. We are introducing planning reform initiatives, and we want the Planning Service to work smarter than in the past. I have no apologies to make for wanting to drive through an agenda of change in planning, because such an agenda is absolutely necessary.

With respect to individuals with planning expertise who will be redeployed elsewhere, when the economy begins to recover and there is an upturn in planning applications, we intend

to be in a position to offer planning jobs to those who wish to come back.

Therefore, we want to retain them in the Civil Service and to have the opportunity to avail ourselves of their planning skills in the future.

Mr T Clarke: I thank the Minister for the fact that we are looking at redeployment as opposed to redundancies. Given that a large number of planning applications are being held up under PPS 21, would bringing forward its review secure at least some of those Planning Service jobs for longer? Will the Minister update Members on why it is taking so long to review PPS 21?

The Minister of the Environment: The Planning Service has a deferred income. The more cases that are cleared, the more income there is — it is a chicken and egg situation. About £4.5 million in deferred income is outstanding.

I put PPS 21 to go before the Executive Committee at the end of last year. It is out of my hands and in the hands of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The First Minister has given it his clearance. The only thing holding back the putting in place of a better planning policy for rural dwellers is the deputy First Minister's office, and he can explain for himself why that is.

Planning Applications

3. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of the Environment what percentage of the target set for the processing of planning applications is currently being met by the Planning Service.
(AQO 1205/10)

The Minister of the Environment: The Planning Service made significant improvement towards achieving public service agreement (PSA) and business plan targets. Statistics that were published for the third quarter up to December 2009 showed that the agency met and exceeded PSA 2011 and 2009-2010 agency business plan targets for processing intermediate applications — 79%, up from 65% in 2008-09. Minor applications stood at 81%, up from 68% in 2008-09. The service achieved 46% towards the major target of 50% of applications determined within 23 weeks, compared to 40.5% at the end of 2008-09. Early indications are that there has been continued improvement in the major category, which should be highlighted in the end-of-year position to be published in July this year.

Mr McCartney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra.

I thank the Minister for his answer. In light of his earlier answer on the redeployment of staff, does he expect those percentages to increase or decrease as a result of redeployment?

The Minister of the Environment: I expect them to increase. I am demanding better service from the Planning Service because that is what the public demand. I know that staff will be under greater pressure, they will have to work harder and smarter, and all of that. That is what we expect of our public servants. This country is in a financial crisis. We have suffered the consequences of a global downturn. The public sector is not immune from that. Therefore, we must have higher expectations of everyone in the private and the public sector if we are all to see our way through and emerge from that crisis in better shape.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister advise Members whether all statutory agencies, such as the Environment Agency and Roads Service, are now delivering their responses to the Planning Service within the appropriate time frame?

The Minister of the Environment: Both agencies that were mentioned and others have considerably improved, but, in my opinion, they can improve further. So, yes, I will seek to put further pressure on those agencies to respond quicker. To turn the economy around and get the appropriate planning decisions out at an appropriate time, everyone will have to pull their weight including the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Roads Service.

Review of Public Administration/Local Government

4. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the review of public administration.
(AQO 1206/10)

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the local government aspects of the review of public administration.
(AQO 1207/10)

12. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the reorganisation of local government.
(AQO 1214/10)

The Minister of the Environment: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I propose to answer questions 4, 5 and 12 together.

I am continuing to take forward the Executive's decision to reshape local government in the most effective and efficient manner possible to create a strong sector that will deliver tangible benefits to ratepayers at no additional cost. At a recent meeting of the strategic leadership board, the local government sector provided me with a good foundation to take forward the creation of a service-delivery model that will provide efficiencies through regional collaboration.

It is through ongoing dialogue with the sector that, I believe, we are making positive inroads towards the reform of local government. I have been speaking to representatives of Executive parties, and, on Thursday, I will put firm proposals to the Executive with options on a way forward to deliver a local government reform programme.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. It is useful to get an update at regular intervals. I am aware that the Minister will put forward proposals at this week's Executive meeting and that he probably does not want to go into much detail on that — I am probably giving him a way out of answering my question — but will he confirm whether next year's local government elections will be contested on the current 26-county model, including the six? *[Laughter]* I thought that I would slip that one in. I meant to say 26-council model. Will the Minister confirm whether next year's local government elections will be contested on the basis of the current local government boundaries or the proposed 11-council model?

The Minister of the Environment: As is the case mathematically, six into 26 does not go, and I am not sure whether I can give away whether 26 into 11 will go on this occasion. A paper is going to the Executive. It is an absolute certainty that local government elections will be held next year. I am very keen to ensure that further powers are vested to local government, where local people can make those decisions, and that we deliver on the collaboration, which will ensure that there are real savings to the public.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is widely expected that the 2011 elections will have to proceed under the old boundaries. As the Minister well knows, those date back to 1992 and are well out of date. How can the Minister justify that under the principle of equality of votes in many constituencies?

The Minister of the Environment: Those boundaries are a matter for the Northern Ireland Office, so the question should be referred to the Northern Ireland Office Minister. Now that the Alliance Party has a Member of Parliament, it has the facility to do that.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his response. I was interested to hear him say that the results of the review of public administration would be a tangible benefit to ratepayers with no additional cost. I sat in on today's meeting of the Environment Committee, and we heard about the Planning Service and the difficulties that it faces with regard to income, trying to balance the books and the redeployment of staff. Can the Minister assure the House that there will be no extra costs as a consequence of the transition from the Planning Service to the new councils as part of the review of public administration?

The Minister of the Environment: That is exactly the case. We have to live within our means, and if we are going to transfer powers to local government, those powers have to be transferred with an appropriate and applicable budget. If we are to transfer, as is my intention, the budget to support the numbers of staff whom we are transferring does not exist. Immediately, therefore, we would have been imposing an additional tax on the hard-pressed ratepayers across Northern Ireland and in every individual council. That is not something that I am prepared to do. If I am to transfer the Planning Service to local authorities, I will seek to meet the costs of that transfer, as they currently exist, and to do so within my budget.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will recognise that the staff are an important part of any change in the review of public administration and that there has been uncertainty up to now as to whether there will be 11 or 26 councils. Will the Minister give an assurance that the staff will be informed as early as possible of whether there will be 11 or 26? Will he also detail what the work of transition committees will be if the 26-council model is maintained?

3.15 pm

The Minister of the Environment: As soon as the Executive agree the way forward, the councils and their staff will be informed. I recognise that the period of flux has been

somewhat unfair on council staff, many of whom are very good hard-working people. It is important that they are shown the proper degree of courtesy and respect and are made aware of the decisions on staffing as soon as possible.

Mr Cree: The Minister referred to the planners, and I am interested in how people with that specialised skill set could be transplanted into other clerical or administrative jobs. He may or may not wish to answer that.

Given that the Executive have been unable to agree the boundaries in time, how can the Minister justify the cost of the RPA to date? What is the Minister's best estimate of whether there will be 11 or 26 councils next year?

The Minister of the Environment: The Department is seeking to deliver savings, and if those savings cannot be delivered, the cost expended thus far cannot be justified. However, I am determined that the Department will deliver savings. I am pressing, pressing and pressing again on that, because if those savings are not delivered, the Department will have failed. The Department must deliver savings, and that is something that I intend to force. It is a simple equation: if the savings can be delivered, the costs will be justified.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has already been answered.

DOE: Legislative Programme

6. **Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his Department's legislative programme for the remainder of this Assembly mandate. (AQO 1208/10)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has four Bills going through the Assembly: the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill; the Waste and Contaminated Land (Amendment) Bill; the Local Government (Finance) Bill; and the High Hedges Bill. I plan to bring three further Bills to the Assembly before the end of the current mandate: a planning reform Bill, a local government reorganisation Bill and the draft Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill. My Department also has an extensive programme of subordinate legislation that will be made during this mandate.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Minister for his reply. Will he update the House on the current position on the change to boundaries?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member's supplementary question is perhaps more relevant to the previous question. If we are to change the boundaries, a local government boundaries Order must be introduced to give effect to new government districts. Subsequent to Executive agreement on boundary changes, the Department can proceed to do whatever is necessary thereafter.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Minister's intention to bring forward those Bills. Will he outline which, if any, of those Bills are held up in the Executive, at what stage they are being held up and why?

The Minister of the Environment: The Bill to reorganise local government is the only one that is being held up. Several issues raised by the deputy First Minister's office have not allowed it to proceed. If we were to proceed with the 11-council model, that is one of the Bills that would be absolutely necessary.

Planning Service: Staffing

7. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of the Environment what consultation was undertaken by his Department on the potential redeployment of 269 Planning Service staff. (AQO 1209/10)

The Minister of the Environment: Several stages remain to be completed before the formal process of redeploying staff from the Planning Service can commence. One such stage will be the consultation with the Committee for the Environment, the corporate HR division of the Department of Finance and Personnel, the trade unions, the staff affected and the other Departments that will import Department of the Environment staff. Now that I have considered the report prepared by the Department, the process will gain momentum.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister assure the House that those who are redeployed will be given work that matches their skill sets and that all aspects of equality law will be followed?

The Minister of the Environment: All aspects of equality law will be followed. It will be interesting, and surprising, for many to discover the skills that Planning Service staff possess in addition to their degrees in planning. Redeployment can be a good experience for many people, as it widens their skill set and

offers them a new and different perspective. When the Department is in a position to bring many of those people back to the Planning Service, they will return with an even better skill set. They will have had a completely new experience, which would not have happened had they remained in the Planning Service for their entire Civil Service careers.

Mr McNarry: The issue concerns my constituency of Strangford, so I would be grateful if the Minister could explain the thinking behind workforce planning in the Planning Service. It was recruiting staff until August 2009, but it now requires a reduction in staffing of one third. He will appreciate that that is causing great concerns.

The Minister of the Environment: When I became Minister in July 2009, I became aware of financial issues in the Department. One of the early decisions was to freeze Civil Service recruitment. Previously, positions that became vacant were filled. We have not been filling positions from August 2009, otherwise we would be in a more difficult situation than at present. Nonetheless, despite the effects of the downturn, finance had come into the Department from earlier applications, and there was a stream of work. At the peak two years ago, 36,000 planning applications were in the system, and that figure has now been reduced to 20,000, so a fair amount of backlog work has been cleared up. We now need to address the difficult issues and make difficult decisions. I have worked on that since I came into office.

Mr Bell: The public can understand that a reduction from 36,000 planning applications to 20,000 means that action is needed, but I appreciate that the situation is causing much personal pain to a number of planners and administrative staff. Let us hope that the economy picks up and the number of planning applications rises again, because the construction industry needs them. If and when that occurs, can the Minister assure the House that the people who have been redeployed can come back to the Planning Service as a priority, thereby not only retaining their employment but boosting the Northern Ireland economy?

The Minister of the Environment: I trust that, within the next year, responsibility for almost all planning decisions will rest with local authorities. I expect that, as the workload rises, Planning Service will take on further numbers of staff. We are in an economic decline, but

we could be on the cusp of turning the corner. One simply does not know. When that corner is turned and planning applications start to be made in greater numbers, I have no doubt that many of those people will be redeployed in planning. The councils will be keen to get people with a particular skill set and with particular experience to help to ensure the delivery of smooth planning in council areas.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. If the redeployment of staff in the Planning Service were to lead to the local office in my constituency being closed, it would cause great inconvenience. Will the Minister make every effort to retain staff in local offices such as the one in Enniskillen, rather than inconveniencing councillors by requiring them to go to Omagh, as has happened with many job redeployments in the past?

The Minister of the Environment: At this time, there are no plans to close local offices. We are carrying out a staff redeployment, and the offices will remain intact for the foreseeable future. If the requirement to make further savings were to arise, we would have to make further decisions on how to arrive at those savings. Closing offices is not currently one of those decisions.

