
OFFICIAL REPORT

(HANSARD)

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NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 18 November 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Education, Employment and Training

Mr 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 wish to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech.

Ms S Ramsey: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its concerns at the number of 16-19 year olds who are not in education, employment or training; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline his actions to address this situation.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Young people who are not in education, employment or training are usually the most vulnerable in society. Often, they are the young people who have dropped out of school or who have left school with few or no educational qualifications. For that reason, I have taken on board — and we will accept — the SDLP amendment, which is quite helpful.

Such young people have frequently been absent from school or have been in care, and they are often on the fringes of the juvenile justice system. They are also the young people with learning difficulties, who — as the Assembly has discussed many times — can face huge difficulties in and barriers to accessing training and employment. Sometimes they are those young people who have given up hope of having a better future and better opportunities, and they have given up hope that their lives can be different.

For all those young people, it is crucial that we address how they can be re-engaged in learning, in attainment, and in seeing themselves as valuable members of their families, communities and society.

Those young people need to believe that we can provide them with the kind of services and support that will enable them to re-engage and make a success of their lives.

Approximately 34,000 young people in the North are not in employment or are not participating in training schemes or education. That represents 15% of all 16- to 24-year-olds, and the figure among 16- to 18-year-olds is 12%, or 9,000 young people. Although the figure for young people who are not in education, employment or training is slightly lower than that in England, it remains a huge area of concern.

A large number of young people leave education without any qualifications. Those young people make up almost 40% of those who are not in any kind of employment or training. Addressing the educational outcomes of young people while they are in school is crucial to improving their life chances and to ensuring that they are more likely to make a valuable contribution to society.

Education must work for all our children. After 12 years of compulsory education, no young person should leave without qualifications and skills. As the amendment states, I call on the Minister of Education to outline her plans to address the most disadvantaged young people.

The young people who are most likely not to be in education, employment or training are boys — almost twice as many boys are in that situation than girls. Among the girls who are at risk, young mothers are at the most risk. Young people with learning difficulties and disabilities are twice as likely to be in that position as those without. The group is also getting older, as young people who are aged 18 and over are more likely not to be in employment, education or training.

It is shocking and worrying that such substantial numbers of our young people are completely disengaged from any kind of occupation or improvement. It is likely that the current economic downturn will serve only to make that situation much worse. There are also substantial economic costs that are associated with youth unemployment. A 2007 report indicated that youth unemployment was costing the economy here almost £1.6 million each week.

I welcome the Minister for Employment and Learning to the debate. It is crucial that he outlines what actions he plans to take to cut the number of young people who are in that position. A dedicated programme of action is required, rather than simply relying on existing mainstream programmes. A concerted and focused approach must be developed that encourages young people back into the system as soon as they show signs of dropping out, and then supports them to find different and new opportunities if their current training or education is not right for them.

In England and Wales, the policy debate regarding those young people has progressed substantially, with dedicated programmes and approaches being established that are aimed at keeping track of young people as soon as they become disengaged with employment, education or training. That recognises that an excellent universal system for all young people is needed to prevent them from disengaging. It also recognises that young people who become disengaged — but who have no specific barriers to engagement — require an efficient and dedicated service to get them back into learning, and further includes a more targeted and intensive support programme to engage those young people who have particular barriers to participation and re-engagement.

I ask the Minister to outline the extent to which we identify and track young people who are, or who are at risk of becoming, disengaged. The Westminster Government use Connexions Direct to identify and track young people, and there are targets for the local authorities to reduce the number of young people who are disengaged. However, as far as I am aware, that service is not available here.

There are also proposals to make it a legal duty on post-16 providers to notify Connexions Direct if a young person drops out to ensure that they are not simply lost from the system and do not receive support. Will the Minister explain how, and to what extent, we track our young people who are at risk? What targets are in place to reduce the numbers of young people who are at risk at local level and overall? Will the Minister also clarify whether he is minded to introduce such a legal duty? If so, who would have that responsibility?

Most young people who are not in education, employment or training say that it is because the right provision is not available, or because they do not have the qualifications to proceed.

It is vital that a level and choice of provision be afforded to all our young people, allowing them the opportunity to progress. Due to the large number of those young people, it is crucial to have good entry-level programmes that specifically engage and support young people. It is also crucial that the programmes be flexible and have start dates throughout the academic year. That will mean that those who drop out have an opportunity for re-engagement.

We have often debated the lack of provision for disabled young people, who are not alone in finding it difficult to access the right course or to address the barriers that prevent them from engaging and progressing. I am aware of the excellent work of the Training for Success scheme in addressing the needs of young people not in employment, training or education. However, a more targeted programme and intervention is required.

Will the Minister for Employment and Learning advise the House about the success of the current provisions in re-engaging young people? Furthermore, will he outline whether he has any plans to introduce a strategy or service that is specifically aimed at young people not in education, employment or training, who require further support other than what is universally available?

Finally, as I said earlier, I recognise that the responsibility for those young people lies both with the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and the Department of Education. What co-operation has there been between those two Departments in implementing any strategy? I support the motion.

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move the following amendment: At end insert

“; and further expresses concern at the number of 16 year olds who leave school with few or no qualifications; and calls on the Minister of Education to outline her actions to improve the qualifications/skills base of 14 to 16 year olds.”

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Members who tabled the motion, which addresses an important issue that requires the full attention of the House. However, I believed that the motion needed to be strengthened because it gives the impression that the numbers of 16- to 19-year-olds not in education, employment and training are the sole responsibility of the Minister for Employment and Learning — a point that I am glad that Sue Ramsey addressed during her speech. The reasons that so many 16- to 19-year-olds are not in education, employment or training can be traced to their education before the age of 16 — to their secondary education, and, in many cases, to their primary education. That is why I tabled the amendment.

We cannot separate one part of the education system from the other as though primary and secondary education have no connection with further and higher education. They are connected, and what happens during the earlier stages has a knock-on effect during the later stages. If we do not identify the weaknesses at primary and secondary levels, it will be more difficult to address them at later stages in the system. That should not absolve the Minister for Employment and Learning from any responsibility, because he must play his role. However, the amount of success that he will have in attracting more young people into employment, training and further education will be determined by what happens during the earlier stages of our education system.

One of the main reasons why so many 16- to 19-year-olds are not in education, employment or training is that many young people finish secondary education without basic qualifications, and without basic numeracy and literacy skills. However, do not take my word alone for that:

“The recognised level of performance for entry to further education or onto the employment ladder is the achievement of five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, or equivalent level 2 qualification. Some

37% of children did not achieve that standard in 2006. Under-performance is concentrated in the most disadvantaged communities. Being caught on the bottom rung of the career ladder because of poor literacy and numeracy skills is bad not only for young people, but also for employers and the North of Ireland as a whole. Each year 4,000 pupils leave school without the necessary literacy and numeracy skills." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, p223, col 2*].

I was quoting the Minister of Education, so it is appropriate that she has just arrived. That quotation shows, therefore, that both the Minister and the Department of Education recognise what is happening.

10.45 am

In 1998, the Department of Education launched a strategy for the promotion of literacy and numeracy in primary and secondary schools. The House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts criticised that strategy in its report 'Improving literacy and numeracy in schools (Northern Ireland)', which is dated 27 November 2006.

That Committee found that 20% of our children leave school without attaining a level of competency in numeracy and literacy that would prepare them adequately for life. The report found that many of those young people do not have the basic tools that will enable them to continue in education or to go into employment or training. Of a total of 25,000 school-leavers, 7,000 are likely to leave secondary school with a lower-than-expected level of mathematics.

The report found that educational underachievement is particularly low among boys in inner city areas. In the Belfast Education and Library Board area, boys trailed girls by an unbelievable 29%. That reflects what Ms Ramsey said earlier about the low levels of young male adults in education, training and further education. That problem is even more evident in disadvantaged Protestant areas than in deprived Catholic areas. Only 17.3% of pupils in schools in those areas achieve grades A* to C in English. Even more astonishingly, only 4.4% achieve those grades in mathematics.

Only 37% of school-leavers from the most disadvantaged areas leave school with five or more GCSEs; the average across Northern Ireland is 61%. The skills base in neighbourhood renewal areas also compares very unfavourably when measured against that of the whole of the North of Ireland. In those areas, only 20% of people aged between 16 and 65 are qualified to level 2, whereas the Northern Ireland average is 45%.

A review of the Northern Ireland literacy strategy, which was carried out on behalf of the Northern Ireland literacy steering group in October 2006, investigated substantial research on how neighbourhoods influence educational attainment. Tests for the existence of those effects on 2,500 young people in Scotland found a significant correlation between levels of deprivation in the home and neighbourhood and levels of educational

attainment. The study's conclusions were that policies to alleviate educational disadvantage cannot be focused on schooling alone but must form part of a broader initiative to tackle social deprivation in society. That means that a cross-cutting approach must be taken.

It is now generally accepted that the children who face the greatest obstacle when it comes to raising attainment levels are those from disadvantaged families — they live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods or attend schools with many other disadvantaged children. In Northern Ireland, it is estimated that 102,000 children are living in poverty — that indicates the scale of the problem.

If social deprivation, which is one of the major causes of educational underachievement, is not addressed as part of a coherent strategy, the vicious circle of underachievement will continue unabated into the next generation. That point is made in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) anti-poverty strategy, entitled 'Lifetime Opportunities: Government's Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland'.

