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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 31 May 2011

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Assembly Business

**Mr Speaker:** Order, Members. I want to deal with an issue that Mr Allister raised in a point of order last week on the terminology used in the Chamber to refer to Northern Ireland. In a previous ruling on 21 April 2009, I have made it clear already that, for the purposes of clarity and, especially, legal effect, items that are tabled for plenary business should use official titles for places or organisations. Of course, Members' oral contributions in the Chamber are another matter. My ruling about the use of proper names for Members and parties is very much rooted in the clear understanding that debates should be conducted with courtesy, good temper and moderation. Therefore, I will rule out of order any item that I judge to be used to be provocative or offensive in any way to any Member. However, Members from all sides of the House use many different items to refer to Northern Ireland, the UK, Ireland and even other places. I believe that Members have shown that they are mature enough not to take deliberate offence when others use a term for Northern Ireland that they might not use themselves. I certainly do not intend to get to my feet every time an alternative term is used in properly conducted debates. I will always seek to be fair, reasonable and impartial in my rulings, and that is no different to my approach this morning.

**Mr Allister:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it not absurd that due deference is required for the name of Sinn Féin when it can do despite to the proper name of Northern Ireland?

**Mr Speaker:** Let me say that I am not surprised at the Member's difficulty with what I have said. He was challenging this ruling in the press a week ago, before it was made. My view is clear, and the Member should not challenge it. If we were to go down the road suggested by the Member, I would have had to call him to order

because he has already referred to Northern Ireland as "the Province" in the Chamber.

Let me say this to the Member directly: I know that he has many skills, and he certainly has a contribution to make to the Chamber. There is absolutely no doubt about that. However, he must make that contribution within the procedures, Standing Orders and rulings of the Assembly. He must understand that. If he continually goes down the road that he is going down, I will continually ask the Member to take his seat, and I will move on. Let me make that absolutely clear. That goes for all sides of the House.

There are many different political views in the House. Some of those views are very much shared by some Members, while others have very different political views. I will not stifle those political views. In fact, I say directly to the Member that, irrespective of the political views that Members have in the Chamber, I will work with them. I want to make that clear to the Member. If, as I said, the Member can confine his terminology to the Standing Orders and rules of the House, I might even have a cup of tea with him. I hope that the Member now has a better understanding of the rules, procedures and conventions of the Assembly.

**Mr Allister:** Further to that point of order —

**Mr Speaker:** I will now move on. I ask the Member to please stay in his seat.

## Suspension of Standing Order 20(1)

**Mr Weir:** I beg to move

*That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 31 May 2011.*

**Mr Speaker:** Before I proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved (with cross-community support):*

*That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 31 May 2011.*

## Private Members' Business

### Educational Attainment: Working-class Protestants

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes 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 Easton:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes the comparative lack of post-GCSE educational qualifications held by people from working-class Protestant communities; expresses concern at the effect this may have on the future employability of young people from such areas; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to bring forward a strategy to address this matter.*

At the outset, I will let everybody in the Chamber know that we will accept the Ulster Unionist amendment. North Down has long been nicknamed "the Golden Coast". Nevertheless, in north Down, as is the case in many other areas of our Province, a large number of people remain excluded from achievement. Since my election to the House in 2003, I have always sought to work with and assist those who find themselves in that category of exclusion. Much of my work is focused on Kilcooley, Rathgill and Bloomfield and many other working-class communities.

I believe that, for many people, social exclusion starts at school, with a large number of young Protestants leaving school without any GCSEs. I also believe that, due to the impact of the period that is commonly referred to as "the Troubles", we missed a huge opportunity to rebuild and rejuvenate society. Prior to those events, which are largely believed to have started in 1969, we saw the death of our local industries. The shipyard, Shorts and many other noteworthy local industries declined, leaving a huge gap in the labour market. As those industries declined, many Protestants who were traditionally employed in them lost their job and their way with no one to help them.

North Down is home to one of the largest housing estates in Europe, where young people are lost without hope, a future or a job. I refer to Kilcooley, which was built in the 1960s. From speaking day and daily to people on the ground in Kilcooley and across north Down, I know that they want to see change for the better. As a community, they are willing to assist in any way that they can. At this point, I want to mention the tremendous work of the Kilcooley Women's Centre and the Kilcooley Community Forum. Despite their excellent work, they get no funding from the Department for Employment and Learning and rely on funding from the Irish Government, which is unacceptable. Unfortunately for those who live in disadvantaged areas, no single agency is responsible for or tasked with finding a solution. No one seems motivated to find a solution to the problem, as it is deemed far too difficult to solve and no one knows where to start.

The people of Kilcooley and other working-class areas have shown by their actions that they want their areas to achieve and prosper. They want their areas to emerge as attractive, safe and prosperous, where residents enjoy healthy activities and lifestyles. They want to see community, social and physical renewal. In the limited time that I have available, I want to make a number of points that, I hope, will assist decision-makers to help people in working-class communities with similar profiles to realise that vision, which offers a better future, particularly for the many young people who live in working-class communities. Early in the life of the Assembly, the Executive will bring forward important policies and strategies that will fundamentally impact on the lives and futures of residents of those areas. Crucially, they include the new skills strategy; the early years strategy; how to address the problem of educational underachievement; and what to do about young people who are not in education, employment or training. Those are but a few of the key social policies that the House will have to consider.

As a legislative Assembly, we must work to shape those proposals to meet the needs of communities such as Kilcooley. If we want there to be a skilled workforce, logically investment should be made in early years provision and other proven interventions, which are needed most in areas where children's life chances are worse than in affluent areas. Area-based approaches are key. However, they alone will not guarantee success. Joined-up thinking on the

part of policy-makers is as important as joined-up action, if not more so. In times of austerity, we naturally seek to reduce expenditure. However, evidence strongly directs us to invest in early years provision and prevention in order to obtain better social and economic outcomes. Spending money to deal with the symptoms of the problem down the line is reckless. Turning around communities such as Kilcooley takes time and commitment as well as investment. Policy-makers need to listen to communities and support what has worked.

Although recent statistics have shown that school leavers' educational achievement has exceeded expectations, those from disadvantaged areas still score poorly compared with those from more affluent areas. When we consider entitlement to free school meals, we can see that 6.1% of those who are entitled to free school meals leave school without any GCSEs, compared with 2.3% of those who are not entitled to free school meals. Some 55.2% of pupils who are not entitled to free school meals achieved two or more A levels or equivalent qualifications; a much higher figure than the 25% for children who are entitled to free school meals. When we consider pupils' religion, we can see that 38% of Protestant school leavers attend institutions of higher education compared with 46% of Catholic school leavers. The Executive need to address that imbalance, especially the new Minister for Employment and Learning, who happens to hail from north Down. Responsibility largely rests on his shoulders and on those of the Minister of Education.

During the election, I promised that I would raise those issues. I have kept that promise. I now ask the Minister to take those issues seriously and address them.

**Mr Beggs:** I beg to move the following amendment: At end insert:

*‘; and further calls on the Minister of Education to address educational underachievement at the earliest stage.’*

I thank the proposer for tabling the motion, which highlights educational underachievement post GCSE level and how the issue pertains to Protestant working-class young people in particular. I support the motion as far as it goes. Why have I tabled the amendment? I trained as an engineer. I was always taught to get to the root of a problem, rather than simply dealing with the symptoms. It is widely

acknowledged that getting it right first time in an industrial setting is essential for a company if it is to control its costs and survive global competition.

My amendment highlights the need for the Minister of Education to address educational underachievement at the earliest stage. That is where things are going wrong, and we cannot solve the problem by simply trying to pick up the pieces after our young people have left school. The Employment and Learning Minister will have to address the underachievement of many of our young people who are leaving school with few GCSEs and are unable to gain further qualifications. Again, that is only a symptom; we need to address the problem.

#### 10.45 am

I declare an interest as a governor of Glynn Primary School and as a committee member of Horizon Sure Start, which supports parents and young people in parts of Carrickfergus and Larne. I am very proud to be associated with both organisations, which are trying — successfully, I believe — to enable more of our young people to reach their full potential. For the sake of our young people and our economy, it is vital that our young people gain GCSE qualifications and progress further. So many of our young people should not go through seven years of primary school and a further five years of post-primary school without gaining significant qualifications. Once more I draw Members' attention to the work of Professor James Heckman of the University of Chicago, a Nobel laureate economist, who has advised that investing in disadvantaged young people is good economics and good public policy. Some of the key messages from him are that the economic returns for early investment are high and it is much more costly to have remedial programmes in adolescent and young adult years to produce the same level of skill attainment in adulthood. Let us, therefore, make sure that we get our education system right first time, so that fewer young people and, indeed, adults have to go through further education to get the education and qualifications that, for whatever reason, they did not get at school. We must get things right first time.

In simple, common sense terms, let us ensure that there is very early intervention, whether at nought-to-four, primary school or, if issues have not been picked up, even in the early years

of post-primary education. It is better for the child; it is better for society; and it is better for our economy. There is little point in asking the Minister for Employment and Learning to simply draw up a strategy to address the comparative lack of GCSE education and qualifications. We must establish why so many are not excelling at school. That is clearly an issue for the Minister of Education.

I pay tribute to the work of former MLA Dawn Purvis. She highlighted the issue in her recent report, 'Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class: A Call to Action', which she produced with a group of supporting academics. The report contains many profound statements, which are, I might add, backed up by evidence and international research. One such statement is:

*"Funding priorities are 'back to front'. Accumulated evidence suggests that the more we invest in young people early, the better the outcome. Proportionately too little is invested in the early years during key stages of a child's development."*

I have been saying exactly the same thing for some time. That is why I helped to establish the Carrickfergus children's locality group in my constituency and Horizon Sure Start, which is working in Carrickfergus and Larne and gives additional support to parents and helps children in the nought-to-four age group. I also commend the work of Abbey Sure Start in Monkstown.

It is startling that only one in 10 working-class Protestant pupils goes to university, compared with one in five Catholics from a similar background. However, that is not a new issue that has been highlighted recently. On 24 March 2006, over five years ago, the Northern Ireland Audit Office report, 'Improving Literacy and Numeracy in Schools' highlighted issues in that area. That led to the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee report of November 2006, which identified the discrepancy between results in the comparative controlled and maintained sectors for pupils who were eligible for free school meals. At an evidence session during the PAC inquiry at Westminster on Wednesday 21 June 2006, Dr Mark Browne, finance director and head of finance and strategic planning division of the Department of Education stated:

*"There is a particular problem. The levels of achievement are lowest amongst the Protestant working class and that is linked into a whole range of issues around the values placed on education,*



*the changing industrial structure in many of these Protestant working class areas where the routes to work previously available are no longer there and the whole attitude towards education is different and maybe there is not the same support and emphasis and value on education as there is in other areas."*

**Mr Humphrey:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I agree with his last point about communities that do or do not value education. Sure Start, which you mentioned, is crucial to getting to the root of the problem, and there has to be a policy right across education from preschool, with Sure Start, to primary school to secondary school. Frankly, a huge amount of money has been invested, but it has not addressed the issue. Does the Member agree that the establishment of educational action zones is the way to address it?

**Mr Beggs:** I have little knowledge of educational action zones. I have knowledge of Sure Start, and, from what I have seen of it so far, the outcomes are positive. It takes time to collate evidence that we can stand over, but hopefully definitive evidence will come to prove that. However, I am just speaking anecdotally about what I have seen.

The House of Commons report also stated:

*"It is clear from the evidence presented to the Committee that, among socially deprived communities in Belfast, significant differences between Protestant and Roman Catholic children exist in GCSE English and Mathematics."*

Significantly, the report pointed out that there is a noticeable difference between Belfast and Glasgow and that data provided by the Department show that there is a reasonable degree of consistency between the performance of Catholic schools and non-denominational schools in Glasgow in English and mathematics at Scottish national qualification level; however, that is certainly not the case in Belfast. Here, schools with 40% or more pupils entitled to free school meals do disturbingly less well than their Catholic counterparts and do much less well than their counterparts in Glasgow. That needs to be addressed.

The report contained some frightening figures. At comparable schools, for example, 24% of the Catholic maintained sector attained qualifications in maths, whereas only 4.4% of the controlled sector did. That is a startling difference, and something needs to be done

about it. That PAC report is almost five years old. The Sinn Féin Minister of Education should be here today to tell us what the Department of Education has done about this very real issue. This is not about driving home an ideological dogma about the 11-plus but about addressing educational underachievement in very early years.

**Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education):** I thank the Member for giving way. I am conscious that the Minister for Employment and Learning will formally respond to the debate. There has been some contact between our two Departments. I am more than happy to return to the Chamber when a motion is directed towards my Department and to enter into debate about this important matter at any stage with any Member across the Chamber.

**Mr Beggs:** Thank you for that. I hope that action will be taken.

It has been five years since the issue was highlighted, and I am not sure what action has been taken to address it in one section of our community. I do not believe that there is a quick fix; however, early years is a start. Indeed, addressing other issues at primary school as well as identifying weaknesses and speech and language difficulties at an early age is vital. There is the evidence from Andy McMorrán of Ashfield Boys' High School, which has shown significantly enhanced performance when compared with other similar schools. There have been successes there, and lessons must be learnt from those successes and widened out.

I would like the Minister of Education to address poor attendance. I draw his attention to a series of Assembly questions that I have asked about that area. If children are not at school, there are not good educational outcomes. That key issue must be addressed.

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

**Mr Beggs:** I ask Members' support for the amendment and ask Ministers and Committees to take the issue seriously and to address it.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the motion and the amendment. I welcome the motion as it is the first opportunity to discuss education in the new Assembly term. It is always worth restating that education is related not only to the schools and colleges that children and young adults attend

but to the environment that they are raised in, their socio-economic background, poverty and various community and cultural factors. As elected representatives, we should encourage a more holistic view of education.

It is vital that we reduce the number of young people between the ages of 16 and 19 who are not in education, employment or training and may be at risk of remaining in that position for a long period. Measures can be taken to address that, and Ministers are to be commended for the work that has been done, such as ensuring that major public works contracts include agreements that relate to the number of apprentices to be employed. That needs to be built on. Retaining young people in education, employment and training must be a priority.

Educational disadvantage exists among young people from all backgrounds, and the previous Minister of Education introduced interconnected policies to tackle underachievement, promote equality and raise educational standards. Those policies included Every School a Good School, the entitlement framework and the Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry programmes. Good work has been done to address educational underachievement, but more, of course, needs to be done. The new Minister of Education will continue to prioritise the work highlighted in the amendment and the good work undertaken by his predecessor.

The widening participation strategy is a welcome proposal, and the implementation of such a strategy will be key to improving the skills of a future workforce and strengthening the local economy. 'Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class', a report issued recently by Dawn Purvis, a former MLA for East Belfast, and the working group on educational disadvantage, makes pertinent points. It found that academic selection accentuates social division; the lack of social balance in many schools leads to an unequal distribution of resources and an unfair burden on non-selective schools; and community and cultural factors affect how Protestant families perceive education and participation in schools. There are, undoubtedly, community and cultural factors that affect how families of other religions and none perceive education, and we should not be in any way complacent about education for Catholic pupils or for any other group. However, that should not take away from the fact that, as elected representatives, we should seek to

address whatever barriers Protestant student have to face in education.