Planning Service: Staffing

8. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the staffing requirements within the Planning Service and when staff will have clarity as to their future prospects. (AQO 1210/10)

The Minister of the Environment: In 2010-11, the Department and its Planning Service experienced the difficult financial position of a shortfall in the Planning Service budget of over £8 million. A report is now being prepared on whether the Planning Service can live within its opening budget allocation. The report has identified 270 posts that are now considered surplus from the point of view of affordability. I have considered the report, and I hope to release it to all the staff in the Department in the near future. Thereafter, senior staff in the Department will embark on a series of brief meetings with staff in each Planning Service office.

Mr Beggs: There has been a reduction in planning applications since the end of the

property boom in 2007. The Minister has said already today that he has noticed the Planning Service workforce and finance crisis since coming into office. Does he accept that his predecessor, in failing to workforce-plan, created a crisis not only for existing staff but turmoil for staff who have been newly recruited and additional, unnecessary HR costs? Does he agree that it would have been much better to have managed staffing during that entire period rather than to have reached the crisis point of today, where one third of staff may be redeployed?

The Minister of the Environment: A considerable number of planning applications were in the system. Had we moved to redeploy staff earlier, we would not have been in the position in which, as I told Mr McCartney, we had a much better response time than was previously the case. The fact that more planning officers have been in post than there have been applications lodged has helped us to deal with the considerable backlog. That backlog has now been dealt with. The financial circumstances are such that we move on. The previous Minister received a ringing endorsement from the public last week, and I cannot take that away.

Road Safety: Drivers over 70

9. **Mr Bresland** asked the Minister of the Environment what action he is taking to improve road safety awareness among drivers aged 70 years and over. (AQO 1211/10)

The Minister of the Environment: I am consulting on the development of a new road safety strategy for Northern Ireland, and I recognise that we cannot afford to lose sight of older people, who are among our most vulnerable road users. Over the lifetime of the new road safety strategy, the population of Northern Ireland is projected to increase from around 1.8 million in 2010 to 1.9 million by 2020, and the age profile of the population will gradually become older. The safety of older people is likely to have increasing importance to the delivery of the new strategy's objectives. We propose, therefore, to consider how we can work with partners, including the wider voluntary and community sector, to understand better the cause of collisions involving older people and develop strategies to tackle them.

Furthermore, proposed measures in the strategy, such as improvements in road

markings, signage and infrastructure, and the wider use of 20 miles per hour zones, will positively improve road safety for all road users, including older people.

I urge all those with an interest in road safety, including those who represent the interests of older road users, to consider the consultation document carefully and, in responding to the Department, to give us their views and practical proposals as to how we can make a positive contribution to the way forward for road safety. We will continue our intelligence-led, high-profile approach to addressing and improving road users' behaviours, attitudes and awareness through road safety campaigns that focus on the main dangerous behaviours that lead to serious injuries and death. We will continue to ensure that all road users receive appropriate messages about such behaviours.

Mr Bresland: Will the Minister consider the merits of a refresher course on safe motoring just before a driver reaches 70 years of age?

The Minister of the Environment: We will certainly give the suggestion consideration. However, drivers in the 70-plus category are not responsible for a large number of the accidents or deaths on our roads. Therefore, I do not want to target people in a way that may be deemed as persecuting them or making them less equal than others. Many older people may drive a little slower, but normally they drive very carefully. However, I will look at the matter, particularly in the light of road accident statistics, to ensure that all target groups are met.

Road Safety Strategy

10. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the potential savings if his Department meets the targets set out in the draft road safety strategy.

(AQO 1212/10)

The Minister of the Environment: The consultation on preparing a new road safety strategy for Northern Ireland was launched on 16 March 2010 and includes proposed targets for casualty reductions by 2020. Those targets will be measured against the average annual number of deaths and serious injuries between 2004 and 2008 of 126 and 1,111 respectively. If the first strategic target to reduce the number of people killed on our roads by at least 40% is adopted and achieved, it is estimated that

by 2020 the annual number of road deaths will have fallen to around 76. Thus, by 2020, approximately 50 fewer people will die on our roads each year.

It is estimated that, if the second target to reduce the number of people seriously injured on our roads by at least 45% is adopted and achieved, by 2020 the annual number of serious injuries will have fallen to around 611. That means that, by 2020, approximately 500 fewer people will be seriously injured on our roads each year.

3.30 pm

Detailed calculations, with estimated savings in each intervening year, are being prepared for inclusion in the final strategy. However, if the new targets are adopted and achieved, approximately 275 deaths and 2,750 serious injuries will be avoided over the period of the new strategy. It is a sad reality that, even though we are focusing on saving lives and reducing human suffering, we must also talk in money terms. The latest estimation indicates that, if the proposed new targets were achieved, the financial saving would be around £938 million. Please note that that figure is calculated using today's valuations for deaths and serious injuries and does not include slight injuries, which could take the total to well over £1 billion. I must stress that the forecasted values cannot allow for unforeseen developments and are based on the assumption that the conditions that have brought about casualty reductions to date will continue in the coming years. It must also be emphasised that predicted reductions will only be achieved by continuing efforts to improve road safety and that they are in no sense predestined.

Assembly Commission

Speaker: US Visit

1. **Mr McGlone** asked the Assembly Commission to outline the overall cost of the visit by the Speaker and staff to America for St Patrick's Day 2010, including travel, accommodation and other expenses. (AQO 1218/10)

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The total cost of the visit to Washington by the Speaker, the Clerk/ Director General and the adviser to the Speaker

for the St Patrick's Day celebrations was £6,294.99.

Mr McGlone: Are there any additional or further benefits by way of return visits, or were any further details discussed in relation to twinning projects that might be useful for this Parliament?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The support that we in Northern Ireland have received from the United States over many years and from several Administrations has been instrumental in developing a better future for Northern Ireland, politically, economically and socially. Maintaining strong links with America, including participation in events such as those, is crucial for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland. With that in mind, the Speaker formally launched the Assembly all-party USA group during his visit to Washington DC, with the stated aim of increasing engagement and understanding on issues of political, economic, social, cultural and educational interest for our people.

Stormont Estate: Newtownards Road Entrance

2. **Mr Leonard** asked the Assembly Commission what consideration it has given to opening the entrance at the main gates to the Stormont estate on the Newtownards Road before 8.00am. (AQO 1219/10)

Mr Neeson: The opening hours for the three entrances to Stormont estate are as follows: Prince of Wales Avenue, Newtownards Road, is open Monday to Friday, 7.45 am to 6.00 pm, and on Saturdays, Sundays and bank holidays, it is closed to traffic; the Massey Avenue gates are open all day, every day for vehicular traffic on business; the Stoney Road entrance is open Monday to Friday, 7.00 am to 6.30 pm, and on Saturdays, Sundays and bank holidays, it is closed to traffic. All gates to the Stormont estate are directly managed, controlled and staffed by DFP, and the Assembly Commission has no jurisdiction in the matter whatsoever.

Mr Leonard: I thank the Member for the comprehensive nature of his answer to that important question. On a slightly different subject matter, has the Commission entered into any negotiations with the estate owners with a view to increasing the space available for car parking for Assembly workers?

Mr Neeson: There is a question on car parking later, and I will deal with the issue at that stage. At present, the Assembly Commission does not have any direct influence on the opening times for the gates. However, should a definitive business need or operational requirement to change those times be identified, it could be explored further with DFP through the Office of the Keeper.

Mr Beggs: The question appears to be seeking additional hours for the opening of an additional gate. Does the Commission agree that politicians must be mindful of money that they spend to confer honours on themselves so that money is available to improve services to the public?

Mr Neeson: Finance is very important, but, as I said earlier, the issue is under the control of DFP. However, the very fact that the Massey Avenue gate is open all day every day means that there is continuous access to the grounds.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

North/South Parliamentary Forum

4. **Ms Purvis** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the establishment of a North/South parliamentary forum. (AQO 1221/10)

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Members may be aware that references to the establishment of a joint parliamentary forum involving the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Oireachtas were made in both the Belfast Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement. Since the restoration of the Assembly in May 2007, the issue has been raised with and by the Speaker on a number of occasions and has been the subject of discussions between the Speaker and the leaders of all political parties represented in the Assembly.

Building on those discussions and other discussions between the Commissions of the Assembly and the Oireachtas, the Speaker and Ceann Comhairle agreed to establish two working groups to develop proposals for such a body. The working groups have held a number of meetings independently. Additionally, officials from both legislatures have met to consider the wider operational requirements for a forum.

Both working groups met in the Dáil in November 2009. At that meeting it was agreed to convene a conference in autumn 2010 to

further assist in progressing the establishment of the North/South parliamentary forum.

Ms Purvis: I thank Reverend Coulter for his answer. I welcome the fact that there is going to be a conference in the autumn. I urge the Commission to push ahead on the issue. The only way to secure the Union is to have good relationships with our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland. It is a recognition of partition and of this devolved institution, and I encourage the Commission and the Speaker to move ahead with the establishment of the forum as quickly as possible.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: It goes without saying that we are looking forward to the forum holding its first meeting, and it is anticipated that it will meet in December 2010 or in January 2011.

Mr McNarry: What are the staffing and cost implications of a North/South parliamentary forum?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I do not have those figures to hand, but I will ensure that the Member receives them at an early date.

Assembly Staff: Pay and Grading

5. **Mr O'Loan** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the review of pay and grading of Assembly staff. (AQO 1222/10)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member on behalf of the Commission for his question. Members will all agree that staff are entitled to proper pay and conditions. The first stage of a review of pay and grading, which involved a systematic evaluation of all posts within the Assembly secretariat, has now been completed. That work was undertaken by members of staff from the Scottish Parliament. As a new member of the Commission, I have enquired to ensure that that exercise was fit for purpose.

The methodology used in respect of that exercise was not cheap. It had previously been purchased by the Commission in respect of a previous grading exercise and cost £127,000. It is now intended that a bespoke grading structure for the secretariat will be developed. In addition, a pay benchmarking exercise will be completed. That exercise has been tendered for, and the tender has been awarded at a cost of £45,400. Proposals for grading and pay will then be brought to the Assembly Commission later in the year.

Mr O'Loan: I agree that our staff should have proper pay and conditions, and to that extent I welcome the review. Does the Member have any further comments to make on the actual review process? Can he tell us what the cost implications are in relation to salary outcomes and how those cost implications are being provided for?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Everybody agrees that human resources are a critical part of the Assembly Commission's work. Staff are a highly valuable asset. In the past, I have raised various issues about staff management. I reassure the Member that, as long as I am on the Commission, the proper treatment of staff will be a priority for me and the Commission and that the processes around the treatment of staff will be as good as they can get.

There are differentials between the Assembly's pay and grading and that of other parliamentary bodies on these islands, and there may be some cost consequences for the Assembly Commission once the pay and grading exercise is complete. However, it would be premature to draw that conclusion at this stage. We will not know the full cost follow-through for members of staff in the Building until the exercise is complete.

Assembly Committees: Paper Use

6. **Mr McDevitt** asked the Assembly Commission what steps will be taken to reduce the amount of paper used in Assembly Committee packs. (AQO 1223/10)

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Assembly Commission recognises the need to reduce the Assembly's impact on the environment. The amount of paper used in the Assembly has been identified as an area where improvements need to be made. Members may be aware that the Assembly Commission recently endorsed a three-year sustainable development strategy with a supporting action plan, a key theme of which is environmental impact reduction.

In an effort to reduce the amount of paper used in Assembly Committee packs, Committee meeting papers are printed and/or photocopied double-sided. In addition, larger documents are either summarised or provided electronically in the vast majority of cases. Committee meeting

papers are also available electronically for Committee members on request. The files and subject dividers of any returned Committee meeting packs are reused, and the paper is recycled.

The main initiative under consideration to reduce further the amount of paper used is the use of e-readers to enable Committee members to view Committee packs electronically. A pilot study on the use of e-reader technology in the Assembly was undertaken in 2009. Although it was recognised that the use of e-readers had potential, difficulties were encountered with the then commercially available equipment. The Information Systems Office, on behalf of the Assembly Commission, continues to review technological advances in the emerging e-reader market, and it is hopeful that an enhanced e-reader will become available that could be trialled at a later date. The successful introduction of an effective user-friendly e-reader would significantly reduce the amount of paper used in Assembly Committee packs.