The OFMDFM report states:

"Policy must break the cycle and the process that results in children who are born into poverty developing into underachieving young people with limited aspiration and low levels of educational qualifications and skills. They in turn become working age adults living in low incomes often in poor health and benefit dependence, with the prospect of a shorter, less healthy, comfortable and financially secure older age. They are also the adults most likely to be parents of children again born into poverty — with the cycle continuing. Policy must disrupt this process focussing on different priority needs and different times in people's lives, from early years through to childhood, adult working life and later years."

It is undoubtedly true that education can improve the situation — school factors can raise attainment for an average pupil at GCSE level by up to 14 points. Clearly, schools are good places in which to improve children's skills.

Nevertheless, a strategy that focuses solely on improving average school performance is less likely to be effective in reducing educational underachievement than a cross-cutting departmental approach, involving communities, that addresses the causes of social deprivation as well as educational underachievement. Close co-operation between the Department of Education, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department for Social Development (DSD) is the best way to approach the problem. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Newton: Although I support the motion, I am pleased that the amendment was accepted by the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, and I pay tribute to her vision.

The motion is of the utmost importance and, in the current economic climate, it is timely. On many occasions in the House, I have stated that, in the past, Northern

Ireland had one of the most skilled workforces in the world. It will only be through training and educating our young people that a skilled workforce that suits economic needs will be created.

The House's aspiration must be for young people either to stay in education or training or to gain full-time employment, and their failure to do so would mean that they would not have acquired the skills that are necessary to meet the demands of future life. The Northern Ireland economy will prosper, and we will reduce the negative impact of the economic downturn, only when our young people learn. When the current economic difficulties pass, it is certain that the economy will change quicker and, consequently, learning and skills requirements will become increasingly demanding. Encouraging young people to stay in post-education training in order to acquire the skills demanded by a job not only supports them economically but improves their social skills and equips them to prosper in future life.

Approximately 9,000, or 12%, of 16-to-18-year olds are not in education, employment or training (NEET), and every Member must admit that that figure is shocking. Having asked the Minister of Education, I was appalled to learn that approximately 30 young people leave schools in my constituency each year with no qualifications.

Research demonstrates that the young people who are categorised as NEET form a diverse group. Some young people are planning to join that group, and, in some ways, I encourage that — they may be planning to take a gap year before going to university. Others may encounter significant barriers to their participation in education and training, such as poor home circumstances and problems due to offending or substance abuse. Whatever the circumstances, the policy must be to address those barriers, and, given the current situation, the likelihood is that that will only be achieved on a one-to-one basis. Children who have rejected school and stayed away from the classroom, have low educational-attainment levels, and have failed to acquire the necessary life skills are at the greatest risk of spending long periods in the NEET category.

It appears that young males are most at risk, especially those who have a statement of special needs. That suggests that measures to make classrooms — or learning environments, as we should perhaps call them — more attractive to improve achievements in the three Rs and to boost attainment are likely to have the biggest long-term effect in addressing the NEET issue.

Investment in preventative work is necessary through specialist training programmes. Individual programmes may not address the issue, but implementing the synergy that is required between programmes will help to address the needs of, and improve the long-term chances for, the most disadvantaged.

However, Ministers must ensure that that happens now, not some time in the future. The figures demand it, and it is the right thing to do for the young people, their parents, the economy, and Northern Ireland's society.

Turning to the amendment, Ashfield Boys' High School and Ashfield Girls' High School had poor educational records. They were categorised by low and poor attendance, appalling behaviour, and low staff morale. Over the past number of years, the head teachers — Andy McMorran and Adeline Dinsmore — and their teaching and support staff have raised respect for the school in the minds of the educational bodies, pupils' parents, and the wider community. Each school now has an environment that is composed and purposeful — pupils are uniform conscious and respectful, and the school corridors are covered with evidence of the educational and vocational achievements that have led to pupils' development as responsible citizens.

This is a complex issue that has many aspects. However, it is necessary that we address it.

Mr McClarty: One in 10 of our 16- to 19-year-olds is not in education, employment or training. That is a problem that we cannot afford to ignore. The costs of that statistic are enormous — the life chances of the individuals concerned are reduced, and their families, communities and society are affected adversely. The economy and public services also suffer due to lost opportunities in job creation and as a result of a reduction in revenue.

The Northern Ireland statistics compare favourably with the UK average. However, statistics for the UK show that it is thirteenth among the old EU membership of 15 states — only Italy and Finland are worse. Scandinavia and the Republic of Ireland have half our problems — approximately one in 20 16- to 19-year-olds is not in employment or education. We should be able to match the standard that has been achieved in those countries.

However, I appreciate that the Minister for Employment for Learning is on the ball on the subject. Any Member who doubts that should consult the Hansard reports from 14 April 2008 and, particularly, 15 October 2007, in which in answer to a question from Alex Attwood, the Minister spoke of his Department's commitment to ensuring that the NEET issue was dealt with in the Programme for Government, which was in preparation at the time. The Minister also outlined some of the measures that were in hand.

Large numbers of children are disengaged from the norms of society. In all probability, they were absent from school frequently and they gained few or no qualifications. Motivating members of that group to enter one of the programmes that are aimed at the NEET problem is likely to be challenging and would be best approached

by professionals. In fact, many in that group will be motivated positively against involvement.

The Department for Employment and Learning, through various strands of its Training for Success programme, is addressing the problem. It has in place flexible opportunities that consider the particular needs of the individual. I know that developments can be made, and I am confident that the Minister is advancing the agenda.

Some children have learning difficulties or disabilities, and they are in need of programmes and support that are tailored to their special educational and personal needs. There are programmes in DEL that seek to help that group, and I am aware that the Minister is seeking improvements in certain areas.

11.00 am

When one drills down, one finds that there will be other identifiable groups with different circumstances and motivations. A set of broad approaches and programmes are needed to address the overall problems of those groups and, within those programmes, the ability to provide advice and tailor courses and actions to individuals.

We are dealing with 9,000 different personal problems. If we are to halve the numbers classified as NEET and attain comparability with the Republic, we must personalise the solutions to the individuals. The motion relates to the actions that the Department for Employment and Learning is undertaking and new programmes that are being embarked upon. However, the problems and their solutions are interdepartmental. There is also a clear case for the involvement of the voluntary and community sector, particularly those organisations that have special expertise in interacting with young people, such as those with mental or physical disabilities or the hard-to-get-to groups with which mainstream society usually has little contact.

The Department of Education also has a significant role to play. We are becoming more aware of the need for early educational intervention to ensure that when young people reach their teenage years, they are established within the education system and have the capabilities to get the most out of it.

The Ulster Unionist Party supports the motion. We cannot abandon the one in 10 of our youth classified as NEET and the impact that that has on their life chances. My party supports fully equality of opportunity. Those young people need our help to access those opportunities.

Ms Lo: I support both the motion and the amendment. It is totally unacceptable for our young people to leave school every year with few or no qualifications. The statistics show that 9,000 of our 16- to 18-year-olds are not in education, employment or training, and that is worrying. It is not what our young people or their families

aspire to. It is not only a waste of a young person's potential, but a loss to society and the economy as a whole. As we know, such young people are more prone to future long-term unemployment, social exclusion, poverty and poor mental health. I look forward, therefore, to hearing the Minister's plan for addressing the issue.

However, the Department for Employment and Learning alone will not be able to solve the problem. We must get those young people interested in learning from a young age — from pre-school programmes right up to age 16 before they leave school. We must address the low attainment level in some of our schools and raise the aspirations of our young people. We must stop young people from falling out of education, training or employment by motivating and encouraging them while they are still in school and offering attractive and relevant provisions post-16 years of age.

As other Members have said, the gender gap is widening, with 16-year-old boys being more likely to be not in employment or education than 16-year-old girls. We must get those young males interested in acquiring qualifications. However, it is important that the training courses and opportunities available are relevant to them and meet their needs. It is such a pity that we now see so many apprentices being made redundant in the construction industry — although I understand that the Department for Employment and Learning is doing what it can to help those young people to redress the situation. The majority of the young people who are not in employment, education or training are only in that situation for a short period.

The Government must urgently ensure that those young people are quickly re-engaged in education, employment and training. Young people and those at risk of dropping out must be identified by those services as early as possible in order to ensure that the right interventions are made to secure the relevant skills and knowledge that open the way to training and employment. That will enable those young people to make informed choices about their future.

People with specific needs, such as learning difficulties or disabilities, must be given help and support that enables them to overcome barriers to participation, and that places them on a level playing field. The reason that school-leavers from ethnic minorities have below-average education attainment must be seriously considered by the Department of Education, in order that those people avoid missing higher and further education and employment opportunities. They must be offered the chance to reach their potential and to contribute to society.

Mr Easton: Everyone in Northern Ireland is living in difficult times. Challenges arise from the pressing need to establish devolved institutions against a background of a historical and frightening underinvestment

in our physical infrastructure and a breakdown in community cohesiveness that stems from four decades of violence and disturbance.

The collapse of the world's capital system multiplies those difficulties, and means that solutions must be found in an environment in which resources are extremely limited. Times are challenging for everyone, but for young people in particular.

Recent research by Barnardo's has shown that many older people have a negative and stereotypical view of youth. It is easy to get matters out of proportion and perspective. We should be proud of the vast majority of young people, and parents and teachers who helped those young people to fulfil their academic ambitions and make a positive contribution to society. Schools, colleges and universities throughout the Province have dedicated staff, parents and governors who ensure that everyone has the education and training opportunities that allow those young people to get on in life and to obtain suitable and rewarding employment.

