
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

December Fisheries Council Meeting

Monday 14 January 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill

Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill has received Royal Assent. The Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Act Northern Ireland 2007 became law on 14 December 2007.

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement regarding the outcome of the December Fisheries Council meeting.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement about the outcome of the Fisheries Council meeting that was held in Brussels on 18 and 19 December to determine the fishing opportunities for our local fleet for 2008.

Members will be aware that the Fisheries Council meets each December to reach agreement on the fishing opportunities for the following year. The outcome of that meeting is a detailed regulation that sets the total allowable catches (TACs), representing the maximum quantities of fish that can be caught from specific stocks in different sea areas in accordance with the management objectives.

As well as TACs and quotas, the regulation details the number of days that vessels may spend at sea. The overarching concern is to ensure that a system of fisheries management is in place to ensure that there are sufficient stocks from which everyone can fish in the years to come.

The December council meeting represents the end of a long process involving engagement between the European Commission and member states at official and ministerial level. The process begins with the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), which compiles scientific evidence on the state of fish stocks from many different sources. Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) scientists contribute to that body of knowledge from the research on the Irish Sea that is carried out annually.

ICES makes recommendations to the European Commission on the TACs for more than 100 stocks, which are then considered by the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF). STECF comprises national experts, representatives from the fishing industry and other stakeholders.

Key negotiations also take place with non-EU countries, such as Norway, that have an interest in the same fishing grounds or stocks. Throughout the process, member states make representations to the Commission and submit technical papers to support the case that they are making on behalf of their fishing industries.

In the lead-up to the December council meeting, Fisheries Ministers Jonathan Shaw, Richard Lochhead and I attended two meetings with Commissioner Borg to

brief him on the key issues that are facing our fishermen and our priorities for the December council meeting. During those meetings, I was able to press the case for an increase in the Irish Sea haddock quota and for maintaining TAC levels on other stocks that are important to our fishermen. The delegation also presented strong arguments against draconian cuts in the days that may be fished and presented alternative proposals that it considered would better meet fisheries management objectives without the adverse impacts that blunt across-the-board cuts would bring on the industry.

I believe that those meetings played an important part in shaping the Commission's final proposals, which were further refined through negotiation at the Council of Ministers. In the four months leading up to the December council meeting, my officials worked closely with their counterparts to assemble evidence, to agree priorities and the approach to the negotiations. I also met my fellow Fisheries Ministers on a number of occasions to confirm our negotiating priorities in the light of emerging information that ensured that the issues facing our fishing industry were heard and understood. During that time, there was a series of meetings with fishing industry representatives in order to take their views and to explain our approach. The priority areas identified for the local industry were agreed with them, and I had several helpful discussions with the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development in the lead-up to the council meeting. The Committee also met Commissioner Borg in order to support the case that I was proposing. Committee members heard from the Commissioner at first hand his determination to restrict fishing effort on vulnerable cod stocks.

I was particularly delighted that we were able to meet my fellow Fisheries Minister, Mary Coughlan TD, in the run-up to the December negotiations, when we were able to discuss areas of common interest.

The shopping list assembled by Jonathan Shaw, Richard Lochhead and I was formidable, and it was more extensive than those from other member states. The key issue for us was to resist the blunt cuts that had been proposed by the Commission on the number of days that can be fished by vessels in areas affected by the Commission's cod-recovery zone. As I mentioned earlier, we wanted the Commission to adopt a different, more focused approach that would better protect vulnerable stocks and provide incentives for the industry to engage in responsible fishing practices. That was a tough battle, and the Commission was determined to reduce the effort on cod to help to rebuild stocks. However, the Commission was convinced by our arguments that its proposed 25% cuts in days at sea for white-fish and prawn vessels operating in the Irish Sea were unjustified, and it has finally proposed cuts of 18% for white-fish vessels and 10% for prawn

vessels. That was accepted as part of the wider package of fishing opportunities.

It is important that Members understand that our fleet will not necessarily be restricted by the 10% and 18% cuts, which would result in the prawn fleet having 184 days at sea and the white-fish vessels having either 146 days or 174 days at sea, depending on the fishing gear deployed. Over 95% of our fleet targets prawns, fishing mainly in the Irish Sea, and they catch other species as a by-catch. However, at individual vessel level, their impact on cod stock is minimal.

Under the rules contained in the 2008 TAC and Quotas Regulation, vessels that have a track record for landing less than 5% cod can get 204 days at sea, and those that land less than 5% cod, sole and plaice can get 280 days at sea. For vessels that do not have a track record, there is an opportunity to participate in initiatives involving on-board observers, which would lead to the provision of similar days-at-sea allowances for them. The majority of vessels that fish for prawns will be able to take advantage of one of those provisions. That means that, if they choose to take advantage of the provisions, they will not suffer any loss of days, compared with 2007. Furthermore, those vessels that are involved in the Irish Sea data enhancement project could gain up to 12 further days from taking part in the project.

We also successfully negotiated provisions for managing days differently, and derogations for discard-reduction and cod-avoidance plans, which would also enable vessels to obtain extra days.

The fleet does not take up the full number of days that are available to it. That means that the most active vessels are still able to transfer in days sufficient for their needs from less-active vessels.

I wish to emphasise that the headline cuts in days do not represent the full story. There are other choices for our fishermen that allow them to fully fish the quota that is available to them. We successfully minimised the broad cuts that were proposed by the Commission and secured agreement for a system that provided appropriate incentives for fishermen. My officials will be discussing with the industry how the new provisions on days at sea can best be utilised by the local fleet.

I turn to the key stocks that are fished by our fishermen. There was a rollover for the prawn quota, which is by far the most important fishery for us. I secured a 5% increase in the haddock quota, in the face of an initial Commission proposal for a 15% cut. That is a lesser increase than I and the industry had hoped for. The Commission was very reluctant to budge from its initial proposal, only agreeing the 5% increase very late in the negotiations. Right until the final moments of those negotiations, we pressed the Commission for a larger increase, but it would not agree.

I also managed to get the Commission to agree to bring forward a proposal next year to establish a separate haddock TAC for the Irish Sea. Until now, the Irish Sea area has been part of a much wider management area, which includes the Celtic Sea and Atlantic waters on the west coast of Ireland. That approach will ensure that the TAC for the Irish Sea that is fished by our industry will better reflect the biological structure of those stocks, and not be influenced by changes in the wider area 7.

The Commission has also proposed an 8% cut in the TAC for Irish Sea herring, and a 6% reduction for plaice. We successfully argued for a rollover in the TAC for both stocks, and for the herring fishery in the Clyde area, which is fished mainly by vessels from the North. We have also secured an acknowledgement from the Commission that there is a strong case for the removal of the seasonal closure of the herring fishery on the Douglas Bank spawning grounds, east of the Isle of Man, once the formal advisory processes have been completed. The industry here has sought that measure for some time.

There have been particular concerns about the demise of cod stocks in the Irish Sea. Against a background of scientific evidence recommending a zero catch, the Commission was determined to see through a 25% cut in the quota. However, that was limited to an 18% cut. I pressed for a smaller reduction, but the Commission would not agree, on account of the scientific advice. There has been a fair amount of media attention on that species, and some commentators have either been misinformed, or have misreported the facts on the council results.

In 2007, our share of the Irish Sea cod TAC was 421 tons and, following the December council, that has been cut by 18% to 345 tons for 2008. The cod available to our fishermen for 2008 will also be increased through post-council swaps and the unused quota that has been banked from 2007. For 2008, there will be at least 495 tons of cod quota available: 345 tons from the council, augmented by 150 tons in post-council swaps, which I authorised, plus whatever cod can be banked from 2007. Our white-fish vessels had, until Christmas 2007, caught approximately 420 tons. I am, therefore, satisfied that the cod quota available for our industry in 2008 is more than was caught in 2007.

I am grateful for this opportunity to explain to the Assembly how the December council has affected fishing opportunities for our fleet in 2008. It is important to realise that this process is a negotiation that involves many member states, which have differing and sometimes contradictory priorities. The Commission's overriding concern is to ensure that the fish resources that are available to member states are fished in a way that is sustainable, while minimising the impact that fishing has on the wider marine environment. I share

that objective, and I wish to ensure that the fisheries for which I am responsible continue to be managed in a sustainable way.

Given the nature of the negotiations, whereby the outcome is determined by member states reaching a consensus with the Commission, I am satisfied that — in the circumstances prevailing in Brussels in December — I obtained the best possible deal for our fishing industry. That has involved a lot of hard work. I and my officials tried to be open and transparent in how we prepared for the negotiations.

I wish to thank the industry for the part that it has played. It is important that we build on the progress that has been made, and that we begin now the process of putting together the best case that we can for the 2008 negotiations.

Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

12.15 pm

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Elliott): At this stage, I want to put on record my thanks to the Minister for bringing forward the statement on the fishing industry. However, on behalf of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I have to say, in the absence of the Chairperson, that the Committee does not share the same optimism about that announcement and the EU decision as the Minister and her officials appear to do. The Committee does not believe that it represents the best possible deal that could have been reached — a view shared by the fishing industry.

Is the Minister suggesting that she and her Department are prepared to sacrifice the white-fish industry in Northern Ireland in order to achieve that agreement? Will she accept that, following the Irish Republic's refusal to swap back to the same levels as last year, there is, in fact, a 33% reduction in the amount of cod available to our fleet, as opposed to that being caught?

Ms Gildernew: The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development asks whether I am prepared to sacrifice the white-fish industry. The short answer to that is no. However, the reality is — and we have to work with the reality — that 95% of the industry either catches or processes prawns. There are only two white-fish vessels. It must be understood that we have to protect the industry as a whole and that we have to work as best we can. We were faced with scientific evidence that suggested a zero catch in cod. We resisted a 25% cut in white fish and got it down to 18%, which applies right around these islands. There is no scientific evidence of cod recovery in the Irish Sea. That is the reality with which we must deal.

With regard to the 33% reduction referred to by the Member, it is necessary to compare like with like. The

Hague Preference, which is what he is talking about, was also invoked last year and in previous years by the Twenty-six Counties. It was also brought in this year by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) Minister. The quotas, the days at sea and the environmental aspects — for example, the Irish Sea data enhancement project — that we achieved represent a very good deal for our white-fish vessels, considering the scientific evidence. It is also a good deal for the majority of our industry.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister accept that if that is the best possible deal, heaven help our fishing industry when she comes back with a bad deal? Does she accept that the fishing industry in County Down is suffering death by a thousand cuts? She talked about the deal. Let us examine that deal. Prawn days are down by 10% to 184 days. Three years ago, that was 264 days. That is what is happening in the industry. The figure for white fish is down by 18%. The TAC for cod is down by 33%. Will the Minister accept that one of the reasons behind that is the selfish approach by her Irish counterpart, who refused to swap back the tonnage that was given up by Northern Ireland's fishermen? What did she do apart from cosying up to her counterpart in the Irish Republic —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to please come to the question.

Mr Wells: — to stop that happening?

Ms Gildernew: I am not sure what I am supposed to say. I did not hear a question in there. Does the Member want to ask a question? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind Members that there has already been a ministerial statement. It is important that we now have questions to the Minister about that statement.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Given the very poor state of cod stocks in the Irish Sea, is it reasonable for the European Union to seek such large cuts?

Ms Gildernew: The main cod spawning grounds in the Irish Sea are protected from direct fishing by the spring closure. The current cod TAC for the Irish Sea is only 8% of the level that it was 20 years ago. That level mainly permits the landing of small by-catches of cod from the prawn fleet. A zero catch level would simply result in small by-catches being discarded.

Although by-catch levels are low, we are nevertheless continuing to conduct research, with the industry's help, to identify selective gear that will help us to reduce cod-by-catch levels even further. However, as I have already pointed out, there is not yet the scientific evidence for increasing the cod quota. We shall work with scientific experts, and with the fishing industry, to

see how we might play a responsible role in the management of our fishing stocks and fishing efforts.

Mr P J Bradley: I, too, thank the Minister for her statement. In it, she said that it was a tough battle to resist cuts, and I imagine that it was. Something good that came from the negotiations is the 5% increase in haddock quotas. There could easily have been a 15% cut, so that news is to be welcomed. However, as a South Down representative, I have difficulty in accepting all the achievements that the Minister claims. Today's statement is similar to the press release that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development issued on 19 December 2007. It was not her own wording — it was worded for her — but its headline read:

“Gildernew delivers fishing industry priorities”.

In that press release, describing the fishermen, the Minister said:

“their needs have been heard and met.”

Having spoken to them since the negotiations concluded, I did not find that to be the view among trawlermen. I ask the Minister a simple question: will she please explain why Northern Ireland's fishermen, and their organisations, express completely different views to hers on the outcome of the talks?

Ms Gildernew: The fishing industry's views very much formed part of our preparations for the December Fisheries Council negotiations. Indeed, its representatives were in attendance in Brussels. Perhaps this was the first time that a Minister had done this, but I met with representatives of our industry during part of the negotiations. I left the Commission building to brief them on what had been discussed up to that point. Therefore, we were working hand in hand with the industry in order to agree our priorities. We knew what those priorities were going in, and those priorities had been agreed.

We also knew what the Commission's likely approach would be, and that we would not simply get everything that we wanted. However, we kept the industry fully apprised of the situation. Telephone calls were made through the night, and a meeting was held early the next morning, after the second compromise had been reached. How the fishing industry chooses to report the negotiations is entirely up to it — I cannot influence what the industry says. I will be meeting with the fishing industry again, because this is an ongoing situation, and we will want to assess our priorities for the 2008 meeting of the Fisheries Council. I also want to hold a pre-emptive meeting with Commissioner Borg in the coming weeks on this year's negotiations.

We asked for what the industry had requested, but we knew that we would not achieve all our aims. A difficulty arises in negotiations when other member states agree to a compromise position, and negotiating currency diminishes as more member states agree that they can live with the Commission's proposals. That is

what happened. Therefore, we were never going to get absolutely everything that we wanted, but we got the best deal that we possibly could, and we have explained that to the industry. We got the absolute best deal that we could for it. Our fishermen can catch as much cod, and more, than they caught in 2007. Ninety-five per cent of our fleet fish for prawns, and we have achieved a rollover in our prawn quotas. Moreover, as the Member has pointed out, the Commission was looking for a 15% reduction in quotas for haddock, which we know is extremely important to Kilkeel, but, in getting a 5% increase in our haddock stock, we overturned that by 20%. Overall, we have fought very hard for the fishing industry, with which we have worked throughout this long and protracted process.

Mr Shannon: Undoubtedly, the Minister will be aware that the fishing industry and its representative organisations are very unhappy with the outcome of the December Fisheries Council meeting in Brussels. The reduction in quotas and in the number of days at sea that our fleet may spend strikes a blow to the heart of the fishing industry and puts a question mark over the industry's viability, not to mention its future.

Some time ago, the Minister, in reply to a question from me, stated that she would be a champion for the fishing industry. Will she, therefore, explain why Scotland got a better deal in the negotiations than Northern Ireland? Scottish fishermen were granted more days at sea than their Northern Ireland counterparts. Scotland also achieved better fish quotas than we did. Will the Minister explain what went wrong at the Fisheries Council meeting in Brussels? More importantly, what help can she give to our fishing industry and our fishing fleet, in particular the white-fish fleet?

Will the Minister consider tie-up aid as one solution to a very serious problem?

I ask my questions because the future of fishing is at stake.

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Member for his questions, and hope that I can cover all of them. The Scottish quota that he mentioned is primarily North Sea cod. The west of Scotland TAC and quota on herring, haddock, prawn, and so on is the same as Northern Ireland's; therefore, by and large, Scotland's quotas and TACs are the same as ours. There is, however, a very strong cod-recovery scientific-evidence base for the North Sea, where the cuts have not been as draconian and difficult to live with. Although there is scientific evidence to support a cod-recovery plan in the North Sea, the Commission nevertheless made a reduction; however, that was less — 10% instead of 18%.

We deal with scientific realities and we must understand that scientists are there to ensure that stocks are not over-fished to the point where there is no more cod to catch. We must manage sensibly, and consider the

marine environment. I take the Member's point, however; the fishing industry is in a very difficult position. I have seen, and heard about at first hand, some of the pressures, and not all of those concern TACs and quotas. For example, the high cost of fuel is one pressure, and the Department is considering what can be done in that regard by the European Fisheries Fund.

The Member mentioned transitional aid. That was not paid in 2006-07, because it was found to be unjustifiable on economic grounds. However, I am prepared to ask officials to determine whether anything can be done about that. At this stage, I cannot give the Member a straight answer.

He is correct that I fight very hard for the fishing industry. I have made the point strongly at every meeting with the European Commission and with the presidency of the EU Council that our fishing industry is vital, not only economically but socially and culturally, and that we must find a way to keep it in business. It concerns me that scientific evidence, and the way that the fishing industry is going, indicate that, eventually, we will come to a point where the industry is no longer viable. I work hard to ensure that we do not reach that point and that we continue to crawl our way back up the line. I am committed to our fishing industry and to the people who work day and daily on our seas, and who often take their lives in their hands. I am very sympathetic to the fishing industry and the pressures on it, and I want to do all that I can to help.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, Cheann Comhairle. Tugaim mo chéad buíochas don Aire as a ráiteas.

I thank the Minister for her statement. What assistance will she provide to the fleet in cutting fuel costs?

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Member for his question. Members will be aware that, last year, the European Commission confirmed that membership subsidy of the cost of fuel constituted operating aid, or state aid, and is, therefore, incompatible with the treaty. However, the new European Fisheries Fund affords opportunities to the fishing industry to become energy efficient, through such measures as grant aid to support the purchase of more fuel-efficient engines, thereby reducing fuel costs. The Department will consult stakeholders in March on an operational programme for the fund's implementation here, and I hope that the purchase of such engines can be supported.

Mrs I Robinson: I have several points to put to the Minister. Over the years, the Northern Ireland fishing fleet was honourable in the tie-up scheme to protect the fishing stocks and encourage improvement. If we are to believe all that the scientists have indicated, why is there now no scientific evidence to show that that helped the depleted fishing stocks?

Secondly — and my colleague touched on the matter — will the Minister tell me how she intends to assist our fishermen financially?

12.30 pm

When the fishermen reach the meagre quotas, they will spend most of the year tied up, despite having to pay for the maintenance of their boats and their mortgages and despite having children to feed. Those payments must be made all year round, not just on the meagre days that have been granted out of the horse-trading — or fish-trading, if I might use that phrase — that took place in Europe.

Ms Gildernew: The industry has worked well with us in the past in attempting to get the stocks back to where we want them to be, and I hope that that good work will continue. The tie-up aid that the Member mentioned was paid in 2004-05; however, it has not been paid since, because the economic grounds to do so have not existed.

I have a great deal of sympathy with the socio-economic situation of fishermen; I have heard about it first-hand and, indeed, received correspondence from the Member about the pressures that our fishing industry faces. There are measures in the European fisheries fund that allow for diversification, if that is what is felt to be necessary. There will be consultation on those matters, and we will be glad to hear the Member's views on how best to help fishing families to get out of this difficult situation.

The Member is right to say that pressures exist, and I accept that it is becoming increasingly difficult to make a living out of fishing. I want to find ways to enhance fishermen's overall profitability. We must remember that we should not confuse matters: for example, the prawn industry accounts for 95% of the overall industry for both processing and catch. We have over 100 prawn boats, but two cod boats, and although we are working hard on behalf of the entire industry, we must remember those realities. Therefore, we will consider all the points that we can, and, as I said to the Member's colleague, I will ask officials to examine whether transitional aid can be applied. I am not closing my mind to any suggestion that may help the industry.

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

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for her statement. Does she agree that the Assembly needs to make fishermen in Northern Ireland a priority? Does she also agree that the way in which the negotiations take place in Europe must be changed fundamentally in order to end the current annual spectacle of last-minute bargaining? If so, what will she do to bring about that situation?

Ms Gildernew: In the overall scheme of things, it is a bit strange that the December Fisheries Council always

meets so close to Christmas. We were worried about inclement weather, and at the meetings that were held the year before last, there were some difficulties about people getting back in time for Christmas. However, if the Fisheries Council were to meet in a different format, we would never get agreement. That is because everybody is concerned about their respective fishing industries and how their overall economic climates will be affected. It is difficult enough as it is to get agreement, but if the meetings were conducted in any other way, it might never be reached. Therefore, I am not sure whether there is any appetite in the Commission to change how the negotiations are carried out.

However, I assure the Member that we did not leave everything to the last minute. We had a series of meetings, including two with Commissioner Borg in advance of the Fisheries Council meeting, and along with representatives from England and Scotland, we held meetings about priorities. We also had meetings with industry representatives on priorities, and I visited fishing ports and went on the *Corystes*, which is a ship that is used for scientific research. Therefore, a huge amount of work was done before the December Fisheries Council meeting occurred.

We must look at the situation in context. The fisheries sector is one part of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and, as I have said already, it is an important part. As the Member is only too well aware, pressures exist in other sectors — for example, the red meat industry. Therefore, I must manage my time and effort to ascertain how to address the fisheries situation. I have committed myself to going back to Brussels in the next weeks to meet again with Commissioner Borg, but I must also bear in mind that I have meetings to attend with Mariann Fischer Boel, the Commissioner who deals with agriculture and rural development. We must continue to try to punch above our weight to ensure that we get the best deal not just for our fishermen, but for our farmers and our rural development community. I assure the Member that I am using all the time that is available to me to deal with the issue and that I am not leaving everything to the last minute. The series of meetings to ensure that we got the best deal that we could was very long and protracted, and the industry had been very much a priority throughout that process.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister and her team for their efforts. Credit is also due to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, which has made this matter its number-one priority. As someone from South Down who has met representatives of the industry, I believe that one of the biggest issues is the need to modernise the fleet, which consists of boats that are 30 or 40 years old, compared to vessels in the South,

which are between five and 10 years old. Will money and resources be made available to build a new fleet?

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Member for his question. I take his point — it was very welcome that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development met Commissioner Borg in Brussels, heard at first hand how difficult the negotiation was going to be, and heard the commissioner's views on protecting cod stocks. The Committee's support was very much appreciated. I believe that the best results are achieved when we work as a team to secure the best deal for the industry.

As for the purchase of new boats, the European Union ended grant aid for the construction of new vessels at the end of 2004, following a review of the European common fisheries policy in 2002. That move recognised that, at a time when there was overcapacity in fleets for the fishing opportunities available, it did not make sense to have grant aid to enable an increase in fishing effort.

The Council regulation governing the EFF specifically states that no EU aid can be granted for the construction of new fishing vessels. However, providing the vessel's fishing capacity is not increased, support will continue to be available under EFF to modernise vessels, to improve the quality of the catch, to improve working conditions on board, and to ensure the health and safety of the crew. Such modernisation may involve improvements such as engines that are more fuel efficient.

Obviously, health and safety and the welfare of fishermen is of great importance to me. As Members know, the Man Overboard scheme was launched in Ardglass before Christmas. We will do all that we can, and I reiterate that the consultation will be opening shortly, and I will welcome Members' views on how that money can best be spent to improve the lot of our fishing industry. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr T Clarke: The Minister suggested earlier that the proposed cuts were draconian — I agree with that. However, would the Minister agree that her Department is draconian, because, unlike other EU states, it lacks measures to financially assist fishermen?

Ms Gildernew: I am not sure what more to say about that matter. Yes, a 25% cut in the cod TAC was draconian, but we must consider the big picture. I again remind the House that we maintained an increase in the nephrops TAC, which was gained last year; we turned around a 15% proposed haddock reduction to a 5% increase; we achieved a move from 25% to 18% on cod; we achieved a change from an 8% cut to a rollover on herring; and achieved a similar figure on hake.