Mr McDevitt: I am happy with that answer.

Legislation

7. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Assembly Commission whether there will be adequate capacity in the Assembly to manage a potential significant increase in the number of Bills tabled before and after summer recess 2010. (AQO 1224/10)

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On a number of occasions, the Assembly Commission has been briefed on the potential for a significant increase in the number of Bills introduced in the Assembly. The Commission was also briefed on the potential operational impacts of a heavy programme and on actions being taken by the secretariat to ensure that effective arrangements are in place to support the whole process. The secretariat has, for example, emphasised to Departments the importance of introducing Bills as early as possible in the final year of the mandate of this Assembly. Committee Chairpersons have also been encouraged to engage with Departments about priorities and the handling of Bills.

The most immediate impact of the heavy programme of work will be on the Committee Office, the Bill Office and the Legal Services Unit. However, there is also likely to be a significant increase in the demand for Hansard

services for Committee meetings and plenary sittings. A heavy work programme is also likely to place additional demands on Assembly Members in Committee and plenary sessions. To date, the additional workload has been managed mainly through reviewing priorities in the relevant offices. However, monthly updates on the programme of work and any associated resource issues have been requested. On the basis of those updates, the Commission will ensure that action is taken to provide the necessary resources to support the Assembly in its role as a legislature.

3.45 pm

Mrs D Kelly: I thank Mr Doherty for his response. Will he indicate how many Bills are in the process of being brought before the Assembly? We all know that Bills have been held up at Executive level, including some difficult legislation around parades and public processions.

When the Member refers to resources, what resources does he mean? We know that the Bill Office already works very hard and is very efficient. However, the majority of resources are human resources. Therefore, are there any plans to recruit new staff for that office?

Mr Doherty: It is not possible to be absolutely definitive as to how many Bills will be introduced, as it is for the Executive and Members to make the final decisions on whether individual Bills are introduced during this mandate. However, based on its ongoing liaison with departmental officials, the Bill Office estimates that it is possible that a further 20 to 25 Executive Bills could be introduced in the coming months. It is also likely that a number of private Members' Bills and Committee Bills will be introduced.

The Commission is satisfied that the staff currently employed in the secretariat have the necessary skills and experience to support the effective scrutiny of the Bills that are likely to be introduced during the remainder of the mandate. As I said, monthly updates are produced on the programme of work and any associated resource issues. Based on those updates, the Commission will ensure that action is taken to provide whatever resources are necessary to support the Assembly in its role as a legislature.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As the Members are not in their places to ask questions 8 and 9, we will move on to the next item of business.

Private Members' Business

I CAN Centre

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

Mr Shannon: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to arrange urgent discussions to secure funding for the I CAN centre in Ballynahinch that will ensure the long-term future of this vital facility.

This is a very important motion for a great many Members, their constituencies and for the work that the centre does in the area. I will start by reading a section from the South Eastern Education and Library Board's website, as it seems to me that it knows best what exactly the I CAN centre does and how essential it is to the early years development of many children:

"The I CAN Early Years Centre at Ballynahinch Primary School was opened in November 2000 as a response to the high prevalence rates and lack of early intervention services for children with speech, language and communication difficulties. It is a partnership between the South Eastern Education and Library Board, the former Down Lisburn Health and Social Services Trust (now the South East Trust) and I CAN, the national charity for children with speech, language and communication difficulties. It was the first I CAN centre to open in N Ireland. Funding for the centre in the initial 2 years was provided by I CAN. Thereafter funding for the teacher, classroom assistant and secretarial support has been provided by the South Eastern Education and Library Board, while Down Lisburn Trust funded the speech and language therapist. In the Down Lisburn Trust area research shows that up to 42% of pre-school children present with speech, language and communication difficulties. Research also shows that one of the best predictors of success at school is effective communication skills."

A press release from the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) stated:

"We know how important it is that children with speech and language difficulties receive the right

kind of support as early as possible in order to enhance their opportunities for success at school."

It went on to state that the centre:

"is staffed by a full-time teacher, a speech and language therapist and a special needs classroom assistant. It provides a minimum of 20 places each year for pre-school children with speech, language and communication difficulties who reside in the former Down Lisburn Trust area as well as an extensive outreach service for nursery age children throughout the area."

Mr Bell: I thank the Member for pointing out those facts. Does he agree that early intervention leads to less cost in the provision of future services and less cost to the economy? I am sure that all Members here agree with that, particularly my colleague Michelle McIlveen, who is a qualified teacher. The research and evidence base confirms that, if money can be front-loaded into early years provision, money will be saved later on. Therefore, in this case, a short-term cut would, ultimately, be penny wise but pound foolish.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention. As I will outline later, that is one of the issues that we hit upon. It is better to spend £85,000 now than to spend £170,000 later.

Mr Doug Osler, the chairman of the SEELB commissioners, said that the I CAN center is an excellent example of the benefits of early intervention for children with special needs. Evaluations show that in a substantial number of cases, children's understanding of language has significantly improved greatly following a year of support at the center.

The center as well clearly shows the importance of good effective working in the area between education and health in making sure the best outcomes for children. We are keen to see more services of this nature being put in place, and we are currently looking at how resources might be used far better for early intervention work.

Doug Osler, the chairman of the SEELB commissioners, said:

"The I CAN Centre is an excellent example of the benefits of early intervention for children with special needs. Evaluations show that, in a substantial number of cases, children's understanding of language has significantly improved following a year of support at the Centre."

The Centre also clearly demonstrates the importance of effective collaboration between education and health in ensuring the best outcomes for children. We are keen to see more services of this nature being provided and are currently looking at how resources might be used more effectively for early intervention work."

He clearly recognised the need for the centre and said that funding for it was money well spent.

I will stop reading the press release, which seems purpose-written for the occasion and ask what has changed. We are all asking that question. Does the board have any less of a duty to special needs children? Not according to the DENI website, which states that:

"the statutory responsibility for securing provision for pupils with special educational needs rests with the Education and Library Boards and Boards of Governors of mainstream schools."

No change there then. Has policy changed so that nursery education and early years is now not seen as the best stage for intervention? Not according to the chief inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate, Stanley Goudie, who highlighted its importance in his report on the importance of early years provision, 'An Evaluation of the Quality of Educational Provision in Nursery Units in Primary Schools 2007–2009'. At the launch of that report, he said:

"There is a growing body of research, at international level, which emphasises the importance of early years. The right interventions early in life can help to reduce barriers to learning that may, otherwise, reduce children's longer term chances of success."

Therefore, there is still a need for early intervention, and the evidence clearly supports that.

Has something changed? Is the I CAN centre no longer value for money? It certainly still is. Seventy per cent of the children who attend the centre are able to go into mainstream schooling. All of that is provided for a small budget of £85,000, which includes three wages and the running costs of the centre in Ballynahinch Primary School. Not only does the centre cater for 20 children, but the staff go out to playgroups, nursery schools and P1 classes to deliver a service that no one can say is not real value for money. Similarly, no one can say that the centre is not providing savings for the SEELB in the cost of long-term care for those children.

If the issue is savings, will someone tell me where they are? As my colleague Jonathan Bell said, there will be larger costs later on. The educational contribution is £85,000, which is true value for money. Any closure would cost the SEELB three times the good value that they get at present. Therefore, the £85,000 cost, which includes staff wages and an office, is a bargain. It is hard to express the difference that the centre has made to the lives of children who need a little bit extra help and stimulation. They get that in abundance at the centre.

Any closure of the I CAN centre in Ballynahinch would be a false economy. Although the chief executive of the board has suggested that he has to make efficiency savings, any closure will entail considerable costs — two or three times those at present — because the children would have to have their needs catered for in mainstream schools. That would require a personal classroom assistant for each child and additional attention from the teacher, which would be to the detriment of others in the class. Therefore, you take them out of the I CAN centre and put them into mainstream education, which costs more in staffing and effort. Ultimately, that does not help the child either, and it is important that we focus on the children and their needs. Indeed, the suggestion of any closure is preposterous, because £85,000 for the I CAN centre will become £170,000-plus as a result. The Departments will spend literally thousands of pounds more by not running the centre, and where is the efficiency saving in that?

What has changed? Is the I CAN centre no longer making a difference? Well, it makes a big difference. I highlighted the education board's view and costings. It is now time to get to the most important matter, namely the difference that the centre makes to individual children. When I met the chief executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board and some parents of children who attend the I CAN centre two or three months ago, the most telling point was a three-minute video that one parent brought along to show us. That mother was in the great hall in Parliament Buildings just last week, and her wee boy has done exceptionally well. That was all because the teachers at the I CAN centre did their work and did it well.

The video showed the child when he was unable to speak. In the space of seven months at the I CAN centre, that wee boy learned not only to speak but to sing. The song that he sang that

day was 'You are my Sunshine'. His grasp of the words was truly fantastic, and my colleague Michelle McIlveen and I had the opportunity to meet the mother and young child last week. The child poignantly said to Mr Stanton Sloan of the South Eastern Education and Library Board, "Please don't take my sunshine away" and asked him to give the I CAN centre the necessary moneys. Very clearly, therefore, we put the ball at the toe of Stanton Sloan, but we also have to put the ball very clearly at the feet of the commissioners.

That young boy is simply one example of the lives that are changed every day. Children with no voice come out singing. If that is not an encouragement and reason for this debate, I would like to know what is. I have been inundated with calls from the parents of children who attend or have the prospect of attending the I CAN centre who are devastated by the thought that it will no longer operate. On their behalf and on behalf of the children who have no voice to speak for themselves, I ask for the funding to be made available. I ask for the I CAN centre to be there for the children who will need it in the next few years and in the years to come. One parent said to me that he finds it difficult to see so much money being spent teaching children French and German. Those are his words. That is not to say that we should not learn to speak French and German, yet his child cannot find the funding to be helped to speak, full stop.

I urge the Minister of Education and the Health Minister, who also has a role to play, to save themselves money in the long term. More importantly, I urge them to allow that life-changing centre — that is what it does for young children: it changes their lives, gives them opportunity and ensures that they can cope in class — to continue to help children, who need just that little bit more specialist help to reach their potential.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion, and I am happy to be part of this cross-party effort to highlight not only the issue that has come to the fore but the positive aspects and programme that the I CAN centre provides.

Jim being Jim, he has covered a lot of the statistics, so I do not propose to repeat them. Can I just take this opportunity to congratulate Jim on his recent election success? I do not

know whether your party policy says that you will be leaving here, but, if you are, you will be a loss, because you bring a lot of common sense to some of these debates. Congratulations anyway.

The motion can and should be supported by the House as a whole, because all that it asks is that the Education Minister and Health Minister get together to try to find a way forward for that vital service. I welcome the Education Minister to the debate. I have to say once again, however, that I am disappointed that the Health Minister has failed to show up. That just sends out a clear message that it seems that every Tuesday in the Assembly, with a few exceptions, the Health Minister does not weigh in. Is he telling us that he is so important and busy that he cannot give up an hour and a half of his time to attend the debate and listen to the concerns? The motion is directed at health as well as education. He should listen to Members' concerns, because we are asking for collective responsibility and a collective approach to the issues.

4.00 pm

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

As Jim said, the I CAN centre is a children's charity that wants to ensure that no child is left behind because of a difficulty in speaking or understanding. I thank the Assembly's Research and Library Service for the useful information that it provided for the debate; some of the issues jump out of it even though we are probably already aware of them. Communication difficulties are life-limiting, and a child who struggles to speak will find it hard to read, write and make friends.

Reading the research made me think of the Programme for Government, and I read through some of the issues mentioned in its introduction. The Executive stated:

"We are determined that everyone, including the most vulnerable within our society, will have the opportunity to contribute to and benefit from increased prosperity."

