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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 7 June 2011

*The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair).*

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Private Members' Business

### A5 Dual Carriageway

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. The first item of business is the motion on the A5 dual carriageway project. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour 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 the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

A valid petition of concern was presented on 6 June in relation to the motion, and a valid petition of concern was presented on 6 June in relation to the amendment. Therefore, I remind Members that the effect of the petitions is that the votes on the motion and the amendment will be on a cross-community basis.

**Mr Doherty:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly supports the A5 dual carriageway project; recognises that it is essential to the economic regeneration of the north-west region; welcomes the financial commitment made by the Irish Government; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to give an assurance that there will be no dilution of the project, or delay in its completion.*

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I would like the debate to be constructive and supportive of the motion. I say that at the outset because I have noticed a tendency among some MLAs who, while supporting the building of dual carriageways or motorways in their own constituencies, which, of course, they have every right to do, snipe at or undermine the proposed A5 dual carriageway project. If a

motorway project is viable in any constituency, the project should be argued on its merits and not by making undermining references to proposals in other constituencies, particularly with regard to the A5 dual carriageway project.

I am also mindful that, while we are having this debate today, a public inquiry is under way in various locations along the proposed route of the A5 dual carriageway. The public inquiry is scheduled to conclude in the autumn. I attended that inquiry to represent residents who will be affected by the proposed dual carriageway. In previous weeks and months, I made representation for various farmers who would also be affected. While standing up for their rights as individuals, I also made it clear that I was totally supportive of the plans for the A5 western transport corridor.

I am aware that some of my colleagues who will speak in the debate will want to cover the historical situation that left Counties Fermanagh, Donegal and Tyrone without any rail or motorway network. I want to focus, not so much on the long-term history, but on the more recent history in bringing the proposal forward.

In July 2007, the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) noted the Irish Government's intention to make available a contribution of £400 million to help fund the major road works programme in the North, providing dual-carriageway-standard routes to serve the north-west gateway and, on the eastern seaboard corridor, between Belfast and Larne. The Executive confirmed their agreement in principle to taking these two major road projects forward. The two Governments then agreed the following milestones for the A5 western transport corridor project: the preferred corridor was announced in late 2008; the announcement of the preferred route was made in mid-2009; and the draft statutory Orders and environmental statement were published in late 2010.

The North/South Ministerial Council subsequently agreed a further schedule of milestones and anticipated payments from the Irish Government to the Consolidated Fund. The Council agreed an A5 western transport corridor project management structure, which set up a cross-border steering group, an A5 technical group and an A5 project team. The cross-border group reports regularly to the North/South Ministerial Council transport sector and plenary meetings.

In November 2007, Roads Service appointed consultants. It then moved forward with a novel idea of the selected procurement process, which adopted an early contractor involvement. That brought the contractors' procurement phase of the project ahead of the statutory procedures process, thus removing about nine months from the overall project delivery time frame. It also allowed the contractors to provide valuable input to the design, and to provide advice and costs on construction-related issues.

I wish to relay to the House the strategic and policy context framework that advised this project as we moved forward. The long-term vision for transportation in 'Shaping Our Future', the regional development strategy 2015 is:

*"To have a modern, sustainable, safe transportation system which benefits society, the economy and the environment and which actively contributes to social inclusion and everyone's quality of life."*

Other strategic documents have also projected visions: the regional transportation strategy 2002-2012; the regional strategic transport framework transport plan 2015; the Programme for Government and the investment strategy; and the investment delivery plan for roads. The Programme for Government and the investment strategy were agreed by the Executive at their first Programme for Government and associated Budget meeting in 2008. They also endorsed a revised 10-year investment strategy covering the period 2008-2018. Very clearly in the middle of that was the proposal to upgrade the A5 western transport dual carriageway to a very modern standard.

I have quite deliberately gone through all of the mechanisms that led to this proposal. I also clearly anchored it in joint decisions that were made by the Executive and the Irish Government and in what is contained in the Programme for Government and the strategic investment strategy. I did all that because it is a huge project that highlights, as its main objectives,

the need for improvements in road safety, in the road network in the North and in North/South links, and the need for a reduction in journey times along the A5 western transport corridor. It also highlights the need for increased overtaking opportunities for motorists along the route, and for the final proposal to be developed in light of safety, economic, environmental integration and accessibility considerations.

The issue of safety is a huge one —

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Member for giving way. For the purposes of clarification, does the Member accept that the A5 dual carriageway was not included in the regional transportation strategy or the regional strategic transport network transport plan?

**Mr Doherty:** No, I do not accept that. The project was very much part of the Programme for Government. It was also part of the ongoing dialogue in the House and between the Executive and the Irish Government.

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

**Mr Doherty:** I am very conscious of time, so I will hold on until I get towards the end of my contribution.

The issue of safety is crucial along the existing A5, where there have been many accidents and fatalities.

All of those issues are important. However, the major plus in all of this is that, by working together in the House and with the Executive working with the Irish Government through the North/South Ministerial Council, we were able to procure an agreement to build the road. More crucially, we were able to obtain an agreement by the Irish Government to pay £400 million, which is approximately half the required money and which, in the current economic climate, cannot be sneezed at.

Before my time runs out, I want to say that this is an enormous project which the Executive and the Irish Government have brought forward together.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Bring your remarks to a close.

**Mr Doherty:** Any proposal coming to the House to undermine the project at this late stage should be rejected.

**Lord Morrow:** I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after “supports” and insert

*“the upgrading of the existing A5; recognises that it is essential to the economic regeneration of the north-west region; welcomes the financial commitment made by the Irish Government; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to consider all alternatives to the current proposed scheme.”*

At the outset, I must say that the proposal is turning out to be one of the most controversial pieces of road that is ever likely to be constructed in this region of the United Kingdom. However, no matter how controversial it might be, the present Minister for Regional Development has a very simple decision to make. Many people have said many things and committed their parties to many positions. Mr Kennedy is in the unique position that all his colleagues — some present, some past and, perhaps, some in the future — have stated categorically that there is no need for this road under any circumstances. We all heard that. The issue was quite the subject of debate during the election campaign, and what Members said during that campaign makes very interesting reading. I have no doubt that Mr Kennedy will avail himself of all the information about the proposed new road, particularly that highlighted by his colleagues, such as how unnecessary it is and how it will involve the unnecessary expenditure of up to £1 billion, and their claims that that money could be spent on much better things. Indeed, the Ulster Unionist Party said that it is not one of its priorities.

#### 10.45 am

I also read in the paper just this week that Mr Elliott will no longer tolerate anybody in his party stepping out of line. Mr Kennedy, you had better beware: if you step out of line on this one, you will be slinging your hook, your days as Minister will be over, and you will be kicking a stone down the road saying: “What an unfortunate remark I made then.”

We do not need this debate because the decisions have already been made by the different parties. The present deputy — I was going to say Prime Minister, but that is not quite right — First Minister has already said that no matter what comes out of the public inquiry — and this is democracy at work, by the way — this road is going ahead.

Mr Elliott has said that there is absolutely no need for the road. Mr Kennedy, I hope that you are listening because you should by now be able to come to this House to tell us categorically that this road is not going ahead; there is no need for it; it is an unnecessary squandering of nearly £1 billion.

We were told by others that this was a clever trick hatched up at St Andrews. They had nothing to do and they all went behind the closet and came up with the idea of making a dual carriageway from Aughnacloy to New Buildings. Let us see whether that stands up to scrutiny.

Lord Laird, in another place, asked:

*“whether the St Andrews agreement included agreement to build a new road of any type from the Irish border to Londonderry”.*

Lord Shutt of Greetland answered:

*“The St Andrews agreement did not include an agreement about building such a road.”*

That is another fox shot. Those who try to tell us that this was a secret deal that was done at St Andrews now know that it was no such thing; it was never even discussed at St Andrews. Indeed, the whole thing has become a joke.

We could go on and on quoting people. Billy Armstrong, a former Member, also had something to say about the A5. On 18 January 2011, he said that the former Regional Development Minister showed continued support for the hugely expensive A5 project and asked why the Minister felt it more important for a commuter from the Republic to have a speedy journey to Londonderry than to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland had an adequate water supply. Mr Armstrong went on to suggest that Minister Murphy put the needs of the Republic before the needs of the people of Northern Ireland. Another Member from another constituency said that there was no need for it.

Mr Beggs is also on record as saying that there is no need for the project. I do not know what Mr Beggs knows about Aughnacloy, Ballygawley or Omagh, but he seems to have good knowledge of them because he was emphatic that there was no need for this road.

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member accept that I said that there was no need for the quality that is being proposed for a virtual motorway in that

area but that there will be a need to upgrade certain aspects of the road?

**Lord Morrow:** I will tell you what you did say, Mr Beggs, since you accuse me of misquoting you. Mr Beggs said that the Minister was:

*“charging ahead with a wildly expensive and controversial scheme to turn a relatively lightly trafficked road in Tyrone into virtually a motorway ... I strongly suspect that the Minister wishes the A5 to progress regardless of the cost, for political rather than economic reasons.”*

I suspect that you will give the present Minister the same advice: that there is no need for this road. Now that you have given that advice, I am certain that the Minister's officials will take on board everything that has been said.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you too have knowledge of this because this matter came before Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council some 18 to 20 months ago for debate. At that time, there were those of us who stated categorically where we stood on this matter. There were those who tried to misrepresent us during the election campaign and tried to say that we were the cheerleaders for a new A5. Let me make it very clear: I want to see an upgrade in the west. We have the A4, which has just been constructed and has been an asset to the west of the Province. I want to see the upgrading of roads in the west, but I do not believe that the Department has got it right on this.

For instance, the upgrade of the A4 also took in a section of the A5. For those who are not totally familiar with the area, I am talking about the section from Aghnacloy to Ballygawley. Most of that road has already been upgraded as a result of the work that was done on the A4, and it is working very effectively. Roads Service engineers, who are the experts, tell us continually that there is no justification — no justification — for a new section of road from Aghnacloy to Ballygawley because the traffic count does not justify it. That is from the mouths of the experts; they are saying that that should not be done. Is it not ridiculous that even though the A4 has just been finished and most of the road from Aghnacloy to Ballygawley upgraded, we are going to get a further upgrade, with a section of road that will lie parallel to that?

I implore the Minister to get out on site. I know that he comes from a rural constituency and has an interest in the welfare of rural dwellers

and farmers. I urge him to come out on site and take a look at what has been proposed, because it cannot be justified by anybody's standards. The Minister is in the unique position of being able to do something.

There is a political agenda at work from those opposite, but let him step up to the plate and demonstrate very clearly where he stands in relation to the proposal. Let him do so with his colleagues Mr Elliott and Mr Donaldson, who is not here but who had much to say about this road proposal when it was time to go round the doors. He put statements in the local press which, in many cases, were false. Some of us were never given the opportunity to answer them. Had the same gentleman taken the time to do some research and check out where certain MLAs and councillors stood on the issue, he would have got a very clear message. We want to see an upgrading and we believe that the west is entitled to a good road infrastructure. We will continue to campaign for that, but it is patently obvious that there is no justification whatsoever for the proposals.

**Mr Allister:** I have listened with interest to what the Member has said, and I welcome his affirmation of approval for an upgrade but opposition to the type of programme proposed.

Will the Member explain how we got to this point? The Member's Ministers sit on the North/South Ministerial Council and the Executive. Both of those bodies at the least acquiesced to, if not actively approved, the proposals. So, is the Member not making a Jekyll and Hyde presentation when he seeks to distance himself from those aspects of the proposals that he does not approve of even though his Ministers, one of whom is sitting beside him, approved them in their entirety?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Sorry, Lord Morrow, your 10 minutes are up, and there is no extra time for addressing the intervention.

**Lord Morrow:** So I cannot answer that scurrilous remark?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Not at this point in time, but I am sure that you will get an opportunity to do so later.

**Lord Morrow:** It was totally inaccurate.

**Mr Spratt (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development):** It is normal that the Chair of a Committee speaks on a subject



that falls within the remit of that Committee, and I speak as the Chair of the Committee for Regional Development.

The A5 route from New Buildings to Aughnacloy, along with the dualling of the A8 from Belfast to Larne, represents the major capital project in the Department, with a combined budget of £400 million, which is almost 80% of the overall capital budget. It is, therefore, a hugely significant proposal. It is unfortunate that the motion has come before the House at such an early juncture in the new Assembly mandate, due both to the fact that the Committee has not had an opportunity to scrutinise the proposal and the fact that the matter is the subject of a public inquiry.

The Committee will not receive a briefing on the Department's capital spend programme until 29 June, although I doubt that the Committee's position will be established at that point. As a scrutiny Committee, we need to be aware of all of the arguments. I also feel that, as a Committee, we need to be cautious that our deliberations on the matter do not indirectly interfere with or influence the process of the public inquiry. I have no doubt that the Committee will deliberate on the matter over the coming months but, collectively, we agreed that it was too soon for the Committee to offer an opinion.

For those reasons, the Committee agreed at its last meeting that I should advise the House that the Committee for Regional Development reserves judgement on the matter at this stage. With those brief comments —

**Lord Morrow:** Before the Member sits down, I want to deal with the point that Mr Allister made. I suspect that Mr Allister is aware that a Minister draws up his own priorities, not the Executive. That is why we are imploring the Minister to draw up his priorities. We are asking him whether this matter is one of his priorities. We recognise that it was one of Mr Murphy's priorities, but the torchlight now moves to Mr Kennedy, who now has to draw up his priorities, and we will wait and see whether the A5 proposal is one of them.

**Mr Beggs:** I support the amendment. As others have said, there is an ongoing inquiry into the A5. Therefore, the motion that there should be no alteration whatsoever is certainly ill-timed and, at worst, foolhardy. We are in much changed economic times since July 2007, when the current extravagant A5 proposal emerged. Given those

new factors, the Assembly, the Executive, the Department for Regional Development and the Minister would be wise to take all those changes into consideration before coming to a final conclusion.

Four years ago, there was a commitment, following the St Andrews Agreement, for £400 million from the Republic of Ireland to invest in our roads infrastructure. I believe that there was also £200 million from the Chancellor. I am not sure whether many people considered at that time that the proposal that has emerged was the one that would have emerged — the construction of a virtual motorway. It is just off motorway standard, lacking hard shoulders, on what is a relatively lightly used road. There are sections of it that carry around 13,000 vehicles a day, but there are other sections that carry 6,800 vehicles a day.

We have to appreciate that some of the traffic will be local: people going to a local school or shop. Even when the new road is built, people may not actually use it because they want to use a local road that is more convenient, given the limited on/off options that will be available. What level of traffic will the new road carry in places?

In settling on the design for the new road, there is a huge question about the quality standard that was set and its appropriateness for this day and age. There is considerable opposition from farmers, landowners, environmentalists and even transport groups. Who was managing that process over the past four years in the Executive? There have been regular North/South transport sectoral meetings, where I understand there is joint decision-making, and we have a Finance Minister. We are talking about a nearly £1 billion scheme, so it is rather strange that some are deciding that it was nothing to do with them and that it was forced on us by the Regional Development Minister.

Others in the Executive, particularly the Finance Minister and those who attended the North/South group meetings, have a responsibility for the decisions they agreed. It would also be interesting to know what has actually been agreed in the budget. Who voted for the budget? Is this a ring-fenced budget line? I understand that it is. What has been agreed? We have to assess where we are today and decide what is best for Northern Ireland. I have to say that I

was shocked when I viewed the road with the Agriculture Committee.

### 11.00 am

It is not an east-west issue. The scheme means that work on many roads throughout Northern Ireland will not be able to proceed in the next four-year period. The Dungiven bypass and the extension of the M2 between Randalstown and Toome will serve the west. Indeed, those roads will serve more traffic than what is being proposed. The haulage industry is concerned about the roads in those areas because they cause delays that affect the economy. We need to think collectively about what will be good for Northern Ireland plc.

**Mr McGlone:** Thanks to the Member for giving way. Does the Member accept that the rest of those schemes, although crucial to the region's infrastructure in their own right, do not have a £400 million subvention from the Irish Government?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member will have an extra minute.

**Mr Beggs:** When you go into TK Maxx, you do not buy everything because it is half price. You have to decide what you lose when you spend your money. We have to decide what the Northern Ireland economy will lose. Tom Wilson of the Freight Transport Association said:

*"We have little money to spend at the moment."*

He applauds the A5 project, but only when we can justify the expenditure:

*"Let us leave that project until we can justify improving those hot spots."*

He wants to improve the hot spots that cost the economy money first.

We ought to look at the timing and quality of the new road. Is a flyover needed when relatively few cars go up and down sections of that road? The move to a motorway standard will greatly inconvenience the local community, who will have to travel considerably further to cross the road. That will cause problems.

**Ms Ritchie:** I thank Mr Beggs for giving way. Does the Member not accept the need for a greater strategic road vision on the island of Ireland to facilitate greater access for all local and national commuters? Does he not accept that the proposal was contained in the Irish

Government's national development plan and promoted by the then Taoiseach as a means of not only facilitating access but upgrading the infrastructure and providing greater North/South economic co-operation?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Time is up.

**Mr Byrne:** As a resident of west Tyrone and an Assembly Member for the West Tyrone constituency, I am happy to support the motion brought forward by Mr Pat Doherty MLA.

The people of west Tyrone and, indeed, the counties of Derry and Tyrone have waited for such a road for a long time. Why? The A5 is a strategic route. Many years ago, it was classified as a Trans-European Network by the European Commission in a structural funds common chapter document. The north-west of Ireland is a geographic and economic region identified primarily by the counties of Tyrone, Derry and Donegal. The region, therefore, straddles the border. Face-to-face development of infrastructure is required to enable future economic and social development for the people who live there.

When the railway through Tyrone was closed in 1964, a long time ago, the then Government promised that a motorway would be built to link the western part of the North to the rest of Northern Ireland. That never happened. At long last, we have reached the stage of having a major proposal for road transport infrastructure. Let us not jeopardise it.

Road traffic volumes have increased a lot since then, and there are at least 11,000 vehicles a day on that route.

**Mr Beggs:** Does the Member accept that 6,800 vehicles a day use the road between Aghnacloy and Ballygawley, that that figure has fallen considerably since the construction traffic from Tyrone to Dublin has decreased and that considerably fewer vehicles are using that section of the road?

**Mr Byrne:** I accept that fact, but it does not take away from the strategic nature of the route. It is a national all-island strategic transport route.

As I said, road traffic volumes have increased enormously since 1964. The proposed A5 western transport corridor, at long last, offers an opportunity to redress the regional imbalance in roads and transport infrastructure in Northern Ireland and, indeed, in the context of Ireland

as a whole. The people in my constituency of West Tyrone are delighted that the Irish Government have recognised the strategic nature of the road, given that Donegal, part of their jurisdiction, has been cut off for a long time. The Irish Government have agreed to put in £400 million towards the overall cost of the programme involving the A8 and A5, the two major road projects. That is very welcome.

**Mr McGlone:** I thank the Member for giving way. I do not like to hear negative comments from people saying that they are going to refuse an investment of £400 million in a road of such major significance as the A5. Nevertheless, does the Member accept that, rather than having diminished construction traffic on the road, we would like more construction traffic? Does he accept that this project will lead to a significant increase in jobs in the area and sustain existing jobs in that sector?

**Mr Byrne:** I agree with the Member. The construction industry and the road quarrying industry are crying for projects at the moment. We want a kick-start to the local economy, particularly in the construction industry. Hundreds of jobs would be created immediately by the construction of the A5.

The project is also vital for road safety reasons. In the 10 years from 1999 to 2009, there were over 30 fatal collisions on the road, and there were 33 deaths. Two names spring to mind. Mr John Finlay, the founder of John Finlay (Engineering) Ltd, was killed in a passing manoeuvre near Kelly's Inn many years ago. More recently, a young man from Strabane, lorry driver Declan Harvey, was killed near Victoria Bridge. Those men represent the human cost of the death trap that is the A5 at present.

The road haulage industry finds great difficulty in getting road freight to the seaports of Larne, Belfast and Dublin on a timed schedule. That is because, effectively, on that roadway, the average speed of vehicles is between 40 mph and 45 mph, and a bottleneck exists. It is now crucial that the Minister for Regional Development and his Department reaffirm a commitment to the proposed A5 dualling project. We have come so far; £35 million has already been spent by a dedicated team in DRD and by Mouchel, the project consultants, in the design and planning stages. I appeal to the Minister and the DRD to move on with the project, show the people of the north-west that progress is being made

and demonstrate that regional infrastructure imbalances are being tackled.

Let us not go back; let us go forward and get the road project built without any further delay. Motorists are eager for the project to be started and ready for use sooner rather than later. If we talk about democracy and the meaning of having modern politics —

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

**Mr Byrne:** Derry City Council, Strabane District Council, Omagh District Council and Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council, as well as Donegal County Council, have supported the project for over 25 years.

**Mr Lunn:** The Alliance Party has not been directly involved in this discussion, mainly because of our lack of representation in the area affected, but we have a view on it, which I will go into shortly. However, before I do that, I want to say a word about the debate and the fact that we have not one but two petitions of concern relating to a private Member's motion. That effectively means that neither the motion nor the amendment can possibly be passed by the House.

I wonder where that leaves us for the future. A public inquiry into the matter is under way, and I am sure that it will go into things very thoroughly and come up with a considered view that will be passed to the Minister, who will condense the information at his disposal and come up with a view, which, on the basis of today's discussion, will inevitably be rejected by one side of the House or the other. Where will that leave us? We are going back to ESA and the review of public administration — down a cul-de-sac. A lot of work may go into the inquiry, but we will not be able to make a decision, so I wish the Minister luck with his deliberations.

That said, if the debate mattered, I would be saying that we support the DUP amendment. We have not been lobbied like local Members have, but, as a regular user of the road, particularly the section from Ballygawley to Strabane, I know it very well. I do not know the Aughnacloy to Ballygawley section so well, but I hear what Lord Morrow and Roy Beggs said about traffic volumes and the fact that it has already been substantially upgraded. As I understand it, prior to 2006, the policy was to upgrade that type of road by way of bypasses and by dualling

certain sections to make overtaking possible. As far as I know, prior to 2006, it was never envisaged that the A5 from Derry right through to Aghnacloy would be turned into a dual carriageway.

