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Suggested amendments or corrections will be considered by the Editor.

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 23 November 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statements

PPS 4: Economic Development/ PPS 16: Tourism

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment that he wishes to make a statement to the House.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement to the effect that I am now issuing Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 4 on economic development and bringing it into effect. That document replaces the existing PPS 4 and supersedes policies for employment in 'A Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland.' Today, I am also issuing Draft Planning Policy Statement 16 on tourism for four months' public consultation.

A thriving and expanding business community is critically important to our future prosperity and well-being. PPS 4 will help businesses in this tough economic climate to locate in the best places across Northern Ireland. Draft PPS 16 is a response to the challenges and opportunities of future tourism growth. Each PPS is important in its own right, and both have crucial roles to play in supporting economic growth.

PPS 4 concerns the development associated with industry, business, storage and distribution. It puts in place a modern and robust policy framework for the sustainable management of such development and shows how economic growth can be accommodated in development plans. It also gives flexibility and certainty over planning for economic development.

Various industries and business sectors have particular requirements for their location and surroundings. PPS 4, therefore, sets out different criteria for different types of development. Its policies also recognise that

cities, towns and villages differ in the scale of business and industrial development that they can reasonably accommodate. PPS 4 provides for office development to be focused in city and town centres, where it can benefit from the concentration of people and goods, public transport and other infrastructure. In those locations, office-based businesses also benefit from their proximity to business, professional, technical and financial services.

Communications and software design are closely related to high technology, knowledge-driven industries. PPS 4 recognises that there are usually economic benefits to grouping those industries in business parks. To protect existing businesses, PPS 4 prevents incompatible uses in their vicinity. For example, some sectors, such as life sciences and food processing, need a contaminant-free environment. In the case of such businesses, risk of contamination can be taken into account when considering new applications in their vicinity. Some businesses may require some degree of physical separation from neighbouring built-up areas because of noise or smell. PPS 4 takes account of that.

It is important to strike a balance between the need to protect the countryside from unnecessary development and the need to support rural communities. PPS 4 sets out the circumstances in which permission will be granted for economic development in the open countryside. It allows for the redevelopment and expansion of existing employment sites in the rural area, including for tourism. PPS 4 allows for small-scale economic development on suitable sites on the periphery of existing settlements where there are no alternatives in the settlement. PPS 4 encourages such industrial and business uses to cluster on one site in any particular area.

Good design is as important for economic development as it is for other forms of

development. Design is not just about appearance; it is about how a development relates to its surroundings. For that reason, PPS 4 includes general design criteria to ensure that adverse impacts are minimised. In all cases, development will have to accord with Secured by Design principles to ensure that the design of a development helps to deter crime and promote personal safety.

Economic development means investment, which generally means more building and a demand for land. We need a generous and continuous supply of land, which is what the regional development strategy requires. Identifying land for employment purposes is a matter for development plans, and PPS 4 provides guidance on estimating how much land is needed and where. Development plans can identify locations and specify a variety of economic uses to cater for future needs. Such variety and choice will maximise the opportunity for local and inward investors.

We need to protect land that is already zoned for employment for the future and to make sure that it is not lost to uses such as housing. To that end, PPS 4 protects zoned land and indicates where alternative uses may be permitted, including mixed-use regeneration schemes, especially where buildings of architectural or historical interest will be secured. In particular, PPS 4 allows for schemes such as the Titanic Quarter.

The publication of PPS 4 brings planning policy for economic development up to date by providing policy for offices, knowledge-based industries and storage and distribution. PPS 4 ensures that the right types of development are directed to the right location.

I will now turn to draft PPS 16 on tourism. In the draft tourism strategy for Northern Ireland 2020, which she published in February, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment set out a new vision, strategic direction and targets for tourism. The targets for achievement by 2020 are to increase visitor numbers from 3.5 million to 4.5 million and to double earnings from tourism to £1 billion. Those targets reflect the potential for further growth in the tourism industry in Northern Ireland and underline the potential of tourism as a key economic driver.

Increased tourism activity and investment of that scale will inevitably generate pressure for new development, such as tourist

accommodation, facilities, attractions and supporting infrastructure. Draft PPS 16 provides a clear and strong planning framework for managing tourism development in ways that are sustainable. It strikes a careful and sensitive balance between environmental concerns and the development of the tourism industry in Northern Ireland.

It is important to value what the tourist values, and that is reflected in draft PPS 16. Unmanaged and unsustainable development is not in anyone's interest. If permitted, inappropriate development could prejudice the longer-term interests of the tourism industry.

Northern Ireland boasts many assets, such as the Giant's Causeway and the Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge, which are valued and visited by those who are fortunate enough to live here and by tourists from further afield. Those assets are vital in providing a high quality and often unique visitor experience. To maintain the integrity and tourism potential of tourism assets, draft PPS 16 proposes policies to safeguard them from inappropriate and harmful development

Our cities, towns and villages have a great deal to offer tourists. As well as transport links, accommodation, restaurants and shops, our settlements boast places of historic or cultural interest, and they provide entertainment and other attractions. Draft PPS 16 aims to exploit that by focusing new tourism development in settlements. The synergies created between new developments and existing businesses and attractions will enrich the visitor experience and help to boost Northern Ireland's earnings from tourism. However, the policies in draft PPS 16 also recognise that tourists visit different areas for different reasons and to enjoy different experiences.

As not all forms of tourism development will be suited to an urban location, draft PPS 16 facilitates some tourism development in the countryside. It ensures that such development is sustainable within the broader planning policy context of the regional development strategy and PPS 21, which relates to sustainable development in the countryside. It also ensures that random, inappropriate or excessive development in the countryside is avoided.

Draft PPS 16 provides for tourist amenities in the countryside that are not suited to an urban or village location, such as angling centres. Similarly, it allows for tourist amenity proposals

that need to be located close to existing tourist attractions in the countryside, such as a visitor centre that is associated with a particular site of historic or archaeological importance.

Draft PPS 16 also proposes the removal of the much-criticised tourist needs test, which is applied to tourist accommodation proposals in the countryside. Replacement of that test with specific criteria that are tailored to different forms of tourism development will improve the transparency of policy. It will also make it easier for developers to ensure that their proposals accord with planning policy.

Draft PPS 16 sets out the circumstances in which hotels, self-catering units and holiday parks are permitted in the countryside. Generally, it encourages hotels to locate in settlements, but a hotel will be allowed in the countryside if the proposal includes the redevelopment of an appropriate existing building. A newbuild hotel will be permitted outside, but close to, a village or small settlement if there are no development opportunities in the settlement or in nearby villages. Clusters of three or more self-catering units may be permitted if they are within the grounds of a hotel, are associated with a significant visitor attraction or involve the restoration of a clachan or close. In all those cases, the policy requires the units to be retained for tourism use and not to be used for permanent residential accommodation.

Draft PPS 16 also provides for minor extensions to existing static holiday or caravan parks in the countryside and for new small-scale touring sites. However, the scope for integrating a new static holiday park or a large-scale extension to an existing facility into the rural landscape is limited. Regional planning policy is not a suitable tool for the identification of such sites, and, accordingly, draft PPS 16 requires proposals of that nature to be directed to sites identified in a development plan.

Draft PPS 16 also includes general and design criteria that are applicable to all forms of tourism development. Those criteria will be used to assess all applications for tourism development to ensure that Northern Ireland gets sustainable, safe and high quality tourism schemes.

Draft PPS 16 provides a planning policy framework that is right for Northern Ireland. It will contribute to the economic prosperity of Northern Ireland by safeguarding our rich and

diverse tourism assets and by ensuring that future tourism development is sustainable and of high quality. We are at the start of the public consultation period on PPS 16. Planning policy for tourism is an important issue, and I encourage everyone with an interest in tourism to tell the Department what they think.

Both draft PPS 16 and PPS 4 will help us to achieve the modern vibrant economy that is the Executive's top priority. Now more than ever, it is essential that we have the tools in place to meet the challenges of economic recovery and a highly competitive global economy. My Executive colleagues welcomed both PPS 4 and draft PPS 16. I now commend those planning policy statements to the House.

10.45 am

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr Boylan): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask questions both as Committee Chairperson and as an MLA for Newry and Armagh.

On behalf of the Committee, I welcome the Minister's statement. One of the Committee's key concerns when we discussed the early proposals of Planning Policy Statement 4 was that guidance could hinder rural business regeneration that is fostered by European funding. What liaison has there been with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) to ensure that that will not happen? Will the Minister also indicate whether the policy will protect existing businesses or does he intend to introduce policy to protect them?

The Committee is disappointed that we did not have prior sight of the PPS 16 proposals. A departmental official promised us that we would see planning policy statements as they came forward. Will the Minister indicate whether the policy will allow for chalet-type or small cottages to promote angling in rural areas such as mine?

The Minister of the Environment: The Chairperson raises a number of issues. First, Planning Policy Statement 16 is a draft policy. We will go through an extensive consultation exercise, a process in which the views of the Committee will be given full consideration. We will be very interested to hear its views on the issue.

We indicated that, although an emphasis will be placed on creating tourism development opportunities in urban settings — cities, towns

or villages — there are areas in which that may not be possible. In my statement, I mentioned that an angling centre, for example, would not be suited to an urban setting. All those issues are open to interpretation, and we will seek to clarify them during the consultation process on the draft policy. The policy can accommodate industry that exists in the countryside and uses existing buildings. We will look to accommodate such industry where possible. Industry should be developed in the industrial areas that are identified in area plans. PPS 16 will encourage that, but we recognise that there are opportunities for diversification.

The Chairperson asked about liaison with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and about European funding. Previously, planning permission was granted on the basis of whether the Planning Service thought that there was an identifiable need. When the local action groups (LAGs) now identify an economic need and that the project is sustainable, the Planning Service will take that as advice and not seek to second-guess the proposal. That is the basis on which planning approvals will be granted now.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement. He identified the centrality of tourism to the Northern Ireland economy. To follow on from the Committee Chairperson's question, will the Minister indicate whether tourism development will be allowed anywhere in settlements?

The Minister of the Environment: There is a general presumption in favour of development for tourism purposes in settlements, subject to proposals respecting the site context, residential amenity issues and, indeed, the character of the settlement. Development will also be assessed against the specific provisions of a development plan. Tourism development opportunities may be restricted on land that is zoned for alternative uses or that is subject to protective designation or significant development constraints. However, in general, we will be very supportive of tourism opportunities in settlements.

Mr Kinahan: I congratulate the Minister on his statement and welcome much of it.

With regard to PPS 4, it is essential that the Minister speaks to the Regional Development Minister to ensure that the transport system is integrated to encourage what he is doing. By that, I do not mean roads such as the A5, A8

or A6. If I may, I will unashamedly talk about Belfast International Airport. We always push Belfast International Airport, which has the capacity and could be expanded so that we have more jobs and use it better. However, there is very poor transport access to it.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member come to his question?

Mr Kinahan: Will the Minister discuss that with the Regional Development Minister to ensure that we get proper and better integrated transport to all the areas that he is planning?

The Minister of the Environment: I will be discussing the regional development strategy with the Regional Development Minister this afternoon. That is a key document, and it is very important to get it right. I have issues with that document that I want to raise with him. As he just indicated, the Member will have issues to raise with the Regional Development Minister in relation to that document. I will certainly highlight to the Minister for Regional Development the issues that the Member has raised today.

Mr Dallat: I also welcome the statement. Although it does not mention the seaside, it does refer to the Giant's Causeway and the Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge. I am more than happy about that. Is the Minister satisfied that PPS 16 will address the very serious issues in our seaside towns and villages, which have been decimated by very bad and unbalanced planning that has no sense of the needs of the indigenous communities?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member raises a different type of question about the needs of local communities in towns that are used widely for tourism purposes. I tend to agree that a heart within a town is needed if it is going to be attractive to tourists. To have that heart in a town, there needs to be an indigenous population that lives there the whole year round to create a sense of being and a sense of belonging. That will not be dealt with by PPS 16; it needs to be dealt with through the area plan process.

I trust that, as we approach the Planning Appeals Commission hearing on the northern area plan, Members from that area will ensure that the towns there will be enhanced in many ways and will be greatly improved through the opportunities that exist in them and that good

planning procedures are put in place. As we hand that power over to local authorities in due course, I have no doubt that local councillors will take up the battle and ensure that those towns are protected.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome its contents, particularly the part that sets out to protect the countryside from unnecessary development. Hopefully, that includes the coast.

PPS 4 protects zoned land. Will that be set in stone? I am thinking of a planning application in my constituency for a 25-acre site that is zoned for employment. The wish is for a mixed-use development on that site. Will PPS 4 rule out any mixture of housing and small business units, etc?

The Minister of the Environment: PPS 4 seeks to protect employment opportunities and economic opportunities. Therefore, if an area is identified within an area plan for those types of opportunities, PPS 4 will largely protect that area from other types of development. However, we need to be flexible, and if there is a compelling case, the issues that are raised will be taken into consideration. By and large, the document will strengthen the case for industrial land to stay as industrial land, as opposed to being used for residential purposes.

Mr Givan: I, too, welcome PPS 4 and draft PPS 16. I am aware of some applications that are in the system that may benefit from PPS 4 coming into effect. Will the Minister advise the House of how many planning applications there are across the Province that may now benefit from PPS 4 coming into effect?

When discussing PPS 16, the Minister highlighted that a specific tourist need was required for hotel development. How will that draft policy make it easier for hotel development to occur in urban settings?

The Minister of the Environment: With regard to businesses that would benefit from draft PPS 16, around 200 planning applications are associated with rural businesses. I have absolutely no doubt that a considerable number will be approvable on the basis of the document. I think that the document will, therefore, be largely welcomed.

It is my intention in the very near future to bring out a further planning policy statement

on economic considerations. That will further enhance and place further emphasis on the opportunities for economic development. It is essential, in this time of recession, that we are doing that and that we are looking to support and aid business in sustainable development.

The draft planning policy statement's emphasis on providing new hotels in urban areas can significantly enhance the tourism potential of settlements, be of greater tourism benefit and be more readily integrated into the built environment. Previously, hotel operators may have been required to demonstrate a specific tourist need for the area in question. Applications often came in with a Tourist Board letter of support, but those were generic letters and did not add particular value to the application. We will not require such letters for us to give approval to a hotel in an urban settlement. If the application meets and complies with the other standards that I outlined, namely, integration, residential amenity and so forth, those hotels will normally be approved.

Mr I McCrea: I, too, welcome the Minister's announcement on PPS 4 and draft PPS 16. With regard to PPS 4, the Minister referred in his statement to small-scale development on the edge of settlements. Will he ensure that any developer who seeks to make use of that change of policy is forced to look at all other alternatives before they come to the edge of a town? In addition, why does draft PPS 16 not facilitate tourism development throughout the whole countryside?

The Minister of the Environment: Development on the periphery of a village will be permitted only after the opportunities for development in the village or town are identified and only if there is availability in the area.

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

We need to facilitate tourism development throughout the countryside in a way that is sustainable and that would not run counter to the planning policy framework that we established in PPS 21 and, indeed, in the regional development strategy. Therefore, projects that tend to be a bit random in their appearance or inappropriate or excessive development could end up damaging our landscape quality and rural character and, as a consequence, diminish the key tourism asset in the countryside. In that way, failure to value what the tourist values would impair the long-

term viability of the tourism industry in Northern Ireland. The dispersal of tourism development throughout the countryside could forfeit any sustainable and economic benefits that could be derived from a concentration of tourism development in settlements. That said, however, there will be opportunities in the countryside that are sustainable. Therefore, they have to be given a fair and balanced hearing, and I trust that that will happen as a result of this document.

Mr McDevitt: I welcome the Minister's announcement, particularly that on PPS 4, where he reminds us that the incompatible use of planning permissions in vicinities, for example, when food science companies are not able to locate in a vicinity due to potential contaminants, will be particularly welcome.

Will he assure the people of Crumlin in particular that an application such as that for Rose Energy will never again be possible under the new guidelines that he is bringing forward today on PPS 4?

11.00 am

The Minister of the Environment: As the Member well knows, there is a judicial review in relation to that application, which constrains us from getting into the detail of it.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he highlight the significant differences between the existing PPS 4 and the revised PPS 4 that he has announced this morning, and, particularly, the impact that it could have on businesses in the current economic climate?

The Minister of the Environment: The existing PPS 4 would not have been as kind to business as the new PPS 4. The new PPS 4 will create opportunities for rural businesses to progress. That would not have happened under the old PPS 4. It will protect land that is zoned for business from residential development in a much stronger way than the previous PPS 4 would have, and it will create greater flexibility to develop a major infrastructural scheme such as the Titanic Quarter, which is concentrated on employment, whereas, previously, we might have had to step beyond the policies to grant such an approval.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I welcome it. The Minister referred to sectors such as life sciences and food processing. In my constituency, there is a

difficulty in relation to an existing application. Will the policy be retrospective and apply to applications that are in the system?

In relation to the draft tourism strategy, I am disappointed that Lough Neagh did not feature strongly in the Minister's statement. Will he have any discussions with the tourism Minister in relation to the designation of Craigavon as a tourism centre, given its proximity to the southern shores of Lough Neagh?

The Minister of the Environment: PPS 4 becomes a policy from today. Therefore, any live applications will be dealt with under that policy. The policy that I am looking at would give greater support for economic considerations than is currently the case. It would also look at projects that could negatively impact on existing businesses and, therefore, lead to a negative conclusion of a planning application if it would affect jobs and damage job opportunities. I hope, in the not-too-distant future, to get the approval of the Executive for that further policy and to bring it to the Floor of the House. It is important that we create a suite of planning policies that can sustain and support businesses.

Draft PPS 16 is a planning policy document. It is for the area plans to identify areas that are designated for tourism opportunity. However, if there are particular issues in relation to Craigavon and tourism that the Member wishes to raise, my door is always open for discussion on planning proposals, and I am sure that Minister Foster's door is always open for discussion on developing tourism opportunities. We will be happy to speak to the Member on those issues.