Although the headlines generally focus on cod, our industry is about so much more than cod, and the rest of the industry is equally important to me as cod. The cuts were draconian and we resisted them as best we could, but we were not the only member state to have

cuts imposed on us. All of the member states went to the Council with a shopping list of demands and, having sat through those negotiations, and heard those lists, I can assure Members that ours was substantially longer than all of the others.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's initiative in meeting other fisheries Ministers ahead of the Brussels Council meeting. Could the Minister provide further detail on the meeting with Minister Mary Coughlan TD? I hope that that meeting entailed a joint strategy aimed at protecting Irish national interests.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. I will be seeking opportunities to work on an all-island basis in order to maximise the opportunities for the fishing industry in Ireland, including ours. I regularly meet with Mary Coughlan to discuss issues of common interest in respect of a range of areas in agriculture, and I see our fishing industry in a similar light.

We have been particularly successful in securing a co-ordinated approach to our scientific research. Our research vessels work closely together. Although the bulk of the fleet in the South concentrates on the Atlantic coast, obviously we must work together on approaches to fishing in the Irish Sea. We will continue to do all that we can to maximise the opportunities that are available to our fleet.

Mr Irwin: The fishing industry will take cold comfort from the Minister's statement. She said that negotiations continued into the night and that other member states had agreed on their industries' needs. Is it not, therefore, the case that the Minister was left with the scraps from the table?

Ms Gildernew: No, that is not the case.

Mr McNarry: What implications does the Minister feel that the 18% reduction in the amount of white fish that can be caught in the Irish Sea will have for the hardship of fishermen, whose livelihoods depend on catching white fish? What comment will she make on the criticism of her negotiating skills in Brussels? That criticism does not support her view, which she has stated in the House today, that she secured the best possible deal — or even a good deal — for the industry.

Ms Gildernew: I have been in the job for a long time. Everyone gets criticised — the Member will understand that — therefore I cannot become too fixated on it. I must do my absolute best for the people who look to me for leadership, and that is what I am doing.

I reiterate the comments that I made in my statement: vessels that land less than 5% of cod can have 204 days at sea; those that land less than 5% of cod, sole and plaice can have 280 days. Environmental controls and initiatives, such as the Irish Sea data enhancement project, were worked out with the industry on how best

to get a fair deal for fishermen. However, it must be remembered that white-fish vessels, depending on the fishing gear that they deploy, now have either 146 days or 174 days at sea. That applies to two vessels. I did not examine the industry and decide that, because prawn fishing is a bigger part of the industry than cod fishing, I should, therefore, work harder for it. I worked hard for the entire industry right up until the last minute of negotiations. That is the approach that I have taken, and it is how I want to ensure the fishing industry's survival.

In 2008, 495 tons of cod will be available. However, by Christmas 2007, white-fish vessels had caught 420 tons of cod. Therefore, in 2008, a higher quota will be available to white-fish vessels than was caught in 2007. That must be considered alongside scientific evidence. We have secured the best possible deal that anyone could have.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. What are her objectives and priorities for the fishing industry in 2008?

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. My priorities for quotas in 2008 are to at least maintain the prawn quota at its current level and to seek a further, sustainable increase in the Irish Sea haddock quota. Achieving that will require a strong scientific case; therefore, it is vital that everyone works together to provide the evidence that is needed. Good participation in initiatives such as the data enhancement project and the provision of as much catch data as possible is absolutely essential. I hope that the industry will work with the Department in order to achieve that.

The number of days at sea will depend on the outcome of the European Commission's review of the cod recovery plan, which will be published later in 2008. My aim is to maintain existing fishing opportunities and, where there is scientific evidence, to push for increased opportunities. Although those are my priorities, I will work closely with the industry in order to ensure that its priorities are reflected in the Department's negotiations throughout 2008 until the Fisheries Council next meeting in December.

12.45 pm

Mr Burnside: There is probably no industry in the United Kingdom and Ireland that has been hurt more than the fishing industry has been hurt by the common fisheries policy. Since Sinn Féin is an anti-European party, will it commit itself to the United Kingdom's repatriation of its independence on fisheries policy?
[Laughter.]

A Member: You cannot look at your officials now, Minister.

Ms Gildernew: I am not looking at officials; that will tell the tale. It is for the United Kingdom to decide what it wants to do with its fisheries policy. I am interested in the Irish opportunities — in particular, for the fleet that currently fishes out of our fishing villages. If one looks at the ongoing history of fishing policy, one can see that other countries have not had the same burden on fishing opportunities that we have had over the years.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, that concludes questions to the Minister —

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will you ask the Speaker to review the Hansard report of how he dealt with the first question that I asked on this issue? He will note that I asked at least three specific questions in my contribution. Clearly, the Minister was afraid to answer any of those questions, because she feigned not to have heard any questions. The Speaker agreed with her, and she failed to answer any of those questions. There is no sense in having Ministers hiding behind not hearing, or not understanding, the question. Will you please ask the Speaker to review the Hansard report and to rule, as soon as possible, on how that issue was dealt with earlier this morning?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will certainly refer the matter to the Speaker, who was in the Chair at that particular time. Undoubtedly, the Speaker will respond to you in due course.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

The Working Time (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I beg to move

That the Working Time (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/340) be approved.

I seek the Assembly's approval for regulations to increase Northern Ireland workers' minimum annual leave entitlement from four weeks to 5·6 weeks. These regulations are subject to the confirmatory procedure as laid down in the parent legislation, the Work and Families (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. To continue to have effect, they must be approved by resolution of the Assembly within six months of their coming into operation. The regulations were made on 20 July 2007 and came into operation on 1 October 2007.

The increase in the statutory minimum entitlement will be phased in. By April 2009, it will equate to an extra eight days. The right to four weeks' paid annual leave was introduced by the Working Time Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1998. Since then, it has been recognised that some workers — particularly those who are low paid — are being required to include time off for bank and public holidays against their four-week annual leave entitlement. To address that matter, proposals were brought forward to increase the statutory minimum entitlement.

There are 10 bank and public holidays in Northern Ireland and eight in Great Britain. In 2006, my Department's first consultation on those proposals sought views on the potential benefits and impacts of the proposed increases, and the treatment of the additional two bank and public holidays in Northern Ireland. In 2007, a second consultation sought views on the draft legislation and on means for providing support and guidance. That consultation contained proposals for an increase of 10 days in Northern Ireland, which attracted criticism from a significant number of respondents, particularly those in the business community and those trading on a UK-wide basis.

The lack of robust impact data on the Northern Ireland proposals was another cause of concern. A UK-wide regulatory impact assessment estimated the cost to Great Britain of an additional eight days to be between £3·2 billion and £4·4 billion per annum.

That equates to an indicative cost of around £80 million to £110 million for Northern Ireland. Although we were included in the UK research, the sample sizes were too small to produce reliable data here. Also, there was no specific information on the effect of the additional two days on Northern Ireland businesses.

In light of the responses to the consultation exercises, and taking into consideration the lack of a robust regulatory impact assessment, I, with Executive agreement, decided to increase the statutory minimum entitlement for Northern Ireland workers by eight days. However, my Department will undertake further research on the impact of increasing the statutory minimum by a further two days and will engage with key stakeholders. Indeed, that process has already commenced.

The increase is being implemented in two phases: from 4 weeks to 4·8 weeks from October 2007, and from 4·8 weeks to 5·6 weeks from April 2009. The statutory entitlement will be capped at 28 days. To help businesses adjust to the new requirements — particularly in those areas most affected, such as the retail, care and hospitality sectors — the regulations allow for employers to make payment in lieu of the additional leave entitlement for a transitional period until 1 April 2009. However, from April 2009, workers must take their leave, as continuous “buy-out” arrangements would negate the intent and spirit of the law, which is to allow people a reasonable time away from the workplace.

The regulations also permit carry-over to the following leave year of some or all of the additional entitlement, where this is agreed by the employer and the worker, as long as four weeks' holiday leave is taken in the year.

My Department has produced guidance to assist both employers and workers. A dedicated web page has been designed, and an online calculator has been developed to help all those affected to work out their entitlement.

The increase in the statutory minimum leave entitlement is good news for an estimated 150,000 workers here, and it will particularly benefit the low paid, part-time workers, women and agency workers. It will help them to strike a better work-life balance and spend more time with family and friends. Good employers recognise that reasonable holiday provision is a key factor in recruiting and retaining staff and keeping them motivated. The increase will enable good employers that already offer 28 days or more to compete on a more level playing field.

I am most grateful to the Committee for Employment and Learning for its detailed scrutiny of the policy proposals and the regulations. At its meeting on 26 September 2007, the Committee recommended that they be approved by the Assembly.

I beg to move that the regulations be approved.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat. I rise on behalf of the Committee for Employment and Learning to support the motion, and I call on the Assembly to confirm the regulations. These regulations were on the Committee's agenda soon after

the return of devolution, and we considered them before summer recess last year, and again in September.

The Committee was briefed on the regulations by the Department on three occasions, and I take this opportunity to thank the Minister and his officials for their high level of consultation with the Committee on this important piece of subordinate legislation.

This was the first statutory rule subject to a confirmatory resolution to be considered by the Committee. The Committee agreed formally to support the confirming of these regulations at its meeting on 26 September 2007. The Minister has already outlined what these regulations will achieve; I will not repeat what he said. However, it is worth reinforcing a couple of key points.

This legislation will have a significant and positive impact on those local employees who are paid at a lower rate and who currently have the most disadvantageous terms and conditions. In many instances, those workers have been required to offset time taken for bank and public holidays against their annual leave entitlement. As the draft Budget and draft Programme for Government puts the future of the local economy under extensive scrutiny, it is vital that leave entitlement is considered and improved. People deserve and require appropriate leave arrangements, which should be seen as an integral part of a mature economy in which workers are afforded time to rest, refresh and spend time with their families and friends.

The regulations also recognise business needs by providing for “buy-out” — payment in lieu of the additional entitlement — in the transitional years 2007-08 and 2008-09. That should help employers to implement the new arrangements. However, it is important and appropriate that “buy-out” will not be permitted in future years. Were that permitted, there would always be a temptation to offer that option to employees, which would serve only to defeat the purpose of these important regulations.

I thank the Minister for giving the House an up-to-date briefing on the matter. I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: This is good news for approximately 150,000 workers in Northern Ireland. The Minister has spoken with commendable clarity on the detail of his proposals. I have no intention of regurgitating them, but some supporting points are worth making.

It sounds almost too good to be true that people’s holidays are going to be increased by eight days. It is something of a shock to many people that many employers were tempted to include statutory holidays in their employees’ holiday entitlement. This proposal is an attempt to level the playing field, not only for the workers, but for those employers that already give excellent holiday benefits.

It is worth pointing out that both the Labour Party in its 2005 manifesto, and Peter Hain, in a January 2007 announcement, said that something had to be done to

bring Northern Ireland up to the same level as the rest of the United Kingdom. The proposals that have been put forward differ slightly from that point of view, in that the Minister suggests increasing the number of holidays by eight, and not by 10 days. There are reasons for that, and I am gratified to hear that the Minister plans to keep the matter under review, in order to assess the impact of the extra two days. It was interesting that, during consultation, industry representatives pointed out some of the real practical difficulties posed by the two additional days that Northern Ireland enjoys as bank holidays, particularly for those companies that employ people on both sides of the Irish Sea, or for those that provide a mixed service. We must sort those issues out. There would be costs, such as for computer systems, if that arrangement were put in place.

Nevertheless, the Minister has pledged to keep the matter under review. I am sure, as he has said, that he will keep in mind the importance of ensuring that Northern Ireland remains competitive at all levels. It is important to ensure that our workers receive the holidays that they are entitled to, but we must keep an eye to our international competitiveness. With that in mind, and in comparison with other countries, it is worth stating that the Republic of Ireland will have 29 holidays, while Austria tops the league with 38 holidays, so there is still some room for manoeuvre, if that is what comes out.

I commend the Minister for the manner in which he proposed the motion and congratulate him for the excellent consultation and listening process that he brought to the entire exercise.

1.00 pm

Mr Attwood: I apologise for not being in the House to hear the Minister’s statement, but I was speaking at another meeting on the Stormont estate.

In one short statement, the Minister has arguably done as much to improve the lot of the working person in the North as any other Minister since the Assembly was set up. Measured against that standard, the Minister can be congratulated on a good day’s work. I welcome what he has said today, and I welcome the briefings that were provided to the Committee for Employment and Learning.

The announcement is timely, given that, tomorrow, Mr McLaughlin from Sinn Féin will introduce a motion on the pay, conditions and entitlements of agency workers. I am sure that that motion will get broad endorsement in the House, and I have no doubt that the Minister will reply to that tomorrow. It is timely to note the contrast between the lot of the agency worker and that of the permanent worker. Today’s announcement creates better conditions of employment for so many people in the North, when leave entitlement is considered.

I endorse Mr McCrea’s comments. This matter must be kept under review and monitored. A small body of employers in the North will feel that greater leave entitlements are more of a threat than an opportunity.

The small number of employers who may be somewhat hostile to this proposal must be monitored as best as possible and the Department must have a reporting framework to ensure that, especially over the next two years and in the early years thereafter, the new leave entitlement is claimed, and entitled to be claimed, by all.

Finally, I endorse the comments of the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning. She said that the test of the proposal is that the leave entitlement is improved. Over the next two years that standard of leave entitlement being approved must be reached. Employers who, without just cause or for some irregular reason, do not endorse this leave entitlement must be appropriately called to account.

Mr Spratt: I also endorse the comments made by the Chairperson of the Committee. I thank the Minister and the Department for the wide consultation that has taken place — including with the Committee, as the Chairperson said. On behalf of the DUP side of the House, I endorse everything that has been said in the debate. The Minister's announcement is good news for 150,000 employees in Northern Ireland. The increase in holiday entitlement and the protections afforded will help some of the most vulnerable people, including agency workers. From that perspective, the DUP fully supports what has been said.

I welcome the Minister's assurance that he will keep the whole process under continual review to ensure that it is properly implemented across the entire Province. I fully support the motion.

Sir Reg Empey: I am grateful to the Members who have contributed. Before the debate is closed, I have a couple of points of clarification in case there is any confusion. Although bank holidays will be included in the entitlement of 28 days, there never was and there will not be any requirement for people to take their leave on the days that are bank holidays.

That was one anxiety that people who work in the retail trade and in the caring professions expressed. However, there is no such requirement, because the employee and employer will decide between themselves when holidays are to be taken. There is no imposition on employers or workers to take holidays on particular days. Annual leave entitlement, incorporating statutory holidays, simply increases to 28 days.

Basil McCrea talked about the impact of the extra two days' holidays. The review process has already commenced, and my Department is in discussion with stakeholders. The statistical data and impact assessment for the UK as a whole were insufficiently detailed for Northern Ireland purposes, because the sample from which the data were taken was too small. The review will probably conclude by the autumn, after which my officials and I will be in a position to discuss its outworkings with the Committee. We realise that there are complications, but we were not satisfied that the information at our disposal was sufficiently robust to

allow us to make an informed decision. Therefore, a determination will probably be made towards the end of this year.

Mr Attwood rightly said that this is a good day for many workers. Members will debate working conditions for agency workers tomorrow. However, significant numbers of people work in sectors in which their holiday entitlements have been far less than those who work for many good employers, including those in the public sector. For example, everyone who works in this Building, including Members, benefits from a holiday entitlement of at least 28 days. By ensuring that there is a level playing field, many people are given new opportunities, particularly women who work while also coping with raising families.

We were cautious about including the choice to opt out in the legislation, because it could have been exploited and abused. However, as the Chairperson of the Committee has said, there is a transition period in order to allow employers time to adjust. People must understand that the legislation's objective is to allow people to spend more time away from the workplace.

Members have mentioned that we live in a competitive society and that our economy is under pressure. However, had we thought that regulations to reduce the amount of time that people have off work would make the economy more competitive, the Assembly would be having a different debate today.

I welcome the comments of the Committee's Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson. My Department tried to work with the Committee as a team on the regulations, because everyone in society must have cognisance of the issue. All Members are lobbied and pressured by various groups, and sometimes it is hard to stand back and make an objective decision. I think that we have managed to do that as far as was possible, and we have ensured that there has been as much of a consensus as was achievable.

I understand that no one wants to increase the burden on any business, but a work-life balance must be struck. Many people who become stressed end up taking time off sick. My Department is trying to deal with the problem of excessive sick absence, not least in the Civil Service, but improvements will not be achieved by giving people fewer holidays.

I have tried to respond to most of the points that Members have made. I thank Members for their contributions and the Committee for its co-operation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Working Time (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/340) be approved.

Health and Social Care Bill

Legislative Consent Motion

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of provisions of the Health and Social Care Bill dealing with the entering into of arrangements with the Care Quality Commission; regulation of health professions; the health in pregnancy grant (including provision for making such grant an excepted matter under the Northern Ireland Act 1998); and the abolition of the National Biological Standards Board.

The Health and Social Care Bill was introduced in Westminster on 15 November 2007 and deals with a number of issues arising from the White Paper 'Trust, Assurance and Safety — The Regulation of Health Professionals in the 21st Century'. I could have brought the legislation forward as an Assembly Bill, but I did not wish to miss the opportunity of having the legislation available at the earliest possible date.

The first key provision that the Bill proposes is the abolition of the National Biological Standards Board, which provides independent testing of medicines for the UK market, such as vaccines for the children's vaccination programme. In the last decade, Northern Ireland has not been significantly involved in the working of the body, but we contribute towards its funding by over £250,000 per annum. The functions will be transferred to the Health Protection Agency, which has a presence in Northern Ireland. It employs staff at the communicable disease surveillance centre, which is based at Belfast City Hospital and directed and funded by my Department.

The Bill will also legislate on a variety of regulatory issues affecting healthcare professionals in Northern Ireland. Those will include the appointment of an independent adjudicator to hear fitness-to-practice cases involving healthcare professionals; the amendment of the Health Act 1999 to provide for a majority of lay members on healthcare regulatory bodies; the adoption by healthcare regulatory bodies of the civil standard of proof in determining allegations of lack of fitness to practice; and the appointment by healthcare organisations of a responsible officer whose role will be to safeguard patients by identifying and handling issues of poor performance by doctors, liaising with the General Medical Council on possible fitness-to-practice cases, and making recommendations on the re-licensing of doctors.

The Bill also proposes to amend the constitution and functions of the Council for the Regulation of Health Care Professionals, a UK body that promotes best practice in the regulation of healthcare professionals.

With regard to pharmacy, in Great Britain, it has been decided to separate the regulatory and professional leadership function in favour of a general pharmaceutical

council for regulation and a college-like body for professional leadership. The Bill enables appropriate legislation to include Northern Ireland in the establishment of such a council. Although that would harmonise arrangements, not only across the profession but with other health professions that are already regulated on a UK-wide basis, I have not reached a decision yet on whether to adopt that approach.

The Bill will also establish for England a new single integrated independent health and adult social care body to be known as the care quality commission. There are proposals in the Bill for powers to enable Northern Ireland Ministers to enter into arrangements with the new single body.

1.15 pm

An equivalent body already exists in Northern Ireland — the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA), which was established in 2005. It is likely that our mutual regulation bodies will, occasionally, need to share advice or expertise, which is allowed for in the provision.

With the agreement of my Executive colleague, the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, the Bill allows for the introduction of a health-in-pregnancy grant, which is a single, one-off, payment of £190 to every expectant mother from the 25th week of pregnancy. The aim of the grant is to contribute towards an improved lifestyle and healthy diet during the final weeks of pregnancy. The grant will be introduced in April 2009.

The introduction of the legislation will help to provide safer and streamlined services to the public. High quality, responsive and safe health services are what the public demand and deserve. I ask the House to support the motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): As the Motion indicates, the Health and Social Care Bill, which is being debated in Westminster, contains four main provisions that relate to Northern Ireland and require the approval of the Assembly: the power to enter into arrangements with the care quality commission; provisions relating to the regulation of health professionals; proposals for the introduction of a new health-in-pregnancy grant; and the abolition of the National Biological Standards Board.

In October, officials from the Department came to the Committee to explain the relevant provisions of the Bill. They explained that, at that stage, the Bill had not been laid before Parliament and was, therefore, still a draft Bill and subject to change. The Committee is grateful to the officials who visited the Committee again last Thursday to brief members in more detail.

The main issue of interest — and of concern — to the Health Committee, and which has the potential to bring about the greatest change, is the regulation of healthcare professionals, with particular implications for Northern Ireland's pharmaceutical profession. The Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland, which is the main organisation that is likely to be directly affected by the proposal, has made representations to the Committee.

The proposals on the regulation of healthcare professionals were set out in the White Paper 'Trust, assurance and safety: the regulation of health professionals', which was published in February 2007. In drawing up those proposals, the Government identified a potential problem relating to pharmacy: the pharmaceutical profession is regulated by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain and the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland, which are separate. Unlike regulating bodies for the medical, nursing and allied health professions, those bodies have a regulatory function and a professional leadership function. The White Paper put forward the view that those functions should be separated, and that the provisions in the Bill would replace the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain with a general pharmaceutical council, which would deal with regulation, and a college-type body to deal with professional leadership.

As the Minister explained, the new general pharmaceutical council will not automatically take over the regulatory function of the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland. However, the provision in the Bill will give the Minister the power to hand over that function, should he so decide. The Committee fully understands that it could be difficult to defend the perceived conflict of interest for a single body that exists to uphold the public interest, but that has a self interest. That argument has led to the view that those two functions should be separated, as they are for professions such as nursing and medicine. However, it must be recognised that, for the past 80 years, pharmacists in Northern Ireland have been successfully regulated, and professionally represented, by the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland. There is a strong case for asking why the system needs to be fixed if it is not broken. Furthermore, the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland has argued to the Committee that if the proposal is enacted in Northern Ireland, there is a distinct possibility that it would not be able to continue with its representative role, meaning that the local professional voice of pharmacy could be lost.

The Minister has advised the society that he is strongly minded to adopt the approach of having a single regulatory body — the general pharmaceutical council — that will cover the profession throughout the United Kingdom. However, he has assured the Committee that he has not reached a final decision on that, and he has

also given an assurance that he will return to the Committee with his proposals. On that basis, the Committee is content to support the inclusion of an enabling provision in the Health and Social Care Bill.

The Bill also proposes the introduction of a health-in-pregnancy grant. Although the administration of that grant will be a matter for the Department for Social Development, its aim and purpose is a health matter. The grant will help pregnant women to meet the additional nutritional — and other — costs of maintaining a healthy lifestyle during pregnancy. I particularly welcome the requirement on pregnant women to seek health advice from a relevant professional in order that they may qualify for the grant. I hope that that will result in women receiving one-to-one tailored advice and support on their dietary and nutritional needs at such an important time in their lives. I support the motion.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and many of the sentiments that were outlined by the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. It is imperative that the Minister returns to the Health Committee and listens to what it has to say. He must also listen to the Pharmaceutical Society before he makes his decision, given that legislative consent for the Bill will have greater implications for that body than it will for any other.

The health-in-pregnancy grant will have a direct impact on the health of expectant mothers and their ability to concentrate on their aftercare, and I welcome that. There is an equality-impact issue in relation to the payments made to mothers-to-be, regardless of how many babies they are carrying, so I would like a caveat added, if possible. There is evidence that women who have multiple pregnancies are under more physical stress than those with fewer pregnancies. Indeed, such stress has a big impact on them.

The entitlement for pregnant women to contact health professionals and to avail themselves of their advice is also welcome. I am not suggesting that that entitlement is a form of buying in medical advice that should exist at the point of service, but pregnant women will benefit from such services as reflexology, aromatherapy and other forms of medical intervention that are required throughout pregnancy.

I would appreciate it if the legislation could be introduced here before April 2009. Like the Chairperson of the Health Committee, I look forward to the Health Minister returning to the Committee before making his decision regarding the Pharmaceutical Society. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCallister: Although most of the points have been covered, we broadly support the legislation, particularly the health-in-pregnancy grant, which the Chairperson of the Health Committee and Carál Ní

Chuilín mentioned. Will the Minister support the idea of keeping in Northern Ireland the registration of the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland? Will he also work closely with the society in drawing up new proposals and in bringing them to the Health Committee and the Assembly? Perhaps he will respond to those questions in his closing remarks. Those proposals would go a long way in finding a solution to the difficulties and issues that have been raised in the Committee and in the House.