In my opinion, the A4 from the end of the motorway to Ballygawley has been the most successful piece of road building in Northern Ireland since I was a kid. It really did remove a tremendous bottleneck, becoming the gateway to the heart of County Tyrone. It is terrific. However, to my mind, the case has not been made for turning the section from Ballygawley to Strabane into a dual carriageway. The long-standing policy was to relieve congestion by constructing bypasses. In particular, I am thinking of Newtownstewart. I remember having to drive through Newtownstewart regularly, and it was a good reason to go to Donegal by way of Toomebridge. However, that has been dealt with.

I hear the figures involved. Will the Minister tell us whether, if we go for a dualling and bypass upgrade, the Southern Government will honour their commitment to provide a proportion of the money? If they do not, it will put a new slant on the whole thing and distort the figures terribly. We might have to look at it again.

I am told that, if the full dual carriageway proposal is to go ahead, it will affect 419 landowners and 282 working farms. I saw the dramatic effect that the A4 extension had on landowners and farming as it progressed. I am sure that Friends of the Earth and so on will come up with a list of objections the length of your arm, and no doubt we will hear shortly from Mr Agnew with a condensed version of those objections. No doubt, also, some of them will be valid, but I come back to my original point: what is the point of the proposal if somebody is able to produce a petition of concern — a political injunction — to block whatever decision is made? We should be able to do better than that, and, so early in the new mandate, it is disappointing to see that sort of situation develop. I will leave it at that. We support the amendment.

**Mr McElduff:** I fully support the motion. There should be no dilution of or delay in the A5 dual carriageway project. As has already been said, it is an absolutely crucial piece of road infrastructure, essential to economic regeneration west of the Bann and in the north-west of Ireland generally. I, too, welcome the Irish Government's financial commitment. Of

course, any landowner or property owner who is inconvenienced or discommoded by the project deserves a proper hearing and compensation, which should be worked out with full respect for those affected.

### 11.15 am

If there is any dilution or delay in the scheme, it will, for me and for very many other people, certainly in County Tyrone, be history revisited, denuding Tyrone, Derry and Donegal of essential infrastructure. The project is a road to opportunity west of the Bann and in the north-west. A prerequisite of economic development is proper infrastructure. We do not have it west of the Bann for historical reasons, which I will revisit. It is essential for investors and tourists and for public sector jobs that people have speed and ease of access and egress into and out of areas west of the Bann. It is an indispensable project. An old teacher of mine shared a thought with me yesterday that it is sine qua non: it is non-negotiable, because, if you do this, you are simply revisiting history. It is more like the old Stormont than the new.

In 1963, Henry Benson produced the Benson report, which was commissioned by the old Stormont Administration. The report stated that the two lines to Derry would be closed. Of course, the Stormont Administration of the time cherry-picked it. The Campaign for Social Justice at the time accused the unionist Government of political mismanagement and asserted:

*"There were two separate railway lines to Derry. In the interests of economy it became necessary to close one of them. The one to be 'axed' traversed the western region. This has left Fermanagh, Tyrone and practically all of the county of Derry with no railway whatever."*

In March 1964, the Ulster Transport Authority issued a notice to wholly terminate the line from Portadown to Derry via Omagh. In April 1964, the "big house" unionist William Craig met Tyrone County Council and promised that work would begin on the Dungannon bypass in 1965, with the construction of an Omagh bypass beginning in December 1966. He gave verbal promises of a motorway beyond Dungannon and an extension to Omagh. That was vigorously opposed by people, including working-class unionists, who were dismissed by the "big house" unionist Bill Craig. Tyrone County Council challenged the decision at a transport tribunal, but it was upheld by Justice Lowry on

22 February 1965, and all the railway lines were sold off. That was a crime of the old Stormont Government. It was rooted in discrimination, and it had catastrophic consequences for people living west of the Bann.

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

**Mr McElduff:** I will not give way, because I am on the A5 dual carriageway, and I have priority on this road now. I will not be giving way to other road users in this debate.

We should not, in the new Stormont, divide along unionist/nationalist lines over essential infrastructure for west of the Bann or the north-west of Ireland. It smacks of the old “big house” unionism and of discrimination.

**Lord Morrow:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McElduff:** I will not.

It perpetuates historical and present economic realities. In a way, it reveals a mindset of economic apartheid west and east of the Bann. Do it at your peril because the people west of the Bann and people in the north-west of Ireland are citizens with full and equal rights. We do not want “big house” unionism to re-emerge in 2011.

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

**Mr Hussey:** I begin by thanking the constituents of West Tyrone for returning me as one of their Members of the Assembly for the current period. I say “one” because there were rumours in Tyrone that I had actually won two seats, but that was only the suggestion of a political opponent, who said that it would take two seats to hold me. In all seriousness, I am delighted to be here as an Ulster Unionist representative and re-take the seat that was held by my brother Derek, who represented my party here in various parliamentary roles until 2007.

It is also fitting that my maiden speech to the House should be about the A5. My mother, who will be 83 in September, was born in a bungalow in Conywarren, which, if it were still standing, would overlook the main A5 as it leaves Omagh on its way to the maiden city of Londonderry. It is to her that I dedicate this speech, as, without her strength and determination, my brothers and sisters would not have had the strong family unit that we have. My mother was widowed in 1972

when I was 13, the youngest of six children. Through her devotion, we came through the worst of times. My mother was and is a strong Ulster Unionist, and I would not want to face her down in any political argument. Compared with her, I am just a kitten, as you will see over the coming months and years.

**Lord Morrow:** Some kitten.

**Mr Hussey:** Your eyesight is obviously not that good. I also want to point out to my colleague from West Tyrone that I am not a “big house” unionist but a modest “bungalow” unionist.

As Members will know, the A5 is the main route from Aghnacloy in County Tyrone to Ballygawley, Ballygawley to Omagh, Newtownstewart, Sion Mills, Strabane, Ballymagorry, Bready, Magheramason and then crossing into County Londonderry and on to New Buildings and on to the maiden city. For many years, I travelled that route on my journeys from Omagh to Belfast and Londonderry, and there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that there is a need for an upgrade of the road. However, the question must be asked: at what cost? Is the spending of millions of pounds on the project justifiable? I have been involved in local politics for several years now, and the famous political quote is “all politics is local”.

I have spoken to people such as Alfie Cooper, James McFarland, Allan Armstrong, John Dunbar, Ciaran McLean, Caroline Porter, Billy Caldwell and Irwin Shortt. Those names might not mean anything to the vast majority of people in this House, but they will be affected by the road. Alfie worked with me for several years, and I last met him at a public debate on the subject of the A5. He pointed out to the assembled gathering that he had bought a house in the country, and he was prepared to pay a substantial sum for it because it was his dream home where he, his wife and family would have a country lifestyle without all the hustle and bustle of urban dwellers. However, the road would come within a couple of hundred yards of his home. His dreams have been dashed, and he is entitled to no compensation.

James McFarland is the son of a former Ulster Unionist councillor, Crawford McFarland. James runs a farm on the outskirts of Omagh. He spent many years building up the farm that was started by his father. Like most farmers, he dreamed of handing the farm to his son until he was told that his farm was to be split by the new road. Additional miles would have to be travelled

to get from one side of his farm to the other, all at his expense.

Ciaran McLean is an environmentalist, for want of a better word, and he has used many words to describe me. He does not like the idea of additional carbon fuels being discharged in building a road that cannot be justified and more pollution draining into our air for the sake of it. Ciaran made comments that I sat on my hands when it came to the issue of the A5 because I abstained when it came to the vote in Omagh District Council. However, I abstained because I am in favour of an upgrade of the A5, but I am not in favour of the proposals that have been put to the former Minister, Conor Murphy.

Caroline is a Facebook friend of mine who keeps me informed of developments. She is not afraid to voice her concerns when she sees problems ahead for her family or her neighbours. Ordinary Tyrone people have everyday lives to lead but know that the proposed A5 will change their lives forever.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Bring your remarks to a close.

**Mr Hussey:** I support the amendment. The road cannot go ahead as you cannot square a circle.

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

**Mr Eastwood:** I am honoured to represent the people of Derry in the House, following in the footsteps of SDLP representatives such as John Hume, John Tierney, Mark Durkan, Mary Bradley and Pól Callaghan. It is with great pleasure that I deliver my maiden speech to the House on the motion relating to the A5 dual carriageway. Let me state my unequivocal support, and that of my party, for the motion, and I commend the Member for tabling it at this time.

Major infrastructural projects often attract most attention because of their headline cost. The fiscal figures become the main story. In the case of the A5, we should focus on other figures and impacts. An estimated 390,000 people will benefit massively from the greater connectivity provided by the dual carriageway. The construction sector west of the Bann will receive a long-overdue boost. The project will help to ensure that economic output from my constituency of Derry, and the north-west region

generally, will begin exponentially to deliver its true business potential. The list goes on, with increased opportunities in tourism, agriculture and right across the business sectors, creating jobs that are so desperately required. Furthermore, I am sure that the whole House will agree that the totality of those impressive facts and figures is matched by the hugely positive implications that the A5 will have for road safety.

However, there is a narrative that all those statistics tend to miss. As we know, this island was severely buffeted by an economic tsunami that caused real hardships, particularly for ordinary people distant from the convulsions of globalised financial markets. We should collectively express confidence that as a people, economy and country, we will recover. A large part of that recovery should be manifested within the logic that we can no longer afford to run two economies on this one small island. It is for that reason that the financial commitment of successive Irish Governments to this and other infrastructural projects in the North is so welcome. The completion of the A5 will continue the major road network between our cities and the capital. That should be seen as a first step along the path to a fully integrated island economy.

It is also important to emphasise that a sustainable recovery should be built with a firm commitment to balanced regional development. The A5 dual carriageway should be used as a marker, a symbol, to guarantee that Derry and the north-west are no longer left behind when it comes to governmental expenditure. For too long, my city of Derry has been at the heart of Ireland's history, but at the fringe of its economic expansion. If that trend is not quickly reversed, the Executive and Assembly will have failed.

The Minister for Regional Development should hear the clear message from today's debate. There should be no excuse for delaying the funding of the A5. When it comes to that road project, the mantra of limited resources does not qualify. Basic economic common sense dictates that capital expenditure and investment are precisely what is needed in these recessionary times.

The peoples of Derry, Donegal and Tyrone have a huge role to play in the recovery of the island. This road will, I hope, play a major role in

providing the necessary infrastructure to allow them to do so.

**Mr Allister:** I have said it before, and I will say it again: this is not a road project, it is a political project. You can tell that by examining its genesis.

Any regular road programme evolves through a process, which can be quite protracted. Roads Service studies the usage, needs and deficiencies, road traffic figures, accident figures — all in the context of a strategic overview — and it reaches an opinion that a particular road deserves and requires to be prioritised. When a major road is concerned, the project finds its way by due process into the regional transportation strategy.

Ask any of those questions of this project, and you will get a blank sheet of paper. As far as this project is concerned, none of that happened. Instead, it was plucked out of the air on 17 July 2007 at a North/South Ministerial Council meeting and implanted as a priority project. None of the basic qualifying procedures were followed. There was no business case, costing case or infrastructural study. There was nothing.

That is why it patently is, above all else, a political project, which is confirmed today by the sectarian stance of Sinn Féin in filing a petition of concern against the amendment.

### 11.30 am

**Lord Morrow:** And of the SDLP

**Mr Allister:** And of the SDLP. That has given rise to the tit-for-tat necessity for a petition of concern against the motion and demonstrates and underscores that, for those who are so adamant about the road, it is not a roads project but a political project. That is why it is a flawed project.

I make it clear that I am not opposed in the least to the upgrading of the A5. In another place, I represented for five years the west of the Province as well as the east, and I am well aware of the need for adequate road infrastructure. However, the project, in comparison with others, fails the test. Across the Province, there is an uncompleted A26 and the need for multiple village and town bypasses in places such as Magherafelt, Cookstown and Cullybackey, not to mention the A2. Those are all to be parked while this project is prioritised, even though, empirically, they have far greater

needs. Given that, one cannot but conclude that this is a political project.

Yes, let us upgrade the A5, but let us do it rationally, sensibly and according to need, not according to politics. That is why we are in the position today of being on the track to wasting valuable resources in the most austere of times on a single project, while everything else falls by the wayside. I remind some who have been raising issues of concern about the project today that it was their party that let it get this far. Were the DUP Ministers asleep at the wheel on 17 July 2007 at their first North/South Ministerial Council meeting?

**Lord Morrow:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Allister:** I will give way in a moment. Were they asleep at the wheel when the Executive subsequently approved the project? Either they were asleep at the wheel or some who have spoken today do not agree with what they approved. Which is it?

**Lord Morrow:** I am still confused about whether Mr Allister supports the amendment. He has yet to say that he does. He has told us that he does not support the proposal. Mr Allister, you point the finger at us. It is most ironic that Mr Allister gives the Ulster Unionists a bye ball. Were they fast asleep at the Executive meeting? Our Ministers were not fast asleep, and that is why we are having the debate today.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member will have an extra minute.

**Mr Allister:** Remember that it is the DUP that tells us that it has the steering wheel. Any unionist who sat at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting, whether Ulster Unionist or DUP, and who allowed this to pass over them and who then woke up later has a lot to answer for, whichever party they subscribe to.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Member for giving way. Will he accept that the decisions were made at meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council in sectoral format, at which the two representatives from the Northern Ireland Executive were the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister of the Environment? Who held the position of Minister of the Environment over the past four years? It was Arlene Foster, Edwin Poots and one other. How did they allow that to slip through?

**Mr Allister:** It is quite clear to me, as it is to any objective observer, that the fingerprints of the DUP are all over the project, just as much as the fingerprints of Sinn Féin are. Together, as in so much else, they have produced a shambolic, dysfunctional proposal, which, I trust —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Bring your remarks to a close.

**Mr Allister:** I trust that it will now have the brakes put on it by a Minister, who, I trust, will have the courage to face up to what —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Your time is up.

**Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development):** I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the debate. I have asked my officials to take note of the Hansard report, and I have been taking copious notes of the advice that Members have given and the statements that they have made. I will attempt to pick up on some points at the end, time permitting. Should that not be the case, I may have to write to individual Members.

I note the concerns and comments expressed by Members and particularly welcome the debate on the A5 western transport corridor project. At the outset, I must register my deep disappointment and concern at the decision by Sinn Féin and the SDLP to table a petition of concern against the amendment. That is contrary to the spirit in which the debate needs to take place, and it politicises the issue in a way that is not helpful to finding a constructive way forward. I also share Mr Lunn's concerns and regret the use of that tactic so early in the life of this Assembly.

Let me clearly state that I welcome and support improvements to the A5, the A8 and other arterial routes across Northern Ireland. As Minister for Regional Development, I wish to see improvements across the strategic road network that will enhance safety, reduce journey times, provide value for money and support economic growth. I want a selection of schemes to be based on an analysis of their contribution to strategic objectives rather than on purely political considerations, and I trust that the House will agree and support that important guiding principle.

The need for improvement to the roads infrastructure in Northern Ireland has been recognised by both the Executive and the Irish

Government. Many of you will also be aware that after the St Andrews Agreement, the Irish Government and the Executive agreed at the North/South Ministerial Council plenary sitting in July 2007 to bring forward projects to provide dual carriageway standard on the A5 Aughnacloy to north-west gateway and on the A8 Belfast to Larne routes. You will also be aware that the Irish Government have committed to making a significant contribution. Through the North/South Ministerial Council a very challenging programme, leading to the start of construction in 2012 and completion in 2015, was agreed. A schedule of the anticipated key milestones and related payments from the Irish Government has also been agreed.

I advise Members that, to date, development of the project has remained on programme. An initial payment of approximately £8 million to the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund was made by the Irish Government in November 2009 towards development costs, and, subject to final approval at the North/South Ministerial Council plenary sitting in June, a further £11 million is anticipated later this year. That commitment to make a contribution towards those two roads projects was reaffirmed in January 2011 by the Irish Government at a plenary sitting of the North/South Ministerial Council. I also understand that at a recent conference of the Institute for British-Irish Studies, the new Prime Minister of the Republic of Ireland, Enda Kenny, stated that his Government will honour that commitment. In addition, the investment strategy for Northern Ireland 2008-2018 includes the dualling of those two roads, among others. That is the historical, factual position.

The A5 running from Londonderry to the land frontier at Aughnacloy forms the western transport corridor and has been identified as one of the five key transport corridors in the regional development strategy for Northern Ireland 2025. My Department's long-term aim is to provide dual-carriageway-standard roads on those important transport corridors. The A5 also facilitates strategic cross-border links at Aughnacloy, Strabane and Londonderry and connects the new dual carriageway to the A4 south-western transport corridor at Ballygawley. The existing road comprises a variety of single carriageway roads of differing width with intermittent stretches of climbing lanes and overtaking opportunities. It is deficient in relation to carriageway cross-section, forward visibility and alignment when assessed against



modern-day standards. It carries a mix of local and strategic traffic, and there can be considerable driver frustration. Over its 88 km length, the road passes through various towns and villages, with single carriageway bypasses at Omagh, Strabane and Newtownstewart.

The A5 scheme as currently proposed comprises 85 km of new trunk road, of which 82 km will be new offline dual carriageway. The scheme terminates with short lengths of single carriageway bypassing New Buildings at its northern and southern ends before tying into the existing A5 south of Aughnacloy.

Although much of the A5 carries significant volumes of traffic, it is recognised that the minimum traffic volume that is recommended for a dual carriageway is not met on the short section of the A5 between Ballygawley and the land frontier at Aughnacloy. Under the current proposal, and subject to satisfactory completion of the statutory processes, it is anticipated that construction could commence in 2012 and be completed in 2015. The A5 western transport corridor dualling project is estimated to cost between £650 million and £850 million. To date, approximately £35 million has been invested in the design and development of the project.

Design of the scheme has been under way since November 2007, when Roads Service appointed lead consultants Mouchel to assist in taking forward the A5 dualling project. Throughout the scheme's development, my Department has sought to ensure that those who are directly affected by the project, the general public and elected representatives have been kept informed of progress. Public events were held at four locations along the route in April 2008, February 2009, July 2009 and November 2010. They were attended by over 6,000 people in total. Therefore, there is significant local interest.

The selected procurement process was to adopt an early contractor involvement approach, with contractors appointed earlier in the process than is typical. That had the benefit of shortening the development period and gave the construction contractors the opportunity to provide innovation and expertise to the design process. To facilitate development and delivery, the project was split into three sections. That led to the appointment in November 2009 of three contracting consortia to the project.

Those consortia include a number of major international and local contractors.

In July 2009, the preferred route for the scheme was announced and the preferred options report was published. After the public consultation and receipt of additional technical information, the route was refined and taken forward as the proposed scheme, which is the subject of the draft statutory Orders and environmental statement published in November 2010. The formal consultation period that followed produced a significant number of objections. It was decided to hold a public inquiry to consider relevant issues. The public inquiry, which commenced on 9 May 2011, is in progress and will run for around eight weeks, including the beginning of July.

**Lord Morrow:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Kennedy:** No; I have to make progress. The inquiry is being held under an independent inspector at a number of locations along the route to make it more accessible to objectors.

Clearly, a project of this scale cannot be constructed without significant impact on areas that it passes through and on people who live on or near the route. It is very important that people's concerns are given serious and fair consideration. The current public inquiry provides an opportunity for people to articulate their concerns. I encourage people who have personal or business concerns, many of which will be farming-related, to explain them carefully to the public inquiry inspector. I remind members that around 1,200 hectares of land will be required for construction of the proposed scheme, of which 250 hectares will be required temporarily during the construction phase. That affects 419 separate landowners, of whom 282 own agricultural holdings that are actively farmed. The proposed scheme will also necessitate the demolition of seven residential properties. Clearly, the proposed scheme will have a big impact.

I have instructed Roads Service to ensure that all reasonable measures are being taken to investigate the impact of the scheme on people. The environmental assessment has identified and assessed impacts on designated sites and environmentally sensitive areas. It should be noted that the proposed road will cross a special area of conservation of the River Foyle and its tributaries. Where that occurs, the scheme has been designed to avoid and minimise impacts. Depending on the outcome of

the public inquiry, more detailed accommodation works may need to be discussed with individual landowners.

My engineers have provided their professional opinion on the relative merits of upgrading the existing A5, providing a dual carriageway or an online two-plus-one carriageway. Road safety is a key issue on the A5, and it has been proven that dual carriageways are inherently safer than single carriageways. The existing A5 passes through many settlements along its length, and that has journey time and road safety implications for road users. It also has an environmental impact on residents of settlements.

### 11.45 am

I need to make progress, Mr Deputy Speaker. I believe that all those issues and arguments will and should get a proper airing at the public inquiry, and I will reflect on the inspector's views and recommendations when I receive his final report.

I turn now to my Department's budget allocation. Of the £1.2 billion allocated to Roads Service for capital spend over the four-year Budget period, almost two thirds, which is almost £800 million, is allocated to the two major road schemes, namely the A5 Londonderry to Aghnacloy and the A8 Belfast to Larne dual carriageways. I am also conscious that improvements to the strategic road network support the regional development strategy's vision of a modern, safe transport system that will enhance access to regional facilities and services.

I have received numerous requests to meet a wide range of bodies interested in progressing strategic road improvement schemes across Northern Ireland. Those requests include schemes for improvements to the A6 route between Belfast and Londonderry, the A26 at the Frosses and the A2 at Greenisland; the widening of the Sydenham bypass; the York Street flyover; and many bypasses of towns and villages throughout Northern Ireland. I will continue to listen to opinions from across the country before forming a view as to the way forward.

I indicated earlier that the public inquiry into the A5 is in progress, and I do not wish to interfere with due process and pre-empt the inquiry's findings. In conjunction with the independent inspector's report and recommendations, I

intend to consider proposed investment levels across my Department, including the impact of Budget 2010 on the strategic roads programme. In the intervening period, I will consult with my counterpart in the Irish Government to discuss and confirm their position on their contribution, and I will discuss funding implications with my Executive colleagues.

Finally, I await with interest the inspector's report and recommendations from the current public inquiry on the A5 route. I want to place on record my commitment as Minister for Regional Development to improving the A5 route and other parts of the strategic route network. Those improvements will help to improve safety for pedestrians, cyclists, motorists and freight hauliers and will help with the aim of improving our economy, which is an objective that everyone in the House should be able to support.

