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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 17 October 2011

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Before we come to this afternoon's business, I want to say something that especially concerns the Matter of the Day. I understand that today's Matter of the Day is quite an emotive issue for some Members, but I remind the whole House of the standard of debate that we all expect. We expect courtesy, good temper and, certainly, moderation of language.

I have watched Matters of the Day over the past while, and some are being turned into political footballs. Let me say that that is not what Matters of the Day were to be about. When the particular Standing Order was introduced, it was done really to deal with issues that cannot be discussed anywhere else, with the only appropriate place for their discussion being the House. I hope that Members, irrespective of the Matter of the Day, do not turn it into a political football. That is important. I say that for the benefit of the whole House.

Matter of the Day

Pat Finucane Case

Mr Speaker: Mr Gerry Kelly has sought leave to make a statement on the handling of the Pat Finucane case, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I will call Mr Kelly to speak for up to three minutes, and I will then call Members from the other parties, as agreed with the Whips. Those Members will also have up to three minutes to speak on the matter.

As Members will know, there will be no opportunity for intervention, for questions or for a vote on the matter. I will not take any points of order until the item of business is concluded. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat a Cheann Comhairle agus ba mhaith liom cúpla briathar a rá ar an ábhar tábhachtach seo.

I am grateful for the opportunity to say a few words on this very important issue. I listened to what you said at the start of the sitting, a Cheann Comhairle, and I think that it is reasonable to assume that the Assembly is very concerned about this matter.

Pat Finucane was murdered 22 years ago. It took until 2001 to get an agreement from the British Government at Weston Park that there would be an inquiry. Some of the facts about the killing are known. It is already known and in the public arena that the RUC and the Special Branch knew about the killing and that agents were involved. The British army knew about it, and, in fact, Brian Nelson, a well-known agent, was involved in the run-up to that terrible killing. The British Government have agreed that there was collusion. As that is the case, why have successive British Governments resisted inquiries?

The Finucane family was brought to Downing Street last week. It has been said that they were lured there, and it is hard to resist the thought that that is exactly what happened. After something like a year of negotiations, there were high hopes and expectations that, eventually, the family would get some justice through the announcement of an inquiry. Instead, they were told that there would be a review. At no time during the year of negotiations with the family was a review mentioned. It is still hard to understand why the family would be brought to Downing Street for what I can only describe as an insult.

Let us deal with the issue of a review. There have already been two reviews: under Stevens and under Judge Cory. Judge Cory found that there should be an independent public inquiry. Reviews cannot make findings by law. There is a very strong belief out there that the state thought that Pat Finucane was expendable. Of course, he was not the only person to be killed. I listened to his wife, Geraldine, say that the notion of expendability must stop and that it should not happen again.

I listened to what you said before the debate, a Cheann Comhairle, and I will finish by saying that this issue should unite the victims we represent right across the Assembly. The Finucane family deserves the truth. Frankly, so do we all.

Mr Givan: I acknowledge that this is a very difficult issue for the family. A father was murdered, and a husband was lost. We all recognise the grief that that brings to a home. However, I think that the vast majority of people will recognise that a further costly, open-ended inquiry is simply not reasonable. Not only is it an issue of affordability, but previous inquiries have shown that they do not bring closure. There is a clear concern on this side of the House that public inquiries have been used to wage a vendetta against the Royal Ulster Constabulary, as opposed to seeking closure for the families. That is a cause of grave concern.

This case has already been subject to inquiries. One, by Lord Stevens, cost over £9 million, involved over 9,000 witness statements and created an archive of over a million pages. It is very important that we do not elevate certain crimes above others and that the sense of injustice of many other victims is not heightened or exacerbated. Over 3,000 people have been murdered in Northern Ireland. More than 1,000 of them served in the security forces, and we

owe it to the family and friends of every one of those victims to ensure that all those murders are equally investigated and justice sought for everyone.

Mr Nesbitt: My party supports any family seeking an opportunity to establish the truth. I regret that the Finucane family were unable to listen to the full proposal from the Prime Minister. I would like to acknowledge that the Prime Minister committed his personal time to the case. It should be remembered that some in the House, including the deputy First Minister, have complained recently about the lack of access to Downing Street.

When the Finucanes left the meeting, the impression given was that Sir Desmond de Silva would conduct a paper review only. Yet, the Secretary of State reported to the House of Commons that Sir Desmond would:

“be free to meet any individuals who can assist him in his task. It is, of course, open to him to invite or consider submissions as he sees fit.”

So, clearly, it is more than a paper exercise. However, as Mr Givan said, we already have over 9,250 witness statements. If every Troubles-related killing received the same focus, the number of witness statements would exceed 32 million, which equates to something like 20 per head of population, and those relate only to the dead, not the injured.

Every family is on a journey. The starting point is the loss; the finishing line represents the point at which a family has some understanding of what happened and why. In this case, the Finucanes know who killed Patrick Finucane, they know that there was collusion, they have received an apology from the Prime Minister and they are being given a £1.5 million investigation because, as the Secretary of State said:

“Accepting collusion is not sufficient in itself. The public now need to know the extent and nature of that collusion.”

The Ulster Unionist Party accepts that way forward and says no to any more open-ended, expensive inquiries.

Remember that no agreement was reached on the terms of the inquiry. An expensive clock was ticking, as lawyers swapped correspondence confirming the stand-off over the Inquiries Act 2005. Mechanisms such as the inquiries by the Historical Enquiries Team and the Police Ombudsman are means to an end. We believe

that the current mechanisms are imperfect, incomplete and imbalanced, serving always to paint the state and its agents as the guilty parties. As we cannot agree on what happened, why it happened or even on the language — the Troubles, the conflict or a war — perhaps we need to think again. Many, many war crimes remain uninvestigated by those mechanisms. At this point, we remember the hundreds of families still on the starting line and peering enviously into the distance at what the Finucane family has had and is getting.

Mr A Maginness: This is a long-standing issue, but it was thrown into sharp focus by the recent decision of the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, to have the relevant papers reviewed by an eminent QC. My party and I believe that that was a serious breach of an international agreement reached by the Irish and British Governments at Weston Park to have a public independent judicial inquiry. The British Government are simply in breach of that obligation. Not only that, but we have witnessed the scandalous abuse of the Finucane family. A former Secretary of State Shaun Woodward described the Prime Minister's decision as "crass and cruel", and I agree. The hurt that the Finucane family sustained last week was, I believe, enormous. There was an angry response from the family, but I think that it was a justified response to the way in which the British Government dealt with the issue.

It is time for the British Government to live up to their responsibilities in relation to this case. It is clear that the British Prime Minister has accepted that and apologised on behalf of the British Government and state. However, that apology and recognition are insufficient. The extent and nature of the collusion must be exposed, and that cannot be done simply by reviewing the papers. It must be exposed by an independent inquiry that has the right to call witnesses and, by so doing, get to the kernel of the extent and nature of the collusion.

This is a sad aspect of British policy in Ireland over many years that needs to be explored to restore the reputation of those involved and to give justice to Mr Finucane, who simply carried out his work as a lawyer in defending people in our courts of justice. It is right and proper that such an inquiry take place.

12.15 pm

Mr Dickson: Our thoughts today are not only with all victims and survivors but with the

Finucane family, whose expectations were raised by the British Government. Clearly, the issue could have been dealt with more sensitively: after all, a promise is a promise. The situation yet again raises the issue of the lack of a coherent way to deal with the past. Piecemeal approaches and isolated inquiries risk focusing almost entirely on the failings and injustices of the state and risk rewriting history, which compounds the hurt of others who feel ignored or forgotten. Quite simply, the cases of many victims will never be reviewed by an eminent QC.

The talks for which the Assembly has called need to be convened urgently between the parties and between the British and Irish Governments so that we can find a coherent way to deal with the legacy of the past. We need a comprehensive process so that there is a clear way forward for dealing with the past. It is crucial that we agree that overarching strategy instead of having a fragmented approach so that we can address the needs of victims and survivors and build what we all want: a shared future.

Mr Allister: The murder of Pat Finucane was indisputably wrong, as was every murder. However, the point needs to be made — some would like to forget it — that the Finucane family had the offer of a judicial inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005 and rejected it. Many other families never had such an offer. Some families — the Nelson family and the Wright family — had such offers, which they accepted, and had their inquiries. If the Finucane family had not been so insatiable in their demands, they would also have had their judicial inquiry by now. Something about the matter is self-inflicted in that regard.

Many people love to talk about collusion in the context only of the British government authorities. However, collusion has more than one side. I could well ask how much collusion there was from some who now sit in government in the House in the murder of soldiers, policemen and civilians such as Patsy Gillespie, Frank Hegarty and Joanne Mathers, a census worker? Those are unanswered questions about which I hear no calls for inquiries and no apologies, yet they go to the very core of probity in government right here in Northern Ireland, never mind Westminster. When we reflect on collusion, perhaps this place should begin by putting its own house in order.

Executive Committee Business

Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill: Legislative Consent

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions dealing with information about financial resources contained in clauses 21 and 32 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill as introduced in the House of Commons on 21 June 2011; and agrees that the UK Parliament should consider amendments to the Bill to provide for equivalent arrangements in relation to the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission.

This will allow for the sharing of information regarding an individual's financial resources held by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for the purposes of determining his or her eligibility for civil or criminal legal aid. Information contained on the DWP's customer information system (CIS) includes data originating from DWP, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and the relevant Departments in Northern Ireland, which are the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP).

Although the DWP owns the CIS, there is a deficiency in its statutory authority to release Northern Ireland information held in that system. When the DWP has been asked to supply CIS-held Northern Ireland data in the past, it has only released the data by compulsion of legislation or by prior agreement with Northern Ireland colleagues. This current approach is not adequate for the purpose of assessing eligibility for legal aid, in particular the requirement to make such an assessment quickly.

Unfortunately, the DWP cannot always distinguish between Northern Ireland data and DWP data that is held on the CIS. There are, therefore, concerns that, as there is no statutory authority to release Northern Ireland data, the DWP could be at risk of unlawfully disclosing data that relates to persons resident in Northern Ireland. Clause 21 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill, which was introduced on 21 June 2011, creates information gateways for both criminal and civil legal aid and legislates for information held by the DWP, HMRC and Northern Ireland

Departments to be shared with the legal aid department in England and Wales. We have asked for this to be reciprocated to allow the sharing of information with the Legal Services Commission in Northern Ireland, as that would be of great benefit to the commission, giving authority to access UK information and allowing the commission to obtain all the information it requires from one UK source.

The proposed provision will allow the director of legal aid casework in England and Wales and the chief executive of the Legal Services Commission here to make an information request for personal details about an individual, a person's benefits status and any other prescribed information for the purpose and only for the purpose of establishing eligibility for legal aid. The proposed provision would allow the DWP to provide the information requested without breaching the Data Protection Act. The Bill will place restrictions on the onward disclosure of the information obtained and, in clause 32, create a criminal offence of unlawful onward disclosure.

The chief executive of the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission fully supports the proposed sharing of information as set out in the Bill and welcomes the opportunity of having primary legislation in England and Wales to provide the commission with the power to obtain information from the DWP. It is anticipated that once the Bill is implemented the commission can have direct access to that information via an IT link, and that will reduce the time taken to assess an individual's financial eligibility for legal aid, as the work would be carried out much more efficiently.

The Bill, once amended to include reciprocation, will mean that the chief executive of the Legal Services Commission could also make a request to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to enable or assist in the assessment of a person's financial resources to check that they are financially eligible for legal aid, both civil and criminal.

The Bill will allow the chief executive to enter into a data-sharing protocol with DWP on how information can be shared electronically, thus enabling the more efficient assessment of an individual's financial eligibility.

I am grateful for the support of the Committee for Justice, the Executive and the relevant

Departments for this proposal. I ask the House to support the motion.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): The Department advised the Committee for Justice on 8 September that the Minister was proposing to put a legislative consent motion to the Assembly to allow for the provisions of clauses 21 and 32 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill, as introduced at Westminster on 21 June, to extend to Northern Ireland. The Bill will give the Department for Work and Pensions the legal authority to disclose Northern Ireland data to the Legal Services Commission in England and Wales for the purpose of assessing eligibility for legal aid without breaching the Data Protection Act. The Department advised that it was asking for this to be reciprocated to allow the sharing of information held by government Departments in England and Wales with the Legal Services Commission in Northern Ireland, and the Justice Department agreed to make the necessary amendment to the Bill during its passage through Westminster to provide for reciprocation.

The Committee took oral evidence from departmental officials on 15 September, during which officials outlined how, if the arrangements are put in place, the system for processing applications for legal aid will be much more efficient and quicker, thus achieving better value for money. Following consideration of the written and oral evidence presented by the Department and having satisfied itself that the necessary arrangements and funding are in place to implement the new system, the Committee for Justice agrees to support the proposal to extend the provisions in clauses 21 and 32 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill to Northern Ireland by way of a legislative consent motion, on the basis that there is reciprocity through the sharing of information held by government Departments in England and Wales with the Legal Services Commission in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the Committee for Justice supports the motion on the grounds that the Bill is amended to provide equivalent arrangements in relation to the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission and notes the commitment given by the Department of Justice to do that.

Mr Allister: This is a sensible and practical proposition, and I particularly welcome the proposal that there should be reciprocal

arrangements. It is all the more necessary because today we have a very mobile population, moving about not just within parts of the United Kingdom but within the whole EU. There are some who start from eastern European countries, come through GB and end up here and vice versa. So, one can see the necessity for all of this and the need for the reciprocal requirement that is proposed.

I go on, though, to make this observation: it is striking that, so many months into this term of the Assembly, this is the closest that we have got to legislating. We call ourselves MLAs: Members of a legislative Assembly. Yet the only legislation — Budget apart — that we have discussed since I came to the House are matters such as legislative consent motions, where we are consenting to Westminster, quite properly, doing it for us. It raises this question: what is this House all about? Was my MP, the Member for North Antrim, right when he described it as just a glorified county council?

Mr Ford: I am grateful to the Committee Chair for his confirmation of the Committee's support for this procedure. I will make the usual comment that I make on these occasions that I do not resort to LCMs lightly, but I think it has been acknowledged in the way the matter was discussed in Committee that the benefits of ensuring that Northern Ireland and reciprocity are covered in the existing Bill mean that it is important. I am not sure, however, whether I should take Mr Allister's remarks as a compliment to the Department of Justice, in that we are at least doing LCMs, or whether it was also an implicit criticism of us, but I assure the House that there is a heavy legislative programme being discussed by the Committee in consultation phases at this stage, and I have no doubt that Mr Givan, Mr McCartney and others will join me in this Chamber for lengthy sessions in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions dealing with information about financial resources contained in clauses 21 and 32 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill as introduced in the House of Commons on 21 June 2011; and agrees that the UK Parliament should consider amendments to the Bill to provide for equivalent arrangements in relation to the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is the motion on the development of an all-Ireland job creation strategy. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes in which to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Before you move into the business, I refer you to last Tuesday in the House, when the Member for South Belfast Mr Spratt firmly asserted to you, sir, that I, from a sedentary position — as, of course, I should not have done — had asserted that the First Minister had lied. He was very explicit in saying:

“That is the word that he used: ‘lied’.” — [Official Report, Vol 67, No 4, p182, col 2].

I pointed out at the time that I had used no such word. I understand that your inquiries revealed the same.

12.30 pm

What is the procedure now, when a false allegation has been made and a Member has accused another of lying when they patently did not? I waited until Mr Spratt was in the House. He has come and gone, and he made no mention of it. What is the procedure now? I do not mind being held up for what I say and do, but I take some exception to being held to account for what I do not say.

Mr Speaker: I have no doubt that, as the Member raised in his point of order, he knows exactly what action I have taken on the issue. The Member was in the House when Mr Spratt raised the point of order, and I allowed the Member a right of reply. I have read Hansard. I agree with what the Member has said this morning. I even agreed with what he said last Tuesday.

As far as I am concerned, I have dealt with it. I deal with such matters in the manner that, if a Member is in the House and an allegation is made on a point of order by another Member — it was Mr Spratt on this occasion — I allow the Member a right of reply. I told the Member that I would go and check Hansard and come back to him directly. The Member should have received a letter from me this morning. I suppose it is

the old saying, “Never ask a question unless you know the answer.” I believe that the Member already knew the action that I had taken before he made the point of order today.

Mr Allister: I have one question: is there a procedure —

Mr Speaker: The Member is really trying my patience, but I will allow him to ask the question. As the Member will know, I am very patient in this House.

Mr Allister: When a Member makes a false allegation, is there a procedure for that Member to withdraw the allegation in the House?

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me say first of all that I do not believe that that is appropriate on this particular issue. It would have been different if the Member had not been in the House and unable to reply. Members from all sides of the House will know that, when a Member rises on a point of order to make an allegation against another Member, I will normally allow that Member a right of reply if he or she is in the House. The Member got a right of reply last Tuesday. That is how such issues have always been dealt with; that is the convention.

Private Members' Business

All-Ireland Job Creation Strategy

Mr Flanagan: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls for the development of an all-Ireland job creation strategy under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council to focus on areas of high unemployment across the island.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom an rún seo a mholadh agus tá áthas orm í a chur faoi bhráid an Tionóil. I am very happy to propose the motion. This year, the Irish cricket team beat England and is now ranked eleventh in the world. The Irish rugby team is a world force. It reached the quarter-final of the World Cup and is ranked seventh in the world. Conversely, the South's soccer team is ranked twenty-ninth in the world, and the soccer team here is ranked seventieth in the world. "What has that got to do with job creation and the economy?" I hear you ask. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Flanagan: It is simple: as a small island, we have to maximise the efficient use of all our resources. We can continue to compete North and South and follow the soccer model.

Mr A Maskey: Does the Member agree that boxing, which is an all-Ireland sport, has had the highest achievement of any sport on this island over many years?

Mr Flanagan: It is hard to argue with Mr Maskey's comment, but I would also like to point out that darts has been a hugely successful sport on this island in recent times.

Do we need to follow the soccer model? Alternatively, we should seek to unite our economy under one system. This island faces many challenges that have been presented by the current global economic crisis, the catastrophic financial mismanagement in the South and the historical underperformance of the Northern economy. Recent events, such as the increase in cross-border trade, greater regulation in banking and insurance, and the potential of the all-island energy market, have demonstrated the interlinked and interdependent nature of our economies.

I bring the motion to the House in the hope that it will be debated in a mature manner

and that realistic steps can be taken to create meaningful employment in areas where it is badly needed. I know that some in the House are quite apathetic to the success of the Southern state's economy. In fact, some Members have, in the past, welcomed its demise. However, I ask them to think beyond narrow political agendas and to remember that the still considerable wealth and experience in each and every one of the 26 counties provide a huge area of potential for businesses based here.

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

As the motion states, we are calling for the establishment of an all-island job creation strategy under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council. Such a strategy would be jointly chaired by the two Enterprise Ministers on this island — Minister Foster and Minister Bruton. It would focus on areas of high unemployment across the island. If one looks at the most recent statistics, the excessively high figures in many border areas stand out. Places such as Donegal, Fermanagh, west Tyrone, Leitrim and Cavan have all suffered terribly since the beginning of the recession, but things were not so great there during the so-called boom years. The roar of the Celtic tiger never reached that far north. The fact is that partition, since its creation, has failed our island, particularly those who live near the border.

Lord Morrow: It is interesting to hear what the Member has to say about the state of the economy in Northern Ireland and the state of the economy in Southern Ireland. Does he accept that one of the reasons that the economy here in Northern Ireland had its difficulties over the past 35 or 40 years was the relentless terrorist campaign waged by the IRA? If the money spent on rebuilding Northern Ireland after the bombs had been poured into the creation of jobs, we might be in a better position.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for his intervention, but he wants to hark back to the past. Maybe he wants to go the whole way back. He should look at the origins of the conflict, the inequality in our society and the unequal access to jobs, housing, and things like that. However, that is a completely separate issue. The Member prefers to have a dismissive or insular attitude rather than looking for opportunities for

change, but if we take that attitude, we will not make progress on such matters.

Partition has resulted in counterproductive competition, disjointed infrastructure and differing taxation regimes, legislation and economic development policies. It also reduced the value for money of our public services. It is no coincidence that the border counties in both states have the highest unemployment rates, the highest emigration rates, the poorest infrastructure, the weakest health services and, indeed, the lowest investment across the island. Partition has failed our people and undermined the competitiveness of our economy. Continued partitionist economics will fail another generation and fail to realise the value of our wealth for the benefit of all of our people.