I know that we are not talking about the economy, but unless we have people who can deal with issues relating to the economy, there will be no change. Unless we stand up and be counted and ensure that the most vulnerable are given all available opportunities, there is an issue.

The Executive's principles, as set out in the Programme for Government, include working in the interests of everyone and working in partnership. The I CAN centre shows that partnership works. However, everyone needs to step up to the mark and be an equal partner. The motion highlights the need to take responsibility, and as I have said in numerous debates in the Assembly, society will be judged on how it treats its most vulnerable. Unless we can make a difference and show that the Assembly is making, and continues to make, a difference in people's lives, we have questions to answer.

I am a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning. In my former role as Chairperson of that Committee, I pushed for an inquiry into young people who are not in employment, education or training, and more than 52,000 young people are not in any of those sectors. Jonathan Bell's point is relevant: unless we invest now, it will cost us millions and we will have to pick up the pieces later in life. We cannot be penny wise and pound foolish.

I am conscious of my time, and I want to mention a few other issues. I am disappointed that the Health Minister is not here. Perhaps Ulster Unionist Members can tell us why. I look forward to the Minister of Education's contribution, because I noticed in the information that we were given that she had written to the Health Minister, and we will be able to find out whether she has received a response. I am glad that Margaret Ritchie is here, albeit as a private Member.

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

Ms S Ramsey: I hope that she can highlight, through DSD's policies of empowering and supporting communities, how collective responsibility can be brought to the fore so that we can secure and save the I CAN initiative. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCallister: I declare an interest. My wife is a nursery school teacher and has been on a course at the I CAN centre in Ballynahinch.

I support the centre's work. I will make it clear to Ms Ramsey why the Health Minister is not here: no one is in any doubt that this is an education matter. The Health Minister asked me to relay the message that the Health Service's speech and language therapists stand ready

to do the job, and it is up to the Minister of Education to keep the I CAN centre in place. I want to express my disappointment in her failure to find the funding for that life-changing resource.

The health trust and the Minister made it clear that they would assist funding for one year. The Minister of Education's comments last week were rather strange, in that she was trying to blame the Health Minister. That is simply irresponsible and ludicrous. This is an education matter. Maybe we need to look at other Executive funds to see how best to deal with this type of issue when it arises.

The Health Minister has fulfilled his commitment on the health obligations of the unit, and is waiting for the Minister of Education to fulfil her teaching obligations. The SEELB has the lead responsibility to ensure the funding for education staff. As such, the lack of a funding commitment of £85,000 is the direct responsibility of the Minister of Education. However, she has appeared to take a swipe at the education board, claiming that she has responsibility only for policy decisions and not for any resulting actions. That is symptomatic of the Minister of Education. I am disappointed that she is refusing to put children first yet again.

In response to a question tabled in May 2009, the Minister stated that her Department's:

"remit on special education extends to the development of strategy and policy and not to operational delivery ... DE has no role in directing ELBs as to how they determine the specific provision required to meet local needs."

Neglecting those children will have a massive negative impact on their future. There will be a cost to those children as individuals and as families, and to our whole nation. As Mr Shannon quite rightly pointed out, early intervention is key in many of these cases. Unfortunately, we are still waiting for the Minister to bring forward her nought-to-six strategy. We need to up our game and improve those services at a much earlier stage.

The refusal to grant funding to the centre is a false economy. It will distort life chances for those children long into the future. It will also do untold longer-term damage to the public purse. That is the focus. Ms Ramsey used the phrase "penny wise and pound foolish". That is what the Minister is being.

Mr B McCrea: We are together on this issue, so for the sake of being positive, will the Member confirm that the Health Minister is prepared and willing to play his part, and that he is looking for reciprocation from other people?

Mr McCallister: I am happy to give that confirmation. It is important that that be reiterated. The Health Minister is absolutely committed to this. Let us hope that, after the debate, the Minister of Education shares that commitment.

The Education Minister should not only ensure that funding is allocated for this year, she should also grant a long-term funding assurance to this important service. The I CAN centre represents significant cost savings on educational and psychological assessment, a social communication unit, replacement classrooms, assistant support and outreach teacher support. I say to the Minister of Education that we do not want a short-sighted, short-term solution. That would create longer-term, lifelong problems for those children.

As my colleague pointed out, the House has united to speak strongly in support of an excellent centre. Early intervention is exactly the type of programme that we should be encouraging. We should not let the Education Minister close it down.

Ms Ritchie: I support the cross-party motion. The I CAN centre is based in Ballynahinch and is more commonly known as Croob Park Primary School. It has been an important resource for preschool children since 2000, when it started as a pilot project. It helps children with speech and language difficulties in their formative preschool years. It is a dedicated facility that helps many young children right across the South Eastern Board area and in small communities in my constituency such as Kilcoo, Downpatrick and Drumaness. I have met many of the young families who have benefited considerably.

Funding provision has been uncertain for several years, and I recall being involved in representations to the Health Department and, in particular, the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust and, formerly, the Down Lisburn Trust to provide enhanced funding to keep this important centre going.

The I CAN centre provides an innovative and integrated approach to the development of

speech and language services for children who have difficulties. There is absolutely no doubt that the children who benefit from the facility are able to go into mainstream education with a high degree of confidence, having had their problems rectified and remedied. I found the service to be quite remarkable, and given the benefits that are derived from it, it is important that it is allowed to continue.

There has been a considerable debacle over the past number of weeks. Much of that debacle has been relayed in the local press in Down, and many of us who represent South Down have been party to those stories. Clarity must be provided on where responsibility lies. Like Mr McCallister, I understand that the Health Department is prepared to provide its component of funding for speech and language services. Indeed, the Minister stated that quite clearly in last week's 'Down Recorder'; I think that the statement was given at 4.55 pm.

The Minister of Education must now provide certainty and clarity about the funding to enable the service to continue so that it can affect goodness and improvement and ensure that the children in Down receive a service to which they are entitled and from which many of them have already benefited. It must be ensured that the provision for the 20 children who are at the centre is able to continue and that others who badly need the provision can benefit from the innovative approach.

I CAN outlines its purpose as follows:

"We are here to ensure that no child is left out or left behind because of a difficulty speaking or understanding. Nobody wants a child's potential to be wasted. It happens because communication difficulties are not visible, often mistaken for something else, or not noticed at all."

As a collective Assembly, we must ensure that there is one clear message that we will not allow the service to be abandoned, undermined or lost. My message is plain and simple: the money must be found to allow the continued funding of the I CAN centre. I ask both Ministers concerned to have ongoing discussions to ensure the continuation of the much needed facility at Ballynahinch Primary School, commonly known as Croob Park Primary School.

Mr Lunn: I could understand the dilemma if we were talking about £850,000 or £185,000. However, given that we are talking about only

£85,000, one begins to wonder what is going on. I do not want to repeat what other Members have said. The benefit of the centre is so obvious that it does not need to be repeated, but I will do so anyway.

The I CAN centre has 20 pupils. I understand that, on average, about 14 of those pupils are able to transfer into mainstream education at primary 1 level because of the treatment and training that they receive at the I CAN centre. If they were not able to do that, as Jim Shannon and Jonathan Bell rightly pointed out, the extra cost to the system in years to come would be enormous compared with the £85,000 that we are talking about. It is beyond me how such a centre can be run for £85,000, but, apparently, it can. The cost benefit is totally positive.

4.15 pm

We move on to ask who is blocking the funding. I sense some pretty high quality buck-passing here, but I have not yet heard from the Minister of Education. I hear that the Health Minister has said that he will honour his Department's component of the funding. If that is correct, it is good news. If he was here, I would expect him to say that it is the Assembly's fault for cutting his budget again.

As I understand, the Minister of Education is also willing, in some circumstances, to honour the commitment of her Department. So what is the problem? Is it with the South Eastern Board? Is it with the trust? I really do not know, but I know that the overall budget for those two Departments is around £2,000 million for the Department of Education and £7,000 million for the Department of Health. If we cannot find £85,000 out of that, for something that is so clearly invaluable to the people who use it, there is something wrong with this place. It makes joined-up government seem like a farce.

Sue Ramsey said that we are here to make a difference. Let us have the two Ministers, with the trust and the board and whoever else needs to be there, put their heads together and sort this out. It does not seem so impossible. We discussed this at the Education Committee a couple of weeks ago, and the departmental official did not blame the Minister of Health. He just said that hard times deserve hard solutions and hard decisions. This one is too hard. It impinges on people who deserve our support, not oppression.

I hope that between the Assembly and all the relevant authorities, this can be sorted out sooner rather than later.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education (Mr Storey): The Committee has received substantial representations from the staff of, and the parents of the children with speech and language disabilities who attend, the I CAN centre in Ballynahinch.

I note that the Minister of Education, in a letter of 20 April 2010 to the chairperson of the commissioners of the South Eastern Education and Library Board, acknowledged the quality of support given by the centre to these vulnerable children. I have no doubt about the level of need for this type of early intervention and the exceptional outcomes that are produced as a result of the existence of such a centre.

It is important that we place on record the position of funding to services such as the I CAN early years centre. The Committee received a letter from the Department of Education just today, which states that the statutory responsibility for securing provision for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) rests both with schools and with the five education and library boards. If time permits, I will return to that later.

The Department of Education's letter also makes it clear that the SEELB's decision to provide £83,000 to I CAN in 2006-07 and to continue that funding through to 2009-2010 was made entirely at the board's discretion. As to 2010-11, the Minister of Education has asked the board to advise her of its strategy to meet the needs of children with speech and language difficulties in early years, including those at the I CAN centre, and to meet her on this specific issue. As yet, no date has been set for that meeting. The Committee knows that the board has now responded to the Department, but it has not yet seen a copy of that response.

With respect to the funding of the centre from the Department of Health via the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, I understand from today's correspondence that the Health Minister has given a recent commitment to the ongoing funding of the centre. The Committee for Education has recently written to the Health Committee requesting that it raise the issue of the funding of the I CAN centre with its Minister and his officials. We await his reply.

I hope that that clarifies the current position in relation to some of the funding issues around the I CAN centre from an education perspective. I assure the House that the Committee will continue to scrutinise the matter until it has reached a satisfactory conclusion.

In the rest of the time allotted to me, I will speak as a Member of the House. It is disappointing for a centre that clearly benefits children to find itself in the situation that has developed. Members often use rhetoric and even, unfortunately, emotive language in the House, but I have seen and understood the contribution that is made by the centre in Ballynahinch and by those throughout Northern Ireland. In light of that, it would shame us, as political representatives, to use the issue to score points off the Minister of Education or the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety just because it is convenient for Members on each side of the House to deny responsibility. We all have a responsibility to ensure that every effort is made on this and other issues, and it is particularly important that children with specific needs are given priority. It is a shame, therefore, that the Minister of Education allowed the review of special educational needs to go out to public consultation.

In correspondence, the Minister refers to the fact that the legislation does not give the Department of Education any role in the identification and assessment of children with special educational needs or any power to intervene in the process. What is the Minister trying to do by changing the legislation under the current SEN proposals? She is trying to interfere in the very issue of which she now washes her hands. Therefore, I call on the Minister to ensure that she deals with that issue. It should be remembered that she was happy to have a go at removing funding from prep schools in the same area. She told us that that was not an issue of money, but of equality of access.

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: It is an issue of equality of provision for children who have grave needs —

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: The Minister would be better to listen and deliver on this occasion.

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

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am glad that the spokesperson for the DUP rose to speak in this debate before I did. Following his contribution to the previous debate, I was going to have strong words with him during this one. However, in the earlier part of his contribution to this debate, his remarks were generally positive.

The debate is not about party political point scoring — Members on the Benches opposite failed to recognise that — but about the children who attend the I CAN centre and their parents. They do not care what John O'Dowd thinks of Mervyn Storey, what Mervyn Storey thinks of John O'Dowd, or what the two of us think of the two ventriloquists' dummies who sit in the corner and speak on behalf of the Health Minister. They want funding to be directed towards the I CAN centre, but we operate in a system that is governed by statutory regulations. The stringent funding mechanisms under which Departments work are set out in reams and reams of regulations.