I will move quickly to some of the contributions from Members. I have outlined my severe disappointment and concern at the use of the petition of concern by the sponsors of the motion, assisted by the SDLP. I very much regret it, and I hope very much that we can make progress constructively on all the issues in a more positive way.

I thank Mr Spratt for his attendance and contribution as Chair of the Committee. I look forward to a positive working relationship with him. Lord Morrow's speech became a who's who of who in the Ulster Unionist Party said what. He said little about the DUP's view on the issue. I assure him that I am not given to knee-jerk reactions. I will not be stampeded on this issue. I will look carefully at the route in question and at the land issues that he and others raised.

I agree with Mr Beggs, and I have highlighted the difficulty involved and the importance of other projects sponsored and put forward by Members. I will consider those.

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

**Mr Kennedy:** Finally, it is interesting that the Alliance Party had no position, but, as it is a middle-of-the-road party, I would not have expected anything else.

**Mr Buchanan:** There is no doubt that the issue has had a good hearing right around the House this morning. I support the amendment. My

colleague and the proposer of the amendment, Lord Morrow, very ably laid before the House all the accusations made against my party and all the commitments made by the Minister's party, and called on the Minister to step up to the plate on this occasion. We will, of course, wait with interest to see the outcome of what the Minister does in the future.

I do not think that anyone will disagree that the roads infrastructure in the west of the Province needs an injection of investment. We have continually lobbied for that for many years and will continue to do so until there is a proper roads infrastructure in the west. There are many reasons why an upgrade is essential. First, we want to see the economic infrastructure in west Tyrone improved. Secondly, we want to see greater and more employment opportunities in the west of the Province, so we need a proper road network to get people in and out and to encourage businesses to set up there. Thirdly, we want to see safer conditions for road users, because we cannot ignore the unfortunate fact that a number of people, motorists and pedestrians, have lost their lives and that the contributing factor in many of those cases was the frustration of drivers who, perhaps because they were in a hurry and had no place to get by, took a chance, and then, unfortunately, someone ended up losing their life.

Although road improvements are essential, we must always endeavour to ensure that the right balance is struck and that we get value for money. Although we may help others, we need to be very careful not to put the farming community out of business completely, because that is really what the proposed new road would do. If we move in that direction, many in the farming community will have no alternative but to go out of business. I have no doubt that, if we proceed with the current proposals, we will lose a lot of farmers in west Tyrone who have strengthened and built up their livelihood.

Any new road upgrade or improvements will always cause an element of pain; we have no doubt about that. However, under the current proposals, the acres of prime farmland that we see when we drive into west Tyrone and out the other side would be torn apart and ripped up, and the farmers affected would have to pay the price. Mr Byrne mentioned the number of jobs that would be created by building the new road, but he did not say how many jobs would be lost

in the farming community and industry and how many people would be put out of business.

The level of consultation with the farming community has been abysmal, to say the least. Mr Hussey mentioned some of the farming community in Omagh whom he spoke to. I know farmers in the Omagh area who would be affected by the new road, which would run directly through the middle of their farm, dividing it, with the farm home on one side and the farm buildings on the other. That is totally unacceptable, yet the company concerned has completely refused to take the matter into account and to move the road to the other side of the dwelling in order to keep the farmyard and home intact. Another farmer with 300 milking cows had his request for an underpass refused, even though that would have allowed his animals to move from one side of the new road to the other. Again, the working relationship with those people has been abysmal, to say the least. I could go on about the way in which the farming community would be affected, but there is no time.

There are direct, practical problems that we have been dealing with on the ground.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Bring your remarks to a close.

**Mr Buchanan:** The economic climate has changed, and that must be taken into consideration. I call on the Minister to consider all of the options and alternatives to the scheme and to bring forward a road that is fit for purpose —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Time.

**Mr Buchanan:** — that is value for money —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. Time is up.

**Mr Buchanan:** — and that serves all of the people in the community.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis na daoine a labhair ar maidin. I thank all Members who spoke here this morning, in particular the two who made their maiden speeches. I welcome the fact that the Minister spoke and want to address some of what he said initially. I welcome his announcement to the House that the programme for this project remains on course and his restatement that the Dublin Government have reaffirmed the funding that they will give towards this. That is good to know. I reassure the Minister that our party

will be there to support him as he takes this forward.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I strongly urge him to read the Hansard report of the debate. I set out, fairly and squarely, the position that I inherited as Minister and how I intend to proceed on this issue. I ask him, rather than interpreting my speech, to take time to read it more carefully.

**Mr McCartney:** I listened very carefully to what you had to say, and my words stand. You may feel that you have inherited something. I am telling you that, as I read it —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Make your remarks through the Chair.

**Mr McCartney:** Through the Chair, sorry.

Pat Doherty, who proposed the motion, talked about there being no dilution and no delay. I say very clearly that in no way should that undermine the need for, the outcome of or the inputs to a public inquiry. There have been many, many public inquiries in the past number of years. That did not stop Members bringing debates to the Assembly, nor did it stop Members making observations. For Mr Beggs to say today that somehow this was ill timed or ill thought out —

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

**Mr McCartney:** Please, I have already given way once and I am not giving way again. You have had your say and I want to have mine; I do not want to be interrupted all the time. You did make that point; you more or less said that this was ill timed and ill considered as a result of that.

No dilution, for us, is very simple. This should be, and in my opinion will be, a dual carriageway from Derry to Aghnacloy. That has been campaigned for and articulated and, at last, is on the point of delivery. In the past number of years in Derry, there has been a regeneration process hosted by Ilex, which is trying to create much-needed jobs and is a chance to end regional imbalance, disparity and inequalities. There has been input from all the parties, the business sector, the civic sector and the community and voluntary sector. There has been input from OFMDFM, DETI and INI. Through that regeneration process, I have not heard a single dissenting voice in the north-west arguing against the need for a dual carriageway.

The Executive, of which people here are members, have said that job creation is at the heart of the

Programme for Government. They have said that the way to do that is to tackle regional disparity and that the way to tackle that is through good infrastructure. We have seen a lot of political and petty point-scoring this morning, and those who are arguing against this do a disservice to the people whom this road will service.

When the proposer of the amendment spoke, we had a rerun of the many quotes and perhaps misquotes made in the local press.

**Lord Morrow:** No misquotes.

**Mr McCartney:** I said “perhaps misquotes”; other people said that there were misquotes.

I want to say something that I have heard a number of times from a number of Members. I was on the Regional Development Committee for three years. During that time, a number of roads schemes were being introduced and the Minister or the Department came to the Committee to give us an insight into what was being done. In nearly every case, it was always lobbied that more should be done. I think that this is the first roads scheme that I have been part of where people are being offered a dual carriageway but are actually talking about dumbing it down. We have all seen good roads schemes being completed, and the first questions on all our lips seem to be: why was the road not made longer, why did they not consider dual carriageways and why did they not make the road wider, because, two or three years down the line, more work will have to be done and more money will have to be spent due to bad planning?

This is the first time that I have heard people saying that they do not want a dual carriageway and that they actually want climbing lanes. In the past, you have always heard people asking why there should be two-in-one rather than dual carriageways. I want to put it on record that this is a first.

## 12.00 noon

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

**Mr McCartney:** No, I have already said that I am not giving way. I apologise, but I will not be interrupted again.

Roy Beggs called the project extravagant. I think that we should be thankful for a £400 million contribution towards a road scheme rather than describe it as extravagant. He talked about other road schemes going to the wall as

a result of this. Again, this is about priorities. He talked about the Dungiven bypass. From my recollection of what is on the public record, the Dungiven bypass will go ahead with the timeline already outlined by a previous Minister. This Minister will certainly have an input to that. He will be lobbied by the people in the north-west because we see those two road schemes as being vital to regeneration and tackling regional disparity, which is a priority of the Minister.

I think that Joe Byrne was speaking for West Tyrone. He talked about the strategic importance of the road and linked it to the national development plan. As regards the idea that this road scheme came out of thin air, there has been demand for this road for a long time.

Barry McElduff made an excellent point. Those of us who live in the north-west look at our rail network and see how it has been depleted. He said that the Assembly had the opportunity to tackle at least one aspect of regional disparity and that we should not have a repeat of history. If the Minister does not proceed as he should, we will have a deficit of roads in the north-west, which will have an impact on job creation. Rather than doing something to create jobs, we will talk ourselves into a position where people are saying that we should not build this road and, in four or five years' time, will be complaining that the Executive did not deliver on their job creation initiatives.

Ross Hussey made his maiden speech, and I welcome the fact that he made it today. The fact that he abstained rather than voted for the scheme is a matter for himself, but I think that he was out of step with the rest of the council and the rest of opinion in the north-west. Similarly, Colum Eastwood is a former mayor of the city and will well understand the llex regeneration project in particular and the absolute need for the scheme and the priority that it has been given. I have heard Ministers at the Dispatch Box telling us that one of the reasons why people who seek to invest in the North of Ireland do not do so is the poor infrastructure. Indeed, Dublin Ministers have said the same about people who are trying to invest in Donegal. We are saying that this is the way to create jobs. If people think that creating a number of climbing lanes from Derry to Aughnacloy is the answer to the problem, I do not know where they are living. I know that Mr Hussey has travelled the road, but the challenge to those who say that there is no need for the dual carriageway is to travel along the road on

a Friday afternoon, when they will see that it is absolutely needed.

Jim Allister said that this is not a roads project but a political project. I can imagine him stuck in a traffic jam, looking out the window and saying, "This is not really a road traffic jam; this is a political traffic jam". However, if it did take new politics, a new political reality on the island of Ireland, to make these types of things happen, that should be welcomed. There is an absolute need for this road that I cannot stress enough. I think that I speak for many Members, particularly those who represent the north-west, when I say that the need for this road is paramount. We need it.

I will finish by referring to Tom Buchanan's point. He made legitimate points regarding the concerns of the farming community, particularly in his constituency of West Tyrone. I was on the Committee for Regional Development, and I watched this scheme. I have also been following it since leaving the Committee, and I think that the contact between the Department and people with those types of concern has been good. Tom and I have said before that every road, house and new piece of infrastructure built has an impact on people, but, when we think about the collective good and the will of our people, we can see that this scheme must proceed. I do not think that we should waste the opportunity to do this in the right way. I, my party, the SDLP and, indeed, representatives of other parties across the Chamber —

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

**Mr McCartney:** — support this scheme in other Chambers. Therefore, I think that we should go ahead. I support the motion.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. Before I put the Question on the amendment, I remind the House that the vote will be on a cross-community basis.

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The Assembly divided: Ayes 58; Noes 38.*

## AYES

### UNIONIST:

*Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan,*

Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mrs Lewis, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

**OTHER:**

Mr Agnew, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Buchanan and Mr G Robinson.

**NOES****NATIONALIST:**

Ms M Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Flanagan, Ms Gildernew, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Lynch and Mr McCartney.

Total votes 96 Total Ayes 58 [60.4%]

Nationalist Votes 38 Nationalist Ayes 0 [0.0%]

Unionist Votes 49 Unionist Ayes 49 [100%]

Other Votes 9 Other Ayes 9 [100%]

Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** We now vote on the motion. I again remind Members that the vote will be on a cross-community basis.

*Main Question put.*

*The Assembly divided: Ayes 38; Noes 58.*

**AYES****NATIONALIST:**

Ms M Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Flanagan, Ms Gildernew, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr F McCann,

Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Lynch and Mr McCartney.

**NOES****UNIONIST:**

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mrs Lewis, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

**OTHER:**

Mr Agnew, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Buchanan and Mr G Robinson.

Total votes 96 Total Ayes 38 [39.6%]

Nationalist Votes 38 Nationalist Ayes 38 [100%]

Unionist Votes 49 Unionist Ayes 0 [0.0%]

Other Votes 9 Other Ayes 0 [0.0%]

Main Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately on the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

*The sitting was suspended at 12.36 pm.*

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

**2.00 pm**

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Culture, Arts and Leisure

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question 11 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

#### City of Culture 2013

1. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what events and locations are planned in the lead up to the Derry/Londonderry UK City of Culture 2013 to ensure inclusivity. (AQO 31/11-15)

**Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure):** I am glad to be here as Minister for my first Question Time. Plans for the 2013 City of Culture are being progressed by the Culture Company, Ilex Urban Regeneration Company and Derry City Council. Inclusivity was included in the successful bid and will be a guiding principle across the approach to programming. The board of the new Culture Company embodies the principle of inclusivity, as it includes representation from many disciplines and from across the community.

**Mr Campbell:** Does the Minister understand the concept of ensuring that the wider community is not just included but is content with occasions in which her Department will be involved, such as the United Kingdom City of Culture events? Does she appreciate the substantial difficulties that were placed in the way of that inclusion by her appointment of a ministerial adviser who was convicted not of a mistake but of a cold-blooded murder?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** That substantive question will be answered in my response to question 14. I am sure that the Member has seen the Order Paper. In relation to inclusivity, I have asked officials to engage with the new Culture Company and stakeholders in Derry to support and develop proposals for events and projects associated with 2013. I intend to meet representatives of the Culture Company and other stakeholder organisations in the near future to hear how the plans for the year are developing.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I welcome the question from the Member for East Derry. The Minister has indicated her willingness to meet stakeholders. Given the significance and importance of this event, and to maximise the tourism potential of the north-west, will she meet a cross-party delegation of MLAs to discuss those matters in order to accelerate and maximise the importance of such a huge event to the area?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** In short, I would be happy to meet a delegation from Derry City to discuss the City of Culture and the events and activities that will be rolled out. I look forward to that invitation.

**Mrs Overend:** Will the Minister outline the potential job opportunities that will be created because of Londonderry's winning bid to be the first UK City of Culture in 2013?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** The potential for jobs and investment as a result of winning the bid has to be recognised. I look forward to seeing the plans for the City of Culture initiatives and events and to seeing what economic spin-offs can be derived as a collective, because that city and, indeed, the north-west, has been deprived of funding over many years.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire go dtí a post, agus gabhaim buíochas léi as a cuid freagraí. I welcome the new Minister to her post. The new peace bridge over the Foyle, which is due to open on 24 June at a cost of £14.7 million, runs from the heart of Derry city across the river but ends up at Ebrington, where there is no current development. At what stage is that development?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Go raibh maith agat, Cathal, for the question. If I am wrong, I can provide a further answer in writing, but I assume that the Member is referring to the art gallery in Ebrington. Ilex has produced a strategic outline case for the key cultural centre at the Ebrington site. When the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) submitted the strategic outline case to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) in December 2010, DFP raised a number of issues. The strategic outline case is being revised by Ilex on the basis that the project will be taken forward in phases, with phase 1 being complete in time for the 2013 celebrations. Current indications on costs and other details have yet to be brought forward but will be in that plan. I am happy to pass on any

additional information that Cathal or any other Member might need.

## North West 200

2. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if she would consider requesting, from the Department for Regional Development, additional road closure hours for the North West 200 if asked to do so by the organisers.

(AQO 32/11-15)

5. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans she has to help further develop the North West 200 as a premier international event.

(AQO 35/11-15)

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will group questions 2 and 5. Again with your permission, before answering, I put on record — I am sure that the entire Assembly will join me — my sincere condolences to the family and friends of the three racers who died in the past week in incidents at the TT races in the Isle of Man. Sidecar racer Bill Currie and his passenger Kevin Morgan, both from England, were killed during last Tuesday's practice session, and our own Derek Brien, from Bellewstown, County Meath, was killed yesterday during the Supersport race.

I would only consider supporting an application to the Department for Regional Development for additional road closure hours for any motorcycle road race once I was satisfied that ongoing public concerns about safety standards in the sport generally had been fully and satisfactorily addressed. I would also wish to be assured that an increase in hours would be acceptable to all relevant sporting interests and would contribute to the delivery of my targets for sport as set out in my sports strategy, Sport Matters.

**Mr G Robinson:** As the North West 200 is such a major economic and tourist event in Northern Ireland, will the Minister give an assurance that she will assist the organisers in every way possible to expand the event at every opportunity?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** In short, I will, to develop tourism potential, notwithstanding the concerns that I have already raised. There are safety concerns, and we need to get a balance between addressing them and making sure that we tap

into the economic and tourism potential of the North West 200.

**Mr Hilditch:** Will the Minister tell us, in light of the various problems that were suffered this year, what additional resources have been identified in her Department to assist the organisers for next year?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I am undertaking an exercise in the Department to see whether there are additional resources for many projects across my portfolio. At the minute, I cannot confirm what, if any, additional resources are available, but, once I have received that information, I will take on board and answer the Member's question.

**Mr G Kelly:** I, too, welcome the Member for North Belfast to her first Question Time. How much funding has been given to motorsport over the past two years?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** In 2009, my Department earmarked up to £2 million to help motorsport to improve health and safety at venues here. An approved business case for the funding was developed by Sport NI together with the umbrella group for motorsport, the 2&4 Wheel Motor Sport Steering Group. As a result, more than £1 million was allocated to improvement works and dedicated circuits in Kirkistown, Nutt's Corner and Bishopscourt. A further £219,000 was made available for the purchase of road safety equipment, and an additional £155,000 has been spent on urgent safety work at the North West 200 and Cookstown 100 circuits. Another 33 projects and 25 motorsport clubs have also received assistance.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members to continue to rise in their place if they are interested in asking a supplementary question.

**Mr Cree:** I thank the Minister for her replies thus far. Is she prepared to allocate more of her Department's budget to the North West 200 should the event be expanded?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Sorry, I did not hear the last part of the question.

**Mr Cree:** Should the event increase and become greater, is she prepared to consider more funds for it?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I refer the Member to the answer that I gave to Mr Hilditch. I am looking at what funds are available in the Department.



If the event is expanded and if the tourism potential and economic drivers for that area are increased, I will look at that. However, it all depends on available funds.

### **Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich**

3. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the refurbishment and extension to the Irish language and cultural centre, Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich, Belfast. (AQO 33/11-15)

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Work on the refurbishment and extension of Cultúrlann began in September 2010. Good progress is being made on site, and it is anticipated that the project will be completed in the summer of 2011, with an official opening in September this year. Indeed, I visited the Cultúrlann on Saturday after the unveiling of Teanga, which is a new public artwork. I was very impressed with the work thus far.

**Ms S Ramsey:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like other Members, I take this opportunity to welcome the Minister to her first Question Time. I wish her well in her post. The Minister is aware of the positive impact that Cultúrlann has on the community in the west of the city. I am delighted that it is getting recognised and being refurbished. Will the Minister outline some of the potential that she sees Cultúrlann having on the local community and the economy of west Belfast and further afield?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I am happy to do that. Prior to the commencement of construction, 40 people were employed in Cultúrlann. The centre attracts 80,000 visitors annually, many of whom are foreign tourists, so we get the benefit from the growth in cultural tourism. Almost 20,000 people attended arts events at Cultúrlann this year. There is a multidisciplinary, all-year-round programme that promotes the Irish language and arts. There are almost 4,000 participants in arts programmes each year. The theatre and workspace is also available for hire for public and other events, including arts and theatre groups, as well as workshops and coffee shops.

**Mrs Hale:** What are the plans for capital projects for the Ulster-Scots community? What capital funding has been provided to meet its needs?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I am waiting to meet groups from the Ulster-Scots community. Plans for some capital projects have been submitted, but I am waiting to meet the groups because they may want to change their plans. I need to review some of the business cases. As with other Members who asked specific questions that I do not have the answer to, I will get back to you in writing.

**Mr McCallister:** I, too, welcome the Minister to her first Question Time. Will she give us the exact financial cost of the extension and refurbishment of the centre?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** The total budget for the centre is almost £2 million. DCAL is providing over £500,000, as is the International Fund for Ireland. The Arts Council is providing over £300,000, the Tourist Board is providing over £300,000, and the Department for Social Development is providing over £250,000.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I call Conall McDevitt.

**Mr McDevitt:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker — *[Interruption.]* Anseo, indeed. I join the Minister in welcoming the development at Cultúrlann. Will she give the House an estimate of the economic contribution that Irish and Ulster-Scots language and cultural centres make to our regional economy?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** As I outlined to Ms Ramsey in my answer to her question, the centre attracts over 80,000 visitors annually into west Belfast, many of whom are foreign tourists, and currently employs over 40 people. It has programmes in which over 4,000 people participate, and has spin-offs for workshops, coffee shops and even revenue raised through conferences. Naturally, that will have an economic spin-off for the Cultúrlann and west Belfast.

### **Irish Language Strategy**

4. **Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when she intends to forward a paper to the Executive outlining her Department's strategy to protect and enhance the development of the Irish language, as outlined in the St Andrews Agreement and the amended Northern Ireland Act.

(AQO 34/11-15)

## St Andrews Agreement: Irish Language

10. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how she intends to implement the commitment to the Irish language outlined in the St Andrews Agreement and Act. (AQO 40/11-15)

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will answer questions 4 and 10 together.

I am reviewing the Department's work in that area and will decide on the way forward after I have had an opportunity to consider it fully. I am committed to bringing forward a strategy to protect and enhance the development of the Irish language to the Executive for consideration.

2.15 pm

**Ms J McCann:** I thank the Minister for her answer. I, too, congratulate her on her first Question Time. Does the Minister plan to consult further Irish language groups before signing off on the strategy? Ultimately, what will the strategy mean for developing the Irish language?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I look forward to reading the outcome of the consultation exercise. I am meeting Irish language activists and Irish language and Ulster-Scots groups, and I hope to hear the views of stakeholders and of those at the coalface who are driving forward that work to have their support and influence before the strategies are introduced.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom ceist a chur ar an Aire faoin nasc a fheiceann sí a bheith ann idir straitéis Gaeilge agus Acht na Gaeilge agus a fhiafraí di an mbeidh sí ag cur oiread béime ar an Acht agus a dhealraíonn sí a bheith ag cur ar an straitéis. Does the Minister see any linkages between an Irish language strategy and an Irish language Act? Will she pay as much attention to the provision of an Irish language Act as she seems to be devoting to the strategy?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I am delighted that Dominic is taking a great interest in my Department and in my work so far. It seems from Dominic's question that he is paying a great deal of attention to me; I expect nothing less. I am discussing the strategy and the Act with key stakeholders in the community, and I will take

their views along with yours. I am not presenting the importance of one over the other, and I am sure that the Member will not pursue that.