To those of you who think that what happens in places such as Dundalk or Manorhamilton does not matter here, let me tell you that it does. Our retail sector has managed to survive the recession as long as it has only because of the influx of cross-border shoppers into places such as Newry and Enniskillen. The recent drop of 10% in retail sales over the past year is very worrying. We can no longer afford to sit on our hands and ignore the only viable solution to the mess.

Before we can think about introducing a job creation strategy, we need to look at what already exists to see whether it is, if you will pardon the pun, working. It is abundantly clear to me, to many in the business sector and, indeed, to society, that the current direction of travel is not working. The change in name of the £19 million short-term employment scheme to the jobs plan is a fine marketing exercise for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Minister, but let me be clear: it is not a plan. The Minister has no plan, nor is there a clear strategy.

Had the Department been working towards a coherent and well-thought-out job creation plan, the Minister would not have had to hand back to the Department of Finance and Personnel the £17.5 million that Invest NI could not spend on creating jobs. If there was a strategy, the Minister would be able to offer a better defence to soaring unemployment than saying that at least our average rates of unemployment are lower than those in Britain. That is hardly much consolation to those who find themselves unemployed with no prospect of getting work

One of DETI's most recent initiatives for jobs creation is entitled Boosting Business. All that has been done is that a range of existing and largely ineffective policies have been lumped together into one easy-to-read document. The initiative contains nothing new or fresh and definitely nothing innovative or radical. Most worrying of all is the fact that nothing is providing hope to our young people, who are being left with no option but to emigrate in search of employment.

More and more people are leaving this island. It is estimated that 1,000 people leave the South every week, and the figure for the North is not much better, with an average of 500 people leaving every week last year. If that continues, the ability of our economy to recover will be undermined, because we will have exported all our young, skilled workers. With increasing all-island co-operation and collaboration, there is a host of opportunities to grow our economy sustainably and create thousands upon thousands of meaningful jobs. We can create jobs across all sectors, but there are particular opportunities in agrifood, in tourism, in developing new technologies, in renewable sustainable energy generation, in manufacturing for export, in innovation and in research and development. The agrifood sector, uniquely at a time when global business is in contraction, has demonstrated consistently strong growth across the island.

More support mechanisms need to be put in place for our small indigenous businesses across the island, including the potential for tax breaks or incentives and the consideration of enterprise zones. Banks are still not assisting local enterprises and individual businesspeople quite as enthusiastically as they expected taxpayers to help them when they were in need. We need to see what co-operation we can get from the banks in that regard. More pressure needs to be put on the financial sector to assist in job creation by relaxing the suffocating conditions that are placed on borrowers. The resources and role of InterTradeIreland need to be reassessed to ensure that it can further promote all-Ireland networks of research, development and innovation for complementary industries.

There is also a need to assist start-ups in getting into the global marketplace. We have the scarce resources of Enterprise Ireland and Invest NI duplicating promotions and activities,

all the while competing with each other. A better approach surely would be to combine forces to promote industries in the global marketplace. A single investment and job creation agency would eliminate the counterproductive anomaly of competition for inward investment. It would eradicate the waste of duplication, open wider opportunities to business throughout the island and generally contribute to growing the economy.

Mr Allister: The Member paints this utopia that few of us find easy to recognise, but will he simply answer one question? Will this utopia be within or outside the euro zone?

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for his intervention. That is a debate for another day, and if the Member wants to table a motion for such a debate, I will be happy to participate in it. There are pros and cons to being a part of the open European market. There is greater collaboration with other member states for free trade and free movement of people, but there are also the contradictions of handing over economic sovereignty to places such as London or Brussels. We have consistently argued for the transfer of fiscal powers out of those places to here.

The Assembly and the Executive need to push for the devolution of further fiscal powers. I thank the Member for bringing me to that point. We can look at taking serious measures to tackle unemployment, including the possibility of improved social security safety for the self-employed as a key change.

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

Mr Flanagan: There were two interventions. Do I not get an extra minute?

Mr Deputy Speaker: You have 10 minutes.

Mr Flanagan: All right. We need to look at the options for encouraging young people to become entrepreneurs. Both the North and the South face similar problems. In the North, we have limited fiscal powers.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, the Member's time is up.

Mr Flanagan: Members will note that, earlier, I used a GAA analogy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up, please.

Mr Flanagan: I did so because the son of a former Member of the House once said that the GAA is more important than money.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call Mr David McIlveen, I remind Members of the need to observe the standards of debate for the House, which are good temper and moderation. The cut and thrust of politics, yes, but there is too much shouting across the Chamber.

Mr D McIlveen: It will probably not come as a huge surprise that I oppose the motion. I do so for a couple of simple reasons. First, I have to say that we must approach such motions with an element of responsibility for what we are doing. I speak with a degree of personal understanding, because I own a business. One of the things that people in the private sector find most frustrating in this economic climate is false hope. People who are unemployed and who opened the paper this morning or looked at today's order of business may have some expectation that this debate will bring about a wonderful announcement that will make everything rosy in the garden. The reality is that it will not. To play with people's lives and the stress and strains that the unemployed are under, with a remit of nothing beyond trying to extend the ambit of the North/South Ministerial Council, is very irresponsible.

The motion should not really be taken seriously. The message needs to be sent out loud and clear that real people are affected by the decisions that we make in the House.

12.45 pm

The reason for the lack of need has already been touched on. There is this thing called freedom of movement in the European Union. We already have it. There is a joint employment strategy, as there is throughout the rest of the European Union. To go down the road of trying to introduce something for which there really is no need is a bizarre proposal.

We also have to cast our minds back to 2006, when a report was done on the all-Ireland economy. It promised riches and rewards and competition on a global scale if we all came together to promote a single economy. There were some obvious areas to target, such as infrastructure, research and development, co-operation on tourism promotion. However, that report was published in 2006, when the economy looked quite bright. Indeed, Ireland

was competing on a truly global scale at that stage. The Republic of Ireland's current fiscal situation is even worse than ours. Therefore, why would we want to go down the road of having an all-island job creation strategy?

The debate really does not merit much more time. We have to take the motion as it has been clearly intended: there is a political motive to it. It involves real people's lives —

Mr McKay: Will the Member give way?

Mr D McIlveen: I will.

Mr McKay: Aside from the bigger political questions about the Union and a united Ireland, I think that most businesses recognise that we need to see more collaboration on the island. We have a small labour force and a very small resource in general. Collaboration, as businesses recognise, will lead to more innovation, competitiveness and resourcefulness. That is a fact. Aside from the big Union politics, we need to look at the reality of the situation.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for his intervention, but I have not actually mentioned the Union in my contribution. I agree with him, but it is already there at an all-Europe level. The mechanisms are in place. We are making use of them, and I hope that we will continue to do so.

Although I like the Barack Obama, "Yes, we can" approach to all-Ireland job creation, we have to accept that, with 14.5% unemployment in the Republic of Ireland, where are the jobs, anyway? It is all well and good coming to the House with such proposals, but I reiterate that the motion is unrealistic and unworkable. We will certainly oppose it.

Mr Nesbitt: The motion is very interesting. Its text

"calls for the development of an all-Ireland job creation strategy".

Surely there is some merit in it. The Republic of Ireland has a population of 4.6 million people and a gross domestic product (GDP) of \$165 billion. Surely there is some merit in doing business there. However, we are, of course, part of the United Kingdom, which has a population of 62 million people and a gross domestic product of \$2.715 trillion. No matter how much you bob and weave, even Mr Maskey will find that that is something of a knockout blow.

Is it to be North/South or east-west co-operation? Should it be done through the North/South Ministerial Council or should we be looking to the British-Irish Council? I say to Mr Flanagan that it is a competitive world. Co-operation can go only so far before competition trumps it. The answer is not a strategy on an all-Ireland basis but to pick our own sectors and skill up accordingly. Agrifood, creative industries, information and communication technology (ICT), financial services — pick what you want, but then get on with it and skill up. The answer has to lie partly in the economies of agglomeration. It lies in geographic concentration, not in spreading out over the whole of the island. The answer is also a three-legged stool: not just the public and private sectors but the social economy, which offers local solutions to local problems. Again, that is not something that is best suited to an all-Ireland strategy. To me, the answer is economic expediency, not political ideology.

I wonder whether the motion is an implicit criticism of the North/South Ministerial Council and the implementation bodies therein, the Special EU Programmes Body and InterTradelreland.

Let us look at InterTradelreland. It exists to promote trade and business on an all-island and cross-border basis and for the enhancement of the global competitiveness of the all-island economy to mutual benefit. Is the motion not a criticism that that aim has failed to be achieved? InterTradelreland says:

"We bring together networks of companies to help them to become more profitable and competitive through joint marketing, skill-sharing, product or process development, meeting supply needs or co-production opportunities."

Again, is the motion not implicit criticism of what InterTradelreland does? Finally, InterTradelreland says that its strategy is to:

"enhance North/South business co-operation, delivering mutual economic benefits to Northern Ireland and Ireland."

Again, I read in the motion an implicit criticism of the North/South implementation body InterTradelreland.

As for the Special EU Programmes Body, we have had Peace I, Peace II and Peace III, the last of which offered some €333 million. Is the party not happy with how that has been

allocated? Should we not look also to framework programme 7 (FP7), which makes some €55 billion available for innovation, half of which is still unallocated? We could look to the Republic, which has a population of 4.6 million people, or to Europe, which has a population of over 700 million. We could look to the Republic, which has a GDP of \$165 billion, or to the European Union, which has a GDP of some \$20 trillion. It seems to me that our focus is a little too narrow.

Mr McKay: The Member seems to be very big on numbers. He mentioned the agrifood sector and InterTradelreland. As all parties in the House will agree, InterTradelreland does a hell of a lot of good work. It has also done a study on the benefits of building an all-Ireland approach to the agrifood sector. That study was completed a few months ago. Will the Member join me in asking that the Minister release the findings of that report?

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I will leave it to the Minister to respond to that. Numbers and the economy tend to go hand in glove, so I make no apology if you believe that I am hitting you with too many numbers. Perhaps those numbers are just very uncomfortable to your economic world view.

I question whether there is not a mixed message coming from Sinn Féin with this motion. It is calling for the development of an all-Ireland job creation strategy, yet, in September of last year, its leader in Dáil Éireann, Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin, published a Sinn Féin plan for a 26-county economic strategy. Which is it to be: 26 or 32? I leave the Member with more numbers to ponder.

Mr A Maginness: It will come as no surprise that the SDLP supports the motion, which calls for an all-Ireland job creation approach and on the North/South Ministerial Council to focus areas of high unemployment across the island. There is no harm in any of that, and it is right and proper that that should be the approach. I say to unionist colleagues in the House that that does not exclude having east-west co-operation on economic matters. There is a view in the House that a North/South strategy excludes an east-west strategy and vice versa, but they are not mutually exclusive. They can, in fact, be married together quite properly so that we maximise the benefit of our position in these

islands. That is right and proper for all of the people in Northern Ireland.

I have looked at the draft Programme for Government. Where in that Programme for Government is there an all-Ireland job-creation strategy, whether it comes under the work of the North/South Ministerial Council or any other body? There is a complete absence of such a strategy. Why does the Programme for Government neglect to address this issue? Surely, if Sinn Féin was serious about the motion, and I hope that it is, it would have included it in the draft Programme for Government. Why is there this absence? Why does Sinn Féin not pursue this in the Executive, where it has substantial membership? If that is absent from the Programme for Government is not Sinn Féin letting down its own support base and people in general?

With regard to North/South co-operation in the Programme for Government, there is an absolute lack of any meaningful commitment to developing partnership between the Executive in the North and the Government in the Republic. That is fact. Look at the Programme for Government. That needs to be addressed if we are serious about developing an all-Ireland job-creation strategy. We in the SDLP therefore look forward to receiving a credible and more detailed version of the Programme for Government.

In relation to North/South co-operation, we are fully supportive of the development of any job-creation strategy. I hope that everybody in this House is in favour of that and that their own political position — and I refer specifically to unionists — does not prevent them from supporting that on a reasonable cross-border basis. On this island, we should be co-operating together.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for introducing this theme. With respect to the construction industry in particular, people want to see some creativity. They also want to see joined-up thinking and joined-up government, not only within the island but within the North. One of the criticisms that we are hearing from the industry is that all Departments with responsibilities in the area are almost acting as silos. It is for us — all parties in the Assembly — to ensure that that advances to the stage of working for the people and delivering and getting decisions out into the community.

Mr A Maginness: I agree with that.

In relation to North/South co-operation and the development of job-creation strategies throughout this island, the European dimension is very important. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is doing good work in that respect by using the resources at our disposal to link in to European programmes particular to FP7 and to innovation to get investment moneys for research and development. That is the right way of going. InterTradeIreland, for example, is doing a very good job in trying to develop trade between North and South and trying to develop investment within businesses both North and South. Those synergies are important to developing our economies both North and South.

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

Mr A Maginness: We support the motion, but there is much more work to be done, particularly by Sinn Féin, to persuade the Executive about the Programme for Government in that respect.

Mr Lyttle: I am content to support the general principle of the motion, although I was somewhat disappointed by the lack of specific proposals put forward. I noted with interest the reference to duplication and how important it is to tackle duplication, given the lack of action on that issue that has been taken in this Assembly by the party that tabled the motion.

1.00 pm

I also agree with the House that creating jobs and tackling high unemployment must be the priority for the Executive and North/South Ministerial Council at such a difficult time. It is important that we identify specific potential growth sectors, such as renewable energy, tourism and infrastructure, on which to focus our work. I have noted and understand that there may be political sensitivities around such co-operation but would hope that Members agree that this is primarily an issue of harnessing economic benefit for people in Northern Ireland.

We do, of course, also support ongoing work with the UK Treasury to robustly cost and consider the devolution of corporation tax powers to Northern Ireland, not least given the competitive disadvantage we experience in that respect compared with the rest of Ireland. I

note the support for development of east-west working relationships also.

With regard to renewable energy, the island of Ireland has excellent access to wind and tidal power. However, Governments have some way to go in capitalising on that resource in comparison with other European countries such as Denmark and Germany. Potential employment opportunities in the sector range from manufacturing to maintenance at wind power plants and exist also in agriculture, with biomass production.

Scotland appears to have made significant progress in capitalising on wind resources. The Government there has designated specific land and territorial waters as renewable energy enterprise zones. It is important that we work together to capitalise on our resources in that sector, not only to maximise job creation but also for improved sustainability. By 2020, for example, EU targets demand that 20% of our energy will come from renewable sources. Therefore, it is critical that we work together to improve our innovation and productivity in the sector.

Mr Newton: The Member indicated that he would be generally supportive of the motion. I am not sure that that transfers into supporting the motion. Will he agree, however, that it will take the Republic of Ireland at least two decades to return, if that is possible, to the boom years that it experienced under the Celtic Tiger? Does he also agree that the unemployment rate in the Republic is twice that of Northern Ireland and to combine two rates of unemployment that are in difficulty does not make common economic sense, never mind political sense?

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention. I do, of course, recognise the significant difficulties being faced by the economy in Ireland and the length of time that recovery will take. However, there are specific areas in which strategic co-operation will benefit our economy in Northern Ireland. For example, I am aware of existing North/South co-operation in the tourism sector and agree that promoting Northern Ireland and Ireland as a joint destination to visitors from America, Europe and all over the world would be of economic benefit to our region.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board has made progress in that area but we are still behind

in tourist spend, and we need to ensure that anyone who visits Ireland is encouraged to include in their stay all that Northern Ireland has to offer. Obviously, 2012 offers unique opportunities in that respect, with the Derry/Londonderry — “legenderry” — Capital of Culture, the Titanic centenary and many other exceptional cultural, musical and sporting offerings. We need to do all that we can to ensure that Northern Ireland is regarded as a vital part of any Irish tourist experience in order to maximise and spread the economic benefit of that opportunity.

The important work of InterTradeIreland was mentioned. It should be supported and developed to help to increase trade, research and development, and tendering co-operation even further across the island and to help our business services sector to sustain and create jobs at a challenging time.

Other areas of co-operation, such as health and transport, have demonstrated how savings and opportunities can be created from shared service delivery and investment.

There are, of course, Executive proposals with the specific aim of tackling high levels of persistent unemployment in Northern Ireland, such as the social investment fund. It remains to be seen, however, if we can really target such resources to deliver improved life chances and job opportunities in this region. Indeed, the Alliance Party has consistently highlighted vital reform that is needed in education and tackling the cost of division if we are to get anywhere near achieving that aim.

I have identified the importance of improved North/South co-operation to realising savings and helping to create job opportunities that are necessary for economic recovery in Northern Ireland. Therefore, I am content to support the motion.

Mr Newton: When I first read the motion, my reaction was to look at it from an economic point of view and to think that the arguments should be about that. However, after hearing the Members who tabled the motion speak in this debate, I know that that is not the case. It is purely and simply a political argument that is being advanced.

It is not a difficult motion, and it is not a complex issue. Quite simply, Northern Ireland needs to take a pragmatic approach to how it

develops its economic well-being, and there is the potential for co-operation for Northern Ireland in areas that will lead to job creation. However, to restrict those areas to co-operation with a neighbour that has major economic difficulties, rising unemployment and fiscal difficulties and that needs to be bailed out not only by the EU but, at the same time, by the UK, does not seem to me to make good economic sense. It is purely a political argument.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member accept that the economy of Ireland and the economy of the UK are inextricably linked and that that is the reason why the Chancellor recognised the financial necessity of having some co-operation on the banks rescue scheme?

Mr Newton: There are implications for the UK and the Republic, and I will not argue that there should be no co-operation. However, there are also implications for the UK economy in Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal, which are all connected into the euro. The UK has responsibilities that will have a negative impact on the UK economy when trading in a European context. The people of Northern Ireland would be extremely disappointed if we looked only south rather than looking to the east and west, and we should look even more to international connections in potential job creation opportunities. Northern Ireland has the potential to do more in areas of co-operation with international partners, the other devolved Administrations and England, where there is much greater potential for success.

There is no bar to a working-together arrangement, co-operation or concerted action by Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. There are many examples where business-to-business co-operation already exists, and that is to be welcomed. However, co-operation should be for economic reasons rather than be motivated by a political agenda. It should be the economy first, the economy second and the economy third. Only through that approach will more jobs be created.

The vision of any western economy in the current economic situation must be characterised by a strong, competitive and socially inclusive ethos. Strong economic clusters need to be developed, and their development must not be impaired by politics but be purely economic in its approach. The

aim of any economic strategy has to include economic initiatives and strategies and business performances that can be measured against best performance internationally. Only by doing that will our businesses in Northern Ireland survive and thrive. For Northern Ireland, it means developing the capability to become even more fully aware of operating in the global economy and includes the ability to act locally but to think globally as well. It means building the economic and competitive advantages that we enjoy, particularly in the areas of our roads, rail, sea and air connections, and it means developing our ports and airports to allow ease of export and, indeed, easy access to Northern Ireland.

I conclude by saying that, because of the educational base of Northern Ireland, we have a great opportunity to look at research and development. Developing R&D, upgrading skills and innovation, which are essential in securing a strong position in a knowledge-based economy of the future and are already prioritised in the Programme for Government, are the successes we should build on if we are to trade on an international basis.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I am disappointed that people have used the issue to score party political points in the Chamber. We are debating a very important issue. Mr McIlveen said that we are talking about real people, real lives and real families and the effect that unemployment and people losing their job has on those people. I met some of those people earlier this morning, when I met young people from east Belfast who had been working with a project 'Training by Choice', which was recently closed down. Those 50 young people are the real people who will be looking for jobs in another year or two or, perhaps, are looking for a job right now. When discussing the issue, it is important to be mindful of what we are talking about.

Like me, many MLAs have been lobbied by people in our constituencies and beyond with regard to the hardships and financial difficulties that families find themselves in because people have lost their job due to the recession or have been unable to secure a job. It is important to do all that we can. We must co-operate and share with whoever we can to create those employment opportunities. There is a clear need to look at where we can work more

collaboratively and have a more co-ordinated approach. Someone said that we must have a more strategic, co-ordinated approach right across the island. Some Members have already talked about the agrifood sector; tourism; the development of the creative industries, particularly for our young people; and training, research and development. Surely, best practice must be a shared and co-ordinated approach right across.