I listened closely to what Mr Allister said. When I first read the motion, I welcomed the fact that people had been sensible by putting their names to a motion that called on both Departments to examine the way forward. However, on several occasions, Mr Allister claimed that the I CAN centre was an education matter. It came to the stage at which I thought that the Member doth deny too much. Those Members of a party whose Health Minister failed even to turn up to the debate cannot simply act as ventriloquists' dummies and tell us what they believe that he might have said. I do not know whose hand is stuffed where, but both Members have an awful habit of putting their feet in each other's mouths. If they are serious about the I CAN centre, they should come to the Chamber to try to work out a resolution to its funding problem. Contributions such as theirs do not solve that problem.

I am amazed that the Minister for Social Development, who has left the Chamber, put her name to a motion that calls for extra funding to be provided in a certain area. That Minister has a significant budget, and if her concern is as genuine as was claimed during her speech, she

could put funding towards the centre through a number of funding streams in the Department for Social Development. The Department for Social Development has some responsibility, and the development of our children and their needs is a social responsibility.

Mr McDevitt: I wonder whether the Member will address the motion or spend his five minutes dealing with what Members said about other Members and what Members might do about something that is not their responsibility. I would genuinely like to hear what he thinks about the I CAN centre.

Mr O'Dowd: I know that you are still new to this place, but this is the debating Chamber. There is debate back and forth with other people's points of view. Members may read a prepared speech if they so wish, but I do not do that. I debate the issues at hand.

Clearly, the I CAN centre has excellent special needs provision for the children who need it. We can make speeches and demand that this or that Minister funds the centre, and then we will all go home, but the parents and children will still be left without funding. The motion, which I support, calls for the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to work out a funding stream for the I CAN centre. The parents, children, teachers and support network around the centre deserve a wee bit more respect than Members coming here, making sanctimonious speeches on the back of an election campaign, after they signed the motion in the first place, and calling for funding when they are in charge of a significant budget for social development.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No. If the Health Minister wants to say something, he can come and say it.

I have no doubt that all Members will support today's motion. However, they should not simply leave the Chamber and think that they have done their bit for the I CAN centre and have a clear conscience. Let us all go back to our ministerial colleagues and say that £85,000 is not a major amount of money. I am sorry to have a dig at the Alliance Party, but as someone once said, that party would spend the entire block grant within the first two weeks of an Assembly. It all adds up, but we should all go to our ministerial colleagues and say that the Executive, at their next meeting, should discuss

how they fund projects such as the I CAN centre to ensure that the good work in such centres continues. Party political broadcasts should be left at home.

Ms S Ramsey: There are surpluses in colleges. There is plenty of money there.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that all remarks should be made through the Chair. For the Hansard report, we want to correct Mr O'Dowd: it is Mr McCallister not Mr Allister.

Miss McIlveen: I support the motion. The issue has become emotive over the past number of weeks. It has concerned me deeply, and I have spoken to some parents since the I CAN centre was notified of the withdrawal of funding by the South Eastern Education and Library Board.

Last week, many Members and I had the pleasure of meeting some of the children who have benefited from the fantastic service that has been offered and provided by the I CAN centre in Ballynahinch. My colleague Jim Shannon has already told the story of the little boy whom we met in the Great Hall. It was particularly heart-warming when he sang 'You Are My Sunshine' into my ear. It really made my day; such a sad life that I lead. Last year, before that little three-year-old boy attended the I CAN centre, he could not communicate, but he gave us a wonderful rendition last week. As a result of attending the I CAN centre, he will be able to participate in mainstream education. An average of 71% of the children who attend the I CAN centre are able to access mainstream education as a result.

The Minister of Education often speaks about inclusivity and equality, but what excludes a child more than the inability to communicate? What perpetuates inequality more? Children with the most complex and severe speech, language and communication difficulties attend the centre. As my colleague said, early intervention is absolutely vital.

Research shows that, where speech and language difficulties are resolved by the age of five or six, children go on to develop good literacy skills.

4.30 pm

If we want to break things down into the coldness of money, by reducing educational psychology assessments and allowing children to enter mainstream education, the centre's

work represents a cost saving in the long term. As my colleague Jim Shannon stated, the unit caters for 20 preschool children for four days a week, at a total cost to the board of £85,000. Earlier, there seemed to be some confusion over whether that amount was the entire budget. Obviously, that is not the case. The Health Department came up with the remainder. The I CAN centre is not a luxury service, and it is not a matter of trimming the fat to meet budgetary targets. The centre is an essential front line service that is all about inclusivity. Thanks to the centre, dozens of children now benefit from having enhanced social skills, which have an incredibly positive impact on their lives. In essence, that is what education is all about.

This should be a prime example of two Departments working together, yet staff working at the facility were told that funding will be removed by the end of the school year. Even worse, we have witnessed the battle of the press statements between the two Departments over which one has ultimate responsibility. I have no difficulty in supporting the motion, but I am astounded that, on 11 May, the matter has not been resolved.

Regardless of what Mr O'Dowd said when he tried to pass the buck around various Departments, we have a clear commitment from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The relevant trust will continue to fund its part, but, as yet, we have had no commitment from the Minister of Education and her hand-picked commissioners. It is that lack of funding that threatens this vital centre. Only three years ago, the chairman of the commissioners said:

"The I CAN Centre is an excellent example of the benefits of early intervention for children with special needs."

Furthermore, he was:

"keen to see more services of this nature".

It seems incredible, therefore, that the centre now faces closure. Given that the Minister of Education talks about the invaluable work that the centre does for children, and if the benefits have a value that it is too great to measure, instead of standing by like Pontius Pilate, why can she not ensure that funding be found?

Mr Shannon: Will the Member give way?

Miss McIlveen: I have only a few seconds left.

Mr Shannon: You will get an extra minute. Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker, that is not for me to say.

The Member is quite right, but, as well as seeking the short-term continuance of the service, we must also look to a five- to 10-year programme. It is very important that that happens.

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

Miss McIlveen: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank my colleague for his intervention.

Obviously, we do not want to have to rehearse the same issue next year.

As Mr Storey said, there is an amazing similarity to the prep school issue. The Department of Education always seems to seek short-term balance sheet gains, without considering long-term budgetary costs. In the long term, it is quite obvious that the cost to the education budget of losing the I CAN centre will be much greater. Common sense needs to prevail.

Finally, perhaps the Minister will give the House a definitive date for the publication of the early years strategy.

Mr B McCrea: I would be grateful, Mr Deputy Speaker, if you would clarify to colleagues across the way that Mr McCallister is not the leader of the TUV. In fact, he is my colleague. It is good to hear from all the MPs in here. Hopefully, they will all be away from here soon, leaving just Caitríona and me to debate things and to get down to some real nitty-gritty.

Mr Lunn asked whether the following, from a letter to the Committee for Education, is true:

"It would be the Department's view that this project requires funding from both the health and education services and Caitríona Ruane has welcomed the Health Minister's recent commitment to ongoing funding."

That seems to me to be fairly definitive.

I am extremely disappointed by Mr O'Dowd's disposition. This did not have to be a cantankerous debate. Many of us met the parents and children from the I CAN centre in the Great Hall. In fact, I seem to remember that Mr McCarthy managed to completely wreck the entire security system by bringing those people in through the gates.

Mr McCarthy: No problem.

Mr B McCrea: No matter: it was an important issue, and I notice that all of the Members who have spoken in the debate were there. I am not sure whether Mr O'Dowd was at that gathering, but what came through loud and clear was that the people, parents and politicians who were there were not playing politics: they were there because the I CAN service really matters to them.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: Is it not the case that the Minister of Education is playing politics with the South Eastern Education and Library Board in that she is refusing to put the board in place and that commissioners, not elected representatives, are making decisions?

Mr B McCrea: The Minister makes — sorry, elevation all round — the Chairman of the Committee for Education makes an interesting point. In 2006-07, the Department of Education was able to release £83,000, which the South Eastern Education and Library Board used to fund the I CAN centre. The Minister of Education has requested a meeting with the commissioners to find out their strategy. So far, there is no date for such a meeting.

I will not play politics with the I CAN centre. It is disgraceful that Members on the opposite Benches attempt to prevaricate and frustrate the whole process by trying to bring petty party politics into the debate.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I will not give way, because the Member would not give way here. In a proper debate, the issue involves the simple sum of £85,000 that the Minister of Education can and should find. It is not a huge sum of money, but it is really important to the children, parents and staff at that school. There is no disagreement among us about the value of such intervention. There should be no disagreement about the necessity to find a solution. All that we are asking for here, and I gave this commitment to those parents with whom I talked in the Great Hall, is for Members to talk to their respective Ministers and ask them whether there is funding. Sue Ramsey was among the people there. I told her that I could make that commitment. I stood there and I did —

Ms S Ramsey: I am from the liberal wing of my party: I think that is why the Member gave way.

Does he agree that it may be useful for him to ask his party leader to release the money for pastoral care in colleges that has not been spent? Maybe that money should be released and used for better purposes.

Mr B McCrea: I gave way because the Member usually gives way to me when I ask her to do so, which is fair in a debate. I think that there is common cause on this issue. I do not believe that we need fall out on it. I am disappointed about the tone that comes across.

Ms S Ramsey: *[Interruption.]*

Mr B McCrea: No, I am being serious: there is general agreement in the debate. I am completely won over by arguments about communication and the impact that it has on people in all walks of life. I know that there must be early intervention and that such intervention makes a huge difference for people. We should be able to find a relatively small sum of money without falling out on this issue.

My colleague and I were very positive, but I think that we may have been misinterpreted by Mr O'Dowd. There is a responsibility on the part of the Health Minister, which my colleague Mr McCallister dealt with, and a responsibility on the Education Minister, which I have dealt with. What we were clearly and genuinely saying was: please, Education Minister, can you find a sum of money that you can give to those poor parents, teachers and children? It is a worthwhile project; it is worth doing and worth doing now. Please, please, please will you do something? I need say no more; I just urge the Minister of Education to have some humility and some conscience and to help those children.

Mr Donaldson: I congratulate my colleague the Member for Strangford Mr Shannon for securing the debate along with a cross-party group of MLAs who supported the motion. I also congratulate him on his recent victory in the Strangford constituency. I look forward to sitting with him on the green Benches in the House of Commons.

I am not sure whether this will be my last speech in the Assembly before Basil has his wish and the place is rid of Members of Parliament. If it is my last speech in the House, for the time being, there could not be a better subject on which to speak, because children with special needs has been an issue close to my heart for many years. Above all else,

I enjoy my work as a governor of Parkview Special School in Lisburn. It is a great privilege for a public representative to be involved in that kind of work and working on behalf of children with special needs. In fairness to the Minister, it is an issue to which she has given a degree of priority in her Department. I echo the sentiments of the Member for Lagan Valley Basil McCrea that this debate should not be rancorous. I think that there is consensus across the House that we want to help the I CAN centre; we want to keep the centre open.

Like all colleagues, I have received representations from a number of my constituents. The I CAN centre is in Ballynahinch, which was formerly in South Down, but is now in the Strangford constituency. A number of parents from the Lagan Valley area have had their children attend the I CAN centre or hope to have their children attend it in the future. I want to quote from a letter that I received from a parent in Moira whose child attended the I CAN centre. The parent states:

"When our daughter was 18 months old, we were concerned that her speech was not developing at an appropriate rate. We raised concerns with our health visitor and soon after, our daughter attended language therapy at Lisburn. Although a very bright child, her difficulties were very complex and she was recommended for a place at I CAN.

Although I was a primary school teacher myself for 16 years, I had no idea how to support my daughter, as all conventional methods of support had failed. She was totally mute outside of the house and her speech at home was unintelligible. The I CAN team changed all of that and despite the fact that they diagnosed in her a severe disorder of her sound system, she started making good progress after a few months of intensive therapy. The team also provided parents with effective and innovative training which was invaluable in the support of our children."