**Mr Allister:** Having alienated much of the non-terrorist-supporting community by the malevolent appointment of a convicted murderer as her special adviser, why does the Minister now want to alienate further swathes of —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Can we have a question that is relevant?

**Mr Allister:** — the population of Northern Ireland by the promotion of a language that she uses as a political tool?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I did not detect a question, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

**Miss M McIlveen:** I would like to think that the Minister will recognise that she will not receive any support for an Irish language Act from this side of the Chamber. However, does she accept that Her Majesty The Queen has done more for the Irish language in the past few weeks than anyone in this Chamber? Does the Minister not regret her party's absence at an event where the Queen spoke Irish so fluently?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I regret that the Irish language is already being used in a belittling and begrudging way. I was quite happy to see and hear the Queen of England, and, indeed, the President of the United States, speak Irish in a non-threatening way. It is a pity that that leadership did not extend to your Benches.

## 2012 Olympics: Torch Relay

6. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure which towns and dates have been selected for hosting the Olympic torch relay. (AQO 36/11-15)

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** The dates and locations for the evening celebrations of the Olympic torch relay were officially announced on 18 May and are as follows: Portrush on Sunday 3 June 2012; Derry on Monday 4 June 2012; Newry on Tuesday 5 June 2012; and, finally, Belfast on 6 June 2012. A more detailed route announcement, which involves the other communities on the route, will be made by the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG). That will happen in November, after local consultation. DCAL and LOCOG have invited all

local authorities to a meeting to discuss the torch relay on 13 June.

**Mr Brady:** I thank the Minister for her answer. I take this opportunity to welcome the Minister and congratulate her on her appointment. Obviously, I am pleased that the torch will visit Newry in my constituency. Has the Minister any update on the proposals for the torch to visit Dublin? Go raibh maith agat.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I understand that LOCOG has been looking at proposals to bring the torch to Dublin. It has confirmed that the feasibility of taking the flame for a short visit is being explored with all the relevant parties, including the Executive. I have no further update at this stage.

**Mr Gardiner:** Does the Minister agree that it is totally unacceptable that her Department was unable to influence anyone connected with the Olympic teams to come to Northern Ireland prior to the Olympic Games?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I understand that there is a lot of concern about that. Today, I will receive a briefing on how many athletes are using here for their training and preparation for the London games. I feel that it is an opportunity missed. Similar sentiments have been expressed by many Members and individuals across the community. On behalf of other people, I will pass those sentiments on to LOCOG.

**Mr Weir:** I welcome the Olympic torch relay's coming to Northern Ireland as part of the UK tour. We have just heard Mr Brady attempt to reintegrate Dublin with the UK. Will the Minister work to ensure that Northern Ireland plays a full role and maximises the benefits from London 2012 along with the rest of the UK?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** The meeting that has been organised for 13 June with local authorities will be key in that. Already, I have been lobbied by several Members who very genuinely outlined the case for the torch to go through their towns. Some have had the support of former Olympians. I feel that that is an opportunity for Members who are councillors, and for councillors and their parties, to make known their feelings about that through local government. I will try to take forward their suggestions.

**Mr Durkan:** My question follows on from the last couple of questions. Will the Minister outline

whether there will be any infrastructural legacy from the Olympics for Northern Ireland?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I am not too sure what the Member means by infrastructural legacy. Does he refer to capital projects?

**Mr Weir:** Bangor.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I hear Members saying Bangor. There is the whole issue of elite facilities, Bangor and the 50 m pool. You will be glad that I got that on the record. I take the question of legacy seriously. We must use this opportunity to ensure that there is a legacy of volunteering and involvement of youth and community groups in the 2012 Olympics. Their contribution here in the North will be recognised in London.

## World Police and Fire Games

7. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline her Department's plans for the World Police and Fire Games in 2013. (AQO 37/11-15)

**Mr McCarthy:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ceist seven. Question 7. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Fair play to Kieran. I welcome your positive use of the Irish language.

A company limited by guarantee known as 2013 World Police and Fire Games Limited has been established by my Department to deliver the games in 2013. The company was registered in Company House on Monday 28 February 2011.

A chairman and board of directors have been appointed, and they are now responsible for taking forward the delivery of the games. Following a competition, a chief executive for 2013 World Police and Fire Games Limited has been appointed and will take up the post on 21 June.

**Mr McCarthy:** I thank the Minister for her response. With 2013 just around the corner, can the Minister assure the House that there will be sufficient facilities for competitors and the huge amount of visitors who will come to Northern Ireland for the 2013 Police and Fire Games?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** We are awaiting plans coming forward from the World Police and Fire Games and the company. There are huge perceptions about the Olympics, and it is vitally important that we ensure that we get this right. There are

benefits for our economy, for the North and for people who are participating in the event.

**Mr I McCrea:** Anyone in the Chamber who knows me will know that I will try to be as parochial as I can in looking into issues in my constituency. If no venues have been chosen yet, can the Minister give my constituents some type of assurance that she will consider Mid Ulster as a possible area for those games to be held in?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** In fairness to the Member who asked the question, he was consistent in the previous mandate and is continuing to be in this one. He has every right to be parochial, because that has put him where he is.

I am concerned that all parts of the North will benefit from this event, and, although decisions on where the events will be held have still to be taken, there are still opportunities for all parts to benefit. Again, local councils should consider what they can do to maximise the benefits to their areas, because this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

**Mr Flanagan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Leas Cheann Comhairle. The Minister answered my question.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** Can the Minister outline how many countries and athletes will participate in the games?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I cannot at this stage; I do not have any details. I know that the sectors that are involved are the police, the Prison Service and the Fire and Rescue Service. I do not have the exact details of how many people will participate and the countries that they will represent.

### Ulster-Scots Agency

8. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding, in total, has been cut from the Community and Ulster-Scots Group and reallocated to the running costs of the Ulster-Scots Agency over the last three years. (AQO 38/11-15)

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** From 2008 to 2010, the Ulster-Scots Agency budget was reduced from £3·315 million to £3·202 million, a reduction of 3·4%. Over that period, the funding awarded as grants to community groups and other qualifying organisations increased from £1·32 million to

£1·8 million, an increase of 8·6%. Over the three-year period, the amount that was spent on administration costs rose slightly, from £1·11 million to £1·14 million. During that period, the agency significantly reduced expenditure on marketing and promotion, from £654,000 to £138,000.

**Mr Craig:** I thank the Minister for that comprehensive answer. Will she join me in congratulating the agency on reducing its overheads to deliver for the people on the ground? It can be used as an example for other organisations.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I totally agree. An organisation that has gone through a rigorous and robust process to reduce what are seen as internal costs to ensure that those are targeted and directed towards front line delivery has to be congratulated. Through my deliberations with the Ulster-Scots Agency, I intend to find out how it did that. I hope to apply the same sort of governance procedures and the same sort of attention to the service users that it has done.

## Education

### Education: Parental Choice

1. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Education to outline how his Department's policy on education embraces and respects parental choice. (AQO 46/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My Department's education policy most obviously embraces and respects parental choice in the area of school admission. The open enrolment policy in legislation provides a framework for all preschool and school admissions. That framework ensures that parents' preferences for preschools and schools are met to the maximum possible degree. According to that framework, parents are able to express an unlimited order of preference for the preschools, primary schools and post-primary schools that they wish their child to attend. Education and library boards are then required by law to process those preferences in that order until an application is successful.

**2.30 pm**

The only limit constraining the degree to which the admissions process may meet parental preference is the physical capacity of preschools and schools. That is defined, for the purposes of admissions, by individual school number limits that are set annually by the Department of Education (DE) in accordance with the legislative framework. That limit will mean that some parents' preferences cannot be met, and that is always unfortunate. However, the most recent figures available show that the typical rate at which the framework delivers on the first preferences of parents is 98% in admissions to primary schools and 88% in admissions to post-primary schools.

**Mr Allister:** The Minister comes to the House with platitudes about respecting parental choice. However, is the truth not that his cornerstone policy of destroying the grammar schools and denying a legitimate transfer process is built on the destruction of parental choice? When will Her Majesty's Minister of Education give paramountcy to parental choice in the very important matter of children being allowed to attend schools of choice and school types of choice through a process of choice?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am actually a Minister of the people. If the Member opposite wishes to be a subject, that is perfectly up to him, but I am the Minister of the people. I carry that title with pride.

The Member said that I was destroying parental choice. Where exactly is the parental choice in children having to sit five tests? Where is the parental choice in 10- and 11-year-old — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. Minister, resume your seat. I remind Members that this is Question Time, not a debate. In any case, no one should be shouting from a sedentary position.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Where is the parental choice in 10- and 11-year-old children being not only selected but rejected by schools? There is no parental choice there. My focus as Education Minister, as was the case with the previous Minister, Caitríona Ruane, is on academic excellence, tackling underachievement in the education system and ensuring that, through our education system, we produce young people who not only value themselves — it is vital that they value

themselves — but become valuable members of society. We will continue on that course.

**Mr Storey:** I welcome the Minister to his first Question Time. Will he give the House a categorical assurance that, when he considers the rights of parents and the choices that they make, the schools that their children attend will not, as happened under the previous Minister, be demonised in any way or looked on as schools that should not be in existence? Will the Minister give an assurance in the House today that he will ensure that, as a priority, he meets the needs of children who attend special schools and have special educational needs? I refer particularly to the disgraceful situation in my constituency in Castle Tower School.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member, and I welcome him back and congratulate him on retaining his position as Chair of the Committee for Education. I look forward to working with him and the Education Committee over the coming months and years.

I do not accept the Member's terminology about the work of the previous Minister. Our function has never been to demonise any school. We want to ensure that schools open up their doors and resources to the local communities that they serve and to local pupils and parents, so that everyone can have access to a first-rate high-quality education system.

The Member's other points were about special educational needs and special schools. Certainly, by right, we have to ensure that we service and fund those schools correctly and that, when it comes to new capital builds, we push the boat out and ensure that we can achieve the maximum with the limited capital resources that we have.

I am aware of issues that relate to the school that the Member mentioned. I have agreed to visit the school with him at a later date. We will proceed with that visit and discuss matters further. I assure him that, as was the case with the previous Minister of Education, I will do everything in my power and with my limited budget to ensure that special educational needs are a high priority.

**Ms Boyle:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate the Minister on his new post and, indeed, on today's Question Time. Is he aware of media reports that GL Assessment papers were seen by some pupils

before they sat the exam? Does he believe that that undermines the unregulated testing system?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am certainly aware of media reports on the matter, and my Department is investigating it. I await further information on documentation, which I hope has been forwarded to my Department by the source who also brought the issue to the media. Those who set about putting forward unregulated exams had a responsibility not only to individual children but to schools and broader society to ensure that those tests were set in a professional and well-managed way. I am deeply concerned about media reports on the possibility that some children were given an advantage in tests by seeing papers before other children. I intend to return to the matter. I will keep the House informed of my Department's investigations.

**Mr McDevitt:** How does the Minister intend to uphold the principle of parental choice in light of the Budget that his party and the DUP put through the previous Assembly? Will he confirm to the House whether all schools that are running in Northern Ireland will remain open for the next four years, or will he, in fact, preside over the closure of significant numbers of schools, thus reducing parental choice in the region?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member for his question. He is referring to the Executive Budget, which was passed by the previous Assembly and which we are working with in the current tenure. In years 2, 3 and 4 in particular, my Department is presented with a difficult budget. However, the Member should not equate the difficult budget with the current school estate. A number of factors determine whether schools remain open, the main one being parental choice. If parents decide not to send their children to a particular school, the numbers in that school fall. When the number of pupils attending a school falls, the income that goes into that school also falls. It reaches a certain critical point at which it is incumbent on and important for all educationalists, including the Committee for Education, of which, I believe, Mr McDevitt is now a member, to look at that school not only from a constituency perspective or with a view to battering the Minister over the head but from the perspective of ensuring that children in the school receive a first-rate, first-class education.

At present, a number of schools are in a critical condition. The Department and the boards will work with those schools and support them. However, when it comes to the crucial decision as to whether a school should stay open to save my blushes or should close to ensure that its children receive a quality education elsewhere, I will take the blushes and ensure that those children receive a first-rate quality education elsewhere.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Questions 10 and 14 have been withdrawn. Both questions require a written answer.

### **Foyle and Londonderry College and Ebrington Primary School**

2. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the proposed move of Foyle and Londonderry College and Ebrington Primary School to a new site in Clooney. (AQO 47/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** Foyle College and Ebrington Primary School are two major capital investments that remain on my Department's investment delivery plan. The proposed site at Clooney was acquired in December 2009. A stage C submission of initial sketch plans and costs for both schools was approved by the Department on 21 March 2011. The Executive Budget, however, highlights significant reductions in capital resources for education during the next four years, which will have a detrimental effect on the Department's ability to deliver a school building programme. It will, therefore, be important to consider how the limited capital funds that are available should be deployed on a strategic and prioritised basis to address the most pressing needs and to secure maximum educational benefits for children and young people. That work will be a priority for me and my officials in the coming months.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I thank the Minister and welcome him to the Dispatch Box. I understand and appreciate the dilemma that the Minister faces, but, last week, I met the chair of the board of governors and the principal of Foyle and Londonderry College, who made it clear to me that the project started in 1995. It is a long time in moving. In 2001, I attended a meeting in the city regarding a number of Departments looking at the three-way educational development, involving the university, the expansion of the northern campus and St

Mary's College, a secondary school that has since moved. Minister, given the importance that the college and the parents place on this newbuild programme, would you be kind enough to meet the chair of the board of governors, the principal and myself to discuss the project?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Yes, of course I am happy to meet you and a delegation from the college. One of the reasons why it is important to have a local Administration is that it gives accessibility to the citizens we serve. I am acutely aware of the frustration and disappointment not only of schools such as the college in Derry but of others across the North. Not only am I the Education Minister, I am an MLA for a constituency, and I am aware of the difficulties and pressures placed on schools that are awaiting builds, especially in the longer term.

I am also aware that this project is part of a wider development for an economic brief for Derry. If the build goes ahead, Magee College can move in, and other things will fall into place. I am aware of all the potential that it has. However, we are working with the realities of a constrained budget. I recently took the opportunity to visit Lisneal College in Derry. It is a fine school with a fine intake and leadership. I had discussions with the board of governors. We have a £17 million project sitting there, and we have to ensure that we protect that. With the changing demographics and the fall in numbers across the board, it would be foolish of me and the Administration to allow that £17 million project to go to waste and to decline over the years. When we are coming to final decisions around Foyle College, we will have to ensure that the school moves forward, that Magee College is allowed to move in and that we protect Lisneal College.

## DE: Procurement

3. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Education what plans his Department has to incorporate social objectives into procurement policy in the 2011-15 period.  
(AQO 48/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** My Department ensures that procurement for capital projects is carried out in line with the public procurement policy, as approved by the Executive in 2002, and in accordance with the principles of best practice. Economic, social and environmental strategies and initiatives compatible with existing EU and

international law are integrated into all current procurement. That integration is transparent and aims not to discriminate directly or indirectly between suppliers. The Executive's policy commitments, including equality, sustainable development and environmental standards are also incorporated into the procurement process.

The education sector utilises the Central Procurement Directorate's standard major works procurement documentation, which takes into consideration the need to provide opportunities for small to medium-sized enterprises and social economy enterprises to compete for education projects. That documentation is revised on an ongoing basis to take account of changes in legislation, guidance and matters endorsed by the Executive and the procurement board.

**Ms S Ramsey:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like others, I welcome the Minister to his first Question Time and wish him well in his portfolio. In previous questions and answers there was a mention of some projects that are ongoing. You are aware of the benefits of introducing social requirements. Have you plans to expand on the opportunities afforded by procurement, given the current economic difficulties?

**Mr O'Dowd:** My predecessor brought in a number of reviews in relation to procurement across the education boards. My departmental officials are further exploring those to see how we can expand that area. As part of their examinations, I have raised with them the issue not only of how we protect SMEs but of how we should expand their role. I also want them to look at how we can use the spending power of Departments to ensure that we tackle social disadvantage and long-term unemployment in all those matters. I hope to report to the House at a later stage. I suspect that it will be after the summer recess before we know how the procurement policy will roll out. Suggestions on how we tackle social disadvantage will certainly be contained in that document, and I am open to suggestions on that.

## 2.45 pm

**Mr Craig:** When it comes to including the social enterprise aspect of procurement, does the Minister agree that it is better to do so with a central procurement policy? If so, does he agree that the idea outlined by the Department to devolve to schools the power to procure

some services, as opposed to that being done centrally, is contradictory?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Any changes we make will be done in consultation with the Central Procurement Directorate and in line with Executive policies, principles and papers. If the Member has any specific areas of concern, I am more than happy to take further details of those. I assure him that any policies we bring forward will be in line with the Executive's thinking and with the way in which they are moving forward. My Department — I can speak only for it — has a major financial contribution to make to the economy, and I think that that contribution has to be used wisely in a bid to tackle social disadvantage. As I stated in an answer to the previous questioner, we are looking at procurement across the board, and I will bring a report about that to the Assembly. However, I am more than happy to discuss the matter further with the Member.

**Mr Eastwood:** First, I congratulate the Minister on his recent appointment. What plans does he have to incorporate fair trade requirements into school meals procurement?

**Mr O'Dowd:** That matter is the responsibility of the purchasing body, be it the school or the board. I certainly encourage all bodies with access to resources to include fair trade in their purchasing policies.

## Teachers: Employment

4. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to assist newly qualified teachers in obtaining full-time positions. (AQO 49/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am keen to ensure that newly qualified teachers are afforded every opportunity to obtain full-time positions. The number and type of vacancies for which newly qualified teachers may be eligible to apply is primarily influenced by the decisions made by schools on the basis of the funding they receive under the local management of schools common funding formula arrangements. The decision on whom to appoint to a vacant post is a matter for the board of governors and/or the relevant employing authority in line with current employment legislation.

I am aware that newly qualified teachers gain vital experience providing substitute cover and filling temporary vacancies. However, I am concerned that schools continuing the practice

of re-employing prematurely retired teachers are denying newly qualified teachers the opportunity to gain employment in a temporary or substitute capacity. My Department has taken action and plans to take further measures to encourage schools to give preference to newly qualified teachers over prematurely retired ones. That includes proposed amendments to the common funding scheme for the local management of schools, on which consultation closed on May 11.

**Mr Ross:** One of the many failures of the previous Minister was around the issue of trying to get newly graduated teachers into full-time work. There is an old saying that, if you always do what you have always done, you will always get what you have always got. I am afraid that, listening to the Minister's answer, we have not heard much new. What new thinking is the new Education Minister bringing to this Department, and what new policies does he plan to bring in to help those newly qualified teachers?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I could bat that one back to you: in your questions and response, I did not hear any new proposals. I sat through many debates in the previous Assembly, where no concrete proposals came forward from any section of the Floor. Indeed, I am more than willing to examine any proposals on the matter that come forward from either side of the House.

The fact of the matter is this: the previous Minister did take action on the issue. She put constraints on how the employing bodies — the boards of governors — should employ newly qualified teachers and, indeed, prematurely retired teachers, and that is having an effect. There was previous mention of an initiative taken in Scotland, and that is under review. It would cost the Executive £12 million to give newly qualified teachers a year's guaranteed employment. The counter-argument to that is that those teachers will not be on benefits. However, the fact of the matter is that the Executive would not get a return in the benefits system and would lose that £12 million. If we can negotiate a package that ensures that, if we saved money for the Chancellor's Budget around benefits, they were prepared to give us £12 million, whole new avenues would be opened up.

We are dealing with the budget that we have. The previous Minister took forward initiatives that are showing results. If the Member or anyone else in the House has proposals to present, please feel free to do so.



**Mr Flanagan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I take this opportunity to congratulate the Minister on his appointment. I wish him all the best for the future, and, as a member of the Education Committee, I look forward to working with him.

I want to pay tribute to a primary 6 pupil from St Columban's school in Belcoo, who, along with students from Ballinamallard Primary School, visited Parliament Buildings today. We went to a meeting with them, and one of the questions they asked me was what measures were being taken to prohibit or restrict the re-employment of prematurely retired teachers and to encourage the employment of newly elected teachers.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I suspect that you are a pupil of Barry McElduff, who is quick to mention his local constituency and constituents.

Measures have been put in place on the rates of pay available to newly retired teachers and on the responsibility of boards of governors to pick up the difference. The previous Minister set in train a review of locally managed school funding, the equality impact assessment of which ended on 11 May. My Department is reviewing that. When those results become clear, I will report to the Assembly on what, if any, other measures we can take.

Boards of governors are made up of teachers and members of the community who do an excellent job in the majority of cases. As local representatives, we should encourage boards of governors to take a principled stand and to ensure that they use their power to assist newly qualified teachers to obtain employment.

**Mr Lunn:** I wish the Minister well in his new position. Unfortunately, my question is on the same topic of substitute teachers. The Minister said that the previous Minister had been able to place constraints on boards of governors. However, the only constraint of which I am aware is the requirement not to have a level rate of pay, whether that is for a newly qualified teacher or a recently retired one. Does the Minister have any plans to give that policy some teeth so that he can enforce the position that a newly qualified teacher must be preferred to a recently voluntarily retired teacher?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member for that question. I understand — I am willing to be corrected — that it would not be legal to discriminate against prematurely retired

teachers applying for any post. They are perfectly entitled in law to apply for those posts. We could not put a legal barrier in their way. The constraints on pay are having an effect on how boards of governors view such matters. The debates in the House and the media and public debate on those matters have also had an influence. The review of LMS, which I mentioned to the previous questioner, was completed on 11 May. When its findings have been sifted through, I will report to the Assembly in a more detailed manner on what, if any, further actions we can take.

### Education: All-Ireland Co-operation

5. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the ongoing North/South co-operation study, including any further areas identified for all-Ireland co-operation in education. (AQO 50/11-15)

### Education Ministers

11. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Education when he intends to meet with his counterpart in the Dublin Government. (AQO 56/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I shall answer questions 5 and 11 together.