Experience informs me how much I owe to people who helped me in school and in further education. The period of moving from education to employment is crucial, and young people must make that transition in an environment that presents many challenges and obstacles. Traditional family structures have altered greatly, and the rapidly changing labour market faces years of recession. Young people who do not make the best use of their time at school and who do not opt for further education or training are at a serious disadvantage, which presents society with a serious and costly problem.

Mr Shannon: Does the Member agree that statistics issued by the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning showed that young Protestant males underachieved in comparison with their Roman Catholic counterparts? Does the Member agree that something must be done to assist young Protestant males in urban areas to integrate into society and to reach their full potential?

Mr Easton: I thank the Member for that intervention and I agree with his comments. I urge the Minister to give that matter urgent consideration, with a view to addressing that problem.

I have been referring to young people between the ages of 16 and 24. However, Members must concentrate their attention and energy on the group aged 16 to 18, often referred to as NEET — not in education, employment or training.

Children most at risk have an impoverished background and low educational attainment. That includes those who, for one reason or another, are persistent truants, are frequently excluded from school, and who may use alcohol and drugs. Those not in education, employment or training also includes children with disabilities, those in care, and those who are involved in crime and

antisocial behaviour. There are also many teenage mothers who are not in education or employment.

Those young people often have a very negative self image and low self-esteem. They feel a deep sense of failure and are easily persuaded into criminality and antisocial activity.

We must realise that a big factor is that many young people are functionally illiterate and lack many important life skills. Perhaps part of the solution is to concentrate a lot of energy and resources on our schools so that there are early indications of the children who are most at risk. Can we appoint a task force that comprises those who work in schools, such as teachers and counsellors, and who have experience in addressing successfully children's literacy and who can advise us on how to deal with what is a central problem? Can the Children's Commissioner be involved in the urgent formulation of a serious response to a serious problem?

We must put huge emphasis on school attendance and review constantly the academic performance of children. We must provide all schools with specifically tasked counsellors who follow children through their secondary education to ensure that they have structured support. We must ensure that no one leaves school without being able to read and write to a standard that allows them to function comfortably in the workplace. We must work with disadvantaged families and provide resources in community settings where those who need help can receive it.

In order that no time is wasted in arriving at the appropriate courses of action, we could learn a great deal from the experiences of other countries that are tackling the same problems. We cannot afford to deny the skills and opportunities that are necessary to succeed in life to such a percentage of young people. We are talking about 34,000 young people, which is 15% of 16- to 23-year-olds, and 9,000 15- to 18-year-olds, which is 12% of that age group. That is a devastating indictment of the system, and the situation cannot be allowed to continue.

I join my colleagues in calling on the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline how he will address the situation.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh dhíospóireacht an lae inniu. Beidh mé ag labhairt mar Chomhalta den Tionól agus ní mar Aire Oideachais.

I am speaking as an Assembly Member, rather than as the Minister of Education. I welcome the motion — this is a very important issue, which is one reason why I was moved to speak in the debate as a Member. I thank Sue Ramsey for tabling the motion, and we have accepted the amendment.

Throughout my life, I have said that we must address disadvantage and disadvantaged groups. The level of disadvantage in our society is frightening. Our at-risk children were mentioned earlier, and it is essential that programmes are implemented in every Department to help them. Our children from the Travelling community suffer multiple disadvantage in all indices across all Departments. Working-class Protestant boys were mentioned, and they face significant discrimination in our system in every area of deprivation.

Our girls face different barriers to our boys, but those barriers are significant. Indeed, the previous Member who spoke mentioned some of them. In addition to teenage pregnancy, our girls have to contend with a high incidence of violence against women and children, which is so widespread that many do not report it. That has a huge impact on them throughout their lives, and it creates intergenerational difficulties for their children. We must stop that cycle of disadvantage.

Catholic working-class boys also face serious disadvantage. Although Protestant boys face a higher rate of disadvantage, that does not mean that there are not Catholic boys who suffer disadvantage. All Departments must, therefore, target resources on the basis of need.

In our migrant communities, there are young people from different parts of the world who face multiple barriers in their lives. The Assembly must implement mechanisms to support those people. Our education system must be more flexible at all levels.

11.15 am

Some Members talked about transition periods and about early-years provision, both of which are crucial for young people because they are times of change. All transition periods are important; from pre-school and primary school to post-primary education, and from post-primary education to further education.

We need a good, flexible careers strategy, as we are losing children before the age of 16. Many young people find the year between the ages of 15 and 16 difficult, and that is often when they fall away from the system. However, they cannot enrol in a further education college at that age; therefore, we must consider the difficulties associated with transition periods.

We need to create job opportunities. It has been said that girls are more likely to have jobs, but those jobs are often poorly paid, and many of them remain in those jobs throughout their lives. Therefore, we must create real job opportunities for young women and men, and the cross-departmental investment strategy gives us an opportunity to do that. We can exert a positive influence and change people's lives through public procurement. Billions of pounds will be spent in the investment

strategy. New procurement guidelines have been produced, and all Departments must adhere to them.

Every public spending project should include social objectives, such as employment of the long-term unemployed and apprenticeship training. We can and should take the initiative now, as it could have a dramatic effect. For instance, if one job was created or one apprentice was trained for every £500,000 that the Executive plan to spend, it would equate to 40,000 people over the next decade. We need some radical, well-thought-out interventions to bring about change for unemployed working-class people.

Mr Hilditch: I welcome the opportunity to debate the issue, and I support the motion as amended.

Over the past 10 years, Northern Ireland has had a higher rate of long-term unemployment than the rest of the UK. In December 2007, some 9,000 people between 16 and 18 years of age and 19,000 people who are between 16 and 20 years of age were economically inactive, not participating in Government training schemes or in full-time education. Therefore, it is time for the Minister and the Department to address the numbers of 16- to 19-year-olds who are not in education, employment or training and to give priority to that age group in the Lifetime Opportunities anti-poverty strategy.

A survey by Barnardo's revealed that four out of 10 young people in the Province live in poverty. The level of poverty in Northern Ireland is worse than in England because more parents are on benefits, families are bigger, incomes are lower and the cost of living is higher. Those children are more likely to become addicts, to get involved in crime and to become homeless.

Poverty has serious implications for children's development, and children born into poverty find it difficult to move on and to get out of those situations. Their health is affected, their educational attainment is affected, and their chances of getting good employment are affected. They will be affected by crime and by addiction to drugs and alcohol. They may not necessarily become addicted themselves, but they will be affected by other members of their families or communities who are in those situations.

The term "NEET" is used to describe 16- to 18-year-olds who are not in education, employment or training. Ten per cent of all 16- to 17-year-olds across Northern Ireland fall into that category, and that has been a steady trend since 2004.

We have only to look at our constituencies and communities to see how many youths are hanging about without jobs, apprenticeships or education. Research shows that 16- to 18-year-olds who are not in education, employment or training increase their potential for unemployment, low income, depression and poor mental health in later life.

In November 2008, approximately 610 people in Carrickfergus, which is in my constituency of East Antrim, are claiming jobseeker's allowance. Young people say that they are not in education, employment or training because they do not have the right qualifications to progress or because the right provision is not available.

In October, we discussed the fact that fewer than 10% of people with learning difficulties are in paid employment; there is no doubt that there is a huge gap for people with learning difficulties finding employment. Those people are socially and educationally disadvantaged. It is not only people with special needs who are in need of more employment opportunities; disabled people are losing out.

It is time for the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning to work together to get economically inactive people into further education, employment or some kind of training.

I welcome the Minister for Employment and Learning's recent announcement that his Department will contribute a modest amount of conditional funding towards the additional wage costs that are incurred by foster employers who take on apprentices. I also welcome the news that the age limit for apprenticeships has been removed, and I commend all those who have taken up apprenticeships. The contribution of apprenticeships to society is vital, because they offer the potential to obtain a qualification while following a career path.

We are all aware of the current economic climate, but we must not let that interrupt those people who wish to enter apprenticeships. With the help and support of family and friends, most young people can make a successful transition from childhood to adulthood. However, the Department for Employment and Learning must tackle the multiple barriers to participation that prevent some young people from receiving the careers advice and guidance that they require.

I understand that getting people out of need will be a cross-departmental issue, and not one solely for the Department for Employment and Learning to address. If Departments can work together to reduce fuel poverty by 2016, upgrade deprived housing areas, and halve child poverty by 2010, that will help to reduce the numbers of those who are in need.

I thank those Members who proposed the motion and those who tabled the amendment. I look forward to the Minister's response.

Mr K Robinson: I support the motion and the amendment, as did my colleague David McClarty.

It is important to remember that most young people between the ages of 16 and 19 are not in the NEET category. Although we all take great pride in our children and grandchildren, and those of our relatives, neighbours and friends, who are getting on with life and building

their futures, we can all identify young people — that one in 10 — who are outside that busy and fulfilled majority; those who, for one reason or another, are not getting on and building for future fulfilment in life, attainment and happiness.

From any ethical standpoint, given economic considerations of loss of opportunity and its impact on the net national product, state income and state expenditure, or of the social impact on the individual and his or her family and community or society in general, the problem cannot be ignored. There is an imperative on society and on Government to put resources into tackling the problem.