The parent went on to say:

"By the end of her Nursery year, our child had finally mastered speech and was able to transfer to mainstream primary school that September, with minimum support required in the community. She has excellent literacy skills, is very musical and is a very confident P1 child.

I am positive that our daughter would have been condemned to years of anguish if she had not received this expert help when she did."

Those words speak louder and more intelligibly than I ever could in explaining the benefits of the I CAN centre and the life-changing impact that it has on the children who attend it.

I add my voice to those of other Members who have spoken in appealing to the Minister. I recognise the financial constraints on her Department, and I know that it is not easy. She has got to prioritise and look at how to spend a limited budget. However, there is no doubt, as the Member for Strangford highlighted in his opening remarks, that if the Department and the board do not provide the funding and the I CAN centre is closed, there will be a net cost to the system in the future. Children who benefit from early intervention can go on to mainstream education, and the cost of providing them with specialist support is not as great as the costs that will be required if we lose this expertise.

I appeal to the Minister to see and examine with her counterpart, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, whether there is any way that funding can be found to sustain the I CAN centre, not only for one year — I want her to look at the longer-term sustainability of the centre. I believe that it would be money well spent. On behalf of the parents whom I represent and the children whom they care for, I hope that the Minister will be able to get a positive result. If she does, she will have support across the House.

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

4.45 pm

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I had hoped that the Health Minister would have chosen to respond to the debate, and I am disappointed that he has not. The reason I have decided to respond is that regardless of the difference of opinion — and there clearly is one in the House on the issue of responsibility — we are talking about young children with special needs, and I place children with special needs at the top of my agenda.

Thug mé cuairt ar Ionad luathbhlianta I CAN ar Bhunscoil Bhaile na hInse agus chonaic mé le mo shúile féin an obair ríluachmhar atá á déanamh do pháistí óga.

I visited the I CAN centre at Ballynahinch Primary School, and I have seen for myself the invaluable work that it does for young children.

As Minister of Education, I have the responsibility for the management of the annual education budget. My primary role is in setting education policy, putting legislation in place to support that policy and ensuring that it is adequately resourced. My Department's vision is to ensure that every learner fulfils her or his potential at each stage of their development, and that is particularly important with regard to children with special educational needs. I am determined that resources be targeted at those with the greatest need.

To ensure that local needs are identified and met, roles and responsibilities are delegated to bodies outside the Department: the education and library boards. In the area serviced by the I CAN centre, the South Eastern Education and Library Board has a statutory responsibility to identify and make provision for children with special educational needs, and it is funded by my Department to do so.

Tá freagracht reachtúil ar bhoird oideachais agus leabharlainne riachtanais oideachais speisialta páistí a shaináithint, a mheas agus le riar orthu.

Education and library boards have the statutory responsibility for identifying, assessing and meeting the special educational needs of children. Under special education legislation, the education and library boards have a statutory duty to identify those children who have attained the age of two and who have, or probably have, special educational needs, and, having done so, to determine the special educational provision that any learning difficulty the child has calls for. It is the education and library boards that are best placed to identify and respond to local needs in their areas. In the current financial year, the block grant to the SEELB is £78.7 million.

The I CAN centre provides speech and language services for up to 20 preschool children and also provides support for parents. I am advised by the South Eastern Education and Library Board that the I CAN centre opened for pupils in September 2000 in agreement with the SEELB, the Down Lisburn Trust — now the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust — and the I CAN charity. The I CAN charity provided initial grant aid for two years. I understand that, following this, the SEELB funded the teacher, the classroom assistant and some clerical assistance and resources. Down Lisburn Trust

— now part of South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust — funded the speech and language therapist. The board and trust continued to jointly fund the project following that period.

Due to major financial expenditure, the South Eastern Education and Library Board sought funding from the Department for the I CAN centre in 2006. The Department allocated £83,000 to each education and library board in 2006-07 to meet pressures relating to special educational needs provision. It was a matter for each education and library board to determine the deployment of that funding, but the Department noted that the SEELB would use that funding for the I CAN centre. It was made clear that that funding was non-recurrent — for one year.

I understand that in 2007-08 the SEELB funded £80,000 towards the I CAN centre and the trust funded a speech and language therapist. In 2008-09, the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust provided £50,000 in addition to continuing to provide the speech and language therapist, with the South Eastern Education and Library Board contributing £35,000. In 2009-2010 the trust provided £80,000 in addition to funding the speech and language therapist, with the South Eastern Education and Library Board providing £8,000. The trust, therefore, as funded by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, is the project's major funder.

The chairperson of the South Eastern Education and Library Board commissioners wrote to me before the Budget for 2010-11 was confirmed by the Executive. The chairperson requested additional funding to sustain the I CAN centre for the 2010-11 academic year before knowing Budget decisions. In that letter, he advised me that:

“At a recent meeting with senior officials from the trust, the SEELB was advised that due to financial pressures the SEHSCT would not be in a position to continue funding”.

The chief executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board had previously written to departmental officials in January 2009 requesting additional funds for I CAN, at which time it was stressed that funding of local special educational needs provision such as I CAN is a matter for the board in its prioritisation of its budget. I wrote to the chairperson, reiterating that it is the responsibility of each

education and library board to identify local need and to allocate funding that best meets identified special educational need in its area.

I also asked the chairperson to advise me of the SEELB's strategy to meet the needs of all children in the board area with speech, language and communication difficulties in early years and to meet to discuss those issues. The chairperson has since responded with details of the funding provided by the SEELB to meet speech and language and social communication needs, but he has not detailed its strategic approach. I will be raising that again as a matter of urgency.

This year, the SEELB has received approximately £300,000 of earmarked funding for speech and language provision. Since 2001, the education and library boards have received an additional £9 million of earmarked funding to improve speech and language provision, including early intervention programmes. I note that the SEELB invests a considerable part of its earmarked and block grant budget allocation on speech, language and communication provision, but it is a matter for the board to determine its priorities from those allocations.

I recognise fully the importance of early intervention for children with speech and language difficulties. That is why, in 2001, my Department initiated the early intervention for children with learning difficulties project to promote collaboration between education and library boards and health and social care trusts in delivering early intervention. The aim of that project was to minimise difficulties in acquiring literacy skills for children who enter school with language delay by concentrating on the delivery of a more efficient and effective service for children at Key Stage 1. The project was designed to build partnerships in order to facilitate ongoing, effective collaboration between teachers and speech and language therapists. Each education and library board established a project in its area, and evaluation showed positive outcomes in the effective working between health and education and positive results in the outcomes for children's language and communication skills.

The delivery of speech and language therapy is the responsibility of health and social care trusts, and I have written to the Health Minister to acknowledge the funding provided by the South Eastern Health and Social Care

Trust to I CAN. I have also asked the Health Minister to advise of his Department's strategic direction on that type of provision with a view to departmental officials and health and education providers continuing to work together to ensure that the needs of children who present with speech, language and communication difficulties are met.

I have also written to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Michael McGimpsey, to request a meeting. To date, I have not received a response, and I look forward to his response. I am prepared to meet Minister Michael McGimpsey on the matter.

My Department has been working with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, along with other key stakeholders, in the development of a speech, language and communication therapy action plan. The action plan is in response to the review by the Commissioner for Children and Young People in 2004-05, which raised concerns about the provision of speech and language therapy and led to the commissioning of the speech and language therapy task force report.

I am advised by the Health Minister that he anticipates that the draft action plan will be published and go out for full public consultation this summer, and I look forward to his response. Officials from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education have been working closely on the action plan, which will lay down the direction of the further development of speech and language services over the next two years and acknowledge the importance of joint working and the need for services to be developed in a multidisciplinary model designed around the child. The I CAN centre is an example of effective early intervention and multi-agency working. There are other examples of successful multi-agency preschool and early intervention provision across the North of Ireland that is funded from the boards' allocated budgets.

There has been a deliberate attempt to mislead parents and the public over where responsibility rests for the funding of I CAN. I reiterate that I am prepared to meet the Health Minister to discuss the issue, and I hope that that the Minister's two colleagues will bring that message back to him. I look forward to a response to a request for a meeting. I am also prepared to meet the Minister for Social

Development, even though she did not request a meeting; maybe her colleague on the SDLP Bench will tell the Minister that. In the run-up to an election, she signed this motion to discuss this important matter further.

I want to mention the example of the Welcome Service, which is a preschool speech and language centre that is funded by the Western Education and Library Board from within existing allocations. The Western Education and Library Board advises that the service was designed to fit seamlessly with other arrangements for school-age children and, working in collaboration with the Western Health and Social Care Trust, to provide more opportunities for inclusion and to allow staff to increase outreach support and thereby provide greater access to a greater number of children.

I have striven to ensure that as many resources as possible are directed to the provision of special educational needs. It is not appropriate for my Department to specify how education and library boards prioritise their funding. However, I assure Members that I am happy to meet my ministerial colleagues, the Minister for Social Development and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, on the matter. I assure Members that I will continue to prioritise children with special educational needs.

Mr McCarthy: I support the motion. I am delighted that it has been signed by Members of all the different parties in the Assembly. That being the case, it is vital, indeed imperative, that a solution to this serious problem is found immediately. I am angry and disgusted that the authorities seem to have turned their backs on the I CAN centre in Ballynahinch. I am disappointed that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is not in the Chamber. In fact, I was led to believe earlier that the Minister of Education would not be here, and I raised that matter angrily at the Business Committee meeting. I am delighted to say that somebody must have told her, and she has —

Ms Anderson: She always intended to come.

Mr McCarthy: Pardon? Well, she has graced us with her presence, and I am delighted to see her.

Like other Members, I have been to the I CAN centre in Ballynahinch to see at first hand the excellent work that is being done by all concerned and to see how it has benefited so many children. The I CAN centre has

been operational for over 10 years and has a fantastic success rate. It would be almost criminal for any Member to deny I CAN its annual ring-fenced funding.

As has been mentioned earlier, the Programme for Government was introduced in the Assembly by the former First Minister, and he quite rightly said that the children in Northern Ireland are our future and must be supported. Only yesterday, in response to a question on children's issues, junior Minister Kelly told the Assembly that:

"Children and young people remain a priority for Ministers and the Executive." — [Official Report, Vol 51, No 4, p187, col 2].

That was repeated yesterday. If the abandonment of the I CAN centre goes ahead, all these weasel words will be hypocritical. That will lessen the credibility of the Executive and our Assembly.

5.00 pm

Mr Donaldson: Having listened to the Minister's response, I think that it seems the problem is that Ministers are not talking to each other. Is the Member willing to join me and other Members on a cross-party basis in seeking to convene a meeting, which we would invite Ministers to attend, to see whether we can resolve the issue? Frankly, the parents and children deserve better.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for his intervention. I will gladly join with anyone to see the decision reversed and the sooner the better, because, as I understand it, redundancy notices have been placed on the staff. That situation cannot be allowed to go any further.

I have already been in touch with interested authorities, and it seems to me that each is almost blaming the other for not sorting out the problem. That is simply not good enough. I would like to ask the Minister of Education a few questions. She may well have answered them, but they are important questions. If members of her staff are about, they can forward a reply to me. In a reply to me, Minister Ruane said that funding had been given to the board for the continuation of the I CAN centre. If that is the case, why is the chairman of the board asking the Department to have earmarked funds to support the I CAN centre? Who takes responsibility for funding the centre? I respectfully ask the Minister to seek reasons, if any, why the SEELB chose not to fund the I

CAN centre, when the Western Board, which the Minister mentioned, continues to provide yearly funding for its preschool speech and language nursery.

In my correspondence with the South Eastern Trust, it stated that its responsibility was to provide speech and language therapists, which it did and is still willing to do. That is encouraging, and we are grateful for that commitment. Unfortunately, the trust informed me — I think that the Minister referred to this — that it does not have any non-recurrent funding for this year. That is where the problem lies, and it could be sorted out if we had a joint meeting with the Ministers. The Minister for Social Development has been brought in to the debate. If she is willing to help — I am sure that she is — she is welcome to join us to try to get the matter sorted out now.