In the short time that I have to speak, I want to concentrate on one or two issues. Someone already referred to the all-island energy market and the fact that we live on an island and have the potential to produce energy from wave and wind. We should be looking at how to develop the all-island market with regard to exporting our energy. We should also find ways to create jobs and build the economy.

Public procurement was discussed a few weeks ago. We must look at how we can best utilise public procurement to create employment opportunities and whether we can be more innovative with regard to government contracts. Those contracts should include social clauses so that young people can have apprenticeships and the long-term unemployed and those who need jobs can access them.

A Member — I think that it was Mr Nesbitt — already mentioned the social economy sector. We have great potential in the social economy sector to create employment and to regenerate communities at the same time. A Member once said in the House that, if we concentrated on the small, local businesses and the social economy sector, and if those businesses could employ one or two more people, we would have full employment.

When we debate these issues, it is important that we see them as issues that affect real people and real families. People do not need to be afraid to talk about it on an all-island basis. I cannot understand why anybody would be concerned about working on an all-island basis and would think that it is a big political issue that cannot be looked at. It is about growing the economy and looking at duplication and waste. It is also about co-operation and co-ordinating our approach. We can be innovative, and we can look at all of those sectors and create employment, because we need to create new employment opportunities and sustain the employment that we have.

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

Ms J McCann: Unless people have jobs, we will never grow our economy. Go raibh maith agat.

1.15 pm

Mr Moutray: As we continue to suffer from the global economic downturn, it almost goes without saying that the pain is being felt across the board. Businesses are suffering, and jobs have been lost. Unemployment in the United Kingdom is now at its highest since 1994, and recent figures for Northern Ireland reveal 7.6% unemployment. Of course, all of that is a result of the economic recession, not only here in Northern Ireland but across the globe. Unfortunately, unemployment is a by-product of the economic downturn and has severe knock-on effects. It is a known fact that high unemployment serves to deepen and prolong a recession. I think that we all agree that job creation is a priority for the Executive and the Assembly.

Minister Foster is all too aware of that fact, and I commend her continuous work to create jobs. We need only look back over the past year, when the Minister and her Department announced jobs in PwC, Capita, Kainos and Micro Focus. Invest Northern Ireland has identified the IT sector as a key driver for growth. I am sure that the Minister will elaborate on those points in her response. In addition, the Minister, along with colleagues throughout the House, has been pushing the case to have the powers to devolve corporation tax. That would allow us to attract further businesses, which would create jobs for people in Northern Ireland.

The Minister is operating in a difficult and genuinely challenging environment. Therefore, it is a great pity that there are those in the House who, while professing to be committed to dealing with our economic difficulties, seem prepared to play politics with those difficulties. The kindest interpretation I can put on the motion before the House is that it is mischievous. Rather than suggesting sensible and practical ideas and solutions, it seems that the proposers of the motion are, like their party, driven largely by political ideology and dogma. Job creation is merely a mask.

I fully accept that we live in a global economy and that economic and fiscal isolationism is a thing of the past. However, we have only to

look at the unemployment rates to see that Northern Ireland and the Republic are very different. As I mentioned, Northern Ireland has an unemployment rate of 7.6%.

Mr A Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Moutray: No. It will do you good to listen.

The Irish Republic's unemployment level is 14.5%, which is almost double. I accept that we should co-operate with our nearest foreign neighbour when it is in our best economic interest, but a synchronised strategy would not work. The island of Ireland has two separate and very different jurisdictions and two very separate and different economic and financial systems. The Irish Republic is in the euro zone and teetering on the brink of an economic and financial precipice. We are part of the British economy and, thankfully, outside the euro zone. Our economy is, undoubtedly, weak, but it is nowhere near as bad as that of our Southern neighbours. Why on earth would we want to tie ourselves to a much weaker economy? Why would we want to engage in the sort of joint initiatives outlined in the motion? We must remember one very important fact: we are in direct competition with the Irish Republic in areas such as job creation. Not only is the motion wrong in principle, but what it proposes cannot work in practice.

I wish the Irish Government every success as they grapple with the serious challenges of a faltering economy, but they must plough their own furrow, and so must we. We can co-operate and negotiate where it makes business sense, as has been the case with Invest Northern Ireland programmes and the existing InterTradeIreland body, which assists in cross-border trade and business development, but we do not need further bureaucracy and additional bodies that replicate work that is already happening.

I commend the Minister and Invest Northern Ireland for their hard work, and I urge them not to be diverted by the sorts of gimmicks and smokescreens that are proposed in the motion. I oppose the motion.

Dr McDonnell: I am very glad to support the motion. It draws attention to the need for a job creation strategy across the island, North and South. However, I will come to that in a moment.

At the outset, I want to say that there is a desperate need for a job creation strategy

in Northern Ireland. The Executive must get their act together across Departments and ensure that there is a clear pattern of where they want us to go with the issue. I urge the Executive to make a job creation strategy part of the Programme for Government, which they are moving slowly towards. It must be a key component of the Programme for Government, and the Executive must be clear and unambiguous in where they want to go.

Reference has been made to the issue being politicised, but that does not have to be the case. It is a bread-and-butter and life-and-death issue for many people, and I will not politicise it. I do not believe that there should be politics in the economy or that the economy should be politicised.

An early contributor to the debate referred to Greece, Portugal and other places, but I am not particularly interested in those countries. I live here, and I am concerned about our economy and about my neighbours having jobs. If I must be blunt, I want to ensure that the unemployment figures in Northern Ireland are as low as possible and that we do everything in our power to ensure that that happens.

There are many opportunities out there. The first area that springs to mind is the single energy market, which creates a whole range of opportunities. There are job opportunities in generation across the hard-core, traditional energy market, but even more opportunities can be achieved if we can get our act together on renewables. There is absolutely no reason why that cannot be done. Work in that area is probably already happening, but it needs a wee bit of encouragement. However, giving that wee bit of encouragement is not the same as politicising the issue.

Not very far away from here, Harland and Wolff is constructing some of the components that are used in windmills, which are one example of a renewable. There is a spectrum of subdivisions within renewables, and we are very far behind places such as Denmark, Holland and other European countries in our approach. There are vast opportunities to harness some subdivisions of renewable energy on this island, whether that is through biomass or tidal power. Indeed, if there is an opportunity to harness tidal power and to create jobs in Strangford Lough, opportunities will also be created in Carlingford Lough, Lough Foyle and a number

of other areas. We have a lot of the technical knowledge that is required, particularly in traditional companies such as Harland and Wolff, and we should do everything in our power to ensure that whatever renewable energy contracts are going on in the South are brought home to Northern Ireland.

A few years ago, I was happy to be able to do something that was very simple in brokering a connection and a deal between Harland and Wolff and fishing-boat owners in Killybegs. Harland and Wolff employees in east Belfast were able to take advantage of that contract, and it has now been expanded to other fishing ports in the South.

I could talk on about energy, but I want to move on. There is another big opportunity in R&D, and I compliment the Minister for her efforts and for pushing opportunities in that area. Bombardier, which is only a few miles away from here, works with a broad spectrum of Irish universities across the island in R&D work. Some of it is done in Galway, and some in Coleraine and Jordanstown.

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

Dr McDonnell: There are massive opportunities in R&D to draw down European money under frameworks 7 and 8.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr Dunne: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. It is regrettable that Northern Ireland faces the problem of unemployment across the country. We are not alone in that. Unfortunately, it is a global problem, shared throughout the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. As an Assembly, we must try to tackle that problem. My colleague Minister Arlene Foster has made every effort to tackle unemployment. She has made it a central priority for her Department, and I trust that that work will continue.

The current rate of unemployment in Northern Ireland is over 7.5%, with over 64,000 people out of work. The issue affects many families in Northern Ireland, and, regrettably, it can equally affect young people who are trying to take their first steps on the employment ladder. Others have worked for many years and have lost their jobs due to companies going down in the recession.

We can all play a part in trying to address this issue in the Assembly. An all-Ireland job creation strategy will not be the answer to the wider unemployment problem. In order to tackle unemployment, the focus needs to be on supporting and encouraging existing businesses and trying to attract new investment and jobs. We need to continue to work towards getting the right business-friendly conditions in order to attract business here. We need to cut the amount of red tape and bureaucracy that both small and larger businesses have to cope with. Having spoken to businesses and business organisations, I share their desire to see on the ground delivery and incentives for those creating jobs, not endless amounts of strategies.

Northern Ireland is very much open for business, and I am sure that everyone will welcome the job creation announcements made in recent weeks. We must keep our eyes on achieving those goals, which will, I hope, help to reduce the unemployment rates. We all want to see increased levels of foreign direct investment here, and I trust that we will continue to see greater investment in research and development from foreign investors. That is an incentive that we can work towards, and one that will help to generate jobs in this country.

Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland face similar challenges but, despite their similarities, they are economic competitors. They are two jurisdictions, with different tax systems and currencies. No doubt there is merit in some degree of co-operation. However, that would be most effective if it were industry-led instead of a mere political attempt.

Invest NI has taken a key role in trying to tackle unemployment here, and I know it already works with bodies such as InterTradeIreland to try to get the best deal for businesses here. Co-operation across the border exists, and we have no problem in seeing it progress. It exists; all we need to do is encourage it. We recognise that it exists. Businesses work on an all-Ireland basis. Good work goes on between Northern Ireland and the Republic: that we recognise and support. The Republic is an export market for Northern Ireland. Having a working relationship with that country is to the benefit of business here. There is room for relationships between the business sectors of Northern Ireland and those of the Republic. They can help to develop local firms by enabling them to gain experience

in the euro market and by encouraging greater exportation to Europe.

I feel that our further and higher education sectors also have a role to play in helping to tackle unemployment.

1.30 pm

We need to ensure that our young people are educated and trained in sectors that are in demand and in areas of need. On a visit last week to the Southern Eastern Regional College, I met a group of young students who cannot get apprenticeships. They are looking for apprenticeships in the building trade, and they have had to resort to refurbishing a room in a college. That was where they were learning their skills and the only experience that they were gaining. We all —

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

Mr Dunne: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Given the scale of our dependence on the public sector, I feel that we want to tackle —

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

Mr Dunne: — unemployment in Northern Ireland. I oppose the motion.

Mr Campbell: As the unionist Member of Parliament who lives closest to the border and represents a constituency closest to the border, I suppose that I have a vested interest in talking about some sort of all-Ireland economic proposal. I have sometimes heard nationalists and republicans put forward the view down through the years that unionists who live a considerable distance from the border have a particular view that they should widen and that, if they were in proximity to the Republic, they would take a different view. Well, I hope that they will learn and listen for the next minutes and find out about that from a person who lives quite close to the border.

I remember speaking at an event in the Irish Republic — in Dublin — about 10 years ago. At that time, I was told that hotels were springing up at the rate of a new one being opened every week over a period of months. That was, of course, symptomatic of the incredible boom that the Irish Republic was and had been going through. If anyone was applying even a modicum of intelligent thinking to this, they

might ask, "If Northern Ireland did not want to join up economically with the Republic in the good times" — we did not — "why on earth would we want to go down the plughole with them together in the bad times? Why would we want to do that?". However, they do not seem to get it. They also talk — we heard it today — of duplication. That is repeated as a mantra. Of course, duplication works both ways. If economies of scale are such that we would have a much better outlook if we had one jobs body, one tourism body or one whatever it may be, are exactly the same criteria not applicable in these islands? Would it not make much more economic sense to have one jobs body for the whole of Great Britain and Ireland, or do economies of scale work only when there is a political motivation? Far be it from me to suggest such a thing. Perish the thought that anybody would think that this is about politics. However, if it is about duplication, then the approach fits, on an island-plus-wide basis, to the islands of both Britain and Ireland. Of course, we know that it is not just about duplication.

We also heard today and on numerous other occasions about regional disparity, and that is a good, relevant point. However, again, they lose the bigger picture. I have heard people in the Republic say that, because of the problems that flowed from the issues of the border and the 1920s, areas away from the Dublin corridor or the Belfast hub in Northern Ireland suffer. Yet, we can look at the example, which I have quoted on occasion, of England. I constantly speak to English MPs from the north-east or the north-west, and they make exactly the same complaint that people in Northern Ireland do: people who live in and represent areas some distance away from the economic powerhouse, which is normally around the urban centre — be that Belfast, London, Cardiff, Glasgow or Edinburgh — do not get sufficient government attention. It goes with the territory. In the Highlands, people complain that they do not get what those in Glasgow and Edinburgh do. In Dublin, people said, in the good times, that things were good, but in Donegal people were complaining. This has nothing to do with a border or partition; it is the reality of life. However, some people are determined to bring their own grade 1 economic illiteracy into the political ambit here in Northern Ireland today, and they will simply have to get on with it.

Northern Ireland is here. We are not going to go away; we are going to make Northern Ireland a

success. I just wish that others in the Chamber would join us and do likewise.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion on the Order Paper. As Members know, job creation and the rebuilding and rebalancing of the economy are central to what my Department and the wider Executive are seeking to achieve; it is certainly not a matter of increasing the remit of the North/South Ministerial Council.

I noted how seriously Members across the way were taking the issue with the opening remarks of the proposer. He also told my colleague Lord Morrow that he was being insular. There is nothing more insular than looking at economic regeneration for Northern Ireland in the context of just this island. As we heard from Mr Nesbitt, we are part of 62 million people in the United Kingdom. If we look at matters from the perspective of this island, we are being entirely insular. That is not the way in which I intend to bring our economy forward.

I am acutely aware of the challenges facing the economy. Last Wednesday, I announced the latest unemployment figures, which highlighted an unemployment rate of 7.6%. Mr Flanagan referred to the fact that it was all the border counties that had higher unemployment. Of course, he is wrong. I have the unemployment rates of all the district councils in front of me. Fermanagh has a rate of 4.8%, whereas Belfast has a rate of 7.2%. That is the first area in which he is wrong.

We should also remember — it has been mentioned by many Members — that our unemployment level remains well below that in the Republic of Ireland, where the corresponding figure is 14.5%. This is also an issue for Governments across the world. Unemployment has increased in the USA, where it is 9.1%. In the European Union it is 9.5%, and the UK has reached a 17-year high of 8.1%. Northern Ireland's unemployment rate is below all of them.

It is in the context of the local labour market, which has been hit hard by the downturn, that I am working to launch an economic strategy for the short, medium and long term. The key focus of that strategy is on job creation and on the wider issues of growing the private sector in Northern Ireland. I think that it was Dr McDonnell who said that we did not have a job creation strategy for Northern Ireland.

Of course, we have the jobs fund and the Boosting Business initiative from Invest Northern Ireland. Tomorrow, I am chairing the Executive subcommittee on the economy. There, we will consider a detailed draft of the economic strategy, and it is my intention that that will be out for public consultation before Christmas. The strategy has been developed with inputs from across the Executive. I have also taken the advice and views of my economic advisory group. The strategy will confirm that the economy remains the number one priority for me and the Executive, and I hope that it will be published around the same time as the Programme for Government, which was referred to by the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The Programme for Government has not yet been published. Some people have a draft of the document, but it is just that — a draft.

Through the work of Invest Northern Ireland, we have been able to promote almost 15,000 jobs in the past three years. I have also been able to make some recent very good announcements, as indicated by Mr Moutray, including PwC, Capita and Kainos. I have mentioned the Boosting Business initiative, and there we are working to introduce changes to encourage as many small businesses as possible to take advantage of the support to stimulate job and wealth creation. Ms McCann's reference to working with small companies is right and well made. I see that she is not in her place, but that is what the initiative is about. We are bringing the Invest NI suite to those businesses and to the social economy. It has been said that the short-term employment scheme is going to be known as the jobs fund because that is exactly what it is — a ring-fenced budget of £19 million to support business owners in creating 5,000 jobs up to 2015, with 4,000 jobs created by March 2014.

Today's motion is about an all-Ireland strategy and, although the economies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland may face similar challenges, in the world context they are very different. The Republic of Ireland, as we have heard, is part of the euro zone; we are not, thank goodness. The Republic of Ireland is having to deal with a rescue package from the European Union and IMF; we are not. And, although I am in no way complacent about the high level of unemployment here, as many people have recognised, I remind Members again that the unemployment rate in the

Republic of Ireland is 14·5%, compared with 7·6% here, so it is almost double. Therefore, a single strategy would simply not work.

I want to look at three of the examples that have been quoted as part of the "It would be great if we had an all-Ireland jobs strategy" argument. The first example is agrifood, and Mr McKay made reference to InterTradelreland's all-Ireland agrifood report. I will not be signing off that agrifood report. The all-Ireland agrifood report is very much out of date. It does not deal with the protectionist practices of the Republic of Ireland Government, Bord Bia and other non-governmental bodies that are excluding Northern Ireland companies, especially in areas such as the milk sector. Indeed, I have just learned that the Republic of Ireland is setting up what I can only describe as a clandestine dinner on Thursday evening, inviting the great and good from Northern Ireland's industry but without a mention of the Northern Ireland Government or the Northern Ireland Assembly. In fact, it has been done without any acknowledgement of our position here in this jurisdiction, and I will complain about that matter to the Republic of Ireland's Government.

The second example is tourism. Tourism Ireland, as you know, promotes the whole of the island of Ireland overseas, but I am dissatisfied with what is happening in relation to Northern Ireland, so much so that I have asked the board of Tourism Ireland for a specific Northern Ireland strategy. Next year, 2012, is the year of opportunity for Northern Ireland, and I want to ensure that we get as many visitors into this country as we can. Therefore, I have asked Tourism Ireland to bring forward its proposals for Northern Ireland.

The single energy market is not delivering on competition as promised, because it is too small. That is why I am pushing for integration with the BETTA system, which is the GB system, so that the two islands are working together, to give us more competition. By the way, the substations that Harland and Wolff is constructing are for a wind farm off the coast of Wales. I was down with fishermen in Kilkeel just last Thursday, and I was alarmed to be told by the fishermen who were working on offshore duties protecting the new east-west interconnector, which goes from Wales into the Republic of Ireland, that, when that interconnector leaves United Kingdom waterways and goes into Republic of Ireland

territorial waterways, Northern Ireland fishermen are not allowed by the Republic of Ireland's Government to work on protecting the line. So much for working together. So much for having the best for the whole island.

The Republic of Ireland's Government — let us be honest, Members — are looking after themselves. It is high time that this Assembly looked after the Northern Ireland people, whom we are here to represent, instead of chasing after rainbows — political rainbows, at that. The reality is that we are competitors on an international scale. Ask any of my colleagues in Invest Northern Ireland in the USA about how the IDA promotes the Republic of Ireland and they will tell you what is going on there. There is not much co-operation there. When it is possible, when it is for the benefit of Northern Ireland, we will co-operate.

Mr A Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Foster: No, I will not give way.

When it makes sense, we will co-operate, but I do not believe that we need any more all-island initiatives.

The Chair of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment mentioned InterTradeIreland's trade and innovation programmes. They are not primarily designed to create jobs, but one of the outcomes of that body's programmes is that there are more competitive and successful companies. Successful companies grow, and that growth can deliver new jobs. The total number of jobs attributed by those same companies as outcomes of their participation is 1,100, so some good work has been carried out in relation to the innovation and the FP7, which we heard about from Mr McDonnell.

1.45pm

Mr Flanagan made a sporting analogy, which we heard at the beginning. He laboured it for some time. It was about how it was always better to work together on an all-Ireland basis. Let me tell him this: in the medals table for the 2008 Olympics — a worldwide event, and I want Northern Ireland to play on a worldwide stage — GB and Northern Ireland were fourth. Where was the Republic of Ireland? Sixty-first. I would rather be fourth than sixty-first.

The construction industry was mentioned by Mr McGlone and Mr Dunne. There is a trade mission going to Kurdistan on Friday — Mr

McGlone is not in his place — which I am leading. The whole point of that is to look for opportunities in different markets for the construction industry. Indeed, I met the Construction Employers Federation very recently, and my colleague, Minister McCausland, the Minister for Social Development, is meeting it this week. So, it is wrong to say that we are operating in silos in relation to the construction sector.

Mr Newton is absolutely right to say that we need to look internationally. Confining ourselves to this island is parochial and insular. My vision is to look up and look out, not look south.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. It has been a very animated debate, but it is unfortunate that it was not more of an argument about economics, as opposed to the other politics that influenced many of the DUP speeches.