Social background remains a factor in educational attainment. The 2009-2010 school leavers' survey shows that 26.7% of school leavers who were entitled to free school meals achieved at least two A levels or equivalent. That is in stark contrast to the figure of 57.9% for those who were not entitled to free school meals. However, there have been improvements in attainment. For example, 59% of school leavers achieved at least five GCSEs at grades A\* to C or equivalent, including English and maths, which is up from 52.6% in 2005-06. That level of attainment is vital when it comes to a young person's career.

As other Members have highlighted, the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning must continue to work in tandem to ensure that 14- to 19-year-olds receive a good overall standard of education, along with careers education, advice and guidance, and that those policies are in line with the Executive's overarching economic strategy. In bringing the motion to the Floor and highlighting the lack of educational attainment in the Protestant community, unionist parties should also recognise that it has been proven beyond any doubt through departmental statistics and the recent report on the Protestant working class that their political stance on selection is making educational attainment problems for Protestant working-class communities worse, not better.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I welcome the motion and thank Alex Easton for proposing it. The issue is important to many of my constituents and, perhaps, it is not tackled as well as it should be. I should first make reference, as the previous Member did, to Dawn Purvis, who, unfortunately, was not returned to the House to represent East Belfast. She contributed greatly to this and many other topics that affected the community that she represented. I speak from greater knowledge about the subject due to the work that she undertook in her report, 'A Call to Action'.

#### **11.00 am**

The wider issues of lower educational achievement and the corresponding economic effects on the labour market are being considered from many different angles, especially with the young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) strategy overview and its outputs. That

strategy was undertaken by our Committee, the Committee for Employment and Learning. I am glad that this community-specific motion has focused our attention on this important subject.

The report that I mentioned previously makes it clear that Protestant boys are at a huge disadvantage. The demise of heavy industries such as shipbuilding and other related key employers in Protestant working-class areas has left many with a legacy of redundant skill sets. Many Protestant areas were reliant on such industries, and when they were replaced by new qualification-based jobs and industries, many people in Protestant working-class areas were left behind. They were unable to access or adapt to the new labour market to which they were clearly not accustomed.

The report states that:

*“The collapse of established, long-term inter-generational labour markets led to some aiming for new skills but many merely feeling ‘out of sync’ with contemporary requirements.”*

We must decipher whether the issue lies in the educational framework, which is included in the report, or whether it is a purely local labour market issue. I am glad that the amendment has been tabled to take account of the responsibility of the Department of Education as well as the Department for Employment and Learning, and I welcome both Ministers in the House.

An overarching quote given by Dawn Purvis at the time of the report's publication was that one in 10 young Protestants from a socially disadvantaged background attending school have the opportunity to go to university, compared with one in five Catholics of a similar background. The 'A Call to Action' report notes that there is an unmistakable link between underachievement and socio-economic deprivation. We know this to be true, yet we are still duplicating services and provisions to deal with the problem. I believe that we must take a holistic approach in addressing the very valid concerns raised by the motion and by Members about the social and educational factors that are contributing to this particular problem.

We must act to ensure that early years education, where children are nurtured and taught about the social aspects of education, is accessible to people from Protestant working-class backgrounds. In Northern Ireland as a whole,

almost 50% more Catholic children are enrolled in nursery and early years centres than their Protestant counterparts. Carrying that approach through to primary school will open education to greater family involvement and greater community provision so that the real inequality and problems facing educational attainment in the Protestant community can be addressed.

A more general approach to education in the Protestant community outside the classroom must be a target for any future joined-up strategy between both Departments. In my constituency and yours, Mr Speaker, residents of the Fountain area avail themselves of a number of training programmes. We must seek to emulate this as a pilot project, and a good one.

We should not forget that the university sector is also affected by this issue. A high proportion of Protestant students leaves these shores for Britain and does not return, and we have a very segregated and closed university system. Take Magee campus in my constituency as an example: I have worked for many years to try to address the shocking lack of Protestant students despite the large Protestant community still living in the city.

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

**Mr P Ramsey:** That needs to be included in a cross-departmental holistic approach in which both Ministers should be involved.

**Mr Lyttle:** I, too, welcome the debate today, not least because this Assembly has to deliver on issues that matter to local people if it is to be regarded as meaningful by those people. There can be few more meaningful issues than providing world-class and inclusive education, training and employment opportunities for all in Northern Ireland.

Providing local people with first-class education and relevant skills is vital not only for their individual health and well-being, but for the economic and social well-being of this region. It is therefore vital to the delivery of the Programme for Government and to building a shared and better future for all.

Although the current system delivers excellent results for some local people, it fails a significant number of others every year. That is particularly the case with the most disadvantaged young people, of whom only 31% achieved five or more

good GCSEs, including English and maths, in 2009. Such underachievement is a problem for disadvantaged communities across Northern Ireland. However, young males from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds are particularly under-represented in higher education and make up only 10% of students. Indeed, males from a perceived Protestant background made up only 3.7% of enrolments in 2008-09.

Members from the DUP have called on the Minister for Employment and Learning to respond to the debate. However, it is abundantly clear from all today's contributions that we require the Executive, Departments, educational institutions and community and voluntary sectors to work together in a joined-up manner to tackle the problem of educational underachievement. I am glad that a Minister from the Alliance Party is able to play a significant role in improving the education and learning system in Northern Ireland. I am sure that he will detail a number of existing policies and strategies on which he will lead to deliver change on the issue for local people and the local economy.

As a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, it is my privilege to continue to contribute to this important task. I worked on the inquiry that Mr Ramsey mentioned, which contributed to the production of the Department for Employment and Learning's draft strategy 'Pathways to Success'. That draft strategy aims to keep young people in education, training and employment opportunities, regardless of their background. However, many policies and strategies will be required to address social disadvantage and exclusion at post-GCSE level. The Department will work on the widening participation and NEETs strategies, but cross-departmental co-operation is also required if we are to deliver an improved outcome for local people.

We also require OFMDFM to deliver the child poverty strategy, which was to be laid before the previous Assembly. As mentioned, we also require vastly improved early years provision, not least because the most significant developmental stage of a person's life is the first three years. We need to find an end to the post-primary transfer debacle. A compromise must be given immediate and serious consideration, and there must be wider education reform. I join colleagues in paying tribute to and recognising the work undertaken by Dawn Purvis in this field, particularly in my constituency of East

Belfast, and I acknowledge the call to action that she and her working group have made to the policymakers.

It is clear that Departments, including the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education, must work together to ensure that local people receive quality and equal opportunities in education and training, so that they can gain meaningful employment. That is essential for the individual, the economy and the building of a shared and better future for all in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Campbell:** I also support the motion and the amendment tabled by the Ulster Unionist Party. As other Members said, thousands of young people across Northern Ireland leave school with very few or no qualifications. As one or two Members mentioned, there is a 1960s-style post-education sentiment in working-class areas of Northern Ireland that is totally irrelevant in 2011. Many young people still work on the premise that because their fathers and grandfathers did not go on to further or higher education, similarly, that is sufficient for them.

A number of Members referred to their work in working-class estates, and I concur that we all need to do that. However, I draw a distinction between doing so regularly and simply going into working-class estates four weeks before an election, because that can lead to disdain and, on occasions, contempt. I prefer to work in those estates for 50 or 52 weeks of the year. In fact, I was on the doorsteps in those areas last week and the week before. When people asked me whether the election was still on, I told them that it was not and that I am in working-class estates every week of the year.

It is only when people see that politicians relate to the working-class people that they, in turn, will relate to us. Many in the working-class estates feel marginalised and excluded. Some of them, if they are in employment at all, are in part-time employment, and some of that is only temporary. So we should, as politicians, be working in those areas to try to address the disillusionment and hopelessness that is sometimes the hallmark of people who live in the estates.

If we are absolutely frank, political life, communal life, elections and systems of education are totally and utterly irrelevant for many people in those large estates. They do not make any difference to their day, week, month or year. We

have to try to address the disillusionment that exists in that community. That is exceptionally difficult. I know that some councils, including Coleraine Borough Council in my constituency, are starting to address that issue. I am working in concert with that council after a very successful public meeting that was designed to address these issues.

Unfortunately, it is the case, and we heard it alluded to, that some individuals and political parties try to politicise the issue by again raising the comprehensive/grammar debate. I will not compound that, except to say that there are many indications in GB in areas with a substantial comprehensive education system that there are still significant problems in trying to get young people through further or higher education.

However, there are political and community issues that need to be addressed, and, like others, I welcome —

**Mr Beggs:** Does the Member agree that there is clear evidence of low levels of educational attendance in some of these working-class areas and that, if a child is not at school, guess what, it is not going to perform very well? Statistics show that that poor attendance starts even at primary school level before the 11-plus is done. So the issue is wider than simply pinning everything on to the 11-plus.

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

**Mr Campbell:** Thank you, Mr Speaker; that is good. I will give way again if I get another minute. The Member is absolutely right, and that is a point that comes into play for children between the ages of four and 10, which is the time before the debate about post-primary begins. So he is accurate, and I am glad that he drew that to our attention again.

There are communal problems that we all encounter, and, hopefully, each Member will be aware of that. There are welfare dependency issues. I think one Member alluded to the fact that we need to ensure that educational establishments do not provide a cold house for young Protestants. For example, Magee College had a difficulty with a careers issue that concerned the Army coming to the campus and the young people there who wanted to attend that event, and I had occasion to deal with that. There was a problem with that issue. So we

have to make sure that there are no cold-house issues for young people from the Protestant community.

I welcome the debate, and, hopefully, we can take it forward, with the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education addressing the core issues and not repeating the mantra of “every school a good school”.

**Mr Speaker:** Members will know that this is the first debate in the Assembly in which we will hear from Mr Phil Flanagan. I remind the House that the convention is that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

**Mr Flanagan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to make my maiden speech on educational underachievement, an issue that has a huge impact on the lives of so many people and on our society as a whole. I support the motion and the amendment, and I thank the proposers for the opportunity to speak. For some years now, Sinn Féin has been highlighting the fact that working-class Protestant boys are the demographic most failed by the educational arrangements that the majority of unionist representatives have fought vigorously to retain.

#### 11.15 am

Sinn Féin has begun the process of bringing about meaningful change in our education system by putting an end to the discriminatory 11-plus exam. Academic selection is a failed system, socially and educationally. It creates and sustains injustice and inequality, and it is fundamentally immoral. It has no place in a modern, progressive and enlightened society. In truth, state-sponsored academic selection was academic rejection for the majority of our children.

Just last week, we saw the publication of the most up-to-date figures on the qualifications of school leavers. They show a continuing improvement in the number of students leaving school with at least five good GCSEs, including English and maths, and a more substantial increase in the number of students leaving school with at least two A levels. That positive development reflects much of the good work that has been carried out across the education system over the past number of years and the hard work that has been put in by students and

teachers across the North. However, we cannot merely accept that continuing improvement, and we must not become complacent. We must do much more to raise standards for all of our young people, particularly those who are being left behind. We need to drive out inequalities that still exist in the system. Much good work has been done in recent years to raise standards. If we are to equip young people with the skills and the qualifications that they need to find meaningful employment and to help drive the local economy, that work must be built on and continued.

When I attended school, not all that long ago, performing well and trying hard was thought to be insufficiently masculine by a very small number of my peers. However, that attitude was and remains much more prevalent in working-class areas than in more affluent ones. That attitude needs to change, and it will take positive role models and leadership to achieve that.

The motion calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to bring forward a strategy to address the level of educational attainment in working-class Protestant areas. The amendment calls on the Education Minister to address the problem at the earliest possible stage. I largely welcome those calls, but I also impress on the Employment Minister the need to resist any potential increase in third-level tuition fees. University fees of any kind are a huge disincentive to people from a working-class background, who are forced to take out loans to cover those fees and to cover their accommodation and living costs during their time at university. Accommodation costs are a huge barrier for those who live far away from a university in constituencies like mine.

I come from a working-class family and know all too well the difficulties that young people in deprived areas face when pursuing a decent education. I welcome any measures that can be put in place to reduce and potentially remove those difficulties. Drawing up a strategy and simply ignoring the attitudinal problems that exist in our society will not address any of the issues that we have discussed. The recent report commissioned by Dawn Purvis highlighted the broad factors that impact directly on the educational and vocational development of our young people. It also recognised that our education system alone cannot solve all of those problems.

Good leadership and great teaching in a school can and often does make a positive difference, but much more needs to be done in communities to support the work of schools, encourage young people and their families to have aspirations for their futures, and send out clear signals about the value and importance of a good education. That positive leadership must stem from the political system.

There is an old Irish proverb: “Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí.” That means, “Praise the youth and they will prosper.” I am confident that, if Members from all sides of the House can work constructively together, we will see continued improvement.

**Mr Speaker:** As with the previous Member, this will be the first debate in which the Assembly will hear from Mr David McIlveen. Once again, I remind the House of the convention that there are no interruptions during a maiden speech.

**Mr D McIlveen:** I am possibly going to produce a first for a member of the Democratic Unionist Party by dedicating my victory in the election to an Irish republican. Before Mr Allister picks up the phone to Darwin Templeton or has a heart attack, I will qualify what I mean by that. Evelyn Margaret McIlveen was born in Bailieborough in 1918 and passed away in January 2010. She moved to Belfast because of the economic deprivation in the Irish Republic and found herself in a prosperous part of Northern Ireland. She yearned for the reunification of Ireland. She gave birth to a Free Presbyterian minister, an RUC officer and a member of the Ulster Unionist Party, so she never had a lot of influence on her children, or her grandchildren for that matter.

Although she longed for the re-unification of Ireland, she taught me by her arguments what an erroneous path that was, and I am very glad that I can be found on this side of the House. I dedicate my election victory to someone who taught me what political debate is all about, and that although we do not agree on certain issues — or many issues, as the case may be — the place to have those arguments is in an environment such as this. I dedicate my victory to that great woman, who had a profound influence on my life, and who, I greatly regret, did not get the opportunity to witness this maiden speech.

I, too, welcome the motion. Those of us who canvassed, particularly in working-class unionist areas, know that this issue is right at the top

of the agenda. However, we have to accept that although this is a debate that circles around education, the education aspect of it is really just the tip of the iceberg. I have spoken to many people who work in the education sector, particularly in working-class areas, and it is very clear that the debate spans other Departments, such as the Department for Social Development, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education. In fact, it really goes right to the very moral fibre of Northern Ireland.

Whether we like it or not, in our schools and working-class estates, particularly in Protestant areas, there is a lack of parental guidance, pastoral guidance and principled guidance. That is the biggest issue in working-class Protestant areas at the moment. When Queen's University was opened it was branded as one of Pitt's "godless colleges" and, unfortunately, our schools have followed that example. That is where we find the biggest breakdown. It is a breakdown of families and of moral guidance in the home.

I was told by a teacher in my constituency of two 12-year-old girls who were arrested due to taking too much alcohol one weekend. The racket made on the back seat of the police car was so riotous — that is probably the best description for it — that the police control centre actually asked the officers if they needed assistance. That was two 12-year-old girls. We have to realise that we have a much deeper problem than what is happening in the schools.