Mr Gallagher: As a member of the Health Committee, I support the provisions of the Bill.

I share the concerns that have been raised about health professionals, particularly the Pharmaceutical Society, and the possible implications that the Bill's provisions will have for its future role, not least in its registration and regulatory functions.

Northern Ireland is now taking responsibility for its own affairs through the Assembly, and, in many cases, there are special circumstances that must be recognised. I represent a border constituency, and sometimes the needs of those who live in border areas lead to peculiar circumstances, which very often the Government at Westminster do not recognise. Therefore, it is important that, in order to reflect local needs and the peculiarities that sometimes face us in Northern Ireland, we receive an assurance that the local voice of the Pharmaceutical Society will be heard.

As the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety stressed, it is important that the Minister assures us that, before any further decisions are taken, professionals, the Committee and the British Medical Association (BMA), all of which still have some concerns about the Bill's provisions, will be consulted.

Mr Buchanan: As a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I support the motion, while reiterating the concerns that my fellow Committee members have highlighted.

I have some questions to put to the Minister for him to answer in his closing remarks. I recognise that the regulation of doctors and other healthcare staff in Northern Ireland should be the same as in Great Britain, because we cannot get into a situation in which doctors are under any greater or lesser obligation than their colleagues in hospitals across the water. However, although I have no intention of opposing the position that the Committee has adopted, the BMA has raised some legitimate concerns that require clarification.

Can the Minister tell the House the likely impact of a change from use of the present criminal standard to the civil standard of proof in fitness to practise cases, which is outlined in clause 104? We do not want to have doctors who are afraid to take decisions. Everyone knows that it is almost impossible to get doctors in the

United States to specialise in, for example, obstetrics or anaesthetics, because of the high levels of patient litigation.

I call on the Minister to inform the Assembly of how we can be assured that defensive medicine will not occur in Northern Ireland. Moreover, what input will our elected representatives have in the legislative process across the water?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): The Health and Social Care Bill includes a grant that will provide financial support to expectant mothers to help them to meet the higher costs, including dietary and other additional costs, of living a healthy lifestyle during their pregnancy. The Committee welcomes the introduction of the grant that will be awarded to every mother-to-be from week 29 of her pregnancy, particularly the fact that it will be paid regardless of income.

However, entitlement to the grant does require pregnant women to seek health advice from a health professional. That will surely be of benefit to the mother, as it will not only provide a financial incentive to seek health advice at the right time but will provide an excellent opportunity to inform expectant mothers of the importance of good nutrition during pregnancy. The health-in-pregnancy grant will take the form of a one-off payment of £190 to expectant mothers for every pregnancy, regardless of whether a single birth or multiple births are expected.

When the Committee was considering the proposed introduction of the grant, it considered information received from the Twins and Multiple Births Association (TAMBA).

It believes that the grant should be paid for each expectant child, rather than for each pregnancy. Research has shown that compared to single pregnancies, multiple-birth pregnancies have additional nutritional requirements and that consequently there are additional costs in achieving healthy weight gain.

1.30 pm

Research has also shown that expectant multiple-birth mothers not only need to gain more weight than expectant single mothers, they also need to gain weight at an earlier stage. Due to the increased risk of premature birth, more weight needs to be gained in the first trimester; therefore, not surprisingly, TAMBA raised some concern about the timing of the payment of the grant for multiple-birth pregnancies. It believes that the optimal time for any intervention is in the very early stages of pregnancy.

In conclusion, the Committee for Social Development supports the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Health and Social Care Bill that deal with the health and pregnancy grant but wishes to

highlight the concerns raised by TAMBA in relation to the needs of expectant multiple-birth mothers. It is hoped that that will be considered both by the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and by the Minister.

Mr Easton: I support the motion. Time does not permit me to deal comprehensively with all material concerns. Nonetheless, I wish to draw attention to several specific areas, particularly the welcome area of the pregnancy grant, which is aimed at promoting health in the latter stages of pregnancy, and the sensitive area of the integrity of the responsibilities of the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland.

It is essential that the promotion of health for women in the latter stages of pregnancy is not open to abuse, as the priority must be that expectant mothers can receive the benefit during the time when rising costs can impact on healthy living, and particularly on diet and nutrition. I commend the fact that the financial incentive is linked to receiving advice from a suitable, qualified health professional but I will be seeking reassurances from the Minister that the financial incentive can be appropriately ring-fenced for the purpose for which it is being designed.

The pharmaceutical industry is ever-developing, and it is imperative that we have local, effective regulation. Will the Minister assure us that the needs of the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland are treated with the appropriate degree of sensitivity and that further development in the area will be communicated to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety?

Mr McGimpsey: Several valuable points have been made, and I will attempt to respond to them. The first point relates to the grant of £190 which is payable at the twenty-fifth week of pregnancy and which aims to encourage a healthy lifestyle and diet. It does not infringe on other rights of mothers; for example, Sure Start, maternity grant, healthy start schemes or other state support. As Gregory Campbell said, it is not means tested and it is applicable to everyone.

Tom Buchanan referred to doctors. It is true that the civil standard of proof rather than the criminal standard of proof is applicable. The General Medical Council has already moved to that form of proof in so far as the criminal standard of proof requires people to be wholly convinced. The civil standard of proof is more appropriate. The standard adopted should be appropriate to ensure patient safety and public confidence in the system.

The stimulus for those measures was the Shipman Inquiry. Shipman was a GP, and it is estimated that he murdered around 300 of his patients. There were instances that would have pointed to his criminal activity had they been appreciated. Proof needs to be collected, and in Shipman's case evidence was available but was not recognised, seized or acted on.

Had they been, a large number of lives would have been saved. That is another reason why the standard of proof that is required in civil law is regarded as the appropriate way forward, rather than that required in criminal law, whereby facts must be wholly proven beyond all reasonable doubt.

Tommy Gallagher, John McCallister and Alex Easton each properly pointed out that pharmacies must act as local voices for local needs, and I strongly support that. Local pharmacies must belong to the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, but that does not preclude local leadership or representation. The Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland is concerned about those matters, and, for that reason, I have informed it that, although I will be empowered to by the proposed legislation, I will not proceed without having held discussions with the society about how to alleviate those concerns. I am also committed to discussions with the Royal Pharmaceutical of Great Britain in order to help to establish the proposed general pharmaceutical council, while ensuring that we retain a local voice and leadership. I will work on that and, in due course, report back to the Health Committee.

Alex Easton mentioned ring-fencing in respect of the health-in-pregnancy grant. It is difficult to envisage how that grant could be ring-fenced. When a grant is paid for a specific purpose, it is assumed that people are responsible for how they spend such money, and a £190 one-off grant, or anything like it, will by no means address the cost of a pregnancy. I believe that that is accepted. Such a grant is intended to encourage a healthy diet and lifestyle, which will have a positive impact on a baby — particularly as he or she grows up. Those are the reasons for the grant, and it is difficult to envisage how ring-fencing could be enforced, other than by providing advice.

Mrs Robinson also mentioned the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland's representations to the Committee and, as I said, I will return to the Committee on that point after I have spoken to the society.

I believe that I have covered the points that Members have raised, and I shall finish by asking for the support of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of provisions of the Health and Social Care Bill dealing with the entering into of arrangements with the Care Quality Commission; regulation of health professions; the health in pregnancy grant (including provision for making such grant an excepted matter under the Northern Ireland Act 1998); and the abolition of the National Biological Standards Board.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

All-Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People

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

Mr Beggs: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the work of Professor Heckman and Mark Greenberg on government investment with young children; urges the Executive to take note of the outcomes from this work, and to invest in early intervention and prevention; and calls on the Executive to protect, maintain and further develop the investment that has been made in children and young people, through Executive Programme Funds, the Children and Young People's Priority Funding Package, and the Supporting Families Package.

I declare an interest as a voluntary committee member of Horizon Sure Start in Carrickfergus and Larne, which was established in order to assist children. The All-Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People has been re-established, and meets at lunchtime on the first Tuesday of each month. We would welcome any other Members who might care to join us on that group in order that they might be better informed on children's issues.

I am pleased that the motion has been proposed during this critical Budget period, and I hope that Ministers are listening and that children's needs will be addressed by alterations to the draft Budget.

The previous devolved Assembly established the Executive programme fund for children to assist, in particular, with individual Departments that might not have prioritised children's issues because they were cross-cutting in nature. In reply to a question for oral answer on 5 November 2007, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety advised that:

"The proposal under the draft Budget is that from March 2008, the children's fund will disappear. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will therefore have to absorb that funding itself at a cost of £5.9 million per annum. In the present harsh financial climate"

— where a 3% saving must be made every year —

"the offer for my Department under the draft Budget is £3.8 million for year one, £2 million for year two and £2.1 million for year three." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 25, p25, col 1.*]

That would result in a reduction by two thirds of the resources under that fund, and it would have a substantial effect on services that have been helping some of the most vulnerable children, young people and families in Northern Ireland. For example, Barnardo's has advised me that it would mean the loss of 11 services that operate in eight different constituencies.

Those services are working to help children with disabilities, children who have experienced domestic violence and children who are at risk of being taken into care or custody. This cut would also affect the support that Barnardo's is giving to young parents and to parents whose children display behavioural difficulties. To date, Barnardo's has helped 2,500 children and young people and over 600 parents.

A second stream of funding that is currently at risk is the children and young people funding package. In March 2006, the then Secretary of State, Peter Hain, announced that new package of £61.7 million over two years. The document which outlined the details of that package at the time stated that:

"this will be included in baselines of relevant participating Departments."

That funding will come to an end in a little over two months, and there is still uncertainty about the long-term funding of various programmes that have been helped to date. I believe that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has promised some £26 million, but, if that is over one year, it will represent a reduction. However, there is a lack of clarity, and the groups on the ground have yet to be told their future.

The types of activities that have been assisted have been extended schools, extended early-years provision, looked-after children and vulnerable young adults, youth outreach initiatives, child protection, and children with special needs and disabilities.

This comes on the back of a damning report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), published in May 2007, which exposed the lack of public expenditure on children in Northern Ireland. That research was funded by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Department of Finance and Personnel. The report indicated that personal social services funding per capita was £287 per child in Northern Ireland, £402 in England, £513 in Scotland and £429 in Wales. Children's services in Northern Ireland are underfunded by at least 30%.

The former Homefirst Community Health and Social Services Trust area, which covers my constituency, had the lowest funding per capita of any part of Northern Ireland, with only £216 per child. As a public representative, I saw the outcome of that. There were excessive waiting times for special needs assessments, speech and language support and mental-health support. Children who were in need of support were let down. As Members will be aware, early intervention is critical in many cases.

Soon after the re-establishment of the all-party group, we picked up concern from the children's sector about funding and the implications of the draft Budget.

Children's and parent's hopes are often built up, only to face uncertainty or be dashed due to the stop-start nature of the funding arrangements. We must accept that we need long-term investment in children and young people. Therefore, we must commit to resourcing a robust action plan to deliver the 10-year children's strategy. The resources for that are not apparent in the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget.

In my experience, the voluntary sector can often reach those in need when the statutory sector somehow fails to reach them. Therefore, I suggest that there is an ongoing need for the children's voluntary and community sector to be a key partner in that work.

1.45 pm

It is important to appreciate the type of services that are at risk if funding is not granted. Today, I attended a Home-Start press launch in the Long Gallery; the junior Ministers will also attend that event. Some of Home-Start's projects are at risk. Will funding be available to ensure that volunteers are co-ordinated in order to help families that are at risk? If that does not happen, it is likely that more children will go into care, resulting in poor outcomes. I urge the Executive to ensure that vulnerable families are not put at increased risk.

PlayBoard has administered the extended schools projects and supported children in breakfast clubs and after-school groups. Those after-school groups, by assisting children with homework, can improve educational outcomes and enable parents to take up employment. Both those factors can have a significant effect in the reduction of child poverty. When a parent is working, household incomes are boosted and children have a positive role model, which, in addition to the support that they are getting with their homework, also encourages them.

I am aware of waiting lists for affordable childcare in my own constituency. If the full cost of childcare had to be met by parents, some of them may be better off on benefits. If such people did go onto benefits, how would anti-poverty targets and employment targets that have been set out in the draft Programme for Government be met?

The NCH, formerly known as the National Children's Home, has indicated that funding is uncertain for some of its services, including those that have been acknowledged as successfully assisting vulnerable children. Include Youth, which works with young people who are at risk of offending, also indicates an uncertain future.

The all-party group has met the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to press for funding, as well as junior Ministers Ian Paisley Jnr and Gerry Kelly.

The role of Northern Ireland's Minister for Children was established under direct rule. The Minister's main

role was to be to co-ordinate ministerial subcommittee meetings on children's issues, including cross-cutting issues. When the all-party group met the junior Ministers, it learned that, after seven months of devolution, a ministerial subcommittee meeting to address those issues has not been held. The group urges the junior Ministers to meet the relevant Ministers before the consultation period for the Budget is finished so that relevant issues can be addressed. I hope that the Minister of Education, who is present today, will be able to advise Members whether that has happened. It certainly should have happened. If it has not, there is a danger of children's issues going by default.

Professor James Heckman of the University of Chicago, who also assists at University College Dublin, is a Nobel laureate in economic sciences. We are fortunate that he is working in Northern Ireland and assisting Early Years, which was formerly known as NIPPA (Northern Ireland Pre-School Playgroup Association). His research has shown the benefits of investing in the skills of children in their early years. Investment in human capital is likely to be more effective and to produce more favourable outcomes in the long run if it is targeted at children and young people.

Mark Greenberg is an American economist who also works in this area. He has indicated that it is important that guaranteed childcare assistance to low-income families should be available to promote early-years educational opportunities for all.

The draft Budget is supposedly aimed at the future economic growth of Northern Ireland. However, it does not maintain previously committed expenditure for children. I urge Members to support the motion and to ensure that we invest in young people.

Miss McIlveen: An essential aspect of investing in young children is through education. That is an area in which I have a particular interest.

In the Executive's draft Programme for Government, the Department of Education, as well as the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, aims to:

"Provide for effective early intervention through more coherent education and care provision for pre school children."

The Department intends to that by ensuring that:

"a solid framework is in place to support the development of resilient children who are skilled communicators and competent learners prepared for life at school and beyond."

The Department of Education, along with the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure further aims to reduce the gap in educational outcomes by addressing the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people by, among other things, implementation of the literacy and numeracy strategy,

the school improvement policy, and improved access to the Youth Service for young people most at risk of exclusion. However, there is no reference to maintaining or furthering the already-established elements of the children and young people funding package, which contributes to reducing gaps in the educational needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable young people.

What does the Minister of Education propose to do regarding extended schools provision? That is an initiative to assist schools that wish to extend the use of school facilities in order to benefit the community more widely, for example, by providing support for after-school provision, pre-school childcare, creative learning centres, adult learning and other community needs. Schools can provide any facilities or services whose provision furthers any charitable purpose for the benefit of pupils, their families or people who live or work in the area.

Furthermore, what does the Minister of Education propose to do about extended early-years provision? There are now 25 Sure Start programmes across Northern Ireland, where Sure Start represents an investment of £9.3 million for 2006-07. That means that over 22,000 children under the age of four and their families have access to services provided through that programme. In England, the Sure Start scheme guarantees all three- and four-year-olds a free, part-time — that is, 12.5 hours per week — early education place and there are over 37,000 settings delivering free, Government-funded, early education. No mention is made of a similar expansion of the Northern Ireland Sure Start programme.

In England, through Sure Start, it has been promised that:

“There will be a childcare place for all children aged between 3 and 14, between the hours of 8am to 6pm each weekday by 2010, when there will be over 2 million sustainable childcare places for children up to the age of 14.”

We have no equivalent to that promise in the Programme for Government. There is no mention of a planned-development programme for two-year-olds. It seems incredible that a literacy and numeracy strategy has been mentioned, but that there is a disregard for Professor Heckman's research in early-years learning, which an extension of what Sure Start would offer.

What does the Minister propose to do about improving education support and provision for children and vulnerable adults? Again, that is not mentioned in the Programme for Government. Such support could provide invaluable assistance for those children who feel detached from society by virtue of being placed in residential care and assisting foster parents in the role of first educators.

What does the Minister propose to do about children with special needs and disabilities?

Increasing numbers of children whose first language is not English are coming to live in Northern Ireland. Core documents need to be translated so that those children do not miss out on their education.

Additional child and youth respite places are needed as well as social and life-skills training for young people aged over 14 with statements of special educational needs. In the latest monitoring round the Minister of Education has handed back £5 million for revenue and £28 million for capital. She is wasting millions of pounds on under-attended Irish-medium schools. Ministers are given a huge responsibility and, arguably, the Minister of Education has been given the biggest of them all: the education of our children, our most valued asset.

We require value for money. Investment in early-years learning gives us that. Focus is needed. I feel that young children, vulnerable children and those with special needs have not been well-served by what is contained in the Programme for Government. I ask the Education Minister to clarify her position in relation to the current initiatives funded by the children and young people's package. The current funding structure is about to end. Those employed under the schemes, and those benefiting from them, have a right to know what will happen. These initiatives are crucial: if adequately resourced and properly implemented in a sustained and well-planned manner, they can make a significant contribution to reducing the gap in educational outcomes, which, after all, is a key objective of the literacy and numeracy strategy.

As Professor Heckman states:

“Early learning begets later learning and early success breeds later success...”

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. As a member of the All-Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People, I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on the motion which has been proposed by all of the parties' spokespersons on children's matters. That, in itself, is an issue.

I take a slightly different, though complementary, angle to the previous speakers. As a signatory to the motion, I agree with it totally, and I remind Members that it calls on the Executive to:

“invest in early intervention and prevention; and calls on the Executive to protect, maintain and further develop the investment that has been made in children and young people, through Executive Programme Funds, the Children and Young People's Priority Funding Package and the Supporting Families Package”.

I will mention the supporting families package; however, it is naive that we, as spokespersons for our respective parties and for children, should criticise any investment in children and young people. As a group, we should not go down the path of saying that money should be taken away from one thing and allocated to another; we should be calling for additional investment.

At a time when there are great pressures on public finances and a need for innovative thinking, no issue is more important than investing in parenting — political investment, as regards leadership; policy investment, as regards strategy; and financial investment, as regards service. I regret that I am unable to say that there is a coherent strategy on parenting; regrettably, there is not. While valuable work has been carried out by various Ministers, Departments and officials, we have yet to see a clear road map and way forward.

Following the change to the law on physical punishment in 2005, Jeff Rooker, the then Minister of State for Children, Young People and Families, established a working group on positive parenting to take forward positive parenting and raise awareness of the change in the law. A number of very useful publications have followed, including 'Top Tips for Parenting Toddlers' and 'Top Tips for Parenting Teenagers'. The group has carried out valuable awareness-raising among health and social care professionals, parents and the wider legal profession and in education.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety published its 'Families Matter' strategy last year, and we have seen other helpful publications from the Department, such as 'The Safe Parenting Handbook'. As a strategy, 'Families Matter' provides a useful start as it makes a range of suggestions regarding policy and service development. In their responses to the consultation document, many children's organisations made further suggestions regarding investment in parenting, particularly the availability of parenting programmes.

The Department of Education is also developing a strategy for children aged nought to six, which will contain elements of parenting and parenting support through early-years settings, extended school development and the curriculum. We must bring those parenting initiatives together and have a clear, agreed focus, which brings me back to my earlier point concerning the Executive and the need for a joined-up approach on issues relating to children and young people. Many ideas could be progressed in a joined-up way across Government that would maximise the use of resources and ensure better outcomes for parents.

I thank the Minister of Education for attending today and for responding to the debate on behalf of the Executive. I take this opportunity to ask her for an assurance that there will be an investment in parenting and a clear joined-up approach to the various elements that I have described. I ask her how the strategies of the Departments of Education and Health and the work of the group led by the Department of Finance and Personnel will be taken forward.

In conclusion, and following the comments of the Chairperson of the All-Party Assembly Group on

Children and Young People, I urge the Executive and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to review the Budget and send out a clear message that the Assembly cares about children and will invest in them and in our future. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs M Bradley: There are more people with learning disabilities in Northern Ireland than in any other region of these islands. We are all living longer, and that is one of the reasons why our children need to be properly cared for and educated, especially those with a learning difficulty or a disability of any ilk.

As a member of the All-Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People, I am very concerned about the draft Programme for Government and associated budgets. I am even more concerned about the financial uncertainty that is hovering over the future of budgets associated with spending on children's services.

Many families, on discovering that a child has learning difficulties, face a daily struggle in deciding the most suitable path for securing a stable and effective future for their child.

Members, no doubt, are familiar with the work and ideas of Professor Heckman, which are based on good, safe common sense. However, in the draft Budget, there is by no means even a glimmer of hope that the proper financial resources will be provided to allow delivery of the Programme for Government's objectives. The uncertainty is palpable in every Department. The watchwords of fairness, inclusion and equality of opportunity, which we have been told will govern every strand in every Department, encourage great expectations. However, meetings that the group has held with various Ministers give no such hope for even a small percentage of that delivery of promise.

2.00 pm

Many issues need to be addressed in making provision for children with special needs, not least the severe lack of speech and language therapy, which prevails in all our constituencies. The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People has recommended that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister should place an emphasis on this issue in order to begin, at least, to address this huge problem.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's announcement in June 2007 that he intends to reduce the waiting list times for speech and language therapy was extremely welcome. His confirmation that children will be at the centre of his programming went some way to dispel the belief that, in all Departments, children had all but been forgotten in the draft Budget.

Autism is also an extremely prevalent disability, and Northern Ireland has many sufferers — one in every 100 — and the figure is rising every year. The issue of respite care in general must be addressed, and the provision of

respite care for the families of children and young people who suffer from disorders that have symptomatic portrayals of disruptive behaviour and/or violent outbursts should be an inescapable budgetary priority.

At present, the entire process of statementing is a minefield for parents and teachers. Each time a child is bullied by other students and frowned on, he or she is dealt a metaphorical blow. Early intervention is essential if we are to learn from Professor Heckman's theories.

If Members read the report, I am sure that they will agree that it makes good sense. Professor Heckman's theories represent the right road to go down. The provision of appropriate class support, the delivery of after-schools activities and the appropriate diagnostic procedures are essential, basic needs that should — and must — be delivered through the Programme for Government.

However, when members of the group approached the Minister of Finance and Personnel, they were told that they had to approach Ministers, who had already been allocated their departmental budgets. That shocked me, and, regrettably, I have to say that, on the part of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, there was an unwillingness to discuss the possibility of ring-fencing the Barnett consequential, as I suggested, in order to provide for children with special needs. Today, I ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel to review that situation. The value of the Barnett consequential — £11.3 million — should be ring-fenced for disabled children's services, and it is the collective responsibility of the two junior Ministers to ensure that that happens by challenging the Minister of Finance and Personnel's proposals. A start must be made now, because the problem will exist for many years.

The Department of Education's planned review of special education needs is welcomed, and I await an early and positive outcome. The conclusion of the children's fund and the subsequent reduction — if not total obliteration — of the associated projects will result in the absolute destruction of any groundwork that had been laid down during the fund's existence. A recent report commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Department of Finance and Personnel, and launched by NICCY, clearly illustrates the substantial gap in per capita spend on children's services here. Northern Ireland fared pitifully against the rest of the UK; Scotland, being the highest contributor, sits at £513 per capita, and Northern Ireland limps home at a pathetic £287 per capita.

I urge all Ministers —

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

Ms Lo: I am speaking on behalf of Mrs Naomi Long, who is a member of the All-Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People.

I entirely agree with all the points that Members have raised, and I have very little to add to those contributions.

I agree with Miss McIlveen that investing in children represents value for money. Any society will reap the future benefits of investing in children now.

There is an issue of specific concern in the Budget. It seems to my party that the idea is to abolish Executive programme funds, including those specified in the motion, and simply place money into the general pot. That would lead to a total lack of transparency concerning how much money the Executive are setting aside for children and young people, and for much of the work that has been outlined by other Members and in the reports that have been mentioned. We must be sure that funding is being set aside and that it represents value for money. That does not mean that the Executive programme funds must continue exactly as they are or that money must be ring-fenced. However, specific funds must be demarcated for expenditure on children and young people along the lines suggested.