If I am reiterating any of the arguments that were made by my party colleague and other Members, it is because this is such an important point. Those in the NEET category represent one of the most significant social and economic challenges facing this Assembly and this Administration.

Although the Department for Employment and Learning has a responsibility to deal with the consequences of young people's not being in education, employment or training, the die is often cast for those young people much earlier, in their primary-school years. Children who move into post-primary education with minimal capabilities in reading and writing, and who are not able to add, subtract, multiply and divide, will experience severe difficulties as they move from primary class-based teaching methods to post-primary subject-based teaching. If, after seven years of education, children arrive in post-primary education ill-equipped to cope with the variety of classes and the intensity of class work, and are unlikely to catch up, they will get little or nothing out of a further five years of formal schooling.

Mr McClarty: Is the Member saying that it is much more important to invest in primary education than to rectify what has gone wrong in post-primary education?

Mr K Robinson: Yes, that is what I am saying. It is much more cost-effective, too.

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute to speak.

Ms S Ramsey: I am taking his minute off him.

I appreciate what the Member said. However, he should take on board the point that I made earlier when I accepted the SDLP amendment. The Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education have roles to play, as do other Departments. Will the Member confirm that he is not saying that we should not focus on those 34,000 and more young people who are not in education, employment and training? There are two streams to concentrate on; we must focus on the young people who are in education,

employment and training now, but we must also ensure that young people do not fall into the NEET category.

Mr K Robinson: I thank both Members for their helpful interventions. We have a problem that we must deal with now, and we have an ongoing problem that must be dealt with at source. In fact, we must go back beyond primary education and get into the home, almost as soon as the child is born, in some instances, in order to compensate.

It is no wonder that so many children become disengaged, become problem children in their schools, and are persistently absent, with all the attendant dangers of being on the streets. All of that is well documented, and I refer Members to the Committee of Public Accounts report on literacy in Northern Ireland schools, which was published in 2006. That report revealed that in 2004-05, nearly one quarter of children in Northern Ireland left primary school below the standard level, with resultant adverse effects on their future life chances.

Indeed, the Prince's Trust report, 'The Cost of Exclusion: Counting the cost of youth disadvantage in the UK' highlights and enumerates the cost of educational underachievement, particular in literacy and numeracy. The Prince's Trust quotes an International Adult Literacy Survey that shows that 22% of 16- to 25-year-olds in GB lack the basic literacy and numeracy skills to operate effectively in the job market. Without those skills, they cannot operate effectively in society.

In Northern Ireland, 20% of school-leavers lacked those skills, which is a little better than the average in GB. However, as other Members have mentioned, we do not compare favourably with other EU states. We must learn from the culture of learning in those countries.

Primary education is fundamental to addressing the challenge of young people who are categorised as NEET. To focus on what happens at the age of 11 is to miss the point entirely. Improving basic literacy and numeracy at primary level will have a major impact on the size of the NEET problem; although, as has been highlighted, it will take a few years for the improvement to be seen in the 16- to 19-year-old group. However, if we make serious inroads into the level of young people who are classified as NEET, we will achieve a major improvement for our country, economically and socially.

We have an economic and social duty to do better for our young people. The Minister for Employment and Learning's approach to the matter is proactive, and I look forward to hearing what he is doing when he responds to the debate. The largest part of the problem, and the means of making the greatest long-term impact to reduce the level of people who are classified as NEET, lies with the Department of Education. The allocation of money and resources at primary level and programmes to improve literacy and numeracy are fundamental to addressing the economic and social

changes that are posed by the far too high numbers of young people who are categorised as NEET and whose talents and skills are wasted.

I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I support the motion and the amendment.

A worrying number of young people are not in education, employment or training, and the reasons behind the figures are as varied as the young people themselves. When young people leave school, they have more choice in their career paths and in their learning options than ever before. However, they also face more problems than ever before in sustaining themselves through education and training, and, ultimately, in finding employment.

University and further education is now heavily associated with tuition fees and inevitable debt. The financial pressures that are associated with university mean that people who leave school at 16 and come from a disadvantaged background are put off from pursuing higher education, and that must change. Social background has also been proven to affect a young person's determination and drive to find and pursue a career path, and that means that young people need greater support throughout their primary and secondary education in order to give them the necessary mindset to pursue either further education or training.

Reports have proven that young people who are not in education, employment or training are more likely to become involved in antisocial behaviour, drug use and alcohol misuse. Although not everyone fits into that bracket, resources are diverted to deal with those knock-on effects. I worry that a significant number of young people who remain in the NEET bracket can generate an unwelcome trend for younger family members, who may also develop lower determination to succeed and may follow a similar path simply because their peers do not provide an example.

People who wish to follow apprenticeships in the current economic climate are also at a disadvantage, and many have been engaged in training only to see the employers who took them on terminate their employment due to the downturn in many trade sectors. Incentives must be given to employers to encourage them to take on apprentices in that climate and to see the training to its conclusion. Northern Ireland has thrived on good tradesmen, and it would be detrimental in the long term to the Province for a trend to develop of young people rejecting the path of learning a trade.

The problems are too numerous to cover in the Chamber today, and, given the range of issues that has been discussed, I call on the Minister to outline how he intends to deliver on the measures that are required to reduce the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training.

11.30 am

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I welcome the debate and the contributions of Members. It is widely accepted that engagement in learning and educational attainment are critical to young people if they are to make a success of their lives. For a variety of reasons, including a range of social and personal issues, many young people do not continue in learning beyond the age of 16 or drop out between the ages of 16 and 19 and, therefore, are not equipped with the skills that they need for successful employment. Those young people are, therefore, the long-term unemployed of the future.

A recent labour force survey stated that 10% of young people between the ages of 16 and 19 are not in education, employment or training in Northern Ireland. That compares with an average of around 13% in the UK, as has been mentioned. Several interdepartmental strategies embrace the needs of that group, principally the 10-year strategy for children and young people. My Department is actively engaged in the implementation of that strategy, and its actions focus heavily on those disengaged young people. The Department aims to provide support for young people who are not in education, employment or training through the provision of appropriate further education and training, and careers guidance and advice.

By the age of 16, young people's attitudes to education and training are well established, and their views of themselves and what motivates them are very hard to change. I believe that young people must be engaged in education and undertake courses that offer success and motivate them. That is why my Department is working with the Department of Education to introduce a range of professional and technical courses to all young people between the ages of 14 and 19 so that they can experience a wide range of occupations and can have a chance to gain hands-on practical experience. The range of courses on offer allows young people to find out what they enjoy, to make informed decisions about their careers, and helps to keep them engaged.

As for the amendment, although I cannot comment on the responsibility of another Minister, what I say today has a bearing on improving the employment prospects of those who leave school with no qualifications whatsoever. A case in point is the joint vocational enhancement programme (VEP), which ran as a pilot scheme from 2004 to 2008, and which informed the development of a framework that supports local collaboration among schools and further education colleges.

That programme introduces school pupils to professional and technical or vocational courses at an earlier age and contributes to a more interesting and engaging curriculum. During the 2007-08 academic

year, 215 post-primary schools, including 30 special schools, together with six further-education colleges, provided opportunities for approximately 12,500 pupils under the vocational enhancement programme.

The VEP has shown that inclusion of professional and technical learning, as part of the curriculum, widens the education pathway provided to 14- to 19-year-olds by ensuring that they are aware of all the career choices that are available to them. In February, the Education and Training Inspectorate published 'An evaluation of the vocational enhancement programme in schools and colleges of further education', which stated:

"There is discernable improvement in the motivation and quality of learning of previously disaffected pupils through their participation in VEP."

That is why we must build on that type of provision through schools and colleges working together.

In order to address that problem in England, there are plans to change the law so that the age of compulsory participation in formal education or training is raised to 18. Of course, up to the age of 18, everyone should have access to education and training. However, the question of whether we go down that route will require some serious consideration. I have very strong reservations about doing so.

Further education colleges also offer a wide range of courses for people who leave school at 16 and who decide not to enter into employment or training. In recent years, further education colleges have enrolled annually approximately 42,000 learners between the ages of 16 and 19. Such learners receive advice and guidance on the course of study that is most appropriate to them.

Work is under way to enhance that process further to ensure that each learner agrees an individual programme of study to meet his or her aspirations and level of study. We aim to have the enhanced arrangements in place for the start of 2009-10 academic year.

The Prince's Trust team programme secured funding from the European social fund, which my Department's European unit administered. The training component of that programme is delivered by further education colleges, the cost of which is met by the funding allocated to DEL's further education sector. Statistics from the Prince's Trust show that of the 77% of Northern Ireland participants who finish the course, 84% progress to further study, training or employment.

Further education colleges also carry out extensive marketing each year in order to reach out to young people who are not currently enrolled.

The Department's Training for Success programme is firmly focused on the needs and aspirations of each young person, and offers flexible opportunities. Each participant is provided with a personal training plan that identifies individual needs and the specific actions

required to address them. The Department is committed to endorsing flexibility of training under the programme — time permitting — in order to enable young people with additional needs or disabilities to realise their full potential and achieve targeted qualifications.

There are several such programmes. Training for Success is designed to enable participants to progress to higher-level training in further education or employment, and provides training that is designed to address personal and social development needs and, where necessary, individual essential skills training. The Skills for Life strand addresses the personal and developmental needs of young people who have disengaged from learning and/or face significant obstacles. The Skills for Work strand includes those who have been assessed as not yet being capable of achieving a pre-apprenticeship, for example, due to low academic standards, specific learning difficulties or other barriers.