Obviously, it has been an economically challenging period. We should consider all proposals that can alleviate things, regardless of where they come from or what jurisdictions they concern, as long as they create jobs and prosperity for the people we represent. On this island, we have a lot in common. We have intertwined labour, transport, businesses and communities. In that context, all-Ireland economic proposals make economic sense and, in most instances, result in savings. Of course, corporation tax is an obvious example, and there are benefits in job creation that have been seen in the rest of the country as a result of corporation tax levels. That is something that the Executive —

Mr Newton: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKay: I will

Mr Newton: Does the Member accept that it is for the economy of Northern Ireland and, indeed, the economy of the Republic of Ireland to develop to meet global competitive changes? It is necessary for them to think internationally, to benchmark against best practice internationally and to adopt all the research and development opportunities that are brought about through international linkages, rather than to think only about co-operation 50 miles or 100 miles down the road.

Mr McKay: I actually agree with most of what the Member says. We need to

look internationally, and, where there are opportunities that make sense in terms of an economic argument, we need to seize them. However, the opportunities on an all-island basis are on our doorstep. The Member referred to research and development: the relationships between universities and businesses, which Dr McDonnell referred to, are already in place. We need to build on that. That makes sense economically, and that is the argument that we are putting forward.

With regard to tourism, I note that the Dublin Government are putting forward a campaign called "The Gathering" to bring many expats, as well as the Irish diaspora, back to Ireland in two years' time and will try to reap economic benefits from that. That is something that we should tie into as well. We should also learn from the Scottish example: they are trying to put that sort of thing in place as well.

We need all-Ireland harmonisation of taxation and regulation policy in the longer term. We need to maximise the potential of InterTradeIreland, and we need to establish an all-Ireland job creation plan. Promoting an all-island network of universities and centres of research and development expertise in specific sectors, adopting tax incentives for R&D and increasing GDP investment in R&D would help place us at the cutting edge economically.

I was looking through the research pack. In it was an Ernst and Young Economic Eye piece from summer this year. It says that the North has a smaller export base than the rest of the island. Even with the dire economic circumstances that the Dublin Government are currently in, in the medium to long term the North will return to a growth rate below that of the rest of the island. That shows you where the South is placed with regard to exports and economic opportunities. Quite simply, we need to tap into that. That is not a big ask.

Phil Flanagan opened the debate with a number of sporting analogies. He also referred to the excessively high levels of unemployment in border areas and the effect of emigration. In all our communities, a lot of young people are going to places such as Australia in the light of the massive hits that sectors such as construction have taken in recent times. Mr Flanagan also said that DETI did not have a strategy and that it was hard to take in that £17

million had been handed back to the Finance Minister in recent days.

Even on 'The Nolan Show' on BBC Radio Ulster this week, you had businesses phoning in to say that hundreds of jobs were being squandered and going to places such as Asia because Invest NI took the wrong approach. The Minister and her Department would do well to learn from that.

Mrs Foster: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKay: Yes.

Mrs Foster: The Member has raised an issue that I had hoped somebody would raise today. That particular company did not bring that situation to Invest Northern Ireland so that Invest Northern Ireland could answer the allegations made against it. I am surprised that the Member is taking his economic analysis from 'The Nolan Show', but, if he chooses to do so, that is a matter for him. I would be happy to give full details to 'The Nolan Show' of that particular case.

Mr McKay: I do not take my economics from 'The Nolan Show'; I take my economics from the people. The people who were ringing in — *[Interruption]* — and those who were representative of the business community —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. This is not a promotion for 'The Nolan Show'; it is a serious debate. At this point, I ask Members to remain silent when another Member is speaking. If someone goes to the trouble of preparing a speech, they should be listened to. Continue.

Mr McKay: In general, the people who were phoning in to that show were dissatisfied with the Invest NI approach and with how they were treated and believed that Invest NI needed to up its game with regard to small and medium-sized enterprises. The Minister should take that into consideration.

Mr A Maskey: I thank the Member for giving way. I will return the question to the Minister. When she says that she had hoped that somebody would raise the issue that was raised on the 'The Nolan Show' last week, I understand, but why does the Minister not give the details to the House? She should not need to be invited to do so. In fact, this was a matter of public concern, and it would have been helpful for the Minister to give the details to Members of the Assembly, rather than talking about 'The Nolan Show'. She should have given

the information to Members here when she was on her feet.

Mrs Foster: The matter was not mentioned in the Assembly. I am very aware of the Deputy Speaker's ruling on the matter, so I will not even mention the particular show. The matter was mentioned on that show, and, therefore, it is right that we should go back and correct the mistakes that were made on it. If the matter is raised in the House, I will answer the Member who raises it.

Mr McKay: I thank the Minister for her intervention. Moving swiftly on, I will mention David McIlveen's contribution. He referred to the 14.5% unemployment rate in the South, and other DUP Members also referred to it. The fact that the South has that rate of unemployment does not mean that there are no opportunities there for working on an all-island basis. That maybe demonstrates the level of economics that they have.

Mr Newton: The Member raised the issue of Invest Northern Ireland. Invest Northern Ireland — DETI, actually — attended a meeting of the ETI Committee. The Member had an opportunity to question the witnesses who gave evidence to the Committee. I do not remember him expressing huge concern about this matter. In fact, I think that those on the other side of the table from him would have described his remarks as being quite calm and collected, rather than expressing any real anger or concern about the matter.

Mr McKay: With all due respect, what meeting was the Member for East Belfast at? I quite strenuously questioned Invest NI. I have also been in contact with Invest NI through questions to the Minister about its performance. Maybe the Member was dozing at that point in the meeting. The fact is that Invest NI has questions to answer about its performance.

The Member for Strangford Mike Nesbitt referred to the bigger numbers in Britain and Europe as some sort of excuse for not working more closely with the South. I am all in favour of working with the British economy and in a European context, but an insular attitude is coming across from the unionist Benches. Many business people across the community are happy to work in an all-Ireland context and develop all-Ireland economics. I do not think that unionist politicians are up to speed with their community in that regard.

The Member for North Belfast Alban Maginness said that east-west co-operation should not be excluded. I fully agree. We should look to places like Scotland to see how it is developing renewables. Mr Maginness took an intervention from Patsy McGlone about construction. That is a good example of how labour in the North has benefited and availed itself of employment in Dublin, Galway and other parts of the island. Chris Lyttle referred to opportunities in renewables, tourism and infrastructure.

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

Mr McKay: Tá brón orm a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister said that she will not be signing off on an agrifood sectoral report on the benefits of an all-Ireland approach.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr McKay: Recently, the DUP has refused to recognise the benefits —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has no extra time. Time is up.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 41; Noes 48.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Ms M Anderson, Mr Attwood, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr W Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Flanagan, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Ritchie, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Flanagan and Mr Lynch.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lewis, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen,

Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan,
Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton,
Mrs Overend, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt,
Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Givan and Mr Moutray.

Question accordingly negatived.

Private Members' Business

Rural Schools

Mr Deputy Speaker: Two amendments have been selected, so up to one hour and 45 minutes will be allowed for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. I ask those Members who are leaving the Chamber to do so quietly, please.

Mr McDevitt: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern at the potential impact of the statement by the Minister of Education on 26 September 2011, particularly on the future of smaller rural schools; notes that schools are at the heart of rural communities; further notes the particular access requirements of rural communities to education; and calls on the Minister of Education to ensure that decisions on the future of rural schools are fully measured against rural standards and proofing.

We are happy to accept the amendment tabled by Mr Lunn and others and that tabled by Mr Storey and others. We feel that both amendments add to the motion and give it the depth and attention that the issue deserves in the House.

Here in the North, half of our primary schools — some 304 out of 735 — have fewer pupils than the required viability quota for rural schools. That is the quota that has been set out by the Department of Education in the sustainable schools policy. Many smaller schools, controlled, maintained and other management types, are, at present, faced with huge challenges and major changes.

Federation, which involves two or more primary schools working together under a single board of governors and principal, is one way of helping to ensure the future viability of those schools, and, in my party's opinion, makes good sense. The most attractive form of federation can help to keep the pupils enrolled and taught at their home school. That is preferable to running a split-site model with Key Stage 1 pupils on one site and Key Stage 2 pupils on another. I appeal to the Minister of Education to explore fully that

option. If we are honest about it, that option is not adequately catered for in the current policy framework.

I agree with my colleague Dominic Bradley, who, regrettably, Mr Deputy Speaker, is not in a position to contribute to today's debate. Recently, he said:

"Rather than have smaller schools competing with each other for survival, federation offers two or more smaller schools within a parish the opportunity to avoid closure through co-existence and co-operation and the chance to realise the prospect of accessing future capital funding through combined enrolments."

I ask the Minister to ensure that any legal impediments to sharing through joint management across the sectors are examined with a view to their removal. There are possibilities here for ensuring the best use of our schools estate, retaining smaller schools and advancing what we all believe to be a common objective of a shared society. I welcome the fact that the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) has tried this confederation model in some areas, where it has worked well, and that it is contemplating it in other areas. It is a relatively new concept in this region, but it has been seen to work successfully in parts of Britain for some years. I realise that, if federation is to work, it first has to address the education issues, so that at least three teachers in each school are able to deliver all three stages of primary education and, secondly, it must be economically efficient.

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

Through federation, senior management costs and head count can be reduced. For example, one principal or a vice-principal, or even some senior teachers managing the individual sites, can be shared between two or three schools. As a consequence, additional resource savings can be generated. The extra resource that is needed can be generated by each school retaining its small schools allowance.

I want to put this matter on the agenda for debate today because I believe that the current conversation about the existing sustainable schools policy is not adequately expansive to allow that important balance to be struck in the years ahead between the guarantee of a quality education for all our children and the Assembly

continuing to contribute to the sustainability of communities, particularly rural communities.

2.15 pm

I appeal to the Minister to consider piloting some such federation models. Such pilots could be explored without having to call on extra resources. Rather than rushing to amalgamation or closure as a means of managing the schools estate, we should fully explore other options, such as federation, and ensure that every opportunity be given to every small school to survive. It is only through being imaginative at a regional level, by coming up with local solutions to the challenges that face our rural communities and our families who wish to continue to live, grow old and, hopefully, see their children establish families, live and grow old in rural communities, that we will be able to ensure that education really serves the purpose for which it is intended.

We have concerns that the current approach to school rationalisation is overly reliant on a blunt numbers game. Let us take, for example, the arbitrary number of 105 pupils, which is the magic number that dictates whether a school is sustainable. A survey of the rural schools estate would show that many of the buildings were not built to hold 105 pupils.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member acknowledge that there are concerns that, if the policy is rolled out as the Minister says, the accommodation that is needed for amalgamation may not be put in place before it happens? It is a chicken-and-egg situation. Many people are very concerned, given the maintenance backlog alone that exists in the school estate, that there will be no school buildings for this magic amalgamation.

Mr McDevitt: Mrs Kelly's point is well made. In fact, it is a point that has been conceded in the House in a different context. When the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was considering the closure of A&E services at Belfast City Hospital, one of the major concerns that he identified was the need for extra physical space and extra capital investment to build new temporary buildings at the Royal Jubilee Maternity Services to accommodate the change. The same situation will end up happening in schools. We will end up having to spend more money on building new, bigger sites to accommodate the fact that we are closing smaller ones. The issue is not the site — this

is our argument around federation — but the management, cost and quality of education that children receive. If that requires teachers to be a little more mobile, so be it. Surely, however, communities, and rural communities in particular, have the basic right to sustainability in the truest possible sense of the word.

There is a further concern with the existing sustainable schools policy. A number of the criteria are dependent on other things in education working well. Let us take leadership as an example. Miss McIlveen and I have had occasion to be in touch with a school that is under threat in the Strangford constituency. A series of inspection reports questioned the leadership in the school — the quality of the principal, how the school has been working, the board of governors, and so on. However, if we track that back, we quickly find that one of the reasons that there has been a bit of a crisis in the leadership of the school is that the local education board has basically had the sword of Damocles hanging over the school's head for almost a decade. Guess what? When the sword of Damocles hangs over the head of a school because the local education board cannot get its act together, the leadership begins to suffer.

I concede that the Minister is at least willing to begin to deal with the problem. The previous Minister chose not to. He is willing to do that, and I acknowledge and applaud him for doing the right thing in that regard. However, there is a good chance that he will become a victim of his system. Some schools are under threat because we never dealt with the Education and Skills Authority (ESA).

It is a consequence of the fact that the boards have been run into the ground and that we are not taking decisions in the proper way in many other parts of the education governance structure. If we are to be able to complete the debate in an orderly manner, it needs to get back to two basic principles: the centrality of rural communities, and the importance —

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

Mr McDevitt: — of finding a mechanism, such as the federation model, that can deliver both sustainable communities and quality education for all children.

Mr Lunn: I beg to move the amendment No 1: After second “education;” insert:

“believes that shared and integrated education could provide alternatives to school closures;”

I support the motion and propose the amendment in our name, which seeks to maintain the principle that shared education and the sharing of educational facilities is an important component of the structure of our educational framework as we move forward. I would like to hear what the DUP has to say about its amendment before we decide whether or not to support it. For a start, there are more than two sectors, and we hope that this is not an attempt to balance school closures, one against another.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: I am sure that we will hear from you shortly anyway, so I will keep going. *[Laughter.]* I have no extra time for my speech.

The integrated movement must be allowed to continue to develop. I will not rehearse the many arguments in favour of the integrated approach; frankly, I do not need to because, these days, so many others are doing that for me, and it is a surprise that some of those are doing so. I mention that only to make the point that, if we are to protect our rural school infrastructure, serious decisions will have to be made around the sharing of facilities and the amalgamation of schools across sectors. If the transformation of existing schools to integrated status is the express wish of parents and is the best way to maintain a school's viability, that process should be encouraged and facilitated by the boards and the Minister. A few months ago, the Assembly approved that wording in a private Member's motion.

The motion expresses concern about the potential impact of the Minister's statement of 26 September, and rightly so. One third of primary schools are numerically unviable, and a large proportion of them are in rural areas. If I were a principal of a rural primary school with fewer than 100 pupils or a parent who sent their child there, I would be extremely worried. If it were only a numbers game, the decision would be almost automatic, but, in my opinion, there was more than numbers to Mr O'Dowd's statement of 26 September. He said:

“However, the sustainable schools policy is not simply a numbers game, and schools will be measured against the six principles of that policy.”
— *[Official Report, Vol 66, No 5, p260, col 2].*

Those principles include stable enrolment trends, a sound financial position and strong links to the community. The most significant principle to me, and, I think, to the Minister, is quality educational experience. That is the one that, in the long term, must be at the heart of the decision on whether to maintain a rural school or look for an alternative option in the best interests of the pupils.

I am pleased that the Minister has ordered a viability audit of schools, which is to be completed before Christmas. It is to identify those that are showing signs of stress in remaining educationally viable. The key word is "educationally". We need an update. Surveys and reports galore have been done, but a short, sharp audit of all schools will be a useful starting point.

It is perfectly possible for a school to provide a quality educational experience without meeting the enrolment threshold if it is well led, rooted in the community and financially sound. I hope that the Minister will acknowledge the need, as stated in the motion, for measurement against rural standards and rural proofing. However, there will be situations where the best interests of children's educational experience are not served by maintaining a small school. We will have to look at the solutions that are in their best interests. A couple of years ago, in my constituency, the maintained sector kept open a primary school when it was down to three pupils. That made no sense at all; there were more staff than pupils. Some people managed to blame the integrated sector for stealing all the pupils, and that was not the case. There comes a point where it is just not educationally sound to try to maintain a small school with multiple classes amalgamated, and so on.

The other criteria are important. In particular, the effect of a school closure on a rural community must be explored fully. The connections between a rural school and its community are critical to the sustainability of both. When a school closes, particularly in a rural area, there will inevitably be a knock-on effect on shops, employment and services.

Decisions about the future of any school must not be made by a governing body in isolation; they must involve key rural stakeholders, including rural citizens, and, of course, public representatives. I hope that those public representatives will be able to look at the

overall picture for what is best for the children educationally as well as the normal parochial considerations that are usually foremost in all of our thinking.

I look forward to the Minister's response. In particular, I would like him to expand on what he said on 26 September. I would like him to confirm that he will include the points made in the motion in his approach and that he will accept the terms of the amendment and agree that shared and integrated solutions are a valid alternative to school closures.

I look forward with interest to hear what Mr Storey has to say in clarifying his amendment. I could have given him time for an intervention, but I did not realise that I was going to speak for such a short period. I commend the motion and our amendment to the House. I will see about the DUP amendment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. The debate will resume at 3.30 pm when the first Member to speak will be Michelle McIlveen.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Regional Development

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 1 and 9 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

Roads: Twaddell Avenue, Belfast

2. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to widen the carriageway at Twaddell Avenue, Belfast.

(AQO 547/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): My Department's Roads Service has advised that Twaddell Avenue is designated as part of the A55, a busy and important traffic route to the north side of the city that runs through a private residential area. In 2001, Roads Service implemented a traffic calming scheme on Twaddell Avenue, providing a central hatched area incorporating right-turn pockets and pedestrian refuge islands and footway build-outs placed strategically along the length of the road to assist pedestrian movements and to help to reduce the speed of vehicles.

Roads Service is aware that there have been incidents where vehicles travelling along Twaddell Avenue have caused minor damage to door mirrors of parked vehicles. However, to widen Twaddell Avenue would involve the relocation of kerb lines and a reduction in the size of existing footways. It would also entail the removal of a number of mature street trees and the relocation of underground services, drainage pipes and gullies.

As I am sure the Member will appreciate, Roads Service receives many more requests for such work than it has the budget to deliver. Therefore, each request is assessed and prioritised. Given the likely financial and environmental cost of works to widen Twaddell Avenue, Roads Service has advised that it currently has no plans to widen the carriageway but will keep the situation under review. Although it is acknowledged that the existing road layout has some shortcomings, it is felt that that is the best that can be achieved within the existing constraints.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his reply, which is what I feared. I appreciate the cost of widening the entire road. However, Twaddell Avenue is part of the outer ring and is a very busy road, particularly at the height of traffic in the evening and morning, and I ask the Minister to look at the areas where there are footways and where the footpath has been broadened because it really is causing a bottleneck. Three cars have already been damaged in the last number of months, and it is causing a serious problem for those who live there.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I know that the Member has been in contact with Roads Service officials and local residents with regard to the issue, and I am not in any way underestimating the strength of opinion. I will look, and will ask officials to look, at the issue that he has now raised again.

Mr A Maginness: I endorse what Mr Humphrey said. It would be very helpful if there was an in-depth review, because there are problems there and they really ought to be addressed. I invite the Minister to look at this in a genuine review.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. Yes, mindful of the widespread political support that there appears to be on this issue, I will refer the matter again to officials.

Severe Winter Weather

3. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister for Regional Development what provision has been made in the 2011-12 budget for his Department to deal, in conjunction with the local councils, with the impact of the anticipated severe winter weather.

(AQO 548/11-15)

Footpaths

7. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the key principles that have been agreed by his Department on the removal of snow and ice from town centre footpaths. (AQO 552/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will reply to questions 3 and 7 together as they concern similar and related issues. As the Members are aware, there is no legal responsibility for councils or Roads Service to treat footpaths with salt or grit during

adverse weather. However, my Department's Roads Service held a series of meetings with representatives of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) throughout the summer months. I personally attended the first of those meetings, after which Roads Service's chief executive continued the negotiations and discussions on my behalf.

The aim of the meetings was to establish a consensus on a number of points of principle that could be used as a basis for negotiations between Roads Service and councils relating to the removal of snow and ice from busy town-centre footways during prolonged periods of wintry weather.

I am pleased that agreement has been reached, demonstrating a willingness to provide that valuable service to local ratepayers. Roads Service has now incorporated those agreed points of principle into a draft agreement, which can be amended to take account of local council preferences. Roads Service officials are now approaching all councils with a view to having those agreements in place for the coming winter season. However, it should be stressed that, under the agreements, efforts will be focused on the busiest town centre footways as it would not be feasible to treat footways on a widespread basis. In addition to the provision made in the 2011-12 budget to deal with the impact of the anticipated severe winter weather, Roads Service earmarks significant funds to provide a salting service with the aim of helping main road traffic to move safely and freely in winter conditions.