MLAs, Members who sit on all-party groups and the public at large must have access to appropriate information so that they can judge the merit of the ongoing work. As we call on the Executive to protect, maintain, and further develop the investment that has been made in children and young people, we also call on the Executive to make clear what funding is being set aside for that purpose in the Budget. We urge consideration of that matter before publication of the Budget later this month. The motion is to be strongly commended and we welcome and support it fully.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion that has been proposed by my colleagues, whom I thank for bringing this matter to the attention of the Assembly. It will be no surprise that I, as a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, wish to speak on this issue.

The commitment has been made to cut poverty in Northern Ireland by half by 2010. There is also a long-term goal to eradicate child poverty in Northern Ireland by 2020. To fulfil that commitment, it is essential that there are programmes in place with long-term strategies that provide long-lasting benefits.

In that context, I read the report by Professor Heckman and Mark Greenberg, and came to the same conclusion as those two men — as, obviously, have other Assembly colleagues. That conclusion stems from the fact that, if we invest in our children in order to enhance their social and academic skills, the result will be a new generation of well-adjusted and well-balanced individuals. That is simple common sense.

It is a sad fact that, in Northern Ireland, children who are born into troubled homes and who end up in short-term or long-term foster care are less likely to finish school. Of those children, girls are five times

more likely to become teenage mothers, and boys are six times more likely to become teenage fathers. That trend alone translates into the fact that children who are born into single-parent families are more likely to live in poverty than those who are from a complete family unit. That again translates into the fact that children from backgrounds of poverty are less likely to finish their education and go on to further education, and so the cycle continues.

The Heckman and Greenberg Report suggests that the answer lies in early investment in order to produce financial and social long-term benefits. If we invest in children during their formative early years in order to give them a sense of well-being and confidence, it follows that those well-adjusted children will be more likely to get a job and less likely to follow the crowd and underachieve at school and later in life.

The report demonstrates that children who receive stimulation and love from a young age are better able to adapt to the schooling system and interact with their peers. It has also been proven that children who are more settled within school and confident in their role in the classroom are better able to achieve their full potential, inside or outside the classroom.

The unfortunate fact is that there are many single-parent families in which the parent is not home very often and low-income families in which both parents must work. That means that the stimulation and love that are essential for the well-being of the child are not readily available. Therefore, such a child will be disadvantaged. It is logical, therefore, that the more help children are given during their formative years by way of social interaction and stimuli, the more they will achieve in life. The knock-on effect of that will be a generation who are higher achieving and who generate more wealth and finance in our economy.

The 28% child poverty level in the Province concerns us all. In my constituency of Strangford, in the Ards area, that level is 30%, which is above the provincial average.

Many children do not have sufficient clothing and food or do not receive the attention that they require. It is important that the Assembly takes those matters on board. I am not saying that everyone must be an academic — indeed, those of us who are Members of this Assembly perhaps exemplify that point. Whether a person's expertise relates to the bin lorry or to brain surgery, everyone's particular skills are essential for a community if it is to survive and thrive.

In acknowledgement of that, the children's fund was set up to fund projects that would make a difference to early-years development and would provide a positive influence in children's lives by, for example, allowing them to express themselves through art in an after-school club or by giving them something to eat at a breakfast club. All those are vital to children.

As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and having subscribed to its pledges on poverty — particularly child poverty — I feel that the findings of the report should be taken into account and that the children and young people's funding package should not only be maintained but enhanced. The positive impact that that fund has on many children and young people in the Province is hard to measure, but it has made a difference. We are unsure about what benefits will be reaped from it in years to come, but I believe that they will be significant.

We will reap from long-term investment in the lives of children in years to come. The Northern Ireland in which our grandchildren will grow up will be a completely new Northern Ireland. Poverty will be part of a history lesson — a thing of the past.

That is not a pie-in-the-sky idea; it is achievable if we invest now. I urge the Assembly to invest in the lives of children and to sit back and watch the benefits that that investment will bring about for the generations of the not-so-distant future.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion, and I commend the members of the all-party Assembly group on children and young people on bringing the motion to the House today.

Many Members spoke of the benefits of investing in the skills of children in their early years. Research has shown time and time again that that is the case. Professor Heckman's report demonstrates clearly that early intervention and investment will create more favourable outcomes in the long run if they are targeted at children and young people.

That is also true of investment in parenting, to which my colleague Sue Ramsey referred. As we enter 2008, children and young people across the North still face far too many inequalities. There are dire levels of fuel poverty, and 24% of children live at 60% below the average income. Children and young people who live in poverty are much less likely than children overall to achieve five or more GCSE passes at grades A to C. In order to address that, Sinn Féin wants to see in place a strategy that will focus on increasing the level of qualifications for those children who live in poverty in the most deprived areas. That must be a cross-departmental priority. The Assembly and the Executive must commit to addressing those inequalities by implementing a policy and monitoring its outcomes. The motion calls on the Executive to:

“protect, maintain and further develop the investment that has been made in children and young people”.

At this stage, Members should remind themselves of the goals of the children and young people's funding package. That aims to reduce underachievement and to improve the life chances of children and young people by enhancing their educational development and by

fostering their health, well-being and social inclusion through the integrated delivery of the support and services that are necessary to ensure that every child has the best start in life. As I mentioned earlier, research shows that that approach will pay off in the long run.

Roy Beggs, in moving the motion, referred to some of the activities that are funded by the children and young people's package. Those activities include: the extended schools' youth provision; addressing the requirements of children with special educational needs; extended early years provision; and examining how, overall, those activities have worked towards achieving those aims. The Assembly must continue to support those activities.

In conclusion, Sinn Féin believes that the re-establishment of the children's fund by the Executive will be a strong sign of their commitment to the future of our children and young people. I support the motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): As Chairperson of the Committee with responsibility for scrutinising the children's strategy, I thank the members of the all-party group for tabling the motion and for creating the opportunity to have such an important issue debated in the Assembly.

2.15 pm

The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has identified children's issues as one of its main priorities for the current session. Members will be aware that it has just published an interim report on its inquiry into child poverty. The report reveals that, according to official statistics, more than 100,000 children still live in poverty in Northern Ireland. It is also estimated that around 44,000 children live in severe poverty. Statistics are always a matter for debate. However, it is indisputable that behind those statistics, there are children who lack basic necessities and whose life chances are reduced as a result of their impoverished start in life.

As part of its inquiry, the Committee received over 40 written submissions from key stakeholders. The evidence that it has considered highlights the need for early action by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and, indeed, by the Executive. The Committee welcomes the Programme for Government's commitment to work towards the elimination of child poverty by 2020 and severe child poverty by 2012. However, the Committee is concerned that insufficient information is available in the Programme for Government, the Budget and the accompanying public-service agreements on how those challenging targets are to be delivered. Of course, there is still time for that to be corrected and for the inclusion of more detail on how child poverty is to be tackled in the Programme for

Government and in the forthcoming delivery and investment plans.

My Committee has not reached a final decision on the specific policies and programmes that will need to be enacted in order to improve outcomes for the most disadvantaged families. However, it is already clear that a key element of any effective strategy to tackle child poverty will be the provision of high-quality services that offer support to families during the first few critical years of a child's life. It appears that that conclusion is supported by Professor Heckman's research. On the basis of the weight of evidence that supports such interventions, the Committee, in its interim report, has highlighted the need for action to expand the availability of accessible high-quality childcare and to expand access to interventions such as Sure Start. I hope that the Executive give careful consideration to my Committee's recommendations as they seek to finalise the Programme for Government and the Budget.

My Committee is also aware of the immediate concerns that exist about the long-term future of programmes that were established with Executive programme funds, the children and young people's priority funding packages and the supporting families package. The Committee has, therefore, written to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ask for a detailed breakdown of the funding that has been allocated through such programmes, and for clarification on how much of that funding will continue to be available to each of the programmes during the next three financial years. In addition, it has invited the two junior Ministers to attend a Committee meeting to discuss their role in the action that is being taken by the Department to ensure that adequate resources and comprehensive plans are in place across Government to deal with priorities for children and young people. I expect that the meeting will take place before the end of the month.

In conclusion, I offer my support for the motion and assure the House that my Committee will monitor carefully the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's work in order to ensure that there is, indeed, sufficient investment across Departments in early intervention and prevention. Without such investment, another generation will be condemned to a cycle of poverty.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members are aware that absolutely nothing gets in the way of Question Time, which will begin at 2.30 pm with questions to the Minister of Education. I propose, therefore, that the House take its ease until then.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed, I wish to address the issue of flexibility during Question Time, and to draw Members' attention to an agreement that I have reached with the Whips. Members will be aware that the 30-minute period of questions to Ministers is very rigid and, on occasions, has prevented a Member from asking a supplementary question or a Minister from answering one. I have agreed with the Whips that we should be more flexible, and we shall begin to be so today.

For example, when the time for questions to the Minister of Education runs out at 3.00 pm, I will indicate that time is up but, if necessary, will allow the Minister three minutes to answer a supplementary question. If we are close to the end of the allotted 30 minutes, Members can ask a supplementary question, subject to the Minister's giving a brief answer. I stress that answers must be brief, particularly when time is up, in order to allow all three Ministers to answer questions in the time allotted. I hope that that flexibility will allow a Member, when time is running out, to ask a supplementary question and the Minister to answer it. Each Minister will still have 30 minutes in which to take questions, because the clock will automatically stop. We may run slightly beyond 4.00 pm as a result, but I am sure that Members will not object to that.

EDUCATION

West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Forces' Report

1. **Mr Adams** asked the Minister of Education to outline the progress made on the implementation of the recommendations made by the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Forces' report in 2002.

(AQO 1330/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. D'aithin tuarascálacha ó thascfhórsaí iarthar Bhéal Feirste agus mhórchéantar na Seanchille an tábhacht atá leis an oideachas agus dhírigh siad a n-aire ar an riachtanas le caighdeán oideachais a ardú.

The 2002 joint report of the West Belfast Task Force and Greater Shankill Task Force recognised the

importance of education and focused on the need to raise educational standards.

Tá mo Roinn ag obair ar pholasaithe agus trí Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne Bhéal Feirste agus le Comhairle na Scoileanna Caitliceacha faoi Chothabháil le bua a fháil ar an tearcghnóthachtáil agus leis an dul chun cinn a chothú.

My Department has been working at policy level, and through the Belfast Education and Library Board and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, to tackle educational underachievement and promote improvement. That is one of the key areas that the Executive, and I, as Minister of Education, must deal with in the coming years.

It is important to realise that, out of the 18 wards in the west Belfast and greater Shankill area, 14 fall within the top 30% most deprived wards in the education domain. We must break the link between educational underperformance and social disadvantage by supporting schools that work with the most disadvantaged children in order to achieve the clear prospect of good qualifications and skills for all. I have seen at first hand how schools can be placed at the centre of the community, where children and adults can learn in a relaxed, welcoming and stimulating environment. That has been particularly evident in my visits to a range of schools in west Belfast and the greater Shankill and at my meetings with primary school principals in the Shankill area.

Specific interventions have been introduced to help communities, and the schools that serve them, to put in place some of the foundations that are needed to promote the value of education and to raise standards. Those include the west Belfast and greater Shankill education initiative, the extended schools programme, measures in the greater Shankill area, the full-service school model in Belfast Boys' Model School and Belfast Model School for Girls, and the recent approval of a full-service community network in Ballymurphy.

I expect to publish for consultation revised strategies for school improvement in literacy and numeracy shortly. Those strategies are designed to ensure that every young person be given the best possible chance to succeed, regardless of background or ability. Recent evidence clearly shows the importance of parental and community support for schools. In the case of schools, such support is particularly important in challenging circumstances, and I ask colleagues to play their part in encouraging positive engagement in their constituencies.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom bliain úr faoi mhaise a ghuí duit agus do gach duine anseo, go áirithe don Aire Oideachais. Tá mé buíoch den Aire as an fhreagra a thug sí.

I wish you and other Members a very happy new year, particularly the Minister. The young people in my

constituency of West Belfast, which includes the Shankill, the Falls, Whiterock and Glencolin, are particularly looking forward to this new year, during which we will finally see the end of the 11-plus.

Will the Minister commend the work of the West Belfast Taskforce to her colleagues in the power-sharing Executive? That is part of a policy framework that has been endorsed by all of the parties in the first power-sharing Executive, and I ask the Minister to use her good offices to encourage action by all Departments to alleviate the disadvantage and deprivation that that report seeks to do away with.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Ghearáid. The West Belfast Taskforce is an important initiative, and I will commend it to the Executive. We are in the middle of a debate on early-years provision, and west Belfast and the greater Shankill area have benefited enormously from the children and young persons' package. The Executive will be judged on how we deal with disadvantage and our most vulnerable children and young people. As I said, 14 of the 18 most deprived wards are in the area that Gerry Adams represents, and that is important.

Mr McCausland: The report highlighted several important matters. Parental and behavioural support in early years are particularly welcome initiatives in the Shankill area. However, does the Minister agree that those benefits will be undermined by her decision to de-prioritise youth work? A 5% cut in funding is proposed in year 1 and a 1% cut is proposed in year 2, which will have a devastating effect on youth services throughout west Belfast and the greater Shankill. Her decision will devastate youth provision in those areas, both in the statutory and the voluntary sector.

Does she also agree that her decision to increase funding for youth work by 7% in year 3, on the other hand, is somewhat disingenuous — to put the best spin on it — since the education and library boards will make the cuts in years 1 and 2, but the Minister's newly formed education authority will take the benefits in year 3? Will she acknowledge that her decision to de-prioritise youth work will receive a negative reaction in the entire West Belfast constituency, and in North Belfast, too?

Ms Ruane: I welcome the Member's concerns on the important area of youth work. The Member will know that final decisions on the comprehensive spending review will not be made until later this month. He will also know that I have written to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, highlighting my concerns about the absence of funding for those programmes, the difficulty that the Department of Education has in finding resources of the scale that is required, and the impact that that is likely to have on our most vulnerable children.

I have asked that, if there is any possibility of additional funding, youth programmes and children's programmes be considered urgent priorities. I absolutely reject that I have de-prioritised youth work; I have always said that it is one of our key priorities. I hope that the Member joins the debate that began earlier about the importance of funding for children and young people. I hope that he will stay after Question Time and join that debate.

Mr Attwood: The Minister may be aware that on the RTE programme 'Morning Ireland' this morning there was a discussion on the target that has been set in the Republic of Ireland, which is that 80% of students who are leaving education should have studied at least one science subject. The report by the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Force recommended that clear measurement tools be established to assess the performance and outcomes of schools in the area. Therefore, will the Minister confirm that such tools have been put in place; detail what information has been brought to bear on those measurement tools, and describe what action has been taken as a result? The experience in the South shows that in order to achieve the best outcomes students need to study the right subjects.

Ms Ruane: I thank Mr Attwood for his comprehensive question. I agree that it is important that young people learn science and that the subject is made more relevant. Indeed, the Department has introduced the revised curriculum, which seeks to make science and other vocational subjects available. In many cases, the study of those subjects is on a much more practical basis now than it was previously. The Department is also carrying out a science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) review. It is important that young people are stimulated by science and that science is introduced into their everyday lives, because it is part of everyone's daily life.

Last week, I attended the BT Young Scientist and Technology exhibition with my colleague in the South, Micheál Martin. I commend that wonderful exhibition, which many schools from the North attended: in fact, there were more schools from the North than last year. I plan to meet the organisers to discuss how to increase the level of interest in science.

The Department is also considering setting up a task force on literacy and numeracy, the proposals for which I will detail soon, and I will ensure that the Member receives the relevant information on that.

Club-Bank Scheme

2. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Education to confirm the date for the introduction of the club-bank scheme for Irish-medium education.

(AQO 1312/08)

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá cur i bhfeidhm shocrú chlub na mbanc d'earnáil an oideachais trí Ghaeilge idir camánaibh idir an Roinn Oideachais agus Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta. Tá roinnt ceisteanna le freagairt ag baint leis an scéim sular féidir í a chur i bhfeidhm.

The implementation of the club-bank arrangement for the Irish-medium sector is a matter for discussion between the Department of Education and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta. Some issues need to be resolved before a scheme can be established, at which point the Department will draw on the integrated schools sector's experience of the club-bank scheme.

There is a question about what role a club bank will play when the new education and skills authority (ESA) is established and when local area-based planning is in force. The ESA should be able to identify the overall needs for an area and prepare investment proposals on that basis. Those arrangements still need to be finalised.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Is léir go bhfuil níos mó ceisteanna ná freagraí ann. There appear to be more questions than answers.

Does the Minister agree that her Department is responsible for providing accommodation that is fit for purpose? The Irish-medium sector's accommodation is significantly worse than that of any other sector and must be addressed urgently. Does she also agree that the club-bank scheme is an innovative attempt to get to grips with that accommodation crisis and that any further delay to its introduction penalises pupils in the Irish-medium sector? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ruane: I agree that accommodation in many Irish-language schools is not fit for purpose. It is not the only sector that has accommodation that is not fit for purpose, but it is one of the most under-resourced sectors.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, the Department and I have issues to discuss and I will take advice from Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta before making a decision on its concerns. If some Irish-medium schools almost qualify for a capital grant, the club bank may not provide the best value-for-money solution, and that is one of the issues for discussion.

My Department also needs to work with the Comhairle to identify schools for which the club-bank arrangement will provide a cost-effective solution. We also need to consider the issues that may arise with the establishment of the education and skills authority. Go raibh maith agat.

2.45 pm

Miss McIlveen: At a time when the Minister and her Department have slashed the school maintenance budgets and proposed the decimation of the Youth Service budget, which will affect tens of thousands of vulnerable

young people and volunteers, how can she justify pouring yet more money into a sector that caters for just a few hundred people and financing capital projects for schools with enrolments of as little as six pupils?

Ms Ruane: I noted Miss McIlveen's comments in the earlier debate, and I was disappointed by them. We should not be sectarian in our comments. Every time we talk about the Irish language, Miss McIlveen and some — but not all — of her party colleagues continue along that line. I absolutely reject the argument that my Department wastes money on the Irish language. Children who go through the Irish-medium system have the same rights as children who go through the English-medium system.

Mr S Wilson: They have more rights.

Ms Ruane: I ask Miss McIlveen and Mr Sammy Wilson not to interrupt. I ask Miss McIlveen to move with the times on the basis of respect. She has duties in relation to the Good Friday Agreement. One of those duties is to promote and respect Irish-medium education. If she does not wish to learn the language, that is entirely a matter for her. It is disappointing to see such a young woman having such a rant.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt don Aire as a freagra.

What issues are being discussed between Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and the Department of Education about the establishment of a club bank scheme? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat to my colleague. We are discussing issues about all aspects of the Irish-language sector. A review into Irish-medium education is being conducted, which was recommended by George Bain. I took the entire review team to Connemara to see Irish being used as an everyday language in a Gaeltacht area and to discuss with our colleagues in the western Gaeltacht what lessons we can learn.

The club bank may not provide the best value for money for schools that are close to qualification for capital grants. We are setting up area-based planning, and I will produce proposals on that. The Irish language must now get fair play and equality of treatment in relation to other sectors, and that is something that we will examine. We also need to consider issues that may arise with the establishment of the education and skills authority.

Grammar School Admission

3. **Mr Burnside** asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to assist children from areas of social deprivation to gain admission to grammar schools if

academic selection for post-primary transfer is ended.
(AQO 1261/08)

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom córas a chur i bhfeidhm a chuideoidh le páistí ó cheantair atá faoi mhíbhuntáiste oideachas den scoth a fháil, is cuma cad é an scoil a bhfuil siad ag freastal uirthi — ní leis an oideachas sin a laghdú. Ba mhaith liom córas a bheith againn a thugann cothrom na Féinne do chách — rud nach bhfuil na socrúithe atá ann faoi láthair a chur ar fáil.

I want to put in place a system that will strengthen the possibility that children from areas of social deprivation will receive a high-quality education in whatever school they attend, not dilute it further. I want a system that gives everyone a fair chance regardless of background, and the current arrangements certainly do not do that.

The 2006 Audit Office report into literacy and numeracy standards in the North showed that, among our school leavers, 6,000 are at risk of having inadequate standards in literacy, and 7,000 have the same risk in numeracy every year. Those are substantial figures, and they are concentrated in our secondary schools.

Implicit in the question is an assumption that grammar schools currently admit a large number of children from areas of social disadvantage: if only that were the case. The indicator used for social deprivation shows that only 3% of some grammar schools have children on free school meals, while the average for all grammar schools is 7%.

In the non-selective sector, or secondary sector, the average is well over 20%. If grammar schools took a proportionate share of children who receive free school meals, it would be 18% of pupils.

I will quote from a report entitled ‘The Effects of the Selective System on Secondary Education in Northern Ireland’ by Tony Gallagher and Alan Smith:

“a selective system produces a disproportionate number of schools that combine low ability and social disadvantage in their enrolments.”

Many parents feel obliged to pay for out-of-school coaching. However, parents from socially-disadvantaged areas are less likely to pay for coaching, because of the cost, and because they expect local primary schools to provide adequate preparation. Therefore, the cost of coaching reinforces social disadvantage. In 2000, a study published by Peter Daly and Ian Shuttleworth of Queen’s University, Belfast showed that, although 84% of children from professional families attend grammar schools, only 13% of children with unemployed fathers do so. Those figures suggest that academic selection does not provide social mobility and is not good for working-class and disadvantaged communities. They suggest that the opposite is the case.

I am determined that, in every area, there will be high-quality schools that are open to all and ready to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum. My new school-improvement policy, ‘Every school a good school’, is designed to achieve that. There will be a clear focus on academic excellence as well as access to other pathways — including vocational options for those children who want to study professional and technical courses. I am determined that the new arrangements will be constructed to ensure equality for all, and will promote social inclusion.

Mr Burnside: The Minister of Education has maintained the same low standard that she achieved last year, since she became a Minister. If that is the standard of answer that the Minister gives to a sensible question, which asks how working-class children can — as they do at the present — get into our grammar schools, it is a pathetic performance.

There are two grammar schools in my constituency — Ballyclare High School and Antrim Grammar School. If there is a geographic postcode system, in which a three-mile barrier is a catchment area, how will working-class children in socially deprived areas outside that get the opportunity to go to those grammar schools? There was a time when Sinn Féin called itself a socialist party. The prospects of working-class children are being damaged, which is pathetic.

Ms Ruane: The Member is entitled to his opinion; I do not agree with it. I have given comprehensive answers on how the Assembly should deal with social disadvantage. I have said that my policy, ‘Every School a Good School’ will be advanced, and my Department will introduce policies on area-based planning. It is time to deal with the tale of disadvantage that children in the North of Ireland suffer from: according to the Northern Ireland Audit Office, more than 6,000 children a year do not receive sufficient support, and are not literate enough to get on the first rung of the ladder. We can play politics —

Mr S Wilson: She is the Minister.

Ms Ruane: I am the Minister, and I have introduced — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order. The Minister has the Floor.

Ms Ruane: I have introduced proposals and some people do not like them. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: I want to reach a consensus. However, make no mistake — those who continue to play politics with the issue must realise that change is happening, and will continue to happen, regardless. I ask people like Mr Sammy Wilson and Mr Burnside to join me in creating change, and to stop trying to block the change that is urgently needed.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire cad é mar a chinnteoidh sí go mbeidh na roghanna a dhéanfar in aois 14 bunaithe ar ábaltacht agus ar chumas agus nach mbeidh siad ag teacht leis an chúlra shóisialta agus eacnamaíoch de na daltaí agus nach mbeidh iontu ach aithris ar na torthaí is measa den scrúdú aistrithe?