During the last election, David Cameron, our Prime Minister, fought on the basis of "Broken Britain". I sincerely believe that we have a case of "Broken Ulster" in this society at the moment, and it is incumbent on everybody in the House to do what they can to ensure that "Broken Ulster" is fixed.

What is the solution? I believe the solution we have to look at is how we can inspire those young people to better places. We have to get away from the 'X Factor'-like principle that everybody can be a star. The fact is that everybody cannot be a star. Everybody can work to be the best that they possibly can, but, with the Education Minister, we need to refocus our efforts to putting pupils into courses that have employability at the end of them.

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

**Mr D McIlveen:** I ask the Minister to look at that as a matter of urgency.

**Mr Copeland:** I am not quite sure if I am a maiden today or not. I have been here before; I was away for four years, and now I am back. It strikes me as somewhat strange — *[Interruption.]* I trust that I will be defended from interruptions. It strikes me as somewhat strange that the last time I stood here in this corner, on 16 January 2007, I was speaking on social disadvantage and educational underachievement. At that stage we had not quite narrowed it down to members of the Protestant working-class community. In some ways, it highlights thoughts that I have had and harboured through the last four years.

The first time that I was here, we did not really talk about very much. In fact, I think that there were only two occasions on which everyone was in the Chamber. Such was the dispensation at that time, I said that the settled will of everyone who was here could not, had it wished to, occasion the changing of a light bulb in the chandelier in the Great Hall. It seems that things have improved to a degree in my absence. Yet we are still confronted —

**Mr Weir:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Copeland:** No, I will not, sir.

We are still confronted with the same difficulties. Just before that date, 16 January 2007, I held an event in the Senate Chamber with Holy Cross Boys' Primary School of west Belfast and Beechfield Primary School of east Belfast. Mr Speaker, it was hosted by your predecessor, Mrs Bell, who was the Speaker at that time. The proceedings of the debate were recorded in Hansard, and the kids did well. The problem is that Beechfield Primary School is now closed and the library 120 yards from where that school was located is now closed. Every single waking day people in that community wake up and see further evidence of a state withdrawal of service provision in the districts in which they live — and we wonder why there are rumblings of discontent.

Without a shadow of doubt, somewhere in this Province, a child will have been born on 16 January 2007. Without a shadow of doubt, somewhere in this Province, a child will be born today. It is a sad fact that any of us could take the date and time of that child's birth, write the postcode of its birth on a piece of paper and

from that postcode, which will be specific to 30 or 40 addresses, write, with a fair degree of certainty, the education that that child will avail itself of and its future employment prospects or prospects of going to university. That situation is no different today from what it was four or five years ago. I hope that, at the end of this mandate, this House, through the corporate actions of us all, will have done something to redress the imbalance in our society and the lottery with which the postcode of their birth ladders or saddles children.

Much has been made of under-attendance at school, and that is a fact. There is also an imbalance between the funding of nursery schools, primary schools and secondary schools. It is probably self-evident to everyone in the Chamber that I never received the benefit of a university education. My grandfather, who was a formative character in my life, was firmly of the view that a university education was useful if you were going to work for somebody else. Since he had not figured working for someone else into his or my future, I did not go to university.

My son, however, was slightly different. He went to a good state school. When he was eight or nine years of age, we were told that he would never be able to read and write. Consequently, we did not put him through the horrors of the 11-plus. He went to Lagan College, which, at that stage, was unusual for someone of our background. He progressed through that school well, going in at the bottom and coming out pretty close to the top. He got his first degree and is now on target for a second degree, which brings a slightly different set of problems. Had he been born in a different postcode and not benefited from the attention, advice and guidance, most particularly of my wife —

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

**Mr Copeland:** — his course through life would have been entirely different.

Sir, I will say this: this House will be judged. I hope that we will be judged favourably by ensuring that our children and grandchildren do not become forever the prisoners of what we have done but the inheritors of what we will do.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a chur in iúl don rún agus don leasú. I support the motion and the amendment. Following on from

Mr McIlveen's maiden speech, I cannot help but think that Granny McIlveen and Granny McGurk would have got on well, given the views that she obviously held. I hope to get on just as well with Mr McIlveen in the time ahead.

**Mr Storey:** *[Interruption.]*

**Mr McElduff:** You are keeping well, Mervyn?

Undoubtedly, there is an issue. The DUP MLAs have done us some service by tabling the motion. I feel that it has been prompted, in part, by Dawn Purvis's work, 'Educational Disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class: A Call to Action'.

**11.30 am**

**Mr Weir:** On a point of accuracy, I think I am right in saying that my colleague initially tabled this motion during the previous term, before Dawn Purvis produced her report. It has not been inspired by anyone, and credit should be given to my colleague for putting it forward before Dawn Purvis lost her seat.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member will have an extra minute added to his time.

**Mr McElduff:** I will reiterate the point. I think that it was prompted, at least in part, by the work of Dawn Purvis and her team. It is good to see the main unionist political parties —

**Mr Weir:** Will the Member give way again?

**Mr McElduff:** OK, go on ahead, Peter.

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for giving way. It seems that the former Member for East Belfast has been elevated to a form of sainthood today. I wonder, if she was doing such a brilliant job, as seems to have been so universally acknowledged, why she managed to get so few votes.

**Mr McElduff:** We should try to concentrate on educational disadvantage. We should put young people's education at the heart of this debate, although Dawn is young enough herself. It is good to see the main unionist parties concerned about working-class Protestants and their education. That is a very welcome development. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The Member must be allowed to continue.

**Mr McElduff:** In the previous mandate, on very many occasions, the Minister of Education made



that point. I will quote Caitríona Ruane, the Minister of Education in the previous Assembly. She said:

*“Educational disadvantage exists among Protestants and Catholics, boys and girls, children of no religion and children from our ethnic minority communities.” — [Official Report, Vol 59, No 2, p138, col 1].*

She said that there are:

*“interconnected policies to tackle underachievement, promote equality and raise educational standards. Those policies include Every School a Good School, the revised curriculum, the review of special education needs and inclusion, the Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry programmes, the entitlement framework and the literacy and numeracy strategy”. — [Official Report, Vol 59, No 2, p138, col 1].*

Obviously, the Department of Education and the new Minister of Education, with the Minister for Employment and Learning, will have a lot to do to continue that work and the very many programmes that both Departments have initiated.

**Mr B McCrea:** I thank the Member for giving way. When he is outlining the commitment of the previous Minister of Education from Sinn Féin, he might also talk about the previous previous Minister of Education from Sinn Féin. I wonder whether he could update us on what progress has been made on tackling this issue?

**Mr McElduff:** I welcome the fact that both Ministers are here for the debate, in the form of Dr Stephen Farry and John O’Dowd. John has said that he will spell out how the Department of Education is going to deal with the matter in an ongoing way. There are many issues for the Department for Employment and Learning, and this is definitely one of them.

There are other areas that I am concerned about and which require attention. For example, the construction industry, particularly west of the Bann, is in very serious decline. As well as taking forward the crucial area of work that is spelled out in the motion, monetary resources that are held by the Department for Employment and Learning need to be awarded to and invested in the further education colleges to ensure that young people and people already in the construction industry can diversify, upskill and reskill. I am taking this opportunity, with the Minister for Employment and Learning present,

to make a call for that area to be addressed as well.

An interdepartmental strategy is required. If Members read Dawn Purvis’s report, they will see that, for example, it is very important to have greater involvement of parents and local communities, particularly in socially deprived areas. There is a need for a more flexible curriculum and more flexible learning styles. In rural areas, I suggest that poor transportation and poor broadband access stand in the way of young people achieving in education and leaving themselves that bit more employable. I again emphasise that there is an interdepartmental aspect to this work. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, for example, has work to do to improve broadband access. By and large, Sinn Féin is positive towards the motion and the amendment. It is pleased that the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education have been present and looks forward to this issue being taken forward.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member’s time is up.

**Mr McElduff:** Thank you.

**Mr McDevitt:** It is a great honour to take up the role of the SDLP’s education spokesperson. It is particularly important that any of us who seeks to speak on this topic in the next four to five years should be given the opportunity to do so today on an important issue that goes to the heart of one of the true inequalities still present in our society, which, as the motion rightly illustrates, impacts on those who have less from a Protestant faith background. Nonetheless, it impacts on those who have less in every community in this region. In the Chamber and elsewhere, we often get carried away talking about only one apparent inequality in our society, when the truth is that this issue is arguably the greatest shame that should hang on all our shoulders.

We have managed to construct an education system that relies heavily on class to define success and also relies on external support and parental pushing. It nearly assumes that we send our children home from school at the end of the day to a stable household where mum and dad are available to help with the homework, where work will be rewarded and where a school lunch will be prepared, and a child will be sent back to school the next morning ready and able to learn. However,

that is not the North in which we live. It is not the reality in many parts of my constituency. It is not the reality in many parts of all our constituencies.

There is a further historical lesson, to which many colleagues referred throughout the debate. It is ironic that we should debate this topic on the 100th anniversary of the cutting of the ropes of the Titanic. That is so because, in some ways, when we think about this great centenary of engineering prowess and great human achievements that we will celebrate, we must also reflect on how little we have done in the century between then and now to understand that the changes going on all around us — not political, but socio-economic and industrial changes — required a response from government. Throughout the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and in our generation, the required response from government was that we understand that education must start earlier and not, in a formal sense, so early and that we must invest from the earliest possible moment in vulnerable parents and their children.

We must invest. A son of our own city, Dr Simon Field, the head of education and research at the OECD, pointed out recently in a seminal report that if we do not redress the inequality in how we fund our education system, we will continue to have a system in which the elephant in the classroom will be the class of the children who predominantly make up that classroom.

Therefore, it is fine that the new Minister for Employment and Learning is here to respond to the debate. I wish him well not just today but in the job ahead, but the truth is that we are debating only the symptoms, which is why I welcome the amendment as an honest attempt to go to the cause. The question that we must all pose as we set out on the new mandate is: are we serious about tackling the fundamental inequality in education? Are we serious about understanding that, although we have all too conveniently thrown our children on ideological bonfires in the past century, we will have to understand, in the years ahead, that we cannot run at the pace of the slowest if we do nothing to pick up that pace?

**Mr Storey:** I appreciate the Member's giving way. I have listened carefully to what he is saying. I go back to a point that I made in the House before the last mandate came to an end.

It is the challenge for us all in the House and particularly for the Ministers. It is regrettable that we have a situation in the House today in which we have two Ministers who did not really know who was to respond to the motion. That shows the huge problem that we have in relation to a joined-up approach to education. I refer again to my father, who was educated in a small, rural country school. His writing and spelling is exceptional. He did not achieve huge grades in the then examination system, but the system then, with all its poverty, challenges and difficulties, gave him a good education. There is an issue with the way in which we teach our children in our schools. We have followed so many new theories, which have not worked, and then we go back to another brand of new theories. However, we always come back to the traditional methods, which still produce the goods.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

**Mr McDevitt:** That added 30 seconds on to my time, Mr Speaker. In those brief 30 seconds, I will not pick up Mr Storey's challenge. However, I make this commitment to him and every other colleague in the House: I will come here every day with an open mind about what we must do to improve the lot.

I leave us with words that I have used in the Chamber before. They should be our guiding principle and what defines how we tackle this issue: if you think that education is expensive — if you think that it costs too much — just try ignorance.

**Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning):** I congratulate the movers of the motion and the amendment. I am very happy to follow through on what has been said. I also thank all of the Members who have spoken today on this issue. It has clearly stimulated a lot of thought and interest in the Chamber. I also acknowledge the Members who are making their maiden speeches today. I suppose that I am one of them, albeit in a different guise.

Addressing underachievement, wherever and however it manifests itself, will be one of my top priorities. However, I stress that my Department is not just a Department of higher education. As we will no doubt be discussing challenging issues regarding higher education funding over coming weeks and months, we must also be mindful of the broader skills and employment responsibilities of my Department. Every

decision and reprioritisation that we will seek to discuss over coming weeks will have knock-on consequences within the context of a finite budget. Members must be mindful of that.

Undoubtedly, there are particular issues that disproportionately relate to Protestants, just as there are with Catholics and other sections of the community. Regardless of whether problems relate to unemployment, low skills or the poor acquisition of qualifications, my Department's policies, strategies and programmes are designed to meet the needs of individuals, irrespective of their background. That is not to say that programmes and services cannot be targeted to ensure maximum impact. I have no doubt that when we come to agree our new Programme for Government, the priority will remain to grow a dynamic and innovative economy. A skilled workforce equipped with the competencies and attitudes that are required by employers is absolutely key to future economic success. That is essential not only for the economy but to unlock talent and enable people to meet their aspirations.

Last week, I launched the skills strategy 'Success Through Skills — Transforming Futures'. Following on from the first skills strategy, the approach considers our current skills base, examines the skills that we will need in the future and highlights a number of areas for action. By aiming to meet the needs of all learners, my Department's education, training and employment programmes are designed to widen access and raise standards of educational achievement, including in working-class Protestant communities. There is a well-established pattern of low academic achievement in deprived communities generally. By deprived areas, I mean those super output areas that are ranked in the lowest quintile by Northern Ireland's multiple deprivation measure. A predominantly Protestant area is one in which 80% or more of people have a Protestant background.

There have been a number of initiatives over the past decade or more to address issues in areas of multiple deprivation. There was the task force on Protestant working-class areas that operated in the early part of the past decade. There was also the west Belfast and greater Shankill task forces, which were established in 2001 by the then Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Minister for Social Development. The vast majority of the areas

that were targeted by the task forces were subsequently designated as neighbourhood renewal areas. There are six that are considered to be predominantly Protestant, including Rathcoole; south, inner south and inner east Belfast; Tullycarnet; and Ligoniel. My Department, through its delivery organisations, has been a significant partner in those various initiatives. One example of that is the Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS) programme. LEMIS is a community-based outreach and mentoring service designed to engage with those who are furthest from the labour market and to encourage them to move towards and into work.

#### **11.45 am**

Educational underachievement does not just materialise when young people leave school. The factors contributing to underachievement are many and varied, and a number of points have been made about that today, including those about early years. Factors include socio-economic background, parental influence, aspirations, readiness for schooling and a variety of in-school factors, to name but a few. We could also talk about leadership in the community and what happens through the Assembly and the Executive. Therefore, I recognise the intent behind the amendment, and I am grateful to my colleague, the Minister of Education, for information on what his Department is doing to address educational underachievement in the school system. I recognise that it is a crossover issue. As in many other areas, over the coming months and years, we will have to work together across Departments and in the Executive.

In education, however, the 2009-10 school leavers survey showed that young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, as measured by entitlement to free school meals, were less likely to achieve good outcomes. For example, 25% of leavers with free school meals achieved three or more A levels at grades A\* to C, compared to 56% of leavers without free school meals. An important indicator for the Department of Education is the percentage of leavers achieving five or more GCSE grades at A\* to C or equivalent, including English and maths, as that is the level often sought by employers. Overall in 2009-10, 59% of leavers achieved that level. However, among leavers with free school meals, the level dropped to 31%, compared to 64.3% of leavers without

free school meals. Ambitious targets have been set to increase the number of young people achieving good GCSEs.