NI Water is implementing the recommendations of the review of last winter's water supply emergency through a range of measures, and I believe that it will be better prepared to handle the effects of severe weather conditions.

Mr B McCrea: Given the forecast of severe weather this winter, have the Executive had any discussions with the Minister regarding additional budget and, if money is available, whether that will not only allow salt to be provided to councils but, potentially, provide for council staff to do the work?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. Almost everywhere I go now, I am met with dire predictions of likely weather conditions this coming winter. Whether or not that is from 'Old Moore's Almanack' or

just made up to make me feel uncomfortable, I am not quite sure. However, I know that the Member would not be in that category anyway.

On a year-by-year basis, my departmental budget has to take account of winter conditions, and we have done so in preparation for the current season, whatever the weather. If there is a prolonged spell of adverse wintery weather, it may well be that that budget allocation will be challenged, and I may need to go to Executive colleagues to have it supplemented. However, I assure the Member that we are attempting to make good preparation for the winter season ahead.

At this stage, I cannot predict how bad the weather will be. I am not a prophet or the son of a prophet, but I do know that there will be winter weather such as ice, frost, snow, rain and hail — all of which may happen on the same day. *[Laughter.]* However, for all of that, I will be expected to manage the situation along with Roads Service. I encourage Members of this House, members of local councils and, indeed, the community to help to play their part as we prepare for the winter. Last year, we had the worst winter since 1881. I hope very much that things will improve.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time.

Mr Kennedy: I am confident that we have the resources available at this point.

Mr Lunn: My question is more to do with town centre footpaths. Pedestrian traffic rather than vehicular traffic was, perhaps, the bigger problem last year. Can the Minister confirm that, within the protocols that he has established between Roads Service and councils, there is no dispute about liability and that the councils will be adequately funded for the work that they will be asked to do?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for raising that important point. It is crucial that Roads Service and my Department work with local government to improve on the situation of last year. I am pleased to say that heads of agreement were reached with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA). That is now being reflected down to local council areas and local section engineers to put in place measures through which we can improve things.

It is absolutely correct to say that not every street, town centre and section of pathway

can or will be gritted. Roads Service and the councils acknowledge that. However, greater co-operation and collaboration between those bodies will help to improve the situation. I am pleased to say that every household in Northern Ireland will receive a leaflet of advice that will include advice from the Attorney General on the legal position of clearing snow, which has been an issue of liability. I hope that Members of the House and all householders will take note of that advice, and that we can work together in a positive and constructive way.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his information so far. However, I hope that the Attorney General's advice is more specific than what was agreed with regard to the points of principle that is currently out from NILGA and which is going to local councils. I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, nor do I read 'Old Moore's Almanack', but I have no doubt that we will have another crisis this winter. In 2002, there were discussions about an annual service fee to participating councils. There is no mention of that in the points of principle.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Can I have a question?

Mr Storey: Will the Minister assure us that there will be a working relationship between the Department for Regional Development and local councils with respect to whoever is responsible to deal with the problem, and that there will not be, as the Member for Lagan Valley suggested, buck passing to the Executive?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. When one talks about principles, I am reminded of what Groucho Marx said:

"These are my principles. And if you don't like them, I have others."

Nevertheless, the important principles that were agreed are being reflected between section engineers and local councils. Under the agreed principles, Roads Service will make salt available to councils free of charge. Where resources permit, it will also provide manpower to councils and pass on the legal indemnity currently available to my Department to councils or groups working on their behalf, such as chambers of commerce or local community groups. In the spirit of co-operation, I very much hope that officials from Roads Service, working with their counterparts in local government, will achieve better results. I have no doubt that

we will face bad weather. However, the issue is whether it will be similar to the prolonged spell that we had last year.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his responses. Where does the indemnity lie for clearing footpaths, particularly with regard to third parties outside Roads Service and councils?

Mr Kennedy: The Member raises a very important question. The detail of the sensible, proper and practical measures that householders or businesses operators and owners can do to clear snow, ice or frost from the front of their properties will be confirmed in writing to every household in Northern Ireland. It will take away any suggestion or any risk of them being liable legally in some way. Clearly, common sense plays a major part in that, and I know that people will respond accordingly. The advice is there and will be provided. However, it is important that common sense is maintained as a way of dealing with those issues.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Will he confirm which councils have signed up for the agreement and on what basis the cost-sharing will be arranged between the Department, Roads Service and individual councils?

Mr Kennedy: We are still in the early stages of collating council responses. I am encouraged by those responses and by the willingness of councils to work with Roads Service. I have no doubt that that will continue as it is in everybody's interests — taxpayers and ratepayers. I hope that Members of the House and members in local government will help to encourage greater co-operation with the measures that we are trying to put in place.

Severe Winter Weather: Water Supplies

4. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister for Regional Development what provision has been made for distribution centres and the delivery of bottled water in the event of severe winter weather conditions, including how much extra water will be made available this year. (AQO 549/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Utility Regulator's report into Northern Ireland Water's handling of the 2010-11 freeze/thaw concluded that over three-quarters of the additional water demand caused

by the severe weather conditions leaked from private domestic and business water pipes.

Northern Ireland Water has addressed the lessons learned and undertaken a substantial amount of work focusing on communication, contingency planning, supply failures and governance. It has commenced a winter awareness campaign to raise awareness of the need to protect water supplies. The key message is that, to avoid the worst effects of a freeze/thaw, customers can take certain steps to reduce the risks of pipes freezing and subsequently bursting. Steps include lagging pipes, knowing where the stopcock is and having the contact details of a plumber ready in the event of a burst pipe. An extensive public awareness advertising campaign with a key message, "Don't Wait, Insulate", will run from 24 October 2011. They might use me on that basis. In any event, a wide range of media outlets will be used, and the campaign will include a leaflet drop to all customers throughout Northern Ireland.

2.45 pm

Northern Ireland Water has also enhanced its plans for the provision of alternative water supplies in the event of severe weather conditions. Alternative water supply locations have been identified throughout Northern Ireland for the distribution of drinking water to customers using static water tanks, wheel-mounted towable bowsers, tankers, standpipes or bottled water. The amount of bottled water retained in stock for distribution in the event of an emergency has been increased to approximately 250,000 litres, compared with the 100,000 litres that were retained prior to the incident last year. Northern Ireland Water has a contract with a local supplier to provide up to 144,000 additional litres of bottled water a day, if required, during an emergency.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will the Minister provide the criteria for the distribution of bottled water? Will he also outline what assistance can be given to community and voluntary groups, which will be organising and involved in the community distribution of water? Finally, will the Minister instruct Northern Ireland Water to identify contact names in geographical areas, as was the case last year?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: There should be only one question.

Mr Kennedy: I take it that I can choose which question I wish to answer. A range of sites have been identified, and through emergency planning between NI Water and other agencies, we continue to work to identify those sites. I very much hope that those sites will have been agreed, for instance, with the district councils. Further discussions will take place to formalise the exact location of all those centres.

The Member mentioned community engagement. I acknowledge the fact that community associations and activists, as well as public representatives, played an important role last winter in making sure that water distribution took place quickly and efficiently in difficult circumstances, and I have no doubt that, with that co-operation and goodwill, that can happen again.

Mr S Anderson: Will the Minister assure the House that Northern Ireland Water is fully resourced and organised this winter in matters other than bottled water? Will he guarantee that there will be no repeat of last year's fiasco?

Mr Kennedy: The Member asks a very straight question. At this stage, we are not able to predict safely the type of weather conditions that we are going to face, but it is clear that from the lessons learned from last year, NI Water, along with other agencies, is putting in place plans to deal with winter emergencies. That includes additional bottled water, as I informed the House. It also includes better methods of communication. I was not the Minister for Regional Development last year, but it seems to me that one of the problems faced last year related to communication. People who were experiencing water difficulties were not able to get their calls through to NI Water, and that led to huge frustration. Additional lines have, therefore, been installed in preparation for that. I can inform the House and the Member that additional hotlines will be available to allow elected representatives to play their part.

Northern Ireland Water continues its emergency planning and will hold a mock emergency event within the next couple of weeks. I hope to review that to see what arrangements are in place to enable NI Water to provide a proper response.

Mr Beggs: The question was about having a good emergency bottled water supply. However, does the Minister agree that it is equally important to ensure that we do not arrive at that situation again? Does he further agree that

the community should identify where the leaks are and assist in conserving our limited water supplies by cutting down on usage and closing off leaking valves?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for raising that point. It strikes at the very heart of the advisory campaign that NI Water will promote, which I hope will also be supported and promoted by Members and others. That advice is that we should not wait but that we should insulate, identify where the stopcocks are, install proper lagging to protect our property and supplies and look out for neighbours who need help and assistance. That spirit of community and self-help can be employed to produce a response, and the wider community recognise that that will happen this year, as it did last year. We must all be mindful of leaks to ensure that no loss of water to our domestic or business supplies will impact on us or others. There is much work to be done by NI Water and the wider community.

Railways: Belfast to Londonderry

5. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the Minister for Regional Development, given that the Belfast to Londonderry railway line links the major universities and colleges, how he plans to satisfy passenger demand on the line.

(AQO 550/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has informed me that the Coleraine campus of the Ulster University is served by 23 daily rail connections and over 60 bus services and the Magee campus by 10 rail services and nearly 60 bus services. Higher education colleges also have bus and rail connections.

Translink has advised me that, during next year's planned nine-month closure of the rail line for the planned relay work on the Coleraine to Londonderry section of the network, it will work to maintain connections to the rest of the bus and rail network. Capacity and travel patterns will be regularly reviewed, and services will be adapted accordingly, within the limits of available resources.

A particular focus will be required on services to the Magee campus and to the North West Regional College. A bus substitution service will be in place during any disruption to rail services on the Londonderry line. Those schedules have

not yet been finalised, but connections will be maintained.

The University of Ulster at Coleraine is directly served by the university halt on the Coleraine to Portrush section of the Londonderry line. That will be unaffected by the temporary closure of the line.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his response. Perhaps I can put my question another way. Last week, I spoke to a constituent, who is one of many to have described scenarios of up to 30 people standing on a train at peak times. One person was bruised when someone carrying a large bag fell into them, causing quite a considerable injury. Does the Minister agree that the time to consider the use of more carriages has long since passed?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question, and, of course, I extend my sympathy and best wishes to individuals who have been injured, in any way, as a result of their travel. In one sense, I am pleased to hear that increasing numbers are using rail services; that is a fact. That very good and welcome increase justifies my decision last week to phase the relay work on the Coleraine to Londonderry line. I will raise the provision of additional carriages on that particular section of line with Translink and reply to the Member in writing.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers. Given that £27 million has been allocated to upgrading the line between Derry and Coleraine, will the Minister assure the Assembly that the work on the railway will be completed within the timescale projected by Translink?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question, which seems to depart somewhat from the subject of universities. Nevertheless, it is important and I am happy to address it.

The phasing of the work is such that it creates a rather narrow window of opportunity to get work done in time for much of 2013 UK City of Culture in Londonderry. All of those things are subject to the usual procurement arrangements. On behalf of my Department and Translink, we will do our level best to achieve the targets we have set out. We want to see those in place and meet their timescales because, I believe

genuinely, that the announcement we were able to make has been very warmly welcomed, not least in Londonderry. Last week, I had the opportunity to hear that first hand. It also sends a signal to those who are opposed, plant bombs in Londonderry and want to disrupt the lives of the people of Londonderry, that we will not be taken away from providing effective services and opportunities as we approach the UK City of Culture year, 2013.

Mr Swann: The March Budget ring-fenced a very significant part of the transport capital expenditure and only allocated moneys to the Londonderry rail line after 2013. Is the Minister surprised that Sinn Féin, which approved the Budget that delayed the rail investment to the university centres of Londonderry and Coleraine, initially had the gall to attempt to blame him for the delay in the upgrading of the track?

Mr Kennedy: Yes. *[Laughter]*

Schools: Walking and Cycling

6. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he supports Sustrans' call for the forthcoming Programme for Government to include specific targets on increasing the proportion of children who walk and cycle to school. (AQO 551/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am a strong supporter of promoting active options such as walking and cycling, as serious alternatives for our young people as they make their way to and from school each day. My Department currently promotes walking and cycling to school through its Travelwise initiative and Safer Routes to Schools programme, which offers appropriate education and awareness resources, such as 'Best Foot Forward for Schools', for use in the classroom. To build on that important work, my Department has been working on an Active Travel strategy, which is being drafted under the guidance of the Active Travel Forum on which Sustrans is represented. I hope to issue the draft strategy for public consultation in the near future, and I confirm that promoting and increasing active and sustainable travel to schools will be a core part of the Active Travel strategy.

The Programme for Government is a strategic-level document, setting out the Executive's collective priorities and key targets. It will be for the Executive, collectively, to agree the level and nature of any targets. However, I expect

the Programme for Government to reflect our commitment and direction for transport.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his response. Minister, you were seen out in the summer on your bicycle. I am sure that you encountered some difficulties with the crossings. Are you willing to look at the criteria for those? A number of areas have had applications for crossings turned down.

Mr Kennedy: The Member is right. I was on my bike earlier this summer. Many people would like me to be permanently on my bike — and that is only within my own party, I suspect. *[Laughter]*

I will reflect on what the Member has said and write to him accordingly.

3.00 pm

Social Development

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 1, 6 and 10 have been withdrawn and require a written answer.

Housing Executive: Unfit Properties

2. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the 4% of Housing Executive properties in the mid-Antrim area that are unfit for habitation compared to the average of 2.4%. (AQO 560/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): Figures from the 'House Condition Survey 2009' in relation to unfitness indicated that in the mid-Antrim and Causeway Coast areas the level of unfitness across all housing stock was estimated to be 4% and 1% respectively. That compares with 2.4% across Northern Ireland, a figure which relates to all tenures and includes vacant dwellings.

The latest figures available on Housing Executive stock indicate that there are 29 voids in the Antrim district office, a void rate of 1.2%. That compares with housing association figures of one void property — void for over six weeks — in the Antrim council area. The opportunities that are presented by empty homes such as those are clearly not being taken. Turning empty homes into living assets is not only vital for those in housing need but would help to regenerate many run-down areas and provide a much-needed boost for the construction industry.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given the need that there is in north Antrim, mid-Antrim and the Causeway Coast, what action has he taken or is he about to take to bring empty homes back into use?

Mr McCausland: Despite the development and implementation of an earlier Housing Executive empty homes strategy, the actions taken proved ineffective, with no discernible progress made in bringing empty homes back into use. Since coming into the Department, I have made the issue a priority, and I am determined that the opportunity presented by empty homes across the private and the social sectors is maximised to meet social housing need, as well as assisting to reduce blight and helping to tackle antisocial behaviour issues.

A working group has been established. The first meeting is scheduled for 21 October 2011. That group includes representatives from the Housing Executive, the Finance Department's Land and Property Services and officials from my Department's housing and urban regeneration directorates. Under the group's stewardship, the Housing Executive's new draft empty homes action plan will be further developed to ensure that the activities in it are properly focused and reflect best practice elsewhere. Clear, outcome-based targets and timescales will be set for each stage of the action plan.

Mr Kinahan: The Minister touched on the problems in Antrim, although I wonder which parts of his answer relate to south Antrim. What factors are there behind the unfitness of housing in that area?

Mr McCausland: There are a number of factors, but I suggest that the main issue is that, over a number of years, the maintenance of properties has not been given the required priority. It was, in effect, de-prioritised. I get calls from across constituencies in various parts of Northern Ireland from elected representatives and from community workers who say that the situation in their area is unsatisfactory. That has been my experience in my own constituency. We need to put a focus back onto maintaining the social housing stock, particularly Housing Executive properties. Most of the housing association properties are newer.

With older properties in particular, it is that issue of maintenance. When a property is let sit and work is not done, it becomes unfit through issues such as dampness. In other

cases, difficulties may arise because of current standards, for example, on kitchen size. Houses built a long time ago might not meet those standards. There is a lot of work to be done, and we are making empty homes and maintenance priorities in my Department.

Mr Eastwood: What action does the Minister's Department intend to take to improve conditions in multi-occupancy homes in Foyle, given that over half of them failed to meet house in multiple occupation (HMO) standards in 2010-11?

Mr McCausland: HMOs in the private rented sector clearly need to be regulated. Sufficient attention has not been given to that matter, but we are working on it. The Member will be aware that we are bringing in a register of private landlords. There will be a process linked to that of trying to improve standards in the private rented sector. However, we particularly need to get on top of finding out who the landlords are.

The issue of HMOs affects not just Foyle but other areas, and it creates imbalances in the housing market. If, for example, we were to improve the standards of HMOs — I am sure that there would be a resultant increase in the rents charged for some of those houses — we might address some of the difficulties experienced in areas, particularly in parts of Belfast, where there is antisocial behaviour and where there are problems associated with HMOs.

Housing Executive: Frozen Pipes

3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for Social Development if the Housing Executive has plans in place to ensure that the mains water pipes within its properties are suitably lagged and that tenants know where stop valves are located to prevent damage if sustained sub-zero temperatures are experienced this winter.

(AQO 561/11-15)

Mr McCausland: As a result of the unprecedented weather last winter, a considerable amount of work has been undertaken to ensure that Housing Executive staff and their contractors will be in a position to respond effectively and speedily if there are severe weather conditions this winter.

Housing Executive heating contractors are currently checking that all water pipes are properly insulated when they visit properties to carry out planned servicing to the heating systems. Any missing or damaged pipe insulation

will be replaced at that time. That will see improvements to 3,800 properties.

The Housing Executive's annual magazine for tenants, 'Housing News', will be issued towards the end of this month and will include a full page of guidance on how to avoid burst pipes, deal with frozen pipes, deal with burst pipes, find the stopcock in a property and what to do if there is no water. A further advice leaflet from NI Water will also be included with the magazine. I have already held a dedicated meeting with the Housing Executive to review preparations and response plans.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his reply. The Housing Executive was criticised over its telephone communications last year. Has anything been done to improve that?

Mr McCausland: I assure the Member that a number of actions have indeed been taken to address that, including enhancing the pool of staff resources willing and able to respond to an emergency across the Province. A review has been undertaken of the triggers that provide a warning of a potential emergency, such as the volume of calls coming into their customer service unit and the number of calls not being answered. To facilitate use by emergency services, public representatives and community representatives, a priority call-handling system of silver numbers is now in place. The Housing Executive holds contact numbers for all contractors who cover normal working hours and after-hours. Those numbers provide round-the-clock contact details.

Mr Byrne: Can the Minister say whether there will be closer co-operation between Northern Ireland Housing Executive officials and NI Water (NIW) officials at a local level? A lot of problems arose last year because operational staff at NIW did not know where the stopcocks in properties where.

Mr McCausland: As I said at the end of my answer to the previous supplementary question, I recently met the chief executive of the Housing Executive, and we spent a considerable time covering a wide range of issues. Indeed, I think that we covered nearly all of the issues that could arise. That issue was one that we talked about. We need a good level of co-operation between the Housing Executive and NI Water, and I was assured that that exists.

Ms Lo: During the last freeze, many of my constituents in South Belfast, particularly in the Markets area, said that they could not find a stop valve and that, if they did locate one, they found that the handle of the valve had been taken away or had never been fitted because of lack of space in the cupboard. Can the Minister assure us that Housing Executive engineers will replace those handles before the next freeze?

Mr McCausland: As I indicated, the Housing Executive is sending out information in its next edition of 'Housing News'. That will go out towards the end of this month, which is in a couple of weeks' time.

The issue of stopcocks is identified in that. If a tenant, having received a leaflet and read it, has gone and looked for the stopcock to ensure that he or she knows where it is, and cannot find one, I assume and hope that he or she would then contact the Housing Executive to ensure that one is installed. Certainly, if I were in one of those properties and I searched for and could not find a stopcock, that is the first thing that I would do. I am sure that the Member would encourage tenants to do the same.

Mr Beggs: I am aware of constituents' concern about the levels of insulation in some Northern Ireland Housing Executive homes. When levels are poor, heat escapes. Pipes and, indeed, tenants become more vulnerable. When will all Northern Ireland Housing Executive homes' insulation be upgraded to modern standards?