The aim of the study is to appraise the key themes and patterns of historical co-operation in the education sector and to consider areas of future collaboration between the two Departments. Both Departments have received a draft copy of part 1 of the report, which is under consideration. The report describes the ongoing work by the education bodies, schools and youth organisations, North and South. We need to build on that for the benefit of all our children and young people and of our economies.

On 3 June, I met the Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn TD, to discuss the scope of part 2 of the study, which will be a jointly costed action plan. Minister Quinn and I agreed that our respective Departments would work closely on the plan and identify areas with the potential for practical co-operation.

**Mr McKay:** I thank the Minister for his answer and congratulate him on his new appointment.

Further to that answer, will the Minister provide an update on the work involving both Administrations on the autism centre in Middletown?

**Mr O'Dowd:** The autism centre in Middletown has delivered training to more than 7,000 professionals and parents since its training service commenced in December 2007. The research and information service publishes quarterly research bulletins, which are distributed to all schools and relevant agencies, North and South. Recent publications include research on leisure, translations and educational assessments. Until all services can be delivered, the centre has in the interim introduced an advice and guidance service in line with the two Departments' wishes. That has focused on delivering the service to a small number of children in the North and on parental training in the South.

An assessment of current autism services, North and South, has been completed. Informed by that assessment, the Department of Education and the Department of Education and Skills are preparing proposals for the development of the centre for ministerial consideration.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I call Mr Francie Molloy.

**Mr Molloy:** Question 11.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I am sorry, Mr Molloy. Do you have a supplementary question?

**Mr Molloy:** Sorry.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I call Mr Dominic Bradley.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire nua go Tráth na gCeist anseo inniu; agus guím gach rath ar a chuid oibre sa toadhcháí. I welcome the new Minister to his first Question Time and wish him every success in the future.

As regards the study mentioned in the original question, does it address the need to harmonise safeguarding policies across Ireland, and, if so, what actions have been taken to date?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat for your kind remarks and good wishes.

The study is retrospective and looks at the co-operation that has taken place between the Departments over the years. In one sense, I suppose, you have to know where you have

come from to know where you are going. It is that kind of study. I am more interested in how we move forward. Politicians are often lambasted if they look back too much. In some senses, this study could be lambasted for looking back too much, but it is an important piece of work because it allows us to understand what work has been carried out and what work we can do.

As far as protection across the island is concerned, there is — again, I am prepared to be corrected — no specific mention of this work, but I will be keen to examine with my counterpart in Dublin how we can ensure that child safety is at the centre of all our policies and that we have policies to ensure that the border does not get in the way of protecting young children.

**Mr Cree:** I welcome the Minister and thank him for his answers so far. Does he agree that the significant differences between the examination systems in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic make it easier, more profitable and more appropriate to seek co-operation with other UK regions that have an identical examination structure to our own?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I assure the Member that I have no phobia about working with England, Scotland and Wales, and I am more than happy to meet the relevant Ministers in those jurisdictions. The fact is that we are on an island, and it is much easier for people to travel back and forth here. When you are living in the border constituencies, whether you are a pupil or an educationalist, it is much easier on many occasions to use the services or centres of educational excellence on either side of the border. It is a piece of work that is worth looking at, both from an educational and an economic point of view.

In my conversation with Minister Quinn, he told me that the South is planning to build 20 new schools — not replacement schools but new schools — because the population is growing. Therefore, it is important that I, as Education Minister for this jurisdiction, ensure that we have harmonisation across the island. With respect to previous questions about how we can get work for student teachers, if someone close to us is building 20 new schools, I want to be in on that to ensure that our teachers are qualified to work in those schools. If it can in any way assist with the budgetary constraints that both Minister Quinn and I face, we want to be in there. However, I am more than happy to

meet and work with the Education Ministers of England, Scotland and Wales.

## Private Members' Business

### Nursery and Preschool Education

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has allowed up to one hour 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes for the 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 for the winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes to speak.

**3.00 pm**

**Mr McDevitt:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to ensure that adequate nursery school provision is available for all children; to conduct an immediate review of current provision to ensure that unmet need in areas of high demand is addressed in advance of the next school year; to undertake a wider review to ensure that there is adequate provision in future years, with increased attention to early years education; and to introduce a statutory right to preschool education.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask Members leaving the Chamber to be quiet.

**Mr McDevitt:** Members might be interested to know that on Tuesday 25 May 2010, the House debated a similar motion to the one that we are about to debate. That motion called for the Department of Education to recognise the need to review the criteria around the allocation of nursery and preschool places. It also called on the Department to acknowledge the fact that, although at a headline figure there would appear to be enough preschool and nursery places for every child needing one in this region, they are not in the right places.

It is with a heavy heart that SDLP Members have felt the need to bring the motion to the Floor of the Assembly again. We believe that a series of basic inequalities face children at a very early age, and those inequalities affect their parents, their families and many people who, through their professional lives, are deeply committed to providing the best possible preschool access to learning for all.

The first inequality is in funding. It is simply not the case that all children accessing preschool education are entitled to the same funding.

We have, effectively, three systems in one, each funded differently and some funded much better than others. The net effect of that is to create a perception that some are better than others. Another inequality is geography, in that some families simply do not have access to an appropriate place close to their home. Today's press reports that families in Ballynahinch have been offered places in Twinbrook, which is hardly a solution to a young family's problem or a young family's desire for their young child to enter into a form of preschool education. In effect, we have a postcode lottery that says that if you live in certain places, you will be fine, and that if you live in other places, you will be in deep trouble.

There is also a perceived inequality in standards, which is fuelled by the inequality in funding and to some extent by the postcode lottery. That is compounded by an inequality in the pay of the people who provide preschool education. Teachers in our nursery schools enjoy the same terms and conditions as other teachers. That is not so in our nursery units, and it is not so at all in our preschools and playschools. What message does that send out about how seriously we take the issue? Does it say to parents and young children that the early years of everyone's education are valued and important to us as an Executive and as legislators, or does it say that we are quite happy for the market to sort this one out? We are quite happy to have some kind of mixed economy in play in which, if the state can get a good deal on the cheap, it will take it, or, if it cannot, it will send people 30 miles to their nearest possible provider.

This year again we have the situation that arises every year, whereby parents all over the region, but more so in some parts than in others, are receiving letters telling them that their children will not get a place. The figures in today's press state that there were 210 unplaced children in the Western Education and Library Board; 158 in the South Eastern Education and Library Board; 133 in the Belfast Education and Library Board; 71 in the North Eastern Education and Library Board; and 38 in the Southern Education and Library Board.

Those children, who are three years old, simply do not have access to a nursery school place this year. It is an improvement on last year; I will give the Minister that. However, it is not an acceptable outcome.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Member for giving way. We run the risk of reading into those statistics that there has been an improvement. In fact, what may have happened is that parents who decided that it was not worthwhile going through the process made other provision. By this time next year, the problem may be much worse.

**Mr McDevitt:** Mr Storey makes a salient point, which leads me on to the question of criteria. Bearing in mind the basic inequalities in the system, the second issue that the motion seeks to address directly is that the criteria could not be more out of kilter with the need. Before speaking about the specifics of the criteria, I will outline one thing that depresses me. In 2006, the Department of Education published a report called 'Outcomes from the Review of Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland'. In that report, the Department expressed concerns about what are known as the social disadvantage criteria. Many parents in working families will argue that those criteria discriminate against them and exclude them from the opportunity to access nursery-school places. That is a problem in itself. If those criteria do the right thing for one section of our community at the expense of another, we have a problem. It is a particular problem when working families in our community are a group who want and could do with access to nursery schools. We have known since 2006 that this has been a problem, yet, for some reason, we doggedly refuse to do anything about it.

We have a second problem. In 2006, the same report identified as questionable the fact that children with birthdays in July and August were a priority. Those children have a preferential position in the application process. The Department acknowledged that it:

*"no longer considers that there is a need for children born between 2nd July and 31st August to receive priority in admission as the current criteria can work against younger children. For example, a child born on 1st July may not get a place in a pre-school setting in its final pre-school year, because older children are given priority. This could lead to a situation where, on starting compulsory primary education, a child born on 1st July (aged 4 years and 2 months) will not have had the opportunity to access pre-school education, whilst a child born on 2nd July, and starting school at the same time (aged 5 years and two months) will have had at least one year's pre-school education."*

In 2006, the Department identified that as a criterion that had to be addressed. What has happened? Absolutely nothing. I would not mind if it was 2007 and we had just got our act together and settled down to devolved government, but it is not. It is 2011, and we have had devolved government for four-odd years. We all want the Minister to explain why, although we have known about the problem for five years, the issues surrounding the allocation of nursery-school places in this region have still not been addressed.

I do not have much time left, but I would like to make one final point about the basic right of a child to access pre-school education. I come from a party that defends the rights of children, and I thought that the Minister belonged to a party that does the same. However, his amendment seeks not to uphold the right of a child to pre-school education, but to introduce a conditional right that states that we will think about allowing kids to have a pre-school education if we can afford it. That is an indictment of anyone who does not believe that the rights of children should be elevated to a position of absolute sanctity and prominence in our society.

I hope that, when Members walk through the Lobbies to vote in this debate, they will, as well as supporting the need for improved criteria and allocation, acknowledge the basic right that every child should have: that irrespective of a child's colour, creed or socio-economic background, the state should guarantee him or her the right to access to preschool education at age three if he or she so wishes. That should be done in statute. That is what this motion seeks to do, and it was on that basis that I was happy to propose it.

**Mr Flanagan:** I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "nursery school" and insert

*"and preschool provision are available for all children; to conduct an immediate review of current provision to ensure that unmet need in areas of high demand is addressed in advance of the next school year; to undertake a wider review to ensure that there is adequate provision in future years, with increased attention to early years education and with a focus within the review on the educational benefits and financial implications of bringing forward legislation giving a statutory right to preschool education."*

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the amendment. My party has some concerns about the impact that the motion would have on the provision of preschool education across the North, if it were to be agreed without amendment. Preschool education in my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone is very well served by the community and voluntary sector, and that is particularly so in rural areas such as Garrison in the heart of the west and places such as Kinawley and Killyman. Those organisations often operate with limited space or in shared facilities but always with staff who are well trained and qualified, dedicated to the children whom they care for and passionate about providing a quality service. This year, almost 8,000 places out of a total of 22,500 were funded to the community or voluntary sector, which shows the extent to which we are reliant on that sector to provide a world-class education service to our children. If it were to be agreed without amendment, the motion would effectively do away with that provision, leaving rural communities in my constituency struggling to compete for a quality service in a scenario in which there are only four statutory providers.

Preschool education must be delivered locally. It is not feasible for three- and four-year-olds to travel 10, 15 or even 20 miles for a morning session, nor is it possible for their parents to get them there. If all preschool places were to be based in a statutory nursery setting, there would be a minimum annual cost of £30 million, and that, in itself, is a very low estimate. There would also be a requirement for an initial capital investment of at least £40 million to establish the required number of new nursery units. The consequence of that is that much-needed funding would be removed from the community and voluntary sector, which not only delivers a fantastic service, but does —

**Mr D Bradley:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Flanagan:** I will not. It also does so at great value to the taxpayer.

**Mr D Bradley:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McDevitt:** Give way.

**Mr Flanagan:** I will give way. Go on.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh míle maith agat. I think that the Member has misinterpreted the terms of the motion, which calls for children to have

a statutory right to a preschool place but not necessarily a right to such a place in a statutory setting. That is a distinction that the Member needs to bear in mind.

**Mr Flanagan:** I thank the Member for his intervention. There are two key elements to the amendment that we tabled. The first of those is an attempt to change the motion's reference to "nursery school provision" to "nursery school and preschool provision". The second element comes at the end of the text of the amendment, and I will deal with that at the end of my contribution.

Just this week, my wife and I were discussing where we should send our 17-month-old child to preschool. We have thought long and hard about it, and we have decided that Rosie will attend the local preschool in Tempo, which is provided by a community and voluntary organisation. When I attended nursery school, I attended one run by a community and voluntary organisation, and that same organisation is still in Garrison providing the same service and the same world-class education system that it always has.

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Flanagan:** No. I wish to use this opportunity to pay tribute to the vast number of community and voluntary preschools right across the North. I was delighted to attend an event in Enniskillen town hall earlier this year at which the cathaoirleach of Fermanagh District Council held a reception to mark the achievements of those community and voluntary preschools that had received accreditation from the Early Years organisation in Fermanagh. I was delighted to see so many volunteers from across the county attending that event, and their passion and their dedication to the children was clear for all to see.

In 1997, the North had the lowest level of nursery provision and provision for under-fives in these islands, and that was despite the fact that our children start school younger than elsewhere. In 1997, the figure was 45%, whereas in 2009-2010, the comparable figure was 97%. Therefore, tremendous advancements have been made, and we are all keen to ensure that further improvements are made.

That progress was made possible only through the partnership approach that has been in place to date. We are all aware that spending money earlier in young people's lives is much more

cost-effective and more effective in raising the standards of our education system.

The programme for international student assessment (PISA) has shown:

*"Fifteen-year-old students who had attended pre-primary education perform better on PISA than those who did not, even after accounting for their socio-economic backgrounds."*

PISA also highlights the impact of parents playing a positive role in their child's educational development, particularly when it comes to reading. Parents need to be encouraged and supported to become more engaged with education and need to be reassured that it makes not one bit of difference who they are; it is what they do that makes the difference.

### 3.15 pm

The motion sets out ambitious targets for the provision of preschool education, and rightly so. At this stage, we have all been convinced of the benefits of early years education and investment in that sector. Although preschool education may not be compulsory, the fact that parents recognise its value is very welcome.

There should be a place for every child whose parents wish it, and that is currently departmental policy. In the past few years, a significant number of children have been unable to get a place in their preferred preschool as a result of oversubscription. The responsibility for the planning and implementation of preschools lies with each education and library board, which carries out annual reviews of provision at a local level.

I ask Members from all sides of the House to support the amendment.

**Mr S Anderson:** I welcome the motion and am happy to support it, but it is a great pity that such a motion is needed at all. These issues have been around for a long time, yet we are still calling for the Minister of Education to act.

As we know, the previous Minister was rarely short of words. Indeed, she could waffle for hours in English and Irish and still say nothing. It was all talk and no action. That is why we have a motion on nursery provision before us today. This motion is, indeed, a testament to Caitriona Ruane's failure. I note that the Minister's party colleagues have tabled an amendment. From its wording, it seems that

they also accept that we have had four years of failure in the area of nursery provision.

However, I suppose we should be thankful for small mercies. The long-awaited early years strategy is making some progress, but we now need to move the debate on and try to implement that five-year strategy. Sadly, we seem to be moving at a snail's pace, and the same problems are still with us. The policy and funding of nursery provision leave a lot to be desired. There are anomalies right across the system. We need clear leadership from the Minister of Education and his Department.

Feelings among parents have been running so high that some have threatened legal action against the previous Minister. Indeed, many are of the opinion that there is a legal entitlement to a nursery-school place, but that is not the case. The motion proposes a statutory right, but that is qualified in the amendment. Although I understand the funding implications, we should aim to move towards the establishment of a statutory right.

As I said, there are anomalies right across the system. We hear regularly in the media, and I hear in conversations with constituents and others, about how the most popular schools are heavily oversubscribed and how up to 1,500 young children are left without a place. Some children are being offered places many miles from home, as was stated by Mr McDevitt. I think that he said 30 miles, but it may be as far away as 60 miles.

Let me illustrate that by referring to a case in my Upper Bann constituency, where a mother recently failed to get a place for her three-year-old daughter at three Portadown nursery schools. She has been offered a place at Crossmaglen, in south Armagh. She said in the press:

*"there aren't enough places in Portadown and we just can't drive her to somewhere like Crossmaglen each day. It just can't be done and I'm not the only one in this situation, I know of other parents who are in the same boat."*

That mother's case highlights the severe shortage of nursery provision in the Portadown area, and that really does need to be addressed. I warmly welcome the proposal for a new nursery unit at Bocombra Primary School, and the additional units at Seagoe and Portadown Integrated primary schools. It is vital

that progress is made as quickly as possible in those areas.

I also understand that the consultation on the proposed additional unit at Waringstown has just ended. There is a severe shortage of places in Waringstown, and I urge the Minister to look favourably on this proposal or, better still, approve it without further delay.

The statutory basis for the allocation of places needs to be reviewed and amended. At present, children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are given preference over other children. That means that many children whose parents work hard are denied access to nursery provision simply because they do not meet the criteria. That has created a two-tier system.

The statutory arrangements also favour children whose fourth birthday falls in July or August. The basis for that is that older children are likely to benefit more from the preschool nursery experience. That might well be the case and children should be old enough to benefit from the preschool experience, but we should look at that area again to see how we can make it fairer for all children in the three- and four-year age brackets. At present, a child who turns four in August is more likely to get a place than one who turns four a few days later.

Nursery education is not just a luxury but a key foundation stone of our education system.

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

**Mr S Anderson:** The inequalities and discrepancies in the system ought to be sorted out now. Failure to do so will store up problems for years to come.

**Mr McNarry:** This debate could be a scene-setter for developing new opportunities. We will support the amendment to further that cause.

Ulster Unionists are unequivocal in their support for early intervention as a means of dealing, in a fundamental root-and-branch way, with many of the defects in education that we all know surface later, such as literacy and numeracy. Our constant and consistent record has been in demanding that early intervention be a key underpinning element of any new Programme for Government. We have persistently asked for preschool education to be a universal entitlement, and it is to that end that we have pushed for a cross-cutting early years strategy for all children aged up to six, offering combined

and integrated support for children and families on issues that relate to parenting skills as well as to education itself. To sustain that, we previously suggested a cross-departmental early years fund to help finance such an early years strategy. Without such a fund, such a strategy would be pointless.

Education is a partnership between parents and schools; they need to function together and not apart. The emphasis of this House has to be on prioritising the children's interests. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of public policy not just sustaining a joined-up approach to education but using the huge and free resource that parents represent. Meeting adequate, localised nursery provision is essential to giving children the right start in their lives.

We need to bring the continuing old-fashioned approach to an abrupt end, because it does not get results; it has never really got results. We need to think and plan far better our future courses of action in early years education and in other fields. "Integration of approach" should be the catchword that we adopt.

I suggest that the relevant authorities use birth registers as a point of reference not only to assess how many children locally are entitled to nursery and preschool education but to validate those who are applying. A postcode lottery has been referred to. An example of that is that pointing families from Ballynahinch to places in Twinbrook or Newtownards is outrageous. I would love to know where the places are in Newtownards, because families are telling me how difficult it is to find them in their and my constituency.

I throw into this debate the issue of families coping with children's pre-nursery provision, which, certainly for most of them, is not free. Rather, for some families, the cost is equal to their monthly mortgage payment. Those young families need to be congratulated for their persistence and dedication in helping to maintain high education standards for their children while leading a responsible economic lifestyle. Perhaps in his oversight of the immediate issues impacting on those young families, the Minister will look at a form of easement for pre-nursery provision. Perhaps he will also address the serious concerns of parents with children who are making the transition from nursery to primary school and

who feel penalised by the criteria set, especially when they know that they have personally funded their child at pre-nursery school.

The Ulster Unionists want to see a people's agenda brought forward in this place. A big part of that is delivery — delivery on time — of real quantitative and qualitative change in how things are organised and delivered, including early years education. I welcome the Minister to the debate and look forward to hearing his approach on this important issue, among others.

In conclusion, in this place we cannot curtail, deny or diminish any opportunities open to children, and, where they are not accessible to children, we must widen, not reduce, access to those opportunities.

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

**Mrs Cochrane:** I am very pleased to be able to debate this matter in my maiden speech. The lack of adequate preschool provision has been a real issue all over Northern Ireland, particularly in the constituency that I represent, East Belfast. Over the past couple of years, I have spent many hours with parents, trying to negotiate the system and assist them in finding a place for their child. It is a matter that is very close to me on a personal level, too. Indeed, due to the timing of this debate, I am unable to take my three-year-old to meet her nursery teacher and her classmates for the incoming year. However, I realise that I was fortunate enough to get a place for my daughter, and I understand the stress placed on other parents who have failed to find a place. That is why I am here today to support the motion.

Other Members have already mentioned the benefits of a quality preschool education experience, so I will not go over those points. However, it is important to underline the fact that quality provision leads to a reduction of at-risk status for developing special educational needs. Surely that strengthens the economic case for moving to a statutory right to a quality preschool education place, as special educational needs are expensive in relation to individuals' development and public finances.



What do we mean by quality preschool education? The EPPNI report of 2006 provides clear evidence that children benefit more from nursery school, nursery classes or playgroups than from other types of preschool provision. Those findings were supported by the chief inspector's report. However, in planning for the future, we need to recognise the role played by the voluntary and private sectors, too, and give them the opportunity, where necessary, to increase the quality of their provision. Perhaps a move towards consistency in qualifications and remuneration of staff and the level of early years specialist support would lead to recognised standards across all settings.

Planning of the provision is key to ensuring that needs are met, and the preschool education expansion programme has planned on the basis that 10% of parents do not wish to send their child to a preschool. Will the Minister detail when the figure was arrived at and whether he thinks it is accurate? Has his Department investigated the reason why parents are choosing not to apply for a preschool place when, surely, the benefits are undisputed? Perhaps it is because timings are too difficult to co-ordinate with work patterns, or perhaps parents are unhappy with the standard of provision in their area. Or is it because places are too far away and it is more hassle to try to get a young child ready and transported to a place for two and a half hours?

Many parents also complain about the selection criteria, including the fact, as has already been mentioned, that children from socially deprived backgrounds receive priority over others. I have spent many hours explaining that rationale to parents, and I feel that the only way to prevent it from still causing upset is to ensure the availability of a place for every child.

Those are all issues that need to be looked at and addressed in any review process. However, I would be concerned if the Department were simply to conduct another review process and not actually implement the recommendations. It has already been stated that, since 2006, the Department no longer considers that priority should be given to children with birthdays in July and August, yet that admissions criterion is still in place. Indeed, in my constituency, it has allowed children who live 12 miles from a setting to secure a place at the expense of children who live within a two-mile radius.

Perhaps the Minister will indicate whether that will be removed from the application process for 2012-13.