Underachievement is a problem for Protestant and Catholic communities, especially the most disadvantaged. The issue remains the need to tackle underachievement wherever it exists to improve the life chances of all young people. Every School a Good School is the overarching policy for raising standards and tackling underachievement wherever it exists. Many young people need additional support to ensure that they can attend school regularly and achieve their full potential. For example, they may have special or additional educational needs or they may come from a very disadvantaged background.

Literacy, numeracy and ICT are at the core of the curriculum. Therefore, the new strategy, Count, Read: Succeed, sets out a renewed focus on improving literacy and numeracy standards and on closing existing achievement gaps. Of course, we want to make sure that young people get the support that they need to make informed and appropriate choices. That is why the Department of Education and my Department are working together to ensure that young people's choices are underpinned by a coherent programme of careers education, advice, information and guidance from primary school onwards.

As part of Further Education Means Business, the strategy for further education in Northern Ireland, previous Education and Employment and Learning Ministers agreed that we should work together to agree how best to deliver provision to 14- to 19-year-olds. Therefore, an important strand of our joint work on 14- to 19-year-olds is to ensure that the entitlement framework is implemented in its entirety and that a stimulating curriculum comprising an appropriate mix of vocational and academic subjects is made available to all schoolchildren. It is my view that it is essential to engage young people in study programmes that inspire, motivate and, at the same time, challenge them and lead to qualifications that are recognised by employers and that prepare them for the world of work.

The motion expresses concern about the effect that educational underachievement may have on the future employability of young people. That is why the Department's programmes have

such a strong focus on removing barriers to participating in learning, widening participation, addressing the deep-seated problem of literacy and numeracy and raising the qualifications and skill levels of those in work and those seeking to find employment. It is also why we place such a strong emphasis on working with unemployed people and why we are increasingly assisting those who are economically inactive. It is worth stressing that we have the highest levels of economic inactivity in the entire United Kingdom.

On behalf of the Executive, my Department is taking on the development of a draft cross-cutting strategy specifically for young people who are not in education, employment or training, frequently called NEETs. The draft strategy, Pathways to Success, is currently out for consultation, with a closing date of 30 June, and I look forward greatly to the responses to it. They will help in the development of a strategy, which, subject to Executive endorsement, will lead to a concerted effort to tackle related issues.

Another key area is widening participation in higher education. To achieve that, it is essential to raise aspirations and attainment levels while young people are still in school. In the 2010-11 academic year, my Department has allocated £2.5 million to various widening-participation funding mechanisms for under-represented sections of the community. Both Queen's University and the University of Ulster have their own programmes for that.

Protestant working-class boys are among the most under-represented groups in higher education. Under-representation of this group is much more marked for students from low-participation areas and for those entitled to free school meals. My Department is leading on the development of a new integrated regional strategy for widening participation in higher education, and, again, the consultation process will draw to a close in early June. It is interesting to note that, in the 2009-2010 academic year, there were almost 900 enrolments in Northern Ireland's higher education institutions from deprived areas that are predominantly Protestant. That shows an increase of 7% in higher education participation from those areas in the three years through to 2009-2010. Of course, although much more needs to be done, it is nevertheless a very encouraging trend.

The six further education colleges offer a wide and varied curriculum through their main campuses, and they have a very wide network of community outreach centres. Although this is not exclusive to Protestant working-class communities, my Department has developed and implemented the learner access and engagement programme. That programme, which is currently being piloted, allows FE colleges to contract with third-party organisations to provide learner support and mentoring for hard-to-reach or disengaged adult learners. To date, the programme has been successful in engaging with leavers from areas of deprivation. Through the programme, individuals are encouraged to enrol and to successfully complete a course. Hopefully, that will be their first step on the lifelong learning ladder. It is interesting to note that, in the academic year 2009-2010, there were over 9,600 enrolments in our further education colleges from deprived areas that are predominantly Protestant. That shows a significant increase in participation from those areas over the past three years, showing an increase by 10% from 2007-08 through to 2009-2010.

Raising the level of competence in the essential skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT is also immensely important. In 2009-2010 alone, there were almost 3,800 essential-skills enrolments from these areas. That shows a substantial increase in participation over the past three years, with an increase of 71% from 2007-08 to 2009-2010. Between the commencement of the essential skills strategy in 2002 and 31 March this year, there have been around 224,000 enrolments. Some 85% of students completed their course, of whom 68% achieved the qualification. Although much more remains to be done, this programme has delivered crucial help to a large number of people.

My Department's Training for Success programme provides a guarantee of a training place to all school leavers aged 16 and 17. As of 25 May, there were 6,714 young people on Training for Success. It meets the needs of a wide variety of young people and enables participants to progress to higher-level training, further education or employment. It is currently delivered under the following three strands: first, Skills for your Life, which aims to address the personal development needs of young people who have disengaged from learning and/or have significant obstacles, with the aim of preparing them for working life; secondly, Skills for Work,

which aims to help young people to gain skills and a vocationally related qualification at level 1 and provides the opportunity to progress to level 2 training through an apprenticeship or further education; and thirdly, programmed apprenticeships, which were introduced in September 2009 as an intervention measure during the economic downturn, as it was unlikely that young people wishing to be apprentices would secure employment at the outset. Even within that framework, through the introduction of the Working Rite pilot to inform future provision, the Department is looking at more innovative ways to target young people who are disadvantaged.

My Department is also the managing authority for the Northern Ireland European social fund, which aims to reduce unemployment and economic inactivity and to improve the skills of those currently in work. In particular, priority 1 of the programme, "Helping people into sustainable employment", aims to extend the employment opportunities of unemployed and inactive people by helping them to enter, remain in and make progress in sustained employment. The programme does not reserve funding for any particular group of participants, but focuses on disadvantaged people, including those with disabilities and health conditions; lone parents; older workers; young people not in education, employment or training; women; and people with low or no qualifications. One of the programme's targets is to assist 45,000 individuals under priority 1 during the programming period. The programme results in overall funding for those purposes of some €414 million, of which 40% is contributed by the European Union, 25% by the Department and 35% by other Departments and public bodies.

In some respects, careers guidance is the glue that holds together many of those initiatives. In January 2009, my Department, together with the Department of Education, launched Preparing for Success, our all-age career strategy. Its overall aim is that young people and adults develop the skills and confidence to make the most of their life choices. My Department's Careers Service works in partnership with post-primary schools and alternative education providers to help young people to articulate their career goals and to support them in the career planning process.

I have enjoyed listening to the debate, and I am very grateful for all the comments and suggestions made by Members. We have made

a note of all the comments, and we will follow through on that. I will consider carefully what I have heard and take forward these and other issues over the coming months as part of the ongoing work of the Department. Again, I stress that it will involve cross-cutting work across Departments in the Executive and strong leadership from our communities and at a political level.

**Mr B McCrea:** I rise as Chair of the Committee for Employment and Learning, but, as the Committee has not yet met, I think that it is appropriate that I make these comments on a personal basis. However, I will talk briefly about what I think the Committee may wish to consider.

According to Chris Lyttle, there are few more important issues that the House will consider. It is also the case that the proposer of the motion, Mr Easton, made a commitment on the matter during the election campaign, and he has, rightly, brought it to the House for immediate consideration. That raises the matter of whether we are asking the right question to the right person, which is why I am very grateful to my colleague Roy Beggs for tabling the amendment that draws in the Minister of Education. A number of issues come forward on that as we seek to start a fresh mandate. There has been much talk about the work of Dawn Purvis, and I have to say that I have some sympathy with the position of Mervyn Storey as Chair of the Committee for Education because that Committee carried out a proper and thorough investigation into the causes of and concerns raised by educational underachievement.

When talking about education, the party to my right quite often says that we should not be having discussions outside the accepted norms of the Assembly.

**Mr McElduff:** Does the Member accept that we may be positioned on your right, but, ideologically, we are on your left?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member will have an extra minute added to his time.

**Mr B McCrea:** I doubt that an extra minute will be sufficient for me to consider where that party is actually positioned, given that there has been a very significant change in its attitude to this place over the past number of weeks. We shall consider that further, but I make the point that, when it comes to causal effects, early education

is accepted as the way forward. We have had a number of Ministers of Education, mainly from the same party, who, thus far, have failed to address the issue.

**Mr Agnew:** I thank the Member and his party for tabling the amendment and highlighting to the House that it is an issue that goes beyond just the Department for Employment and Learning. However, will he agree with me that if we are going to talk about tackling early years, we have to take it beyond the Department of Education and bring in the Health Minister? In fact, what we need is a cross-departmental early years strategy and not an early years strategy that sits in the silo of the Department of Education.

**Mr B McCrea:** I thank the Member. I will take no more interventions because of time. The Member pre-empted what I was going to say towards the end of my speech, but I will say it now to ensure that it comes out. This is not just an issue for the Executive.

This is an issue for all Committees that provide oversight. Therefore, I will make an offer now to each and every other Chair of a Committee — the Committee for Education, the Committee for Social Development, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister or the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety — that we take a cross-Committee approach to educational attainment. There is no point in dealing with the issue in silos. If Committees are to prove their worth in this institution, it is right that they hold Members, Ministers and the Executive to account. Proper scrutiny is looking at what has been done until now and what has been said in the debate. The effectiveness of that action must then be evaluated in the months and years to come.

## 12.00 noon

Mr Beggs repeatedly brought up the work of Professor Heckman, whose influence on early years intervention is known to all in the Assembly. I think that it was Daithí McKay who said that there was an imbalance in the number of children going to nursery school. If tackling that imbalance is the solution, we should ensure that there is universal, teacher-led provision for all the children of Northern Ireland.

Some really interesting issues came up in the debate. I do not say this that often, but Gregory Campbell made a real contribution when he said

that this debate and debates on other issues have no impact in the estates. People there listen to what goes on but are not interested and do not find elections or anything else relevant. That brings me to another point. There was a bit of a spat earlier when someone asked, "If Dawn Purvis made such a big contribution, how come she is no longer here?". I like Dawn. I think that she made a great contribution, and I think that we all do. However, do you know what her absence really says? It reinforces Mr Campbell's point. Despite her doing the good work and getting the message across, it made little impact on the electorate, the people whom we are trying to serve. That is the challenge that we all have to meet.

No amount of hand wringing or exhortation will make a difference unless we get down to doing something. I look forward to working with the Minister. We have already talked about other issues. I look forward to engaging with the Minister of Education, and I repeat my invitation to all Committee Chairs who have an interest in the matter to come together to deal with it so that the Committee for Employment and Learning can actually do something. The Committee for Employment and Learning should be first, not last.

**Mr Weir:** At the end of what has been quite a good-natured debate — there has been a bit of banter, but, broadly speaking, there has been a consensual position — there has been a recognition across the Chamber that there is a problem out there that needs to be solved and a determination from all parties to solve it.

I acknowledge all who contributed to the debate, particularly Members who made their maiden speech. Moreover, particularly as this is the first occasion on which I have had the opportunity to do so, I congratulate my colleague from North Down Mr Farry on his elevation to high office. He highlighted, as did Michael Copeland, the fact that a lot of good work has been done. No one is trying to deny that, and it would be churlish if we did. Mr Copeland said that things had improved greatly in his absence. It would also be churlish of me to say that there is any causal connection between the two. Nevertheless, he made one of the central points, which is that we in the Assembly, be it on this issue or others, will ultimately be judged on what we do rather than on what we say. We will be judged on the practical differences that we make to society.

Despite all the good work that has been done, it is undoubtedly the case that much good work remains to be done. The statistics on the differences in levels of success for those from a lower economic background and the statistics on the differences in the level of university attainment between those from working-class Protestant communities and those from working-class Catholic communities show that there is a genuine problem out there. A number of Members provided some historical background. The traditional dependence on manufacturing and on heavy industry in principally working-class areas is no longer the case. We have moved from that situation. As a society, we have perhaps failed to deal with the problem caused by that gap, which has been there for a considerable time.

Undoubtedly, the issue cuts across Departments and, indeed, goes beyond Departments. Therefore, I welcome the Ulster Unionist Party amendment, which deals with an early years strategy. Our party highlighted that strongly in its manifesto. Although the issue of academic selection at 11 is important, we have, at times, got into a degree of trench warfare on that. One of the problems with that debate is that issues such as low academic achievement of people from Protestant working-class areas and the lack of investment and focus on early years education have tended to be ignored. Consequently, it is important that that key debate is engaged in also.

Pat Ramsey provided statistics on the disparities in nursery school placements, and that is a long-term social problem that is perhaps not being tackled as it should be. Nearly 15 years ago, I was part of the Education Committee in the old Northern Ireland Forum. I suppose that I am one of the few survivors from that body. It looked at nursery education and highlighted the need to move to universal coverage. We are still struggling with that.

Other issues were raised in the debate. Clearly, there is work to be done to reach out to very young people in particular. Much of the focus has been on educational systems, but, as a number of Members said, the issue goes well beyond that. For example, Daithí McKay talked about a holistic view and a need to look at environment and poverty, culture and community. The issue goes beyond education systems. There are things that we can provide in schools to provide that support, and there have been initiatives such as breakfast clubs,

homework clubs and a range of things that we need to look at. It goes beyond that. It includes support for parents, and, indeed, we need to address the different aspirations and levels of push among many parents. We also need to look at who the role models are, particularly in working-class areas. Unfortunately, for many years during the Troubles, those from a criminal background were seen as the role models. Why go out and achieve and get a job? Why not aspire to be seen as the local big man or the local hood? Changing the culture of aspiration, which goes beyond simply the education systems, is vital.

The proposer highlighted the fact that, although it is important to look at early years and, indeed, at the periods of schooling and GCSEs, we need to be much more widely focused and recognise that people whom the system has failed or who have gone through the system without qualifications have an opportunity to be helped at a later stage. The proposer highlighted the good work of the women's education group in Kilcooley in our constituency. In many ways, that shows that, at times, thinking outside the box is needed. Although what is provided by the universities and further education colleges is good, it should be seen not as the end solution but as part of the solution, and there is work to be done in the communities. Good work is also being done in mentoring. For instance, in east Belfast, the Glentoran Community Trust, which plans to expand into greater educational work, has realised the value of mentoring young people, and that is important.

I regard some of the remarks as a little discordant. Not surprisingly, the party opposite said that the answer to all our ills was to end academic selection. I said earlier that there was a degree of distraction with that issue, and ending academic selection would have a counter effect. If it were removed, it would reinforce class and social divisions and would take away at least one of the ladders from people in those communities. We need to look at solutions that provide more ladders to people, not fewer. Of late, many commentators have highlighted the example of what has happened in England with the comprehensive system, where you get more and more sink estates and less and less social mobility. We ought to look at solutions that provide greater social mobility.

It is about dealing with a problem that clearly affects society. Indeed, the previous

Employment and Learning Committee did an in-depth study of the issue of NEETs, which is a by-product of the lack of educational attainment. It creates great problems for society, with people not contributing financially or economically to society, and it leads to increased crime and increased health problems. However, leaving aside the major problems that low academic achievement creates for society, such failure is, above all, a tragedy for those individuals. We, as an Assembly, need to address that. As Gregory Campbell highlighted, it is about getting in among the communities and dealing with disillusionment and hopelessness, and that means getting real solutions on the ground.