Mr McCausland: The Member will be aware of recent comments that I have made on the installation of double glazing in all Housing Executive properties. The current situation is that 60% of Housing Executive properties do not have double glazing. Only 40% do. In some constituencies, including my own, the figure is higher. In North Belfast, it is 70%. In some areas, it is a little lower.

Part of the double glazing programme that will be rolled out will involve improvement and enhancement of insulation levels. The two need to be done together. The fact is that under the Executive's current proposals, it will be another decade before that is fully completed. That is because over quite a number of years, double glazing, maintenance and insulation of existing properties was deprioritised. We are reprioritising that. At present, I am looking to work with the Housing Executive and speak to those who have their hands on the purse strings

to see what we can do to ensure that additional money is made available to complete that programme within a shorter period. I will not be specific about that today. It is our priority. I am sure that it is one that the Member shares. I am sure that he would agree that it is disappointing that that work has not been done in the past.

Sunday Trading

4. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline why he has decided not to make any changes to Sunday trading laws.
(AQO 562/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Member will be aware that earlier in 2011, my predecessor, Alex Attwood, published a discussion paper on Sunday trading. The tone of the paper was very much on extending Sunday shopping hours to boost the local economy and promote tourism. However, there is no firm evidence that deregulation would bring economic benefits. There was considerable interest in the consultation. More than 500 responses were received, including the views of 61 organisations. Analysis indicates that opinion on the contentious issue of Sunday opening remains divided. When introduced, the current law was regarded by those who introduced it as a reasonable compromise between strongly held and competing views.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat. Is the Minister satisfied that all relevant stakeholders have been consulted, particularly the workforce? Will he confirm that there is no significant demand for Sunday opening outside designated hours?

Mr McCausland: The Department's consultation list is extensive and runs to many pages. Of course, the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers would be contacted with information and encouraged to respond. It is fairly clear that it is in workers' interests to have some protection. I was, therefore, pleased to read in the 'North Belfast News' on 4 December 2010 that that particular newspaper made the point that the latest campaign by the then Minister for Social Development to extend Sunday opening hours for retailers was one that he had got wrong. I do not always agree with the 'North Belfast News'. However, I did on that occasion. It said that the Tescofication of communities is not to be welcomed and that what is important is to protect the difference that Sunday brings in the weekly calendar:

it should be a day for family, relaxation and recreation. In the paper's view, the present system gets that mix right. It believes that the idea that longer opening hours will boost the economy is a myth; it would simply displace on-the-road shopping to the big supermarkets. It said that the Minister should think again. Well, there is a different Minister now. I have looked carefully at the responses. We will consider what to do in the future.

3.15 pm

Mr Campbell: Has the Minister had an opportunity to examine the consultation process and the response to it? Has he drawn any conclusions from that and learned any lessons for the future?

Mr McCausland: The tone of the discussion paper that was sent out was very much on liberalising opening hours. Indeed, many people complained that the consultation did not allow them to express a contrary view. The purpose of the discussion paper was to stimulate debate on Sunday trading; it was not a referendum on change. However, having looked at the figures and the responses that have come back, it is clear that there is no great demand for an extension of Sunday trading and the strongest view is against any extension. Therefore, the issue that the previous Member raised about the interests of workers and the concern to preserve the opportunity for a family day obviously weigh heavily in people's minds, and I am encouraged by that.

Mr Nesbitt: If the Minister agrees that the social economy is a key lever to rebalancing our economy, does he have any leeway to offer any opportunities to the not-for-profit sector in that area?

Mr McCausland: I am trying to work out the connection between the question that the Member asks and the subject that we are dealing with. We are dealing with the issue of the Sunday opening laws as regards the trading hours of shops. That is a matter that I dealt with, and I wish that the Member could bring some clarity to his question, because, quite frankly, it baffles me. I do not know what he is talking about, but maybe he does not know either.

Child Poverty

5. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline his Department's contribution to combating the high level of children living below the poverty line.

(AQO 563/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Although the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) has lead policy responsibility for tackling child poverty, I believe that my Department has a major operational role to play. Indeed, my Department has responsibility for a number of key initiatives aimed at tackling poverty in our most disadvantaged communities and supporting those most in need. Those initiatives include: raising the standards of housing available for young people and families in the private-rented and social housing sectors; tackling fuel poverty in the most vulnerable households through our fuel poverty strategy; and taking forward the neighbourhood renewal strategy. However, for the vast majority of people who can work, being in employment is the best possible option for escaping poverty and being able to play a full role in society.

At the centre of my Department's approach to tackling poverty is implementing universal credit as part of the welfare reform agenda, with its focus on helping people to escape the benefit trap, supporting those who can work into work and making work pay through a reformed system of income disregards.

Although we are facing difficult economic times, we must give everyone the opportunity and support necessary to participate in our economy. Indeed, if we are to be successful in tackling poverty, we must maximise the potential for disadvantaged families to benefit from economic growth in the future. In addition to the areas mentioned, my Department will continue to engage in discussions with Executive colleagues on areas of mutual interest in relation to poverty. I will work closely with Executive colleagues to deliver funding through the social investment fund and the social protection fund, which are targeted at breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for a very full answer. He has just about covered everything that I wanted to ask him. However, will he confirm that he is satisfied that his Department is making every possible effort to ensure that the parents of children in that situation have

access to their benefits and know exactly what their potential benefits are?

Mr McCausland: I assure the Member that there is an extensive system of advice-giving across Northern Ireland. Some of the areas of advice are funded through Minister Foster's Department, and some are funded through my Department, but whether it be general advice-giving, financial advice-giving, advice about mortgage difficulties or housing advice, all those things impact many of those families, and we are certainly doing all that we can.

I think that there is a very good advice service delivered in Northern Ireland. Whether the Social Security Agency, through its advertising, makes people aware of changes to benefits or situations that might arise, or whether it is the general advice service, we are certainly keen to ensure that people take up the benefits to which they are entitled.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister referred to the proposed welfare reform programme. Does he share the concerns expressed by all members of the Committee for Social Development that many elements, not only of the Bill that is due but of the British Government's current welfare reform programme, may well cause more difficulties, particularly for young children who are vulnerable and living below the poverty line?

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for drawing the distinction between different elements of what is called welfare reform. The universal credit element, which seeks to remove the benefit traps and encourage and facilitate people going back to work, because they would otherwise lose out, is to be welcomed. In fact, that will cost Westminster. It is the elements that were put in to save money that give cause for concern. There are certain elements of the overall package that give us cause for concern, but other elements of it are positive, and it is important to draw the distinction between the two.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers. How does the Minister intend to prioritise the provision of childcare to support parents getting back to work and, therefore, bringing their children out of poverty?

Mr McCausland: That issue is not specific to my Department; it is a cross-departmental issue,

because it has an impact on the Department for Employment and Learning, through getting people on to work programmes, and so on, and OFMDFM is also involved with it. The Department for Social Development also has a role, I suppose.

I assure the Member that there is no doubt that we have to focus on the growth of the childcare sector over the next while. When I spoke to Lord Freud, he was surprised that childcare in Northern Ireland was at such a lower level than it is in Great Britain. I understand that £3 million is available for childcare this year, and £12 million in total is being directed towards that by the Executive. However, we need to make sure that, as we go down this road of welfare reform and encouraging people back into work, the necessary support for childcare is available.

Ms Lewis: What is the Minister's view on the criteria for defining poverty?

Mr McCausland: The fact is that there is no single definition of poverty that has universal acceptance. There are inherent problems and dilemmas in trying to define poverty and how it relates to similar concepts, such as social exclusion or multiple deprivation. Definitions generally make a distinction between absolute poverty and relative poverty. The former is generally a measure that remains fixed, while the latter changes over time as societies develop and grow more prosperous. The terms "poverty", "social exclusion" and "multiple deprivation" are sometimes used interchangeably, but they are not necessarily synonymous. It is useful to think of poverty as a measure of low income, and social exclusion and multiple deprivation as having a broader definition that encapsulates some of the wider causes and consequences of poverty, such as unemployment, low educational qualifications, poor health, high crime rates, and so on. I do consider, however, that we should be focusing our help and resources on those who are most in need, so I am considering how we might better target our efforts to tackle fuel poverty to support those most at risk.

Mr Agnew: The Minister mentioned how tackling child poverty is a cross-departmental issue. He also mentioned the constrained financial times. In the light of that, does the Minister agree that we need to get Departments working together on the issue and that a statutory duty on them

to do so would be helpful to ensure the most efficient use of resources?

Mr McCausland: Co-operation across Departments is essential on a wide range of issues; child poverty is obviously one. I do not disagree with that at all, and I do not think that any other Member would disagree. The more co-operation we can achieve across Departments, the more successful we will be in tackling this and a range of other problems. The Member makes a valid point that no one could disagree with.

Social Housing: North Down

7. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister for Social Development how many social housing sector homes in the north Down area are without double glazing and adequate thermal insulation.
(AQO 565/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested, as the Housing Executive has not collated those details by area. However, I can advise that approximately 60% of Housing Executive stock across Northern Ireland does not have double glazing. The Housing Executive has included a number of window-replacement schemes in its planned maintenance programme for this financial year, which will see work carried out to over 3,200 homes across Northern Ireland. In addition, the Housing Executive's objective is to double-glaze all its properties by 2021. I am bidding for additional funding in the October monitoring round to enable the Housing Executive to replace single-glazed windows with double glazing, as well as additional insulation measures to improve the thermal efficiency of individual homes.

Much housing association stock already has double glazing, and most associations have advised that they intend to replace any remaining single-glazed windows with double glazing in their planned programme of works. The Housing Executive estimates that the vast majority of its properties already have some cavity-wall and roof-space insulation. Insulation and double glazing are small but significant parts of addressing the problem of rising fuel costs. I want the housing budget to have a balanced approach between the provision of newbuild housing and the maintenance of existing stock.

Mr Dunne: Does the Minister agree that this is an energy efficiency issue that needs addressed to help to reduce fuel poverty?

Mr McCausland: I agree with the Member entirely. We are faced with problems of fuel poverty as the cost of fuel rises. Therefore, one way to minimise the impact on families is to have energy efficient homes in which the fuel purchased brings lasting benefit. As I said, the Housing Executive has 3,200 window-replacement schemes in its planned programme for this year. However, we are bidding for more money to do additional work.

In addition, the Housing Executive has developed a maintenance investment strategy for 2011-16, which includes having all its properties double glazed by 2021. The cost of the window-replacement scheme is in the region of £2,284 per dwelling. We need the money, and I am bidding for the money to do the work.

Mr Cree: The Minister referred to the difficulties in conducting an audit of energy efficiency in houses. When that is complete, is it the Department's intention to introduce efficiency rating numbers — they used to be called SAPs — so that everyone will know the energy efficiency of a particular home?

Mr McCausland: Much as it would be desirable to have those, I would prefer the staff to focus on getting the work done. In Northern Ireland, we have a tendency to measure things all the time to see whether they are up to a certain standard of a, b or c. However, the priority should be to get Housing Executive staff to target getting the work done, because people are crying out for it to happen. They have waited so long, and we do not want them to have to wait any longer. I agree that it is desirable to have some standard, but getting the work done must be the priority.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree that one excellent way of reducing fuel poverty would be to replace the tens of thousands of clapped-out boilers in the homes of people on low incomes? Will he consider widening the criteria, which are extremely restricted at the moment?

3.30 pm

Mr McCausland: I must say that I am disappointed that the Member is so critical of the performance of the two previous Social Development Ministers. I will be looking for him

to get his knuckles rapped. I am glad to see that the current leader of his party is all for rapping knuckles, and we will be right behind her in that.

The fact is that the boiler replacement scheme is a pilot scheme that we have introduced alongside the warm homes scheme. The results of that will be reviewed, and we will then decide on a permanent resolution. It is important to run pilot schemes to see how a thing works out, because we are moving into new territory there. It has been helpful to many people, and we want it to be helpful to many more. We have made a recent adjustment to the scheme, and I am sure that when we get the review completed we will be in a much better position.

Mr Dallat: That is a better answer.

Mr McCausland: But the first one, I am sure, was much more entertaining.

Private Members' Business

Rural Schools

Debate resumed on amendment No 1 to motion:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the potential impact of the statement by the Minister of Education on 26 September 2011, particularly on the future of smaller rural schools; notes that schools are at the heart of rural communities; further notes the particular access requirements of rural communities to education; and calls on the Minister of Education to ensure that decisions on the future of rural schools are fully measured against rural standards and proofing. — [Mr McDevitt.]

Which amendment was:

After second 'education;' insert:

'believes that shared and integrated education could provide alternatives to school closures;' — [Mr Lunn.]

Miss M McIlveen: I beg to move amendment No 2: At end insert:

'and that there is equity of treatment between the controlled and maintained sectors.'

I thank those who tabled the motion for bringing this important issue to the Chamber. Mr Lunn has requested clarification of our amendment. Although I had an opportunity to speak to him during Question Time, I will put it on the record for the House.

No one can dispute that there are two main sectors that educate our children — the controlled sector and the maintained sector. We do not want this to be a sectarian headcount, because that is not what our amendment is about. It is to address what are perceived to be historical inequalities in the treatment of the two main sectors. That said, in hindsight, perhaps a more appropriate wording — a wording that the Member for Lagan Valley might have preferred — would have been to call on the Minister to ensure that there is equity of treatment across all sectors.

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

The position of rural schools was a matter that I raised at the time of the Minister's statement. He, like many of us who represent a rural constituency, should be aware of the importance of rural schools and of how the use of enrolment figures does not tell the whole story

of their huge importance to a community. Like many issues in education, the treatment of rural schools is a hardy perennial, but it is once again given prominence due to the Minister's recent announcement. Although I appreciate that rationalisation of the schools estate is needed — that issue was raised by my party many times during the last mandate of the Assembly — there is concern about how the viability audit was announced.

The Minister spoke of 85,000 spare school places and of how one third of our primary schools had fewer than 100 children and one fifth of our 217 post-primary schools had fewer than 400 pupils, all of which is factual. He then went on to say that it was not simply a numbers game, insisting that schools would be measured against the six principles of the sustainable schools policy. The Minister did not elaborate on what those six principles were, either in that statement or in the press statement released on the matter. That is not so much of an issue for those of us involved in the Education Committee and others who are aware of the sustainable schools policy, but, for the wider public and, in particular, the media reporting on the proceedings in the Chamber and those who received the Minister's statement, the focus will inevitably be on the numbers game. That naturally led to one of the newspapers in my constituency printing a list of the schools in the area that fell below the numbers referred to by the Minister in his statement, with particular focus on Ballykeigle Primary School in Killinchy, Comber, which was referred to by Mr McDevitt as having the sword of Damocles hanging over it. You can imagine the concern for parents of pupils at the school, not to mention the teachers, that such a report can cause. It was entirely foreseeable that such a report would result from the statement. It causes immense instability in schools with concerns about their future. Is it possible that, when issuing the statement, the Minister could have foreseen headlines such as that in the 'Down Recorder' on Wednesday, which referred to 40 small schools on a hit list for closure? Those 40 small schools are under SEELB control. The Minister denied to the Committee that such a hit list existed, and I would be grateful if he would repeat that on the Floor of the Chamber today. Despite those protestations, my understanding is that letters are being sent out by the commissioners of the South Eastern Education and Library Board to a number of schools before

the viability audit even begins. That being the case, how can we be assured that the audits have not already been predetermined and will be carried out in a fair manner, taking into account all relevant factors, including rural proofing?

The problem with stoking up press speculation, which is a particular difficulty for rural schools and can become the focus of a local paper's reporting, is that such speculation can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. That is why the Minister needs to choose his words carefully. It is almost inevitable that some parents will remove their children from smaller schools that, they feel, are under threat of closure, thus making the school's future even less certain. I hope that this debate brings some clarity to the issue and that the Minister can stress that numbers are not the only factor and explain to parents and those who are following these proceedings what other factors will be taken into consideration with regard to rural schools when everything else comes into play. I also hope that, when he talks about the six principles of the sustainable schools policy, he does not simply recite them but explains what is meant by them to those who are potentially affected and those already affected by his previous statement. I refer to phrases such as the quality of the educational experience of children, enrolment trends, financial provision, school leadership, management accessibility and the strength of a school's link to the community. Those phrases can mean different things to whomever wishes to interpret them. After so much uncertainty, it would be helpful if some certainty could now be given.

Rural schools, despite having smaller numbers, are more often at the heart of a community and are key to its identity. Generations of the same family will have attended them, and, in some cases, they give a community its identity. In a previous debate on rural schools, I mentioned the controlled sector school in Pomeroy that is under the control of the Southern Education and Library Board. It is the only non-denominational school in the area and is where many of the Protestant families in the area send their children. It falls a long way below the Bain criteria, but it gives the minority Protestant community in that area the opportunity of sending their children to a school that meets their needs and requirements. The fear, as I outlined previously, would be that, if such a school closed, those families would move from the area to be nearer a controlled sector school.

It is conceivable that that would be equally true for minority Catholic communities. It is a complex and sensitive issue that needs a co-ordinated and mature approach.

It is important that, as the audits are undertaken, there is equity of treatment among those taking part. One of the criticisms levelled against CCMS, for example, is that, when it prepares reports, they are not all-encompassing but focus only on Catholic maintained schools and do not take cognisance of other provision. In recent times, the controlled sector has borne the brunt of closures, with 31 schools closing and six amalgamations in the past five years, while the maintained sector has closed only nine schools. It is important that the sectors work closely together for the good of education in Northern Ireland as a whole and do not pursue narrow sectoral protectionism.

It is important that the sectors work together to carry out the audit, but in doing so it is equally important that the CCMS, the education and library boards and the Department of Education consult and seek the views of principals, teachers, other staff, parents and the wider community. All factors and views must be taken into consideration when assessing the viability of a school, particularly in a rural context, and, in order for that to be done, those immediately affected must be part of that process. Only then can the full importance of a school be appreciated in the context of rural proofing. However, the carrying-out of the review should not stop with the CCMS and the education boards: all sectors should come into the reckoning. It is unfair and inequitable that other schools should enjoy protected status and drain resources from mainstream schools whose pupils suffer as a result.

The Alliance Party's amendment talks about shared and integrated education providing alternatives to school closures. The DUP wants to see a day when there is a single education sector in Northern Ireland, but it must take place as the result of a restructuring of education in Northern Ireland and not in the form that it takes in the current integrated education framework. It is necessary that the viability audits form part of a wholesale review of education provision in Northern Ireland, with a view to the ultimate unification of that provision and an end to the benign apartheid that was referred to last year by my party leader.

In conclusion, I repeat my call to the Minister to assure the House that the viability audits are not predetermined; that they will be fully rural-proofed; that a full explanation can be given to those who are following these proceedings about what is being taken into consideration in that regard; that close co-operation between sectors will take place during the audit; that key representatives from potentially affected schools will be consulted; and that any resulting decisions will be just, fair and equitable among the sectors, thereby ensuring that no sector is favoured over another.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I very much welcome the opportunity to speak to the debate. Rural schools play a very important role in rural communities such as the one that I come from. It is important to change the direction and narrative of the debate. Numbers have been bandied about and thrown into newspaper stories and so on. That is not entirely helpful. As constructive politicians, we need to ensure that the discussions in the Chamber are about the policy and how it will be implemented. If other politicians disagree, that is fair enough.

The Minister made a statement and outlined where we stood with the numbers in schools. As other Members have pointed out, the Minister said:

"the sustainable schools policy is not simply a numbers game, and schools will be measured against the six principles of that policy." — [Official Report, Vol 66, No 5, p260, col 2].

As Miss McIlveen outlined, those principles are quality educational experience; sustainable enrolment trends; sound financial position; strong leadership and management by boards of governors and principals; accessibility, which is very important in the context of this debate; and community links. I was concerned by the contribution to that debate of the proposer of today's motion, the Member for South Belfast, who said:

"A total of 380 schools face the axe." — [Official Report, Vol 66, No 5, p265, col 2].

Clearly, that is not true.

Mr McDevitt: I do not want the Member to mislead the House accidentally. I said that, if you do the numbers that are buried in the Minister's statement, the number of schools was 350, not 380. I am sure that the Minister

will not fall out with me over 30 schools. I did not make up that number; it was buried in the Minister's figures. That is the number of schools that fall below the sustainability threshold that is set out in the sustainable schools policy.