How will the Minister ensure that pathways chosen by children aged 14 genuinely reflect ability and aptitude, rather than coinciding primarily with social and economic background and, consequently, reflecting the worst effects of academic selection, even after it is abolished?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. I thank my colleague for that question. I am bringing forward proposals that will ensure that children have access to a range of educational provision, and that their life and educational choices remain open for as long as possible. It seems that we have reached consensus that 14 is a better age at which to make those choices. Interestingly, it is difficult to find anyone who used to support the 11-plus, and I welcome that.

Grammar schools are not the only route available to bright disadvantaged children to get to university. The North provides greater access to university from less-privileged backgrounds despite the unfair selective system. I have visited different schools, and, in the past, I mentioned arrangements that operate in schools such as St Patrick's High School in Keady. For 25 years, the primary and post-primary schools got together, and the 11-plus system does not operate there. Members should look at the results from that school as well as those from Ashfield Girls' High School; Lagan College; Cookstown High School; and St Mark's High School, Warrenpoint. Those schools are doing tremendous work against the odds. There are many other secondary schools in the same situation; I have mentioned only some of them. Members must work together to ensure that the Assembly creates a system that benefits all children, and I look forward to working with Members in that regard.

Ms Lo: What steps is the Minister taking to reduce the significant social inequalities in outcomes for primary school children, which will remain a problem regardless of the change to the transfer procedure?

Ms Ruane: I thank Ms Lo for that important question. The Member will be aware that the Department of Education is in the midst of a debate on funding for early-years provision and the importance of early intervention. We will have a fairer system — there will be far less disruption and less distortion of the curriculum — when the 11-plus goes and the new arrangements are in place.

The revised curriculum was implemented in September 2007; it is bedding in. Teachers in many schools that I visited said that the revised curriculum is

a huge improvement, because children are learning in a more stimulating environment with good pedagogical — that is as difficult to say as the word “phenomenon” — efforts. The revised curriculum is an important part of the system, and we will see its benefits. The Education and Training Inspectorate is compiling reports on the revised curriculum, and I will ensure that Members get copies of any results.

Health Checks/Grief and Trauma Counselling in Schools

4. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Education, in light of the recent death of a primary year 2 pupil, what plans she has to introduce health checks in schools; and to confirm what facilities are in place to provide grief and trauma counselling for children within the schools system. (AQO 1348/08)

Some Members: Are we only on question number four?

Ms Ruane: If there were not so many interruptions, we would get through more questions. *[Interruption.]* I will proceed when Members stop interrupting me. This is an important question, and Members should be serious.

I am grateful to the Member for asking the question. It gives me the opportunity to express my sincere condolences to the family of the young child and the staff, pupils and parents at St Patrick's Primary School and the wider community. I spoke to the school principal to offer my support at this difficult time for the school and its community.

A teacher who is trained in Heartstart was with the child within one minute of his collapsing, and the ambulance arrived within five minutes of the call for it. The critical incident team from the Southern Education and Library Board was in the school the following day. I congratulate the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the board and the principal and staff of the school for their prompt and sensitive handling of the tragic situation. In such a tragic situation, it behoves all of us to respect the family's privacy in grief and that of the school.

Tá ról tábhachtach ag an scoil tacaíocht a thabhairt dá cuid scoláirí, agus dearbhaím go bhfuil an fhoireann teagmhais chriticiúil ó Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Deiscirt sa scoil go fóill.

The school has a key role to play in providing support for its pupils, and I confirm that the critical incident team from the Southern Education and Library Board remains in the school. They have already developed a support strategy and have been providing support for individual pupils and staff in the school. As part of that support, parents of all pupils

will be receiving a letter and a critical incident response team leaflet providing advice and guidance information, and individual pupils who need additional therapeutic support following the trauma will have been identified. You may be aware that the independent schools counselling service became fully operational in September 2007 and is also available.

3.00 pm

The Member asked what plans I have to introduce health checks. Routine health checks in schools are a matter for the school health service, and therefore decisions on their introduction lie with my colleague Mr McGimpsey. By law, schools are obliged to provide reasonable facilities for the school health service to carry out such checks, and all children have regular health checks, which are carried out from birth and through the pre-school years and school years. Those checks are carried out by the school health service within the context of the national child health surveillance programme, 'Health for all children'.

The Department of Education co-operates fully with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in planning new health checks and programmes for schools. Indeed, in direct response to the recent debate on heart screening, which was prompted by the recent tragic deaths of two of our young schoolchildren, my Department has been actively engaged with colleagues in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in planning a workshop on that issue. Officials from my Department have attended an initial planning meeting lead by the Chief Medical Officer to examine research evidence on heart screening. The group will include leading health experts, Departments, public-health bodies and sport and voluntary organisations.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Shannon for a supplementary question if he is very quick.

Mr Shannon: I have just realised that the Minister has taken almost 29 minutes to answer four questions.

We are all very aware of the horrendous death of the young child at the school, and many of my constituents who are worried parents have asked me about health checks. The Minister said that the responsibility for those checks lies with the Health Service. Will the Minister indicate what discussions she has had with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on that issue? Will she also tell the House whether grief and trauma counselling for children will be available for all children at short notice if the situation should occur again?

I have just finished before the 30 minutes is up.

Mr Speaker: The Minister has around three minutes to answer the supplementary question, although time is up.

Ms Ruane: My Department had discussions about health checks after the two young people died, and that is why I spoke about the workshop and how health screening is being looked at. Michael McGimpsey and I are working very closely on health and education matters because there is an overlap between those areas, but the issue is urgent and we are working with experts in the field and my officials are very active.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Unionist Attendance: Queen's University, Belfast

1. **Mr Burnside** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to encourage more students from a unionist background to attend Queen's University, Belfast. (AQO 1262/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): Queen's University is designated under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and, therefore, when carrying out its functions, it must have due regard for the need to promote equality of opportunity between persons of different religious beliefs or political opinions. It must also have regard for the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious beliefs or political opinions.

The university, like other higher education institutions, is an autonomous body, legally independent of Government and completely responsible for its own policies and procedures.

Mr Burnside: I thank the Minister for his answer.

The sooner that we get rid of the Minister of Education and combine those two Departments and put them in the charge of a responsible Minister, the better it will be for the House.

Will the Minister give us a statistical breakdown of the religious headcount at Queen's University and at the University of Ulster, although I know that that will not completely correlate with political views; and will he tell us what the trends are? In my view, the trend in Queen's University in recent years has been moving in the right direction going by the last figures that I looked at, which were at the beginning of 2001, when the Catholic student population was about 58%. However, the University of Ulster gives me some concern.

Will the Minister enlighten the House on the current numbers and on what action he can take with the two university authorities to ensure that there is some degree of balance, especially after the chill factor that Queen's University had during the worst of the

Troubles? I believe that there are now some problems at the University of Ulster.

Sir Reg Empey: There has been a perception of a chill factor and perceptions matter in determining where people study. However, there is no definitive evidence as to the scale of the chill factor. Data are not collected on the political affiliation of Northern Ireland students, nor, indeed, should they ever be; data on religion are poor and do not always allow for reliable conclusions. Nevertheless, data are collected by the university on religion. However, 29% of students at Queen's University and 25% of students at the University of Ulster choose to exercise their right not to declare their religious affiliation.

Statistics for the academic year 2005-06 at Queen's University showed the religious composition at enrolment as 31% Protestant, 36% Roman Catholic, 5% stated their religion as "other", and 29% refused to comment. In the same year, the student population at the University of Ulster was 29% Protestant, 44% Roman Catholic, 2% "other", and 25% of its students chose not to respond.

We believe that both universities are conscious of their social responsibilities in this matter, and we encourage them to ensure a welcoming environment for students of all religious beliefs and none. We are moving in that direction, although some local issues remain to be resolved. However, that is the present position.

Mr Lunn: Does the Minister agree that sectarianism is one of the factors that puts local students off staying in Northern Ireland? Does he agree that this kind of question is a good example of what makes so many young people leave, and will he outline what steps he intends to take to combat sectarianism?

Sir Reg Empey: There were significant issues pertaining to students leaving during the worst of the Troubles, and it is a sad fact that about a quarter of our students choose to study outside Northern Ireland. However, that in itself is not necessarily a bad thing, provided that people gain experience and can come back. Some students who study here leave to go elsewhere and that circulation continues. Nevertheless, I regret that it happens on such a scale.

The quality of the teaching, the success of the universities in getting research ratings, and the subjects available to be taught are probably more to the fore in determining where a student chooses to study. One must also remember that social issues are involved. For example, if a student lives in the greater Belfast area and wants to go to Queen's University, does that represent going away to university?

The honourable Member must be aware that he and his colleagues are drawing these matters to the attention of the general public virtually every day of the week.

There is inevitably a run-off effect, and I urge him to use caution when pursuing that policy.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. A similar question was asked at the Committee for Employment and Learning. It was thought that there was a problem at Magee College in Derry, when in fact there was no evidence to suggest that there was any chill factor. Will the Minister clarify whether the chancellor or vice-chancellor of Queen's University or the University of Ulster raised the issue with him or has he discussed any chill factor with them? It is regrettable that we are focusing on the religious background of students at Queen's University rather than on their achievements and how we can get more students attending university.

Sir Reg Empey: I want to focus on the universities' achievements. I have been asked several questions in the past few months — most of them written — on those issues from a wide variety of Members.

I have answered those questions and made it clear that, in order to better inform policy in that area, we have commissioned research into the decision-making processes used by students. In other words, we are asking them about the steps that they take when making up their minds about where to study. It is better to go to the people who are making those decisions in order to gather accurate information. I hope to have the results from that research in the next couple of months, and, in light of the interest that has been shown by several Members on this matter, I will be happy to share that information. We must ask the people who make the decisions, and that will better inform us about the direction in which we should go and the policies that we should pursue.

Employment Services Board

2. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action he is taking to support the work of the Employment Services Board for West Belfast and the Greater Shankill area. (AQO 1400/08)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department is funding the Employment Services Board for West Belfast and the Greater Shankill area in order to help in the operation of a Belfast-wide stakeholder forum for the Department's local employment intermediary service initiative, which offers a community-based employment service for the most severely disadvantaged areas. Officials are also actively involved in several of the board's employability subgroups.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tugaim buíochas don Aire.

I thank the Minister for that brief answer to my question. In a previous incarnation, during the first

power-sharing Executive, the Minister endorsed the 'Report of the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Forces', from which the Employment and Services Board emerged.

Does the Minister agree that the full implementation of the task forces' recommendations must be a priority for the Executive, and that the Employment Services Board, which includes representatives from the Shankill part of my constituency, is generating new thinking on policy and effective interventions for a spectrum of marginalised groups, including Travellers, lone parents, political ex-prisoners, and people with disabilities. Consequently, will he confirm that the Employment Services Board's funding, which is required if it is to continue beyond March 2008 — and which will ensure the sustainability of the pioneering work that is under way in the area of the greatest social need — will be secured by his Department? Go raibh maith agat.

Sir Reg Empey: I concur that that board does, and has done, a good job. The Executive have set growing the economy and associated matters as priorities in the draft Programme for Government. However, the Department has moved away from core funding for such organisations, and has sought tenders from people who will deliver services on behalf of the Department in particular local areas.

Having said that, I recently met the chairperson and a delegation from that board, and I am awaiting a paper from them about some matters pertaining to work that they have been undertaking over the past couple of years. When I receive that paper, I will consider the available options; however, today, I am in no position to offer guarantees about its future funding, other than to say that the Department's methodology has changed. I firmly acknowledge the work of that board, and I look forward to receiving its paper as soon as possible. Apparently, there were some hiccups over the holiday period, but I have been promised the paper within a few days.

Mr K Robinson: I accept what the Minister said about moving towards a tendering process, but does he agree that his Department must treat all voluntary and community organisations, or training providers, consistently and equally? In other words, it would be wrong to provide core funding for some bodies, while others do not receive any.

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the Member for his question. He has outlined the obvious difficulty. We are in a transition period, and several Members have written to or approached me about several organisations that are being core funded, or whose core-funding contracts are coming to a close.

Instead of spending the Department's money on paying rent, rates, heating, lighting and staff costs, we have tried to reach the point at which we are paying for

actual delivery of service. Several bodies that do not get core funding have approached my Department.

3.15 pm

The flip side of the question that the Member for West Belfast Mr Paul Maskey asked is that those bodies are asking whether the Department is operating a closed shop and why it is not giving all groups an opportunity to see whether they are capable of contributing. That is why the policy has taken that particular direction.

Equally, organisations have work ongoing, and I am anxious to ensure that, while we are examining such matters, we do not throw the baby out with the bath water and lose the money that we have already invested in work that we have commissioned. All those matters must be considered. However, the pattern is now well established, and, given the background and the fact that groups are demanding access to opportunities, we must pursue that policy in consultation with the Department of Finance and Personnel's procurement branch, which usually spearheads competitions for us.

As I have said, the policy does not diminish the efforts that other groups have made or their successes.

Mr Attwood: As the Minister will be aware, the task force said that it was very important to protect those who provide training and employment in west Belfast. The Minister will agree that one such organisation that does so is USEL — Ulster Supported Employment Ltd — which the Minister has visited in the upper Shankill.

I have two questions for the Minister about USEL. First, will he intervene in order to enable it to receive funding from Invest NI for marketing and other requirements? As a non-departmental public body, it faces the problem of not being entitled to dual funding.

Secondly, will he use his good offices to accelerate an economic business appraisal that is ongoing for proposed new accommodation for USEL in the upper Shankill? That proposal includes a land swap, where there are some technical and other difficulties. I urge the Minister to intervene and to consider how an organisation such as USEL can access funding, including that from Invest NI, in order to achieve the task force's recommendations of enhancing and extending the providers of employment and training, particularly in the upper Shankill.

Sir Reg Empey: The question that the Member asked is somewhat distant from that on the list of questions for oral answer, but I am happy to respond to him. He asked that question with some aplomb, as what he said was well away from the original question. As the Member said, I visited USEL's premises; I have had a discussion with its chairman and the board of directors; and I have had a tour of the shop floor. I was exceptionally impressed with the work that is being

done there and with the attempts being made to market skills and make them commercial. I am aware of the issues concerning Invest NI and accommodation, to which Member referred.

I am not Wikipedia, and, therefore, the Member must excuse me for not having every fact at my disposal. I am happy, however, to write to him with the details. USEL's status is a major hurdle as far as Invest NI is concerned. I am not sure that that matter can be resolved. The accommodation issue is slightly more complicated, but I will apprise the Member as soon as possible.

Seagate Technology

3. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline what plans he has to assist those affected in the north-west by the impending closure of Seagate. (AQO 1409/08)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department, in partnership with the Social Security Agency and other organisations, will provide advice on employment, education and training opportunities, job search, careers and benefits. A training-needs analysis is being carried out by North West Regional College to determine the level of reskilling required to prepare workers to apply for other job opportunities. Training provision will be made as appropriate. I am meeting the employees' forum and Seagate management on 23 January to discuss further how the Department can assist the company and integrate with its outplacement programme.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he guarantee that any plans that he has will be implemented as a joint approach that involves the local council and that ensures that the needs of the people of the north-west are addressed?

Sir Reg Empey: I confirm that my office remains in close contact with Limavady Borough Council. It is my intention to meet with the mayor and deputy mayor of the council on 23 January 2008. We will also meet with other people in the district, including the president of the Roe Valley Chamber of Trade and Commerce, the employees' forum, and, as I have indicated, Seagate Technology Ltd.

I want an office to be established on the premises so that we can work with the individual employees while they are at work. However, the agreement of the company is required before that can happen. So far, it has agreed to the training-needs analysis, which started last week. Representatives from the North West Regional College will interview every employee for approximately 30 minutes to assess their individual ability profile, what they might need, what help we can give them, and what training is appropriate.

Whether we can get any of that started before production ends is a matter for the company, which is focused on its production schedules. If the company is prepared to be flexible, we can start work immediately. However, that is a matter for negotiation with the company.

I look forward to meeting with the representatives of the employees' forum on 23 January 2008. That should give us at least some sense of how the issues are progressing. I assure the Member that I will continue to keep Limavady Borough Council fully informed.

Mr Dallat: I congratulate the Minister on his initiative. I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Educational Guidance Service for Adults, which has done tremendous work in the north-west, particularly in Magilligan Prison.

Does the Minister agree that the best way of co-ordinating all the plans is to agree to a special economic task force that would involve not just the councils, but regeneration groups, community groups and the chambers of commerce?

Sir Reg Empey: I will certainly bring that suggestion to the attention of my colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. We are, of course, working closely with the Social Security Agency. All our organisations, including Invest NI, are working closely on this issue. Obviously, one always has to consider whether any value would be added by setting up such a task force. Indeed, we have established task forces in the past in certain circumstances.

It is undoubtedly the case that the north-west has been hit with a series of hard blows in the past few months, the impact of which will roll out this year. Therefore, I am open to discussion on the matter. However, we must be satisfied that such a task force would bring something to the table that is not already there.

I am not aware of any such scheme at the moment, but I will certainly draw the matter to the attention of Minister Dodds and assess whether there is anything that we can do together. As I have said, I will meet with the president of the Roe Valley Chamber of Trade and Commerce during my visit to Limavady next week.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his response to the original question, and I welcome news of his visit to the Limavady area later this month. Will the Minister advise the House of the track record of DEL in dealing with large-scale redundancies in the north-west?

Sir Reg Empey: Basically, a mechanism to deal with such issues exists. DEL does not operate unilaterally; it operates in conjunction with other agencies. We have close links with Invest NI, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and the Social Security Agency. Once we become aware of a problem with a company, we start to work together immediately.

Obviously, one of the biggest redundancy cases that we have had to deal with recently has involved former members of the Royal Irish Regiment, a number of whom were based in that particular area.

That was the largest redundancy caseload that we have had to take on in the short term. Most Members who have been through that will be aware that we have dealt with many thousands of people, quite a number of whom live in that area. I am confident that the system, if it is allowed to work, will work. However, it requires the co-operation of employers. Where there is co-operation, the system will work effectively. If it runs into difficulties, it will be less effective, but I do not anticipate any such difficulties in the Seagate situation. I am optimistic that, as a result of our work with the company and local interests, we will be able to do a good job on behalf of the employees, who are the key players.

Higher Education Strategy

4. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the time frame for development and implementation of a higher education strategy.

(AQO 1408/08)

Sir Reg Empey: Development of a higher education strategy is at an early stage. I am in the process of determining appropriate mechanisms for the development of the strategy, and a full public consultation will form part of that development. It is my intention that the strategy will be complete by the academic year 2009-10.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for his response. Skills are clearly a major priority for the Executive. One of the key lessons of the Varney Report — which was a most disappointing report overall — was the example of the South of Ireland. The Government there took a decision to match the skills of people coming out of universities to the needs of investors. Will that approach be considered for Northern Ireland?

In view of the 300 additional PhD places mentioned in the Programme for Government, I ask the Minister to comment on the concerns raised by the Employment and Learning Committee and many others at the lack of funding in the draft Budget to match those 300 places.

Sir Reg Empey: Members are being inventive today in how they get things in.

I share the Member's view on the requirement for skills. The first conclusion that one encounters in the Varney Report is that that is a critical factor. There is no doubt that, before the Celtic tiger emerged, a decision had been taken to go for professional and technical education, or vocational education using technical colleges, in the Republic. That provided a

pool of labour that was the genesis of the economic growth that took place there.

Grant regimes are coming to a close and we cannot buy in investment any more. Companies will only come here if there is a pool of capable people willing to work. The Varney Review has now morphed into Varney II, and that presents an opportunity to make suggestions. The Executive are looking at this, but I hope that the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I can combine to work up specific proposals to put before Varney II.

With respect to the 300 PhDs, the Member leads me into responses on the Budget. He knows that that is one of our top priorities. As the Member for South Belfast and Deputy Chairman of the Committee Mr Spratt knows, we have the full support of the Committee on this issue. If we are unable to take a relatively basic step such as that, we will be struggling. We have made the point firmly to the Department of Finance and Personnel, and I hope that the settlement, when it emerges, will be sufficient to allow me to deliver that target, which has received virtually universal support from Members.

Mr A Maginness: The Minister has referred to the higher education strategy's being complete by 2009-10. However, an essential basis for that strategy must be the attraction of people from the broadest range within society. A recent media report indicated that the Russell Group of universities, of which Queen's is one, considers that student fees should double to £6,000.

Has the Minister had any confirmation of that or had any discussions with representatives from Queen's University on the matter? That would adversely affect people's ability to go to university, particularly to Queen's.

3.30 pm

Sir Reg Empey: I wonder whether Question Time should be dispensed with and replaced with a weekly free-for-all.

The Member has raised a pertinent point. At present, there is a higher education strategy. However, for the sake of expediency, it is being reviewed, amended and updated in the light of recent developments. I welcome the fact that Queen's University is now part of the Russell Group, of which 20 universities are members. Universities are invited to join the group, so it is an achievement.

I have not run away from the matter of fees: I will return to that issue in a moment. Northern Ireland has the best record in the UK of attracting students from disadvantaged economic backgrounds to universities. Its participation rate is almost 48%. The rate of participation by people from disadvantaged economic

backgrounds is significant and far higher than that of any other region.

I urge Members to be cautious about last week's reports. All statistics must be examined carefully. Certain figures that appeared last week could easily misdirect Members. I promised the House that a full review of student fees would be carried out in the next academic year and that it would be an open and transparent process. That work has already started. It will be open to Members to examine and make their own judgements.

I have not been advised of such a proposal about fees. Nobody has indicated to me that that is the direction in which Queen's University is going. If that is a proposal, it will have to go into the mix during the review. I understand that fees are already a matter of considerable concern to Members, and doubling those fees would be a matter of exceptional significance. Therefore, I suggest that the Assembly awaits further details. I accept the Member's point that the doubling of fees would be an extremely significant development.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Seagate Technology/Hüco

1. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what meetings his Department has had with local councils in Limavady and Coleraine to discuss the job crisis arising out of the pay-offs at Seagate Technology and Hüco.
(AQO 1415/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): Along with senior officials from Invest Northern Ireland, I met local council representatives at the time of the initial Seagate announcement in October 2007. Since then, Invest Northern Ireland has had numerous meetings with both companies. However, engagement with stakeholders is somewhat constrained because of the statutory consultation process that is due to conclude at the end of January 2008. Nevertheless, Invest Northern Ireland has also facilitated company contact with the Department for Employment and Learning. A Seagate training needs analysis is currently in hand, the outcome of which will be crucial to inform next steps.

On a more general level, the House will be aware that Invest Northern Ireland maintains regular contact with local councils on economic matters. I am confident that specific issues that relate to Seagate and Hüco will be dealt with appropriately outside the constraints of the consultation process. The companies will then be

better placed to confirm effective closure dates and to discuss matters such as employee access to various support, advice and guidance services, as well as broader issues such as the fate of the sites and factories.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's response. Is he aware that, because of operational difficulties in Malaysia, there may be a delay in the transfer of the plant — about which, I must say, I am not a bit sorry? Does the Minister support the setting up of a special economic task force, as has been favoured by Limavady Borough Council and Coleraine Borough Council in recent motions that were passed unanimously?

Mr Dodds: I am grateful for the honourable Member's comments. I entirely understand his views on the possible impact of news from Malaysia.

The Assembly debated the question of a task force on 19 November 2007; the Member spoke in the debate. The Assembly took the view that a co-ordinated strategy should be agreed to assist Seagate Technology's workers back into employment. That work is continuing.

The Member will also be aware, when he talks about task forces, that the north-west action plan has brought various players together over the past four years. Indeed, we are now in phase 2. Such co-ordinated action, which was endorsed by the Assembly, is behind the Member's call and it is what we see in the north-west action plan. Nevertheless, I am always open to further suggestions about what can be done to help the north-west. I will do all that I can to ensure the implementation of the action plan and of specific measures that will help the north-west to get over what has happened there recently.

Mr Campbell: The Minister outlined the actions that he and his officials have undertaken with regard to Seagate Technology and Hüco Lightronic (NI) Ltd. Are there any openings that the Minister can report on either of the sites that will shortly become vacant? Does he have additional information to assist the workers to gain productive employment for the long term?