### 3.30 pm

I would like to take this opportunity to put on record my thanks to the previous Education Minister for meeting Alliance representatives last September and taking on board the proposal to amend the application process to ensure that children in their immediate preschool year receive priority over those in their penultimate year. That has certainly made a difference in east Belfast this year. However, despite the change, there was still a worrying oversubscription rate. Thankfully, by working proactively with the Department, the education and library board and parents in east Belfast, I have managed to ensure further places at St Colmcille's, a playgroup with an excellent reputation for quality preschool provision. That is an example of how the problem can be somewhat addressed in the short term.

However, we must plan for the future. We must plan for the best for our children and deal with the resulting financial implications. The Department may have to take difficult decisions; for example, to convert some full-time places into part-time places to try to match preschool provision with the number of P1 places. Indeed, research indicates that there are no additional benefits for children who attend preschool on a full-time basis compared with those who attend part-time. Therefore, the arguments for full-time preschool have to be looked at within the social context for the family and the economy. Perhaps the funding formula could be applied to enable smaller groups in rural settings to be sustained.

We should also consider what full-time means. We are talking about four-and-a-half hours.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Time is up.

**Mrs Cochrane:** What many parents will come to realise is that that will not make any difference if they are paying for day care. Parents do not want, and our children do not need, review after review.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Time is up.

**Mrs Cochrane:** May I just finish?

Let us give a commitment that action will be taken to implement recommendations and ensure that our children have the best start —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Sorry; I know that it is your maiden speech, but you are still confined to five minutes.

**Mr Givan:** I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion and the amendment.

I agree with other Members' comments about early years intervention. Early years intervention is critical, particularly in identifying young children with a learning difficulty. There is an opportunity in a nursery school or preschool to, hopefully, identify any learning difficulties and take action. Indeed, I was suspended from the South Eastern Education and Library Board because we refused to accept a budget that removed the assessment of children in nursery school. Hopefully that board can be reconstituted under the new Minister rather than having three commissioners, at a rate of £500 a day, running the board for tens of thousands of children. I digress.

It has been pointed out to me that some parents believe that a formal nursery school provides a greater structure than voluntary preschool facilities. The Department should take that on board and provide those parents with greater information and greater confidence that preschool, outside of a traditional nursery school-type facility, is an appropriate means by which children can get a preschool place and allay some of the concerns that have been raised.

In my constituency, almost 100 children in Lisburn did not have any of their indicated choices met. Today, I have been informed that there are still children who, having gone through the second stage, have not been allocated any preschool provision in Lisburn. The Department needs to look at that issue. I ask the Minister to give me an assurance that, if required, the Department will be able to assist the board in ensuring that the children who still do not have a place, the number of which I believe is now down to single figures, get a place.

The Member for East Belfast also raised a concern about the criteria. I, like her, have spent considerable periods listening to irate parents trying to understand why the criteria favours those on benefits in getting their first choice. Indeed, a nursery school in Lisburn had 78 places, 26 of which were full-time. I think that 19 of those 26 full-time places have been filled based on the criteria favouring those on benefits. That has caused some consternation

among working families. They feel that they are being discriminated against because they work and that the criteria have disadvantaged them. That is a particular grievance which would not exist if every child were able to get a place. Obviously, families from socially deprived backgrounds need assistance, but the current criteria disadvantage working families.

**Mr McDevitt:** I concur with the Member's argument that, if there were a place for every child, the question of criteria would not be as big a deal. Therefore, is it not the case that the best way to ensure a place for every child is by endowing every child with a statutory right to such a place?

**Mr Givan:** It is obvious that there should be a statutory right. We support the amendment because we believe that it is critical that resources are available for that provision. It should be a priority for the Department of Education and the Executive. Ultimately, however, financial resources are always necessary to empower us to do what we want to do. Every child should get a place; that would ensure that there would be none of the concerns that have been expressed to me by working parents. The situation has an impact on them, because many of them pay for childcare provision as well. If those parents do not get a nursery or preschool place of their choice, that will continue to have an impact on them. That must be addressed.

**Ms Boyle:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the amendment. It is vital for children's development that they receive a high quality of early years education to help them to develop the required social and emotional skills that are essential for their health and well-being. Equally importantly, the education should be delivered alongside parental involvement. Parents also need to be proactive in engaging with education through the early years, as those are a child's formative years.

We all recognise that funding is required to reach areas of high demand for preschool places. That will be a complex issue. In Strabane, in my constituency, there is a rise in demand for preschool places, and parents are finding it difficult to access places in the district. All providers of preschool education are valued equally, and I acknowledge the significant changes in preschool provision since 1997. I

welcome the previous Minister of Education's funding of £200 per child for statutory nursery provision. I believe that we can all agree here today that early intervention is best. The nought-to-six strategy has addressed that issue.

As a Member mentioned earlier, no statistical data is available on future provision. Mechanisms need to be put in place so that data can be collected to ensure that the same issues do not arise year in, year out. We also need to instil confidence in parents that we can provide for the sector. To meet the needs of parents for full- and part-time provision, we need to be flexible. Preschool advisory groups in the education and library boards, whose job it is to plan and implement, need to review provision at local level to ensure that people's unmet needs are provided for and that allocations to voluntary and private sector providers meet the needs of the area. There is no doubt that we all recognise the importance and benefits of good preschool education. I finish by acknowledging the high quality of work provided for our children by dedicated preschool teachers and staff.

**Mr Craig:** I support the motion and the amendment. This issue is very important not just locally but for the wider constituency of Northern Ireland. I read with interest the foreword to the 'Early Years (0-6) Strategy', published by the Department of Education, in which the former Minister said:

*"Early years are vital years in our children's lives. They are unique in terms of children's intellectual, emotional, physical and social development and the formation of children's ability to interact successfully with the world around them, both in early childhood and in later life. They are the springboard for creating confident learners and participative citizens."*

Unfortunately, however, many parents have approached me after their child has been refused not their first but their second and third choice for a preschool place. The process has not been as smooth as it should have been for what is an important transition for any child and an anxious time for any parent. Speaking as a parent — all parents are of the same opinion — early years is the most important stage in a child's development, and we worry about it. We want the best for our children. However, many parents find that they cannot access provision and have to start from scratch once they have been knocked back by the system.

Early years education is a vital part of every child's future. That has been highlighted not only by the Department's early years strategy but in various other reports, including those from the European Commission and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

I have a difficulty with the previous Member saying that the facts and figures are not there — they are. One has only to track the statistics on birth rates to which the Department has access: where children are, the number born and even the sex and orientation of some of them. All that information is held by government, and it is held three years in advance of someone looking for an early years preschool place. Why has the Department got it so wrong? Why is there a complete mismatch of provision for those in need of the service? We have had that situation for two years in a row. I appeal to the new Minister to go back to the Department and bang a few heads together, because there should have been a three-year intervening period for the Department to look at the statistics, match them to areas and say that there is overprovision in some areas and underprovision in others.

As my colleague Mr Givan said, there is serious underprovision in the Lisburn area. Why was that allowed to happen? I will leave that question with the Minister, who I hope will give us some idea of how the Department works out the numbers. Nevertheless, I appeal to him to knock some heads together at the Department and ask those people to use the information and statistics that are available to them.

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

**Mrs Dobson:** I am extremely pleased to have the opportunity to make my maiden speech on nursery provision, an issue about which I feel passionately. I believe that every child should be entitled to a nursery-school place. Therefore, I support the motion and the amendment, and I thank those who tabled the motion for affording me this opportunity to speak. It is both an honour and a privilege to speak to the House, and I will for ever owe a debt of gratitude to the voters of Upper Bann who have bestowed on me this position of service.

**3.45 pm**

In speaking to the debate, I bring to the attention of the House the very personal story of three-year-old Lily-Pyper Davison, who is a little girl from my home village of Waringstown. Lily-Pyper suffers from cystic fibrosis, has two holes in her heart and has to endure a serious kidney condition. Her father has not been able to work due to a serious industrial injury, and her mother is presently training to become a paramedic due to the family health problems. Sadly, like hundreds of children across Northern Ireland, Lily-Pyper has recently been refused a place at nursery school. Her parents are at a loss to understand why she has been refused, especially as her elder brother, Ethan, who does not have health problems, gained a local nursery place last year. Like countless parents across Northern Ireland, they quite rightly blame the Department of Education's current criteria for allocating preschool places.

The Davison family, under the current rules, does not qualify as being socially disadvantaged. They do not claim benefits and do not wish to do so. I visited them shortly after they contacted me and would defy anyone here not to feel for them as they go through what must be a very difficult period. I have launched an appeal on their behalf with the SELB as, so far, no acceptable outcome has been offered to them. In making my maiden speech today, I dedicate my election victory to that brave little girl, Lily-Pyper Davison.

The story is not unique: it is one of many across Northern Ireland of countless angry and frustrated parents whose children have been let down. Denying a child a nursery-school place could seriously disadvantage them throughout their school years and into later life. I believe passionately that early years intervention is key to our children receiving the highest quality of educational experience. Nursery school is, after all, a child's first step on to the educational ladder. Our children are the future of Northern Ireland; we owe it to all of them to provide a firm educational foundation.

Furthermore, the Department's present system of identifying the demand for increased nursery provision is fundamentally flawed. Waringstown is a growing village, but, despite having almost 5,000 residents, it does not as yet have a nursery school. Since being elected to Craigavon Borough Council last year, I have led

the campaign on behalf of parents to establish a nursery school at Waringstown Primary School. Indeed, the decision lies presently with the Minister. I have been overwhelmed by the support of local people, parents and grandparents, who believe that every child should be entitled to a nursery place. My party is committed to giving every child the best start in their educational journey. Central to that commitment is a universal entitlement to preschool education. The present system of allocating places boils down to little more than a lottery and must end. Therefore, I support the amendment.

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

**Mrs McKeivitt:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to address the House. I am pleased to have the opportunity to make my maiden speech on such an important issue. It impacts on so many lives, and it is a particularly important matter for my constituency.

I express my gratitude to the good people of South Down who elected me to this position. I am truly honoured, and I look forward to doing my best to serve my constituency to the best of my ability. I also thank my party colleagues, who have helped me to settle into my role. I make special mention of my predecessor, colleague and friend P J Bradley. He served the people of South Down with distinction. Although his retirement from elected politics is certainly well earned, his contribution will be greatly missed.

As a mother of five children, I have hands-on experience of how important nursery education is. I know that the early years of a child's life are of critical importance for the child's future development and well-being. Nursery education is a critical part of a child's life as they develop personally, emotionally and physically. Friendships can be made, and the foundations of language skills and learning are laid.

It is not an easy task for any parent to hand their child over to a stranger to be educated, but when they choose a local preschool and are guaranteed a place, it makes it much easier. That is why I am dismayed to hear of families in distress because their children did not receive a place in their local preschool and were not offered a place in any preschool near their

parish. Coming from a mainly rural community presents immense difficulties in childcare and employment, particularly for women who work. It was no surprise to me that the Northern Ireland Childminding Association has reported that the number of women who report that they are prevented from seeking work due to family commitments has risen by 50% to 15,000 in the past nine months. That drastic increase highlights just how important the issue is. The SDLP is committed to supporting children and supporting early years provision that is accessible, close and realistic.

The criteria for selection are hugely important. It is important that parental choice be offered in all cases — no excuses. Children and their families should have a legal right to preschool provision in their parish. We need the Minister to have a proactive approach to ensure adequate provision in future to allow the community to grow and to allow children to grow with their peers. A statutory right to preschool education is the only way of ensuring equality of access to education. We want every child to have the right to preschool education. We should not play politics with the issue, which is why we are calling on all sides to support every child's right to a preschool education. After all, school days are supposed to be the best days of their lives. Let us get it right. I support the motion.

**Mr Irwin:** This issue gains more importance with each passing term. Over the past few weeks, like many other public representatives, I have received calls from frustrated parents who are angry because their applications to have their son or daughter admitted to a full-time, funded preschool place in their area has failed. All the cases that I dealt with involved parents who both worked. Most of those parents came to the conclusion that they were being penalised for going out to earn a living, and their child was being filtered through the admissions process and dropped out at the other end without a preschool place or receiving only a part-time place. That should alarm the Minister, as parents who wish to go out to work to improve Northern Ireland's economic outlook are being disenfranchised through an unfair admissions system.

Most people want to work and earn a living; that is good and proper. However, I want to know why those same people are being disenfranchised when they apply for a funded preschool

place. It is right and proper that the socially disadvantaged are assisted; no one disagrees with that. However, we must look more closely at how the admissions criteria are applied. I have major concerns for the parents who are in full-time employment but are left with only a part-time slot for their child. The timeframe is much too short. Parents have told me that their only option is for one parent to stop work. That is a massive retrograde step. It is obvious that the admissions system needs to be overhauled to meet today's economic reality of both parents needing to work to make ends meet.

In my constituency, there is a feeling among parents and staff that funded provision is well below the level required. I agree with the motion. Unmet need must be addressed in the short term and further ahead. Preschool provision should be a right for every child, regardless of their circumstances. It is important that the new Minister gives the issue the required detailed consideration. What is best for a child should lie at the core of any review, and in the short term there is a massive onus on the Department to ensure that demand is met. I support the need for additional funding places in my constituency. Before the new term commences, there is time to address any shortfalls. Given that many hard-working parents depend on this need, I expect it to be met. I support the motion.

**Mr B McCrea:** This matter is of great concern to people, particularly as the majority get places but the few who do not feel aggrieved — rightly — about the matter.

Many Members used the debate as an opportunity to make their maiden speeches. I congratulate them all for the way in which they expressed their points of view. Many brought their personal concerns and issues to the fore. It is right and proper that a maiden speech should be used for that purpose.

However, I was somewhat disappointed when the proposer of the amendment chose not to take an intervention. Surely when you are trying to persuade Members to accept your amendment, you want to give them some idea about why they might accept it. I am at a loss as to know what point was being made. The leader on this policy issue has informed me that our party will support the amendment.

**Mr A Maskey:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr B McCrea:** I will not give way. No, sorry, I have changed my mind. I will give way.

**Mr A Maskey:** I appreciate the Member's willingness to give way as he normally does. Do you accept that Mr Flanagan gave way during his contribution earlier today and that the intervention used up all his time? It is unfair for an experienced Member to chastise a new Member who had already given way in his earlier contribution.

**Mr B McCrea:** I am happy to take the chastisement about chastising. The point is that, if you are going to propose an amendment as opposed to making a contribution during a speech, or if you are making a maiden speech, you have certain privileges. However, this is an important issue. As the Member commented, I normally take interventions and treat them properly and respectfully.

I want to make a point that is germane to the debate. When the proposer of the amendment outlined the decision that he and his wife took about sending their child to a local centre, I wanted to ask him whether every set of parents in Northern Ireland should have that right. Should it not be the case that parents are entitled to send their children to the school of adequate provision that is closest to their home? What is appropriate for one family is surely appropriate for another. The proposer of the motion pointed out that there are basic inequalities in the system. In layman's terms, this is an unfair system that has not been tackled. I hope that the Minister, who has oft-times mentioned the tackling of inequalities, will deal with this provision when he responds to the debate.

I have spoken many times on the issue. If we are serious about tackling educational underachievement and preparing our young people for a prosperous and peaceful Northern Ireland, we must make the investment at the very start of their learning careers. That requires that all people be treated equally, without fear or favour.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Member for giving way. He referred to all children being treated equally. Is there not an irony in the situation? I listened to the debate. On the one hand, the Department's ideological position is that all children go to their nearest school on post-primary transfer, but when it comes to preschool provision, it is happy to justify the ludicrous

situation whereby children are shipped from Ballycastle to Larne.

Surely, there is an irony there. At the end of the day, the parental choice element has to be protected. It is not being protected in either case.

#### 4.00 pm

**Mr B McCrea:** It is worth taking my last minute to speak to the serious points that Mr Storey has raised. A complete nonsense of an argument has been put forward by people who say that children should go to their closest school but will not resolve nursery provision. The issue needs to be debated properly at another time. I agree with Mr Anderson's point that it is inequitable that people who work hard for a living cannot get their children into a school. Those people are not being treated fairly. It is an unfair system. Any party that advocates equality as its central thesis should deal with this now, and it should deal with it first. I think that I have made my point.

**Mr Allister:** I declare an interest as the chairman of the board of governors of Moorfields Primary School, to which some of my remarks will relate. The school is situated between Ballymena and Larne. We had the good fortune to have a new school building not so long ago, but, despite a 20-year campaign for a nursery unit, the parents in that area are still bereft of that provision, with the consequence that that large, sprawling rural area goes largely unserved for nursery provision, certainly in the state sector. Therefore, I will focus on the rural deficit in nursery school provision, at least in that part of north Antrim. That has been highlighted many, many times, yet neither the board nor the Department has been at all moved to deal with it.

Today, I make a fresh plea in that regard. Why should my neighbours and constituents be treated as second-class citizens when it comes to the provision of nursery facilities for their children and grandchildren? They ought not to be, but, to date, they have been because of a lamentable failure on the part of the Department and the board. A number of Members have made the point that that, of course, is compounded by the fact that many hard-working parents face huge expense when they can find, at some distance, a private facility or some other facility that can take their child. That huge expense of trying to take up that

provision eats into the viability of their working at all.

In the provision of nursery places, we have got somewhat out of kilter the prioritising of the social need element. If we are not going to provide what we ought to provide, namely a statutory right to a place for every child, we certainly need to make sure that the places that are available are provided on a more equitable and sustainable basis. We can talk about the application of the policy, but, if the places are not there in a particular geographical location in the first place, it does not matter what the policy is, because no one is getting a place.

The essential prerequisite is planning that will provide nursery units. I look around an area not so far away from the Moorfields Primary School, and I see overprovision. However, when I come back to that rural hinterland, I find that there is not just underprovision but no provision. The whole ward of Glenwhirry, one of the largest, sprawling wards in north Antrim, is totally without such provision. If we care at all for the future of our children, that cannot go on. It is time that the Department grabbed hold of issues such as this, and, instead of wasting time, money and effort on chasing ideological moonbeams, let it chase things that really matter to parents and, my oh my, the provision of nursery units and places certainly matters to parents.

**Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am happy to be here this afternoon to respond to the debate, and I am pleased that we are debating a topic as important as preschool education so early in the new Assembly mandate.

I will respond in detail to Members' comments as I go through the debate. However, it is important that we remember that we are debating preschool education. It is set in a number of different formats for a variety of reasons, but, no matter where preschool education is provided, we have to ensure that it is of high quality. That is achieved through the commitment of staff. It is also governed by the Education and Training Inspectorate, because any unit, whether statutory, voluntary or community, that provides preschool education is inspected, and, through those inspections, we are raising standards right across providers. That concern has been raised in the motion. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, the

motion refers to nursery school provision, and the debate has been peppered with references to nursery school provision as if it were a different or better type of educational provision. Reports from the inspectorate call many of our nursery schools outstanding; however, it will not and cannot be the case, either financially or socially, that we can provide all our preschool education in nursery places. It simply cannot be done.

**Mr Storey:** I thank the Minister for giving way. Will he also look at the issue, which he is well aware of from his time on the previous Education Committee, that some provision in the sectors is not meeting the inspectorate's standards? That needs to be looked at, and those improvements need to be made if there is to be continued funding.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I certainly agree with the Member, and he will be aware that, across our educational provision — preschool, primary and post-primary — there are educational facilities that cause concern. The inspectorate works with them to ensure that they raise their standards. If they do not, measures can be taken to ensure that the children in those schools are given proper education or that the provider is closed down. That is the worst-case scenario, and we do not want to reach that stage. However, if we have to, we will.

The preschool expansion programme was introduced in 1998. It provides one year of free, quality, funded preschool education in the year before compulsory education. A debate is going on — it will no doubt enter this Chamber — that perhaps we send our children to school too early here. I have no firm position on that, but I am sure that we can agree that, if there is an ongoing debate about whether four or five is too early, sending our children to school at three is far too early. Therefore preschool education is not the formal setting that we perhaps think —

**Mr McNarry:** I want some clarification, Minister. I am inclined to agree with you about sending children to school too early, but can you define what level of school you mean? I think that that is what the public needs to hear, and I certainly would like to hear your definition.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I emphasise that I am not making a definitive statement. However, when we talk about "school", we mean primary school and the formal setting where children are set a

curriculum to learn. Some experts will tell you that that formal setting is too soon for some children. I am cautioning this: let us not slip into a system where we send our children to school at three.

Children are sent into preschool education for a variety of reasons. One reason is to prepare them for formal education. However, it also allows children to develop their social skills and play skills and to learn through play. That is the scenario in which preschool education is provided. I caution Members who rally to the cause of a nursery school and claim that it is a better provider than preschool education in a community or voluntary setting. We will judge each development proposal on its merits and each community and voluntary sector provider on its education inspectorate reports. If we can get to a place where that provision is excellent, we will have achieved the best for young people.

The rate of expansion has been due to a partnership approach and to recognising and utilising existing provision that has been developed in the voluntary and private sectors. It does not make economic sense to ignore or displace quality provision where it exists and has benefited from public investment and has many strengths to commend it. There are currently 8,000 children in preschool places in the community and voluntary sector. That supports numerous jobs and community initiatives in that sector. Mr Allister referred to the rural community: many settings in the rural community are provided through the community and voluntary sector. In fairness to that sector, we should say that it stepped in to provide for the rural community when statutory agencies had failed it. Therefore, let us be careful not to undermine the provision offered in those settings, whether they be rural or urban, and let us secure those places and jobs.

Expansion of the range of providers also allowed for new nursery schools to be built in early years provision, including new units to replace reception provision, and facilitated choice for parents. In 2011, there are 22,503 children in funded preschool places. Naturally enough, you do not meet the parents of those children. Those parents are lucky enough to have been provided with preschool places for their children. Therefore, they are not in constituency offices using the services of local MLAs and councillors. Parents who are disappointed are perfectly entitled to go to their elected

representatives. I encourage them to do so because it is one way that the Department can pick up on underprovision in an area. However, almost 98% coverage is being provided: 22,503 children are being provided with preschool places on both a part-time and full-time basis. Educational research shows that there is no proven educational benefit to full-time rather than part-time —

**Mr B McCrea:** The real point of the debate is that, if 98% of people get what they require, why are the 2% who do not penalised? I am simply using your figures. I could understand the argument that special provision has to be made for those who live in rural communities. Obviously, there are certain issues that we want to consider. However, people who come into our constituency offices live in the middle of towns and are being offered places elsewhere. For example, someone who lives in Lisburn might be offered a place in Newtownards. That does not make sense. Surely, the Assembly should try to ensure that, in the interests of equality, the 2% get exactly the same service as the 98%.