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for his intervention. That was a quotation that I took this morning from Hansard. It is opportunistic and irresponsible of the Member, and it is scaremongering. One of those schools is on Rathlin Island, which is in my constituency. Numbers and accessibility will be considered for Rathlin. We can have an understanding of how that will be considered under that policy. I do not appreciate the issue of the Rathlin school being raised in the Committee for Education. It obviously plays to people's emotions and gets them concerned about numbers of schools, when, as responsible politicians, we need to outline what the policies are. If Members disagree with them, that is fine, but they should not pretend that the policy is something that it is not.

The Bain report of 2006 showed that we have inherited a pattern of provision that is educationally and financially unsustainable. We have to deal with that to raise standards and improve the quality of education for our children. We have to put children first, not buildings, bricks or mortar. Trevor Lunn made a very measured contribution. Things are changing in the estate. St Aloysius's High School used to be in Cushendall in my North Antrim constituency. It closed, and many of its pupils went to a new school, St Killian's College, and some pupils came to it from Larne. That was a very successful amalgamation. I am sure that Michaela Boyle will refer to Strabane, where there have been controlled and maintained amalgamations. The sky did not fall in, so there are a lot of opportunities for successful amalgamations as a result of the policy. The work is not going to start in 2012; it has, quite clearly, started already. If Members study the policy, they will see that it contains a section on rural issues. It recognises that schools are at the heart of rural communities, as is stated in the motion. The policy refers to the Rural Development Council's report, 'Striking the Balance'. That is on page 28 of the policy, and Members may like to refer to it. The sustainable schools policy covers the concerns that are listed in the motion.

The debate is worthwhile. Rural schools are of concern to many Members of the House and members of our communities. We need to have that debate in a constructive way and based on the policies that are in front of us. We have to address the issue of 150 empty schools. We have to raise the standards of our schools and ensure that rural proofing is at the heart of that.

3.45 pm

Mr McNarry: I refer the House to last week's headline in a rural newspaper, the 'Down Recorder', which we have to pay attention to and deal with. The headline highlights that 40 small schools are on a hit list for closure, and the journalist's report relates to that headline by quoting a local principal saying that SEELB officers already have a hit list of schools that are earmarked for closure. The report states that he said that many teachers felt "demoralised" and uncertain of the future of their school. He said that jitters have spread across the rural school community and warned that the review could spark:

"unprecedented industrial action involving principals and teachers."

He concluded that principals are:

"sensing that small schools are going to be targeted regardless of their reputation and standards".

He asked:

"how can you provide better education when you are going to kill off small schools?".

I suspect that the "you" referred to by the principal is, ultimately, the Minister. Therefore, I suggest that the Minister responds to that report accordingly.

We all know that rural schools offer more than simply seats at desks. They deserve better than to be put in a position of threat, rather than protection. During the past number of weeks, I have been delighted to visit rural primary schools across Northern Ireland in places as far apart as Dungannon and Comber in my capacity as a judge in the primary schools gardening competition that has been personally sponsored by my esteemed colleague Sam Gardiner. I have been deeply impressed at first hand by the quality of the overall educational experience that is enjoyed by the children in those schools, the enthusiasm of the pupils, the way that the

pupils are engaged in what they are doing and the dedication and professionalism of their teachers and other staff.

There is one key aspect of the future of our primary schools that the central planners at the Department of Education, driven by their own budgetary deficits, fail to see all the time: the centrality of those primary schools to the life and survival of our rural communities. It is no exaggeration to say that, when you close a local primary school, you close down a community with it, draining it of all its life and vigour. In effect, you sentence that community to nil growth. At the very time when we hear and know that modern technology is making viable the survival of relatively small communities, the old-fashioned, ponderous thinking of the Department of Education, which I know this Minister will change, perseveres to rend those communities apart by closing their central asset — their local primary school.

There is a problem with premature school closures. Why should any of this happen before the boards and the Department itself are reorganised? Surely, they should rationalise themselves and their costly support services before they begin to butcher rural schools. No one, least of all me, denies the need for maximum efficiency in the deployment of resources. What is open to question is the process that we are engaged in to achieve that. Boards appear to be jumping the gun, with or without the tacit support of the Department, and school closures are being determined ahead of the audit that the Minister has announced. That is the perception among the public, and that is the perception of the principal in the report in the 'Down Recorder' that I mentioned.

One thing that I am sure of is that the premature race to close schools will tear the heart out of many rural communities and will do so at a time when we need to look upon schools as a resource that is welded into local communities and not simply as educational institutions that are run by a Department that is making what passes for an educational policy on the back of its budgetary deficit. This is not about money but about communities.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I will make a few initial comments as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education. Following the Minister's statement to the House on 27 September,

he came to the Committee. In a wide-ranging discussion, he set out the six criteria in the sustainable schools policy: quality of educational experience; sustainable enrolment trends; sound financial position; strong leadership and management; accessibility; and strong links with the community. I concur with my colleague Michelle McIlveen's comment that we have a task in hand to translate all six criteria to the community, because people do not fully comprehend their implications. Among other issues, Committee members expressed their concerns about the relative vulnerability of small rural schools; the Minister's openness to proposals for the amalgamation of schools from different sectors; and the need to ensure that all sectors participating in the viability audits and area planning will do so on a level playing field. Obviously, this is an issue that the Committee will return to over the coming weeks and months.

I will now make some comments as a Member. Franklin Roosevelt said:

"The school is the last expenditure upon which America should be willing to economise."

There is no doubt that the current debate has been fuelled by media hype and by fears that are genuine, not merely perceived. There is a genuine concern about the future of our rural schools.

I ask the Minister to clarify why we started with the post-primary sector. Any logical and coherent consideration of the situation would refer to the primary sector in Northern Ireland. I suspect that the reason for the omission is on the map that I have in my hand. Should Members take the time to consider the map, they will see that it clearly shows a myriad — there are dozens — of primary schools that fall below the criteria set out in the Bain report and the sustainable schools policy. That brings me to the point made by SDLP Members. They talked about federations, joint management and imaginative local solutions. Can Members from the SDLP or Sinn Féin give one example of an imaginative scheme that has lasted over the past 10 years and involved an amalgamation or federation with another sector that is outside the maintained sector? That is the difficulty. We can skirt round it and try to dress it up.

Mr McDevitt: I am glad that Mr Storey raised that issue. In my opening remarks, I made the point that there appears to be a legal

impediment to achieving that outcome. That is certainly the view of many who are in positions of governance. There is a great duty on the House and the Committee to explore those legal barriers, if they exist. That is my understanding of the situation, and that is why we are not able to progress as we should.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Storey: If there is a legal impediment, why have schools in the controlled sector gone through the transformation process but those in the maintained sector have not? The huge reluctance on the part of CCMS to become involved in open dialogue on the future of education has been a poison at the centre of progress for educational provision in Northern Ireland.

The Minister must fulfil his commitment to the education sector. When he came to the Committee, he made his position clear:

"I asked both bodies to go into the same room and work on this at the same time to ensure that we achieve exactly what you have requested".

If I read his words correctly, the Minister made that clear. However, I ask him to clarify whether the terms of reference have been agreed and tell us whether the exact grounds on which the viability audit will be conducted are known. The reality for many schools is that the aggregate schools budget has been slashed. There have been decisions by boards of governors — I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of the Model Integrated Primary School and Ballymoney High School— and those boards of governors and many more whose members are in this Chamber and beyond face difficult and dire situations. The issue will not be whether they survive under the viability audit but whether they survive under the financial audit. That is clearly a concern. Look at the debt we have in our primary schools and post-primary education system. Those issues are critical and severe.

I also come to an issue that I think —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Allister: On the concern that financial viability is one of the touchstones in the viability audit, does the Member share the concern

about how one completes that financial viability in advance of completion of the review —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry. The time is up.

Mr Allister: —of the funding of schools?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, the time is up. Would the Member take his seat? I am sorry, the time is up. Members have to —

Mr Storey: I will write to the Member. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members need to take great care when it comes to near the end of their time.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. I quote from the Minister's address to the House on 26 September. His opening remarks were:

"We must prioritise the needs of children over institutions and make sure that it is the needs of all our young people that are to the fore." — [Official Report, Vol 66, No 5, p260, col 1].

In order to do that, we cannot ignore the fact that the enrolment figures tell us that there are 85,000 empty places in our schools. We need to deliver change, and, in doing so, we need to focus on strategic planning and reorganisation of the schools estate. We have schools that struggle to give children the education that they deserve and are entitled to receive. It is of equal importance that children in rural areas have access to a good standard of education. We need to recognise that there are schools failing in that, and that problem needs to be addressed and resolved.

The managing authorities are now tasked with conducting a viability audit to identify schools that are finding it difficult to remain viable. Like any audit, that audit needs to be monitored, and, in determining the outcomes such as clustering, amalgamation or even closure, all that needs to be done in an open, transparent and fair way. The educational, economic and wider community needs to be listened to. Collaboration and amalgamation may well be the only answer for some schools. In my constituency, we have great examples of schools amalgamating. Most recently, St Mary's Girls' Primary School and St Mary's Boys' Primary School in Strabane amalgamated, and I congratulate them on that. The Education Committee is paying a visit to Strabane at the

end of the month to see how that amalgamation is working.

Some schools face challenges in providing the full curriculum and what schools can offer to our children. Those challenges are more evident at a time of falling enrolments. For any school, rural or urban, that is experiencing difficulties there is the intervention process of the inspectorate, and mechanisms are in place to support those schools. However, a balance needs to be struck between long-term sustainability and schools that are no longer viable.

We need to pay particular tribute to parents, principals and boards of governors in rural communities for their contribution, hard work, dedication and commitment and for the leadership that they show in rural schools, churches and wider community by ensuring that the vibrant role of the school remains at the heart of their rural community.

Small rural schools provide much-needed employment within the community, and that has to be acknowledged. Co-operation and collaboration between small rural schools improves capacity to provide a range of comprehensive extended services. There is evidence to suggest that those formal collaborations can create a climate of innovation that improves schools' capacity to seek new solutions to established problems.

4.00 pm

Education has been and always will be essential to the success of any society, and it is vital to the future well-being of our children. Therefore, it is vital that we have an input on how our education system is managed. Whether we are a politician, a parent — or both — a member of the education system or, just as importantly, a member of our local urban and rural community, we have a vested interest in the success of our society, and we cannot be complacent with our education system. We all have a responsibility to ensure that it becomes a world-class system, and we must ensure that we work together to achieve that. As politicians, we can have a positive effect on doing so.

I want to conclude by referring to comments from a Member who spoke previously and to Members' scaremongering about the closure of schools. In one statement, it was stated that the Minister's vision was to close 45 schools

in west Tyrone and that the Department and the Minister are working together to wreak havoc within our school estates. Those types of comments only serve as scaremongering —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw her remarks to a close, please?

Ms Boyle: — and do not reflect what is in the sustainable schools policy.

Mr Buchanan: I support the amendment proposed by my party. The potential school closures that will undoubtedly result from the review announced by the Minister on 26 September are concerning for many parents, teachers and pupils as well as communities in a rural environment because numbers will obviously play a central part of any decision as to whether to keep a school open or to close it. Therefore, it is essential that the Minister takes account of all the circumstances relating to rural schools.

No further away than last week, we had a debate in this House on transportation to schools, the distance to the nearest and most appropriate school and the impact of a rural school closure on our local communities, taking into account all issues to do with community cohesion and identity. During that debate, we heard that, when two schools did decide to come together, the transportation consequences were that 133 pupils were denied the transportation that they got prior to the coming together of the two schools. So, that has to play an important role in any review and, indeed, in any decision to close schools in rural areas.

The previous Education Minister informed the House in answer to a question that “urban” is defined as Belfast and Londonderry city council areas and that all other areas are considered to be rural. I have no doubt that there will be no ambiguity or argument from any Member in this House today that west Tyrone is really rural and must be taken into account as we look at the issues. That leaves a vast area of space and a significant number of the population of Northern Ireland sending their children to what is defined as a rural school.

Schools are a feature of society and a part of the very fabric of our rural communities in Northern Ireland. As a society, we remain keen to put our children through a school that is sympathetic to our faiths and beliefs. In the past three years, 14 schools in the controlled

sector have closed compared with eight schools in the maintained sector. That raises questions that I do not think the Minister has answered at any stage in this House.

The DUP amendment relates to ensuring equity in proposed closures in the controlled and maintained sectors. Many parts of Northern Ireland are isolated, leaving members of one community or the other unable to send their children to a school that falls in line with their faith. I refer to the obvious differences between the controlled and maintained sectors. Many parents have to send their children to the school of their choice some distance away, and others are able to send their children to the school around the corner. However, that depends on what type of school they choose to send their children to. That problem can make people of one faith background or another further isolated in a rural environment, and it is, therefore, imperative that we ensure equity in any closure of schools situated in a rural environment.

In similar debates during the previous mandate on the threat to rural schools, the then Minister of Education argued that numbers were only a small part of the criteria on sustainable schools policy. However, we can be concerned with that only at a time when the Department of Education is seeking to save money. Although I appreciate the fact that empty desks in schools must be dealt with, viable small rural schools that deliver education excellently must not be targeted and must not pay a price in the review. We must ensure that, in the implementation of the policy, the children and the needs of the rural community are put before money.

Like many Members, I want the best for our children because they are the future of Northern Ireland.

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

Mr Buchanan: Education is an important issue, especially during a downturn and a time of economic concern. Therefore, I support the motion and amendment No 2.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Member for tabling the motion. I support the motion and the amendments and those who have spoken about the need to protect our rural communities.

Rural life has been scientifically proven to be less stressful than urban living. I have often

heard it said that if you do not know what you are doing in the countryside, do not worry, there is always someone around who does. A sense of community, identity and belonging is at the very heart of rural life. Rural communities, villages and towns across Northern Ireland are rightly proud of their history and culture, and they contribute so much to what it means to come from Northern Ireland. The concerns of parents of young children, especially those in rural communities, are entirely justifiable following the Minister's statement to the House four weeks ago on the future of our schools. As my colleague Mr McNarry reminded us last week, living in a rural community is the normal way of life for almost one third of our citizens.

As a resident of a rural village, I know only too well how important it was to be able to take my children to the local primary school in Waringstown. Rural communities across Northern Ireland are served by excellent teaching and non-teaching staff. Residents of Waringstown village in my constituency are awaiting the Minister's decision on a proposed nursery school to be sited at the primary school. We are all too aware that each year the needs of parents and young children across Northern Ireland are not being met by the school system with regard to statutory nursery places. Indeed, it was suggested to parents in Waringstown that they should send their children as far away as Newry, a journey of 20 miles, to get a place in a nursery school.

Many, if not most, Members would not like to think that the coming rationalisation of the school system would lead to similar stories of lengthy and impractical journeys so that our children could ensure a place in a primary or secondary school. However, it may be the case that, in rationalising the schools estate, considerable financial pressure will be brought to bear on the home-to-school transport budget as more and more children, especially those in rural communities, will require transport to schools located further and further away from their homes. That makes the review of the policy all the more necessary. However, there is a danger that speculation and rumour could lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. The Minister must be clear in the use of language because, in labelling a school, parents may choose to move their children to another school or not make an application to it at all. That could have devastating consequences for the long-term viability of successful rural schools across

Northern Ireland and for parents applying for school places for their children in coming years.

I understand that the Department of Education is looking at ways to improve the carbon footprint across the schools estate by reducing energy consumption. If the Minister decides to turn out the lights permanently in schools across Northern Ireland, it will indeed reduce our carbon footprint. However, a lot of worried parents and children will be left totally in the dark.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. I support the principle of the motion, and I am glad to have the opportunity to deal with some of the points that have been raised.

Many Members have often used reform within the educational system as a tool through which to criticise the Minister. I am keen to find out where many of their points of criticism come from. Talk of hit lists and schools under threat and disclosing the number of schools that are due to close in any constituency is careless. It is regrettable and completely unfounded. As Jo-Anne said, we need to be careful about the type of language we are using, because such actions might damage confidence among parents on the future sustainability of a school and exacerbate the problem of falling school numbers, particularly in rural areas.

It is important that the Assembly and the Minister acknowledge the key role that many of our schools play in their communities and that, in many cases, the quality of educational outcomes are unquestionably above the high standards he sets. The schools that exceed those targets must be rewarded. However, some schools fail to meet those criteria, and we cannot allow that to continue. Such failure in educational outcomes needs to be addressed, and I commend the Minister for taking forward and implementing policies that are designed to improve our education system for our children and young people. He is basing his decisions not on numbers, but on outcomes. Rural schools play a vital role in the life of many isolated communities, but we must make sure that they deliver their primary function, which is to provide the highest level of education possible.

The Minister has clearly stated his commitment to the reform of the entire education system. That will ensure that each and every school is not only delivering a first-class education to

the children, but that it is at the heart of every community.

The review initiated by the Minister does not differ between rural and urban schools, and each school will be judged on its own merits.

Mr Craig: I thank the Member for raising the issue of how it should be judged against the Minister's announced criteria. I agree with some other Members: there are schools being closed, but, clearly, the Minister's criteria are not being used. Some of those schools have very high academic achievement, and the reports done on them less than a year ago prove that. Despite the good academic outturn of those schools, they are on the list for closure, and that is purely because of the numbers game. Does the Member disagree with that?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Flanagan: I do not have any facts about what the Member is raising, but I know that he is bringing an Adjournment debate on a particular school to the House tomorrow. Perhaps that is what he is talking about. If it is, I am keen to hear the comments he raises. I will tune in to the debate, and I look forward to the Minister's response as well.

The Minister has also made it clear that the viability of a school will be judged against a wide range of criteria, not simply enrolment numbers. Therefore small schools, particularly in rural areas, are not unsustainable schools. That is a much more complex system than merely looking at enrolment numbers. The Minister has outlined a number of criteria, which he will take forward.

Members have raised the fact that there are 85,000 extra classroom places and that we can no longer afford such wastage in the education system. There is a greater need for collaboration between library boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and other education sectors, but we must also look towards greater collaboration with the Department of Education and Skills in the South to see whether cross-border working can assist schools in border areas.

If people are genuinely interested in the education of our children, they should support the motion. They should work constructively with the Minister and stop scaremongering about the number of rural schools that may close.

Ms Ritchie: Across Northern Ireland, schools are undoubtedly at the heart of the community, particularly in rural areas. Not only do they provide education for our children, but they are very much a community resource. Along with the church, local convenience store, filling station and pub they provide the hub for villages, towns, hamlets and townlands. Furthermore, one will find many housing settlements, old and new, situated around the school providing that critical mass of population.

My constituency of South Down is essentially rural, and I am deeply concerned about the implications of the Minister's statement and how the thoughts and content, if formalised, will impact not only on the future of rural schools but on the vibrancy and vitality of many rural communities.

If one were to take the Minister's viability quota for rural schools as a benchmark for the future, some schools would be under threat, and many families would perhaps have to travel longer distances to schools. That would, in turn, put pressure on financial resources for the home-to-school transport policy, an area which is already under extreme scrutiny.

4.15 pm

I ask the following questions: did the Minister undertake any real rural and equality proofing on his thoughts in the document to ascertain their impact on rural schools before he came forward with his statement? Were in-depth discussions held with all of those who are involved in education, such as parents, teachers, boards of governors, trustees and management teams? If so, what were the outcomes, and was any recognition or acknowledgement given to those features in the ministerial document?

Instead of rushing towards possible amalgamations or closures, the Minister should explore other options that may be applicable to rural schools. An example of that would be the federation model detailed by my colleague Mr McDevitt, in which schools in a rural hinterland would collaborate to provide the best possible outcomes for children at primary and secondary levels. The Minister of Education and the Executive must avoid any circumstances in which our rural primary schools must compete for survival. Putting in place measures that allow rural schools to collaborate and to work together as learning communities, particularly primary schools, will allow smaller schools with

a clear identity to survive and to continue to provide education in rural communities.

Rural primary schools and the education that they provide ensure that children receive a well-grounded and fundamental basis in all aspects of education, inside and outside of the classroom. The Minister must also take into account the unique nature of rural schools with respect to their wide catchment areas, transport services and infrastructure. The review must not simply be a numbers game for the Department. Many rural schools have a sterling reputation for providing excellent education, pastoral support, extracurricular activities and of being the hub of the community. All of those facts and factors must be considered by the Department.