Mr Dodds: I am grateful to the Member for his question. The use of the sites came up in discussions when the closures were first announced. The Member will be aware that both companies own their respective properties and sites under a 999 lease. Therefore each company is free to dispose of its facilities on the open market. Invest Northern Ireland's property services branch is well aware of that and will promote the facilities. An independent valuation of the Seagate site has been undertaken, and a report is due in the coming weeks.

Through Invest Northern Ireland we have initiated an assessment of the site and the factory with a view to identifying possible industrial uses and targeting relevant companies. An enormous amount of co-ordinated work is being done between Invest Northern Ireland, the

Department for Employment and Learning, the Social Security Agency and other bodies. I reiterate the commitment that I made to the House in November: we are focusing strongly on the north-west, particularly because of the blows that it has received recently. Invest Northern Ireland is acutely conscious of the needs of that area. We continue to work hard to promote the north-west — particularly in light of recent events — as well as other areas.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We are all aware of the historic neglect of the north-west. It is time to stop the hand-wringing and the sending of condolences to the workers and the population of the north-west. Has the Minister had a serious meeting with the Roe Valley Chamber of Trade and Commerce? What are his plans to attract sustainable jobs to the north-west? To what extent is he prepared to help those in the north-west who are willing to put their money where their mouth is?

Mr Dodds: What was said at a previous Question Time and what I have said today shows that much is being done. We are in regular contact with Seagate Technology, and we have pressed the Department for Employment and Learning for early intervention. We have worked to ensure that the Department for Employment and Learning has been able to access the employees' forum and that there is access to workforce training.

We have also facilitated, through Invest Northern Ireland, a meeting between Seagate, the Department for Employment and Learning and Michelin to discuss the lessons that could be learned from the task force that was set up after an earlier withdrawal of multinationals. We are following up on sites and clawback. We are also working with stakeholders to find out what can be done to ensure that those workers get back into work and also to provide new work opportunities for the north-west.

All that work is continuing in a co-ordinated fashion, and we will continue to work at it. There are no quick fixes, but I am very confident that, as we put our resources and energy into this matter, we will be able to achieve results. I will certainly talk to people in the north-west about those specific issues very shortly. We will also continue with other work that we are doing, and I hope that I will be able to elaborate on that in due course.

Grants to Inward Investors: Monetary Protection

2. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the monetary protection available to Invest NI in awarding grants to inward investors. (AQO 1435/08)

Mr Dodds: Invest Northern Ireland is committed to maintaining the highest standards of corporate governance and accountability in the award of Government grants to all of its clients, including inward investors. The agency has in place rigorous systems and controls. Projects are carefully scoped to ensure that they are in line with Invest Northern Ireland, departmental and broader UK economic priorities. Business plans are subject to comprehensive independent appraisals that assess the viability of the project and the net economic benefit that will accrue, both to Northern Ireland and to the United Kingdom as a whole.

In addition, Invest Northern Ireland carefully assesses the need for financial support and identifies the minimum amount of public funds necessary to secure the project for Northern Ireland. Furthermore, all grant support must receive formal approval, typically from Invest Northern Ireland's executive board, and also at ministerial level. Support for very large projects, where the assistance exceeds £10 million, requires the approval of the Department of Finance and Personnel.

In addition, clients who are offered grant support must enter into a binding legal agreement with Invest Northern Ireland. Those agreements specify the conditions associated with the grants, the expenditure against which grants will be paid and the circumstances in which companies will be deemed to be in default of the legal agreements and, consequently, subject to clawback. It is also important to stress that grants that are offered are paid only when the companies have either incurred eligible expenditure — for example, in the case of capital grants — or when Invest Northern Ireland is satisfied that they have achieved agreed milestones, such as employment levels.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer.

The Programme for Government implies that foreign direct investment (FDI) will continue to be attracted to Northern Ireland through selective financial assistance. Does the Minister recognise the limitations and risks involved in such an approach, including the risk of dead money, particularly after the period of a legal agreement is up? It also limits the range of possible industries that will come to Northern Ireland, in that the jobs tend to be low rather than high added value.

Mr Dodds: If I have understood the Member correctly, he seems to be questioning the rationale behind the emphasis on FDI in the Programme for Government and the comprehensive spending review.

Dr Farry: My question was about selective financial assistance.

Mr Dodds: Selective financial assistance is an instrument that helps to attract FDI.

I have heard those arguments before, but, as far as I am concerned, as with every major economy and regional economy, everyone is keen to attract foreign direct investment of the right quality. It is absolutely essential that we in Northern Ireland focus on that. That is why we have included in the Programme for Government the very stretching target that 85% or more of all the new FDI that comes into Northern Ireland must pay wages above the private-sector median. We do not want to continue to bring in jobs that are all low-paying, although there will, at times, be opportunities to bring in jobs that are in and around the private-sector median. Also, 2,750 of the jobs that we intend to bring in over the next three years under FDI will pay 25% above the private-sector median. We are very conscious of the need to close the gap in productivity and attract higher-value jobs. That is why the Programme for Government sets out the targets that it does in the way that it does.

However, Members must realise that not all our eggs are in the one basket. It is not a question of supporting FDI and nothing else. The figures clearly show that FDI is important, but so also is growing our indigenous local companies to become more export-oriented and growing the economy in that way — that is why targets are included for such companies, too.

3.45 pm

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I listened carefully to the Minister's response to the Member for North Down Dr Farry. In light of that, I wish to raise a particular case. The Minister will be aware that in February 2006, Trivirix, a US-based high-tech company, pulled out of the Springvale site in West Belfast with the loss of 119 jobs, just after it had received £4 million from Invest NI. That was a devastating blow to the workers, the constituency and the local economy.

In 2005, Trivirix had an annual revenue of \$51.5 million. It was in the top 100 fastest-growing companies in the USA. After it went into administration, I was among those who raised serious concerns about the apparent inability of Invest NI to account for the manner in which all the money it had given to Trivirix was spent. More importantly, a year later — and this is interesting — the company claimed that 2006 was a successful year. It boasted of positive growth, a major expansion in the US in 2007 —

Mr Speaker: The Member must ask his supplementary question.

Mr Adams: What efforts were made by Invest NI to recover any of the money that was handed to Trivirix? Do we know how that money was spent? Can we account for that £4 million of public money?

Mr Dodds: I am well aware of that issue, although, as the Member has indicated, the dates show that those

events happened under direct rule. The issues of clawback remain, however, and I have no doubt that he will be in the Chamber next week when those matters are debated at greater length. Invest Northern Ireland has implemented full recovery procedures to claw back all public moneys owed. Invest Northern Ireland remains in regular contact with the joint administrators, who continue to review creditor control and who have indicated their intention to pay a dividend to creditors in the coming months. I have agreed, in response to previous questions from other Members for West Belfast, to keep the House fully informed about the recovery of public funds in that case. That is very much work in progress.

Mr Hamilton: What is the total amount of financial assistance that has been offered in support of inward investment since the inception of Invest Northern Ireland several years ago?

Mr Dodds: The Member has put the issue of clawback in context: fortunately, it does not often arise. It is important that we pursue clawback when it is necessary, prudent and effective to do so. As I recall, more than £210 million in assistance has been given by Invest Northern Ireland since its formation to companies involved in inward investment projects. Many dozens of companies have received assistance — well over 150 in total — all of which have had a major impact on employment, investment and salaries paid in Northern Ireland.

St Columb's Cathedral/First Derry and Claremont Presbyterian Church

3. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress was being made on the refurbishment and restoration of St Columb's Cathedral and First Derry and Claremont Presbyterian Church in the context of the tourism offering of Derry/Londonderry. (AQO 1298/08)

Mr Dodds: Both St Columb's Cathedral and the First Derry and Claremont Presbyterian Church are key elements of the history of the city of Londonderry and are extremely important to tourism in that city. The projects are vital parts of the built-heritage programme, which is administered by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board as part of the Walled City signature initiative. Funding has been secured through the integrated development fund, and I am eager to ensure the full implementation of those extensive renovation and restoration projects.

The costs for the First Derry Presbyterian Church project have been finalised. The Tourist Board has approved funding of £690,000 for the project and continues to work closely with the project promoters to seek to address the shortfall in the overall funding

available to take the project forward. The target is to have contractors on site by late spring. In addition to the funding secured through the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, the St Columba's Cathedral project has recently applied to the Environment and Heritage Service to secure additional support for its planned renovation works. As I understand it, the St Columba's Cathedral project also intends to submit an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund, for which an in-principle decision on its level of support is likely to be made by September 2008.

The Tourist Board is working in close co-operation with the cathedral to help secure the funding package that will be necessary to take this important project forward.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that we will soon be marking the 400th anniversary of the plantation of Ulster, in which the city of Londonderry played such a pivotal role, will the Minister update Members on the progress of the Walled City of Londonderry signature project? That project is of great cultural importance to the remaining unionist population of Londonderry, as was highlighted by last week's BBC programme, 'Exodus'.

Mr Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. He referred to the recent television programme, which I thought was a significant one. He is right to point to the significance of the anniversary of the plantation and the Walled City of Londonderry project, which is one of five signature projects being undertaken to improve the tourism product across Northern Ireland. Along with other Members, he will also be aware that phase one of the project has already received £4.6 million of funding from a variety of sources. That money has been allocated to the refurbishment of the Tower Museum, the fitting out of the 'Armada in Ireland' exhibition and the wider story of the city. A visitor orientation programme has also been implemented.

Recently, I had an opportunity to see some of the work that has taken place as a result of the signature project and the investment that has been put in. It is an important and extremely good example of what can be done to build up the tourism product in the city when money is used well. I commend everyone who has been involved, including the council and all the other stakeholders, as they have played an immense part. Funding has now been secured to implement phase two of the signature project, which will entail the implementation of a lighting scheme, the built heritage programme and a business and cultural animation programme.

Mr P Ramsey: Mr Speaker, as a Member for Foyle you will be only too familiar with the subject. I welcome the Minister's comments; it is clear that he has been to the city. The built heritage programme sought to address the inability of congregations and

community groups to create match funding. Those projects, alongside the Apprentice Boys memorial hall and St Columba's school at Long Tower church, Aras Colmcille, are part of the same signature project. Will the Minister accept that those two projects will lead to the story of Derry being told through the Walled City project, leading to the bid, which is being prepared, for world heritage status?

Under the built heritage programme, the money that has been allocated for phase two will not stretch to meet all of the projects. I accept that First Derry and Claremont Presbyterian Church has done tremendous work, but its bids were underestimated and there is a shortfall of £500,000. It would be a crying shame if that project did not go ahead. Together with my colleague Mr Robinson, I appeal to the Minister to recognise that part of the Walled City project is about telling the story and leaving a legacy of the plantation of Ulster. However, it is important that all of the projects that are part of the signature project are developed holistically as part of one package.

Mr Dodds: I am grateful to the Member for his comments. I met representatives of the cathedral and the council at Stormont, and I was impressed with the case that they put. The Member is right to mention the importance of the built heritage programme and the contribution that it can make. The programme has identified six of the most important historical buildings located within the walled city, including St Columba's Cathedral, the Playhouse, the Apprentice Boys museum, the Guildhall and Long Tower church. I reiterate that I want those projects to come to fruition. The Department will work with people to secure the necessary funding. As the Member knows, we must ensure that we get the best out of whatever funding opportunities are there. I am well aware of the tremendous opportunities that exist if the projects can be brought to fruition.

Financial Services Sector

4. **Mr Burnside** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions he has had with HM Treasury in relation to financial and tax incentives for the financial services sector in Belfast.
(AQO 1263/08)

Mr Dodds: I have had no direct contact with Her Majesty's Treasury on the subject of tax incentives. As the Member knows, the Executive liaise with the Treasury through the Minister of Finance and Personnel. However, my discussions with my colleague the Finance Minister on a range of strategic tax issues are regular and ongoing. Furthermore, in the context of the next phase of the Varney Review, I will continue to work with him to ensure that we secure the best possible outcome for our economy.

Mr Burnside: The Minister will acknowledge that, over the past 20 years since the big bang in the city of London, there has been tremendous centralisation of financial services such as merchant banking, investment banking, private equity and even hedge funds. Stockbroking in the great cities and the provincial centres of the United Kingdom has declined and been centralised. It benefits the whole UK, but it is based in London.

The Minister and I will have no admiration for the former Fianna Fáil crook who was Prime Minister, Charlie Haughey. However, during his term of office, Charlie Haughey produced a package to create a financial services sector in Dublin. Are any other cities doing that? In the United Kingdom, Edinburgh is an exception in that it has its own financial centre. In trying to recreate a financial services sector in Belfast — and its financial services sector is much smaller than it was 20 years ago — is there anything to be learned from the incentives that were used in Dublin or Edinburgh?

Mr Dodds: I am grateful to the Member for his question on financial services, which is a crucial sector for foreign direct investment. Despite the credit crunch and the gloomy news from the financial services sectors in the United States and elsewhere, compared with the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland remains under-represented in employment and investment in financial services.

I am glad that the Member identified the particular crook, because I thought he was about to paint everyone with the same brush. He is correct in saying that the Irish Republic placed an emphasis on financial services. The sector presents a great opportunity to Northern Ireland, not least because of the skills of many of the young people who attend its tremendous universities and because of its fine education system.

Northern Ireland has enjoyed recent successes in the financial services sector, not least of which was that Citi, one of the world's leading financial institutions, created 700 jobs in Belfast. More recently, in July 2007 the securities services section of the Bank of Ireland, a bank that is based in Dublin, announced the creation of almost 150 high-wage jobs in Northern Ireland.

There is an opportunity to consider the situation and to recognise that the Irish Republic, for example, does not have the same supply of skilled workers in the financial sector as it had previously, and Northern Ireland could take advantage of that. I am focused on the financial services sector, and I would be grateful if the Member would liaise with me on that subject.

Mr Durkan: In an earlier answer, the Minister spoke about how some issues may be progressed in the second Varney review. Was Varney 2 simply volunteered by Sir David Varney and his team to carry out a further review or were Ministers consulted and did they agree

to it in advance? Given that the first Varney Review shut the door on a reduction in corporation tax, does the Minister hope that other tax windows will be opened by the second review? Many fear that it will turn into an exercise whereby the Treasury marks devolution's homework.

Mr Dodds: If that were either the purpose or the outcome of a further review, no one would accept it. It is not the job of the Treasury or anyone else to mark the Assembly's homework. A second Varney review was agreed following discussions between the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Treasury. As I said earlier, that Department takes the lead in the relationship between the Executive, the Assembly and the Treasury. As the Member knows, the work will include an assessment of the extent to which tax incentives might contribute to improved economic performance. Tax incentives are a reserved matter and, therefore, it cannot be a question of those involved in the second review simply examining the work of the Assembly. Our work on investment, innovation, skills enterprise and infrastructure is important.

That is all important. We have clearly set out our priorities in that area. We recognise what needs to be done; however, we seek something on which only the Treasury can help. The terms of reference for Varney mark II indicate that it is not simply a matter of telling the Assembly or the Executive what it needs to do: it is a two-way process.

4.00 pm

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister has said that the mechanism for lobbying the British Treasury is through the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Will the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment speak directly to that Minister about financial and tax incentives or compensatory arrangements for petrol retailers in border areas? That is a different sector, but a very relevant one. In my constituency of West Tyrone, businesses in Castlederg, Strabane, Clady and other towns along the border have been disadvantaged by the proximity of similar retailers just across the border where prices tend to be lower.

Mr Dodds: Again, that supplementary question strays a long way from the original question, but I am sure that the Minister of Finance will have heard what has been said. There are a number of issues there, not least that of illegal and fraudulent trade in fuels, which has been highlighted recently. All of us want to do what we can to support the Health and Safety Executive, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Police Service in cracking down on that trade and in providing any information that will lead to the apprehension of those involved. I am sure that the Minister of Finance will have heard what the Member has said about tax incentives and other fiscal issues.

Ulster-Scots/Scotch-Irish Heritage

5. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the level of representation of Ulster-Scots/Scotch-Irish heritage in the promotional material produced by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland.

(AQO 1338/08)

Mr Dodds: Ulster-Scots heritage and culture is integral to the story of Northern Ireland. I am, therefore, encouraged that the profile of the Ulster-Scots and Scotch-Irish heritage is gaining increasing recognition in the promotional material produced by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland. However, there are further opportunities for improvement in that important area.

I am also encouraged that the Tourist Board and the Ulster-Scots Agency will focus on developing the definitive Ulster-Scots trail — a tangible product that visitors can explore on their own, or as part of an organised tour. The agency has agreed to take the lead on that, and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board will support them with marketing expertise.

Furthermore, I am pleased that the chairman of the Ulster-Scots Agency is also involved in a major branding review, recently conducted by Tourism Ireland. The review indicated, among other things, a desire among potential holidaymakers to experience a greater diversity of culture and things to do and see in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: Order. That ends questions to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On the list of questions for oral answer, there were 20 hopefuls for each of the three Ministers. Apart from the last session — and then it was only barely — we never got past question 4 on any of the lists. That makes the list of questions for oral answer a fictional publication, because Members do not get an opportunity to ask their questions. In one case, it took the Minister seven minutes to respond to a question and a supplementary. Surely there is an obligation on you, Mr Speaker, not only to cut questioners short, but to demand some rigour from Ministers to prevent what many see as cynical time wasting to avoid questions further down the list.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. I assure him and all sides of the House that the matter has concentrated the minds of the Business Committee and me. I have reminded Members on a number of occasions to make their supplementaries brief, but that seems to be impossible for some. I have also told Members that their supplementaries must relate to the original question. Some Members were far off the mark from the original question.

Mr Durkan: It was the same with the answers.

Mr Speaker: I am coming to that. In future, if Members' supplementaries do not relate to the original questions, they may not be allowed to ask them. We are keeping a list of those Members who, for whatever reason, do not adhere to the original question when asking a supplementary question.

We have also been discussing a new format for Question Time with all the party Whips. There have been some fairly good discussions at Business Committee meetings and with the Whips, and I have prepared a paper to which I hope to receive a response. However, there are some Ministers who take a long time to answer a question or a supplementary question. That cannot and will not continue.

We are examining all those issues, and I am glad that the Member raised them in his point of order. I assure Members that Question Time will not continue in its current format.

Mr Burnside: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, as the representative of the House against the Executive — although the four main parties are represented on the Executive — you might be able to help the House in this matter. It would be useful if you could bring evidence of time-wasting by Ministers to the House, and to quantify and qualify the performance of all Ministers since taking office by showing how long they have taken in making statements. Civil servants are fudging answers so that Ministers have to answer only three or four questions instead of having to work down the list. The time taken by Ministers to answer questions is much longer than at Westminster, or any other Assembly or Parliament of which I have experience.

Mr Speaker: Members will know which Ministers take longer to answer questions and supplementary questions — they have only to read Hansard. The Speaker's Office has examined the Hansard reports of debates in the last number of months, and some Ministers take a very long time to answer questions and supplementary questions. However, the support of the whole House is required to resolve those issues. I assure the Member that those issues will be resolved. As I said to Mr Sammy Wilson, the honourable Member for East Antrim, Question Time will not remain in its current format, and there has been discussion with the Whips about how to accomplish change.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 17 January 2000, a Member raised a point of order to ask how Members could catch the Speaker's attention to express their desire to speak on a particular issue, even if they did not raise the original question. At that time, there was some advice in the 'Assembly Companion' about how to do that, but things have changed since then. I had my name down to speak on the first issue of today's Question Time and, as the UUP spokesman on education, I was keen to speak. I realise that you will

examine this issue, and that some flexibility will be introduced, but a better way must be found for Members to express to you their desire to speak, so that they might be called.

Mr Speaker: That is one of the issues that we are examining with the Whips in devising a new format for Question Time. I agree with the Member. However, introducing a new format does not mean that Members who bob up and down in the Chamber will automatically be called to ask a question.

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for the Member for East Antrim Sammy Wilson to read a broadsheet newspaper during Question Time? *[Laughter.]*

Is it the case that perhaps the Member's name was called, but he was so engrossed in reading his newspaper that he missed it?

Mr Speaker: It is not in order for Members to bring any newspaper into the Chamber and to read it.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As these matters are being reported, there is another issue. I do not intend to get into the rights or wrongs of speaking in two languages, but Members who speak in two languages impact on the amount of time available. How will the House take cognisance of that, because we must ensure that as many questions as possible are asked?

Mr Speaker: I do not want to stop anybody speaking in any language, but it is obvious that some Ministers take a long time to answer questions. Members ask supplementary questions, but some Members try to get three supplementary questions into one question. That is not good either. Those issues are being looked at, and consideration is being given on how they will be handled in the future.

Mr P Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Do you agree that the Minister of Education — who spoke bilingually — got through the same number of questions as the Minister for Employment and Learning who spoke only in English?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Floor of the Chamber is not the best place for this debate. With the co-operation of all the Whips, it is hoped that we will bring a new format to the House that will work for everyone. However, it will require the co-operation of all Members and Ministers.

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you make it clear to the House that although I was illegally reading the broadsheet referred to by the Member I was not called and did not miss a question?

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that there is nothing wrong with Members bringing newspapers into the Chamber when they wish to quote from them. However, Members are not permitted to bring newspapers into the Chamber with the specific intention of reading them.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

All-Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the work of Professor Heckman and Mark Greenberg on government investment with young children; urges the Executive to take note of the outcomes from this work, and to invest in early intervention and prevention; and calls on the Executive to protect, maintain and further develop the investment that has been made in children and young people, through Executive Programme Funds, the Children and Young People's Priority Funding Package, and the Supporting Families Package.

Mr Durkan: Unfortunately, I missed some of the earlier contributions to this important debate, but I support the motion from the All-Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People.

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

Funding for children's services and projects — particularly those that tackle early-years provision, help children in need and support families in stress — was accorded priority during the previous period of devolution. Not only did the previous Executive agree to the establishment of a children's fund, all Executive programme funds gave priority to projects or bids that addressed the needs of children and families, particularly those families with members with disabilities. Therefore funding was not only allocated from the children's fund but from the new directions fund; the modernisation fund; the social inclusion/community regeneration fund, and the infrastructure/capital renewal fund.

Those funds showed that the Executive had a particular interest in, and supported, new measures and ways of taking forward the children's agenda — not only through early-years provision, although that important aspect was addressed also. The early-years agenda was also strongly addressed through mainstream budgeting at that time, when the Executive made a commitment to provide a free nursery place for every child for one year. Therefore funding allocations were made through discreet non-departmental funding as well as departmental funding.

Although appreciating the importance that Professor Heckman and Mark Greenberg have placed on providing support for child-supporting measures, we must recognise that within the European funding programmes — for instance, the peace and reconciliation programme — emphasis was put on support for funding for services and projects that were supporting children and young people. There is a dropping-off in European funding of some of the funds that will remain and a skewing of the funds away from some of the social and community support projects.

4.15 pm

We face a situation where many people who brought forward very good pilots and developed new measures and programmes — not only in the community and voluntary sector, but also in the statutory sector and in partnership work between all sectors — now find themselves literally at a loss as to where they can look for funding.

Both the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education face difficult budget constraints, and finding funding for those services is not going to be easy, particularly for some of the new measures. In the past, we deliberately created funding windows outside departmental budgets, so that Departments would be encouraged to come forward with good cross-cutting bids, and, in the context of the children's fund, we encouraged non-statutory players to come forward with good bids too.

In circumstances where direct rule abolished the children's fund, only for a later phase of direct rule to recreate some of its logic in the funding package for children and young people, it is regrettable that in the draft Budget the Executive have decided to do away with any such funding, just as they have decided to do away with the integrated development fund. I hope that, in the time that is still available to Ministers and the Executive before we have the presentation of the revised Budget, there will be a rethink on that issue, because it is not enough for the Executive to point to the fact that there are some commitments to children in the Programme for Government. If we have a children's strategy with no budget to support it, we do not have a meaningful children's strategy. It simply does not translate into anything meaningful.