**Mr O'Dowd:** We have to strive towards that goal. The question is whether the motion before the House allows us to achieve that. The amendment allows a review to take place; it does not quash the sentiments of the motion. It certainly allows it to be expanded and for the Assembly to move forward in an informed fashion.

**Mr McDevitt:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I will in just a moment. The Department has limited financial resources. It wants to ensure that those resources are injected into education properly. I do not accept that people are being penalised, but I certainly understand the frustration and, perhaps, the anger of parents whose children have no provision. However, if we are to tackle social disadvantage and the cycle of poverty and long-term unemployment, one way to do that is to ensure that young people who come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are given an advantage in education.

The Department has let down around 100 people this year according to figures that it has. I have noted comments in this morning's edition of 'The Irish News'. I have asked officials to contact the five boards that are mentioned to find out why they have given different figures to 'The Irish News' than they gave to my



Department. I am a firm believer in the freedom of the press —

**Mr McNarry:** Who is right?

**4.15 pm**

**Mr O'Dowd:** I hope to find out who is right. I want to know whether the 'The Irish News' is getting more reliable information than I am. Certainly, somebody has been getting the wrong information.

We accept that, as part of the expansion programme, we have to target 100%. That is the ambition that we have set ourselves. It is a question of how we do that. People have asked why the Department does not know where the children reside. They say that the Department knows the birth rates. Yes, we know the birth rates, but a birth certificate does not tell us where a child will reside in the next three years. Demographics change, and there are population shifts. The movement of 30 or 40 young people into an area over a period will change provision in that area. That is where I challenge the proposer of the motion, who rightly stated that there was an Assembly debate on the subject around this time last year but also stated that nothing had changed. Things have changed in the past year. The previous Minister injected £1.3 million into the service, which allowed the community and voluntary sector to respond almost immediately in areas where there was severe underprovision. She brought in a two-stage policy, which ensured that children in the qualifying age bracket were dealt with first, while other children were dealt with at the second stage. Therefore, things have changed.

The Department and I, as Minister, will not be satisfied until we ensure that we inject 100% provision into the sector and that all young people who wish to —

**Mr McDevitt:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Give me one second, so that I can finish this point. A percentage of parents still do not want to send their children to preschool. There is a variety of reasons for that. A Member asked me whether there was research on that. Research was carried out on the reasons behind that decision, following publication of a PAC report in October 2010, and Mr McDevitt outlined many of them. One of the reasons that we cannot be satisfied with is that parents have too far to travel. That is not a reason but an

obstacle. We have to remove that obstacle for them. I would like to see the review remove that obstacle.

**Mr McDevitt:** I appreciate the Minister giving way. He will be aware that the European Commission believes that universal access to preschool education should be in place across the European Union, so the question remains. I do not think that anyone in the House is in disagreement about the need for a statutory right. Why, therefore, have you tabled an amendment through your party colleagues that would turn it not into a statutory right but a statutory luxury? It would be, in other words, a right that we can have if we can afford to have it, like the DVD player or the Xbox. That is not the way to set and realise your ambition of 100%. Minister, why will you not join us now in saying that we will make this a legally binding obligation and, therefore, force the state and the system to meet that obligation?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am not sure if there is agreement around the House that statutory provision is the way forward. I am not arguing against it, because the research is not there to dictate to the House, the Executive or my Department that we should spend an extra £30 million on that provision and possibly £40 million on capital provision. That is £70 million in a very strapped budget. I want to be assured and I am sure that the House wants to be assured that, if we are to spend £70 million on that provision, it is the right way to spend that money.

We have to ensure that there is provision on the ground. If it becomes a statutory right, you will still run into this problem. If my figures are right and there are still around 100 people displaced, they will still be displaced if we bring in statutory provision. They may still have to travel 10, 15 or 20 miles down the road. Statutory provision will not change the distance that someone has to travel.

**Mr McDevitt:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am not giving way any further, because I am running out of time. The key to this is to review the procedures and the statutory requirement that you have introduced and to look at the financial situation and the most important part of the equation — the educational benefits of bringing in statutory preschool education. Let us look at that. As Ms Cochrane said, a certain percentage of parents

do not want to send their children to preschool. How do we deal with that in statute?

I also want to touch on the question around the 2006 review, to which Mr McDevitt referred, and that around July and August birthdays. That matter needs to be dealt with, and legislation is required to deal with it. The previous Minister had hoped to bring it through in the ESA legislation. I will not rehearse that. Mr Craig suggested that I knock the heads of my officials together. I am pretty sure that I am not allowed to knock their heads together, and I am pretty sure that some of them would knock me straight back. I will meet my officials in a more diplomatic way and discuss how we can bring about the necessary legislation to remove that anomaly and the barriers that exist. We should be able to work at that.

I appeal to Members — I am not looking to undermine anybody's proposal — to vote in favour of the amendment. It will allow the proposer, the Executive and the Assembly to move forward in an informed way and will ensure that the review that they all want, which will include a review of the implications of statutory provision and will take the focus away from simply being on nursery schools, takes place. Let us admire the provision that we have out there, be it in the statutory nursery sector or the community and voluntary sector. As long as that provision is made in an excellent way, the children under that supervision will be provided with a first-class start in life.

**Mr McKay:** I support the amendment and thank the Member for tabling the motion. I think that this has been a worthwhile debate, and there is broad agreement about the issue across the House.

As we all know, preschool places are a useful and beneficial resource, and the community and voluntary sector, in particular, offers a valuable contribution to education through the provision of such places. My colleague, the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Phil Flanagan, outlined the importance of that sector in his local community and in meeting the needs of his family. So, we should be cognisant of the benefits of that sector, especially for those from a rural background.

The Minister outlined the aims of the preschool education expansion programme, which provides one year of quality preschool provision through the statutory nursery sector and funded

preschool places in the voluntary and private sector. Preschool education is clearly beneficial to children, and the number of parents who wish to see their children avail themselves of it clearly demonstrates that. Research also shows that it has significant benefits for children at the early years stage.

The proposer of the motion expressed some concern about the use of social criteria. Judith Cochrane and Paul Givan also touched on that issue. However, we should bear it in mind that the research demonstrates that children from disadvantaged circumstances benefit most from preschool education. It is important that we put on record the benefits of those criteria and their implementation.

Sydney Anderson outlined the difficulties faced by many parents in his constituency, and that theme was also adopted by Judith Cochrane, David McNarry and Michaela Boyle. David McNarry said that there should be universal entitlement to preschool provision, and I agree. However, we, of course, need to strive towards that and to take into account all the necessary factors. Judith Cochrane said that research showed that part-time places have equal value to full-time places. Indeed, the EPPNI report states that full-time attendance has no benefits for children's cognitive development at the start of primary school when compared with part-time provision. The Minister also touched on that theme.

Paul Givan outlined that there should be statutory provision. However, it is important to consider the financial implications of that. Michaela Boyle, Jonathan Craig and many others raised the importance of being able to forecast demand. However, we, of course, need to recognise that there is great difficulty in doing that.

The Minister outlined the importance of ensuring that we provide high-quality education and raise standards of preschool provision across the board. He made an interesting point about the starting age for pupils, about which there has been some debate. I think that the Education Committee, in particular, should look at that and take it forward. We in the Committee should strive to make a measured assessment of the benefits or otherwise of reviewing the school starting age for pupils.

The Minister touched on a factor that was not discussed during the debate: the number of

jobs in the community and voluntary sector and, indeed, all the sectors that make early years provision for children aged three and four. We should be cognisant of the decisions that we make in regard to that and of the impact that those decisions might have on jobs in rural and urban communities. He also said that there should be a focus on the anomalies and that we should look jointly at how we can remove the barriers to preschool provision. We should commit ourselves to looking at that.

I would support the motion as amended. Children clearly benefit immensely from the preschool provision that exists across the community. Preschool provision is important because the capacity for growth and development in children that age is intense. That being the case, we should ensure that parents can access places for their children and should assess through a review how we can legislate for a right to preschool education and the benefits and impacts that that has.

**Mr P Ramsey:** On behalf of the proposer of the motion, I thank Members for their contributions. It has been a very positive and constructive debate on the way forward, and many Members, whom I will mention, are coming at this from a personal, constituency basis and making clear reference to issues on the ground.

I welcome the motion. This is something that was a high priority for many of my constituents during the election, and I am pleased that it is being debated early in this Chamber. I welcome the Minister's presence today, and hopefully he will, diplomatically, shake heads or whatever he needs to do in the Department.

I will concentrate, if I may, on the effect that the criteria for admission are having on families across the region. If we had more spaces than applicants, the same criteria would still be prevalent in the minds of many parents and applicants. In the 2006 review of preschool education in Northern Ireland, many respondents, including the Western Education and Library Board, which operates largely in my constituency, stated that the social disadvantage criteria should be removed or reformed to include families who may be on benefit or receiving some form of tax credit. As I said, that was a key issue on the doorstep for many families in Foyle, especially families who are working and are not in receipt of income support or jobseeker's allowance. They felt that

the system was disadvantaging them and their children, as many Members said, because they were working. I am aware that the Department of Education has said that, after the review, it will look into other ways in which the criteria could be reformed, but, as yet, that has not been the case. I ask the Minister to perhaps take that into further consideration as part of the motion and give an early indication of how that reform could take place.

It is accepted the world over that children who have had the opportunity to have early years education progress more quickly than their classmates who have not had the same opportunity. They are more social and independent in primary school, which is something that every parent wants and something that we in this House should strive to enable them to undertake through a right to preschool education.

According to departmental figures and projections, from this year until 2016-17 almost 6,000 children will be in either full-time or part-time nursery schools. I wonder what percentage that is of the overall demand for early years provision in our communities. This needs to be given priority attention by the Department and the Minister.

I will go over Members' contributions. The proposer of the motion, Conall McDevitt, spoke with great passion and good knowledge of the system, recognising the need for children's places and for again reviewing the criteria. He talked about the basic inequalities facing children and parents, clearly emphasising the stress and pressure that parents are under at such times, a point that a lot of Members made. The postcode lottery is a concept that is still there and still worrying. He talked about the basic right of access to preschool education, which has, I think, united so many Members in the Chamber today.

In moving the amendment, Phil Flanagan spoke of the rural perspective. He spoke of the dedicated, well-trained, effective and passionate staff in his community. He talked about the contribution that the community and voluntary sector makes, but a place for every child is what we want.

In supporting the motion, Sydney Anderson said that the issue of nursery places has been around for a long time and that the policy for funding nursery schools leaves a lot to be

desired. I think that we all can say that, hand on heart. He made the point that offering a child a place up to 60 miles from their own home is unacceptable.

#### 4.30 pm

David McNarry said that developing new opportunities for early intervention was crucial. He also said that literacy and numeracy are things that we should all be concerned about if we do not have early years development in children. He said that cross-cutting early years programmes are necessary. During my short time on the Committee for Employment and Learning, when we were carrying out the NEETS inquiry, it was the people who did not get early years education who became vulnerable and who suffered badly from literacy and numeracy problems. The effect of that is that there are 40,000 young people across Northern Ireland who are NEET. An education partnership between parents and schools was the key message from David.

Judith Cochrane, in her maiden speech, talked from her personal perspective in east Belfast. She said there is a particular problem regarding stress among parents who cannot find a place for their children, and that what was also required was quality provision for children. She also spoke about the roles of the private and voluntary sectors and said that we need to plan for the future.

Paul Givan said that early years intervention is critical in determining and assessing learning disabilities. This morning, we attended a meeting of the all-party group on learning disabilities, and it is obvious that the earlier a child can get an assessment the better chance it will have to get the means of affecting and addressing the learning disabilities it may have.

Michaela Boyle said that it is vital for children that there is early years intervention. Again, she spoke of the experiences and difficulties that parents have in Strabane and the 0-6 strategy. She also acknowledged the good work of the community and voluntary sector in Strabane.

Jonathan Craig made the point that, although it is important locally, it is an anxious time for many parents across Northern Ireland who are worrying and wanting the best for their children. He said that early years provision is vital for children and talked about under-provision in Lisburn, in his constituency.

Jo-Anne Dobson is not here at the moment, but in her maiden speech she talked about every child being entitled to a nursery place. She talked passionately about Lily-Pyper Davison, a child with special needs who was refused a place and with whom she is still working to get a place. When we talk about people in our community, it is those who are most vulnerable, particularly people with special needs, who deserve the places. It is a crying shame that nothing could be found for her.

My colleague Karen McKeivitt, in her maiden speech, talked about an issue that is of huge importance to her. She said that it was critical that there was hands-on experience and that that was important for the well-being of the child in its personal, emotional and physical development. She talked about the families she has been in close contact with and who are in distress, and, like other Members, she talked about equity in the rural community.

The DUP's William Irwin said that he had been receiving constant calls from parents who are stressed, frustrated and under pressure because their children did not get a place. He talked about the criteria and about children being penalised because their parents are working.

Basil McCrea said that it was a matter of grave concern for families whose children did not get a place. After chastising a Member, he was chastised for daring to intervene. He talked about an unfair system that has not yet been tackled. I am sure that the Minister, in his early days and early years, will make an effort to try and redress that.

Jim Allister is not in the Chamber, but he spoke from his experience as a member of a board of governors in his constituency who have been trying for 20 years to get provision where there is none. He highlighted many times when there was no help from the Department of Education or the Minister. Perhaps he will seek a meeting with the Minister to explore opportunities.

The Minister spoke about preschool education and places. He talked about the importance of children having quality and high-quality education. He talked about the Education and Training Inspectorate and about how outstanding nursery-school provision is across Northern Ireland. He said that the community and voluntary sector provides 8,000 places and spoke of the number of jobs being created in that sector as we go forward. Again, he referred

to the rural community. He said that he may require more than £30 million revenue and £40 million capital.

In his winding-up speech, Daithí McKay said that it was a very worthwhile debate, and we would all agree. He said that there was a lot of agreement around the Chamber and that rural communities needed direct access and equality. He said that preschool years were clearly beneficial, and he referred to research that showed that it was children from disadvantaged communities who benefit most on the targeting social need ladder.

It was a well-respected and constructive debate. I appeal to Members to support the motion.

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

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

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to ensure that adequate nursery school and preschool provision are available for all children; to conduct an immediate review of current provision to ensure that unmet need in areas of high demand is addressed in advance of the next school year; to undertake a wider review to ensure that there is adequate provision in future years, with increased attention to early years education and with a focus within the review on the educational benefits and financial implications of bringing forward legislation giving a statutory right to preschool education.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The House will take its ease for a few moments while the Deputy Speakers change over for the Adjournment debate.

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

*Motion made:*

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

## Adjournment

### Mid-Ulster Hospital: Minor Injuries Unit

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

**Mr Molloy:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Business Office for allowing this Adjournment debate, which is an important subject for someone who represents Mid Ulster. I thank Members for showing support by attending it. We have a number of MLAs whose neighbouring constituencies are affected. Everyone knows that the services at the Mid-Ulster Hospital affect not only the mid-Ulster area but the neighbouring constituencies, particularly the Antrim constituencies, because of the effect that they have on Antrim Area Hospital. So many units have been piled into Antrim Area Hospital that it is overloaded and its facilities are being diluted.

In November 2008, I voiced concern about the accident and emergency unit at the Mid-Ulster Hospital. At the time, the Health Minister dismissed those concerns as invalid and scaremongering. Other parties said that my concerns had no justification and supported the Minister. However, in 2010, the Minister and the Northern Trust took the decision to close the A&E department at the Mid-Ulster Hospital and replace it with a minor injuries unit, which only opens from 9.00 am to 5.00 pm, Monday to Friday, excluding bank holidays and other holidays. We were told that the service would cover 70% of the patients who had presented at the Mid-Ulster A&E department in the past and that the remainder would be catered for in Antrim Area Hospital. At the time, the Minister was extremely vocal in insisting that there would be no problem and that Antrim Area Hospital could cope with the influx. He pledged additional beds and resources to ensure that that would happen. Of course, none of that happened; it all stayed the same.

Sadly, that has been the case throughout. Antrim Area Hospital is unable to cope with the increased numbers, and there is evidence that it was already overstretched before the accident and emergency department at the Mid-Ulster Hospital closed. Also, it could not cope with the generality of the hospital overall. When I raised those issues with the Minister at the time, they were dismissed as though I had a grudge against Antrim Area Hospital. I do not have a grudge against any hospital; in fact, I respect the staff who try to cope with the circumstances in their hospital.

Antrim Area Hospital did not get its newbuild, just as people had predicted. Now, it is proposed that Portakabins be put in place to try to accommodate the influx of new patients.

Statistics released by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety recently show that the number of people forced to wait for more than 12 hours in A&E departments across the North has risen by almost one third. It is not surprising that patients attending Antrim Area Hospital A&E have had the longest waits. Unbelievably, between January and March this year, 1,451 people spent more than 12 hours waiting to be seen. That is simply not good enough. It is not acceptable and surely cannot be deemed safe, as others said in the past. It certainly cannot support the argument that 70% of patients who would have been treated at the Mid-Ulster Hospital for minor injuries are being catered for. How could they be?

Despite the closure of A&E units at the Mid-Ulster and Whiteabbey Hospitals, there have been no changes or newbuilds. The minor injuries unit opens only between 9.00 am and 5.00 pm on weekdays. It caters for those who are about during the day but does not provide a facility from Friday to Sunday or on holidays. Those are the times when young people in particular participate in different activities and sports. The farming community may also be involved in accidents at work. Some of those injuries are minor and could be treated at the minor injuries unit if it was open, but it is not.

Some years back, there was a similar situation in the hospital in Dungannon, when the minor injuries unit was open between 9.00 am and 5.00 pm. At that time, the argument was that there was no reason why it should be open for longer because the numbers did not justify it. However, when the hours were increased, people

started using it, and, as a result, the numbers justified the extension of those hours.

Some individuals take part in particular sporting activities. The Mid Ulster constituency is a rural area in which people enjoy various sports, including GAA and soccer. Over the weekend, none of those people can be catered for by the minor injuries unit. As we can see from the figures for Dungannon, Monday morning is the busiest time for the minor injuries unit there.

The minor injuries unit at the Mid-Ulster Hospital is not seen as offering a reasonable and safe service. It is not seen as being available, and people have to consider their situation before they go to the unit. Bank holidays are excluded from the opening hours. That is a time when children are off school and people are off work. Do-it-yourself enthusiasts get to work, and that is when accidents can happen, but there is no facility to deal with them.

We are told that the volume of people using the service would not justify an increase in opening times, but people do not regard that as a real service. They do not see it as being as available as a hospital should be, or a place where people can be treated when injured.

First, individuals must assess whether their injury is serious enough that they need to go to accident and emergency at Antrim Area Hospital, or whether it could be treated in the minor injuries unit. The individual could have a cut finger or an injury requiring an amputation to be carried out. Various issues could affect the situation. After performing a self-assessment, people must consider the time of day and whether they would make it to the minor injuries unit at the Mid-Ulster Hospital before closing time, or whether they should go straight to accident and emergency at Antrim Area Hospital. After 5.00 pm, they have to do that anyway. People do not judge that as a good or reasonable service for a general hospital to offer.

The whole hospital provision is being eroded, downgraded and declared unsafe. Departments are then closed. Over time, the hospital's acute services have been run down. First, they came for the surgical procedures and maternity services, then they came for the medical beds and high-dependency unit, and now they have taken A&E. One by one, services are being reduced, and the remaining wards will gradually end up in the same situation.

Those are not my words. The briefing paper issued by the Department gave reasons why those services were moving. It stated that the Mid-Ulster and Whiteabbey Hospitals had no access to acute surgical services, no modern technologies, no cardiology service, and so on. Once those services had been taken away, the Department said that, as those services were not offered, the hospitals were unsafe and should not be maintained in that condition, and so they were gradually run down. As each piece is removed, the next piece is considered unsafe, because the cover is not there.

We have seen a gradual push, which is making Antrim Area Hospital unworkable and pushing it towards breaking point. We need to reinstate the A&E at the Mid-Ulster Hospital to ensure that the pressure is taken off Antrim Area Hospital.

#### 4.45 pm

It is the planning process that is wrong. The Department, the board and the executive within the board set targets and met dates. However, they did not assess whether it was safe or whether it provided a good service and healthy environment for people. That is where the fault seems to lie.

At different times, different MLAs and MPs met the previous Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey, to try to persuade him to hold off on making decisions to close down wards and to first look at what is in place. However, he refused to listen. I was present at a number of those meetings, and the Minister told me and others that he had no money, that there was nothing that he could do. Gradually, the services were run down.

**Mr I McCrea:** The Member has said that money was an issue for the previous Minister. However, in some of the meetings that I held with the trust and the Minister, it was suggested that money was not the reason why the A&E at the Mid-Ulster Hospital was closed. Although funding was always an issue for the previous Minister, and will no doubt be an issue for the current Minister, it is important that we clarify that the acute services were removed because of so-called health and safety issues, not because of the funding.

**Mr Molloy:** I accept that the closure of the A&E department was not as the result of funding. However, the point that I was making was that there was a running down of services and the

various different structures beforehand, which had an added effect. The previous Minister stated that it was the clinicians who had decided that the unit was unsafe and required different services and had then put pressure on him. By doing so, the Minister was saying that it was the clinicians and not him who made that decision.

The limited services that remain in the Mid-Ulster Hospital fall short of what other areas have and can expect. For example, the minor injuries unit at the South Tyrone Hospital is open from 9.00 am to 9.00 pm seven days a week. That unit caters for work and sporting accidents, and the figures for the number of minor injuries dealt with by that unit are very interesting. In December there were very low figures and in January there was an increased number due to the frost and snow. I am not a great advocate of the minor injuries unit in the South Tyrone Hospital, and I argued against it for the same reason, which was that it would dilute acute services and replace them with a minor injuries unit that was not up to the job. In all of that, we must remember that the staff involved have tried to do their best and have tried to provide services with the limited resources that they have.