Enrolment figures, which will immediately put rural communities at a distinct disadvantage, must not be the sole criterion used by the Department in its review. Other factors must be taken into account to ensure that rural schools can have a continued existence.

The Department should also take on board the fact that many rural schools have been waiting a considerable time for newbuilds or for maintenance work to be carried out. I can think of schools in my own constituency, such as St Louis Grammar School in Kilkeel, Down High School in Downpatrick, which I spoke to the Minister about last week, and primary schools such as St Patrick's Primary School in Saul and St Colman's Primary School in Saval that are looking for new classrooms. Those schools are extremely viable, they play a vital part in their rural communities and they serve large rural catchment areas. Please do not let the baby go out with the bath-water, and do not let this review suspend the aspirations and requirements of schools that have inadequate accommodation requirements.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the member draw her marks to a close?

Ms Ritchie: We must look after rural communities, and ensure that there is a joined-up approach to government and to government policy across the spectrum.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome today's debate, as it allows me to reiterate the key messages that lay at the heart of my statement to the Assembly on 26 September, and to alleviate concerns about the

future of rural schools. My focus is firmly on the quality of education that we provide for pupils in every school, and I believe that pupils living in rural areas deserve quality education in the same way as pupils in urban areas.

The motion expresses concern at the impact of my statement:

"particularly on the future of smaller rural schools;".

The amendments advocate shared and integrated education as alternatives to school closures — the Member referred to federations — and seek equality of treatment of controlled and maintained schools.

None — I repeat none — of those options have been ruled out. Indeed, I listened to the proposer of the motion, Mr McDevitt, very carefully. Frankly, he sounded more like an estate agent than an agent of change or education because all we heard about was buildings. He talked about school buildings and institutions, and not until the very last line of his speech was the term "quality education" used. That is what the debate should surely be about. It is what my statement in September was about and what the viability audit that I have put in place is about.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will not.

This is not about buildings in villages, rural communities or city-centre hubs. It is about the education of the young people who go to those schools. The listing of buildings, in my opinion, serves no purpose; certainly not the purposes of rural communities.

The motion notes:

"schools are at the heart of rural communities".

Again, I ask: where is it stated that quality education is at the heart of rural communities? We have many fine examples of schools in rural communities providing first-rate education for young people. The viability audit will assess those and all schools, whether in urban or rural catchment areas, and dictate the way forward.

Rural communities deserve first-rate education, too. I stated that the effective planning of education provision is at the core of the challenge to provide the best education for our young people. However, we have too many small schools to provide the education that our

young people deserve. We face a very difficult budgetary position. Mr McNarry referred to the budget deficit in the Department of Education. I assure him that neither the Department of Education nor the Executive asked for that deficit. It was imposed on us by the Tory Party. I am proud to say that I have never canvassed for the Tory Party. I wonder whether Members on the Benches opposite can say the same. There is no point complaining to me about the education budget after endorsing the policies of the party that imposed it.

We have far too many surplus places in our schools. At the last tally, there were approximately 85,000. We currently fund, in real terms, around 150 empty schools. Yet, some Members call on me, as Education Minister, to do nothing. I underline that only some do so. They ask me to remain static because of a bad newspaper headline. I cannot run departmental policy on the basis of the opinion of every newspaper editor. I am not responsible for poor journalism, nor am I responsible for good journalism. However, I must say that journalists, editors, politicians and local representatives have a duty to act responsibly, because we are talking about the future of education. We are also talking about the jobs of school principals, teachers, staff, caretakers, etc. We must all act responsibly.

We have in place a sustainable schools policy to deal with those matters. We now need to quicken the pace at which we implement it. That is why I announced in September that I was commissioning the education and library boards and CCMS to conduct a viability audit of schools. It is an educational viability audit based on enrolment trends, educational standards and financial viability. That work has begun already. Terms of reference were issued four days after my announcement, and two meetings of my Department, the five boards and CCMS have already taken place. I am determined to drive that forward and have set challenging but achievable deadlines.

Some in the media and in the House referred to a "hit list" for school closures that is based simply on the size of schools and said that some rural schools were feeling the pressure. At no time in my speech did I say that we would base this exercise on a numbers game. Indeed, during questions after my statement, I challenged a number of Members about the numbers game. I have never used the phrase

"hit list"; I find it offensive and unhelpful. Perhaps it is used to be deliberately unhelpful. I repeat that we are talking about the future education of young people and about the future of teachers, principals and staff in all schools. The term "hit list" is totally inappropriate.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will not.

Mr McDevitt: *[Interruption.]*

Mr O'Dowd: It is.

If it were a simple numbers game, I would not need to bring the five education and library boards together or require the CCMS to go into the same room with them. I would not require them to consult with the other stakeholders in education. I would get out my calculator, make a list on paper and do the numbers game.

Ms Ritchie said that I had to ensure that the views of schools are taken on board, there had to be proper research and all these things had to be done. That is exactly what is being done at this moment. The key players in education, the boards and CCMS in conjunction with the other stakeholders, are now looking at the viability of schools. As Education Minister, I am not sitting with a calculator in Rathgael House or on the first floor of this building deciding the future of schools. I have asked the experts to sit down and look at the future of schools in a manner which has at its core the future educational well-being of our young people. That, I believe, is a responsible way forward.

I want to ensure that every school is looked at closely. We will look initially at enrolments, the quality of education provided and, yes, the projected financial viability over a number of years. In taking that work forward, the boards and CCMS must ensure that their assessment reflects and supports the implementation of the Department's policies, in particular those on sustainable schools; Every School a Good School; the revised curriculum and the entitlement framework; Count, Read: Succeed; the Irish-medium review; the special educational needs (SEN) review; and our obligations under the Good Friday Agreement in relation to integrated and Irish-medium provision. I will supply the terms of reference to the Education Committee as well. The terms of reference in relation to area planning has not yet been agreed. I want further consultation with the

boards, CCMS and other stakeholders to ensure that those terms of reference meet the needs of the project.

We need swift action to protect the education of pupils in schools that face challenges. We cannot play with children's and young people's life chances. Children must come before buildings. Where there are obvious solutions, they must be implemented without delay. Those may include amalgamation, federation or integration. However, if the only option is school closure, I will implement that option. The only option that I will not implement is stagnation. I will not stand around and allow our schools estate to further stagnate. It is not an option. Surely it is not one that the House would want me to take?

I also announced that the education and library boards, working in close conjunction with CCMS and other schools' managing authorities, will undertake collective strategic planning on an area basis. The sustainable schools policy, which provides the basis for that work, takes account of the particular needs of rural communities. Prior to the publication of the sustainable schools policy in January 2009, my Department consulted with officials from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The policy was also assessed against the Rural Development Council's rural-proofing checklist, which is set out in its report 'Striking the Balance'. All those issues were debated and addressed before the policy was launched in January 2009.

Ms McIlveen pointed to the policy's six principles, the first of which is the educational experience of children, which I think is self-explanatory. We want to ensure and assess the educational experiences of young people in all our schools. Enrolments relate to enrolment trends over a number of years to see exactly how viable in terms of pupil numbers a school will be in future. Future planning for housing and birth rates in the school's area will also be looked at.

On the financial position, the Chair of the Education Committee, quite rightly, highlights the financial difficulties that our schools face. I referred to the most difficult Budget in our history of modern education. I do not use that phrase lightly. One of the reasons why I made the statement is that I want to ensure that we do not spread the icing on the cake

too thinly. Where there are unviable schools, we must deal with them and put the savings back into education. I am not talking about handing money back to the centre. I am not talking about handing money back to the British Exchequer. I am not talking about handing money to the International Monetary Fund or the EU. I am talking about bringing money back into education.

As regards leadership and management, when I was on the Education Committee, we looked at succeeding schools in areas of deprivation, and one of the key elements that came through in those schools was leadership and good management. Whether that leadership was in the principal's office, at board of governors meetings or in the classroom in the delivery of education, it was key to the success of such schools.

Again, key to rural communities is accessibility. Of course we have to look at school accessibility in our rural communities. Michaela Boyle said that there had been comments that I intend to close 45 schools in west Tyrone. There are currently 90 schools in west Tyrone. So, given those figure, it is clear that the elected representatives who say that there are to be 45 school closures in west Tyrone — it is not me who stands by that — are doing a great disservice to the community in that area. There is no way that we are going to close one in every two schools in west Tyrone. That does not stack up, even if you use the numbers game that parties are playing in the Chamber. Members need to be responsible when dealing with figures.

4.30 pm

The last criteria are links with the community. Any school that is at the heart of a community is a successful one. Examples of that have been shown time and time again in rural communities where the school is the local community centre, sports centre, church centre or whatever it needs to be. You go to the local school to learn. That breeds a relationship with the school, which, in turn, means that parents send their children to that school and that that school succeeds. Where there are no links with the community, there are failing schools.

The six criteria that I have outlined provide a robust framework for developing strong, vibrant schools that, first and foremost, serve the interests of pupils. I appreciate the central place that many schools have in communities, both

rural and urban. However, I believe that where there is a school, it must be a good school, be educationally viable and be able to deliver for today's generation of young people.

The issue of shared and integrated education was raised. I will support any proposal that provides high-quality education, has the support and confidence of parents and is viable and sustainable in the long term.

There was a call for equality of treatment between the controlled and maintained sectors. I have no difficulty in supporting that. However, I will say this: I will deal with each school on the basis of need, not on the basis of creed. I will ensure that there is equality of treatment for all children and young people, regardless of which sector their parents choose.

As I said at the outset, my focus is on the quality of education that is provided for all pupils. Schools are there to meet the needs of pupils, whether in rural or urban settings. I am determined that the system will be reshaped to provide high-quality education for all pupils that can be sustained in the longer term. I understand that schools carry emotional attachment and history for people. However, let us not cloud our decision-making with emotion or history. It is our young people's futures that we are dealing with. We should not blight that because we hanker after our past. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Craig: I speak as a member of the Education Committee and in support of not only the substantive motion but my party's amendment. The Minister alluded to the fact that Northern Ireland has too many schools — he clearly outlined that — and too many places. He also clearly outlined where the financial responsibility for that has come from. Like him, I have not helped any Tory. So, we have at least one thing in common.

My party's amendment calls for the:

"equity of treatment between both the controlled and maintained sectors."

Both sectors receive funding from central government but are governed separately. The controlled sector's experience is that harsh cuts are much more likely to be imposed on it than on the other element in our education system. That is where the inequity comes from. Whether

perceived or real, that is the perception in the community.

Unlike many Members in the House, I have already had to sit through a public consultation meeting about one of our local schools, and, from that experience, I can tell you that it was quite clear what people's perception is. They feel that there is an unequal balance in how those two sectors are treated.

I accept the Minister's assurance about the viability audit. However, I have a difficulty with it, because two schools in my locality face closure, and yet neither of them came under the viability audit. That makes me wonder how far the boards will take the viability audit. Will there be equity of treatment across the board?

There is genuine concern that that will not be the case.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Member for giving way. Can he clarify what he means by:

"equity of treatment between the controlled and maintained sectors."?

Does he mean that he wants exactly the same criteria to be applied to all sectors and that there would be no possibility of one sector or the other being able to subsidise its own schools when they should be closed?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute added to his time.

Mr Craig: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Member, quite rightly, outlines the fear in the controlled sector that schools in other sectors will be subsidised that, quite frankly, will not meet the viability criteria that the Minister outlined. I ask the Minister to keep a very close eye on that. That is why my party tabled its amendment. It is not that we advocate a sectarian headcount. We agree with the Minister on viability. We are just looking for fairness.

I declare an interest in rural schools because both my children were educated in a rural school in Annahilt. Every Member who spoke in the debate outlined the importance of rural schools to their communities. That is my experience. The school is the heart of a community; the community builds itself around the school. When schools are taken out of a community, it tends, in many ways, to dissipate; it does not have a base around which to centralise itself. In that regard, I understand from where the motion

comes. How do we take that into account when we look at small communities? We need to look at that.

The other great difficulty that I have noticed is that when schools are closed, especially in rural areas and even in urban areas, a huge transport problem is created, which, unfortunately, like many things in Northern Ireland, will not go away. It will increase with each and every school closure in the Province. All those issues need to be looked at while the viability audit goes ahead. It is important, at the end of the day, to look at the impact that any closure has on its local community.

I agree with the Minister with regard to educational attainment in schools: it needs to be high, good and delivering for the community. However, when all those criteria are met, I, like many others around the Chamber, share the concern that it will come down to a headcount — nothing more, nothing less. I have witnessed that in my own constituency. I appeal to the Minister to keep an eye on what criteria are used.

Ms Lo: Obviously, I support my party's amendment. The Alliance Party wants to see some 20% of children in integrated or shared education by 2020. Our amendment aims to save schools through the use of integrated and shared education.

My party had reservations about the DUP amendment; we were certainly concerned about its wording. Although it advocates equity between the maintained and controlled sectors, it does not mention others, such as integrated and Irish-medium. However, Mr Craig and Miss McIlveen explained that their party's amendment does not advocate a sectarian headcount. My party, therefore, supports the amendment. We were concerned that we were talking about just two sectors, as that could lead to a maintained school being closed in return for the closure of a controlled one. We were concerned that that could lead to us perpetuating segregation along the lines of being equal but separate. However, we have listened to Members' comments and are content to support the motion and the DUP amendment.

I will comment briefly on points that are relevant to our amendment. Conall McDevitt mentioned a federation of two or three schools as a new concept. That is very much aligned to integrated and shared education, and we really need to invest in thinking about and taking action on it.

Miss McIlveen said that the issue is not just about a sectarian headcount. However, she is obviously concerned that the two sectors are being treated differently and that controlled schools are bearing the brunt of closures. She also said that the DUP wants a single education system that does not favour one sector over another.

Daithí McKay mentioned the school on Rathlin Island and the good example of controlled and maintained schools amalgamating and the sky not falling down. We need to think further and wider rather than simply continuing to talk about segregated schooling.

Mr McNarry mentioned the hit list of schools for closure and the fact that small rural schools are being targeted. I can understand the concern of those schools.

Mervyn Storey also mentioned federation, and he questioned its legal status and whether it is workable. He also referred to issues about the workings and processes of the CCMS.

Ms Boyle said that she supported the amalgamation of schools and that better co-operation and collaboration will improve school standards. I very much agree with that.

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

Ms Lo: The Minister said that quality of education should be at the heart of the matter.

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

Ms Lo: I support that, and I agree that he should consider the issue on the basis of need rather than creed.

Mr Byrne: A debate on rural schools is important and timely. Most of the debate has been about primary schools. In rural areas, the local primary school still goes to the heart of the local community, as other Members stated. The rural school represents the present and future well-being of any community. Schools and their future are crucial for many constituencies and communities, not least in West Tyrone.

I make no apologies for the fact that I have the list of the 42 schools that currently have fewer than 100 pupils. It strikes fear into the minds of principals, parents and pupils, but we have to be mature enough to have a rational debate about the issue. The current proposed criteria from

the Department could mean the closure of up to 42 of those schools. Let us hope it does not.

I welcome the Minister's clarification that the numbers game is not the only issue in town. A concerted threat to the future of rural communities because of the threat of the closure of rural schools could be very damaging. This is a new Assembly with a new mandate. It would be terrible if, during this mandate, we decimated the schools estate.

4.45 pm

I am delighted that the motion is being debated because, as I said, this is potentially the most significant issue to be dealt with by the Assembly and the Executive. People should be aware that the future of our rural communities could be determined by how this issue is handled over the coming months and years. How we handle the matter is the real issue to be dealt with. People should be aware that the Department of Education needs to be sensitive and mature in handling the issue, which is now more vital than ever in determining the future of our primary education.

Throughout the debate, emphases have been placed on a number of themes. One such theme was that the primary school is at the heart of the local community, particularly in rural villages. The primary school represents the heartbeat of our communities. I think it was Mr Storey who mentioned Pomeroy. There are two primary schools there: a controlled school and a Catholic school. The future of those two schools is obviously in question if the numbers criterion is the primary one to be used.

The proposer of our motion, Conall McDevitt, clearly outlined the need for real discussions at a local level. That may require an outcome of some sort of federation, collaboration and co-operation among existing primary schools.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he admit that the difficulty that we have had historically is that, whenever there has been an attempt at cross-community work, amalgamations or discussions, the CCMS was the problem? The Member has only to go back to the issues of how the CCMS and the bishops interacted with the integrated sector: they would not allow Roman Catholic priests to go into integrated schools because they did not recognise them at that stage. Those are the

sort of problems that we will come up against. We must be honest about this debate.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Member's comments, but I think that the key issue is that the Northern Ireland education system is very fragmented. We have the CCMS, the controlled sector, the education and library boards, the Department, the Irish-medium sector and the integrated sector. There is a need for real co-operation, and somebody has to take the lead. I hope that the Department of Education and the Minister will lead on this issue. Until recently, the Department has been slow in providing the required leadership. We have only to look at the debacle over the Education and Skills Authority to see that there is a great deal of indifference and a reluctance to come to a conclusion that would benefit the overall administration of education. Now we are getting to the heart of the matter: the delivery of education in schools. That current fragmentation is the issue that has to be dealt with, and it will require co-operation among all the stakeholders. I concede that some sectors in some areas seem to be in the lead position. We cannot afford the luxury of having any individual sector in any particular locality being in the lead position in future.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that one small step that his party could take to improve falling numbers in rural schools would be to amend PPS 21 to allow non-farming families to build houses in rural areas, thus giving people a chance to remain in their local area and allowing their children to go to school? Will he also encourage the Minister to do more on the issue? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Byrne: I am totally in favour of rural development and the building of new homes in rural areas. However, if we do away with the schools, there will not be the same demand for rural housing. That is the kernel of the issue. The entire future of rural communities has been pre-determined and, indeed, will be determined by the continued existence of those rural schools. If they go, the communities will feel that there is no future in those areas.

Talk to any young couple or parents: they want to know that a local school is available to them. A primary school is about providing a local service. People do not want to be bussed eight or 10 miles to a primary school. They want to be able to leave their child at a primary school

close to where they live. That is why this issue is so crucial.

Mr McKay: Will the Member give way?

Mr Byrne: I have given way twice already. I am concerned that Sinn Féin people are so concerned about the hit lists of schools and what 'The Down Recorder' and other papers have written about.

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for giving way. I notice that he thanked the Minister for clarifying a few issues in respect of the criteria. Did the Member not take the time to read the policy? That information is included at the back. If he had actually read the policy, those would have been clarified for him.

Mr Byrne: I accept Mr McKay's comment. However, I have been involved in primary education, secondary education, further education and higher education, so I have a little knowledge of the subject.

The debate has been very constructive. I welcome the fact that two amendments have been tabled that add to the breadth and relevance of the education debate. Genuine concerns have been expressed by different parties and different Members. People want equity in the system. They want a degree of fairness. They want to ensure that there is no predetermined hit list of schools. A number of Members referred to the fact that some schools are already up for discussions about closure. Where is the audit of the determination of those schools? It appears that some schools are already being put into the mix for discussions about closure.

We must have an area-based-analysis approach to educational provision and primary schools in the future. Given that enrolment numbers are dropping, a local area-based approach is crucial. No individual sector must be able to determine the future of its school and area without the cognisance of the rest of the community and the other educational sectors in that area.

It will be very delicate. I fully understand what some Members have said about faith-based schools. People want an assurance that faith-based approaches in education will be protected in some way in any future schools policy. That goes to the kernel and the heart of what the DUP has said, for example. I am concerned that Sinn Féin people are so annoyed that

there has been so much discussion about this topic already. I do not think that we should be concerned about it. We should be content that a real debate is going on.

The debate has started, and it is very important that we conclude it in a way that demonstrates to the wider public that we will take a comprehensive approach to the issue this time and that no individual sector will get a priority over another sector. I am pleased with the debate; some very good points were made. I am pleased that the two amendments largely add to our motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before putting the question on amendment No 1, I remind Members that, if amendment No 1 is made, the Question on amendment No 2 may still be put.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and negatived.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the potential impact of the statement by the Minister of Education on 26 September 2011, particularly on the future of smaller rural schools; notes that schools are at the heart of rural communities; further notes the particular access requirements of rural communities to education; and calls on the Minister of Education to ensure that decisions on the future of rural schools are fully measured against rural standards and proofing and that there is equity of treatment between the controlled and maintained sectors.

Adjourned at 4.55pm.



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