The child poverty targets that the Executive have set are only a recycling of the child poverty targets that were set by direct rule in the anti-poverty strategy. All of us criticised them at the time for their lack of ambition, yet now, according to the Executive, they are very important. The fact is that the anti-poverty strategy is not properly resourced within the Programme for Government or the Budget.

I hope that Ministers will reflect on those points, and that we will see some suitable improvement in the revised Budget.

Mrs I Robinson: Spending on services for children and young people represents a wise investment of public resources. Spending on children is likely to have a greater impact, prove more cost-effective and produce better long-term outcomes. Early intervention programmes, for instance, are more effective in children than in adults.

We should all welcome the challenging child poverty commitments in the draft Programme for Government. Statistics, including some from the Children's

Commissioner, indicate that spending on children in Northern Ireland has been significantly lower than in the rest of the United Kingdom. However, I note that the Department of Health has not assimilated the findings of such research into its expenditure on children and young people. Some research suggests that up to twice as many children in Northern Ireland may be living without basic necessities as in the rest of the United Kingdom.

We must do all that we can to reduce child and infant mortality, which varies markedly across the Province. Investment in preventative measures and early intervention is essential. Directing resources towards early-years provision will pay the maximum dividends.

Northern Ireland has a very high number of children on the child protection register, and we must continue to shift our emphasis from mere protection towards prevention. Greater inter-agency co-operation and information exchange are essential. It is imperative that the Irish Republic has systems that are equally as robust as those in Northern Ireland to ensure that the border does not permit sex offenders to escape easily from one jurisdiction to another.

We must also do everything that we can to safeguard against sexual exploitation and trafficking. Sufficient resources must be provided for young people in care, and more accommodation options should be available, such as supported lodgings and the ability to remain in foster placement if that is what the children prefer.

We recognise that inequalities exist in educational achievement, and we want fewer young people leaving school without qualifications. It is important to raise aspirations, particularly in families where multiple generations have obtained a job.

Given that Sure Start has proved effective, it could be of benefit to older children. Many would be assisted by greater access to the extended schools programme. High-risk behaviours, such as alcohol misuse, early teen sex and drug and solvent abuse, are strongly interrelated and have a profound impact on our society. Much more must also be done to combat bullying.

Waiting times for appointments to access child and adolescent mental-health services remain unacceptable. We must see the speedy implementation of the Bamford recommendations. The key theme of the Bamford Report 'Vision of a Comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service' was the development of a holistic and integrated service that crosses organisational and institutional boundaries.

Closer partnerships and better working relationships are vital. For example, collaboration with the education sector is crucial. Schools have been found to be effective settings for intervening in aggressive and acting-out behaviours, as was recognised in the Audit Commission's report 'Misspent Youth'.

Pryce and Twyble et al in their 2004 paper, 'Mental Health Promotion Among Young People' state that:

"Schools have a significant influence on the behaviour, attitudes and development of young people."

The regional strategy document 'Promoting Mental Health: Strategy and Action Plan 2003-2008' identifies specific actions that relate to the promotion of young people's mental health. Action 9 in the document refers specifically to pupils' mental health. It states that:

"DE in partnership with DHSSPS, Health Promotion Agency (HPA), schools and the voluntary and community sectors will develop a regional education resource for the promotion of pupils' mental health and emotional well-being including anti-bullying approaches for use in schools."

The target date for that was set at March 2004.

The Health Promotion Agency Action has taken forward the Health Promoting Schools initiative. That has proven to be internationally effective, and it offers a vehicle for change in Northern Ireland. However, there have been issues with that in regard to funding and to the fraction of schools in Northern Ireland that have been targeted.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat. I am delighted to have the chance to speak to the motion. It deals with an area that is within the remit of the Department of Education, following the transfer of policy responsibility in November 2006 for early-years matters from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Department of Education is also the lead Department in the co-ordination of the children and young people's funding package.

I also met with the All-Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People before Christmas, and I am delighted that its members tabled this important motion. I find myself in agreement with Mr Jim Shannon. He is not in the Chamber at the moment, but tackling child poverty is not a pie-in-the-sky aspiration — it can be done if all Departments and the Executive prioritise it. Child poverty can be eradicated.

The purpose of transferring responsibility for the early-years policy was to enable Government to build an integrated policy platform from which to deliver services to very young people and their families and to be able to do so in a joined-up way with the child, rather than the institutions, at the centre. My officials are currently developing a nought-to-six strategy to take that work forward, but I will return to that point in a moment.

"Early years" is not simply another phrase for early intervention, which encompasses a wide range of issues. Early intervention means identifying and addressing specific needs in a timely way, whether they are a child's speech and language needs, learning or behavioural needs. Those needs all contribute to the individual's ability to grow and learn, to develop and fulfil his or her potential, and, vitally, to enjoy the very

best start in life that every child deserves. The early years of a child's life are critical for his or her future development and well-being. It is during those early months and years that a high percentage of a child's learning takes place, attitudes are formed, first relationships are made, concepts are developed, and the foundation of all later skills and learning are laid.

It is therefore vital that early-years intervention — and indeed preventative measures — are part and parcel of our commitment to children and young people, and their parents and carers.

Earlier, I spoke about giving every child the best start in life. Making — and delivering on — that commitment to a vision of equality for children and young people is important to me, and that is captured in the 10-year strategy for children and young people. That strategy contains six high-level outcomes and indicators of progress for all children and young people in the North of Ireland, including those who are vulnerable or marginalised.

Is straitéis fhad-téarmach í seo. Aithnimid nach bhfuil cóngar ar bith ann agus go nglacfaidh sé am athrú tairbheach a chur i bhfeidhm. Caithfimid a chinntiú mar sin go ndéanaimid ár ndícheall lena chinntiú go dtéann an straitéis chun sochair dár ndaoine óga.

That is a long-term strategy, and we recognise that there are no quick fixes and that meaningful and sustained change will take time. Therefore, we must ensure that our energies and resources are wisely and coherently applied in order to ensure that all our young people are served by that strategy.

International evidence, including the work of Professor James Heckman, shows that there are significant benefits in investing in early intervention and prevention. One of the supporting themes of the strategy is that of making a gradual shift to preventative and early-intervention approaches, without compromising those children and young people who currently need our services most.

Junior Minister Kelly and junior Minister Paisley have been given particular responsibility for the co-ordination of policy for children and young people. They have a key role to play in driving forward the 10-year strategy and keeping the needs of children and young people high on the agenda. The junior Ministers will shortly bring proposals for the establishment of a ministerial subcommittee on children and young people to the Executive in order to improve the integration of policy and service delivery on cross-cutting issues.

The ministerial subcommittee was originally established under the previous Administration in the wake of the appointment, in August 2005, of a Minister for Children and Young People. The first ministerial subcommittee sat in October 2005, and its purpose was

to enable resources to be used to the best effect and to facilitate joined-up working. It was chaired by the Minister for Children and Young People — first, by Jeff Rooker, from August 2005 to May 2006, and then by Maria Eagle from May 2006 until the restoration of devolution. All Ministers and permanent secretaries, or their deputies, were invited to ministerial subcommittee meetings, and representatives of the Court Service in the North of Ireland also attended.

A draft Executive paper has been circulated to Executive colleagues for comments on the re-establishment and membership of the group, and that is scheduled to be discussed at a forthcoming Executive meeting.

The junior Ministers are aware of the growing body of evidence that supports investment in young children, and they plan to bring that to the ministerial subcommittee for discussion at an early stage. In addition, they secured funding in the draft Budget for exemplar, area-based interventions, which will help to demonstrate the effectiveness of early interventions locally and will highlight the benefits to children, young people, families and communities of joined-up working between Government and the voluntary and community sector.

The Department of Education's appreciation of the significance of early-years provision and its recognition of the importance of early intervention and prevention is drawn from extensive research — locally, nationally and internationally — into what works. In the Department of Education, research has helped, and continues to help, to shape both the content and delivery of education policy — particularly in the early-years sector, in which we are developing a new strategy for children under seven years of age.

That work has been helpfully informed by the work of Professor James Heckman and Mark Greenberg, both of whom were met in November last year in Belfast by departmental officials, and I will highlight some of the key findings that have emerged from the work of those distinguished academics and others. James Heckman, a Nobel laureate, has noted that ability gaps open up early — long before formal schooling begins — and that the highest returns are from early interventions that set the stage and create the abilities that are required for success in later life.

The longer we wait to intervene in the life cycle of a child, the more costly it is to remedy any problems and restore the child to his or her full potential. Early interventions produce much higher returns than later interventions. Other conclusions from Professor Heckman's work were that those who benefited from early investment completed, on average, almost one more full year of schooling; spent, on average, 1.3 fewer years in special-education services, such as those

for mental, emotional, speech or learning impairment; experienced a lower proportion of births in single-parent families; and experienced fewer teenage pregnancies.

4.30 pm

Early-childhood education and care has experienced a surge of policy attention in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries over the past 15 years. The Heckman study is one of many that are used in formulating the policy on early-years education.

The recent OECD conference that I attended in Dublin — jointly hosted with Mary Hanafin, my counterpart in the South — highlighted that early education is a shared issue in building strong, equitable and prosperous societies. The economic rationale for early-childhood education and care is based on the benefits to children, families and to society, compared to the costs incurred. Studies show that longer-term benefits accrue to society in the form of reduced crime, workforce productivity and a strengthening of the economy. The well-known longitudinal study in the United States, the Perry Preschool Project, showed a cost-benefit analysis of a £17 return for every £1 invested.

Our nought-to-six early-years draft strategy will draw on policy conclusions from a range of research material, including Professor Heckman's study. It will also draw on the excellent work that has been undertaken in that area in Britain, the North of Ireland and the South of Ireland.

I wish to turn to what I am doing to reflect that the needs of children, both in the early years and in the later phases of their childhood, are holistic and that we cannot allow our focus to be only on the academic progress of the child. Much of that work has been supported by the children and young people's funding package and shows just how important that resource has been, and continues to be, in making a difference to the lives of children.

Work in my Department is under way to formulate a new joined-up strategy for early-years provision that will bring Sure Start, pre-school and the home childcare agendas together in a cohesive way. A draft strategy will be put to the Assembly's Committee for Education in the next few months.

Our commitment to personal health and well-being has been reflected in the development of a pupils' emotional health and well-being programme that aims to provide young people with the skills to deal with the challenges of day-to-day life and thus build resilient young people. We have also provided counselling support to pupils in post-primary schools, enabling one day a week or three counselling sessions in each post-primary school that wished to avail of the service. Current provision is delivered by Contact Youth Counselling and our partnership with that third-sector organisation

is one way in which my Department contributes to Government commitment to effective working with the voluntary and community sectors, as outlined in 'Partners for Change'.

Young people, of course, have needs that transcend the classroom. Some do not make it over the classroom door or over the door of any youth club. Such young people have been supported, in particular, by our investment in outreach youth workers who work where the young people are, engaging with them and signposting them towards activities that will enhance their development and divert them from antisocial behaviour.

Outreach workers have also formed a vital bridge to young people who feel excluded because of their rural location, disability or sexual orientation. Youth workers enable vulnerable or excluded young individuals to be included in society.

Schools have also been able to make stronger links with the communities that they serve. The previous Member who spoke mentioned the extended schools programme, which has seen 500 schools throw open their doors, enabling activities such as breakfast clubs, after-school sports, study support and booster classes to take place.

The extended schools programme has developed the role of schools as learning hubs in their communities, responsive to community need. The core aim of the extended schools initiative has been to make a significant contribution to reducing differentials and improving the quality of life for children and young people from disadvantaged areas. One striking example of that is the Belfast Model School for Girls and Belfast Boys' Model School, which I visited recently. People will also know that I launched a full-service school in Ballymurphy. Those are models of good practice.

The motion refers to the important investment that is being made in children and young people through Executive programme funds. Mark Durkan mentioned some of those — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry to interrupt, Minister, but someone's mobile phone is switched on, and it is interfering with the transmission. Will the Member responsible please switch his or her phone off?

Mrs I Robinson: Minister, it is your phone.

Ms Ruane: Is it mine? The Member is right. I thought that it was switched off. I am very sorry about that.

Gabh mo leithscéal. As I have said, the Executive programme funds, the children and young people's funding package, and the supporting families package have all been mentioned.

The Executive programme funds were established by the previous Executive as a means by which resources could be focused on the Programme for Government

priorities, and as a mechanism to encourage co-operation between Departments.

In my own Department during 2005-06, the Executive programme funds resource funding of £10.5 million was provided for 17 projects, and, with the exception of one project that did not require continued support, funding for the other 16 was mainstreamed. Once mainstreamed, funding for the 16 projects was in excess of £10 million.

The children and young people's funding package was announced in three separate stages, and a total of £100 million was available. The overall objective of that package was to reduce underachievement and to improve the life chances of children and young people. A key aspect of the package was to fund actions and activities that were new, or expansions or developments of proven innovations, which would be underpinned by greater co-operation between Departments and their agencies to secure more effective services through integrated service delivery.

The supporting families package was developed as an addendum to the children and young people's funding package, and amounts to £6 million. In her contribution, Sue Ramsey mentioned the package, which involves a range of measures including parenting classes — another issue that Sue Ramsey raised. The package is also aimed at tackling antisocial behaviour through a regional database of family support services across the North. Furthermore, the package enables 25 additional speech and language therapists to work with schools, and provides services for young carers. That is only a flavour of the important work that the package has supported.

Priority funding packages, by their nature, are often intended to provide support for specific projects for a finite period only. During that time, the projects will have had an opportunity to prove their worth and ultimately should be either mainstreamed into departmental baselines or scaled back. In that regard, it is for the main sponsoring Department to decide whether individual projects should continue and whether they are of sufficient value to merit being mainstreamed.

When the children and young people's funding package was introduced, it was on the grounds that it was a baseline allocation, not a short-term funding measure. The activities and programmes that have been supported by the package have been progressed on the basis that they are long-term programmes that will make a difference. That is why I have written to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Peter Robinson, highlighting my serious concerns about the future of the children and young people's funding package. Those concerns were raised by a number of respondents to the public consultation on the draft Budget: many urged

that any possibility of securing additional funding should be considered.

I have also highlighted the difficulty that my Department has had in finding resources of the scale required to achieve the impact that is needed. It is important that the money is made available if there is extra funding.

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

Mr Beggs: The motion calls for the Executive to:

"invest in early intervention and prevention; and calls on the Executive to protect, maintain and further develop the investment that has been made in children and young people".

Many groups have made contact with members of the all-party group and with other Assembly Members to indicate the degree of uncertainty that presently exists regarding their funding. It is important that additional funds are found and that clarity is given to those groups. They have responsibilities as employers, and they have responsibilities to the communities and the children they have been working with.

I, and many other Members, referred to the impressive work of James Heckman, a Nobel-Prize winning economist. We are fortunate that someone of his calibre has been assisting groups such as Early Years in Belfast.

Michelle Mclveen advocated the expansion of the Sure Start scheme and also advocated giving additional assistance to young children and vulnerable children. To do that, she suggested that the Minister of Education should find funds from her existing budget by cutting other services.

Sue Ramsey concentrated on the need for positive parenting and the family matters programme. I agree that as parents we play a huge role in the development of our children. I also agree that help and guidance is needed for new parents, particularly for those who do not have extensive family support to help them in difficult times. Ms Ramsey also highlighted that the motion calls on the Executive to protect, maintain and develop children's services further.

Mary Bradley drew attention to the work of James Heckman and the concern of the All Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People for the children's sector in the current uncertainty about funding. She emphasised the need for funding and mentioned particularly vulnerable children and those with special needs. As a member of the Committee, she expressed her concern at the response of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who has taken almost no responsibility for children's funding: he believes it to be the responsibility of individual departmental Ministers.

I am concerned that junior Ministers do not seem to accept any responsibility for that matter, which I will return to later. Many of those issues are cross-cutting

and do not therefore appear high on the priority list of individual Departments.

Jim Shannon spoke of the need for long-term strategies and about the common-sense recommendations made by James Heckman. I concur that investing early and giving young people the best possible start to life is a common-sense approach. In that way, they will be able to make the most of their early education, whether it is in pre-school education or in primary school. That is important.

I am still uncertain as to what actions will be taken to reduce child poverty, which Mr Shannon mentioned. What actions in the Programme for Government will effect a reduction in that? Are we just adopting the figures and targets set by Gordon Brown and the Labour Government? We appear to have adopted those without having in place a clear programme that will be funded and that will enable child poverty targets to be achieved.

Michelle O'Neill expressed concern at the high number of children living in poverty and urged the Executive to target that area. She also spoke of support for existing funding programmes and indicated her support for the re-establishment of a fund to address children's issues.

Anna Lo indicated support for investment in young children and voiced her concern at the uncertainty of funding for existing programmes. She expressed the wish that children's funding should be clearly demarcated, so that expenditure levels are clear.

I, too, am more interested in achieving the funding and the result that will follow than in the mechanism for achieving that. If the Executive and the Minister of Finance and Personnel decide upon a particular mechanism, that is fine. However, it appears to me that, in the current Budget, the funding is not there. Departments are largely expected to try to find funding from within their budgets and from money that was previously allocated to them. Some £26 million has been allocated for expenditure on children, but even that represents funding at a lower level than that which came from the children's fund over the last two years, where £61.7 million —

Ms S Ramsey: Does the Member agree that one way of taking this forward is through recent announcements made by the British Labour Party? It has agreed to put additional money into funding for children and young people. Our cut of that money will go straight into the block grant, rather than being ring-fenced for children and young people. Does he agree that we should be calling for it to be ring-fenced for the purpose?

Mr Beggs: That is an obvious method of dealing with it. However, should the English funding level out, we would then be exposed. Current expenditure in Northern Ireland is at a much lower level. We would

not wish to become purely reliant upon future increases in England.

I appreciate that there has been a recent announcement; however, I want to know whether that is new money or whether it is money already accounted for in the settlement passed to the Minister of Finance and Personnel. The issue is clear: additional money is needed for children's services or children will suffer.

Danny Kennedy highlighted the OFMDFM Committee's inquiry into child poverty and the resulting reduction in life chances that it presents to those children. He indicated that, while the report is not yet complete, there is concern that, if the challenging targets in reducing child poverty are to be achieved, more action will be required.

4.45 pm

Mark Durkan spoke about a range of funding programmes that could improve children's services. He noted that European funding had recently changed, which has resulted in less funding being available to the sector.

Iris Robinson supports the early-intervention programme and highlighted the variations in child mortality rates in different areas of Northern Ireland and the need to identify and reduce those rates even further. She also supported a move towards preventative programmes. She supports Sure Start and wants it to be extended to an older age group. She again urged the introduction of the recommendations of the Bamford Report, but she did not indicate how they might be funded, an accusation that has been made against me in the past.

The Minister of Education believes that it is possible to reduce poverty, and she supports the early-years programmes. She stated that there should be a shift towards early intervention and prevention. That shift would be gradual to avoid adversely affecting other programmes. She stated that there was a proposal to establish a ministerial subcommittee, at the behest of the junior Ministers. I am absolutely astounded that, after eight months of devolution, the two junior Ministers propose that they are going to call a meeting with the relevant Ministers. I cannot believe that. The Budget process will have been completed, and the opportunity to deal with cross-cutting issues will have been lost. I am astounded that the junior Ministers have not had a meeting with relevant Ministers to deal with Budget issues; we are being told today that we can expect a ministerial subcommittee to be established after the funding has been allocated. That is nonsense.

I urge the Minister to take those thoughts — with which I hope that other Members concur — back to the Executive and express Members' concern that that is a clear case of shutting the door after the horse has bolted. Those issues must be addressed now, not after the Budget settlement.

I ask Members to support the motion, which attempts to address the needs of the most vulnerable children in our society, to ensure that all children have a good start in life and can make the most of their education. I reiterate what Professor James Heckman said about investing in young people because it makes economic sense.

Mr Spratt: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is not very often that I jump to the defence of the Minister of Education, but there appears to be something wrong with the microphones in the Chamber today. There was a problem when the previous Member was speaking, and the microphones need to be checked.

Mr Deputy Speaker: A problem was reported earlier, and I am told that it is being dealt with.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the work of Professor Heckman and Mark Greenberg on government investment with young children; urges the Executive to take note of the outcomes from this work, and to invest in early intervention and prevention; and calls on the Executive to protect, maintain and further develop the investment that has been made in children and young people, through Executive Programme Funds, the Children and Young People's Priority Funding Package, and the Supporting Families Package.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Funding Crisis for the Enler Project, Ballybeen

Mr Deputy Speaker: All Members who wish to speak will have up to 10 minutes to contribute to the debate. The Minister will speak for the final 10 minutes.

Mrs I Robinson: It is quite amazing that the Member who leads and promotes the Adjournment debate receives only the same amount of time to contribute as other Members who wish to speak.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The direction that I have been given from the Business Committee is that Members will have up to 10 minutes to speak.

Mrs I Robinson: Is there flexibility?

Mr Deputy Speaker: We have one hour for the debate, and the Minister has to be called before the final 10 minutes.

Mrs I Robinson: I ask Members to consider the details they want to put on record and to be mindful of time constraints.

The future of the Ballybeen estate in Dundonald is uncertain. The area can either continue to experience the economic and social decline that it has witnessed during recent decades, or, as an area of recognised social deprivation, it can be rejuvenated and reinvigorated through initiatives such as the Enler project. The future of the estate's 9,000-plus residents now rests upon the shoulders of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister for Social Development. If action is not taken immediately, £3.5 million of investment that is absolutely critical to the area's future could be lost.

The area's economic and social history does not make for great reading. Industries and businesses that formed the foundation of the local economy are declining and disappearing. If one takes into consideration the repercussions of Harland and Wolff's demise and the huge losses from Bombardier Shorts, the number of manufacturing jobs that have been lost in the area easily runs into the tens of thousands, while my constituency's biggest private employer, TKECC in Dundonald, closed in 2004 with approximately 2,000 job losses. During the same period, much of the Ballybeen Estate became rundown. Buildings became derelict and businesses were discouraged from expanding into the area. That created a distinctly negative feeling across the estate,

which was compounded by the closure of the local post office in October 2004.

Mr Deputy Speaker, the very facet of social cohesion is at stake — the future of schools, businesses, the voluntary sector, and of the local community in general. The Enler project has been shaped since 1999, following the closure of the Enler day-care facility by the South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust. I took part in a campaign to retain provision for the elderly in the Ballybeen area. Following several failed attempts to develop the former nursing home, the building fell into disrepair and became derelict. A campaign succeeded in getting the building demolished because it attracted a considerable degree of antisocial behaviour.

In 2002, Landmark East was given responsibility for driving forward the redevelopment of the site. The organisation is a not-for-profit company whose aim is to develop vacant and derelict buildings and properties for the benefit of local communities. It was invited to take over the development of the Enler project by a loose consortium of interests that included Castlereagh Borough Council, the South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and an umbrella group of local community organisations.

After considerable consultation, a plan was agreed to develop a centre that would provide community facilities that were managed by Castlereagh Borough Council, and retail units that were directly managed by Landmark East and would replace semi-derelict units at Ballybeen Square. The new retail facilities would enable existing retailers who were based in the square to relocate. The project would also provide much-improved services for older people. A new 50-person day-support facility for vulnerable elderly people was promised by the South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust. The new facility would be linked to other parts of the development in order to provide more opportunities for older people to engage in stimulating activity with other members of the community.

So, what happened? An economic appraisal was initiated in January 2002; funding was agreed in principle in June 2003; the economic appraisal was completed in October 2004; funding was confirmed in March 2005; a project manager was appointed in January 2006 and a design team was appointed in May 2006. In August 2006, the South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust informed Landmark East that it must purchase and own the facility. Subsequently, a new economic appraisal was ordered by the Department for Social Development. Planning permission was granted in December 2006.

In February 2007, the South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust submitted its business case to the Department. In April 2007, the trust was dissolved

as part of the reorganisation of local trusts and became part of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. In June 2007, the Department for Social Development's reappraisal of the project was completed. Matters appeared to be moving in the right direction until October 2007, when the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety plunged the entire project into chaos by withdrawing its support.