I look forward to seeing the strategy that the Employment and Learning Minister has put forward and, indeed, to working with his counterparts. The strategy has to be multiagency in nature and has to be built with the communities as a whole to address those problems. There is good practice in Northern Ireland and beyond, and we need to look at how we introduce that in our communities to ensure that there is community buy-in and we start to see real progress on the ground. There is a wide range of issues, including parenting and welfare dependency issues, and it will take a co-ordinated approach at Executive level and beyond to tackle those problems.

I do not want to incur the wrath of the Speaker by not using the term "Northern Ireland", but, to use David McIlveen's phrase, we have a "broken Ulster" in many of our communities, which, over the past 15 years, have perhaps been left behind by many of the advances that have happened. It is important that we move away from some of the arguments about education and drill down into the issues so that we can have a situation that benefits and lifts those communities and in which education is seen as a way to improve those communities. That is why I welcome the support from around the Chamber and why I was glad that the motion was the first issue debated in this Assembly term. It is an important issue. It is important that the Executive go forward with a unified voice, determined to tackle it. I commend the motion and the amendment to the House.

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

*Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*



*That this Assembly notes the comparative lack of post-GCSE educational qualifications held by people from working-class Protestant communities; expresses concern at the effect this may have on the future employability of young people from such areas; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to bring forward a strategy to address this matter; and further calls on the Minister of Education to address educational underachievement at the earliest stage.*

## **Special Needs: Services for Young People and Adults**

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

**Ms J McCann:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly supports a review of the community services, including respite services, that are currently available for young people and adults with special needs after they leave school.*

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Most people in the Chamber will agree that leaving school and moving into adult life is a difficult and daunting experience for most young people and their families. However, we can imagine the added pressures on young people with special needs.

Children with moderate learning difficulties usually leave school at 16 unless they have a severe disability, in which case they stay on until 19. They, their parents and their carers need to be aware of the choices that are available to them because, more often than not, when parents see the poor choices that are available, they feel extremely anxious about what the future holds for their child. We have to remember that the children come from a school environment where they have been able to access the support of teachers and school services. However, parents then face uncertainty about where their child will go and about what support services are available for them and their children. It is vital that parents and their children have those options, to make that transition as smooth as possible for everyone. There is no doubt that good services and practices exist in different organisations. However, it is clear that a lot more needs to be done for people with special needs who face that decision.

### **12.15 pm**

It is vital that that transition is carried out in a planned fashion. It needs to involve all the agencies that will play a major role during the post-school years. The transfer of relevant information should ensure that young people receive any necessary specialist help and support during their continuing education and

training after leaving school or any additional specialist help that they may need.

In a report on the ability of further education colleges to, for instance, provide the necessary services for adults who choose to go there, it was discovered that there were several problems, which ranged from mobility access to lack of training for staff and lack of specialist equipment in those colleges. The necessary support mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure that the right of people with special needs to independent living and participation in all aspects of life, including community life, is respected.

The report suggested clearly that an umbrella organisation is needed to develop that partnership approach to the problem. The need for a cross-departmental approach was mentioned in the previous debate and is mentioned frequently in debates in the Chamber. Clearly, there is a need for all Departments to work together on such issues instead of in silos, as sometimes happens.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that the provision of services should be aimed at achieving the fullest possible integration and individual development of each disabled child. The convention applies to children. However, when a child becomes 18 years of age, it is almost as though all of the work that has been done is thrown away. It is not continued to support the young person's integration into life as a young adult.

**Ms M Anderson:** I received an e-mail at the weekend from a single parent who is the mother of a 19-year-old daughter with severe mental and physical impairment. Her daughter is totally dependent on help and assistance because she cannot walk or talk. She needs 24/7 care. With regard to the Member's point about transition from childhood into adulthood and the wrap-around services that need to be in place, I was concerned when that mother told me that, because of budget cuts, her daughter would not now find a place in Maybrook Adult Training Centre. That mother cannot understand how support that was available to her daughter during childhood can be withdrawn in adulthood. I am sure that the Member would agree that the Minister should take a robust attitude towards examining and exploring that matter further.

**Ms J McCann:** I thank the Member for that intervention. I agree strongly. For day services,

in particular, there is clearly more demand than there are places available. I am sure that most Members have found that in their constituency certain families approach them regularly about that issue.

Problems also arise because young adults are often placed with much older people in some day centres. That is not good for them either. There is also an issue with transport. Often, many of those young adults cannot get to centres because they have no access to transport. With regard to employment opportunities, although there has been considerable growth in supported employment schemes in the North and better access to mainstream employment programmes for people with special needs, again, lack of mainstream funding means that access can be limited and that only a certain number of people can access those services.

I want to concentrate on respite services. I want to make it clear that, when we talk about this issue, we are talking not about statistics but about real people with families. In my constituency, access to respite facilities is a big issue for some families I have dealt with. Many families, carers and adults with disabilities experience a great deal of stress due to their situation. Respite care is an extremely important part of their needs. It can offer a break in the circumstances for parents, carers and family members and for the person who has the disability or special needs. It provides opportunities for them to interact with their peers and to enjoy relationships outside the family circle. That cuts down the social exclusion that they sometimes feel. It can also provide them with a sense of independence. It is important that respite should not be viewed as simply a break; it should be seen as a positive experience, one that should be integrated into any plan for transition from school into adult life. I do not think that there has been a comprehensive study of current respite facilities, but, in my experience and in the experience of some of the families I have dealt with, the families of some young people with severe disabilities and severe special needs are finding it difficult to access respite services.

We tabled the motion because we wanted to ensure that the need for proper provision for people with special needs is recognised and that everyone who needs services is given them

as of right. I find it extremely difficult to watch families having to fight tooth and nail for what is a basic human right: access to services for the family and the young person. Families should not have to do that. That is why there needs to be a review. People need to know what is available, but they also need to have access to opportunity and to be able to access the services that are available.

The transition from school to adult life needs to be planned in partnership with the young person and the parents, but the responsible agencies should also get together to look at how they can plan the transition for that person. The people in our communities, the constituents and the families who come to us for help, are looking for us to open doors for them to access those services.

I appeal to Members to support the motion, which asks for a review to make sure that enough services are freely available. As I said, those services are a right for those people. They are not services for which families should be fighting with organisations and Departments; they are services that the young person and the family should be receiving as of right.

**Mr G Robinson:** I have spoken on this issue on a number of occasions in the Chamber, and I am happy to do so again. It is an area of vital importance and one in which much can be done to benefit very vulnerable young people and adults. The term "special needs" covers a wide spectrum, and many unseen conditions must be remembered in the context of the debate.

I firmly believe that we must give those who have special needs the greatest possible chance of maximising their quality of life. Realistically, that can only be done with specialist services aimed specifically at addressing an individual's needs. It must also be remembered that we are in a period of severe financial restraint, and all decisions have to be made in that context. I hope that more services can be supplied to individuals with special needs, but, first, it may be prudent to review the services we have and see whether they can be used more effectively. Once we know what services are in place and how they are used, whether there is a possibility for greater use and whether they are overstretched and need to be strengthened, we need to ask whether additional targeted services can be considered. I use the word "targeted" because

services have to be targeted to ensure that they are effective and provide value for money. I will support any measures that fulfil those criteria. I am sure that the Minister will provide whatever services he can afford or sees as essential so that people with special needs have the greatest possible opportunity of maximising their quality of life and attainment.

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I therefore propose to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. As we are having some problems with the public address system today, Members may have trouble hearing the announcement at 1.55 pm. I, therefore, suggest that they keep their eyes on the clock, so that they are back here at 2.00 pm. As I said, the sitting is, by leave, suspended until 2.00 pm, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Basil McCrea.

*The sitting was suspended at 12.25 pm.*

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

**2.00 pm**

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** It is now 2.00 pm, so we will return to the debate on services for young people and adults with special needs. The next Member to speak is Mr Basil McCrea.

**Mr B McCrea:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I wish you all the very best in your new role. I shall treat you with the utmost respect from now on, both here and in other places.

**Mr Dallat:** That is a change.

**Mr B McCrea:** Yes, it is something of a change, I agree, Mr Dallat. Congratulations, nevertheless.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. The proposer raised a number of very vital points, particularly about the importance of respite for people who have to care for and support those who are less fortunate than ourselves. During the election period, I think that many of us came across people about whom we can say only that they are magnificent in the way that they look after others who face huge challenges in their lives. If the situation were reversed, I wonder whether we would be up to the challenge to provide the level of service that those people give at home. Many of them say that even an hour of respite makes all the difference — even the ability to have a shower or whatever, free from the constant attention of those for whom they care. There is an issue, in that we have to look to respite services. They are not a luxury, and they are not an add-on: frankly, they are absolutely essential.

A number of other points are worthy of consideration, and perhaps the Minister will be able to look at those in the fullness of time. There are particular issues with employment, particularly at the age of 18. I heard an intervention from Ms Anderson about the difficulty of getting services for people up to the age of 18, but after that age they all seem to disappear. One of the more frequent comments that I hear is about how we ensure that those who have disabilities or other challenges in their lives get into some form of employment that makes use of their skills and values them as members of our society. In that regard, it is important to have places in a college of further education or some other appropriate

establishment that provides people with the appropriate skills to move forward in their lives.

This is not meant to be a criticism in any way, but there is a feeling that we do an awful lot but do not really get to the core of the problem. It is only when you live with the problem that you understand the challenges that are put forward. I was particularly struck by the fact that the proposer mentioned that people who go to day centres are quite often in with children and adults of different ages. It can be difficult to provide some form of respite and engagement for people with a wide variety of needs. Of course, I realise that there are particular challenges in the financial circumstances that we face, but, again, that is something that we have to look at.

In conclusion, when talking about the challenges that many people in our society face, I will say that this is a broad arena. I recently attended a conference on ME, and I was struck by the difficulties that those folk face, largely unassisted by anybody else. They soldier on with family and friends trying to get the services and the support that they deserve, regardless of the cause of the illness. There are real challenges in our society with neuro-dysfunctional diseases, including dementia, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, and we will have to reformulate the type of support that we give, not only to those folk but to the people who are trying to care for them.

I realise that this is a significant issue, and I have no doubt that the Minister and his colleagues will look at it.

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

**Mr B McCrea:** I am happy to support the motion.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** As this is the first debate in which the Assembly will hear from Mark Durkan, I remind the House that the convention is that there should be no interruption during his maiden speech.

**Mr Durkan:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. On behalf of the SDLP, I fully support the motion. I also take the opportunity to thank the people of Foyle who elected me to the House. I am honoured that they have put their faith in me to represent them and I will do so to the very best of my ability. I aspire to serve Derry with the same vigour as John Hume, the same diligence

— and name — as Mark Durkan and the same compassion as Mary Bradley.

At some stage, most of us here will have been contacted by families and carers of people with special needs who are desperate for our help. As services are cut in some places and non-existent in others, many families are at breaking point. They are physically and mentally exhausted. The pressures on carers, who are often parents, increase as their children grow up. The role becomes more physically demanding as carers grow older. Parents, increasingly aware of their own mortality, fear for how their son or daughter will cope after they have gone. That is compounded by the withdrawal of statutory support when school-leaving age is reached. Those young people need structure in their lives. The slightest change to a routine can cause huge disruption.

Day care centres provide an excellent service and are staffed by industrious, dedicated and caring individuals; I am thinking of the Evergreen and Oak Tree centres in my constituency. However, the demand for places in those centres is growing and cannot be met.

The most important issue at present is respite. Current respite services are quite simply not good enough. Respite gives carers a chance to switch off and recharge their batteries, and it is essential if a high standard of care is to be maintained. It is also important for clients to get respite from their carers. Health trusts and education boards have so far been easily able to defend failures to provide for those with special needs. We have no statutory obligation, but this House has a moral obligation. Are we not the legislators?

The SDLP wants a policy to be adopted for children with special needs that is not a postcode lottery, and we want it as a matter of urgency. Our goal is to have an education system in which children, young people, parents and carers work as partners with schools and education authorities to secure the best educational outcomes for young people with special needs. There should be a statutory obligation on the two main Departments — Education and Health — to plan for those over school-leaving age, and assess the options for post-19 care provision, including the number of places available in day care centres. That will be a fundamental step towards providing carers

with the support they need and giving people with special needs the service they deserve.

The Autism Act, championed by my colleague Dominic Bradley, is a recent and relevant example of cross-departmental collaboration intended to improve the quality of life for vulnerable citizens here. Therefore, it is surely not beyond us to emulate its success and make a positive change for people with special needs and their families. We can make that change. We must make that change. We will make that change.

**Mr McCarthy:** Thank you Mr Deputy Speaker, and I congratulate you on your appointment. I thank the Members who tabled the motion, Jennifer McCann and Sue Ramsey, for bringing this very important subject to the Floor of the Assembly yet again. The motion calls for:

*“a review of the community services, including respite services...for young people and adults with special needs after they leave school.”*

Members of the Alliance Party can and will support an exercise in that area. We hope that the outcome of the review will be acknowledged by the Departments, and, more importantly, will be acted on.

As someone who has first-hand experience of the needs and expectations of a family member with severe learning difficulties, I know that it is imperative that provision is made for the health and well-being of individuals. However, educational and social opportunities are also of paramount importance, and that was recognised by Jennifer in her speech earlier today. I welcome the new Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to the debate today. However, I would impress on the House that this is not just a cause for one Minister and that a joined-up approach is required.

I and my party have been fully supportive of the content of the Bamford review, which, way back in 2005, carried out a thorough review of mental health and learning disabilities in Northern Ireland. Included in that review was a document entitled ‘Equal Lives,’ which is a truly comprehensive document and which took contributions from people at the grassroots who knew exactly what the needs were. Primarily, there is a need for joined-up government, with, as I said earlier, all the Departments working together to provide the best for all those with learning disabilities.

Respite services have already been mentioned. For parents, carers and individuals with learning disabilities those services are and have been scarce for a long time, and that was highlighted in 'Equal Lives' as something that must be addressed without delay. Again, as someone who has hands-on, 24-hours-a-day experience of working with someone with a learning disability, I know that it is a very demanding job, and, for the benefit of all concerned, respite services are absolutely essential and must be expanded. Of that, there is no doubt.

'Equal Lives' details everything that needs to be done. In some cases, progress seems to have been slow, but if all — and I mean all — the Departments concentrate on what needs to be done, I am convinced that services, at all levels, can and will be provided.

Objective 3 of 'Equal Lives' was:

*"To ensure that the move into adulthood for young people with a learning disability supports their access to equal opportunities for continuing education, employment and training and that they and their families receive continuity of support during the transition period."*

Objective 4 of 'Equal Lives' was:

*"To enable people with a learning disability to lead full and meaningful lives in their neighbourhoods, have access to a wide range of social, work and leisure opportunities and form and maintain friendships and relationships."*

Those are very important.