Mr Donaldson: The Member will be aware that the children who attend the I CAN centre are entitled to preschool places and that, if they cannot attend that centre, they will be entitled to apply for places elsewhere which are funded, presumably, by the Department or the board. Is he aware that, in the Lisburn area, there are a large number of parents whose children have not been able to obtain preschool placements, with the result that the closure of the I CAN centre will simply compound an existing problem?

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for his intervention. What he said is common sense. It would be absolutely ridiculous to allow the I CAN centre to close. It simply cannot happen.

Ms S Ramsey: This has been a useful discussion and debate. I am conscious that we have had a response from the Minister of Education, which has probably moved the debate on a step further. However, will the Deputy Speaker ensure that the Minister for Social Development and the Health Minister receive a copy of the Official Report of the debate? At least they will get a feel for what Members were saying today, and we will get an idea of what they are saying.

Mr McCarthy: It makes sense for us to do that. I am sure that the Deputy Speaker will agree with that.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCarthy: I have only 10 minutes, and I have to respond to all you guys, so let me hammer on. I have been too generous.

The fourth question is to ask the Minister to explain how the SEELB will meet its statutory responsibilities for children with speech and language difficulties in their early years. As Jeffrey said, children are undergoing statutory assessment of their need for the I CAN centre's preschool speech and language support. If the I CAN centre is allowed to close — it must not be — how on earth is the board going to provide for those children at the level that they require?

It has been proven, as was mentioned earlier, that the cost benefit to the Executive and the SEELB could be up to £125,000 per annum. Surely it makes sense to save that money and, at the same time, provide the funding so that the I CAN centre can continue its excellent provision. Ministers must show the worth of the Assembly and withdraw the redundancy notices as soon as possible.

I will try to respond to as many contributors to the debate as possible and as quickly as possible. Jim Shannon proposed the motion and explained to Members the original working of the I CAN centre, its success and the need for its retention, on which all Members agree. Sue Ramsey acknowledged that the Programme for Government made children a priority. That is absolutely right, and it was reiterated yesterday by junior Minister Kelly. John McCallister defended the Health Minister and blamed the Education Department. All Ministers should come together and sort it out. John spoke about early intervention; we all agree on that. If the I CAN centre goes, our children will be betrayed.

Margaret Ritchie, who has left the Chamber, spoke about children's progress to mainstream education. That is very important; indeed it is the very essence of the existence of the I CAN centre. My colleague Trevor Lunn mentioned the issues of cost and health non-recurring funds, which represent small change compared with the multimillion pound budget that Trevor mentioned. Mervyn Storey, who is not here, spoke of the correspondence among the various bodies. Answers need to be forthcoming. I hope that Ministers can help. I was delighted to hear the Chairperson of the Education Committee moving away from point scoring.

John O'Dowd queried the ability of the Minister for Social Development, if any, to contribute

to the support of the I CAN centre. I support John: if Margaret Ritchie can help, we should all encourage her to do so.

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

Mr McCarthy: Michelle, Basil, Jeffrey and the Minister — every one of us in the Assembly — are fully supportive of the retention of the I CAN centre. We know the work that it has done, and, as I said earlier, it would be criminal for it to close. That must not happen. Let us prove that the Assembly works.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to arrange urgent discussions to secure funding for the I CAN centre in Ballynahinch that will ensure the long-term future of this vital facility.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

B8 Downpatrick to Newry Road

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

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Business Committee for agreeing to list the important issue of upgrading the Downpatrick to Newry road for an Adjournment debate. I also thank the Minister for Regional Development for his attendance. I wish to place on record an apology from my South Down colleague Margaret Ritchie MP. Our new South Down Member of Parliament is off to London this evening on official business, so she cannot be with us. I know that Margaret is fully au fait with the issues under debate, and she has asked me to place on record her full support for the upgrade.

The road that I referred to is 30 miles long and runs right across the centre of south Down, from the city of Newry to the county town of Downpatrick. To strengthen my case for an upgrade of the road, rather than referring to the city of Newry I should have said that the road extends from Downpatrick to the main Belfast to Dublin route, to the railway station at Newry and to the A2 link with Warrenpoint port. To reach those modern facilities, lorry drivers, bus drivers and motorists have to endure a time-consuming and hazardous journey to get to both Newry and Downpatrick and to the main eastern corridor or to join the Enterprise train at Newry or the regular bus services to and from Dublin.

There are literally hundreds of dangerous bends along the 30-mile route, and the many side roads that exit on to the main road simply add to that danger. I recently carried out a survey of the number of exits on the subject route, and I was surprised by the findings. Excluding private dwellings, business properties, churches, schools, sporting venues and gateways leading to farmyards and farmland, 132 adapted roads lead directly on to the Downpatrick to Newry road. Many of the exits from the side roads are blind ones, because of the lack of proper

visibility splays. Motorists entering the main road from those treacherous junctions take their life in their hands and pose a risk to other people's lives as they gamble with their safety and that of others. For example, the Ballyweely Road enters the B8 between Hilltown and the square at Kilcoo. The Minister should seek a report on that junction to see exactly what I mean. While I am speaking about that area, I wish to thank the Roads Service and a co-operative landowner for the great improvements that were carried out recently at the point where the Kinghill Road enters the main Hilltown to Castlewellan section of the B8. That is a fine example of how beneficial such improvements can be.

The Newry to Downpatrick route is identified in two main sections, namely the A25 and the B8, as well as a short section of the A2, which is included where it passes through the village of Clough. It services a large hinterland around Downpatrick, and it passes through the built-up areas of Clough, Annsborough, Castlewellan, Kilcoo, Hilltown and Mayobridge. It is one of Northern Ireland's busiest tourist routes, which is understandable given that it is one of the gateways to the Mourne, to St Patrick's Trail and to the many valuable assets that the area has to offer to the tourist industry.

There are major hospitals at either end of the major route, namely the Downe Hospital and Daisy Hill Hospital. It should not be necessary for me to point out the benefits that the upgrade of that road would bring to the patients who attend those hospitals, particularly those who are rushed to them on life-saving missions.

In the past, I have often attempted on behalf of constituents to deal with refused planning applications for sites fronting the B8, only to be told by the Planning Service that the Department of the Environment had identified the road as a protected route and that approvals could not, therefore, be given. If one Department finds it necessary to protect what is in its care, the Minister for Regional Development must have an obligation to protect that which is in his care, namely the users of the main Newry to Downpatrick route.

I know only too well the constant demands made on the public purse, and I, therefore, do not expect an overnight upgrade of the road. However, I ask the Minister to consider my request for an upgrade to be made in

three stages. First, I ask the Minister to immediately introduce safety measures at the most dangerous locations along the road. For example, 500 m south of the series of bends known as the Seven Sisters in the townland of Ballydulany, which is less than 1 mile from the centre of the village of Mayobridge, there is an accident black spot that is causing great concern locally. Serious accidents have occurred and continued to occur at that spot. Lives have been lost at the location, and local people fear that more lives will be lost if something is not done to reduce the dangers that exist there. There are many other dangerous locations along the subject route that could be made safer, if only by applying rumble strips or adequate warning signs. I ask the Minister to have his Department draw up a list of the most dangerous spots immediately, with a view to addressing those problems and fears. Secondly, the Department for Regional Development should put in place a programme of work to gradually remove, in a prioritised manner, the many bad bends and dips in the road that are a constant hazard to road users. Thirdly, the Downpatrick to Newry road should be upgraded to a standard that is in keeping with its modern-day usage and to address any subsequent dangers. I know that that will require time and money, but it will never happen if it is not included in a strategic programme of work.

I, therefore, earnestly beg the Minister to set about drawing up a major works programme for the B8 and A25 roads from Newry to Downpatrick, because only when that becomes a proper working document can any real efforts be made to advance the proposals therein. I again thank the Minister for his attendance, and I look forward to his initial response to my three-tier request.

5.15 pm

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate PJ Bradley on securing this Adjournment debate and for raising an important issue about which all the Members for South Down are concerned. I, too, thank the Minister for being in attendance.

I understand the economic circumstances that the Minister and his Department face. I am sure that all Members agree that we must prioritise our limited resources. I am a member of the Regional Development Committee, as

John was previously, and I see at first hand the underinvestment in roads maintenance. On a weekly basis, we hear about all the projects that are needed, including our project, the A24 Ballynahinch bypass, which, thankfully, is being progressed. This issue affects all rural areas, not just south Down. As a member of the Committee, I have argued for the B8/A25 to have a more strategic role, particularly in relation to the pivotal function that it plays with regard to tourism in the area. It is the main artery to Dublin from the tourist product in south Down, namely the Mourne, which are the biggest attraction in the area, although Jim Shannon would probably say different in relation to Strangford Lough.

Sinn Féin has lobbied for the implementation of a single tourism strategy for the promotion of south Down and counties north and south of the border. To attract additional visitors to south Down, we need to have in place an improved infrastructure that can accommodate them. In our area, the NITB has identified the Mourne and the St Patrick's Christian heritage project as signature tourism projects. Currently, tourism in the Mourne contributes £72 million to the local economies of Banbridge, Down, and Newry and Mourne.

Many areas of great natural beauty suffer because of their attractive qualities, and south Down is no exception. I want the Department to give equal weight to our industries, which are mainly tourism, agriculture and fishing. There are very few factories in the area, with the aircraft factory and a couple of fish processing factories in Kilkeel being the exceptions. However, there are restaurants, hotels, B&Bs, cafes, public houses and small and medium-sized enterprises that are dependent on tourists getting to south Down. We do not have rail; all we have is road.

Those of us who know the B8/A25 know that it is dangerous, with its sharp corners and sweeping bends, particularly, as has been mentioned, on the stretch between Mayobridge and Hilltown, which is known as the Seven Sisters. I am sure that the Minister knows that part of the road very well. Indeed, I remember going on school trips and swinging about in the back of the bus. It was like a rollercoaster.

On a serious note, I remind the Minister that there have been serious collisions on the road linking Downpatrick and Newry, including dozens

of fatalities, in recent years. The volume of traffic and demands on the road have increased. It is estimated that 6,000 to 9,000 cars use the B8/A25. The A25 section, between Downpatrick and Clough, is very busy and carries around 9,000 cars a day. Another busy stretch is the Hilltown to Newry section, which incorporates traffic coming from the Mourne on the B27 Kilkeel Road and from Newcastle on the B180 Bryansford Road.

I do not want to be totally negative. I pay tribute to the staff at Roads Service for endeavouring to do their best with the resources that they have. There have been resurfacing projects, as P J touched upon, in and around Kilcoo, in Clonvaraghan, which is outside Castletwellan, and in Hilltown. There have also been traffic calming schemes in a number of towns, as well as junction improvements at Burrenreagh Road, Castletwellan; the Castletwellan Road and Kinghill Road junction in Hilltown; and the Vianstown Road junction in Downpatrick, all of which are to be welcomed.

I will touch on a couple of issues that require the Department to recognise the unique circumstances in south Down. The B8/A25 road will carry more tourists to our area. Newry and Mourne and Down District Councils are committed to tourism, which is the main backbone of our economy, and more tourists are visiting the area as a result of the strategies that are in place. We have a unique landscape, which includes the Mourne Mountains, the strategic importance of Newcastle, the potential of the Silent Valley, the Christian heritage and cultural trails, including St Patrick's Trail from Armagh to Downpatrick, and that other tourist gem, Strangford Lough. We have to improve the roads to facilitate tourism growth, rather than just responding to demand and continually firefighting.

The economic impact of tourism arises from expenditure by visitors to the Mourne area on accommodation, retail, catering and attractions, thereby supporting direct employment in those businesses. Good transport links are essential to the long-term growth of our economy. Moreover, under the proposed reorganisation of local councils in the RPA, Newry and Mourne District Council and Down District Council will amalgamate. Given that proposed merger, an enhanced road network is needed to link the two main towns within the boundaries of the new council. Is there potential to submit

a bid for European funding to improve road infrastructure to support tourism development under the INTERREG programme?