Lord Morrow: Today's statement is undoubtedly very welcome, as a number of people in our constituencies were waiting with bated breath to see what the Minister was going to say, particularly in relation to PPS 4. With the introduction of PPS 4, will the Minister confirm that there will be flexibility for economic development in rural communities? Many people are waiting for the statement to see what new things have been brought in from the existing PPS 4.

In relation to PPS 16, can the Minister be more explicit? He says that a hotel will be allowed in the countryside where the proposals involve redevelopment of an appropriate existing building. Can he tell us whether that covers any building? What does he have in mind?

The Minister of the Environment: There remains a significant supply of employment land in statutory plans. If we identify a shortage of land in any council area, an article 31 planning application can provide a mechanism by which suitable proposals can be considered through the development management system, rather than waiting for the preparation of a new area plan.

We also seek to protect zoned land and existing employment uses from unnecessary loss to alternative uses. We also wish to make provision for economic development proposals outwith development plans, such as redevelopment of existing employment sites in rural areas and proposals on the outskirts of small settlements where land is not available within them.

As for the development of buildings for hotels, and so forth, I do not think that developing an ordinary farmhouse or hay shed into a hotel would really stack up and create a plethora of development opportunities for hotels right across the country that would never actually be fulfilled. There are a lot of significant buildings in the countryside that would lend themselves to that practice. There are areas that have particular tourist needs. If those can be identified, there are opportunities for a level of development to take place. It does not create a free-for-all; that is not what we wish to do in bringing forward the document. A free-for-all is not good for tourism, nor is it good for business. There needs to be a means by which business can thrive and develop without creating opportunities for people who have no real interest in delivering something to simply jump on the bandwagon.

Mr B Wilson: I thank the Minister for his statement, which strikes a good balance between economic development and protection of the countryside. I particularly welcome draft PPS 16 and its proposal to ban random, inappropriate and excessive development in the countryside. Does the Minister not agree that it conflicts with PPS 21, which has created bungalow blight in many of the most attractive areas of the countryside?

The Minister of the Environment: I was somewhat concerned that Mr Wilson had agreed with me on something. For a moment, I considered tendering my resignation. As he went on, however, it became fairly clear that we do not agree, so I am happy enough now.

Of course draft PPS 16 does not conflict with PPS 21. Draft PPS 16, PPS 21 and PPS 4 are a combination of policies that have been brought together and are built around sustainability. Sustainability does not mean doing nothing. I want to make that absolutely clear. There is a particular lobby that believes that doing nothing is sustainable. Doing nothing would lead to small villages becoming depopulated and losing their shops, facilities and employment opportunities. Church congregations would get smaller and churches would, possibly, have to close because the local population is in decline. That is not sustainable development. Sustainable development is about creating an opportunity for people to inhabit and live in rural communities in a way that does not impact negatively on them.

I challenge the Member on the issue of bungalow blight. We are not going down the Donegal route of creating a bungalow in every hole in the hedge. We have created our own planning policy, which is based on clusters. Where there is existing development, it can be added to or filled out in a way that is complementary to it and does not litter the countryside with bungalows that are dotted on every hill.

We are bringing forward and putting in place sustainable policies. The two particular policies that I have brought forward today will add to and enhance that, and will create development and employment opportunities for sustainable communities.

Mr T Clarke: Like my colleagues, I welcome the statement on PPS 4 and PPS 16. I have two questions for the Minister. In relation to PPS 16, an application has been in the system since 2007. It seems unfortunate that the Planning Service has brought it forward this week for refusal, because I see an extension to an aparthotel in Templepatrick, which is in my constituency. Surely that application could be revisited before a decision is issued?

For a number of years, Antrim Borough Council, in which I declare an interest as a member, has lobbied hard for economic development. The council believes that there have been insufficient lands in the borough for such development. How does the Minister know how much land is needed for economic and industrial development in the future?

The Minister of the Environment: PPS 16 is a draft policy. Decisions cannot, therefore, be taken on the basis of that policy, but it should be a material consideration in the decision-making process. If the planning application has been in the system for three years and consultation with the council is taking place only now, this document will have relevance to any such application.

The Member asked about identifying the need for industrial land use. There are difficulties relating to the Antrim area plan and its current status. Perhaps we will deal with that in the very near future as we look at how area plans can be brought forward. There is no foolproof way of estimating the amount of land that is required for future growth. We provide advice on how to estimate future land requirements. That advice is based on past trends in the take-up of land, and we take in the views of councils, Departments and the local business community, together with emerging guidance from the Department for Regional Development's (DRD) major review of the regional development strategy. In 2009, a consultant study commissioned by DRD confirmed that there was unlikely to be a shortage of business land for the foreseeable future. In addition, as part of recent baseline monitoring with council transitional committees to help to inform future proposals, the Planning Service is undertaking preliminary work on the amount of industrial and business land available in development plans.

We must identify more land than might be used, because, if growth takes off and opportunities are created, we do not want to be in a position in which the Northern Ireland Government end up hindering those business opportunities. In the event of a period of growth, it is always good to have identified a surplus of land.

Welfare Reform

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Social Development that he wishes to make a statement.

The Minister for Social Development

(Mr Attwood): Members will be aware that this will be a rather lengthy statement. I assure Members that it is not an attempt to drive them out of the Chamber so that I can avoid questions. Rather, it is an attempt to rebalance the political and public debate in Northern Ireland by acknowledging the issues that relate to capital and revenue and, equally, to welfare.

The Assembly will recall that, on 28 September, it passed a motion on welfare reform. It was agreed:

"That this Assembly acknowledges Northern Ireland's high dependency on social security benefits; supports reforms which are aimed at simplifying the social security process and helping people to get back to work; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to continue his dialogue with the Department for Work and Pensions, stressing the need for the special social and economic circumstances of Northern Ireland to be carefully considered and urging the introduction of appropriate measures to ensure that the proposed welfare reforms do not have a disproportionately negative impact on Northern Ireland."

That was a significant motion. It recognised the ferocity of the benefit cuts being implemented and the scale of welfare reform being planned by the London Government. Given the motion and what has developed in respect of benefit cuts and welfare changes, even since 28 September, a mere eight weeks ago, I have an obligation to return to the Floor of the Assembly to give an account of where things reside. I also anticipate going before the Social Development Committee in the next two weeks to assess those and other related matters as we go forward.

11.15 am

In making the statement today, I have a number of objectives. The first is to outline the scale of benefit cuts that the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the London Government are imposing in their June emergency Budget and October Budget. Secondly, I wish to scope out the welfare reform agenda now being disclosed by the Tory/Liberal coalition almost on a weekly basis. I anticipate that even this week there will be more announcements from Iain Duncan Smith in

respect of reform of the welfare process. Thirdly, I wish to detail the strategy that I have been pursuing to argue against benefit cuts on the one hand and the range of welfare changes on the other. Fourthly, I will explain how the Department for Social Development (DSD) is intervening and how, in my view, the Executive can intervene to protect those who are in need and are disadvantaged, critically over the next five years.

I will turn first to the scale of the benefit cuts detailed in the two London Budgets. In doing so, I recall what the Chancellor said in the opening words of his October Budget speech, when he explicitly and deliberately referred to “waste” and “welfare” in the same sentence. I found the association of those concepts — waste and welfare — in sequential words in an opening paragraph of a Budget statement revealing, and I considered it deeply wrong and deeply worrying.

Some £18 billion of welfare cuts are being imposed, driven through and carried forward. The read across of those welfare cuts to Northern Ireland is up to £500 million. That is money withdrawn from the pockets of people in need and from the economy. The London Government have announced a vast scale of changes involving a substantial reduction in payable benefits for mortgage interest, local housing allowance (LHA) and incapacity benefit. Those are complex, technical and difficult matters to fully grasp the significance of, but for the purposes of this statement, I will try to scope them out as best I can.

First, the support for mortgage interest (SMI) scheme has already reduced the interest payable from 6.08% to 3.63%. In addition, the SMI scheme for those who have claimed jobseeker's allowance since January 2009 is limited to 104 weeks. As I understand it, a person in that category will receive mortgage interest support for only two years. It appears that, after two years, people in that category will receive no support towards their mortgage interest. In the past number of days, I have tasked officials to scope out the significance of that intervention and measures and means to mitigate the impact on people who are in mortgage difficulties, mortgage arrears or who are at risk of losing their homes, especially given the potential for so many people to lose their jobs in the coming years.

From April 2011, a number of changes will be applied to LHA. LHA rates in the private-rented sector will be restricted according to the size of accommodation, and monetary caps will be introduced. Current statistics show that, in Northern Ireland, there are 454 households that will be directly affected by that change. From April 2011, excess payments — whereby claimants can receive up to £15 per week in addition to their award of housing benefit where the contractual rent is lower than the LHA rate for their property — will be removed. According to our figures, there are 7,247 claimants receiving excess payments of varying amounts up to £15 per week and 4,205 receiving excess payments of £5 or more.

With effect from October 2011, the LHA rate will be set at the thirtieth percentile of rents in each broad rental market area rather than, as at present, the fiftieth percentile. There are around 38,000 claimants receiving benefit assessed under the LHA scheme. The new change will result in an average reduction of awards to private sector claimants in Northern Ireland of £7 50 per week. That will represent an annual reduction of over £14 million in total and will be likely to place further pressure on the discretionary housing payment budget.

The Assembly will understand that this change will impact not only on claimants already affected by a restriction to the four-bedroom rate, but on the wider social market. That is a major change, with big consequences, which I will comment on later.

I move from LHA to incapacity benefit (IB). The Assembly will be aware that Northern Ireland has a significantly higher rate of incapacity benefit claimants than Britain. I resent the attempts made by the few in recent times to demonise those who happen to be on IB. There are good historical reasons for that situation. For instance, levels of multiple deprivation, the legacy of conflict, and how those manifest in the physical and mental capacity of many people. I resent the fact that so many people may wrongly feel that they are being targeted and demonised because they legitimately claim IB.

A programme reassessing all existing IB claimants will begin here in May 2011 that will see claimants moved onto employment support allowance or jobseeker's allowance. One estimate, which I think is fairly accurate, is that that could be around 23% of the approximately 90,000 current

claimants. Those people will then be deemed to be unemployed. That is one reason why some people fear that 80,000, 90,000 or 100,000 will be out of work in the coming years in Northern Ireland. Last Monday in the Assembly, I spoke to one person who has a particular knowledge of this matter. She said that there is the potential for 110,000 people to become unemployed. That would be as high as the figure that we experienced in the early 1980s.

In any case, given the context of the Northern Ireland labour market, it is unlikely that suitable work will be available for substantial numbers of claimants who may have limited skills or work experience. The difficulties of moving a significant number of individuals who have little or no skills or work experience to a benefit that requires them to seek work to and exist on a significantly lower level of income should not be underestimated. That is a crucial point. Limited work opportunities and increasing unemployment — a situation that may be compounded by the economic developments and borrowings in the Republic of Ireland — make a nonsense of proposals to get those who are capable of working back into work, when there is simply no work available.

As well as fundamental reform of the benefit system, the coalition Government have announced the implementation of the work programme. They say it is:

“a single integrated package of support providing personalised help for everyone who finds themselves out of work, regardless of the benefit they claim”.

It is claimed:

“It will focus on helping people into sustained jobs and pay delivery partners ... by the results they achieve”.

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is moving quickly and aims to have the work programme in place by the summer of 2011. I support helping people who are capable of working to get into work. However, a return to the politics of Thatcher and Tebbit — out the door and on your bike — for a four-week programme is not the sustained, structured, personalised, long-term approach that is needed.

A second phase of benefit cuts is now beginning to roll out for the medium term. Those changes, which will depress the level of welfare support, will follow rapidly. From April 2012, the LHA

shared-room rate will be extended to cover single people aged 35 and under. The previous limit was 25 years. That could lead to greater numbers being homeless and pressure on services for homeless people in the context of difficult, domestic and home environments. Every Member will have had people in constituency offices or making contact with them about this matter. All Members appreciate that domestic and home environments can be very difficult sometimes for a range of serious, if not grave, circumstances. People have to try to get out of those properties and those living environments. This proposal will impede people from having the opportunity to do that, and could result in a greater level of homelessness. From April 2013, housing benefit claimants who are also claiming jobseeker's allowance will only receive their full housing benefit for a period of 12 months.

After that period, their benefit will be reduced by 10%, and they will be ineligible for the full out-of-work housing benefit rate until they have left the benefits system and have worked for a period. Currently, that change would affect approximately 22,500 claimants. It would put increased pressure on those who are dependent on housing benefit, with no rationale to try to get people back into work. I know that the issue is acknowledged and appreciated very much by Members because they have spoken to me in the past 24 hours about its impact.

To dramatise graphically what that particular proposal is about and highlight the particular severity and ferocity of the thinking behind it, let me recount a recent conversation that I had with a senior Tory. In defence of the proposal, he explained that if someone in a street lost their job, had to sell their home and downsize, then it was fair that a person living next door in rented accommodation should lose out, too. I understood, from the words of this senior Tory, that if someone loses out through no fault of their own and through circumstances beyond their control that give rise to them having to downsize and sell up their valued home, someone else living next door should lose out also, regardless of consequences. Members can make their own judgement on that. In my view, it is one of the most abhorrent of the welfare proposals, revealing a dogmatic hand. I will come back to that point later.

A further change to housing benefit will see linked changes to child tax credit to

remove what is known as the baby element. Approximately 1,085 claimants who qualify for increased housing benefit family premium will see a reduction of up to £7 a week for rent and £2 a week for rates. The regulation to implement that change was debated at the Committee for Social Development last week. I wanted to test the temperature of the Committee to see how far Members may wish to go to challenge parity or to take measures to protect those in need as a result of the proposed regulation. I will comment further on that later.

All this is coming down the pipe to the people of Northern Ireland over the next one or two years. However, I want to scope out the scale of the proposed welfare reform agenda of the British Government, which will result in a more fundamental reworking of welfare over the next number of years. In my view, it will mean the most significant change to the welfare regime in 40 years.

The review is the work of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith. As I think I have said in the Chamber before, when one meets him, he is not the man one sees on television. He appears to have deep convictions around the issues of welfare, he has strong views about how welfare should be reformed, and he is acting as best he can to achieve what he is proposing. That may be the case, but I fundamentally differ from him in some of his approaches.

The most significant reform in 40 years will remodel the welfare system into something very different. It will cost billions of pounds to implement; billions that will be funded in part by the Chancellor's up-front benefit cuts in the two Budgets of this year. There are principles behind welfare reform that could unite many. We should provide assistance to people who are capable of work to help them to move from long-term benefit reliance to the self-sufficiency of work. When people make that transition, it should pay them to work. However, from a purely Northern Ireland perspective, acknowledging that some elements of the proposals may make sense in the prosperous south of England, the measures announced look like a major onslaught on low-income households.

I will touch on a number of measures. Changes to disability allowance are focused on those who are of working age and will involve a new

medical assessment that is akin to the work capability assessment that is applied to those who are on incapacity benefit. I understand that further consultation proposals in that regard are imminent.

11.30 am

Changes are also planned to the social fund. It is proposed in Britain to transfer community care grants, funeral payments and crisis loans to local authorities, with loan schemes being considered for outsourcing to the voluntary sector. Winter fuel payments and cold weather payments are to be retained by DWP, which advised that social fund proposals for reform may be advanced over the next two weeks. I have raised that issue and its management with DWP Ministers.

The coalition Government's plans for the state pension are to speed up the pace of state pension age equalisation for women from April 2016, which is an interesting date, so that women's state pension age reaches 65 in November 2018. The state pension age will then increase to 66 for men and women from December 2018 to April 2020. Following the faster increase to 66 years, the Government are also considering future increases to state pension age.

I understand that changes are being considered to child maintenance. I want to protect the very positive work that the child maintenance enforcement division (CMED) has taken forward over recent years in support of children. It was not long ago that the Child Support Agency, as it was then known, was not an institution that earned public confidence, never mind family and parental confidence. CMED has turned that around substantially and, recently, it initiated a stakeholder group to build the relationship between those in the child sector and the agency to make sure that deeper confidences develop. I understand that officials in DWP are working on options in that regard, and I have spoken and written to Maria Miller to reduce the risk of undermining CMED when child-support mechanisms are now better accepted in the context of the need for stability amid the turbulence that is created by aggressive reform.

Through the recent publication of the White Paper on universal credit, which is a fundamental document with immense impact, the Secretary of State has signalled the coalition Government's intention to introduce

universal credit to replace a range of working-age benefits, including income support, income-related employment and support allowance, income-related jobseeker's allowance, child tax credit, working tax credit, housing benefit and some aspects of the social fund. The stated aim of the universal credit is to reform the system of benefits and tax credits for people of working age to improve work incentives, reduce benefit dependency and simplify the system.

The London Government also claim that universal credit seeks to improve the transition between inactivity and work; improve usability for the individual and reduce administration by reducing the number of different benefits, delivery agencies and processes; and make sure that work pays by simplifying the interaction between entitlement and earnings by increasing the amount of earnings that people can have without losing benefits and reducing the rate at which benefit is withdrawn as earnings rise.

As I have said already, there are principles with which many could agree, but I have deep and growing concerns about the changes that have been announced already. It seems that the process is designed substantially to lower the platform of welfare support from which the universal credit proposals will be launched in two years' time. That is a key point for the London Government: if the welfare platform is reduced, top-line expenditure can be cut as a preamble to reform. There are real dangers for us. Northern Ireland is unlikely to come out of recession for at least two years and already experiences some of the highest levels of deprivation in Britain. There are real legacies of the conflict that involve many thousands of our most vulnerable people who are dependent on social welfare. Furthermore, welfare reform that is seen to compound the experience of the most vulnerable, for example, through increased homelessness, may create instability.