Following on from 'Equal Lives,' the Executive published a document entitled 'Delivering the Bamford Vision' in 2009. Contained in that document was an action plan for 2009-2011, progress on which was to be reviewed by the ministerial group on mental health and learning disability in 2011 and an updated rolling action plan published. We are now almost halfway through 2011, and I am unsure where that report is. Perhaps the Minister or someone else could enlighten us, as it would be interesting to see what progress has been made to date. In the meantime, the Alliance Party fully supports the motion and is grateful to the Members who brought it to the Assembly.

**2.15 pm**

**Mr Craig:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and congratulations on your appointment.

I support the motion. Since the publication of the Bamford review in 2007, we have seen significant changes take place, with the expansion of community care for those with learning disabilities. Many of the recommendations in the Bamford review, especially with regard to the transition to adulthood for those with a learning disability, were overlooked and merely glossed over by the former Health Minister.

The Bamford review found serious inadequacies in the provision of care of young adults who had left school. Much of that related to the insignificant planning that was left to the later years of school, and, unfortunately, adequate help was not there. A number of objectives for those suffering from a learning disability were set in the Bamford review. The first was to ensure that, in the move into adulthood, young people with a learning disability have access to equal opportunities for continuing education, employment and training, and that they and their families receive continuity of support during that transition period. The second was to enable people with a learning disability to lead full and meaningful lives in their neighbourhoods, having access to a wide range of social, work and leisure opportunities, and form and maintain friendships and relationships.

Prior to the development of community care, people with special needs were merely cast aside and locked up in institutions. Northern Ireland was the last of the regions of the United Kingdom to treat many of those people with dignity and respect. The mechanisms put in place in the wake of the publication of this report to ease that transition have proven wholly inadequate and confusing, with little resources being placed where they are most needed.

We have, essentially, seen young men and women suffering from learning disabilities live in the community without much help or hope. There has been an absence of a joined-up strategy to help those with special needs to lead normal and prosperous lives. That stretches across more than one Department: the Health Department, the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning each has a role to play. I hope that in this new mandate there will be more joined-up thinking.

I want to highlight two organisations in my constituency, which I believe the Minister is familiar with, that offer a model for success. I

have worked closely with the Lisburn and Down Gateway. The gateway is mainly comprised of volunteers, chiefly parents and relatives of those with a learning disability. It represents a fine example of a voluntary organisation working in partnership with carers and sufferers. That organisation represents a champion for those with special needs and their carers.

Another is Stepping Stones, based a mere 100 m from my constituency office in Lisburn. It is an organisation in receipt of European funding and has been operating successfully for a number of years. It employs people with special needs, providing training, hope and a job for many of those young adults. It, too, offers a model that we should all be aspiring to, a model that is, unfortunately, lacking in our communities. To put it in perspective, the difference it makes to the lives of those with learning disabilities is enormous: they are given purpose and hope through those organisations, something that they are entitled to and something that government should be aspiring to and aiming for. With that in mind, I support the motion.

**Mr Kinahan:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and may I, too, congratulate you on your position.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion, and I thank Jennifer McCann and Sue Ramsey for tabling this motion for discussion.

The Ulster Unionist Party firmly believes that everyone, regardless of individual circumstance, should be provided with a service that meets their needs and makes the most of the opportunities available to them. It is important that all — I say that again: all — the Executive Departments meet the needs of young people and adults with disabilities. The Ulster Unionist Party believes that the state could and should have a greater role to play in supporting families and carers.

The motion refers to respite services. The majority of school leavers from special needs schools are placed in day centres that are commissioned by the local trust. Over time, those day centres have evolved in that they now also provide vital social and life skills. In Antrim, I have seen them running their own centres and training people to speak in public.

Many parents and carers welcome the opportunity for a period of respite, which day centres and particularly schools provide. When young people finish their schooling, they often

find that day care provision is inadequate or inappropriate to their needs. Carers, especially those at home, find themselves facing upheaval, not least in financial and emotional terms.

Day centres provide a vital opportunity for the carers of young people and adults with special needs to experience a well deserved period of respite. Unfortunately, services such as day centres are still not working as well as they should. The needs of two distinct groups must be paramount. First, there are the needs of the participants themselves, who require high quality tailored activities, which will help them to reach their potential. Secondly, there are the needs of carers, who can be parents, foster parents, guardians, friends, neighbours, etc. They need regular and dependable respite.

Unfortunately, we all know that respite services have not always been given the attention or resources that they deserve, so we ask for a review. Also, it is widely acknowledged that the modernisation of day centres will require significant resources in both physical infrastructure and human skills. Even though the Ulster Unionist Party no longer holds the Health Ministry, we still have significant concerns about its ability to deliver the existing rate of services over the next four years. Unfortunately, that also means that it is unlikely that the unnecessary capital will be found to modernise the day centres across Northern Ireland.

The Ulster Unionist Party is fully committed to implementing the Bamford report, which includes a number of important recommendations. Not all of those recommendations will be easy to implement or be cost free, but, nevertheless, they are necessary. Will the new Health Minister give a commitment to follow through with the recommendations? The Bamford report recommended a radical reconfiguration of the existing day service. The potential exists for day centres to be used for complementary community activities, thereby optimising local resources.

The Ulster Unionist Party was also extremely concerned about some of the measures from the previous Sinn Féin Regional Development Minister in relation to transport arrangements for people with special needs. Affordable transport for children and young people has been identified as essential in allowing them to participate in a range of activities and in reducing isolation and exclusion. Even more worrying is the proposal to cut the transport programme for people with

disabilities. That will further add to the isolation and exclusion of some of the most vulnerable children and young people.

I am confident that the new Minister will be much more receptive and flexible and, ultimately, will take the right decision not just for the public purse but for the vulnerable in our community. Although public transport should be affordable, it also needs to be accessible. The Ulster Unionist Party supports the motion and looks forward to all Departments being part of the review and the Bamford recommendations being included.

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety):** I wish you well in your new role, Mr Deputy Speaker. It has been pretty easy today thus far, and I suspect that I will not make it any worse for you. Maybe I will give you more cause for concern another time, but I will give you an easy ride today.

I am grateful for Members' views on this issue. In the first instance, I wish to make it clear that I am committed to providing the best possible services to those who need them most.

I should declare an interest: I was actively engaged in the support group for Lisburn Adult Resource Centre for a number of years. We succeeded in having a superb building put in place for people from the learning disabled community; it carries out its job very effectively, although there is always more that can be done. I will discuss some of the problems and issues later in my speech.

We need to use our resources effectively and efficiently to ensure that we can provide the best services. As Mr Kinahan rightly pointed out, the pot of money is not endless, and we must ensure that what we have is spent in ways that enhance the lives of those in need of our support. That is most keenly true of our social care and community services, particularly those provided to the most vulnerable members of society, such as those with learning disability or other special needs.

I am not convinced that initiating another review is necessarily the most effective use of resources at this time, because over the past number of years we have had quite a number of reviews. In fact, some previous Ministers seemed to think that reviews were always the solution, without actually ever coming to any decisions. I prefer to come to decisions than put

in place reviews that do not actually lead to an awful lot. For example, we have had the health and social care trusts fully engaged in delivering plans arising from the reviews, and it is vital that we see the outcome of their work.

That is not to say that we should not continually look at how we deliver our services and, where money is short we must always strive to get more for the same amount. We must look at new and different approaches, such as more involvement of the private and independent sectors in providing both residential and home-based care while, wherever possible, improving the quality of the service provided and using community-based organisations that can provide significant support on mental health issues.

Let me set out the reviews that we have completed and where we are with their implementation. I will deal first with Bamford. A significant review was carried out in 2008, and we consulted on the response to the Bamford review, which covered the whole spectrum of services for those with mental ill health or learning disability. That review took some five years to complete, and the action plan published in October 2009 in response to the review had almost 150 actions, 80 of which were specifically about mental health, and a further 70 of which were targeted towards learning disability.

The action plan brought a requirement for positive cross-sectoral working in government and recognised the need to engage with service users, their families and carers to ensure that services were fit for purpose. An inter-ministerial group chaired by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was established to oversee the work. In addition, a number of subgroups were established, most notably an interdepartmental subgroup on children and young people. All relevant Departments participate in that group, looking mainly at improving the transition from childhood to adulthood and on into education, training, leisure and social pursuits and employment. The subgroup has its own action plan. In order to support the implementation of that action plan, my Department allocated additional service development moneys, specifically for learning disabled, of an additional £12.5 million recurrent from April 2010-11.

The Bamford action plan has been in place for three years, from 2008 until 2011, and officials from my Department, in collaboration with other



Departments and with the boards and trusts, are now evaluating implementation of the plan. I expect to see a report of that evaluation in the autumn of this year. In the meantime, the action plan remains a template for monitoring, reporting and improving community and social care services in mental health and learning disability for the foreseeable future.

### 2.30 pm

The Bamford review recognised transition from childhood to adulthood as a particularly fraught issue for those with additional needs such as learning disability. In recognition of the difficult issues, a separate interdepartmental subgroup on transitions was established, with its own implementation plan. The group looks at certain aspects of transition from children's to adult's health and social care services and from school to further education or training and then employment. I am pleased to say that a regional group on transitions is chaired by the Health and Social Care Board and that trusts and other relevant Departments and agencies play a full part in the work of that group. As with all other aspects of the Bamford action plan, this will also be subject to detailed evaluation. Appropriate adjustments and amendments will be made as necessary.

I understand Members' concerns in relation to the provision of respite care. We can quite easily set out strong economic and efficiency arguments for supporting carers, but it is also crucial that we properly recognise the equality perspective and the fundamental human rights of individual carers. Carers have told us that one of the most important services for them is the provision of respite care. Members have made that quite clear today. Carers have a right to life outside caring. Respite gives them the opportunity to have a break from their caring duties and time to take part in other activities that those without caring responsibilities often take for granted. Sometimes they need help to do that, and that is where we must step in. All carers are individuals with their own needs. They care for people with a huge range of needs and abilities in what can be very complex and emotionally charged relationships. One solution will not fit all: carers need real choices based on their individual circumstances.

**Mr Wells:** The Member has outlined the Bamford action plan. Many Members are very keen to know when the huge raft of legislation

that will be tabled as a result of the Bamford review will come before the House. The previous Minister indicated his hope that it would be done in this mandate, but many of us hope that it can in fact be done, or at least introduced, within this calendar year. Will the Member give us any indication of when he believes that that legislation will be forthcoming?

**Mr Poots:** I thank the Member for the question. I will deal with it in the course of my speech, and I ask for his patience in that respect. However, he raises a key point.

We know that carers' needs may vary from flexible and responsive support services, advice and information and maintaining their own health and well-being to time for rest, relaxation and a social life through the provision of flexible respite care. I am aware that the level and type of respite care available has been an issue over the past few years. In recognition of that, last year, my Department commissioned the Health and Social Care Board to provide a comprehensive report on respite provision. That report, which contains six very practical recommendations, has now been received and approved by the Department and is currently being implemented. The key aims will be to deliver consistency across Northern Ireland in assessing, measuring and monitoring respite and to significantly widen the range of respite services provided. It has been a key piece of work. Implementation of the recommendations will give us targets, inform us of our current performance and help us to better target resources in the future.

Autism is another area of the service that was the subject of an extensive and independent review, completed in 2009. In response to that review, my Department published an ASD strategic action plan. That plan sets out in detail the improvements that we need to make and the timescale over which those will be completed. To ensure that the improvements are replicated equally across Northern Ireland, a regional autistic spectrum disorder network group was established. That network is multidisciplinary and multi-agency and includes input from our colleagues in the education services.

The network has already delivered significant improvements in the service. Despite increased referrals — almost 40% in 2010 — there has been a big reduction in the number of children waiting more than 13 weeks for assessment.

The majority of trusts are already meeting that target. It is expected that, by March 2010, no child in Northern Ireland will be more than 13 weeks from an assessment.

The network includes a reference group, facilitating the involvement of 30 parents, service users and carers and 10 voluntary organisations in the design and planning of autism services. Those best placed to know where improvements are necessary are now in a position to influence that change. Many parents, carers and those who use our social care services have expressed strong support for that approach.

As well as establishing that infrastructure, we have invested significant additional money to support the action plan. From March this year, an additional £1.6 million recurrent is available for autism services. That will support the network in completing the excellent work that it has begun and allow it to identify and begin work on other priority areas, particularly those on adult services. I am also aware that the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 recently received Royal Assent, and my officials are now discussing the best way to take forward the development of the autism strategy that is required under that legislation.

We plan to consult later this year on the learning disability service framework (LDSF), which aims to improve the health and well-being of people with learning disabilities, as well as that of their carers and families, by promoting social inclusion, reducing inequalities in health and social well-being and improving the quality of HSC services and support. The framework will set standards for communication and involvement in planning the delivery of services; children and young people entering adulthood; inclusion in community life; meeting general physical and mental health needs; meeting complex physical and mental health needs at home and in the community; and ageing well. The LDSF is initially for a three-year period from 2012 to 2015. As you will see, the framework will largely pull together all the other good work that is ongoing across the trusts.

My Department is currently developing a draft physical and sensory disability strategy and action plan that aims to improve outcomes, services and support for people of all ages, including young people and adults in Northern Ireland who have a physical, communication or

sensory disability. The key policy principles that are relevant to young people and adults that are being promoted in the strategy include family and person-centred care and more integrated working between and across Departments, health and social care organisations and the voluntary and community sector. The strategy includes the following recommendations: more personalised services should be commissioned and provided that are appropriate to the needs of individuals and that promote independence; appropriate short-break and respite services should be available to meet the needs of individuals and their parents and carers; good practice models of transitions should be developed; and existing statutory day-support services should be reviewed to refocus commissioning on models of day opportunities that promote independence and inclusion and that meet the needs of disabled people, including those with complex needs.

In the time that is allotted to me, I will briefly cover some of the issues that were raised. Mr Wells's question was not dealt with adequately. It is proposed that the relevant legislation will come before the Assembly in spring 2012, with a plan to have it in place in 2013. Mr Craig raised the issue of supported employment for people with special needs. There is a wide range of provision across trust areas, including training, education and employment placements in social firms. Access to those services is decided by individual assessment and, where possible, choice. I fully understand the benefits for that particular group of people, and I wish that they were more widely available. I agree with Mr Craig that Stepping Stones carries out a wonderful service and would be a good model for others to look at.

Mr Durkan raised the issue of increased pressures as children and their parents get older. That is something that I recognise very clearly, particularly as people with learning disabilities tend to live longer now. The Health and Social Care Board is looking at the services for older carers with a view to supporting family arrangements to remain in place. The board has included a research project by the University of Ulster, and it should be in a position to report by autumn this year.

Ms Anderson raised a constituent's issue. Obviously, we cannot —

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

**Mr Poots:** We cannot deal with individual issues.

In conclusion, I am minded not to impose further reviews on the service. I would like us to act on the reviews that have taken place.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I invite Michaela Boyle to make a winding-up speech. As this is the first debate in which we will hear from Michaela Boyle, I remind Members of the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

**Ms Boyle:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate you on your position.

There has been a lot of debate here this afternoon and before lunchtime on this very emotive issue, which is a clear recognition of support from right across the Floor. I have a number of observations to make. Parents need more choice and more respite care, particularly for children who come from an environment in which they were supported until the age of 18. It has been widely acknowledged that there is good practice, but there is still a long way to go in the provision of specialised equipment and training of specialised nurses to meet the needs of individuals. There needs to be cross-departmental support, with the Health Department, the Education Department and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) involved with such young adults from age 18 onwards.