Mr McCallister: I thank my colleague Mr PJ Bradley for securing the debate and the Minister for attending and responding to it.

Much of the case for an upgrade to the B8 has been laid out by my colleagues. Knowing the road, the area, the surrounding countryside and the pressures on them very well, I think there is an excellent case for the route moving up the Roads Service agenda. From my time on the Regional Development Committee, I am aware of the difficulties that Roads Service faces and the pressures that it is under in prioritising its workload.

I want to make the case to the Minister that, in building and renewing the economy in south Down, particularly tourism, as pointed out by Mr Willie Clarke, it is vital that we improve its infrastructure. The fact that the South Down constituency contains two of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's signature projects — the Mourne and part of St Patrick's Trail — emphasises its importance to a tourism strategy. The fact that the constituency links in to Strangford Lough and opens up to other parts of Northern Ireland underlines why it is vital to improve the pivotal section of road between Newry and Downpatrick.

In addition to tourism, we need to develop and encourage our small and medium-sized businesses, as they respond best when the infrastructure that they need to grow and flourish is in place. Improving the B8 is a key part of building the infrastructure in order to improve a key corridor of the South Down constituency.

I also make the case for improving the safety of the road. Mr PJ Bradley made the case for that very well and recognised that it will not happen overnight due to budgetary constraints. However, it would be good if the Minister could tell us about some of the work that will happen to improve the B8 route in the short to medium term and address some of the severe safety concerns that my colleagues and others have raised. Roads Service can make a huge contribution to improving the safety and quality of our roads, which is vital to everyone in the area. Mr PJ Bradley mentioned certain sections of the B8 route, and the Seven Sisters section was also mentioned. Various sections of the

road need to be improved. We cannot overstate the importance of such improvements to road safety and to our economy in south Down, and I urge the Minister to do all that he can to make sure that they happen.

Ms Ruane: Le roinnt blianta anuas, phléigh mé an cheist seo le muintir an Dúin Theas, agus tá siad iontach buartha faoi staid líonra na mbóithre sa Dúin Theas. Níl cuid mhór de na bóithre seo oiriúnach don fheidhm, go háirithe na bóithre sin i gceantair tuaithe, agus chuir an drochghheimhreadh go mór leis an bhfadhb seo.. I want to clarify that I am speaking as an MLA for the area.

Ní gan ábhar a luaigh mo chomhghleacaí, Willie Clarke, go ndearna Sinn Féin stocaireacht i bhfabhar fheidhmiú straitéis aonair margaíochta um thurasóireacht chun an Dúin Theas agus an cheantair máguaird a chur chun cinn. Ach chun cuairteoirí breise a mhealladh chuig an Dúin Theas, ní mór córas feabhsaithe bonneagair a bheith i bhfeidhm le cur in áit an bhonneagair reatha, ar oidhreacht ó pholasaithe dír-rialaithe é.

I have been engaging with the people of the South Down constituency on this issue for a number of years. There are serious concerns about the state of the road network that services the area. Many of the roads, particularly in rural areas, are simply not fit for purpose, and my colleague Willie Clarke named some of them. The severe winter has compounded the problem.

The Department for Regional Development needs to recognise that a lack of spatial development throughout the North, but particularly in south Down, is having a significant impact on developing the area's tourism infrastructure. Willie Clarke spoke about that, and it is essential that we build our tourism infrastructure from Newgrange to the Mournes to capitalise on the tourist potential of that part of the island.

Feicfidh Seirbhís na mBóithre ó mo chomhfhreagrú roimhe seo gur chóir do mhuintir an Dúin Theas a bheith buartha faoi shábháilteacht líonra na mbóithre áitiúla agus faoi na tionchair atá aige seo ar shláinte agus ar shábháilteacht gluaisteánaithe agus coisithe araon.

Willie Clarke rightly pointed out that Sinn Féin has consistently lobbied for the implementation of a single tourism marketing strategy for the

promotion of south Down and neighbouring counties in both parts of Ireland. However, in order to attract additional visitors to south Down, we need an improved road system to replace the current system, which is a legacy of direct rule policies. South Down has suffered from a failure of investment, and we aim to change that.

I also want to make the Minister aware of the serious number of collisions along the road that links Downpatrick and Newry, which were referred to. There is a clear need for Roads Service to assess the safety of the road network linking Downpatrick and Newry and to carry out safety and improvement schemes as a matter of urgency. I would very much welcome from the Minister, Conor Murphy, details of what his Department is doing to improve that road. I am sure that Conor is also very aware of dangerous sections of the road. The Seven Sisters were mentioned, a series of bends on a lengthy stretch of road between Kilcoo, Hilltown and Mayobridge. It is important that the necessary resources be made available to Newry and Mourne District Council and Down District Council so that road improvements can be carried out. I have no doubt that the Minister is listening carefully and that he will carry out a detailed assessment as a matter of priority.

Roads Service will see from my correspondence that the people of south Down are justifiably concerned about the safety of local road networks and the implications for the health and safety of motorists and pedestrians. As Conor is well aware, I was to the fore in campaigning for the border-link bridge across Carlingford Lough at Narrow Water, near Warrenpoint. We worked as part of the North/South Ministerial Council, as well as with Newry and Mourne District Council and Louth County Council. That type of flagship development is essential if we are to develop a co-operative approach to trade and tourism, and it would make Crotlieve, the Mournes and north Louth much more accessible tourist destinations, as well as improving the lives of the many commuters who regularly travel across the border in both directions. As I said, we need to develop our tourism product from Newgrange to the Mournes and to capitalise on the number of visitors that Newgrange gets every year.

Tá cúpla ceist agam don Aire. An bhféadfá an t-eolas is déanaí a thabhairt dom ar a bhfuil á déanamh agatsa mar Aire Forbartha Réigiúnaí

lena chinntiú go mbeidh comhoibriú leis an Rialtas ó dheas chun dul chun cinn a dhéanamh sa réimse seo?

I would very much appreciate an update on what my colleague the Minister for Regional Development is doing to ensure that there is co-operation on the matter with the Government in the South of Ireland at Minister-to-Minister level and also at North/South Ministerial Council level. I would also welcome an update on the A24 Ballynahinch bypass and the A7 from Doran's Rock to Rowallane.

5.30 pm

The Minister for Regional Development

(Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to debate the upgrading of the B8 route from Downpatrick to Newry. I do not have to explain to the Members who are present that the route from Downpatrick to Newry falls within the Newry and Mourne District Council and Down District Council areas. It passes through a number of villages, including Mayobridge, Kilcoo, Castlewellan and Clough, en route from Newry to Downpatrick. The B8 section of the route in the Newry and Mourne council area extends northwards from Newry for about 15.5 miles through Mayobridge and Hilltown, joining the A25 a mile west of Kilcoo in the Down council area. The final section of the route — the A25 — extends for 16 miles from Kilcoo through Castlewellan, Clough and on to Downpatrick.

Traffic volumes on the B8 between Hilltown and Kilcoo have been measured at about 6,100 vehicles a day, dropping to about 5,500 vehicles a day between Kilcoo and Castlewellan. Traffic volumes are slightly higher along the A25 between Castlewellan and Clough at 6,300 vehicles a day, and between Clough and Downpatrick they rise to about 8,200 vehicles a day. There are 1,062 miles of road network in the entire Newry and Mourne district and 750 miles in the Down district. When compared with other roads here, particularly in the Newry and Mourne and Down council areas, the B8 is not so heavily trafficked.

The context in which Roads Service improves the road network in the North is set out in the regional development strategy and, more specifically, in the regional transportation strategy. Its purpose is to support the regional development strategy and to make a significant contribution to achieving the longer-term vision

for transport throughout the North. Members will be aware of the key components of the regional transportation strategy and the need to concentrate our efforts on improving the regional strategic road network. Members will also be aware of the substantial improvement works that have been carried out over the past number of years to upgrade the A1 Belfast to Dublin strategic corridor. The final section of that project, at Newry, which has been ongoing for the past three years at a cost of £182 million, is due for completion later this year. Further work is ongoing to progress other proposed major improvement schemes in the Newry and Down areas of the North, including the A24 Ballynahinch bypass, the A7 at Doran's Rock and Rowallane and plans for a Newry southern relief road.

The A25 and B8 Downpatrick to Newry route falls within the subregional transport plan, and any work or improvements on it must compete for the available finance against the demands for improvement to other sections of the road network. As Members will be aware, Roads Service prepares annual work programmes to improve and maintain the road network in line with the available funding. That work typically includes a range of measures, such as minor improvement schemes, traffic management measures, street lighting, winter gritting and improvements to highway structures, and structural maintenance, including resurfacing work.

Roads Service prepares programmes that detail the works to be carried out on a council area basis. Those are presented to the relevant councils for consideration, including Newry and Mourne District Council and Down District Council, during the spring and autumn each year. Copies of those reports can be obtained online from Roads Service southern division, in which the Newry to Downpatrick route lies.

I should explain that, in distributing the resources available for the maintenance and improvement of roads, allocations are made to the four Roads Service divisions on the basis of need, using a range of weighted indicators that are tailored to each activity. The divisions use those indicators when apportioning resources across the council areas to ensure, as far as possible, that there is an equitable distribution of funds across the North.

Across the Newry and Mourne and Down council areas, Roads Service spent in the region of

£19 million in the 2009-2010 financial year. For example, the spend in the Newry and Mourne council area last year included more than £5.7 million on structural maintenance, £932,000 on minor improvement works, £463,000 on traffic management measures and £404,000 on highway structures. In the Down District Council area, £4,225,000 was spent on structural maintenance, £600,000 on highway structures and £660,000 and £367,000 on minor improvements and traffic management measures respectively.

Willie Clarke asked about EU funding. He will know, in relation to the east border region, that we have been making applications for priority 2 INTERREG funding that may be available for supporting collaboration on infrastructure. Roads Service is preparing a bid for a percentage of the €10 million available under priority 2 funding. However, it is important to note that three regions — Scotland, the North and the South — are competing for a percentage of that €10 million. The full amount will not be spent in a single region member state.

Caitríona Ruane asked about the route from Doran's Rock to Rowallane. Roads Service is developing proposals to improve a section of the A7 Downpatrick to Belfast link corridor between Doran's Rock and Rowallane, and a preliminary design has been drawn up. Works continue to refine and optimise the design, and it is planned to hold a public exhibition in due course to describe and explain the developing proposal and to obtain feedback from the local community.

Returning to the subject of the road between Downpatrick and Newry, I assure Members that considerable improvements have been made over the past five years. Resurfacing and strengthening works have been completed in the urban areas of the B8 at Newry and at rural sections near Hilltown, at Yellow Road, the Old Road, Clonduff Road and Goward Road. I assure Members that I am aware of the intricacies of the Seven Sisters, having cycled that route on more than one occasion.

Resurfacing work on the rural stretches of the A25 has also been completed in Castlewellan, Aughlisnafin, Moneyscalp Road, Ardnabannon Road and Ballybannon Road, as well as in urban sections of Downpatrick. The cost of completing that work has been in the region of £770,000, and further works are proposed on

that route at Sandy Street in Newry, Kilcoo and Mayobridge. Minor improvement works costing around £300,000 have also been completed at the B8 Kinghill Road junction, the A25 Burrenreagh junction and the A25 Vianstown Road. Further improvements are planned for routes at Haughey's Hill, Tobercorran Road and Ardnabannon Road. Traffic safety improvement measures have also been carried out over the past few years, particularly traffic calming at Kilcoo, Hilltown, Mayobridge and Castlewellan.

I am sure the House will agree that improving the road network across the North places huge demands on the budget. Careful consideration must be given to targeting schemes of greatest priority. Although resources must continue to go to the parts of the strategic road network that require attention, I assure Members that important maintenance and safety-related work will continue to be undertaken in other parts of the network, including the B8 and A25 Downpatrick to Newry Road, in line with policies and competing priorities.

Adjourned at 5.37 pm.