In doing so, by using the excuse of inadequate funding from the Department of Finance and Personnel, it attempted to absolve itself of any responsibility for failure. That announcement was followed by one of similar tone from the Department for Social Development. Landmark East, a community-based charity, had agreed to deliver the project in response to requests from statutory and community organisations. To date, it has borrowed £400,000 to fund the project, only for it to be aborted as a result of the withdrawal of potential funding by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Social Development.

Moreover, interest charges of approximately £2,000 a week are building up. Landmark East has, to date, paid out professional design fees of £112,633 on behalf of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, specifically for its facility. Landmark East asked, in writing, for those fees to be reimbursed on 31 October 2007, but it has not received a satisfactory response. That is an incredibly embarrassing situation in which the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust finds itself, and one that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety alone has created. Therefore, I take the opportunity to ask when that money will be reimbursed.

Over approximately 10 years, a huge amount of public and community resources has been used on the project. It would be a total waste of public funds were it to collapse now. At the same time, the project would be losing out on £400,000 of time-based funding from the International Fund for Ireland. The Enler project was agreed more than five years ago, and the delay since then has been caused by various statutory decision-making processes, including an appraisal process that has been spread over several years.

Why has the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety decided to renege at this late stage? Last year, the underspend in his Department could easily have covered the cost of the Enler project, never mind the savings that could have been made from efficiency savings, which the Minister refuses to initiate. Therefore, there is absolutely no reason why Mr McGimpsey should have abandoned the people of Ballybeen.

The Enler project, without the health facility, is still financially viable. However, as the trust had originally given a commitment to cover the cost of its facility, it is an utter disgrace that politics is being played between Departments at the expense of the people of Ballybeen.

The cost of the retail and community facilities could be met from existing funding. Even if the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety chooses to abandon that project's people, there is no reason why the Minister for Social Development should follow his lead.

The Department for Social Development recently designated Ballybeen as an area of risk. However, immediately after that announcement was made, that Department seemed prepared to withdraw £1.5 million of funding that had already been allocated. It is one thing to waltz on commitments to Castlereagh Borough Council, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Landmark East, but it is another thing entirely to treat the welfare of individuals with such casual disregard.

One local businessman has invested all that he has in the development of his businesses in Ballybeen, based solely on the support that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Social Development gave the Enler project. He has now been well and truly hung out to dry by those two Ministers. All that that businessman did was to act in good faith. If the Enler project collapses, it will make it doubly difficult to engage all such important players in any future partnership approach.

In conclusion, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Social Development have it in their gift to deliver the project for the long-suffering residents of the Ballybeen estate. Michael McGimpsey and Margaret Ritchie have the ability to secure those people's futures. The only question is whether they accept their ministerial obligations and commit the funding that is so desperately needed and that had previously been promised.

I conclude with the words of a few local stakeholders. Maurice Kinkead, the chief executive of Landmark East, whose commitment and dedication to the project is second to none, has said:

"As a charity, we agreed to help deliver this project 'in good faith' but have now been left with nothing but a substantial debt while government departments simply walk away. Having the Department of Health withdrawing funding was bad enough, but for DSD to join the mutiny is devastating. After many years of working with statutory agencies, confidence was being built within the community of Ballybeen that something positive was now being done. The collapse of Enler will destroy that confidence."

Adrian Donaldson, the chief executive of Castlereagh Borough Council, stated:

"We have invested a great deal of time and money in this project and have worked in good faith with fellow stakeholders. We are therefore deeply disappointed with the stance adopted by the Department of Health in withdrawing promised funding at the 11th hour. Ultimately it will be the people of Ballybeen who will pay for this."

Blakely McNally, the chairman of the Ballybeen Improvement Group — he is in the Gallery this afternoon, and I welcome him — said:

“Living on the estate I am only too familiar with the problems that local families and local communities face on a day to day basis.”

5.00 pm

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

Mrs I Robinson: I will.

Mr McNally continued:

“This project represented light at the end of a tunnel in the history of Ballybeen and should have been a turning point in the development of the area. Instead, we have been abandoned at the 11th hour.”

Mr Shannon: I support the comments of my colleague Iris Robinson. I pay tribute to Iris for the hard work that I know that she has personally done. She does not particularly look for credit, but it is only right that I should say that she has worked very hard for the estate over a large number of years. I hear that from the people on the estate and from Government bodies, and it is worth putting on record.

We are here today because we care about our constituency and the people in it. We are aware of the statistics and the need for action in our communities, and of the need to improve them and give our children a better future and a better life than we had when we were growing up. It is with that view that a number of community groups and Government bodies met in the Ballybeen estate to set up a regeneration project.

Ballybeen is a housing estate with over 9,000 occupants. I will provide some statistics to give those Members who may not be familiar with the area a flavour of the problems that exist there. It covers three electoral wards, one of which is in the Strangford constituency. The following statistics come from the Ballybeen Women’s Centre, with which my colleague has been directly involved. In the Noble index, it ranked one hundred and twenty-third out of 566 wards in Northern Ireland — with 1 representing the highest deprivation in Northern Ireland. It was in the worst 15% of wards in relation to health, education and poverty. The area is poorly serviced for statutory provision and has been affected by the polarisation that has occurred as a result of the Troubles. It has a strong single-identity Protestant culture. Some 20% of lone single parents in the Castlereagh borough live in the Ballybeen estate.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Member for giving way.

The Member has already paid tribute to my colleague Iris Robinson, who has undoubtedly put many years of work into this project. Does he agree that officials from Castlereagh Borough Council, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and other statutory agencies have also put tremendous work into this project? Does he agree that they are devastated, as are the long-suffering people of Ballybeen, whom he has mentioned?

They have been looking forward to this project for many years. They are totally devastated at the Health Department’s failure to move forward on this all-important project. It is absolutely disgraceful that the Minister has taken the action that he has.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I endorse his comments.

On the Ballybeen estate in 2001, 13% of births were to teenage mothers. Again, that is above the regional average. That comes back to the point that my colleague Iris made earlier: this is an estate that needs help.

In a review of the local economy in 1998, Castlereagh economic partnership found that the most deprived wards of Ballybeen distinctly lacked employment opportunities in professional occupations, with the majority of the unemployed population being in the semi-skilled manual occupations. It was also a huge blow to the estate and the local workforce when the TK-ECC factory closed its doors in 2004. Over 550 people lost their jobs. Again, a lot of those people were ladies, and it, therefore, hit them particularly hard. Statistics show that over 80% of those unemployed and living in Ballybeen have no formal qualifications.

These statistics are grim, but they must be acknowledged. They paint a very grim picture of the major issues on the estate. However, there is no doubt that there is a very real determination to change things. Be aware of the determination of the people of Ballybeen and their elected representatives to turn the situation around. That was very evident at the meetings on the health impact assessment during talks on the possible regeneration of the site at Enler. Although opinions may have varied on which option was best, it was clear that there was a real desire to regenerate the estate, and that desire was also shared by the Executive, the education and health sectors, the PSNI, Castlereagh Borough Council and the South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust. All those bodies are collectively trying to do something for Ballybeen.

The Department for Social Development provided £5 million to start the Enler project, and it was believed that it would not be long until the site was completed under option 5 of the economic evaluation. I do not intend to go into the details, but the positive outcomes that were anticipated included an increase in jobs for local people; the improved appearance of the immediate vicinity of Enler; an integrated approach to the provision of services, facilities and amenities; and the provision of a meeting place and community facility, a purpose-built day-care centre and medical facilities.

A phenomenal number of elements was supposed to come together as a result of that regeneration, which people had worked hard to achieve, and which would improve the estate now and for future generations. The community was to come together to improve the

appearance of the area and provide a place for children to have fun — that is also an important part of the Assembly's strategy. The estate was to be given a boost, community development would take place, and there would be greater involvement of residents. The residents want to be involved; they want to know what is going on.

No one in the Chamber could help but become excited at the possibilities that that regeneration project was to create. The statistics show how vital it was for the area. However, it is now clear that a severe crisis exists: not in the desire for the project, which remains as strong as ever, but in funding. Unless there is an immediate injection of cash into the project, it will falter. Not only will the estate be none the better, unfortunately, in my opinion, it will be worse off, and the hope that was building will have been destroyed.

The people to whom I have spoken about the project have made it clear what it meant to them as a community. To snatch the project away from a community that has suffered so much discouragement is not an option. More funding must be made available, and I call on the Department for Social Development to complete that which it started. It must pledge money to ensure that the project can be completed. The residents of Ballybeen must be allowed to become a fuller, more thriving community. The area needs a venue for those who wish to take evening classes to gain skills, a day-care centre to enable parents to go out and find work, and facilities that will bring the community closer together in an attempt to provide a better future for their children.

There is also an onus on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to deliver on the project. I am aware, as my colleague said earlier, of the businesses that depend on it, and which borrowed up to their necks on the grounds that it was going ahead, only to find that it is stumbling at the final hurdle. What is happening is morally incorrect, and I urge the Minister to respond in a positive fashion. I look forward to hearing his comments and genuinely hope that he will be able to offer the people of Ballybeen some hope.

The project is worthwhile, to say the least, and there are many who depend on it. I urge the Minister not to let them down. Grant the funding, Minister, and do so quickly, before morale falls any lower than it stands currently. I urge Members to endorse the proposal so ably made by my colleague Iris Robinson, and I ask the Minister to respond positively. The ball lies at his feet.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. There is no doubt that the Enler project is worthy of funding and that the matter deserves to be discussed in the Chamber. I look forward, along with the other Members for Strangford, to hearing what the

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has to say. However, on a number of occasions, references have been made to the Minister for Social Development. The debate cannot fully transpire without the acknowledgement and response of both the Ministers concerned. The Executive have sent one Minister to respond to this issue, despite the fact more than one is involved. Two Departments have repeatedly been mentioned. Will the Minister for Social Development respond in writing? How will that Minister respond to this debate?

Mr Deputy Speaker: As the Member will know, only one Minister can respond in the 10 minutes that are allocated for a ministerial response to an Adjournment debate. I am certain that the Member's point will be noted by the Executive, and that Mr McGimpsey will share it with his Executive colleagues, and, in particular, the Minister for Social Development.

Mrs I Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On this side of the Chamber, the DUP has made it very clear that two Departments are responsible and that we are not targeting only the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, although his thumbprints are on the outcome.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I take that point.

Miss McIlveen: I commend my colleague Mrs Iris Robinson MP for securing the Adjournment debate. For over 20 years, Mrs Robinson has worked tirelessly for the people of Ballybeen, and I fully endorse everything that she has said today.

Ballybeen is the second-largest housing estate in Northern Ireland, with around 2,400 homes. In 2001, the area had a population of over 9,000, approximately 2,500 of whom were aged between five and 25. Over the past three decades, the estate has seen a constant decline in social and economic capital. Economically, the greater east Belfast and Strangford area has witnessed the decline of its traditional manufacturing industries, such as shipbuilding, aerospace and textiles. The local people depended upon those industries for wealth generation. At the same time, the NIO took little action to direct inward investment to the area, choosing instead to provide areas such as west Belfast and Londonderry with attractive financial incentives.

When measuring social deprivation, the clumsy and inaccurate Noble indices do not recognise the three wards that comprise Ballybeen — Carrowreagh, Grahamsbridge and Enler — as being among the most deprived, due to the fact that they include areas of perceived wealth. The Noble index simply cannot identify significant pockets in respective wards and, as a result, is an inaccurate measure of deprivation in the Dundonald area. According to a local analysis of greater east Belfast, Carrowreagh is the lowest-ranking ward in east Belfast for access to services. Enler is among the more deprived half of wards in the area in

all domains except housing, which highlights relative deprivation in the ward more clearly than does the general Noble index. From the information available, it can be concluded that several local areas in the estate rank among the 30% economically most deprived in Northern Ireland.

In 2004, the Belfast Regeneration Office (BRO) cut the estate adrift from its work, with the loss of millions of pounds of future investment. Despite the fact that BRO existed to direct and co-ordinate the implementation of a regeneration strategy aimed at the most deprived areas in and around Belfast, it chose, on the basis of the Noble index, to exclude Ballybeen. The Enler project, therefore, represents a real chance to bring a halt to the ongoing decline of the estate and to instil a degree of hope and optimism in Ballybeen that has been missing for years.

Landmark East is committed to the regeneration of disadvantaged areas, and, in 2002, took up the challenge to help save a project that had previously collapsed due to the legal and financial mistakes of others. The intervening years have seen many delays, caused by a long drawn-out appraisal process and changes to the project by the local health trust. Landmark East has so far committed £400,000 to the project to keep it going, based on the commitment from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Social Development to actively support it.

Just as we thought that the project would proceed, the Health Minister essentially pulled the plug on it, leaving Landmark East stranded and robbing the people of Ballybeen of investment that could well secure the estate's long-term future. The partnership approach that was adopted by Landmark East set a new precedent in local development and brought together a number of different public, private and voluntary bodies. That approach represented an innovative way in which to deliver regeneration. If the project does not proceed, Michael McGimpsey will have shot a hole in the bow of such partnerships for the future. Landmark East has put a huge amount of unremunerated time and effort into the project. For its desire to improve the lives of the people of Ballybeen, it has received a slap in the face from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Social Development.

If the initiative were to collapse as a result of the withdrawal of funding, Landmark East would have to take measures to recoup the hundreds of thousands of pounds that it has already invested. To do that, it may well be forced to sell the Enler site, and a resource that has been set aside for community benefit will, in effect, end up in the hands of a local developer.

Mrs I Robinson: Is the Member aware that if the Enler project were to fall, it would have an incremental effect on further plans for Ballybeen square? The Housing Executive sees the Enler site as only the beginning of a whole new regeneration project to include doing away with the square, which has been identified mostly with antisocial behaviour, and putting housing and various other facilities in its place. The Enler project represents only one part of a greater plan. It would be a disgrace to lose such a project for the community.

5.15 pm

Miss McIlveen: I thank my colleague for her intervention and I endorse what she says: the Enler project is critical to a much bigger plan for Ballybeen. I ask — almost plead with — Michael McGimpsey to think again and not turn his back on the residents of Ballybeen. Perhaps the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, will also consider her Department's position on the matter. To do otherwise could be perceived as a total abdication of ministerial responsibility.

Lord Browne: I am pleased to support my honourable colleague Mrs Iris Robinson on this important subject. The Department for Social Development has identified Ballybeen as an area of need. It is imperative that no organisation or Department do anything to jeopardise the Enler project, which is an important high-priority scheme. If the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety withdraws the commitment to provide funding, the business case for the entire project will be considerably weakened.

Ballybeen urgently requires regeneration, and Members have heard in great detail how the scheme would provide new retail outlets and new day-care facilities that could be of great benefit to the community. Ballybeen is unquestionably an area of special need, and I call on the Minister of Health to release immediately the capital funding that his Department had previously committed in order that the provision of the long-awaited and much needed facilities for one of the largest and most deprived housing estates in Europe can proceed without further delay.

Mr Newton: Like other Members, I pay tribute to Mrs Robinson for raising the issue and for her work in the area. I know that she will not mind my paying tribute to the people of Ballybeen who, in the belief that the project would make a positive contribution to the betterment of the estate and the quality of life of all its residents, put their shoulders to the wheel. The importance of the Enler project in Ballybeen cannot be overestimated. The deprivation in the area has been acknowledged, and the Department for Social Development identified it in legislation as an area of need.

As a director of Landmark East, to which Members have referred, I declare an interest. That charitable organisation is an arm's-length company in the East

Belfast Partnership. Many of my fellow directors were highly enthusiastic when they first became involved. Various agencies asked Landmark East to help by delivering the Enler project. The directors, who took a positive, responsible and professional approach to the project's delivery, are now left with incurred debts of £400,000, yet Government agencies appear to be walking away.

Regardless of the legal implications, one would hope that Government bodies operate according to a moral and ethical code under which that unacceptable situation must be rectified. I am sure that the directors are protected from having to settle the debts of Landmark East. However, we may be asked to settle the debts by selling the site. No one can possibly believe that that would be in the best interests of the Ballybeen community — that option should not even merit consideration.

Expectations have been raised, and they will be dashed if that is the road that we follow. I have already referred to the enthusiasm of the people of Ballybeen. Their time and that of the professionals, business people and community groups who contributed significantly to the development of the project will be exhausted.

Perhaps worst of all is the fact that £400,000 will have been wasted at a time when financial prudence and accountability are being called for. Many will view that as departmental incompetence and mismanagement. Many questions must be asked. For example, why is funding from the Department of Health not available at this late stage, thus putting the whole project at risk? Why is that happening at this stage, when other commitments have been given? Why is the Department for Social Development also withdrawing funds that have already been allocated, especially as the project has been through all the necessary forms of appraisal, is viable and meets the needs of the community? Even without funding from the Department of Health, the Department for Social Development could go ahead. The project is viable regardless, yet the Department for Social Development is bowing out. Landmark East has paid out professional design fees of over £112,000, and, as Mrs Robinson said, on 31 November it requested reimbursement of the money, but did not get a satisfactory reply.

Ballybeen has been designated as an at-risk area. The announcement of the withdrawal of funding for the project came just as it was classified as such.

Mrs I Robinson: Is the Member aware that when the Minister for Social Development met community groups and other interested bodies at Northern Ireland Housing Executive premises, she openly agreed that Ballybeen was an area at risk and said that she would give it her undivided attention when she returned to her office?

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for that information, which well makes the point about the priority that has been verbally attached to the project. However, that verbal agreement must be supported by action. Pulling the plug will send a negative message to the whole Ballybeen community. The Enler project is critical to the entire future of the whole estate, not just the area that immediately surrounds it.

Reference has been made to Ballybeen square. It must be redeveloped to put the heart back into the community, which has suffered much over the years as a result of both the economic downturn of manufacturing and of paramilitary activity, which we all hope has now passed.

The project has been in the talking and in the making for 10 years. A huge amount of time and public and voluntary resources have been devoted to the project, only to see it now potentially collapse. The project was agreed five years ago, but since then, delays have been caused by all the statutory bodies that are involved dragging their feet and by an appraisal process that was spread over several years. There could have been no doubt that, at the end of that appraisal process, a thorough job had been done and that it stacked up in economic terms and in ways that would result in benefits to the community. If the project does not proceed, that will all have been wasted.

Landmark East agreed to help to deliver the project, and it did so in good faith. It has been left with nothing but a large debt, while Departments walk away. It is not just the directors of Landmark East, which was professional in its approach, or the businessmen and professionals who gave of their time free of charge who have been let down — the people of Ballybeen have been left stranded.

Mr Hamilton: All Members have clearly heard what the Member and the other contributors have said on this important matter. Does he agree that it is incumbent on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to send out a positive message today? It has been made clear by the Department for Social Development that although its side of the project is viable, it will not divvy up any funding until the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety does the same.

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for that intervention.

I will leave Members with a final remark. The people of Ballybeen have been left stranded: if this project goes down the tubes, people will ask where the benefit of the peace process is for those who live in the Ballybeen estate.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank the honourable Member for Strangford Mrs Iris Robinson for tabling the Adjournment debate because it gives me an

opportunity to set the record straight. As I have said before, I support the development of the Enler project, which is a community-partnership project in the Ballybeen estate that has been commissioned by the Department for Social Development.

The local community in Ballybeen has given careful thought to the development of an exciting and innovative project that will bring many benefits to the wider community. It is exactly the type of project that I want to see across Northern Ireland: local communities working together to tackle health and social inequalities in their local environment. The project will provide a mixed use, modern and accessible building, which will include retail units, offices and a recording studio. It is also proposed that the Millars Lane Day Centre for the elderly, which is past its best, will be replaced and relocated to the Enler complex.

Following misinformed comments in the press in recent weeks, it is important to set out my Department's involvement with the project. The business case for the health component of the Enler project was submitted to my Department in February 2007. That component is the replacement of the Millars Lane Day Centre, which provides 30 places on the outskirts of Ballybeen.

The Enler project proposals have been under development for some time, and the former South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust was a partner in that development. At the beginning, the trust proposed a contribution of £0.5 million, which would allow it to be a stakeholder in the new facility. The trust would then rent the space required to run a day centre for elderly people, thus investing in new and modern services for the elderly in the Ballybeen area. At that time, the financial commitment was entirely a matter for the trust, as the sum involved was within its delegated limits and did not require approval from the Department.

However, the trust was later advised that that arrangement could cause accounting difficulties. Accordingly, a decision was taken to develop a new business case for the full capital cost of the health component of the Enler project. With that new approach, the Department for Social Development also had to revise its economic appraisal for the project. When the new business case for the replacement Millars Lane Day Centre was developed, the capital cost towards the Enler project had significantly increased — from £0.5 million to £1.4 million. Due to the higher level of funding, the trust was required to submit its proposals to the Department for approval, which in turn had to seek approval from the Department of Finance and Personnel.

From April 2007, my Department has been working closely with the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, which now has responsibility for the health component of the project, to try to progress the scheme as rapidly

as possible. Many issues have been resolved, not least the justification for the substantial increase in the cost of the health component.

The total capital cost of the Enler project is £3.3 million, and that comprises £1.4 million from my Department, £1.5 million from Department for Social Development and £400,000 from the International Fund for Ireland (IFI).

5.30 pm

Following an urgent request from the honourable Member for Strangford, I met a delegation from the Enler project in August 2007. Our discussions were positive and constructive, and no one was left in any doubt that, although I supported the development of the project, I could not make any commitments on capital expenditure until the final outcome of the comprehensive spending review was known. I also advised the group that the indicative allocation of capital to my Department was well short of what was needed. At that meeting, I was advised by Mrs Robinson and the delegation that a possible plan B could be advanced. It would allow the Enler project to commence without the health component, with the understanding that the trust could get involved in the future through a phased development approach. At that meeting, I gave a commitment to progress the business case for plan A as quickly as possible.

The business case was submitted to the Department of Finance and Personnel two weeks later, in September 2007. I undertook to keep Mrs Robinson informed of the business case and funding position, and I wrote to her again in October. By that time, my Department's draft Budget capital allocation had been significantly reduced by some £30 million, to £714 million. I also advised Mrs Robinson in October that, despite the considerable difficulties presented by the draft Budget allocation, I would continue to review the funding position and make every effort to find an alternative way to support the Enler project.

I was pleased to note in November 2007 that Minister Ritchie declared Ballybeen an area at risk. That declaration recognised that although it was not a neighbourhood renewal area, it was nonetheless deserving of additional support to address significant needs. I was, therefore, surprised that my Department and other stakeholders involved in the project, such as the Department for Social Development, were subject to criticism in the press in early December. Through a partnership approach, many people — including my Department and the Department for Social Development — had been quietly working behind the scenes to try and resolve outstanding difficulties. Therefore, the comments were naive and unhelpful.

I am in no doubt that the development of the Enler project will bring numerous benefits to a marginalised

community. I am familiar with the Ballybeen estate; I know the community and the problems that it faces in relation to deprivation and unemployment, and I will continue to work with the local community groups to develop services in their areas.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGimpsey: No. Now is a time for the Member to listen.

This is about delivering services on the ground where they are most needed. That is the key to the reform of health services in Northern Ireland, and I am committed to making that happen. I have, therefore, been working hard to resolve the situation, and I am pleased that the IFI has extended to June 2008 the deadline by which a funding package for the project must be in place. However, the business case for the health component and Department for Social Development's economic appraisal are awaiting approval from the Department of Finance and Personnel. Until the Department of Finance and Personnel has completed its deliberations, I cannot move forward. However, I am hopeful that there will be a favourable outcome and that I will be able to make a positive announcement about the project soon. Of course, that is subject to a satisfactory outcome to the comprehensive spending review next week.

Members all agree that initiatives such as the Enler project sit at the heart of local communities — bringing together vital services for the young and the old. There is an onus on all stakeholders and interested parties to work together and move forward swiftly. I will continue to make every effort to deliver the project for the community in Ballybeen. I hope that I will soon be in a position to bring them good news.

Adjourned at 5.35 pm.