Martina Anderson intervened in the debate with the concerns of a mother who found it difficult to move her child from Foyle View School to Maybrook Adult Training Centre in Derry. The constraints put in place for that mother were unbearable for her. Obviously, there were budget issues there. However, in terms of section 75 — we support equality of opportunity across the spectrum — I wonder just where this family's rights were. People are fighting for the basic human rights that they are entitled to, and they should not have to go through this fight for them.

There was talk earlier about stimulation for these young adults, particularly around day centres and what they entail. Although we acknowledge that day centres provide good care for our young adults, the needs of individuals need to be recognised. It is paramount that that happens. There was also talk about the Bamford report and the need for structured

reviews to be carried out on all services across the spectrum. That needs to be reviewed as a matter of importance. There was also talk about the transitional period for families. Families find it difficult because they are not aware of the care plan once their child reaches the age of 18. Obviously, there are communication barriers there also. The anomalies in the transition period, during which no resources or information are made available to the family, are, in my view, totally inadequate. There needs to be a joined-up approach across the Health Department, the Education Department and DEL.

It was widely acknowledged that young people with special needs, like any other child, need to live their lives to the full. There have been examples of different providers in various areas. Again, although we discussed day centres and the good job that they do, capital is needed to ensure that they continue to provide adequate services, and Mr Kinahan referred to that.

It was also mentioned that cuts in the transport programme are hitting the most vulnerable in our society. Families need to have more confidence in this service. Parents need to have more flexibility, more respite and more choices when caring for their child and the rest of their family.

There is an issue around the location of providers for families, particularly those in rural areas. In my Strabane constituency, we feel that there is a postcode lottery. I want to give a brief example of a family in my constituency whose child has specific and intensive needs. They require a specialist nurse to come in to PEG-feed (percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy) their child if they want a day out shopping or to attend a family funeral or wedding. That support is not available to them because they have been told that no specialist nurse is available to go into the community and that it has to be done in a hospital setting. So, the family are left without that support. The family's eldest sibling is a daughter with moderate learning difficulties, and all too often she is left to provide that care when the parents have to leave. The family informed me that they were never given any specialised training in that area, but they provide care anyway out of the love that they have for their daughter.

#### 2.45 pm

In 2008, Claire McGill and I met the then Minister for Employment and Learning, Reg Empey, to discuss the respite and community

services for young people with special needs once they reach the age of 18. The meeting came about after a number of my constituents came to us with concerns about that. The children were coming out of a special care setting to which they were accustomed up to the age of 18. There was no care plan or anything to meet their needs. Most of the children had been left at home to regress, and that is the unfortunate situation that we are faced with. It should not be allowed to happen. After meeting the Minister, we spoke of a possible interdepartmental co-ordinated approach to future provision. A lot of assurances and promises were given to us at that meeting, but nothing has ever come to fruition. In my constituency, Beltany House in Omagh is facing uncertainty. Parents need to be better informed about what is happening there. As I said earlier, the needs outweigh the places that are available to young people with special needs.

I support the motion that my party has brought to the House, and I believe that there is cross-party support for it.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly supports a review of the community services, including respite services, that are currently available for young people and adults with special needs after they leave school.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Members should take their ease for a few moments while we change the Chair.

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

*Motion made:*

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

## Adjournment

### Upgrade of the A2 in East Antrim

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately six minutes.

**Mr Ross:** It would have been more appropriate had Mr Beggs said that he was changing the Chair and emptying the Chamber, although there are more Members here than perhaps we are used to at Adjournment debates.

I congratulate Mr Danny Kennedy on his appointment as Minister for Regional Development. The Assembly found him to be a Minister who worked well with his Committee and this Chamber in his previous post. We hope that that continues, and we hope that he will be the bearer of some good news, particularly for those of us in east Antrim, at the end of this debate. We appreciate his attendance in the Chamber this afternoon. He will have many important decisions to take during this mandate, a number of which will be about road infrastructure. He has to take decisions on the controversial A5 project, which may be affected by the availability of finance from the Irish Republic. He has decisions to take on the A8 project in Larne, which is also in my constituency of East Antrim and which we are looking forward to seeing completed. He has some decisions to take on road improvements in north Antrim as well. Some of my colleagues have been saying that it is important that those are not forgotten about either.

Of course, there will also be decisions to take on the future of Northern Ireland Water — that is a huge piece of work for which he will have responsibility — and gritting policy. We do not want to see the same sorts of problems that we saw previously. However, I argue that the small 2.5 km stretch of road along the A2 should be high on his agenda as he takes over as Minister.

Not only is it an issue on which we need to see action taken — indeed, the upgrade is

desperately needed — but it is wanted by local representatives, residents and businesses and by anyone who has an interest in building better links to and from Carrickfergus. As a route leading to the glens that is used by tourists, it is strategically important for Northern Ireland. The A2 is a link between two large urban areas — Belfast and Carrickfergus — and many individuals use it to travel to and from work, so it is important for business and for those who work in Belfast and Carrickfergus. Of course, as the Minister will be aware, the bottleneck occurs when two lanes go into one and then back into two, creating all sorts of traffic chaos along that stretch of road. On particularly bad days, people are often caught in traffic delays for half an hour or 45 minutes, which, in the longer term, is not sustainable.

Only a month ago, we were drawing towards the end of what had been a long and intensive election campaign, and I am quite sure that candidates from all political parties who stood in East Antrim, particularly those who canvassed around Carrickfergus, Greenisland and Newtownabbey, had the A2 issue raised with them on numerous occasions and were asked to ensure that the Assembly took urgent action on the matter in the new mandate. In addition, before the election, Carrickfergus Borough Council launched a petition, which was signed by just under 3,000 people, calling for the A2 scheme to proceed immediately, and a collective from the council met the previous Minister on 14 March.

In earlier debates, I listened to people talking about manifesto pledges and about how they wanted to raise them at an early stage. For the DUP's part, we included this issue in our election literature for East Antrim, making sure that people knew that we had pledged our support for the scheme and would raise the matter at the earliest possible opportunity with the new Minister for Regional Development, whoever that might be. That is why I felt that it was important to secure this afternoon's Adjournment debate.

Of course, the debate about the upgrade has been ongoing for much longer than the election campaign, and I recall that the former Member for East Antrim, Mr Dickson's predecessor Sean Neeson, said that it was an issue when he was first elected to Carrickfergus Borough Council in the 1970s. I recall that, in the last mandate, Mr Robinson and Mr Hilditch described how King

Billy had had difficulty on the route, although the previous Minister was perhaps less appreciative of that story.

It is important to note that, since this was an issue with Carrickfergus Borough Council in the 1970s, the populations around Carrickfergus, Greenisland and Jordanstown have grown significantly and, therefore, traffic along that stretch of road has also grown significantly, to upwards of 30,000 vehicular movements a day. Consequently, what was a problem 30 or 40 years ago has since become a nightmare for commuters along the A2, particularly for those who use it early in the morning or after 5.00 pm.

There are problems associated with other roads. As commuters try to find an alternative route to avoid the bottleneck on the A2, traffic on Station Road and other smaller roads that were not built to deal with such volumes has increased. There is also increased pressure on the Doagh Road, Monkstown Road and Upper Road as a result of tailbacks on the A2 and people trying to find an alternative route, not to mention the fumes in Greenisland, where the tailbacks occur.

During the last mandate, orders were published and a public consultation was undertaken, and it is fair to say that there was an expectation among people in East Antrim that progress on the A2 upgrade was imminent. Sadly, people, particularly the MLAs, who were united on the issue, felt very let down because progress was not made. Constituents and businesses situated along the road or in business parks nearby that rely on the road to get to them want to see work begin and the project completed as soon as possible.

As I said, the Minister and the Department for Regional Development (DRD) are well aware of the issues surrounding the A2. I believe that they have plans in place, and they have already spent significant sums on the project. It seems to me that the problem in the last mandate was not so much whether the scheme was needed or, indeed, whether money was available for it; it was, rather, a political decision taken by the Minister, who decided for political reasons that he did not want to pursue the project. I hope that the new Minister will look closely at the project and decide whether it is needed based on need rather than on political reasoning.

It was interesting to note that, at the end of the previous mandate when a Budget settlement was reached, the Department for Regional

Development did significantly well. The Minister may disagree, but most observers think that the Department did well. Indeed, it was allocated an additional £107 million in the final settlement, and that seems to be more than enough money to complete the project. That is what we want to see.

I ask the Minister to detail the latest figure he has for the number of people who use the road, and how it compares to other schemes that are high on his agenda; the amount of money spent on the project to date in vesting land and everything else; and the amount of money that he believes it will take to complete the project over the mandate. I also ask him whether there are any other projects of this scale that he believes to be more significant or important than the A2 project.

I thank the Minister for his attendance this afternoon. I hope that he can provide us with some encouragement in his closing words. I hope that he understands the importance of this project for people in East Antrim and, in a wider context, across Northern Ireland, and that he shows a willingness to deliver the scheme for all of us.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank my fellow East Antrim MLA for raising this matter. The A2 widening scheme has been in the pipeline for decades. Carrickfergus has been one of the fastest growing towns in Northern Ireland over the past 30 years. However, the A2 between Carrickfergus and Belfast has not been completed to deal with the increased traffic.

There are four lanes of traffic for most of the route between Carrickfergus and Belfast. However, in the middle, there is a section of two lanes at Greenisland, which causes daily bottlenecks. Several decades ago, there were even plans to extend the M5 motorway to Carrickfergus, but that was replaced by early and unsuccessful attempts to gain planning permission for a four-lane road.

Removing the two-lane bottleneck at Greenisland was identified as one of the top five priorities in the Belfast metropolitan area plan. At present, the four-lane carriageway traffic merges into a single lane in each direction for the short section from the University of Ulster to Seapark. That affects commuters, businesses, tourists and all who travel from Belfast to Greenisland, Carrickfergus or Whitehead. Even Ballycarry and Islandmagee people use that route on occasions.

However, the need to upgrade the A2 is even more important than that. I have frequently seen emergency vehicles delayed and having to weave in and out of traffic congestion. That delay increases ambulance response times. The upgrade is even more important now that the local accident and emergency unit at Whiteabbey has closed and patients have to travel further to units either in Belfast or Antrim. The Carrickfergus PSNI response officers are now based in Newtownabbey. When police officers are caught up in congestion, it reduces their presence in Carrickfergus. If additional backup is required, there is a potential for delay, which could be critical.

Following the public inquiry into the present A2 widening scheme, DRD published its direction order and notice of intention to proceed in October 2008. Since that time, homes have been blighted and the Department has been forced to purchase some £12 million of property, perhaps even more by now. Drive along the A2 and you will see some homes boarded up. However, people must continue to live among that blighted property. In short, a sort of no-man's-land has been created by the Department, which indicated that it would proceed with building the road. Having served its direction order and notice of intention to proceed, there is surely an onus on the Department to go ahead. Indications had been made that the scheme would be completed during the 2011-15 period but, in January this year, the former Minister, Conor Murphy, announced his intention to put the project on hold. He favours the diversion of over 50% of DRD's capital roads budget to another road, the A5, which has not even gained planning permission.

Worse still, in a meeting with Carrickfergus Borough Council, which I attended, he even suggested that, because of the delay, property might be put on the market again or sold back. That is not good value for money. Surely the A2 scheme should be completed so that the £4 million spent on design and the £12 million spent on property purchase is not wasted.

### 3.00 pm

In the most recent Budget, which the Ulster Unionist Party voted against, the A2 upgrade was overlooked in favour of the A5. The A5 from Aghnacloy to Ballygawley carries 6,800 vehicles a day compared to the A2, which carries some 30,000 vehicles a day. The A2 has

four times the level of traffic; therefore it should receive the investment.

There is some confusion over the A2 funding. The Finance Minister said that he has given the funding for the A2 scheme, yet officials advised the Regional Development Committee last week that the A5 expenditure was ring-fenced in the Budget and no budget line was provided for the A2. I ask the Minister to clarify that issue. Is there a flexible budget line that allows the scheme to proceed by altering its priorities? I understand that it is one of the few schemes that has completed the planning process and which is ready to commence as soon as the Department gives approval.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** As this is the first debate in which the Assembly will hear from Mr Stewart Dickson, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

**Mr Dickson:** I thank Mr Alastair Ross for providing us with the opportunity to have this Adjournment debate, and I note that the Minister is present to hear Members' comments. This reminds me of a meeting of Carrickfergus Borough Council because a number of its former and current members are in the Chamber, and we have heard many of the arguments many times over. However, perhaps some will be heard for the first time in this place.

Some of my colleagues referred to the last 25 years, but I can take the House back to 1964 when a previous Minister of Home Affairs stood, I presume, in this place and announced the extension of the M5 to Carrickfergus. However, it still has not happened, nor has the A2 or the downgraded proposal from 1969 to provide a dual carriageway. In fact, the M5 extension is partly why I stand here today because it was one of the many reasons that brought me into community activism. It was proposed that the M5 would cut Greenisland estate in two, but that plan, which was rather ill conceived, fell by the wayside.

We urgently need the development of the A2 for all the reasons that colleagues mentioned and for others that I will outline to the Assembly today. By 1969, the road was downgraded from a motorway to a dual carriageway. It is important that this road be developed for us in the East Antrim area.

I pay tribute to my colleague Sean Neeson and to other Members from East Antrim who spent many years campaigning for the road and for money to be put in place for the road to be constructed.

A miserable blow was dealt to the people of East Antrim earlier this year when the previous Minister Conor Murphy decided that he would not proceed with the development of the route. I look forward to the Minister giving us the up-to-date figures for the cost of the road, but some £16 million and rising has been spent on fees, on the purchase of properties and on development to date. That does not take into account previous attempts to widen the road and previous amounts of money having been spent on the development by predecessor Departments.

The benefits of the road have been widely set out; nevertheless, the House needs to be reminded of them. Mr Beggs referred to Whiteabbey Hospital.

With the downgrading of accident and emergency services in the area, speedy access through Carrickfergus, Greenisland, Jordanstown and beyond, primarily to either the Belfast or Antrim hospitals, is essential for residents and citizens. To date, we have had some 25 years of frustration and money wasted on the project. It would be a shame if the Minister did not proceed with the expenditure as soon as possible.

The route continues to hold back business development in that part of East Antrim. It thwarts the development of small and medium-sized enterprises, and I find that disgraceful. Moreover, and there are figures to back this up, it has, despite the economic downturn, added further pressures to domestic prices in the greater Carrickfergus and Jordanstown areas and beyond. Quite simply, people have determined that they do not wish to live in the area because of the regular misery of the morning commute, either to get children to school or to take people to work and beyond.

The wider tourist impact on the route must also be considered. The A2 forms the gateway to the Antrim coast and glens, the Giant's Causeway and beyond. It takes people past Carrickfergus Castle.