The reason that I wanted to detail the narrative of the first, second and third phases of welfare cuts and reform is to demonstrate the relentless designs of the British Government to rework benefit and welfare in the image of something different from what has been heretofore and, arguably, to what has been in place for the past 40 years. The scale of that narrative conveys the scale of the issue and, therefore, should convey the scale of our response to me, as Minister, to the Executive and to the Assembly.

I turn now to that response. Although social security is a devolved matter, we are constrained by funding issues. Any variance from DWP social security rates and conditions may breach parity. It would be thoughtless folly, therefore, if I, as the Minister for Social Development, took action that put in greater need those already in need. Parity brings a net benefit to Northern Ireland measured in billions of pounds. One figure given to me recently suggests that when the total tax take in Northern Ireland that goes to the Treasury is deducted from the total Budget and welfare payments that come across the Irish Sea, the net benefit to the Executive and the Assembly is at least £3 billion. Nevertheless, I believe that the issue of parity should be considered and scoped, although doing that in a rush would hurt those whom we need to protect most over the next four or five very difficult years.

As I said, some principles in the universal credit proposals may have some attraction, such as those providing for the simplification of the system, clearer conditionality and better financial support for people moving off benefits and into work. However, many changes to the level of benefit support that are already being introduced will reduce significantly the support available through social welfare, impacting on tens of thousands of people and having a depressing effect on our regional economy.

What has been my and DSD's response to date? I will not outline all of the Department's thinking, the issues that we are scoping or the responses that we may introduce or propose. However, I will scope in broad detail the range of responses that I have undertaken as Minister in the past number of months. First, as Members are aware and as was reflected in the motion that the Assembly passed in September, I have engaged on an ongoing basis the London Ministers in DWP: Iain Duncan Smith; Lord Freud; Chris Grayling; and Maria Miller. They are in no doubt about my view that, be it on the Budget or on benefits, particular circumstances here — higher levels of deprivation, as in parts of Britain, compounded by the legacy of conflict and the risk of alienation — mean that London should have a particular response to our needs.

If Ministers in London tell me that they accept that analysis — as they do, because Iain Duncan Smith, Lord Freud and Maria Miller have told me so — they must accept the consequences of it. In my view, that means, or could mean, additional funds; hardship

provisions; recognition of local factors; or the ability to opt out, slow down or reconfigure reforms in the image of our circumstances. If it does not mean that — I am fearful that, for all that London Ministers tell me, they will not act on what they tell me — London will carry on regardless in the face of evidence, disregarding the very circumstances that they say that they recognise.

I will meet Lord Freud again next Monday, and, as I outlined, my discussions will be informed by a number of principles. The planned changes should be implemented in a manner that recognises the difficulties in areas of high unemployment in general and that has regard to the Northern Ireland's particular circumstances. I will argue for the maximum flexibility to be allowed when implementing changes. As Members will be aware from the passage of the Welfare Reform Bill before the summer, there has been some flexibility to date. I want to expand on that, and I am actively scoping how that might be achieved.

Where appropriate, I will seek to introduce changes more slowly, because it is likely to take Northern Ireland longer to come out of the current economic recession. To follow slavishly the London Government's design and timeline for welfare reform, without measuring it against the particular historical, current and, in the light of the economic downturn, future circumstances, is not credible, mature or a considered way in which to proceed.

In addition, I plan to manage welfare change — if manage it I must — in a way that deals with the real-time objective needs of the various categories of people who may be in need. Given differences in age profiles and economic background, welfare reform may be directed towards one category or group of individuals rather than another.

Moreover, because of the ongoing research that I am undertaking, on which I will comment shortly, and the consequential assessments that will be made, DSD, the Social Security Agency (SSA) and the Executive will be in a position to identify the fault lines, gaps and dangers of welfare reform, and argue, plan or legislate against them.

It is my very strong view that, if welfare reform is to be sustainable and practical, it should be introduced in phases, and slowly. All the evidence suggests that to go for the big bang

in welfare reform, will, over time, cause it to unravel, create disproportionate difficulties and hurt, in an even greater sense, those who are most in need. By my Department doing the research that identifies how welfare reform may have an impact, and where the fault lines, gaps and dangers are, we will have an early start in arguing with London and in deciding among ourselves what the best responses should be.

There are other principles that, for the purpose of best negotiations and outcomes with and from London, I shall not outline here. However, the objective is more freedom, and/or more resources and/or more independence, in a way that will not adversely affect the block grant or the net billions of pounds paid in benefits to our citizens and communities. As I said, making assessments about all those matters, and where they lead us, is crucial. That is why I have made it clear to DSD and to the SSA that, in ensuring that people have quick and efficient access to benefits, they do not simply do welfare. The Department and the SSA must challenge, interrogate and manage welfare for the benefit of our citizens, and I have taken three steps to do so.

Research has been commissioned that will provide information on the consequences of the changes announced by the coalition Government. Research will identify the impact of new procedures on assessing people's capability for work through the new employment support allowance (ESA), and those who will be in receipt of incapacity benefit (IB) from April 2011. Further work will tell us how the new procedures will affect those who have been disengaged from the labour market for a long time and what their needs might be. As I have already said, Northern Ireland could lose up to £500 million payable in benefits during the SR10 period. Therefore, I have also commissioned work that will tell us what the consequences of the cuts that have been announced to date by the coalition Government will be for the incomes of those who are dependent on welfare benefits.

At the same time, I have been consulting widely on what our best response should be to the recently announced cuts and the longer-term plans for universal credit. I believe that by availing myself of the best advice from DSD and from community experts and organisations, I will have access to evidence to create a basis for protecting and materially helping those in need.

The Department and the SSA have been instructed to identify what it would cost and how it would be done were the Belfast Government to deploy a number of interventions to protect those in need and mitigate the Budget cuts. I shall not detail the shape of all that, because it would betray my hand in advance of the meeting with Lord Freud in six days' time. It is still a work in progress. Costings are being worked up and the interventions may, in some cases, require Executive endorsement. A range of interventions may be required, including financial and personal assistance, advocacy and other measures to protect those in need. This is the point at which I return to my comments about the impact of a reduction in mortgage interest support, the attempt to undo the baby element of child tax credit and the other most severe welfare changes. We must ask ourselves if and how we can intervene on those and other matters.

I am also attempting to bring together some of the best practitioners of welfare issues to bear down on the welfare changes and proposals and work out all the best responses. Experts in the social welfare field are working with officials to plan our response to the already announced cuts and the longer-term plans for universal credit. Officials are working with Professor Eileen Evason, Les Allamby from the Northern Ireland Law Centre, and the economist Philip McDonagh to monitor the impact of the wider welfare changes.

A group involving Advice NI, Citizens Advice, the Housing Rights Service and the Housing Executive is considering the impact of reductions in the mortgage interest scheme, and Professor Malcolm Harrington will soon review the impact of using the work capability assessment here. I have also tasked a group of senior officials with monitoring and advising me on the changes that will be necessary to ensure that the implementation of the changes under universal credit are taken forward in a manner that is relevant to meet Northern Ireland's circumstances.

11.45 am

I will resolutely oppose certain proposed changes, such as the 10% cut in housing benefit for those on jobseekers allowance (JSA) for more than 12 months. I want to identify how to offset the damage and, indeed, to determine whether there are ways to avoid the cut's

implementation here. That is an issue of fundamental fairness, and I recognise that it is also an issue of parity. I do not shirk any of that; we should begin to address all of it. I am also taking forward work that will complement my actions on welfare reform, which are designed to protect those most in need. I recognise that issues of welfare cannot be taken or addressed in isolation. People who rely on benefits substantially rely on social housing, and, therefore, questions on access to welfare cannot be divorced from those on access to housing.

This is not the Assembly statement in which to expand too much on housing issues. However, I plan to return to the Assembly before Christmas with a further statement on housing responses in times of need. That shall build and expand on my predecessor's new housing agenda, which defined new territory for housing policy. The statement, which will be titled 'Housing Responses in Times of Need' will aim to build the maximum number of homes; herald the necessary reform of housing associations, Mr Craig; create mechanisms to ensure that public moneys for housing use are best spent; and initiate fresh attempts and deepen ongoing attempts at positive housing reform. It will establish more fully the welfare/housing axis and identify real time solutions for the protection of those in need.

Some initiatives are ongoing. Through the Housing Rights Service, work has already begun to protect those who risk losing their homes because of difficulties with mortgage repayments. The mortgage debt advice service has already advised 755 clients. Homelessness has been prevented in 180 cases, and 16 potential evictions have been cancelled. The Housing Rights Service estimate that a minimum of £1.2 million has been saved to the public purse through avoiding potential homelessness. I am working to extend that scheme until 2015. The funding for a mortgage rescue scheme, which has been often refused, must now be approved, and, as I said earlier, I will take a range of initiatives to protect those in mortgage stress. I will inform the Social Development Committee about that work in due course.

Fuel poverty is part of the welfare narrative. The fuel poverty figures are high, many are dependent on oil, prices are rising, and there is virtually no energy brokering. In light of that, government has the means and the will to do more. Again, I will not detain the Assembly much

on that issue, but I may make a statement shortly when I launch a fuel poverty strategy for times of need. I aim to stretch the limits of what can be done and not only build on the good work in energy efficiency but break new ground in energy brokering. We cannot ignore the two major determinants of fuel poverty, namely low incomes and high fuel prices.

The point of all of this is clear: we should proof government spending and public initiatives against the welfare test and ask whether spending, policy or government initiatives better the circumstances of those on welfare. No aspect of government is excluded, and that means procurement, too. I will do what can be done through discussions with London, through working with the Department and the Social Security Agency, and through developing interventions to address what is already a serious and potentially grave situation. However, in my judgement and certainly in my heart, more can be done.

I will not detain the Assembly by talking about the ongoing Budget negotiations, save to make one point. The family of responsibilities in the Department, namely welfare, housing, child maintenance and neighbourhood renewal, are all about people, families, communities, lone parents and older citizens who are in need and in disadvantage. If one essential value of the Budget is not to protect them, it will not be much of a Budget, and we will not be much of a Government. However, the Executive will need to decide and agree on what measures, beyond the funds of DSD, will be needed to achieve the objective of protecting those in need.

I shall forward to the Executive a remedies paper in which I will include a wider analysis of how we should take forward the issue of social welfare. It will recommend a range of interventions as part of the Budget conclusions on welfare, fuel poverty and housing that the Executive should endorse if we are to be judged favourably and judge ourselves favourably on how we address the severity of welfare changes.

I will do what can be done on AME to mitigate the benefit impact, but, as an Executive, including DSD, we should do what can be done on the departmental expenditure limit if we are to offset the ferocity of London welfare decisions. I am encouraged that my Executive colleagues acknowledge that the jigsaw of our finances over the next four years is made up

not only of the revenue budget and the capital budget but of the welfare budget and how that works itself through in the lives of our citizens.

People say that there will be 100,000 people unemployed and that there will be a wave of poverty. Only two weeks ago, the head of an educational organisation used that description to me. We must be vigilant and act against such a possibility. The people of Northern Ireland have a resilience that has been proven in times of threat and terror. Our people are well skilled, well educated and, given a fair chance, well placed to go forward positively. In doing so, the test of our wisdom and maturity is how we protect those on welfare and in need. We must not let them down.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hamilton): I welcome the Minister's statement, and, given its length, I thank him for keeping the Assembly well briefed about the impact of the proposed changes to the social security system. He and I may not always see eye to eye on every detail of welfare reform, but we are as one in our opposition to the coalition's crude cuts to welfare, which will have a severely detrimental impact on the vulnerable people in our society.

Can the Minister inform the House of any deliberations that he has had with the Department for Work and Pensions on the possible retention of AME savings that are made as a result of expenditure from our Budget? Will he agree that, although we should, as we always have, test what flexibility there is in the social security system and test welfare reform, any step that the Executive take that breaches parity and which puts under threat the over £3 billion in welfare subvention that we receive every year would be a step too far?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. I acknowledge that, as Chairperson of the Committee and as an MLA, Mr Hamilton has demonstrated that, whatever passing differences we may have on one or two issues, especially on the issue of parity, we are on the same page when it comes to the severity and ferocity of what London has been doing. I have made the point previously that, in October, when the Chancellor partnered the words "waste" and "welfare" and outlined £7 billion of further cuts on top of the £11 billion of cuts that had been outlined in June's emergency Budget, it hit deeply, including with

the political community in Northern Ireland. That is why I welcome the comments of the Chairperson of the Committee and the motion to which he spoke a number of weeks ago. I welcome the fact that, by and large, we are on the same page.

A conversation has taken place with the Treasury on the issue of saving money from AME. For example, as a result of various fraud interventions by the Social Security Agency, the amount of fraud might be reduced, thereby reducing the amount of money being paid under AME. There was a discussion about the potential that all or part of those savings thereby identified would come back to the Department. That conversation was initiated, but I am advised by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) that it was concluded in the context of the Budget announcement on the block grant for Northern Ireland. I regret that, and I believe that there might still be some opportunity to exploit the potential that part or all of any savings from AME, for example, arising from fraud intervention measures that reduce the cost to the London Exchequer, could be retained by the Department.

I am anxious that any Barnett consequentials passed to the Northern Ireland Executive under the block grant to fund the implementation of welfare reform, especially as it begins to accelerate over the next two to three years, come across to the Department in full. There are ongoing conversations to determine whether the Barnett consequentials for welfare reform, on both the capital and revenue sides, have been transferred in full.

I will not put those in need into further need unnecessarily through a reckless approach to parity. However, I will stretch the limits of parity in a way that does not prejudice the block grant or those who are on benefits. That is part of the conversation with Lord Freud. We must maximise the opportunities within the constraints of parity. Parity is contentious and cross-cutting and is of interest to Executive colleagues. I may be minded to break parity. However, if I were, it would go nowhere unless the Executive said, "This is a line in the sand that we will not compromise on."

As I have indicated, one of the lines in the sand has to be the proposal to reduce housing benefit by 10% after one year when a person has claimed jobseeker's allowance. The

punitive nature of that intervention invites me and, I think, Members and Executive colleagues to determine whether that is a right and sustainable approach that we should consider in the context of parity. Beyond that, as I have indicated in a remedies paper to the Executive, there may be opportunities without compromising parity whereby the Executive decide to protect those in need, over and above whatever interventions might come from DSD. I hope that, at the very least, when the Executive see the remedies paper, they may see fit to endorse it.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement, but I certainly do not welcome it because he has, rightly, given us a litany of doom and gloom for the past 40 minutes or so. Does the Minister agree that these are not significant changes to the welfare system but, in fact, the dismantling of the welfare state as we know it? He talked about scoping out parity, but does he also agree that until the fundamental tenet of parity is challenged, the "reforms" will go through? I am not sure how, unless parity is challenged, people who are already being impacted on so greatly can be impacted on even more. The changes that we are talking about would have the greatest impact since the inception of the welfare state in 1948.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question, particularly because I was a little fearful that he would ask me a technical question on some of the changes. I would certainly defer to the Member's knowledge on many of these matters, so I am grateful that the question is more political than technical.

We can perceive the Chancellor's political narrative in the decisions made in the June to October Budget and in his use of language. It was also shown in the dogmatic comments that were made by others at a senior level in the Tory party to me and Danny Kennedy, who was at the same meeting. I fear that that commentary means the dismantling of the welfare state as we know it. I have to acknowledge that. I think that Iain Duncan Smith has more lofty ambitions.

He has genuine conviction about remodelling the welfare benefit system in a way that simplifies it, makes work pay and encourages people out of welfare reliance and into self-sufficiency through work. His character and the

colour of his ambitions are different from those of the Chancellor, who wants narrower and more aggressive welfare cuts. Iain Duncan Smith has achieved his objective, through universal credit, of a fundamental reworking of that system. However, the Chancellor has also achieved his ambition of massive and ferocious upfront benefit cuts, which was the price paid for Mr Duncan Smith's getting what he wanted.

12.00 noon

I wish to make one comment about parity, with which I will not play political games. I believe that we, along with the Dublin Government and others who have an interest, should begin to scope the future shape of welfare benefits to see whether there are any adjustments or reconfigurations that might serve our interests better. As I indicated before, that is why Éamon Ó Cuív, the Minister with responsibility for welfare in the South, and I decided some time ago to begin to scope the shape of welfare benefits. Blue-sky and long-term thinking are required, but they do not need to be implemented or considered immediately. Nonetheless, we must stand back and look at those issues in the round and in a more fundamental way.

Is the Member saying to me that this is the moment to fundamentally challenge parity and to put on the table our position about whether we want Northern Ireland to retain or to jettison the £3 billion of net financial gain? Is the Member asking me whether we should put all that on the table and negotiate with the British Government today or this week? If so, I must say to him that today or this week is not the time to do that because, given the number of people who may become unemployed and the range and severity of benefit cuts and revenue and capital cuts, it would set up the people in the North for an even more disproportionate impact on their lives.

Let us scope that to see whether we can begin to have ownership of corporation tax and enterprise zones and responsibility for our financial affairs. However, let us do it on a judicious, measured and ongoing basis rather than rushing into putting parity on the table when we have not worked through the full cost consequences of that, never mind the full consequences of it on those in need. The British Government may want a conversation with us about parity, so that they can fundamentally

adjust the block grant and reduce the cost benefit of parity to Northern Ireland in a way that would damage the stability and lives of many of our citizens.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I draw Members' attention to the fact that someone's mobile phone is on and is interfering with the system.

Mrs M Bradley: The Minister would not get any votes on 'The X Factor' for this morning's report; that is for sure. We all have great cause for enormous concern about the benefit cuts outlined. Nevertheless, I thank the Minister for his statement. Does he agree that the 10% cut in housing benefit for those who get jobseeker's allowance for more than 12 months is particularly mean-spirited?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for her question. I tried to outline, realistically and honestly, what the issues and problems are and what the solutions might be. Regardless of whether those solutions are within the gift of DSD or the Executive or are as a consequence of negotiations with London, I am trying to maximise the answers, not simply pose questions. I took this opportunity to make a statement to try to demonstrate that we are trying to leave no stone unturned in responding to the situation.