The Department has enlisted a number of suppliers such as Disability Action, Opportunity Youth and Include Youth, who will work in conjunction with training organisations to deliver the Training for Success programme. I have visited some of those organisations and spoken to young people whom they are helping. That was a very moving experience, and, as a number of Members have reflected, it was a frightening experience.

We have been arguing about the position of the 11-plus for a long time. I was struck by what Mr Bradley said. The problem is largely at 11-minus. Some young people are in severe difficulties by the time they reach the age of 11. The pattern is virtually the same no matter where one looks. Young people transferring from primary to secondary school without the basic building blocks — which many of them do not have — are facing uphill struggles.

When visiting one of those groups, I spoke with three or four young people who told us of their experiences. One young man had a brother who had been very badly behaved at school. He told us that he had been tarred with the same brush, and treated as if he were also a miscreant. He did not have appropriate reading abilities, yet he was trailed out in front of his class and forced to try to read something — he was made a fool of, and was then stuck at the back of the class, where he completed his education several years later. That humiliation — and that is what it was — is perhaps an isolated example in our education system. That is not representative by any means, but it illustrates how that young person became so hard to reach by the time he left school at 16. I am sure that every Member could quote similar examples.

We must also consider the current social and economic situation. I visited another unit, named Bytes, with which I am sure that Members are familiar. There, we

met young people who have a totally alternative lifestyle. Those young people are getting up at 2.00 pm or 3.00 pm. They are not part of a nuclear family, and do not have any significant self-esteem. They live in a totally different atmosphere, in a totally different world, disengaged from the system.

I have highlighted a number of initiatives that are being taken by my Department. We are also taking initiatives with the Department of Education on the career strategy and its implementation, which we hope to deal with in the next few months. That is squarely targeted at follow-up for individuals, but we have to be careful about data protection issues in respect of such monitoring. There is an enormous problem in respect of the gap between how those people are living, and how the rest of our community lives.

When proposing the motion, the Chairperson of the Committee asked me whether a specific monitoring mechanism is in place. In truth, the answer to that question is both yes and no. A specific monitoring plan does not exist, but we work closely with the Department of Education. The Careers Service follows up on individuals; however, there are data protection issues. I will take that up with ministerial colleagues as it is a cross-departmental issue.

I am not trying to pass the buck. As Members said, three or four Departments could be involved in the matter: the Department for Employment and Learning; the Department of Education; the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; and the Department for Social Development.

There is a gap. We are talking about thousands of young people, and the sad thing is that we are churning out more such young people every year and adding to that list. I welcome that, statistically, our record appears to be better than that of England and Wales; that is a tribute to the work of many professionals. However, I do not know that we can yet be proud of what we have achieved; we have a long way to go.

A huge pool of potential is being lost; that represents a loss not only for those young people for the rest of their lives, but for the entire community. How will those people make an economic contribution? How will they achieve in life through a fulfilling opportunity or job? There is a huge undertaking still ahead that will require us to work together at an interdepartmental level, and there is no problem with that. However, the system that Sue Ramsey asked about is not in place.

The Careers Service contacts 16- and 17-year-olds in that category with a view to engaging with them. For data protection reasons, however, the Department of Education cannot share information on individual pupils in order to formalise those arrangements. I understand that; it is one of the issues that we have to address. No one is trying to be difficult; it is not an

obstruction; it is a fact. As Dominic Bradley said in proposing the amendment, a cross-departmental look at the matter will do no harm.

The Departments co-operate closely on this. The Minister of Education and I are intimately involved in the careers strategy, and I hope that we will soon be able to make announcements about it, including the implementation of the strategy.

Mr Shannon, and other Members, mentioned the disproportionate number of young Protestant males affected. That is a well-known statistic, and there is no question that that is a huge issue. There is a wider male and female issue too. There are very complicated reasons why we are in this position, and much more work must be done to address that.

Through partnership arrangements between training organisations, early leavers from Training for Success are referred to the Careers Service — which has much to do with this issue — for follow-up advice and guidance. We are working with the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO), and there is a great deal of engagement with the criminal justice system.

My Department, and many Members, are deeply committed to taking the lead in a scoping study to research further data on this group in Northern Ireland; to identify the relevant actions in place across all Departments; and to recommend whether a cross-departmental strategy could achieve better outcomes for that group in future.

Given the multiple deprivation issues, I am happy to look very closely at whether the formal establishment of a cross-departmental group is needed to address those issues and to scope what we can do.

Society is losing a shockingly large pool of potential. No one can be proud of the statistic; just because it is slightly better than that of GB does not mean an awful lot. European statistics demonstrate that it is a shocking waste.

11.45 am

I will, certainly, engage with departmental colleagues and Ministers and return to the House in due course to inform it whether a proposal can be made at interdepartmental level that will tackle seriously and bear down even harder on that tremendous societal problem.

Mr O'Loan: I thank all Members who took part in the useful, instructive and constructive debate. The motion is timely. The case to get skills right so that the North can compete in global markets is compelling. That has, certainly, been brought into focus by the global economic downturn.

Members are aware that the USA might adopt a more protectionist stance. Barack Obama has indicated that jobs will be kept at home. That poses a serious risk to the North and, indeed, to the world economy if it

were copied by other countries. It must be challenged at the highest political level.

There is a compelling and distinctive case to enhance the skills base. In a debate on Monday 17 November 2008, I referred to the five drivers of the economy; infrastructure, competition, investment, enterprise and skills. It is possible that skills will become relatively forgotten among the five drivers. That will not do; indeed, it must be given extremely high priority. If not, the economy will be unable to get off the ground in the way that everyone genuinely wants that to happen.

It is interesting that in his foreword to the 'National Development Plan 2007-2013' in the South, the then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, referred to skills, innovation and research, which are the axes of economic prosperity — not the factor on which the Assembly often focuses; a low level of corporation tax. There is a lesson in that for the Assembly.

I refer particularly to the comments of Sue Ramsey and Dominic Bradley, whose remarks were amplified by other contributors to the debate. I appreciate greatly the consensus and support for the amendment that has emerged during it. I thank Sue Ramsey not only for her formal acceptance of the amendment, but for the excellent way that she spoke to the motion. She, quite rightly, pointed out that a large number of people are not in education, employment or training, which is simply not socially or economically acceptable. She said, rightly, that no one should leave the ordinary education system after 12 years without qualifications. That immediately brings in my party's amendment. I thank her for supporting it well.

Ms Ramsey made an interesting point that action must be taken at the first sign that someone might drop out of education. She referred to programmes to deal specifically with that in England, which identify young persons who might be at risk of dropping out in order to target them and deal with them intensively. The Department must consider such programmes seriously. In his response, the Minister referred to similar mechanisms in further education, which include working with partners in the community and voluntary sector. David McClarty also spoke in favour of and recommended that. Certainly, Sue Ramsey's message is valuable and important.

In proposing the amendment, Dominic Bradley made the key point, which was picked up and agreed on by all Members, that the matter is not simply DEL's responsibility. The Minister described it starkly when he said that the problem begins at "11 minus". The reasons why young people are not in education, employment or training relate to their experiences during secondary schooling and, indeed, much earlier. It is, therefore, critical that weaknesses are identified at those early stages. No proper life chances exist for young people unless they have basic literacy and numeracy skills.

That assertion was correlated by considering the experience of families living in disadvantaged areas. Members said that boys in inner-city areas are trailing and that the problem is worse in disadvantaged Protestant areas. Unionist Members must consider flexible educational structures to address that situation.

All Members agreed that we must break the cycle and work on early years. Such an approach will be less costly and more effective in the long term. Although schools can make a difference, a strategy that focuses solely on schools will be less successful. As Dominic Bradley said, the Department of Education, DEL and DSD must co-operate to find a solution.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank Minister Empey for being present for the entire debate. Moreover, I thank Caitríona Ruane, who spoke as an MLA rather than as a Minister.

Sinn Féin proposed the motion, and the SDLP tabled an amendment. I pay tribute to the number of contributions; such a degree of agreement makes my job of making the winding-up speech much easier.

Several themes emerged from the debate, such as the relationship between poverty and poor educational attainment and skills. Members on both sides of the House, and the Minister, mentioned disengagement with young people. The Committee for Employment and Learning discussed the needs of those with special needs and disability at its previous meeting — perhaps the day that Disability Action visited Parliament Buildings — and we discussed the need for joined-up thinking on the issue of providing opportunities for special-needs children, young adults and people with disabilities.

I will now address, go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, some Members' contributions. As Declan O'Loan said, the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, Sue Ramsey, made some all-embracing comments that comprehensively supported the motion and the amendment. She outlined how the most vulnerable individuals cannot find employment, education or training and, subsequently, stop trying. It is an indictment of society that so many young people are in that situation. Ms Ramsey called for a dedicated programme of action, discussed the introduction of legal requirements for training organisations and providers, and suggested how to tackle the issue of disability.

Mr Bradley — who has left the Chamber — moved the amendment and said that the motion is important and called for a broader approach to tackling social deprivation. During his winding-up speech, Mr O'Loan accepted graciously Sinn Féin's support for the amendment and mentioned the need for a cross-departmental approach.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Newton, said some things that I can easily relate to. In particular, he spoke about learning environments, which,

in my view, are critical. In my time, I have met very few young people who do not want to learn. However, much depends on the environment in which they are expected to learn, and also, to some extent, on the teacher/pupil relationship and other factors. Mr Newton said that it was a complex issue, and I agree with that.