All the aforementioned are being held back because of the Department's failure so far to give the green light to upgrading the route.

Public transport in the area must also be mentioned. It is not, for example, possible to maximise and optimise express bus services. Many towns in Northern Ireland from which people commute into Belfast daily have good express bus services, but a bus cannot be expressed through a bottleneck. There is no alternative. If the road were to be widened, it would be possible to maximise bus services in the area. Members may say, "Why not use the trains?", but the trains are maxed out. Park-and-ride facilities are overflowing, and people regularly stand in trains. It is important that the route be developed as quickly as possible.

I invite the Minister to come and join me and colleagues from East Antrim on a section of the A2 between 7.30 am and 10.00 am or between 3.30 pm and 7.00 pm. If he does, he will see for himself the absolute gridlock that is caused from the University of Ulster right through to Seapark, Carrickfergus and beyond. I urge the Minister to reconsider his predecessor's decision and put in place the finance to develop the road for the benefit of all citizens, not only of East Antrim but much further afield.

**Mr Hilditch:** If Stewart is right about 3.30 pm, we are all going to be stuck on the road tonight again, so I may push on.

I thank Mr Ross for tabling the topic and securing the Adjournment debate. I also welcome the Minister along to provide his input. Unfortunately, the Adjournment debate does not reflect some new topic or subject but raises once again the very frustrating and, for some, very controversial issue of the A2. That is the Seapark to Silverstream section on the Shore Road between Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey.

Notwithstanding the issue of King Billy, which formed part of the debate last year, it is frustrating for the many users who have to endure the difficult commute twice a day, as they make their way to work and back, and for visitors to the area, who really cannot believe that their journey has been brought to a standstill, having already negotiated the city and all that that brings.

It is frustrating, too, for the local politicians who have raised the matter regularly through debates, meetings, questions, Committee meetings and delegations here in Stormont since devolution, or indeed for the many delegations that have been to see devolved and direct rule Ministers over the past 40 to 50 years.

The A2 has now entered the realms of controversy. There have been a number of false dawns in recent years, and it sometimes seems that, after making a number of forward steps, we are suddenly placed in reverse mode, which may depend on a new Minister's outlook or on new circumstances beyond our control. The A2 is also controversial because we have spent £16 million to date on planning costs, compensation, public inquiries, geotechnical investigations and archaeological digs, all to be in a state of readiness to go. We have uprooted a whole community in preparation to proceed, with many homes now vacated and boarded up on that particular section of the A2.

How must former residents feel as they pass their previous homes? Indeed, how does it look to the many visitors who are guided on to the Causeway coastal route from the M2? What impression does it create as visitors begin their journey on what is being promoted as the world-famous coastal route only to be met with the blight of dereliction caused by a government Department bringing a halt to the process?

The former Sinn Féin Minister may have had a different political agenda and set of priorities, though he assured us that he would return to the A2 at some stage. Today, because of the state of readiness of the project and the difficulties facing other schemes, that stage must now be reached. Once again, we have come through an election. From canvassing at doorsteps and meetings, I know that the one issue that unites all of us in East Antrim is the A2. Other topics were raised, but the A2 is the one that stands out above all others. Given that records indicate that there are in the region of 30,000 vehicular movements in the two-way traffic flow on the road daily, that does not come as much of a surprise.

There are other areas of infrastructure that affect people's lives and should impact on joined-up government as well as decision-making. When local people are being told that they must use hospitals outside the area, that Whiteabbey police station is the nearest full-time police station, that ambulance journey times are being reviewed and when it is rumoured that third-level education is to be relocated to Belfast, the A2 enters the overall equation. Central government cannot have their cake and eat it. When those services are relocated to other areas, the infrastructure — in this case, roads — must be improved to help



with the impact that those decisions have on people's lives. Hopefully, on this occasion, DRD can step up to the mark.

The A2 in its current state affects people from the local communities who go to work in the greater Belfast area and also has an impact on local businesses, as was outlined by Mr Dickson. The opportunity to promote investment in the area is also hampered by this major infrastructure issue. It is right up there when decisions are taken on future investment. We recently lost a major freight company from the area, and, although the A2 was not the primary reason, it was a continual problem for that company and made its decision to move outside East Antrim much easier.

Minister, as we enter the new mandate, let us give the people of East Antrim some hope. In previous mandates, that community has been very tolerant on the issue. However, people have had their hopes built up and let down again. Although there appear to be difficulties with other previously prioritised schemes in Northern Ireland, let us also be mindful of the construction industry, which sees a scheme prepared and ready to go. This should be a quick win for everyone. Again, I thank the Member for the opportunity of the Adjournment debate, and I look forward to the Minister's response, having noted answers to tabled questions already.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. As this is the first debate in which the Assembly will hear from Mr Jim Allister, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

**Mr Allister:** Mr Deputy Speaker, I am very grateful for your protection. As a wholly non-controversial and inoffensive person, I probably do not need that protection but am grateful for it nonetheless. On reflection, if I could bank it for another occasion, it might be of more benefit to me.

The A2 is one of those issues that has a ramification way beyond East Antrim. I have been familiar with the issue for many years, going back to when I was first in this House between 1982 and 1986. I remember it being debated and the case being made vehemently for it. I did not know until today, however, that we can thank Mr Dickson for the fact that we do not have a motorway to Carrickfergus. I did not know that his political activism destroyed that prospect in the 1960s.

For decade upon decade, the case for the extension and, effectively, the completion of a dual carriageway from Carrickfergus has been made logically, objectively and necessarily. From the time that I represented that town as part of the greater North Antrim constituency in the 1980s until now, that need has gone unmet and encountered so many disappointments that it is unbelievable. Judged by the objective criteria of volume of traffic, hazards created, delays imposed and the sheer misery through which users are put, there can hardly be a more deserving road scheme in the whole of Northern Ireland than the A2. Well, almost hardly: there is the A26, and maybe in a moment I will return to that, if I am permitted.

### 3.15 pm

However, the A2 is one of those schemes that, when one looks at it, it is impossible to contrive of reasons and arguments why it has not been concluded. That makes all the worse the fact that it has to be raised again. Of course, it has to be raised again because, in the previous Assembly, we had one of the most outrageous political decisions — not a roads decision by any stretch of the imagination — to prioritise all the substantive expenditure on roads into a political project, the A5, and thereby starve and strangle projects such as the A2 and the A26.

If Minister Kennedy does nothing else in office, he needs to redress and reverse that iniquitous decision that was taken by his predecessor. He needs to very swiftly put down a marker that decisions on road schemes in this Province will be made on the basis of need, not of politics, and will be decided on the basis of meeting infrastructural needs, community needs, health needs and road objective figures needs, not by a desire to build some sort of motorway from Donegal to Dublin to make a political infrastructural point. If the Minister wants to go down in history as a Minister who made his mark and was prepared to make solid, reliable and defensible decisions, he needs to grasp the nettle of the A5 and face the fact that it is an unsustainable project. There is no point in perpetuating it through ongoing public inquiries that will tighten the noose on the public purse. He needs to address the issue of the A5, and, in doing so, he will free the money that is necessary to deal with the A2 and with the other deserving cause, namely the development of the dualling of the A26 north of Glarryford. In comparative terms, the traffic volume figures

are unanswerable, yet a cruel political decision was taken to park that project, just as was taken with the A2.

So, my message to the Minister is to grasp those nettles and, in doing so, show himself to be worthy of the office that he holds. Let us see a reversal and a return to the making of those decisions on a proper and defensible basis. With that plea, I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. As this is the first debate in which the Assembly will hear from Mr Oliver McMullan, I remind the House that it is convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

**Mr McMullan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This may go down as one of the shortest maiden speeches that you have heard; I do not intend to go on for as long as some other Members. I totally agree that we need to get the money for the A2. However, since I came in to the Chamber, I have not heard any mention of the 40% deficit in the budget. I look forward to what the Minister has to say about how we can find that money.

I totally agree with other Members who have spoken that the road needs to be upgraded because of all the relevant benefits to health, education, the emergency services and tourism. The area that I represent on the Antrim coast road was promised money in the past for tourism. We never got it and it is still in abeyance. That road needs to be upgraded so that we get our fair share of tourism. Also, the industry needs to be brought back into the East Antrim area. So, Minister, I look forward to what you have to say. I cannot say any more except that I support all that has been said in here today, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

**Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development):** I am grateful for the opportunity in what is — I hope that I am correct — the first Adjournment debate of the new mandate to respond to Members on the possible upgrading of the A2 in East Antrim. I thank Mr Ross and, indeed, all contributors to the debate. I notice the attendance of the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development. I welcome Mr Spratt to his place.

We have had an interesting debate. By my reckoning, Mr Speaker, we had three maidens, all of whom were male. There was reference

to, and a degree of blame towards, the old Stormont of the 1960s or, as some Members remembered, King William, who processed in those very parts. As I am not from East Antrim, I know more about King William at Scarva and, indeed, when he stopped at a watering hole in Newry on his way to a memorable victory. However, it is important that we bring things up to date.

I note Members' comments. I welcome the opportunity to debate issues that relate to proposed improvement works on the A2 between Belfast and Carrickfergus at Shore Road, Greenisland. As Members will know from the previous mandate, the matter was the topic of an Adjournment debate almost a year ago on 8 June 2010. In addition to remarks that I will make, I have asked my officials to take note and to study the Hansard report, so that if I do not pick up on particular points, I can write to Members following the debate.

The A2 between Belfast and Carrickfergus is an important link between those two urban centres, and it varies considerably in standards and characteristics along its length. In particular, there is a 2.5 km section of single carriageway at Greenisland between Jordanstown and Seapark, which is inconsistent with the otherwise continuous provision of two lanes in each direction between Carrickfergus and the M5 at Whiteabbey. That section has limited provision for pedestrians, with parts of the footway less than 1m wide at particular points.

That section carries approximately 26,000 vehicles each day; that answers one point that was raised by Mr Hilditch and Mr Beggs. It is a source of significant delays during peak hours in the mornings and evenings. As I said, although I am not from the area, I listen to Radio Ulster's traffic reports and hear that section of road mentioned almost daily.

The Belfast metropolitan transport plan, published in November 2004, identified the Greenisland section of the A2 as a bottleneck on the Belfast metropolitan area's strategic network. The regional transport strategy, published in 2002, affirmed the need to address bottlenecks on strategic highways as one of its priorities. In response, Roads Service has developed proposals for a new dual carriageway on the A2 at the Shore Road, Greenisland, between the Shore Avenue access to the University of Ulster at Jordanstown and

Seapark. The scheme includes the online widening of the existing road between Shore Avenue and Station Road, Greenisland, to create an urban dual carriageway with a new offline dual carriageway from Station Road to Seapark. The scheme also provides for improved junctions at Shore Avenue, the access to the university, and at Shorelands, Station Road and Seapark. Access to individual properties will be on a left-in/left-out only basis with turning facilities provided at the new junctions.

The design of the scheme has been under way since 2005, when consultants were appointed to develop and progress a preferred scheme through statutory procedures. Throughout the course of the scheme development, my Department has sought to ensure that those who are directly affected by the scheme, the general public and elected representatives have been kept fully informed of progress. A public inquiry was held in October 2007 with the inspector's report into the public inquiry published in September 2008.

On consideration of the inspector's recommendations, my Department published the direction order and notice of intention to proceed in October 2008. Since then, work has continued on the scheme development. A detailed geotechnical investigation contract to determine the ground conditions was completed in 2009, and an advance archaeological investigation contract was completed in 2010. No significant archaeological finds were uncovered, even in relation to King William.

Consultations with affected landowners to finalise and agree accommodation works were also substantially completed in 2010. My Department is, therefore, in a position to complete the final statutory vesting order as soon as finance becomes available. The compulsory purchase of land for the scheme is currently valued at £17 million. My Department's Road Service has acquired 25 residential properties under blight legislation. A number of those properties have been demolished in order that they do not become derelict and vandalised. Any surplus land or property not required for the scheme will be declared surplus and disposed of on the open market. That is normally carried out upon completion of the scheme. However, my Department's Road Service is considering early disposal of some properties in order to minimise security and maintenance issues associated with them. In

the meantime, every effort is being made to secure and maintain all acquired properties.

In 2010, tender contract documents were drawn up. The pre-qualification competition was carried out, and, in December 2010, a select list of contractors was identified. However, on consideration of the 2011-15 budget, the procurement process was stopped.

Mr Ross made reference to my Department's budget allocation and appeared to indicate that I had, perhaps, shedloads of money. As we enter this new term in office, I recognise that we are all faced with the challenges that a reduction of two fifths in the Executive's overall capital funding brings. I believe that that is especially so for my Department in relation to infrastructure investment. Initial impressions may suggest to you that Roads Service has received a significant capital allocation, with just under £1.2 billion allocated to capital spend over the four-year Budget 2010 period. However, two thirds of that, almost £800 million, as Members have indicated, is at present allocated to two major road schemes, namely the A5 Londonderry to Aghnacloy road and the A8 Belfast to Larne dual carriageway.

Members will be aware that the public inquiry into the A5 proposals is in progress. On receipt of the independent inspector's report and recommendations, I propose to examine planned expenditure on the A5 and the A8, together with a range of other projects across the strategic roads programme.

Of the remaining capital funding in the four-year period, only minimal levels of funding are available for other schemes, particularly in the middle two years. That makes it particularly difficult to start any other scheme until near the end of the Budget period. In fact, only relatively minor upgrades of the A32 to improve access to the new hospital at Enniskillen are possible prior to that time.

Following the draft Budget consultation, over £60 million of additional funding was received for major road projects in year 4 of the Budget period. That has not been ring-fenced and will be considered for a range of competing priorities. However, commencement of schemes in this year will be dependent on funding made available beyond the current Budget period. Schemes such as the A2 Shore Road tend to take more than one year in construction, and funding in year 5, and possibly beyond, would

be required before I could give approval for construction to commence. The funding in those years will not become clearer until further work has been completed to develop the third edition of the investment strategy for Northern Ireland, which, I understand, is due to conclude later this year.

I have also received numerous invitations to meet a wide range of bodies and elected members interested in progressing strategic road improvement schemes across Northern Ireland. I will use those as an opportunity to listen to opinions from across the Province before forming a view on the way forward.

That will coincide with the work being undertaken to develop the investment strategy beyond this Budget period.

### **3.30 pm**

I will turn briefly to Members' comments. I understand the strength of feeling on this issue, which is, I think, shared by all the political representatives for East Antrim and, indeed, wider afield, as we heard. I understand the economic benefits that such a scheme would provide. I want to look closely at my Department's spending priorities. Reference has been made to the A5, which will be the subject of an Assembly debate early next week that will undoubtedly attract interest. I listened to the representations made here today, particularly the strong advice from the Member for North Antrim Mr Allister.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Will the Minister bring his remarks to a close, please?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am content to carefully consider all of the issues. I would like to see improvements across the strategic road network to enhance safety, to reduce journey times and to provide value for money. I will give active consideration to the exploration of opportunities for bringing forward schemes such as the A2 project at Shore Road/Greenisland.

*Adjourned at 3.32 pm.*





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