If members of the Committee have any suggestions about other stones that need to be upturned in the way that Mr Brady suggested, my door is open to them. I am willing to hear those suggestions and scope them out.

Social security and the core DSD staff who deal with welfare do great work. That is why I brought in, on a structured basis, people such as Professor Eileen Evason, who know the inside track on welfare in Northern Ireland. I brought those people in to the SSA and to DSD to advise me personally so that any opportunities to deal with a solution could be maximised.

The proposal to cut housing benefit by 10% after jobseeker's allowance has been received for one year was not just mean-spirited, it was dogmatic, callous and uncaring. It is one of those measures that, in the fullness of time, I think even the House of Commons will balk at. That is one reason why I have not tabled some of the recommendations that have come across my desk to date.

Dr Farry: I share and understand the concerns that the Minister outlined. However, will he clarify his position on parity? He issued a statement today that, as he confirmed in his answer to Mr Hamilton, talked about potentially breaching parity. However, he then gave a sterling defence of parity in his response to Mr Brady. There is a danger that a mixed message is going out on the matter.

What common cause is the Minister trying to make with his counterparts in Scotland and Wales? In trying to address through Westminster those concerns and the wider interrelated issue of a lack of a proper UK regional policy, what use is the Minister making of Northern Ireland MPs and those MPs from other poorer parts of the United Kingdom?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. As I said in the closing words of my answer to the previous question, I believe that there are opportunities through the House of Commons to derail one or more of the proposals. That is why I said that, in the fullness of time, even the House of Commons will balk at the proposal to reduce housing benefit by 10% after one year. The narrative that I gave of my conversation with a senior Tory and of the way that he framed the proposal was very revealing. Being so revealing gives plenty of opportunity for Members of the House of Commons to resist that proposal.

I will be exploring and exploiting any opportunities through MPs. Given that there is unanimity on the matter in this Chamber and given the motion that was passed on 28 September, it falls to all Members and all parties to communicate between here and the House of Commons to ensure that there are opportunities to deal with it. However, that goes beyond my responsibilities as a Minister and as a member of a political party with representatives in the House of Commons.

I have had some brief conversations with a Minister and Members from the Scottish Parliament. I note that, last week, the Scottish Parliament passed only a one-year Budget. I very much hope that we do not follow that example. I very much believe that we should have a four-year Budget. People deserve, especially in the run-up to Christmas and into the new year, certainty about their futures, including their job prospects. Whatever conversations we have with people in Scotland,

where the circumstances are similar, we must remember that our circumstances are, in my view, more complex and compound need more greatly. Although we may have conversations with the devolved Scottish Administration, I hope that we do not follow their example of having a one-year Budget.

Let me again create certainty and avoid doubt on the issue of parity. In my statement, I suggested that, in my view, to rush head-on into dealing with parity would be thoughtless folly. I have to say that I do not think that that is sending out mixed messages. In my view, it is sending out a very blunt message that it would be thoughtless folly to rush head-on into the issue of parity. I discussed how we may deal with the issue of parity and said that it would be dealt with in the longer term. We are going to scope out, through blue-sky thinking, what the shape of welfare may be in the longer term, including the shape of welfare on the island of Ireland.

I will push parity to the limit. In recent years, and before I or my predecessor took office, things may have been done differently in Northern Ireland, and they may have been technically inconsistent with parity. Therefore, parity is not something that is never compromised. Indeed, as a result of what are known as operational flexibilities, and because of our particular circumstances and our decisions on how best to intervene to protect those in need, we may do some things that are in the interest of Northern Ireland rather than of parity. I want to extend and maximise operational flexibilities to enable us to do that.

I will make two last points on Dr Farry's question. First, if parity and parity legislation were to be slavishly followed, some consequences of that would be so detrimental and prejudicial to the interests of those in need that the Executive would have to seriously consider whether to intervene and find the funding to mitigate their impact. Secondly, I may have a view on parity, push its limits and be inclined, in my private moments, to break from it because of my concern at what London is doing. However, the decision to move away from parity is a cross-cutting and controversial matter, which requires Executive endorsement. I may go to the Executive and scope ways to take that matter forward. That would be a more rounded and multi-dimensional way of dealing with the

issue than making parity a god that we dare not offend.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Again, someone's mobile phone is switched on. Will Members please check that their mobile phones are switched off?

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his statement, although some elements of the welfare reform proposals are quite worrying. The Minister did not mention disability living allowance (DLA) in his statement, and rumours abound that certain elements of it will disappear. Will the Minister update the House on whether that is the case and whether DLA will form part of the proposed universal credit system?

The Minister mentioned that some people who are on incapacity benefit will be moved to employment support allowance. Will there be an appeals mechanism for those who feel that they have been unjustly moved? Finally, the Minister mentioned that he would "resolutely oppose" a 10% cut in housing benefit for those on jobseeker's allowance? Will the Minister outline what he means by "resolutely oppose" and what that opposition will entail?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his questions, and I will deal with them in the order in which they were asked. I will not indulge the rumours of others — not Mr Easton, but others outside the Chamber — on what may or may not happen with DLA. However, we are close to the announcement on the next phase of welfare reform that DWP wants to commence. That announcement may come this week or next week, but it is coming soon, and it will include a further fundamental review and assessment of DLA.

There will be an appeals mechanism for those who migrate from IB to ESA, but the Member's question is timely and appropriate. I have asked officials, through their work with the people whom I named, who are external to the SSA and DSD, to find out what patterns are emerging among the appeals and successful appeals of those who were moved from IB to ESA. I will correct the record if I am in error, and Members should not rely too heavily on this figure, but I understand that 40% of those who enter the appeals process are successful.

Therefore, the question arises of whether there is a pattern or system that we need to look at and adjust so that people who move across do not lose their entitlement to the employment

and support allowance and have to go through the appeals system. The appeals system may throw up lessons about how we administer migration to the employment and support allowance. If there is learning and guidance that can be offered to those in the social security offices who make the assessments, we should give that assistance to our staff so that consistent good evidence and due process enable people to get the benefit that they are entitled to rather than their having to go through an appeals system that leads to 40% of successful appeals.

12.15 pm

I am resolutely opposed to the cut, and, earlier, I tried to answer the question on how I am resolutely opposed to it. A system that seems to me, both politically and personally, to be engineered to penalise one person because someone else has suffered does not have any rationale, evidence base or value beyond wanting to penalise the person who lives next door. There should be a principle to intervene to help a person in mortgage stress. If that does not work and someone loses their house and has to downsize, the obligation to try to help the person who is living nearby in rented accommodation should not be diminished or diluted. That is the ethic.

I will resolutely oppose that cut by seeing whether DSD and/or the Executive can intervene to help those people, including financially. The cost consequences of such intervention may be so elaborate that it is not feasible, or the cost consequences may be secondary to the fact that thousands of people in that position will need help. As I indicated to Mr Farry, this is one measure that has the potential to be derailed. This Chamber and the House of Commons should gather forces. We should argue how offensive the proposal is in any conversations that we have with any British Government Minister. If we speak as one and work through the House of Commons and any other political mechanism, we will be able to derail that proposal.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. In his opening remarks, he mentioned people leaving the Chamber. I am sorry now that I did not make my escape.

In his statement, the Minister talked about protecting those most in need. Can the Minister

give an assurance that, when he meets Ministers and goes to London, his priority is to protect the most vulnerable rather than to attack them? That is what will happen under the reform. Given the proposed changes in Britain, how does he envisage the social fund being administered? What training will staff receive? Does the Minister believe that current staffing levels are adequate for implementing the changes?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for those questions. I am tempted to say that the word “escape” may not be the most appropriate language for a Sinn Féin representative to use. It has historical significance rather than current significance.

The Member picks up what has been proposed in the social fund. In my conversations with Lord Freud, I have made it very clear that the proposal in England, Wales and Scotland to administer the social fund through councils is not a model that we should employ here. The powers, character and nature of our council and local government framework are different to those in Britain. We should have the ability to continue to deliver the social fund in a way that is fit for purpose rather than create new architecture through councils that have not had that function for a long period.

Therefore, the model and mechanism being proposed in Britain are not what we want to see here. I am not often tempted to guess when it comes to the intentions of the British Government, but if I were to do so, I would say that we will win the argument about the delivery mechanism in Northern Ireland when it comes to what the proposed delivery mechanisms through local councils in Britain might be.

When it comes to the issue of staffing in social security offices, I am anxious. I have said, and I will say again now, that Social Security Agency front line staff are part of the family of front line staff. If there is going to be a situation in which there are increasing numbers of unemployed people, we need to have sufficient numbers of front-facing staff in our social security offices to do the work. If there are cuts to the number of front line staff or disproportionate cuts to the Social Security Agency and its budget, there will be people in need coming into social security offices and not enough staff to help them to access benefits and to answer their questions.

That leads me to the wider point: those who work in neighbourhood renewal, housing, CMED,

social security, nursing, teaching and other professions are all front line people who must be protected in the Budget outcomes.

I heard what the Member said about training. I will provide him with a written answer that will give him the details of the conversations that we have had with the new head of the Social Security Agency, Mr O'Reilly, about further training to ensure that staff are fully tuned into the management of benefits.

As I indicated earlier, training and guidance are ways of ensuring that people who go to the agency get all the benefits to which they are entitled, instead of losing out and having to go through an appeal. Therefore, training, as a strategy to address need and to help people to maximise their benefit entitlement, is one way of dealing with the developing situation on welfare reform and benefit cuts.

Mr Craig: Following that train of thought, I had the opportunity last week to visit the fraud department in DSD. One of the interesting statistics that I was told during my visit was that 83,000 errors in the system are investigated by that department annually. Does that not indicate to the Minister that there is a need for additional training, or maybe retraining, of some employees in the Department?

The Minister said that it would be thoughtless folly to ignore parity completely. He well knows my opinions on some of the reforms. I think that the reforms are counterproductive in some respects. However, even thinking through the reduction on mortgage interest rate relief, does the Minister agree that breaking parity on that issue would involve not just making up the extra fund from the interest that was reduced? Does the Minister accept that we would be handing the Tory-led Government the opportunity to do away with all mortgage relief payments, which would leave the Executive in a completely invidious situation?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his questions. It is very useful when Members bear down on particular issues across the field of ministerial responsibility. That is why the persistent questions from the Member on the issue of fraud and error in the Social Security Agency are very useful interventions in ensuring that where there are opportunities to do more in respect of fraud or error, we take them.

I am not aware of the figure of 83,000, but my intuition tells me that those 83,000 errors are not all staff errors. There are categories of error way beyond the responsibility and control of social security staff. Many of those errors will arise from customers giving information that is inaccurate and incomplete and that needs to be checked. My intuition tells me that the balance of error may significantly not be the responsibility of social security staff.

As I indicated to Mr Boylan, if any fine-tuning of training is required with regard to staff error, Members can rest assured that the Department, the Social Security Agency and I will address that. Critically, if more interventions in training are needed to ensure that our staff manage the system with due process and good evidence to ensure that people get all the benefits they are entitled to, we will do that.

I made it clear that we should not rush into the issue of parity with regard to mortgage interest support. As I indicated, I would not necessarily rely on the British Government and not take the opportunity to open issues in a way that we are not prepared for, have not scoped out fully, have not assessed the impact of completely and in a way that only puts those in need in greater need. However, we should be robust and exhaustive in our conversation with London about mortgage interest support and in our conversation in the Executive to identify whether there is anything that we can do. Let us remember that people are, as I understand it, entitled to that scheme for only two years. After the two years are up, which will begin to happen in January 2011 for claimants in Northern Ireland, they will not get mortgage support for up to 39 weeks after they go onto jobseeker's allowance.

That is why I am taking forward particular work on mortgage arrears and repossessions. I want to acknowledge a very useful paper that was provided to me in October by Advice Northern Ireland and a letter that I received from the organisation in early November that encouraged me and the Department to go in certain directions. Arising from that information, I issued instructions that the Department should go in certain directions to deal with the issue of people in mortgage arrears and at risk of repossession, a situation that I think will become more acute.

Mr McCallister: I apologise to the Minister for having to nip out and miss part of his

statement. He said that he agreed with some of the principles of the reforms set out by the coalition, namely that work is a positive and contributes much. Does he agree that the current system, with over 30-something benefits, is very complex and that we have to change? When breaking with any of the parity principles, is there not a huge danger for the Budget terms as we know them? When he breaks parity on any issue, there is a huge risk to the block grant.

The Minister for Social Development: I agree with the Member: there is no doubt that welfare benefits are far too complex and simplification is needed. I do not think that there is any dispute among any party about that. There was no dispute in any responses to a recent welfare consultation from people involved in giving advice. The advice was that the system needs to be simplified and less complex. I completely concur with that.

The danger is that although universal credit may simplify the system, in the meantime, London is driving down the welfare baseline so that, under the guise of reform, we actually have the impact of benefit cuts.

12.30 pm

Over the next two or three years, as the cost of rolling out universal credit becomes more obvious, as the complexity becomes clearer and the difficulties become more certain, I am worried that the London Government will decide that the only way in which they can fund it is to make further benefit cuts. Therefore, whatever about the two phases of the benefit cuts, I am worried that, in 2013, we will discover that the up-front costs of welfare reform are so extravagant and the proposal so complicated that more money will have to be put into it, and welfare reform will need to be funded from a third phase of benefit cuts. I do not discount that possibility.

I repeat that we should stretch parity, we should challenge it, and we should try to find ways of going around and through it. In the longer term, we need to scope the whole issue of parity. Where we are unable to break parity or mitigate the consequences of it in our own legislation, DSD and the Executive may find reason and good grounds to intervene to mitigate the consequences of what parity might mean for law and policy in the North. That is how I will deal with parity. I will not rush in here and tell

Members that now is the time to break parity fundamentally and substantially, because that is how people in need will be put in greater need, and it will create an opportunity for the British Government to say that if we want to breach parity, we can live with the consequences. However, if those consequences are not properly thought through, there will be a disproportionate impact on too many people in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members will be aware that we normally suspend at 12.30 pm, which is when the Business Committee meets. However, there are a substantial number of questions remaining, so we will continue. I ask Members and the Minister to keep focused. We will continue the one hour of questions to the Minister.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his statement, which was very thoughtful and robust in the defence of people here. I wish the Minister well in his discussions with the Minister for Work and Pensions, his Ministers of State and Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State. However, is there not a danger that, although they may be well-intentioned, or at least Iain Duncan Smith may be well-intentioned, the more ideologically minded Ministers at the Treasury will interfere with any flexibility that Iain Duncan Smith might wish to give to Northern Ireland? I wish the Minister well in his discussions, but I would like him to comment on that.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. I have been particular in acknowledging that there are those in the Government who have better intentions when it comes to welfare reform. However, the Member is right on the issue of flexibility and on the issue of management of benefits generally. Too often, Treasury interests prevail, and Treasury interests are to cut money and to be dogmatic about the issue of benefit and welfare generally. Therefore, I completely agree.

As I said in my statement, the London Government ultimately have a fundamental choice to make. They say that they acknowledge the high levels of deprivation, compounded by a legacy of conflict and the potential for instability. If one accepts that those are the circumstances in Northern Ireland and that the same circumstances do not exist in Britain, even though there are areas in Britain that have equivalent deprivation levels to those in Northern Ireland, one has to live with the consequences of accepting that analysis. Iain

Duncan Smith accepts that argument. Indeed, the organisation that he was formerly president of published a report in the late summer making all those arguments.

The consequences should mean that Northern Ireland's particular circumstances are recognised in either financial or operational terms, with regard to how we manage welfare reform, or by conducting welfare reform in the image of our circumstances.

If the London Government do not draw that conclusion, I do not believe that they — I want to be cautious here — are being fair to the people of Northern Ireland. Ultimately, whatever Iain Duncan Smith and the Treasury say, if those circumstances are right, the political leadership of the British Government, the Prime Minister and Nick Clegg, should say that they are right and should act in a way that is consistent with them.

Mr S Anderson: I thank the Minister for his statement. I have a couple of brief questions. The Minister referred to cuts of £500 million. Will he give the House, in round figures, the total number of people on low incomes who will be adversely hit by those cuts? The Minister will be aware that in certain areas, such as my constituency, deprivation often occurs in a number of small pockets. How will he prioritise those areas in his response to the current situation?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. I may provide him with more details in a written reply. In my statement, I tried to break down all the changes and cuts to welfare benefits and how they read across to Northern Ireland with regard to the number of people who will be affected. I understand that 7,500 people will be disadvantaged by the impact of the reduction in support for mortgage interest to 3·63%. That is 7,500 out of 15,000 people who receive that support. The Department is trying to fine-tune that figure to make it more precise, but, as I understand it, it is around 7,500.

Just over 1,000 people will be affected by the change to baby tax credit; 1,068 people, I believe. Statistics show that 454 households will be affected by local housing allowance monetary caps. Around 7,200 households will be affected by the removal of the excess payment of £15. The change to set the rate so that it is consistent with rents in the thirtieth percentile will affect 38,000 people who are in receipt of housing benefit.

Those figures demonstrate the scale of the number of people who will be affected by those changes: it will be measured in tens of thousands. Some people will be affected by single changes; others by multiple changes. Tens of thousands of people will be affected. That figure relates to people who are in receipt of benefits, such as housing benefit. All of that will be compounded by growth in the number of people who are unemployed, which, unfortunately, could also be measured in tens of thousands.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat. I apologise to the Minister for not being in the Chamber for the entire duration of his statement. He was, probably, both correct and incorrect in his comments about escape. I have thought about escaping from other places. I have also thought about escaping from the Chamber, so that I could get out to my constituency to attend to what, at times, I have thought to be more valuable work.