Mr McClarty said that the problem is one that we cannot ignore. He referred to several existing programmes that are managed by DEL, such as Training for Success. Anna Lo referred to social exclusion and mental-health issues, and I agree with her remarks. She also mentioned ethnic minorities and asked the Department of Education to consider that issue — I have no doubt that it will do so. Alex Easton spoke in a wider context about the global issues that we face. He also said that we are proud of our young people, and I can relate to that statement.

Mr Cobain: Is the Member sure that she is in the right party?

Mr Speaker: The Member must not make comments from a sedentary position.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat. I am in Sinn Féin, in case Mr Cobain is not clear about that. Mr Easton and Mr Newton are on the Committee for Employment and Learning, and we work together to try to make things better for young people. This is an important issue. Mr Cobain is one Member in particular who associates himself with trying to speak for those who are socially disadvantaged. I commend him for that, and am glad that he is here to listen to the debate.

Caitríona Ruane spoke about disadvantaged young people and about mechanisms and transitions, all of which are important. Mr Hilditch referred to poverty, and he commented that he often hears that the right provision is not available. I agree that that may be the perception. Perhaps, for some reason, the message about exactly what provision is available is not getting out. Although the departmental officials — who regularly appear before the Committee — are trying to do their best, perhaps the message is not always adequately expressed.

Ken Robinson referred to investing in primary education, and William Irwin stated that the problem of young people not taking up employment, education or training has causes that may be as varied as the young people themselves. He also referred to apprenticeships and the current economic downturn, of which we are all well aware.

I welcome the fact that the Minister intends to consider that issue. Although the Minister did not mention it, the Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS) operates in Strabane, in my constituency, and also in Belfast and Derry. It is an advice service that is designed specifically to help young people to overcome barriers.

Some people in my area had issues with that service, and perhaps I will speak to officials about that. I very much welcome the cross-departmental approach to this issue.

12.00 noon

Mr O'Loan talked about skills and how the economy must be made a priority. He quoted Mr Ahern, and I understand the point that he was making. However, we must return to the issue of education, and not for just the economy. Perhaps I am running against the grain, but young people should not be thought of as people who simply go out and get jobs — education must be thought of as something that is a bit more than that. Go raibh maith agat.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its concerns at the number of 16-19 year olds who are not in education, employment or training; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline his actions to address this situation; and further expresses concern at the number of 16 year olds who leave school with few or no qualifications; and calls on the Minister of Education to outline her actions to improve the qualifications/skills base of 14 to 16 year olds.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Rural Out-of-Hours Ambulance Coverage

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

Mr McQuillan: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that rural communities are adequately provided for during periods of 'out-of-hours', and are not disadvantaged due to the reorganisation in the provision of ambulance cover.

I wish to place on record my admiration for all the ambulance staff in Northern Ireland, applaud them for the difficult job that they do, and assure them that, with this debate, I am in no way criticising how they do their job. I sought this debate in order to protect the emergency ambulance services that are provided to rural areas throughout Northern Ireland, not to demoralise or put down ambulance staff. In fact, the motion will enhance morale because ambulance personnel will see that the Assembly is addressing their needs. It will also greatly help ambulance staff to do their jobs even more efficiently and expertly.

One constituent was so worried about the response times to emergency ambulance call-outs in rural areas that he said that he hoped and prayed that he never had a heart attack at home. As someone who was born in, and who lives in, a rural part of Northern Ireland, I understand and appreciate that statement. In one sentence, that constituent summed up the fear of the rural population regarding the speed of ambulance response, which is a matter of daily concern to rural dwellers.

Living in rural parts of Northern Ireland is a way of life for many people, and those people neither know nor want anything else. Living where they do, should they, therefore, be subject to a second-rate emergency ambulance service? Of course not. That, however, is the reality for those of us who dwell in rural areas. It is all very well for the Minister to say that an ambulance should reach an urban emergency call-out in eight minutes. It is rarely added that the target for rural areas is 20 minutes or more.

Table 4.20 in the 'Health and Social Care Inequalities Monitoring System Second Update Bulletin 2007' shows that the median response time for rural call-outs in 2004 was 14 minutes, but that rose to 14.3 minutes in 2006. The median response time for urban areas during the same period fell from 7.3 minutes to 6.6 minutes. That does not make for comforting or easy

reading for the rural dwellers of Northern Ireland. The use of a median figure is, in any case, a statistical illusion; it is a centre point on a line and has nothing to do with reality. It is just a useful piece of spin for the Minister to use when trying to convince rural dwellers that things are getting better. The more telling figure is the 91% higher rural response time on the same page of the bulletin.

Although I welcome the Minister's substantial investment of £12 million in the Ambulance Service over the next three years, I am more concerned about the reliance and importance that he places on the purchase of rapid-response vehicles (RRVs). I can see the value of RRVs in urban areas, but I fail to see their real use in rural Northern Ireland. Many others share the view that they are nothing more than an attempt to reduce statistically the response times in rural areas by using an estate car that cannot transport patients to hospital. In fact, an ambulance has to be mobilised in addition to an RRV in order to transport a patient to hospital.

This is not value for money in rural areas but a smokescreen to hide reality. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that it is a total waste of money, with two vehicles being mobilised for callouts at a substantial cost to the public purse, while vital resources that could be better utilised elsewhere are tied up. Does the Minister honestly believe that that is the way to achieve an efficient emergency ambulance service that is geared to the patient, while still making the required 3% efficiency savings over the next three years? The approach that the Minister has adopted will endanger, rather than save and protect, lives in rural areas of Northern Ireland.

The Minister has constantly referred to the 3% efficiency savings that every Department must make over the next three years. Perhaps a good start would be to examine the futility of wasting precious resources in the doubling up of equipment and skilled personnel in an attempt to make rural dwellers believe that they are being afforded a better ambulance service.

Ambulance crews want to save lives, and they do so often. However, some have told me that they foresee greater difficulty in continuing to do so, and that a reduction of cover will become a fact as a result of the use of RRVs. One crew member described the use of RRVs as a weapon in public confidence, rather than a useful tool in rural areas.

The Minister said in a press release on 7 October that there would be an increase of 61,000 hours of emergency ambulance cover. However, he failed to clarify that hours of cover provided by RRVs were included in that figure. That is an unintentional misrepresentation of the facts.

The people of Northern Ireland have a right to a twenty-first-century emergency ambulance service. Rural people have to wait the longest and are being fed

a hyped-up version of something that is not going to be reality for them. The fact is that RRVs will replace ambulances. The rural population needs ambulances, not RRVs. That population also needs response times to be reduced, something that can be achieved by stationing crews in strategic locations where they can respond quickly to emergency callouts to a greater degree than at present. I appreciate that that might be difficult for crews, but could rural medical practices not be used as local ambulance bases? The facilities that crews need would be there for them. Of course, if a crew is required to attend an emergency away from the area, it goes without saying that it would be dispatched.

At the beginning of my contribution, I talked about one of my constituents and his fear of having a heart attack in his rural home. One of his relatives had a heart attack at 6.00 am in Portstewart and the cardiac ambulance, dispatched from Coleraine, took 11 minutes to reach the patient. Therefore, it is not surprising that my constituent feels uneasy about his chances of ambulance cover if he has a heart attack. The Minister will doubtless say that an RRV is the answer, but that is not the case. A cardiac patient requires an ambulance to get to hospital, not an estate car — albeit one with a highly trained paramedic. Indeed, I am convinced that paramedics in RRVs are placed under additional and intolerable strain as they try to save lives on their own. That is unfair on paramedics and will result in an additional turnover in staff, as the effects of stress take their toll.

There are occasions when an RRV could be useful. In the case of a serious road accident, an RRV could be used as a backup in rural areas. In such cases, an RRV would eliminate the need for a second ambulance to be mobilised, unless it was genuinely required.

In short, RRVs should be used as support units in rural areas rather than first-response vehicles. That could doubtless be reversed in urban areas, where RRVs could probably make their way through heavy traffic more easily than an ambulance. However, we are discussing rural areas; therefore, I will stick to the point.

The ambulance fleet has installed the most modern satellite navigation systems and the location of every vehicle can be seen, at a glance, by an ambulance controller. This is another example where targeted expenditure can produce real benefits — the key word here being “targeted.” The Executive require every Department to make efficiency savings of 3% over the next three years; I would call those savings value for money. As I have said previously, the waste of resources on RRVs cannot be taken as a serious attempt to achieve such savings in rural areas. However, satellite navigation systems allow controllers to send the nearest ambulance to an emergency callout, reducing response times in real time and the running costs of the service. Fuel costs, in particular, are minimised. That is a good example of

how comparatively modest expenditure can produce economic benefits in the mid- to long-term.

It is probably easier for the Minister to ensure savings through the use of RRVs in urban areas than in rural areas. That is mainly due to the distance that each vehicle has to travel to a callout, and to the geographical areas in which rural and urban ambulances have to work.

Urban areas have high density and easily accessible housing, whereas rural areas have a widely dispersed population. However, that does not mean that Northern Ireland's rural population should accept anything other than parity with their urban counterparts. I acknowledge fully that change will not come overnight, but the length of response times on emergency call-outs for ambulances in rural communities must be dealt with.