It is time to call an end to the downgrading of the healthcare facilities at the Mid-Ulster Hospital. All the elected representatives from Mid Ulster, from all the parties, have been fighting for proper acute hospital facilities and for an increase in the size of the minor injuries unit. The Mid Ulster constituency, which takes in areas of County Tyrone and County Derry, has no acute hospital provision. The centre of the North is completely bare of services. We have clinics and daytime hospital services, but we have no acute hospitals. Instead, those are found around the periphery and the coastline, so we need to look at where acute hospitals are provided.

These are not just my words about the issues that we have; the clinicians, the medics and other serious people also say it. The Department and the Northern Trust told us that the minor injuries unit at the Mid-Ulster Hospital provides a great service and has been a great success. How they can make that claim is difficult to understand, because their own figures show that 1,400 people were left waiting for more than 12 hours for treatment in May 2011, and a senior medic, Dr Brian Patterson,

made the point that the A&E at Antrim Area Hospital is at breaking point.

That is not me as an MLA saying that, but a top medic, and he clearly attributes that to the closure of the casualty departments at the Mid-Ulster Hospital and Whiteabbey Hospital 12 months ago. He is clearly identifying where the problem is and how it should be resolved. All along, medics said that it was unsafe to move those services without alternatives being put in place and a provision being available for what Antrim Area Hospital is unable to cater for at present.

I am heartened that the current Minister, Mr Poots, is here. I thank him for attending and for saying that he will review the situation, although he has not made any promises about its outcome. That at least provides an opening for people to come together and put the case again with a different view and consideration of the situation. An accident and emergency department is required in a rural area such as mid-Ulster to provide a service for a wide catchment area.

We also want enhanced opening times in the minor injuries unit, from 9.00 am to 9.00 pm, seven days a week, including bank holidays, and so forth. We also want as many medical services as possible to be located on the Mid-Ulster site to enhance it in every way possible. Out-of-hours doctors, for instance, should be located there so that there is doctor cover when the hospital is not otherwise up and running. However, the main thing is to try to enhance what we have until we rebuild, to get to the desired position of having an accident and emergency department on that site and to bring about that change.

I take this opportunity to thank the staff of the Mid-Ulster Hospital — the doctors, the nurses, and other staff around the hospital — for their work under the worst of circumstances over the past number of years.

**Mr I McCrea:** I suppose that this is one of the few occasions on which I will thank the Member across the way for something, but I certainly thank him for securing today's Adjournment debate.

I make no apology in joining him and, I hope, every other Member — that is, those of us who are still left in the Chamber — in opposing and voicing my opposition to the previous Minister's

decision to remove acute services from the Mid-Ulster Hospital. I also make no apology if my colleague is offended by my opposition to any decision that he makes or does not make, depending on what way it goes for the Mid-Ulster. I am elected by the people of Mid Ulster to represent their views, and during the election, not one person said to me to support any further removal of services at the Mid-Ulster.

I do not want to go over many of the issues to which Mr Molloy referred because he had 15 minutes to deal with them. However, it is important to go over the gradual removal of services from the Mid-Ulster Hospital undertaken by the trust and previous government officials. Mid Ulster is a rural constituency that needed, and continues to need, an accident and emergency service. However, the removal of services, whether maternity or surgical, brought us to a point at which acute services were unsustainable. They were never going to be retained and were certainly never able to be sustained in the long term.

The Mid-Ulster has a minor injuries unit. That is what we have been left with. The Member opposite referred to the opening hours of 9.00 am to 5.00 pm, five days a week, and 9.00 am to 9.00 pm at the South Tyrone Hospital, seven days a week. I ask the Minister to look at that. Mind you, I asked the chief executive of the trust to consider that issue and I am still awaiting a change. I hope that the Minister has more influence than I or any of the other elected representatives who have made that request.

The minor injuries unit opened on 24 May last year. The headline of the trust's press release was, "Minor Injuries Units — a new era of care — Mid Ulster Hospital". I am not disputing the quality of care provided by the hospital; the care that those responsible, including nurses, provide is excellent. I have known many of the doctors and nurses in the Mid-Ulster Hospital for many years and, on many occasions, have thanked them for all their help with the injuries that I received when I was much younger and fitter and was able to play football. The staff there do a good job, but the difficulty that the people of mid-Ulster have is that there is not an appropriate level of service to cope with their needs.

Mr Molloy referred to enhancing the services at the minor injuries unit, and I ask the Minister to look into that.



My colleague to my left is a representative for the Antrim area. Although he and I jest about whether Antrim Area Hospital is looking after the patients of mid-Ulster, some, including me, question whether it is capable of coping with them.

**Mr T Clarke:** I thank the Member for giving me the opportunity to intervene. I know where his train of thought is going. It is not the case that the staff are unable to care for the people of mid-Ulster when they come to Antrim Area Hospital; the issue is that the facility in Antrim was not designed to cater for the additional patients that are being brought to it. The professionalism of the staff who work in the hospital cannot be questioned. The problem is that the Antrim facility was never designed or built to cater for people from Whiteabbey Hospital, the Mid-Ulster Hospital or other hospitals in which departments have been closed.

**Mr I McCrea:** That was certainly my train of thought. The professionalism or the staff's ability is not in question; it is the fact that the people of mid-Ulster and their representatives were told, prior to a decision being taken, that they would be sent to Antrim Area Hospital only when it was able to cope with the additional patients from the mid-Ulster and Whiteabbey areas. I would like to see the Mid-Ulster Hospital get back its accident and emergency department, and I ask the Minister to consider that.

The decision was premature. The proposed newbuild, if I can believe what I am told, is close to commencing. I will watch that with interest. The important issue is to get back some trust in the trust for the people of mid-Ulster. We have been told many a story about what we will get and what we will not get — more often about what we will get. Dates are set, but they mean nothing. I ask the Minister to ensure that any future dates set by the trust are adhered to. I ask him to ensure that any services that we have are retained and enhanced, as other Members will no doubt call for.

### 5.00 pm

**Mrs Overend:** I welcome the opportunity to take part in the Adjournment debate, and I thank the Member for tabling the topic. I am pleased that we have representation from all sides of the House, and I note the interest of those in the Public Gallery this afternoon. During my election campaign, health was certainly one of the most

important issues raised on the doorsteps, and I said at the time that I would represent those concerns in this place. I took an early opportunity to write to the Health Minister on this issue, and I am glad that he is here this afternoon.

I was born in the Mid-Ulster Hospital, as were my two brothers and my sister, and the only reason that I have been admitted to hospital again was to have my three children, who were all born in the Mid-Ulster Hospital. All my antenatal care was provided there, and my experiences of the hospital were very positive. The care and attitudes of the staff, midwives and nurses at that time were second to none. I was naturally disappointed that, within a year, the maternity ward was closed.

However, in October 2010, I was very pleased to be present at the launch of the midwifery-led antenatal service at the Mid-Ulster Hospital. That service is good news for pregnant mums in mid-Ulster, as it is aimed at those in the low-risk category. It is fantastic that they can attend antenatal appointments locally and know that they will continue to see the same midwives throughout their pregnancy. That means less stress for mums and increased confidence in a successful pregnancy.

Good teamwork is key to the success of the service between the Mid-Ulster and Antrim hospitals, and it will ensure good continuity of care during pregnancy. Midwives have a lead role to play throughout pregnancy, and the service will give an even greater confidence to midwives and others. Teamwork between hospitals is a key concept, when the Mid-Ulster Hospital now lacks the essential A&E services and provides only a minor injuries unit in their place. Good teamwork is essential because people still go to the Mid-Ulster Hospital needing emergency care. They are afraid that they will not make it to Antrim on time. What are the medical staff at the Mid-Ulster to do when that happens?

When the medical decision was made to remove A&E services from the Mid-Ulster Hospital, there was a huge outcry from my constituents, entirely understandably. We all want to receive the best possible care in our emergency time of need. We want the best consultants, the best doctors and the best possible care. However, it was deemed impossible to get that at the Mid-Ulster Hospital because not enough consultants

wanted to work there. Can we improve our teamwork between Antrim and the Mid-Ulster so that A&E provision can return to mid-Ulster? Can the Minister find ways to attract consultants to rural areas such as mid-Ulster?

Better teamwork is also needed with the Ambulance Service for mid-Ulster. It must be improved to meet the demands placed on it. The geographical spread for the Ambulance Service that covers the Northern Trust area is much too big. An ambulance could be driving from my local depot in the heart of mid-Ulster to Ballycastle and, mid-journey, take a call to divert to another emergency in Coagh. I ask the Minister to re-examine the methods used in that department.

In conclusion, there is a fear right across mid-Ulster that, should they need emergency services, people will not have time to receive the care that they need, either because they will not make it to Antrim Area Hospital on time or because, when they do get there, there will be huge delays before they can access help. It is the Minister's responsibility to restore confidence to the people of mid-Ulster and to consider better ways of delivering a first-class Health Service to my rural constituents.

The Patient and Client Council report launched this morning recognised that there should be no difference between the service received by those who live in a rural community and those in an urban community. The people of mid-Ulster need assurance and reassurance from the Health Minister. I can safely say that the Minister might need more money, but we need better teamwork in order to meet the people of mid-Ulster's demands and deliver better health services for them. It is a matter of life or death for far too many.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Molloy, who brought the matter to the House, for the opportunity to speak on an issue that is very close to the hearts of many, not least of everyone in my own family. I and my family live in very close proximity to the Mid-Ulster Hospital. Indeed, in the past, we have had to call upon the services of that hospital. I pay special tribute to the staff and doctors who have worked on site at the Mid-Ulster Hospital for the service that they have given to the locality.

Mr McCrea referred to the assurances that were given to us, as elected representatives, that

there would be no dilution of services at the site in Magherafelt until a supplementary service was available in Antrim, but that assurance fell through.

It is opportune that a Patient and Client Council report called 'Rural Voices Matter' came out just today. There has been coverage about that report on the radio, and I took some time to read it. One of the key issues that it refers to is that the three services given the most average or poor ratings by rural dwellers are A&E, GP out-of-hours and outpatient.

Figures on outpatient waiting times were provided to me today. The indices are that no patient should wait longer than nine weeks for a first outpatient appointment. At 30 April 2011, 9,292 outpatients in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust were waiting over nine weeks. An additional 98 patients were waiting over nine weeks for ICATS, which apparently stands for integrated clinical assessment and treatment services, and 172 patients were breaching the agreed backstop positions for the likes of visiting consultant specialities. In fact 1,516 patients were waiting over nine weeks for those visiting consultant specialities. That is it all boiled down. That is the human face of it. Those are the people who, at election time and in our constituency offices, mention waiting times and the problems that they have had.

I am glad that the Minister is with us here today. I know from working with him in the last mandate that he is a person who is prepared to listen and work with people. Unfortunately, that was not the case with the previous Minister in the previous mandate. On 14 May 2010, I e-mailed the then Minister of Health requesting a meeting with him about the situation at the Mid-Ulster Hospital. He would not meet me. On 4 June 2010, I got a reply that this was because of alleged diary commitments and pressures. He suggested that I meet the chief executive of the Northern Trust, whom I had met anyway. The Minister did not have time to meet us about an issue of clear concern to the community.

On 26 May, I wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister asking that they place provision of acute medical services and hospital provision on an agenda for discussion at the Executive. On 22 June, I received a reply from the First Minister and deputy First Minister stating that it was an operational matter for the Minister of Health. That is the same Minister

of Health who would not meet me. Therefore, Ministers had fobbed it off again.

On 25 June, I wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister again. I feel that it is important that I place on record the sentiments that I expressed in that letter.

*“Dear Ministers, further to your letter of 22 June, I am dismayed at your response, in which you categorise acute medical services and hospital provision in mid-Ulster and west of the Bann, because the whole of Tyrone and south Derry has been denuded of these acute services and hospital provision, which is so required. The current situation and lack of provision of these services raises equality issues, disability issues, rural issues, children’s health and safety, as well of that of the wider public. These are equality matters that fall within your remit as First and deputy First Ministers, and I feel your dismissal of this important issue is extremely disappointing. You may be aware that the Minister of Health has refused to meet me on the decision to close the A&E in the Mid-Ulster Hospital and that there is significant evidence that Antrim Area Hospital’s A&E department is not fit to cope, particularly as planned changes and improvements are far from complete. Further to this, there is concern about ambulance cover across the Northern Trust area.”*

Mrs Overend rightly referred to that today. My letter continued:

*“My constituents in mid-Ulster feel that they are being treated as second class citizens by the Minister, and, if the Executive do not address the lack of provision under these criteria, they too will be failing the people of mid-Ulster. So, I would ask that this matter is brought before the Executive as a matter of urgency.”*

Again, it is fob-off time; fob the matter off to the Minister or to someone else again, and do not land it on my plate.

Here, this evening, I look to the Minister and other Members for support. We have a situation in which Antrim Area Hospital is under serious pressure. Patients turn up at Magherafelt to a minor injuries unit that cannot and does not serve them. After they have been referred there, the Mid-Ulster Hospital has to refer them back up the road to Antrim. We have inadequate ambulance cover. A huge, scattered rural area is not being provided with services that other areas, be it Derry or Belfast, take for granted. I am sure that people there have their concerns about shortcomings in those areas.

I have requested a meeting with the Minister, and I trust that he will facilitate that. I am sure that he will, because fob-off politics is not his style. The people of mid-Ulster require an adequate service for themselves, their families and their children, as do the people of Tyrone. It is a major issue for the people in the Mid-Ulster Hospital’s catchment area. We have just the same rights and entitlements as everyone else in the North. I look to the Minister to help to improve that state of affairs and bring about a situation in which rural people no longer contribute to reports such as the one I mentioned earlier, in which they say that they do not have confidence in waiting times and so forth. We do not want to have to read quotes such as the ones in that report, in which people say that waiting times in A&E are horrendous.

I thank the Member for securing the debate. It is unfortunate that we have to have a debate on an issue such as this, where an area has been totally discriminated against when it comes to hospital provision. I look forward to the Minister’s response and, in future, to some of the actions by the Health Department to help to alleviate the situation.

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety):** I thank Members for their comments, from which it is clear that the services provided by the staff in the Mid-Ulster Hospital are greatly valued by the people of Magherafelt and the surrounding area. I add my appreciation of those staff members and others across the Northern Trust area who are clearly committed to providing high-quality, safe and effective health and social care to the people in that community.

I recognise the importance of local access to timely and effective emergency care services for rural communities. Indeed, I was at this morning’s launch of ‘Rural Voices Matter’, the Patient and Client Council’s report on the needs of rural communities. I want to assure the Assembly that my primary objective in reforming and modernising health and social care services is to ensure that we drive quality upwards, enhance the patient experience and improve health outcomes for the people of Northern Ireland. I want to involve people and front line staff in that decision-making process. That will require mature debate, and tough decisions will have to be made on improving productivity. We will have to do the right things right.

I want acute services to be provided on the basis of evidence of effectiveness, by skilled staff in modern buildings using modern technology, diagnostics and equipment. Yes, we are also looking for value for money. To do that, however, we must be prepared to take the hard decisions. In some instances, those will be to discontinue some services and interventions that are not necessarily sustainable in the long term.

I understand that the decision to reconfigure services at the Mid-Ulster Hospital was taken many years ago. Initially, we had the 'Developing Better Services' document, which outlined where we were going in the future and has been applied across hospitals. In addition, following a risk assessment on the sustainability of local services, it was found that there are significant risks to patients in sustaining acute services and facilities that do not have access to modern services, such as intensive care facilities, appropriate anaesthetic cover and 24/7 specialist radiology services.

### 5.15 pm

Access to appropriate clinical expertise and new technologies is essential to improve patient outcomes. In the view of medical experts, an acute service with a relatively low number of patients — say, an out-of-hours service — that cannot recruit and retain staff at the appropriate clinical grade is not a good service for patients. That is why the Northern Health and Social Care Trust took the decision and why, on that basis, the shift of services and experienced staff was considered to be in the best interests of patients. In doing so, it was recognised that the provision of a minor injuries unit at the Mid-Ulster Hospital would still provide access for the majority of patients living locally.

Given the difficulties faced by the emergency department at Antrim Area Hospital, we owe a debt of gratitude to staff in that department and on the wards who have been working under severe pressure for some time. It is my intention to visit the hospital in the near future to hear from front line staff, patients and senior management about the issues that concern them and about what they have done to improve access to services that are under pressure.

**Mr T Clarke:** I request that, when the Minister gets an opportunity to visit, he does not necessarily do so in conjunction with the chief executive and senior management. His visit should be unannounced, because we

have heard of high profile visits in the past that afforded people an opportunity to tidy up departments and make sure that things were set nicely and looked pretty for the day. I suggest that the Minister goes in unannounced, particularly over a weekend, without notifying the chief executive — unless the Minister wants to ring him just before he goes in the front door — to see first-hand many people's experience. Given the startling figures that we have heard today, including the number of people who have had to wait for more than 12 hours, the only way that the Minister will get a real appreciation of the situation is if he goes in unannounced.

**Mr Poots:** I have made it clear that I want to see the emergency department, warts and all. There is no point in seeing something that has been dickied up for a short period and where the general public do not get that same equitable treatment throughout time.

I welcome the fact that, since last year, we have moved from 343 people having to wait for more than 12 hours — that is an unacceptable time to wait — to 209 this year. However, I still regard 209 people having to wait for that time in March/April as unacceptable, and we certainly want to continue to drive that number down.

As I said, I want to visit the hospital in the near future. Temporary measures are welcome, but they are acceptable only as part of a bigger plan. It is about managing demand and capacity and changing the way in which we do things. For example, do all patients who present themselves to an emergency department need to be there, or could they be managed in a different clinical setting? Could the role of GPs, pharmacists and specialist nurses be expanded in the community, and what further contribution might the community, voluntary and private sectors make?

Having had an opportunity to look at things, I think that too many people go to hospitals for services that should be provided by GPs. We need to enhance the service that is provided at a local level by GPs and primary care clinics. By developing those clinics, which are far more cost-effective and based locally, we can accommodate many of the needs of people who may currently be sitting for 12 hours in order to get something fairly minor done while people who come in with much more significant needs have to be dealt with first. We need to screen out many of those who end up in emergency

departments so that they receive care in the appropriate locations. We also need to look at what further contribution might be made through the community, voluntary and private sectors. In addition, we need more intermediate and community care and rehabilitation to maintain people in their communities, and we need to have timely access to acute care where people need it.

To some extent, I am coming to this situation with some people calling for the door to be closed after the horse has bolted. We have to recognise that there has been a run-down of services at the Mid-Ulster Hospital and that it will be very difficult to get those services back. In respect of reorganising things across Northern Ireland and the Northern Trust, we have to look at the Mid-Ulster Hospital, the revision, and how it can best fit into that future to ensure that the people in that area receive equity of treatment.

As regards Antrim Area Hospital, what we have been looking at up to now is a short-term contingency plan with a focus on a longer-term solution for the whole of the Northern Trust. Clinical leadership will be key to the success of any plan, and I look forward to hearing what clinicians have to say when I meet them in the near future. We will be looking at increasing bed capacity in Antrim in the short term, which will deliver an additional 14 medical beds temporarily. Those will be in place by November 2011. There will also be an additional 24 medical beds at a capital cost to my Department of £5 million. Construction for that will be completed by the end of 2012. Those new permanent beds will provide excellent facilities for patients; they will all be single rooms and will reach the highest standard in infection control.

In 2013, a new emergency department, at a cost of £9 million, will also be available. It will cater for 90,000 attendees per annum and will have state-of-the-art facilities for resuscitation, major and minor trauma and paediatric patients. All those things are far better dealt with at a trauma centre at a major hospital. It is in the interests of the public if those who suffer strokes or heart attacks, those who are in serious car accidents, including children, and those who take serious knocks to the head and so forth, are dealt with in a centre that has all the skills base available. That skills base will be able to provide the additional diagnostic

facilities for X-rays and imaging and will have a new clinical decision area.

That is not about saving money; it is about saving lives. It is important that segregation take place among those conditions and the minor injuries and those conditions where others can be served. We need to look at provision in the Mid-Ulster Hospital, its timing and what is appropriate. Some Members suggested that it may be worthwhile opening beyond nine to five and opening the hospital at weekends. That is something that I am prepared to discuss. Mr McGlone indicated that he had requested a meeting, as has Mr McCrea, both verbally and in writing. More recently, I received a letter from Mrs Overend. I am happy to meet all the Members together. I offer that invitation to Mr Molloy, as well as those whom they deem appropriate to bring with them from the community to make the case. Let us discuss what best meets the needs of people in mid-Ulster.

The environment in an emergency department is important to improve patient outcomes and the patient experience; it is also important for staff to improve patient flows in their working conditions. However, we must look at the bigger picture across Northern Ireland, which is why I expect the Health and Social Care Board, working in collaboration with the Public Health Agency, to bring forward a plan for reorganised emergency departments for Northern Ireland.

I expect that plan to be submitted to me by no later than December 2011. I trust that it will be done in conjunction with what the Ambulance Service can provide. At that point, I will be able to engage fully with the public and to be in a position to take final decisions on the future direction of all emergency department services in Northern Ireland. In the meantime, we are where we are in respect of the Mid-Ulster Hospital. I am prepared to look at how we can best meet the needs of the people of mid-Ulster into the future, although I suspect that that will not involve the reinstatement of services at the Mid-Ulster Hospital. However, there are opportunities to look at what is being provided at the Mid-Ulster Hospital to see how we can maximise the service to the public and best meet the needs of that community.

Over a long time, from the decision in the first Assembly to close Omagh Hospital and run down the services there to the decision of the Royal Colleges to remove many of Dungannon

Hospital's services and now Mid-Ulster Hospital, the area south and west of Lough Neagh has had an awful lot of medical services removed from it. We are in a different time now, and people are looking at doing things differently; nonetheless, we have a large geographical area, and it is important to ensure that its needs are met.

The decision to remove services in the Mid-Ulster Hospital saved the Department of Health no money whatsoever. It actually cost us money because an additional £875,000 was given to the Ambulance Service to provide further services. Therefore, it was not a money-saving exercise. It was something that the Northern Trust did because it believed that there would be better clinical outcomes. Nonetheless, as I indicated, I am happy to have further discussions with the public representatives here today and with members of the community who can bring something to the table.

*Adjourned at 5.27 pm.*





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