I want to ask the Minister about a part of his statement that I heard. I am interested in research that his Department is conducting in order to deal with the consequences of the coming changes. As part of that work, will the Minister consider taking on board our experience in the regeneration plan for the city of Derry? We discovered that data is not being collected on a section 75 basis by the Department for Social Development and by other Departments. Minister, your Department is not the only Department not to do so. I am conscious of the fact that you and your predecessor inherited the situation, so please do not think that I am in any way saying that the situation is of your making or doing. Section 75 data is collected in your Department, but it is not collated in a way that is categorised. I think that collecting and collating such data would enable you, for instance, to inform us further about the 38,000 people who you said would be affected by housing benefit. Who are they? Are they disabled? Where do they live? We cannot get access to that information.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member get to her question, please?

Ms M Anderson: Will the Minister look at his Department to see what is being done about the collection and collation of section 75 data, so as to enable us to target proposals in a more robust way? I have asked other Ministers to do likewise.

The Minister for Social Development: There is a need for immediate short-term research and assessments on the profile of all that London is proposing and on what the immediate and medium-term impacts will be on the people of Northern Ireland. We need to bear down on that piece of work to know precisely the number of people who are at risk and the financial consequences for each of them, and how the proposals, however well-intentioned by London, might be having some detrimental and prejudicial impact on people and families in Northern Ireland.

Professor Harrington will do some important work, and Queen's University has been commissioned to do some as well. I am also seeking advice from the people I named earlier, particularly Professor Eileen Evason. We need to have the information and evidence base in order to plan how to mitigate the impacts. It will enable me, among other things, to go to my Executive colleagues to present a remedies paper and a suggested platform that are not airy-fairy or made up on my way into the office. It is important that plans are evidence-based and will target those most in need.

In that regard, I sat with staff yesterday and instructed them to scope, for instance, the potential for focusing benefit take-up campaigns on particular groups. That would be done on a without-prejudice basis, because no decision has been taken on this. Therefore, if 7,500 people will be adversely affected by the change in mortgage interest support, will we know who they are? Could we target them in a potential benefit take-up campaign to maximise their access to benefits as part of a mortgage intervention approach to deal with issues of need?

I listened carefully to what the Member said about the collection and non-collation of section 75 data. I will look at that to see whether there is something in it that we could reasonably extract that could, usefully, help that research and evidence base.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement. He made an interesting point in his response to Martina Anderson. He said that if the Department has the data, it would almost approach the people, rather than the other way round, in which people have to apply for benefits on an individual basis. This is a different way of doing things. Is the Minister minded to look at how benefits are taken up and in having that

type of one-stop shop approach? Throughout his statement, the Minister commented on DEL and on advice services. How will advice services be protected in any Budget review? Will welfare reform be part of the ongoing discussions with the Budget review team, and with the DEL Minister, in particular?

The Minister for Social Development: Benefit take-up has always been important, but it will become crucial. To some degree, London recognises that there is a higher level of benefit take-up in Northern Ireland. One reason for that is that there have been a number of benefit take-up interventions by the Social Security Agency and other organisations, including some interventions on a targeted basis, to enable people to maximise their benefits. Therefore our benefit take-up profile is in part influenced by the fact that we have benefit take-up campaigns.

12.45 pm

The work of Advice Northern Ireland, Citizens Advice and the Law Centre — all of which are funded by DSD — and the other work undertaken by the SSA on benefit take-up is very important. I brought those organisations in for a meeting about five weeks ago and had a conversation with them about the continued and potentially critical role that they will play. I will not make commitments about what funding might be available for the advice network in Northern Ireland ahead of the conclusions of the Budget discussions, but I told them that day, and I do not mind sharing it with Members, that the funding of advice services is part of the intervention to protect people in need.

As I told Ms Anderson, reworking and developing benefit take-up campaigns to visit those in particular stress — potentially, for example, those in mortgage stress, not least because of mortgage interest support changes — will be a crucial aspect of Government policy over the next four or five years.

Mr Callaghan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the complex and technical changes that he outlined, particularly to disability allowance and incapacity benefit, amount to an ideological assault on vulnerable disabled people?

The Minister for Social Development: There are streams of ideological thinking in what the Treasury in particular has done and in some of the comments, both public and private, that I

have heard from British Government Ministers. I agree that there is an ideological hand in much of what is happening, and although some are acting from the best intentions, as they see it, I believe that they will have some of the worst outcomes. However, when British Government Ministers and people in the Tory Party are saying that getting people out the door for a four-week training programme is the way to help them back into work, I think we are seeing the shadow of Tebbit rather than the influence of those who are best intentioned.

When that issue broke in the media, a local programme covered it extensively. Seamus McAleavey from NICVA said that, in Northern Ireland, getting people out to work for four weeks when there is already a deep volunteering tradition seems to be in tension with local circumstances. Professor Eileen Evason added:

“The problem with the whole exercise is that it is a waste of time, but, as everybody knows, there isn’t the work out there.”

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.48 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Executive Committee Business

Tourism (Amendment) Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to move the Consideration Stage of the Tourism (Amendment) Bill.

Moved. — [The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group the six clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by the schedule and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 6 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Tourism (Amendment) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Committee Business

Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Bill: Second Stage

Mr Weir: I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Bill [NIA 3/10] be agreed.

I am pleased to present the Bill on behalf of the Assembly Commission. Financial support for Members of the Assembly and for Members of other legislatures has been the focus of increased public and media scrutiny in recent years. A high level of criticism has been levelled at the lack of independence in the process for determining Members' salaries, allowances and pensions. By bringing forward this Bill, the Assembly seeks to establish a wholly independent process for the determination of future financial support requirements for MLAs.

The Bill is in two parts, so it is effectively two Bills cobbled together. Part 1 will establish the independent financial review panel, and Part 2 will establish the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards. I will present the general principles of Part 1, and the Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, Mr Declan O'Loan, will discuss the general principles of Part 2.

I begin with an outline to the background of Part 1. The argument has been made that Members in the first mandate should have grasped a lot of the issues in question, so it may be said that we are coming to this matter later than we should have. Nevertheless, I will set out the background to where we have reached.

On 4 May 2007, prior to the restoration of devolution, the Secretary of State wrote to the chairman of the Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB) seeking its agreement to conduct a review of the existing structures for salaries, expenditure and pensions benefits payable to Members and office holders of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The SSRB completed its report in November 2008 and recommended that the Northern Ireland Assembly should commit to accepting the outcome of future independent reviews of salaries, allowances and pensions without modification, thereby respecting the impartiality of the external review

process. That reflected Members' desire to be distanced from deciding their own salaries and financial support arrangements. Indeed, in joint meetings between the Assembly Commission and party leaders, there was consensus that a move to establish an independent body in line with other legislatures would be a positive step towards greater openness and transparency in this area.

After considering the SSRB report, the Assembly Commission supported the recommendation that consideration should be given to the establishment of an independent mechanism for the future determination of salaries, pensions and financial support for Members. To take that forward, the Assembly Commission recommended that an amendment to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 should be made to enable the Northern Ireland Assembly to delegate, in its entirety, the function of determining salaries, pensions and financial support to an independent statutory body. The legal framework for determining and paying salaries, allowances, pensions and gratuities is governed by sections 47 and 48 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Section 48 allows for provision for the payment of pensions, gratuities and allowances to former Members or office holders to be delegated by the Northern Ireland Assembly. However, until recently, section 47, which governs the determination and payment of Members' salaries and allowances, explicitly prevented the Assembly from delegating the function of making a determination.

The Northern Ireland Assembly Members Act 2010, which received Royal Assent on 8 April 2010, amended sections 47 and 48 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and allows the Assembly to continue to determine salaries and allowances of Members or to delegate that function to an independent body. The Assembly Commission recommended in its 'Report on the Financial Support and Pensions for Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly', dated 22 June 2010, that a Bill should be brought forward to establish an independent statutory body. The Bill proposes the establishment of such a body, namely the independent financial review panel.

The Assembly Commission launched a public consultation on 1 June 2010, inviting comments on the establishment of an independent body and on the functions, objectives, governance

and budget arrangements of that body. The Commission also conducted an equality screening exercise on the proposal, and that exercise did not reveal any significant differential impact on any of the groups set out in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Members may be aware that a similar independent body, the National Assembly for Wales Remuneration Board, has been established in Wales by the National Assembly for Wales (Remuneration) Measure 2010. England has the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA), which was established by the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009. Although we are taking this action today, others may be a little bit ahead of us, but the time frame has been relatively similar.

I will explain the general principles of Part 1 of the Bill. The Bill will establish the independent financial review panel, known as the panel. It will consist of a chairperson and two other members, and it will have the power to determine all aspects of financial support to Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly. That means that the panel will determine the salaries and allowances payable to Members of the Assembly under section 47 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the pensions, gratuities and allowances payable to former Members and office holders under section 48 of that Act. The Assembly Commission will retain the administration of salaries and expenditure.

The panel will be required to exercise its functions with a view to achieving a proper balance between the objective of ensuring probity, accountability and value for money in the expenditure of public funds and the objective of securing an adequate level of remuneration for Members that allows them to discharge their functions effectively. The general rule will be that a determination will be made by the panel only once in the lifetime of each Assembly. Further determinations may be made as necessary to take account of changes in the law and practice relating to pensions or exceptional circumstances. Unless there are such changes or circumstances, there will not be a determination where there is less than a year between an ordinary general Assembly election and an extraordinary Assembly election.

The panel will be required, so far as is reasonably practical, to make its determination before the election of the Assembly to which the

determination relates, although a determination will survive until a new one is made to replace it. That will allow candidates and, perhaps more importantly, the electorate to know in advance of an election what financial support will be available to an elected candidate. The panel must communicate the determination to the Assembly Commission as soon as is reasonably practical after it has been made, and the Commission must publish the determination in full. It is important to realise that the Commission cannot amend the determination.

To ensure the independence of the panel, the Bill provides that the panel will not be subject to the direction or control of the Northern Ireland Assembly when exercising its functions. The Assembly Commission will be responsible for the appointment of panel members, but Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly will not be members of the appointment panel. In addition, to ensure that the panel is independent of Members, a broad range of connections to the Assembly or individual Members will result in disqualification. I suspect that Members will want to scrutinise that closely in Committee to ensure that the balance is right.

To ensure that the panel operates as cost-effectively as possible, schedule 2 to the Bill states that the Assembly Commission must:

“provide the Panel, or ensure that the Panel is provided, with such administrative support, including staff, services and accommodation, as the Panel may reasonably require to enable it to discharge its functions.”

The Assembly Commission, however, is obliged to consult the panel about such support in order to ensure that such provision, particularly the duties of the staff of the Assembly and the separation of the panel's work from the business of the Northern Ireland Assembly or the Commission, does not call into question the panel's independence.

I look forward to other Members' contributions to the debate.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges (Mr O'Loan): I will speak as the Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, but, before doing so, speaking on behalf of my party, I give full support to Part 1 of the Bill and its creation of an independent financial review panel.

Peter Weir has just explained, on behalf of the Assembly Commission, the principles behind the creation of an independent panel in Part 1. As Chairman of the Committee, I will explain the principles behind the creation of an independent Commissioner for Standards, which is provided for in Part 2.

All of us in the House should share the vision of building an Assembly that strengthens democracy and engages the people of Northern Ireland in creating a better future for all. It is vital to the proper functioning of our democracy that there be public confidence in the integrity of us as Members and in the Assembly as an institution. That does not mean that the public should always agree with everything that all of us say or do. That is just not how democracies work. In a Chamber such as this, in which all sections of society have a voice, there will inevitably be differences of opinion. There are opposing views, conflicting priorities and competing ideologies. Sometimes we can agree issues very easily, but sometimes we need robust and challenging debate, and compromises need to be made to allow us to take difficult decisions and reach agreement. We should recognise that the reality of the process does not always inspire public acclaim.

What is more important, however, is that when we propose policies, scrutinise Departments, question Ministers, debate among ourselves and take decisions, it is understood and accepted by the public that we do so solely and exclusively to serve the public interest, not personal or private interests. It would be completely unacceptable — indeed, it would damage the very fabric of our democracy — if Members were to use the Assembly to pursue outside interests. That is why we have such strict rules on Members' interests.

The Assembly's code of conduct provides a transparent system to ensure that Members place the public interest ahead of their private interests. The code of conduct maintains the integrity of the Assembly by requiring Members to adhere to high ethical standards. It enshrines the seven principles of public life at the heart of what we do and sets out clearly the rules that we must follow. In doing so, it upholds public confidence. Of course, that confidence would soon be undermined if Members were not accountable for their conduct under the code. That is where having a powerful and independent Commissioner for Standards comes in. Where

there are allegations that a Member may have breached the code of conduct, they must be investigated and the outcome of that investigation must be made known.

The Assembly has had, for a number of years, an interim arrangement to ensure that any such allegations would be independently investigated. A previous Committee on Standards and Privileges concluded that the office of the Assembly Ombudsman was well placed and equipped to discharge the functions of the commissioner on an interim basis. It is appropriate that, as we debate the Bill's principles today, we should acknowledge and recognise the work that the Ombudsman has done as the Interim Assembly Commissioner for Standards.

Tom Frawley and his assistant, John MacQuarrie, have been the Committee's dedicated servants. They have had to investigate and consider many thorny issues. It is right, therefore, that the public record reflects the Assembly's gratitude for their ongoing service.

2.15 pm

It is high time that the Assembly put in place formal arrangements for its Commissioner for Standards. Therefore, in June, the Assembly debated the Committee's report on enforcing the code of conduct and appointing an Assembly Commissioner for Standards. The report followed an extensive inquiry by the Committee, the aim of which was to establish the most appropriate means of maintaining the Assembly's code of conduct and handling alleged breaches of it. In its report, the Committee concluded, and the Assembly agreed, that, broadly speaking, the principles of the existing system, whereby the Assembly regulates its own affairs and takes decisions on complaints against Members, were appropriate, reasonable and workable. However, it was also recognised that, although those principles were sound, important work could and should be done to ensure that, in practice, the system is more robust and is seen to be fairer and more transparent. Most significantly, it was agreed that the Assembly should have its own statutory Commissioner for Standards.

As in the interim arrangements, the commissioner's role will be to carry out independent investigations into complaints against Members and to present his or her findings to the Committee on Standards and Privileges. However, it was agreed that, in support of that

role, the commissioner's powers should be set out in statute. What is more, it was agreed that the commissioner's independence from the Assembly in respect of specific investigations should be set out in legislation. The Assembly agreed. It also agreed that, for a one-off term of appointment, there should be a fair and open competition for the position of Assembly Commissioner for Standards.

Part 2 makes provision for a Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards. The Bill provides for the commissioner to receive and investigate complaints and other issues concerning Members, to initiate investigations and to report outcomes to the Assembly. It is particularly important that the commissioner be able to initiate investigations when he or she believes that the code of conduct may have been breached but when no complaint has been made. Sir Christopher Kelly, from the Committee on Standards in Public Life, pointed out that it is difficult for the public to have confidence in a commissioner who cannot respond to serious allegations because no complaint has been made. There was no clearer example of that than during the expenses scandal at Westminster, when evident abuses were identified but the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards was powerless to act without a formal complaint. The Assembly is the first legislature in these islands to agree that a commissioner should be able to initiate investigations, and I am pleased to note that, having had time to consider our report on the matter, the House of Commons Committee on Standards and Privileges has come to the same conclusion.

The Bill also provides for the commissioner's independence and freedom from the direction and control of the Assembly. It is important to recall what the Assembly agreed about the commissioner's independence. It is not the case that the Committee on Standards and Privileges should have no role in how the commissioner carries out his or her functions. For example, the Committee should be able to agree the protocols and procedures that the commissioner should apply generally to all cases. To an extent, those protocols are already set out in the Assembly's code of conduct, and it is right that the commissioner should take a consistent approach to considering admissibility and carrying out investigations. It is also appropriate that, having received a report from the commissioner on a specific complaint, the Committee should be able to ask the

commissioner to go back and establish or clarify particular points.

When we talk about the commissioner's independence, we mean that, subject to any general admissibility criteria, the commissioner must be free to carry out an investigation into a Member if the commissioner believes that an investigation is appropriate. Furthermore, once the commissioner has decided to carry out a specific investigation, he or she must be able to carry it out as he or she sees fit within the agreed framework. Most importantly of all, the commissioner must be free to reach and express any particular conclusions on the outcome of any investigation.

The Assembly has agreed that, in support of those important principles and to promote transparency, the Committee on Standards and Privileges will always publish in full any reports of the commissioner in its own reports to the Assembly. In that way, the commissioner's independence will be safeguarded, and his or her findings will always be a matter of public record. I am pleased that the Bill provides for each of those principles, and, in doing so, it upholds the commissioner's independence.

The Bill also gives the commissioner important powers. Most significantly, the commissioner will have the independent power to call for witnesses and documents. The Bill also creates a number of offences that relate to refusals to provide, or otherwise failing, to give evidence in accordance with a request by the commissioner. Those provisions will give the commissioner the ability to establish the full facts during any investigation.

I am pleased that the Assembly Commission has indicated that it will provide the necessary resources for the commissioner. Of course, at this time, we are more mindful than ever of the need to use our resources prudently. We should, therefore, be clear that Part 2 of the Bill is not about creating a whole new office with significant running costs. It is about putting in place improved arrangements and greater powers for a function that is already carried out and funded by the public purse. The predicted annual running costs of the new commissioner are estimated to be up to £25,000, but they may well be less. That amount is broadly comparable with the cost of the current arrangements. I hope that we can all agree that that is a small amount to pay to

ensure the open and transparent accountability of Members.

Part 2 of the Bill provides a legislative framework that will strengthen the public's trust in the integrity of the Assembly. It has been agreed unanimously by the Committee on Standards and Privileges, and it signifies how seriously the Assembly takes the issue of the conduct of its Members. I welcome the provisions of the Bill and commend them to the House.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will speak about Part 2 of the Bill. There is a consensus in the Committee on Standards and Privileges and in the Assembly that we, as public representatives, must be able to show leadership and demonstrate that we are capable of taking responsibility for having an effective means of holding one another to account.