People who are brought up and live in rural areas should not be penalised for that. We are just as deserving of having an ambulance — not a rapid-response vehicle — at our doors when it is required, just as is expected in urban areas. I urge the Minister to deal with the response times in rural areas as a matter of great importance. The Minister should examine the best value-for-money option, but that is not to send both a rapid-response vehicle and an ambulance. We rural dwellers ask only that we receive treatment that is equal to that received by our urban counterparts.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion. I commend the good work that is done by the Ambulance Service. Ambulance personnel are at the front line of healthcare, and they do a difficult job in what are often very difficult circumstances. They must be admired for that. I condemn any attacks on ambulance personnel, who are simply trying to do their job. The people who carry out such attacks must realise the implications of their actions.

The issue of ambulance and emergency service provision has not been far from the spotlight in recent months. Recently, there was a debate in the Chamber about the changes in ambulance provision. That debate involved much discussion about the introduction of an increased number of rapid-response vehicles. The Member who proposed today's motion also referred to those increases, but even during the previous debate, Members relayed genuine concerns about the changes. During that debate, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety gave assurances that those changes do not equate to changes in the level of service, arguing that they would lead to an increased or enhanced level of service. However, despite those assurances, Ambulance Service personnel have suggested that they do not accept that that will be the reality for them.

I visited Ambulance Service headquarters, where I saw the rapid-response vehicles up close, and I was quite impressed by them. In my opinion, they seemed to be well stocked, and I am sure that they do a very

good job, in so far as they can. However, considering the strong objections that we are hearing from Ambulance Service personnel, I remain unsure as to whether those vehicles will be the answer to the problems that are experienced on the ground. One member of the Ambulance Service stated that a system that is based around rapid-response vehicles is not suited to rural areas. I find that quite concerning, given that the Ambulance Service, by its own admission, treats everywhere except Belfast as a rural area.

The withdrawal of services over many years means that people who live in rural areas believe — rightly — that their areas must receive increased Health Service investment. There must be equality of Ambulance Service provision in rural communities, and those areas should not be affected disproportionately by any changes in service. Rural communities must not be short-changed by the Department when it comes to the provision of life-saving emergency services. We need assurances from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that he will do all in his power to ensure that our rural communities are not disadvantaged. I support the motion.

Mr McCallister: I agree with the Members who commended the work of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service and all its staff.

I am disappointed that a motion of this nature was tabled. I recognise that one of the greatest concerns that people have is how quickly the health services can respond in an emergency. That is especially true of people who live in rural areas, and as someone who lives in such an area, I know the importance of response times.

People also, rightly, want the best possible out-of-hours service. However, much of the debate on these issues has been built on speculation and a certain amount of scaremongering. As we all know, the Health Minister has initiated a major process of reform in the Health Service. The main purpose of that reform is to improve front-line services as well as the efficiency and effectiveness of Health Service administration.

All parties are aware that much of that reform is being driven by the 3% efficiency savings that the Executive agreed. The DUP, whose Members proposed this motion, was the party that most enthusiastically voiced its support for such tough targets. In fact, it did not even see the need for more money going into the Health Service in last year's Budget, and it did not have the courage to bring another annual Budget.

However, if the DUP wants improvements, it must accept that change is necessary. Sometimes, Members hang on to a direct rule mentality — they play the simplistic blame game. Regrettably, constructive and responsible legislative scrutiny and assistance appears to be beyond many Members.

The Minister has embarked on a process of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of all out-of-hours services throughout Northern Ireland. In April 2008, he launched the new emergency-care record for patients who attend accident and emergency departments or out-of-hours services. A patient's emergency-care record is a summary of information taken from his or her GP practice, and it includes his or her date of birth, gender, address, phone numbers, current medication and any known allergies. That means that patients can be treated more effectively, because more detailed medical information enables staff to make better-informed treatment decisions; that was not the case before the initiative was implemented.

Concerns have been expressed in the debate; however, to date, the Minister has delivered only improvements. The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service is an integral part of the Health Service, and, therefore, it is at the front line of modernisation and necessary change. Ambulance Service coverage in rural areas is a key concern for the Minister, and he is aware, and will take account, of specific demographic and geographic matters when deciding on the best levels of coverage. Consequently, on 5 August 2008, the Minister announced a £3 million investment in services in Fermanagh and Tyrone. The money has gone towards providing additional ambulance cover in the Omagh and Enniskillen areas, 24/7 coverage in Castleterrace and the roll-out of paramedicated thrombolysis, which can be a life-saving treatment for people suffering a heart attack.

Furthermore, in May 2008, the Minister opened the new regional dispatch centre at the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service's headquarters. The new centre uses geographical information systems to dispatch the nearest available ambulance to emergencies, and that will have a significant effect on response speeds, especially in rural areas.

Moreover, the Minister recently announced that up to 60 new accident and emergency ambulances, 60 non-emergency vehicles and 26 rapid-response vehicles will be purchased over the next three years — notwithstanding the DUP's opposition to the 26 rapid-response vehicles. The Minister will inform Members that the Ambulance Service requested those vehicles, and one would assume that the service understands its job better than Mr McQuillan does.

In addition, the Minister announced £17 million of capital investment and plans to invest approximately £100 million over the next 10 years in the fleet, in its estate and in vital equipment, such as defibrillators. That amounts to the largest single investment in the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service's history —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McCallister: The service is also on target to reach its ambulance response times. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Gallagher: I support the motion, and I thank its proposer for raising this important matter. In rural areas, there are concerns about ambulance cover. Those concerns will not go away easily, and I do not agree with the previous Member, who said that they can be dismissed as scaremongering.

Members are aware that ambulance staff work in demanding and often challenging circumstances, and I acknowledge the professional manner in which, in the great majority of cases, they carry out their work.

Several years ago, following the review, response times improved in urban areas; however, although better, they are certainly not perfect in rural areas. In conjunction with those improvements, the service improved staff training and skills, and I congratulate it on that achievement.

I was fortunate enough to visit the Ambulance Service headquarters, and the highly trained force that works there was plain to see. However, in contrast to that was the fleet, which comprised aged vehicles — a situation that has led to problems in rural areas. Some of those problems, particularly those related to breakdowns at crucial times, have been mentioned here and in the media. Following devolution, the Minister's announcement to the House of a £17 million package was welcome news. That money is being rolled out in the next three years to replace the old vehicles with new ones and to introduce rapid-response vehicles. Mr McQuillan mentioned the shortcomings in respect of the use of rapid-response vehicles in rural areas, and I share his concerns.

There are problems with some routine work that is carried out by the Ambulance Service in rural areas, particularly at the Tyrone County Hospital. Some weeks ago, I highlighted the case of an 80-year-old who was brought to the hospital by ambulance and told to make contact when he was ready to go home. Despite three phone calls and promises that an ambulance would be along to pick him up in 10 minutes, an ambulance did not arrive, and that individual had to find another means of getting home. Something is wrong with an Ambulance Service that can allow that to happen.

Throughout the Health Service, trusts are referring patients — particularly those from rural areas — to independent clinics in order to speed up waiting lists. The current ambulance cover arrangements do not extend to those patients who are given appointments at independent clinics. Those people receive a notice from the trust to attend the clinic, but there are no ambulances available for them when they request one. It may be possible for patients in urban areas who are attending a clinic for a minor procedure to get a lift, bus or taxi, but it is not as simple as that in rural areas. I know of an elderly person who priced a taxi for such

a trip and was told that it would cost £45. That issue must be addressed.

The co-operation and collaboration between the ambulance services north and south of the border is reassuring for the people who live close to the border. However, I appeal for even greater co-operation, because that can bring about benefits in certain areas. That co-operation must be developed at North/South level.

Mr McCarthy: I support the motion, and I thank Mr McQuillan and Lord Morrow for securing the debate on such an important subject. Furthermore, I am grateful that the Health Minister is in the House to listen to the debate.

The Alliance Party offers its thanks and support to the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service for its excellent work in serving the community at all times — sometimes in difficult circumstances. We condemn the attacks that have been perpetrated against the ambulance staff by morons and thugs who have no regard for any of the emergency services.

The motion is targeted at out-of-hours periods. The Minister announced recently a major investment in relation to new ambulances and, as has been mentioned, rapid-response vehicles. That investment is welcome, but along with that announcement came the proposal to reduce front-line services through the reduction of working hours throughout the Ambulance Service. If implemented, that development will contribute to more uncertainty in the Ambulance Service and the communities on the availability of ambulances, especially during out-of-hours periods.

There is also the question of the capabilities of the rapid-response vehicles, in that they cannot transport patients to hospital. The out-of-hours periods are always times of great concern. Unfortunately, people have no control over when serious illnesses occur. Everyone in the community is aware of the out-of-hours service and expects a prompt and efficient service, which, by and large, has been provided. However, there can be times of excessive stress and strain if illness strikes at an unearthly hour of the night, and a lot of anxiety can be caused to patients and relatives alike as they wait desperately for an ambulance to arrive. It is incumbent on Members to do whatever is necessary to reduce all those anxieties. The Alliance Party calls on the Health Minister to ensure that there will be no diminution of ambulance cover now or in the future, particularly in rural areas.

In calling on the Minister to play his part in giving the community confidence in its ambulance cover, the general public — particularly our rural population — can help themselves by having their addresses easily identifiable. I and, I am sure, other Members have heard of occasions where an ambulance has had to travel all

over the place to find a rural destination, simply because, in many instances, house numbers are non-existent.