For a number of years, the Assembly has had in place an interim arrangement to ensure that any such allegations would be independently investigated. I thank the Interim Assembly Commissioner for Standards, Mr Tom Frawley, and Mr John McQuarrie. For a number of years, they assisted the Committee with what can appear, at times, to be a thankless task. Let me assure them that the Committee, as the Chairperson said, is grateful for their diligence and professionalism.

The Assembly discussed the policy proposals in relation to the post of Assembly Commissioner for Standards when it debated the Committee's report last June. That report followed a wide-ranging Committee inquiry, the aim of which was to establish the most suitable way of maintaining the Assembly's code of conduct and handling alleged breaches of it. We all want to strengthen our democracy, and it is imperative to our democracy that there is public confidence in our honesty as Members and in the Assembly as an institution. The Bill will help us to repair the enormous damage to the credibility of politicians that occurred following the Westminster scandals. Politicians' names were mud after what went on there, and there was a perception among the general public that every politician was on the gravy train. I want to put on record that I believe that every Member of the Assembly works for the benefit of all the people.

We must obtain the public's trust again, and our new code of conduct endeavours to do that. As we are talking about standards in

public life, it is right and appropriate that the commissioner should be appointed by means of an open and transparent competition that is consistent with the principles of best practice. That is set out very well in schedule 3 to the Bill, which contains a lengthy list of persons who are disqualified from being appointed, or from serving, as the commissioner. The Bill team and the Committee did a lot of work on that important aspect of the Bill.

It is very important that the commissioner will be able to initiate investigations where he or she believes that a breach of the code of conduct may have occurred but where no complaint has been made. There is no clearer example of that, as has already been mentioned, than during the expenses scandal at Westminster. There was no mechanism in place for the commissioner to conduct an investigation. Everybody knew that a significant number of MPs were engaging in serious wrongdoings, and, basically, the system failed the taxpayer. I am glad that Westminster is following the Assembly's lead.

The Bill also provides for the commissioner's independence and freedom from the direction and control of the Assembly. Furthermore, it gives the commissioner important powers, mainly that the commissioner will have the independent power to call for witnesses and documents in a similar way to the Standards and Privileges Committee.

The predicted annual running costs of £25,000 have been touched upon. That is in line with what is paid to the interim commissioner at present. That provides value for money, and I hope that it allows us to continue the good work in an open, transparent and accountable way for elected representatives.

In conclusion, the Bill provides a parliamentary structure that will build up public trust in the honour of the Assembly. It has been endorsed collectively by the Committee on Standards and Privileges and signifies that the Assembly takes its Members' conduct very seriously. I welcome the Bill and commend it to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Rev Dr Bob Coulter. Dr Coulter, if you are still speaking at 2.30 pm, I will have to interrupt to begin Question Time.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The sermon will be short then.

Involvement in public life should, in some sense, be a calling and not simply a paid occupation. That is why I believe that only the highest standards of conduct from public representatives are acceptable, especially in matters of finance, expenses and the conduct of public life. Although some MPs abused the system in Westminster, many public representatives simply operated the system that was in place, largely without question. It is easy to see why that happened. The system was clearly inadequate to ensure the high standards expected by the electorate of their public representatives. That is precisely why a robust system has to be in place. The Bill seeks to ensure that. We must give it our support, because clarity, which the Bill provides, is in the interest of everyone, including Members, the public and those who administer the system.

When he was Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell told his Parliament repeatedly that he had too much power and asked it repeatedly to make him "more bounded than I am". Assembly Members should take note of that sound advice. There is a need to be above suspicion when determining salaries or when adjudicating on the conduct of a Member, and that is why independent bodies are so important to ensure that MLAs demonstrate a willingness to bring themselves under a set of standards and rules of remuneration and a code of conduct that is clear and visible to all.

Transparency has to be the watchword of all public life, all public conduct and all public representatives. The public expects the level of scrutiny and the mechanism to control the controversial issues of pay and conduct that the Bill lays before the House today. To do that job convincingly and adequately, the Standards Commissioner has to have access to the powers that are prescribed in the Bill. How can anyone fear clarity? Why should anyone fear clarity? Let us vote today for clarity, certainty and probity. Let us show the people whom we represent that we mean business. I commend the measures to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members should take their ease for a few seconds. At 2.30 pm, we will begin questions to the Minister of Education. We will return to the debate after Question Time, when Mr Peter Weir will make a winding-up speech.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Education

Faith-based Education

1. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Education to outline her Department's position in relation to the right of parents to opt for faith-based education for their children. (AQO 574/11)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Is prionsabal lárnach den reachtaíocht oideachais í oideachas a chur ar fáil do dhaltaí de réir mhianta a dtuismitheoirí in gach cás inar féidir.

It is a central principle in education legislation that, where possible, pupils must be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents. We have a diversity of school types and sectors in the North of Ireland, each with its own distinctive character. Since coming into office, I have actively supported policies that encourage and support collaboration and integrating between sectors.

The promotion of equality and respect for diversity are long established in education legislation. They are reflected in the rights of churches to establish and own schools and in the duties on my Department to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium and integrated education. Those legislative principles continue to be reflected in the Executive's policy on the review of public administration and in the Education Bill, with the creation of a single education and skills authority (ESA) to support all sectors. I hope that the Bill will return to the Assembly as soon as possible.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for her reply. Can she outline the contribution that faith-based education sectors across Northern Ireland make, and can she give a commitment to allow and guarantee parental choice over the sector that parents want their children to attend?

The Minister of Education: The evidence shows that ethos, whether Catholic, controlled, Irish-medium or integrated, is important and that successful schools are those with an ethos that pupils, parents, staff and governors support. That is why my school improvement policy,

Every School a Good School, identifies the importance of having an ethos of aspiration and high expectation for pupils. That makes a real difference, particularly for children from our most disadvantaged areas. As Minister, I want to ensure that we support diversity of provision and the rights of parents in an equality framework and that we have an ethos of collaborating and integrating so that all our young people are working and studying together.

Mr Storey: Given the Minister's commitment to protecting the rights of parents, can she explain whether she is being partial in that she denies the rights of parents who wish to send their child to a grammar school? Were her proposals on ESA damaging to Catholic education in that they would have taken away from Catholic schools the rights that they have long had since they were established? How does she marry those two blatant contradictions, which are only in keeping with her many others?

The Minister of Education: Any choice needs to be based on equality. It is interesting to hear the Member's party's new-found ideas on academic selection. I remind the DUP of one of its sacred cows, and I can hear them shouting across already, because they know that this is the case. The 1989 DUP election manifesto, which is believed to have been written largely by Mr Robinson and was a platform on which Mr Wilson stood, states:

"We believe that selection at 11 should be ended. The 11-plus procedure is educationally unsound and socially divisive and places unnecessary strain upon children at a very early age."

Now, folks, I am being accused of hypocrisy? I rest my case. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I am sure that, in the lead up to Christmas, we will want to reflect that in how we treat each other.

Mr B McCrea: I am in the Christmas spirit, but, at the risk of getting the Minister's ire, I am interested in the substance of the issue of choice. If one celebrates diversity, people will be making a choice. What is the Minister's feeling on the issue of choice? Should parents have the right to choose the most appropriate school for their child?

The Minister of Education: Well, to my friend Basil, I believe that I answered the question on choice. However, regardless of what choice parents make and regardless of what schools

we have in our system, I want to ensure that we have academic excellence, vocational excellence and a world-class education system for all our young people. That is the point that I was referring to earlier. We can have a little joke about education, but there is no joke about standards and ensuring that we have a world class education system that everybody gets access to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Ian McCrea.

Mr I McCrea: Question number, um —

Mr Buchanan: Two.

Capital Works: Magherafelt

2. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Education to outline progress on the capital build projects being carried out in the Magherafelt area. (AQO 575/11)

The Minister of Education: Are you sure? An bhfuil tú cinnte? Number 2?

Tugadh breis agus £26 milliún d'infheistíocht chaipitil le foirgnimh nua scoile a sholáthar i gceantar Mhachaire Fíolta do Woods Primary School, do St Pius X High School, do Sperrin Integrated College agus do Spires Integrated Primary School.

Capital investment of over £26 million has been provided for new school buildings in the Magherafelt area, at Woods Primary School, St Pius X High School, Sperrin Integrated College and Spires Integrated Primary School. In addition, the construction of the new school building for Magherafelt High School is under way. Work started in January 2010, and it is estimated that the construction of the new school will be completed in November 2011.

This morning, as the Member will be aware, I submitted a written statement to the Assembly setting out concerns regarding the approvals and procurement of that project. The chief executive of the board has reported that the board has entered into an arrangement with the contractor involved, which has resulted in construction works being undertaken without all the necessary approvals being in place with the Department, and the board has made payments, an element of which has not been approved by the Department. That is a very serious matter, and I have, therefore, ordered an external investigation of all the circumstances

surrounding the procurement and work associated with that contract. I expect to have the investigation report before Christmas, and I will then judge what further steps are needed. I will, of course, update the Assembly in due course. The Audit Office has been kept fully apprised of those developments.

The Member will also be aware that, in June, I secured additional capital funding, which permitted me to announce that 13 new school building projects, including those for Magherafelt Primary School and Magherafelt Nursery School, should commence. Those two newbuilds in Magherafelt are scheduled to start in January 2011.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Sir Reg Empey — sorry, I call Ian McCrea.

Mr I McCrea: There is a bit of confusion in the House today.

The Minister has referred to the number of new school builds in the Magherafelt area and, indeed, the Mid Ulster constituency. She also referred to her statement, and I await the outcome of that investigation with interest, because there are concerns there.

The Minister will not be surprised when I raise the issue of the Rainey Endowed grammar school in Magherafelt, which I believe is probably one of the high priorities within the board area but is outside the board's responsibility.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question, Mr McCrea.

Mr I McCrea: Can the Minister assure the House that giving the school in Magherafelt a newbuild is a priority for her Department?

The Minister of Education: The scheme for a proposed new school building for Rainey Endowed is included in my Department's investment delivery plan (IDP). The school is moving to appoint a design team for the project. Following the recent review of capital projects, Rainey Endowed School was deemed fully compliant. At present, there are 53 schemes remaining on the Department's investment delivery plan. Obviously, my ability to move those and other much-needed school building programmes forward is totally dependent on the capital funds given to my Department.

Leanfaidh mé leis an stocaireacht chun cistí caipitil a fháil ionas gur féidir leanúint de chlár tógála na scoileanna.

I will continue to lobby for capital funds to drive forward the school building programme. I very much look forward to the British Government adhering to the agreements made about the strategic investment programme and the investment money that they agreed to allocate to this part of Ireland. Rainey Endowed School will be considered for funding alongside the other projects remaining on the IDP.

Sir Reg Empey: Will the Minister enlighten the House on the progress being made on the capital build project for Strathearn School in east Belfast?

The Minister of Education: Strathearn School is one of the schools that was given priority. I will send the Member an update on that.

Entitlement Framework

3. **Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the implementation of the entitlement framework. (AQO 576/11)

The Minister of Education: Tá cur i bhfeidhm iomlán an chreata teidlíochta faoin bhliain 2013 fós ina phríomh-thosaíocht ag mo Roinn.

The full implementation of the entitlement framework by 2013 remains a key priority for my Department. Although some progress has been made in recent years, the pace of progress needs to be quickened if we are to ensure that all young people, regardless of the sector or geographical area in which they go to school, have equal opportunity to access a broad-based curriculum by 2013. I firmly believe that through offering pupils access to a wide range of courses that meet their interests, aptitudes and career aspirations, we will ensure that many more young people can achieve their full potential.

Although almost all schools are members of area learning communities, I remain to be convinced that they are all actively playing their part, as they should be. There is nothing to fear from engaging with one other. Barriers can be overcome, and issues such as timetabling can be resolved. The area learning community is the forum where issues are brought, discussed and resolved and where good practice is shared on an area basis. In many cases, however, that collaboration is not happening as much it should be across the classes, as opposed to across the various religions.

I want all schools and sectors to work together, because they can deliver so much more for their pupils when they, along with the further education colleges, pool their resources and share experiences and expertise. I want schools to offer pupils a wide range of opportunities through effective collaboration, because that often delivers better education experiences for pupils and better value for money for taxpayers.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister and welcome the frankness of her answer. It confirms what was stated in the recent Together Towards Entitlement report, which was that achieving the entitlement framework across the schools in Northern Ireland is well behind schedule. That ties in with the concept of area-based planning. The Minister outlined that certain sectors are not moving forward with that. Therefore, what can she do and what is she doing to ensure that that schedule will be achieved?

The Minister of Education: I thank the Member for his interest in the area. It is essential that all schools work together. One of the biggest policies that made a big difference to the entitlement framework was the removal of the 11-plus, because schools were in competition with one another rather than collaborating. Thankfully, more and more schools are now working together.

I welcome the fact that a significant number of schools have reached the target of providing 24 or 27 subjects. However, some are still not playing their role. I have said clearly that my Department is monitoring that. For example, we will not continue to fund a couple of courses in art and science for four or five pupils in one town, because we cannot continue to pay for the resources for teachers and pupils for a two-year period when those pupils should be in one class in that area. My Department cannot continue to fund on that basis, and we are telling area learning communities in those towns and villages to get together, provide a broad-based curriculum and not duplicate courses.

Mr Bell: Is it the case that the Minister's Department will have failed to ensure that there are 24 choices at Key Stage 4 and 27 choices at post-16 by September 2013? If so, does she agree that it would be highly regrettable if this were not on target and ready for 2013?

2.45 pm

The Minister of Education: I welcome the progress that has been made. I look forward to support from the Members opposite in bringing about that progress.

Members know about the jigsaw of interconnected reforms that we have: the revised curriculum, which is a good curriculum; the entitlement framework, which is very broad-based; area learning communities, which are working together; and some good models of very good practice. Lisanelly is one example of how we should shape the future of our education system.

All schools have to play their part. My Department is working very closely with schools to do that. I hope that every Member in the House is playing their role with their local schools, because we cannot have a situation in which some schools are refusing to share facilities or to timetable with other schools in their area. Often, that breaks down over class not religion. It is up to everyone to play their role.

Mr Kinahan: The Minister touched on this matter, but I am not very clear about it. What is the Department doing to mainstream good relations and shared education across sectors through the development of the entitlement framework?

The Minister of Education: People may be surprised at the extent of shared education. I have been to schools across the North. Some places are more advanced than others. However, having spoken to parents and young people, I know that more and more pupils are doing one A level in one school, a second A level in another school and a third A level in another school. More and more, as I visit our post-primary schools, I see four or five different uniforms in classrooms, and that is the way that it should be. I am driving integration and collaboration, and I am encouraging and supporting area learning communities. That is the way forward. Schools should not be competing with each other in an area, schools should be working together.

Schools: North Antrim

4. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Education which schools she has visited in the North Antrim area since May 2007 and whether she intends to meet the staff and governors of Castle Tower School to discuss the proposed new build. (AQO 577/11)

The Minister of Education: Ó mhí Bealtaine 2007, thug mé cuairt ar roinnt scoileanna i gceantar Aontroma Thuaidh le réimse leathan de cheisteanna oideachais a phlé.

Since May 2007, I have visited a number of schools in the north Antrim area, including Bunscoil an Chaistil, Garryduff Primary School, Leaney Primary School, St Colmcille's Primary School, St Mary's Primary School, Ballycastle Integrated Primary School, St Patrick's and St Brigid's Primary School, Cross and Passion College, Our Lady of Lourdes High School and North Coast Integrated College to discuss a wide variety of educational issues. In addition, I have already met representatives from and visited Castle Tower School. Therefore, I am fully aware of the conditions under which the school is operating. However, due to uncertainty over the resources available for future development, it is not possible to provide a time frame on the way forward for such potential projects.

I am always keen to meet schools' representatives to discuss issues directly. However, in this case, having already met representatives and visited the school to discuss all the issues, I do not feel that a meeting would add any benefit at this time.

I want to build schools. I have shown that, when resources are available, I can deliver new schools. Since May 2007, the Department has completed 49 major projects. I have visited two such projects yesterday and today and two others in the past couple of weeks, all of which are in north Antrim. We have spent £422.5 million on our schools estate. Seven further major capital schools projects are on site, which is a further investment of £89.4 million.

The rate at which I can invest in the schools estate is dependent upon the resources made available to me by the Executive. I urge Members of the Assembly and, indeed, the Member from the party opposite to support the case for providing adequate resources to continue with the investment and school building programmes.

Mr Frew: The Minister will know the impossible position that Castle Tower School is in, given that it is one school but three campuses. What used to be three schools has been left in an impossible situation. They were promised a newbuild, hence the name Castle Tower School, as that newbuild was to be situated near the old Ballymena castle. The school has been left

in a serious position. Will the Minister prioritise a newbuild for the school? She can and she must act, as she did on behalf of Whitehouse Primary School, which I commend. Will she act responsibly and immediately on this issue?

The Minister of Education: I thank the Member for his complimentary comments, and I take them in the spirit in which they were made.

Aithníonn mo Roinn go bhfuil saincheisteanna tromchúiseacha cóiríochta ag Castle Tower Special School.

My Department recognises that there are serious accommodation issues at Castle Tower School, and I am particularly conscious that our most vulnerable children are being educated in poor accommodation. I also fully appreciate that the difficulties, particularly operating the school on a spilt-site campus, will be fully alleviated only by the provision of a fit-for-purpose school building. The scheme for Castle Tower School is one of a significant number that the Department supports, but for which the funding has not yet been announced. As the Member will know, Whitehouse Primary School was one of the schools on the list of capital projects.

When the North Eastern Education and Library Board brought forward a revised economic appraisal for the Castle Tower School project in 2008, it was accorded priority status by my Department, and it was reviewed and scrutinised as a matter of urgency. I hope that the Members opposite and all other Members in the House understand the importance of the capital budget being protected and of the British Government adhering to the international agreements to which they are party. I look forward to joining all parties in the House in fighting our corner for more money for capital projects.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer and for her investment in north Antrim to date. In recent weeks, she visited Portglenone and Ballycastle, where new capital build schools have been put in place. I understand the frustration of parents, teachers and pupils from Castle Tower School and from Braidside Integrated School in Ballymena. It is important, therefore, that we get the necessary resources for the capital budget. How many capital building projects have been completed since the Minister took office in May 2007?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. I must put on record the wonderful visits that I made to St Mary's in Portglenone and to the new school in Ballycastle.

If anyone wonders whether devolution is working, the answer is yes, and one of the biggest pieces of evidence that I have for that is the capital spend budget. I am sure that other Ministers will talk about their Departments, but I will focus on mine. In the two years prior to my coming into office, direct rule Ministers handed back £62 million and £94 million respectively to the British Exchequer; I have not done that. Since May 2007, the Department has completed 48 major schools and spent £404 million on the schools estate. A further 15 major capital schools projects are on site, representing a further investment of over £250 million. Two additional major capital works at Lagan College and Tor Bank School are being procured, and work has not yet commenced on site.

This morning, I was at a newbuild opening on the lower Falls in Belfast, and I was at St Cecilia's College in Derry yesterday. Indeed, in Derry alone, there have been major investments in St Mary's College, St Cecilia's College and Lisneal College. Two weeks ago, I attended the opening of the Belfast Model School for Girls, which is a wonderful school that does good work and provides high standards.

Mr Storey: You were an hour and a half late.

The Minister of Education: The Member, who is also the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, is very rude. I hope that he is not suggesting that I should have missed my Question Time to attend the opening of that school. We should have more respect for these institutions and for the Assembly. I went to the school immediately after Question Time. We should not have a begrudging approach to this. The Chairperson of the Committee for Education is acting inappropriately. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms Lo: The Minister mentioned Lagan College. Will she provide the House with an update on the progress that has been made on the project at that school?

The Minister of Education: I thank the Member for her question. As she will know, I have visited Lagan College, and it does good work. The project is in the process of being procured, and

it is one of the two school projects that will go forward next.

Schools: Lisanelly Site

5. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Education what level of commitment she has received from the schools in Omagh to move to the proposed shared educational campus on the former military base at Lisanelly. (AQO 578/11)

The Minister of Education: I thank the Member for bringing this matter to the House, because it is one that is close to my heart and in which I have an active interest. Indeed, I established and chaired the related working group.

Ní dóigh liom gur féidir feidhm níos fearr a bhaint as iar-bhunáit de chuid arm na Breataine ná í a bheith ag cur le soláthar oideachais.

There could not be a more laudable use of a former British Army base than to enhance education provision. The Lisanelly project offers a unique opportunity to provide the young people of Omagh with access to a broad and balanced curriculum in state-of-the-art accommodation. The co-location of a number of Omagh schools, including Arvalee Special School, on a single campus will enable schools to share expertise, reduce duplication and provide courses that are sustainable in the longer term. The project will benefit not only the young people enrolled in schools on the campus but pupils from other schools in the Omagh area. It represents a unique opportunity on this island to deliver the integration of education.

This exciting project is in the early stages of development, but, even now, it captures the imagination of all involved. I pay tribute to Rev Robert Herron and Monsignor Joseph Donnelly, co-chairpersons of the Lisanelly shared educational campus steering group, for the leadership that they have provided in getting the project to this stage. I am also encouraged by the support of other stakeholders in the area, including Omagh District Council. The design team, which was appointed in March 2010 and which works with schools in the area, has produced preliminary concept plans and indicative designs of the site layout. For those involved, the process of developing those early plans has increased understanding of what the project is about and hopes to achieve and has highlighted how the shared campus could

change the way in which future education is delivered for the young people of Omagh.

I have seen the outline master plan, and I am more convinced than ever that this is a truly remarkable opportunity. Pupils, parents, teachers, principals, school governors and, indeed, the people of Omagh will be excited about the possibilities that the campus offers. The detail will be available for all to see following the launch of a consultation later this week, and I look forward to going to Omagh to be with the people involved. Following that consultation, the next phase will be to move to more detailed planning. I envisage that, at that stage, all schools in the Omagh area will be able to avail themselves of the facilities and will be actively involved in the project.

Mr Buchanan: I listened carefully to what the Minister said, and I have no doubt that she is out of touch with the people of Omagh. The Minister will be aware that the business case is for six schools to come on to the campus. Given that only three schools are committed to the campus, does the Minister really think that it is a viable project? Does she think that, as Minister, she can bully the other schools to come on to the site by starving them of future funding in the most discriminatory manner?

The Minister of Education: I absolutely reject those comments and the tone in which they were made. I have met the people of Omagh. I have met Danny McSorley, who represents the district council. I have met the Catholic trustees and the co-chairpersons of the project. I have seen the leadership that schools in all sectors demonstrate. The point needs to be made that this is a dynamic project. It is a project through which we have a unique opportunity to build a most amazing educational campus on a former British military site in the heart of Omagh.

The outline business case will have to show value for money, regardless of the number of schools that move to the Lisanelly site. Equally, any school that would like a newbuild will have to include Lisanelly as part of a business case. That is the way in which it works here. I refute the Member's bullying claim. Indeed, I am very disappointed by that comment. Omagh is very lucky to be getting this project, and the people of Omagh understand that.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister explain why it is important that the project progresses, given the

financial constraints now and the possibility of future financial constraints?

The Minister of Education: In the current financial climate, there is a need to focus on, and to address, the issue of sustainable schools, a need for shared planning of capital provision and a need to make optimum use of scarce financial resources.

Unlike previous Ministers, I am not going to build schools that will be empty in a couple of years' time. That would not be a good use of public money.

3.00 pm

School capital provision can no longer be taken in isolation; it must be taken in the context of the overall needs of an area. It is, therefore, important for Omagh to seize the opportunity, as such sites rarely become available. That is particularly true of a site of such magnitude, which has the potential to provide for a shared educational campus. This is not even just about educational issues; it is about the regeneration of a town — the town of Omagh. The project will have benefits for every sector of the community, which is why all sectors are supporting it.

Tá tairbhí oideachais, sóisialta agus eacnamaíochta le baint amach tríd níos mó comhroinnt san oideachas. There are educational, social and economic benefits to be realised through greater sharing in education. This unique project offers the opportunity for a number of schools to co-locate on the Lisanelly site and to explore and plan the campus to include shared facilities that will allow all the young people in Omagh to have access to state-of-the-art facilities that offer a broad and balanced curriculum.

We will have all types of schools on the campus, and that will allow all the pupils to interact with one another. I am particularly pleased that Arvalee School and Resource Centre will be on the campus, because it has much expertise to offer other schools.

Mr Buchanan's comments about the Lisanelly site do not sit very well with his party leader's support for the integrating of education. It would be interesting to know what that party's policy is on the issue. Is it the case that it is for selection and against selection and that it is riding two horses?

Employment and Learning

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 10 has been withdrawn.

Student Fees

1. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether, since taking up office, he has had any discussions with Joanne Stuart or the students' unions on the proposed increase in student fees. (AQO 589/11)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Mr Kennedy): On the same day that a public petition on student fees was presented to the Assembly, I was grateful that, at my request, representatives from the National Union of Students (NUS) and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) and the presidents of the student unions at Queen's, the University of Ulster and St Mary's University College were able to meet with me. That gave me an early opportunity to hear their views and concerns, and I gave them my assurance that, because I recognise and value the contribution that they have to make, they will remain fully involved in the process.

Indeed, my Department recently reconstituted a key stakeholder group for the development of future student finance policy, and the first of a series of meetings over the coming months is taking place this afternoon. The NUS/USI will be key members of that stakeholder group.

I spoke with Joanne Stuart and subsequently met her on 17 November to discuss the updating of her report in light of the publication of the Browne review, the UK Government's response to that review and the new context in which the higher education debate is taking place following the announcement of the details of the comprehensive spending review.

I assure the House that I share the concerns both of Members and Executive colleagues on how the future fees and student finance policy will be impacted on by the impending budget reductions across Departments. Therefore, I underline again the urgent need for all those involved and with an interest to commit to a responsible, mature and democratic debate on the issue of higher education funding and fees.

Mrs McGill: I thank the Minister for his response. I thank him especially for his continued engagement with the students and with Joanne Stuart. Given that Joanne Stuart's

review was commissioned in 2008, that it commenced in 2009 and that we received the report a couple of months ago in 2010, does the Minister have any sense of the time frame for the completion of the update? This is a matter of urgency. It is my belief that some young people and their families will suffer if the matter is not sorted out fairly soon.

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I thank the Member for her supplementary question.

As the Member and the House will know, the Stuart report was commissioned by my predecessor and pre-dated the Browne review at UK level. Therefore, it would have made no sense to publish Stuart without knowing the outcome of the Browne report.

Joanne Stuart's report made a number of recommendations and was submitted to my predecessor in March this year. However, the economic climate was changing quickly, and Joanne Stuart's report expressly indicated that it would need to be reviewed in the light of Lord Browne's report. Therefore although it was appropriate to publish the Stuart report at the same time as the Browne report to enable a fully informed public debate to begin, it is also very important that Joanne Stuart be given the opportunity to update her report.

That is being done in the light of the Browne report, the Government's response to it, and the comprehensive spending review. I am pleased to say that we expect Joanne Stuart to report to me by the end of this year so that I can assess matters and make recommendations to the Executive and, ultimately, to the House.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister confirm that it is his belief that access to university education should be based simply on ability to learn and not on ability to pay? Will he send a message to parents and concerned students that there will be no material increase in fees in Northern Irish universities in the foreseeable future?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am grateful to the Member for his question. As the newly appointed Minister, I have made it clear that my view and guiding principle is that places at university should be based on ability to learn and not on ability to pay.

We are in a difficult economic climate. I will certainly not make the mistake of prejudging the

outcome of Joanne Stuart's deliberations or the ongoing Budget negotiations. It is important that those Budget negotiations be concluded and that we form a Budget so that there is clarity and certainty about the future of the matter.

I have to caution the Member that it is, perhaps, a mistake to make promises that may be difficult to keep in the current economic climate. I am not interested in that. I need to see the detail of Joanne Stuart's report to me, and I need to be aware of the financial implications of the comprehensive spending review settlement for my Department.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that the debate in Northern Ireland avoids the disgraceful scenes of violence recently witnessed at a student protest in London?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I thank the Member for his question. I strongly agree with his sentiments and utterly condemn the despicable scenes of violence witnessed at the student protest in London. The democratic right to protest carries the responsibility to do so in a peaceful and law-abiding fashion. Instead, in our nation's capital, police officers were injured, the property of a democratic political party was attacked, and our nation's capital was scarred by mob violence.

I am pleased that the local NUS leadership saw fit to condemn that thuggery. There is a weighty responsibility on the student leadership, nationally and locally, to ensure that all protests are peaceful. Inflammatory language can have no part in the debate on university funding. That underlines the urgent need for everyone to commit to a responsible, mature and democratic debate on higher-education funding and fees.

Universities: Research and Development

2. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of whether continued investment in research and development in universities is essential to secure future economic growth. (AQO 590/11)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Investment in research and development is absolutely vital for securing economic growth. It is the engine of innovation, and it is innovation that drives growth and economic development.

Therefore, it is essential that the Executive continue to give a high priority to investing in our universities' research and development programmes. That is especially important in Northern Ireland, where research undertaken by universities plays a significant role in the economy compared with the rest of the United Kingdom.

In Northern Ireland, universities account for nearly half of research and development expenditure, which is around twice the UK average. That is mainly due to the high number of small to medium-sized firms, which, historically, are unable to fund research projects. That, in turn, places a greater responsibility on the Government here to ensure that the higher education sector is properly resourced to undertake high-quality research, so that the economic benefits of such investment are available to the wider population of Northern Ireland.

At the recent US/Northern Ireland investment conference in Washington, existing investors from the USA commented that the high quality of the research and development work at Northern Ireland universities, the skills of the workforce, and the relationship between business, academia and Government were the main reasons for locating their operations in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is essential that our current levels of investment are maintained, if not increased, in the forthcoming Budget.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his reply. Does he think that the present level of investment in research and development can be sustained in the absence of the innovation fund?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. My Department and I are committed to continuing to support the further education sector in carrying out its research and development activities to support the needs of businesses, particularly its work in emerging and specialised areas such as wind technology, engineering, information and communication technology, and electronics, which will contribute to the growth of our economy. Further education sector research and development initiatives include the South West College's InnoTech centre, which is working with a range of local small and medium-sized enterprises to assist them in developing new ideas and products and bringing them to market. Carbon Zero Northern Ireland is a further education sector-wide project which is carrying out research and development in the specific area of sustainability. Those

two initiatives have been funded through my Department's innovation fund, which is a time-limited programme and is due to conclude in March 2011. We have bid for resources to sustain those and other good projects. If they are not funded, it will be very difficult to continue with that work.

Mr Bell: Many Members will welcome your commitment to research and development in our universities. Can you assure us that the twin pillars of investment in quality education and the success that we have in Northern Ireland in placing more working-class children in university than any other part of the United Kingdom will continue to go forward together?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am grateful to the Member for his contribution, and I entirely agree. The secret to finding a successful resolution to our economic problems lies in encouraging and developing research and development, as well as training and skills. That surely has to be the guiding principle of the Executive: that even in straitened economic times we can find our way through this and give hope, particularly to our young people.

Mr Callaghan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister inform us of any consideration that he has given, or intends to give, to encouraging further co-operation in research and development between universities in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I will take this opportunity to welcome the new Member to Question Time and to thank him for his question. Co-operation is always dependent on a good working relationship between universities across not only Northern Ireland but the Republic of Ireland.

If there are sensible initiatives, for which funding is available — and I suspect that funding will be the key issue, not only for Northern Ireland but for the Republic of Ireland, given its particular economic problems — my officials and the universities will be keen to explore mutually beneficial opportunities.

3.15 pm

Further and Higher Education: Working-class Protestants

3. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline what

funding or programmes are provided by his Department to promote further and higher education in working-class Protestant areas and for his assessment of the level of success achieved to date. (AQO 591/11)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Raising education attainment at post-primary level is critical to ensuring the widest pool of applicants to further and higher education. Although that is most properly a matter for schools and for the Department and Minister of Education, higher education institutions can play a role.

In the academic year 2010-11, my Department allocated more than £2.2 million to promote widening participation in higher education. That figure includes £700,000 funding for special projects, such as the Step-Up and Discovering Queen's programmes, to support work to raise aspirations and education attainment in schools in working-class areas. Much of that special project work is undertaken in schools in working-class Protestant areas with traditionally low levels of progression in education. In addition, my Department will provide £1.5 million in widening-participation premium funding to support recruitment and retention of students from less-advantaged backgrounds.

In 2000-01, almost 5,000 enrolments in courses at local further and higher education institutions were from students from the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland who declared their community background as Protestant. By 2008-09, that figure had risen to nearly 7,000, which is an increase of around two fifths. Those trends are encouraging. However, stubborn pockets remain, including those in working-class Protestant areas where participation is not as high as it should be.

Therefore, I am not complacent: my Department currently leads the development of a regional widening-participation strategy that aims to further improve the progression rates of all under-represented groups. That demonstrates my Department's continuing commitment to that important issue.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am not sure whether he is aware of the Kilcooley Women's Education Centre in North Down, which offers programmes to working-class Protestant women and is now branching out to provide programmes to men. The centre is funded by Peace III, the Department for Social

Development and the Irish Government. Will the Minister make a commitment to the House that he will visit the centre to see the excellent work that it provides to working-class Protestant communities, and that he will look at funding that he can arrange to help them to progress their educational status.

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I am grateful to the Member for his question. Obviously, an invitation from the group would be considered carefully. I would like to see whether I could pay a visit to observe the important work that is being done and to see whether progress could be made on that. I am aware that, apart from the Member, other local representatives made representations to my predecessor on the issue. I hope that, perhaps, a visit could be arranged at the earliest opportunity in order to explore possibilities.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his commitment to all under-represented groups, not just to those from one section of the community.

One problem that was highlighted during the Committee's NEETs (not in education, employment or training) inquiry is the difficulty, with regard to data collection and tracking, in following a student after he or she has left school at 16 years of age. Has the Minister had any more success with the Minister of Education to bring about good co-operation between the two Departments on following students and on provision of good careers advice? It is my understanding that, at present, some schools can refuse to take up your Department's careers advice, which is critical if young people are to select the right further and higher education courses.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question, and I pay tribute to her work as Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning and thank her for that. I accept entirely her point that co-operation and collaboration would be and will be the sensible way forward. Departmental officials and I will be seeking to achieve progress on ensuring that we can make a difference to the lives of young people who, unless we can deal with this issue in a comprehensive manner, will continue to face a very uncertain future.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers, not only to this question but to

the previous questions. It is useful that more people outside of the Committee know about the widening participation scheme. In one of his earlier answers, the Minister talked about the ability to learn versus the ability to pay. If you go for the ability to pay, does the Minister have any idea of what the impact would be on working-class communities if an increase in student fees were imposed on students?

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I thank the Member for her comments and for her supplementary question. I am loath at this stage to get into a discussion on figures, except to say that I have already stated that the allocation of university places should be based on the ability to learn and not on the ability to pay, and that we want to retain our position at the top of the UK league in respect of widening participation, so that our universities are places that are welcoming and open to students from all backgrounds.

The Budget negotiations will be critical, and I would like to see early progress on those. The whole country, regardless of whether people have an interest in education, health, roads or industry, is looking to the Assembly and the Executive for clarity and certainty. They want to know that we can get in place a Budget that will, at least, chart the way forward to enable us to deal with the very difficult economic issues that we face and to do so with a degree of greater certainty.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Jonathan Bell for a question. I am sorry; I call Jonathan Craig.

Mr Craig: I do not know whether to thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Student Fees

4. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when he will be in a position to report on any changes to student fees. (AQO 592/11)

9. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures his Department is taking to address the potential increase in student fees. (AQO 597/11)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 4 and 9 together.

There is a legislative cap on what fees Northern Ireland universities can charge. Any change in that will need Assembly approval. Subject to clarification of the budgetary position, my Department will bring forward options and proposals early in 2011 and, subject to Executive agreement, a public consultation on tuition fees and student finance will follow. After the consultation, I will bring proposals to my Executive colleagues for the approval of the House.

Mr Craig: Does the Minister agree that there is an imperative to sort this situation out very quickly, because, although the House can prevaricate over its budgets for the next four years, individuals, especially parents, cannot prevaricate over how they will fund their children going to university? They need some clarification and certainty on the issue, and the sooner that they get it, the better.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am grateful to the Member for the point that he makes. I am happy to give my complete support to the emphasis on achieving an early resolution to the budgetary considerations that myself and Executive colleagues are undertaking now. It is in the interest of everyone that we bring forward a Budget that can be consulted upon, reviewed and, if necessary, amended, even by the House. There are a number of budget holders in my Department who are keen to see the level of expenditure, or lack of it, that they will have to deal with in the new financial year.

In my view, we cannot risk running through until the end of this financial year before confirming a Budget, because that will have implications for the new financial year and will incur unnecessary costs. So I hope that all parties in the Executive will work together quickly to bring forward a Budget and that external matters, such as by-elections or impending general elections in other jurisdictions, will not affect those deliberations.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr P J Bradley is not in his place for question 5. Mr Thomas Burns is not in his place for question 6. Mr Kieran McCarthy is not in his place for question 7. Mr Simpson Gibson is not in his place for question 8. Question 9 has already been answered. Question 10 has been withdrawn. Question 11: Mr Boylan is not in his place.

Employment: Training

12. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline what level of co-operation exists between his Department and industry to identify training courses which meet employers' requirements. (AQO 600/11)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I am grateful to so many Members for not turning up today, but I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware that the Department has a great deal of contact with local industry, and the focus of our efforts over recent years has been to ensure that the Department's support for training provision mirrors the needs of local industry — a demand-led system. That has been articulated in many departmental publications, such as 'Further Education Means Business' and the skills strategies.

In practical terms, we have engaged with local industry through, among others, the workforce development forums and the sector skills councils, which we sponsor and the role of which is to work with employers to identify current and future skills and training needs and to develop solutions to meet those needs. In addition, the Northern Ireland Adviser on Employment and Skills has provided valuable intelligence on future skills needs. We have also engaged with industry on our Bridge to Employment programme over many years.

We are currently working with Invest NI on the Assured Skills programme, which seeks to ensure the delivery of a range of activities and interventions that guarantee potential inward investment companies, or existing investment companies that wish to expand, that Northern Ireland has the ability to satisfy their future skills and training needs. Also, our Skills Solutions service, which is now up and running, has the specific aim of providing employers with a learning and skills service that identifies and helps meet their training needs. Our Skills Solutions advisers have been active across Northern Ireland since September, including in East Londonderry.

Furthermore, qualifications underpin the delivery of all vocational education and training, and the Department is leading on the implementation of the cross-UK vocational qualification reform programme in Northern Ireland. Employers are now at the heart of the system for developing and delivering vocational qualifications, and all vocational qualifications on the new

qualifications and credit framework are based on employer-owned standards and strategies.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he give us an assurance that he will encourage industry to communicate its needs to his Department to ensure that suitable courses are provided?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In so far as it is within my power, I certainly do give that commitment.

Mr K Robinson: I am very conscious of the time, Mr Deputy Speaker; thank you very much for calling me to ask a supplementary question. I am sure that the Minister would love to pad out his 30 minutes. Given that most of our industry is based on small family businesses and small industry in general, and given the added difficulty that poses for the Minister's Department in trying to bring skills programmes forward, has he any forethought as to how a basic skills potential might be developed in the workforce so that, when the uplift eventually comes, we will have people partially trained and partially moved along the road towards training?

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I am grateful to the Member for his question. It is my priority, as Minister, and that of my departmental officials to have in place the necessary training and skills — both vocational skills and academic opportunities — in preparation for the economic upturn.

3.30 pm

Although there is an economic depression at the moment, it is right that we prepare our workforce for the upturn and give encouragement to young people so that we stand ready to benefit from the opportunities that will come to us, I hope, in the not too distant future.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Gerry McHugh is not in his place to ask question 13.

That concludes questions to the Minister for Employment and Learning.

Committee Business

Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Bill: Second Stage

Debate resumed.

Mr Weir: I welcome Members' support and thank them for their contributions. It is noticeable that, at the Second Stage, a limited number of Members spoke. That is a good sign, as it shows that there is wide consensus in the House. The Bill is uncontroversial, and everyone accepts that it is common sense. Members therefore took the view that they did not need to add to the volume of debate. Nevertheless, I thank those who contributed.

I will address the issues that were raised, and if Members feel that I did not cover all of them, I am more than happy to write to them.

Declan O'Loan spoke as Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. He set out clearly the rationale and principles underlying Part 2 of the Bill. Accountability and transparency are fundamental in upholding confidence in the democratic process, and those principles inform the provisions for the Assembly Commissioner for Standards. The commissioner will be independent. He or she will not need the Assembly's permission to carry out an investigation into an allegation of misconduct; indeed, there will not even need to be a complaint for him to carry out an investigation. The commissioner will have the power to commence an investigation where they believe that a breach of the code may have occurred.

Declan O'Loan reminded us why the Committee on Standards in Public Life has emphasised that such a power is so necessary. He also explained how the Commissioner for Standards will determine how an investigation is to be carried out, albeit within an agreed time frame. The commissioner will be able to reach and express any conclusion on the outcome of an investigation, and the Assembly will always publish those conclusions. That enshrines the notion of transparency in Part 2 of the Bill.

Willie Clarke spoke about the consensus in the Committee on Standards and Privileges in favour of the provisions in Part 2. He also spoke of how the situation at Westminster has damaged, in many cases unfairly, the

perception of all politicians. He concentrated on Part 2 and said that it went some way to rebuilding confidence. It is interesting to note, with reference to holding people to account, that my remarks on Part 1 seem to have been completely ignored by all other Members who spoke. I will take that as suggesting a high level of consensus on my remarks.

Reverend Robert Coulter, who is not in the Chamber, issued a clarion call for a return to a Cromwellian era. In other contexts, that might not be shared by all Members. He spoke of the importance of a robust system for holding Members to account and of the values of clarity and transparency. I am pleased that he recognised how the Bill will provide for those principles to be put into practice.

As we move ahead with the Bill, it is clear that there is a high level of consensus on the principles of Parts 1 and 2. When the Bill passes its Second Stage, the next stage is the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee for its detailed scrutiny. That will enable Members to comment on it and to make sure that its detail is absolutely right.

I am confident that the establishment of the independent financial review panel and the Assembly Commissioner for Standards are positive steps forward for the Assembly and that they will significantly enhance the independence, openness and transparency of the processes. Therefore I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Bill [NIA 3/10] be agreed.

Ad Hoc Committee: Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Bill

Motion made:

That, as provided for in Standing Order 53(1), this Assembly appoints an Ad Hoc Committee to consider the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Bill; and to submit a report to the Assembly by 25 January 2011.

Composition:

DUP 2

Sinn Féin 2

UUP 1

SDLP 1

Alliance 1

Quorum: *The quorum shall be five Members.*

Procedure: *The procedures of the Committee shall be such as the Committee shall determine. — [Ms Ní Chuilín]*

Private Members' Business

Integrated and Shared Education

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

Mr Lunn: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the report by Oxford Economics, 'Developing the Case for Shared Education'; believes that the current education system is unsustainable; recognises the economic, educational and social benefits that can come from integrated and shared education; and calls on the Minister of Education to actively promote a system of integrated and shared education throughout Northern Ireland.

We are pleased to bring the motion to the House today. It can be broken down into four parts, which we will look at in some detail later. However, at the outset, I confirm that we will not accept the SDLP's amendment, which we see as a dilution of our original proposal.

I will start with a couple of quotations:

"I do not know of any measures which would prepare the way for a better feeling in Ireland than uniting children at an early age and bringing them up in the same school".

The second quotation is a bit more current and is slightly shortened:

"For me this is not just an economic but a moral question. We cannot hope to move beyond our present community divisions while our young people are educated separately...I believe that future generations will scarcely believe that such division and separation was common for so long... Future generations will not thank us if we fail to address this issue."

The second quotation was from Peter Robinson, as part of his now famous speech from a few weeks ago. The first was from the Roman Catholic Bishop of Kildare in 1825. I am making the link that there is a common cause that I was not aware of until now.

I could offer many more statements of support for shared education, some from surprising sources. Indeed, yesterday, we talked about Lord Craigavon, who is on record as being a supporter of the shared education concept. However, as I speak, and despite all that support over the years, our schools are still over 90% segregated.

The maintained sector is pressing ahead with its own post-primary review, which appears to pay scant regard to the needs of our school population as a whole. It is no more than a reorganisation of the Catholic school system. The controlled sector insists that, as a state system, it is open to children of all faiths and none, as, indeed, does the maintained sector, but they both utterly fail, with a few honourable exceptions, to attract pupils from across the divide. There is a major conundrum. As far as I am aware, all the political parties are on record as supporting shared education. All three main sectors — I exclude the Irish-medium sector only for the obvious reason of its unique nature — support the concept. The Department of Education, under the terms of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, has a duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education, which means the education together at school of Protestant and Catholic pupils. Would an objective study of the Department's actions in that area conclude that it had tried to carry out that duty with anything approaching enthusiasm? The Department may have facilitated where it had little option, but it has fallen well short on encouragement.

Despite opposition, the integrated movement has made steady progress. It proved that parental choice is a potent force and that children who learn and play together in their early years carry forward attitudes and beliefs that benefit the child and society. Peter Robinson said:

"If one were to suggest that Protestants and Catholics would be educated at separate Universities it would be manifestly absurd; yet we continue to tolerate the idea that at primary and secondary level our children are educated separately."

Are those wise words from a surprising source? We should not be surprised at common sense from whatever source it comes. I continue to welcome the First Minister's statement.

The Oxford Economics report, as others before it, makes the financial and economic case for shared education. It does not come up with a definitive figure, but does anyone continue to doubt that the present arrangements cost hundreds of millions of pounds in duplicated expenditure and that the system is unsustainable? Do the statistics of empty desks, school building and maintenance programmes that are badly behind and the crumbling schools estate and morale not point the way towards an urgent need for cross-sectoral co-operation as an absolute imperative? Does anyone still doubt the economic, educational and social benefits? If so, they live in a different world from me.

What is the way forward? A complete change of mindset is required at all levels. The motion calls on the Minister actively to promote a system of integrated and shared education, which goes beyond the encouragement and facilitation that is required by the Order. I do not refer solely to the establishment of new integrated schools or transformations. They have their place, which is an important one, but we will never get to where we want to be purely on that basis. We suggest a target, which is that 20% of children should be educated on an integrated basis by 2020.

Where new schools are planned, the Department should survey local residents on the presumption that they will be integrated or inter-Church. The Department should reform and relax the criteria for the creation and maintenance of integrated schools in a way that recognises those children who are of mixed or no religious background. It should review the transformation procedure and recognise the contribution that is being made by mixed schools, which are those with a mixed enrolment but no formal integrated status. I recommend Belfast Royal Academy, which is my old school, as a good example.

We must acknowledge and promote shared learning schemes, of which there are plenty. I know that the Minister favours those. Indeed, we spent most of today's Question Time on that topic. The Sharing Education programme, which is run by Professor Tony Gallagher's group, has just started its second three-year session. The feedback from the first three years from pupils and teachers is extremely positive. As some 60 schools and 5,000 pupils were involved, that is a good sample. Virtually none of the schools

that were involved in that project and in others across the country has reported any difficulties, which perhaps proves that the younger generation has a bit more tolerance than the previous one.

Be that as it may, more radical actions are needed. What does area-based planning mean if decisions continue to be made on a sectoral basis? When will the Department obtain the powers to insist that a maintained school and a controlled school must come together as the only viable solution for a particular area? Are we going to continue to transport children in different directions in order to get to the nearest school in their sector, rather than to the nearest suitable school?

3.45 pm

Recently, I spent time in the Dominican College in Portstewart, which is a maintained school with a Presbyterian headmaster. It is absolutely unique, with 40% of its pupils being Protestant. It manages to maintain a Catholic ethos without causing offence to its Protestant pupils. Religious education is taught jointly and without a problem, and the school co-operates fully with other local schools in a way in which Tony Gallagher would totally approve. It is the way forward and an excellent example of what can be achieved.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: No. I am sorry, but I do not have time. You will both have time in which to speak.

Things cannot stay as they are; the situation is unsustainable, so I look forward to the Minister's response.

Having given the First Minister such praise, I will say that the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) document for which his Department is responsible was pretty sparse in acknowledging reality and the problems associated with segregation in the education system. We believe that increased sharing and integration in education to bring children together in their formative years is absolutely fundamental to creating a cohesive and integrated society, and we hope that the final CSI strategy will reflect that widely held view. This is not the first debate that we have had on the subject, and it probably will not be the last. Nevertheless, I hope that the change in mood in the country, along with

the comments of Mr Robinson and others, may produce progress. I support the motion.

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after the first "Shared Education" and insert

“; upholds the principle of parental choice in education; recognises the contribution to education made by the various education sectors; and calls on the Minister of Education and the Executive to encourage continued integrating and sharing between the various education sectors to maximise the educational, societal and financial benefits and to protect the provision of local schooling.”

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím leis an leasú a mholadh.

I shall begin by outlining the SDLP's position on education provision. We believe in parental choice, whether that is in Irish-medium, maintained, controlled or integrated education, and I have proposed the amendment to recognise that choice. Therefore, I hope that the proposers of the motion will think again. Trevor Lunn extolled the virtues of parental choice in integrated education. If parents can have choice in integrated education, why can they not have it in the other sectors?

We respect the diversity in our system, and we uphold parents' rights. A sign of maturity in society will be people's ability to accept diversity as something that adds richness to their lives, without attempting to colonise under one flag or another. Having said that, much can be done in education to encourage cohesion, sharing and integration without losing diversity. We do not believe that sectors should work in isolation, and there are compelling education, societal and economic reasons why that should not be the case. We encourage the maximum possible sharing in the delivery of the entitlement framework and throughout education phases, from early years to primary education and on to post-primary education.

In planning and provision of the schools estate and in all other aspects of education, there are clear economic reasons why we should share staff, facilities and buildings. Important as those reasons are in the present economic climate, they are not the only or even the most important reasons for doing so. It can only be good educationally for children from various backgrounds to get to know one another as individuals, to be taught and learn together, and to play games and sport together. It is good for

social cohesion that that should happen, and I believe that most parents would welcome it. In a society with a history such as ours, we cannot continue to live in splendid isolation from one another. We must take positive steps to ensure that our education system becomes more integrated than it is at present, promoting sharing while respecting diversity. That can and should be done. Greater sharing in, and integrating of, education cannot and should not be forced on any sector but should be encouraged and fostered in every way possible. It should be done for the right reasons.

Mr Storey: Given the Member's comments about encouraging people to go in a particular direction, does he agree that that is one of the fundamental mistakes that has been made in the debate on academic assessment; that the bully tactics of the Minister of Education have not worked, because we still have academic assessment; and that the duplicity of the SDLP in not accepting the right of parents to choose academic selection has led us to the stalemate that we are in?

Mr D Bradley: I do not accept the particular point that the Member makes. Every attempt has been made to encourage people to come along the path of allowing all children to have access to all types of education, and I hope that we will get to a better place in the future.

As I said, encouragement to share and to integrate should be done for the right reasons and in the right way. The issue should not be used as a political football in an attempt to win votes, as has recently been the case. We should work with the various sectors and encourage them to work together. The various education providers are more aware than most of us of the challenges that are involved. We should listen to them when they tell us what they need to increase sharing, and we should provide them with the tools that they need.

Area-based planning is a useful tool in achieving greater sharing of staff, facilities and buildings for economic and curricular purposes. It is a good basis for greater sharing that goes beyond the mere functional. The professional expertise of teachers is such that the area-learning communities have made reasonable progress on meagre resources and in a short time. As 'Together Towards Entitlement' indicates, there is still much to be done in that area. Instead of reducing the resources available for that work,

we should, in fact, be increasing them, and the Minister of Education should be championing that cause.

We do not underestimate the challenge that greater sharing in education presents, but we should not shy away from it. The work of the area-learning communities is encouraging, as is the work done by the Sharing Education programme managed by Queen's University. The co-operation that exists between the two primary schools in Stewartstown is exemplary, as is that between the two secondary schools in Ballycastle. I am interested in the sharing of sports facilities that has been developed between St Patrick's High School in Keady and Armagh City and District Council. There is a similar project in St Columba's College in Portaferry and an emerging project at St Colman's College in Newry. Those are examples of sharing that is beneficial to the community and the school population. We should build on existing good practice and learn from it.

It is also good that the Churches will consider shared-faith schools. As politicians, we should be working to remove any barriers that may prevent development in that area. Legislative changes are needed to enable the development of more innovative and creative solutions. Under current legislation, there is no mechanism to establish jointly managed schools between sectors or even between phases. As a first step, we must make changes to legislation that will allow greater sharing between and across the sectors. Without those legislative changes, progress will be very difficult to achieve.

The goal of achieving sharing in education may be a long-term one, but it needs to be fostered and encouraged. It is one of the pillars of the SDLP's policy on a shared society, and we will continue to champion it, not only in the weeks ahead but in the months and years to come. I believe that, if we adopt the right approach to the issue by working with the sectors and not attempting to browbeat any sector in any way, we will achieve progress. That is the way to progress. I hope that parties in the House will agree with and support the SDLP amendment. Tá mé buíoch díot, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus sin a bhfuil uaim.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): At the outset, I will make some comments as the Chairperson of the Education Committee and highlight