Many rural dwellers live up lonens — particularly farmers and landowners. I am sure that Members know what a lonen is. However, just in case city dwellers do not know, it is an Ulster-Scots word for a lane. I call on all country dwellers to ensure that their house numbers are clearly placed at the end of their lane. Councils, of which many of us are members, are responsible for placing street and road names around the country and, by and large, that usually happens. However, how can an ambulance or any other emergency service find a destination if a lonen has no house number? No time would be wasted in reaching a destination if house numbers were placed at the end of lanes.

We all have our part to play in ensuring that we get the service to which we are entitled. I support the motion.

Mr Buchanan: In rising to support the motion, I thank the Minister for being in his place. Since taking up his post as Health Minister some 18 months ago, the House has had several debates, Adjournment debates and questions asked about inadequate ambulance provision, especially in rural areas. The fact that the motion on rural out-of-hours ambulance coverage is being debated again shows the concern that remains among political representatives, community organisations and health professionals about the gap in the service that, if not bridged, will continue to have a detrimental impact on the lives of rural dwellers, which could result in preventable deaths.

I remind Mr McCallister that we are not scaremongering; we are talking about reality. If he is so out of touch with his rural constituents, I have no doubt that they will let him know at the next election.

Although I acknowledge the fact that the Minister has announced a financial investment for the Ambulance Service, there has been little evidence of the fruits of that investment being rolled out. I am sure that each Member who represents a rural constituency has his or her own harrowing stories of constituents who have been practically stranded during out-of-hours periods when an ambulance was simply not available, or perhaps when an ambulance took some considerable time to reach the scene — well outside the eight-minute target.

12.30 pm

That target cannot be met in rural areas unless rural hubs or something similar are created to bring emergency services closer to rural communities. That is why there is grave concern that the reorganisation of ambulance cover will further disadvantage rural communities. I hope that the Minister will address those matters today. Making promises is good publicity; however, improving the reality is where the tale is told and where lives are saved.

If rural dwellers are to be treated with equality and given confidence and peace of mind that an adequate service exists, a vast improvement must be made in the ambulance service in my constituency of West Tyrone and in the entire south-west quarter of Northern Ireland. I will not rehearse the arguments and concerns of previous debates, which were raised today by Tommy Gallagher, about ambulance-cover difficulties in rural areas — especially in the west of the Province. It is crucial for Tyrone that the proposed and welcome investment be fast-tracked, made properly and urgently brought to fruition. Tyrone is the only county — and I make no apology for stating it again — with no acute ambulance provision; it relies solely on emergency ambulance cover. That cover is needed to ensure the safety of everyone who is unfortunate enough to require acute medical attention.

That is why I am concerned about the use of rapid-response vehicles, especially in rural areas, rather than accident-and-emergency ambulances. Such a practice may be deemed part of efficiency savings because it is cheaper to purchase, run and maintain rapid-response vehicles; however, rapid-response vehicles cannot transport a casualty to hospital. That casualty must wait for an ambulance — a practice that is inefficient and a duplication of resources. The initial dispatch of an ambulance rather than a rapid-response vehicle cuts out the need for that response vehicle, which, at best, is a first-aid box on wheels.

I commend the staff of the Ambulance Service to whom everyone is indebted for their sterling work over the years in delivering life-saving care on the front line of emergency services, sometimes in difficult circumstances.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buchanan: The Member had his chance to speak. If he could not say what he intended in the time that he had, that is too bad.

I call upon the Minister ensure that the Ambulance Service is properly equipped to deal with the many challenging tasks that confront it in rural areas. I also seek the Minister's assurance that the rural out-of-hours ambulance provision will be strengthened urgently. That would overcome the difficulties experienced by rural dwellers and the frustration of ambulance staff caused by a gap in service provision.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Buchanan: It would also instil confidence in a Health Service that is delivering for rural as well as for urban areas.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Buchanan: Perhaps the Minister will consider that.

Mr Speaker: I insist that the Member's time is up.

The Business Committee has agreed to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. On resumption, the first Member to be called to speak will be Mrs Claire McGill.

The sitting was suspended at 12.33 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Members who tabled the motion. Although the issue was discussed on 7 October 2008, the emphasis in this motion is on rural areas, which I welcome. I commend the members of the Ambulance Service for their work.

“Out of hours”, “reorganisation” and “rural” are the key words in the motion. I represent West Tyrone, which is a large rural constituency that includes Omagh, Gortin, Greencastle, Loughmacrory, Strabane, and Cranagh. It has already been mentioned that the roads in West Tyrone are not always what they should be and that there are access difficulties.

In answer to a recent question from my party colleague Barry McElduff, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety said that there had been an improvement in ambulance provision in Omagh. I have spoken to Ambulance Service employees, and they want me to thank the Minister for that. However, will the money that has been invested in ambulance provision in the Omagh district and in Castleterg — which is part of the Strabane district — benefit people in rural areas? I have been asked whether the extra ambulances in the Omagh area will be deployed to places such as Altnagelvin, and I would welcome some clarity on that from the Minister.

In the previous debate on the issue in October, the Minister accepted that there will be a reconfiguration of non-emergency vehicles' hours of operation. He also said that Ambulance Service proposals would mean a small reduction in the number of accident and emergency ambulances. Will the Minister clarify what that means for the rural constituency?

Although he said that there would be an increase in the number of rapid-response vehicles, not everyone agrees that they can do what people traditionally expect from an ambulance. In the previous debate, Minister McGimpsey recalled his experience of shadowing a rapid-response vehicle on a busy night in Belfast, footage of which was shown on television. He said that someone who had been knocked down was treated and admitted to hospital within minutes. However, that happened in an urban setting. Would there be the same response in Strabane — and its rural hinterland — or in Omagh or in other parts of West Tyrone?

Another Member mentioned the eight-minute target, and I wonder whether that can be achieved in rural areas. There is a target for ambulances to respond to 70% of life-threatening incidents within an eight-minute target, but what about the other 30%? Does that 30% comprise life-threatening incidents in rural areas? What is the time frame for the remaining 30% of

responses? I would like some clarity on those issues. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Craig: I support the motion, and, like others, I pay tribute to the Ambulance Service for the valuable service that it provides for the whole community.

I hope that the debate will trigger a positive response from the Minister. Unlike others, I do not regard the motion as an attack on anything that the Minister has done. I simply see it as an issue that must be debated and investigated by the Ambulance Service. However, there is no fixed way forward.

There have been cuts in the Ambulance Service, and further cuts were to be made in all budgets, not just in the health budget. However, we received assurances that front-line services would not be included in the cuts. I accept that, and I respect the Minister's judgement on that. However, we must debate the issue of how cuts will be introduced in the Ambulance Service and whether they will have a detrimental effect on service delivery.

Rural dwellers are the most vulnerable group in Northern Ireland, because they live the farthest from hospital provision. The Ambulance Service is moving towards the use of rapid-response vehicles to try to meet the eight-minute response time which has been imposed on it, and it is coming increasingly close to meeting that response time across the Province.

However, we must ask a fundamental question — and only the Minister can make a judgement on this. If an ambulance arrives at someone's home within eight minutes, but fails to save the person's life, it is counted as a success. However, if an ambulance arrives within 15 minutes and the paramedics save the person's life, it is counted as a failure. That is not a good way of judging the Ambulance Service's performance. The service must fundamentally examine that.

That said, in many respects the service is stretched, and moving to rapid-response vehicles will, without question, improve response times. Are we only interested in response times, and in a paramedic arriving on the scene?

A rapid-response vehicle is like a giant toolbox for paramedics. They can attend the scene with their equipment and do valuable work to try to save someone's life, but, at some stage, the patient must be taken to hospital. The simple truth is that rapid-response vehicles do not have the capacity to take patients to hospital. In those cases, an ambulance is called out to the scene.

The management of the Ambulance Service have stated that a rapid-response vehicle and an ambulance are sent out to the scene at the same time. If that were the case, I would question why a rapid-response vehicle was actually needed in the first place, because

it would be duplication of service. I am sure that the Minister is as interested as I am in cutting that out. The truth is that the rapid-response vehicle goes to the scene and makes a judgement call, and then the ambulance is called out. However, that can have inherent dangers, because, in certain situations, patients must be taken to the nearest hospital as soon as possible.

In those cases, a rapid-response vehicle is not good enough. Nine times out of 10, unfortunately, such incidents will occur in a rural setting. The greatest response times and the longest distances involved are always in a rural setting. We must examine closely how rapid-response vehicles are deployed in the countryside.

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

Mr Craig: I will leave that matter in the hands of the Minister. I support the motion.

Mr K Robinson: I pay tribute to the Ambulance Service personnel and the wonderful way in which they carry out the most harrowing of tasks for everyone in the community.

The population of Northern Ireland is spread thinly across the land mass, which means that a large part of Northern Ireland can be considered to be rural. In turn, that means that in every decision that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety takes, he must also consider geographic and demographic issues. He must also consider the infrastructural resources, or the lack of them, in certain areas, and the fiscal resources that are available to him. However, the main concern is that front-line services should be of the highest possible standard for all people, regardless of where they live.

Although I recognise the concerns that have been expressed in the debate, Members should deal in facts. As my colleague said, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has undertaken a reform process that is designed to tackle two interlinked fronts. First, the Minister is making our Health Service more efficient and effective, and along with new money that he secured in the Budget round, he will pump efficiency savings back into front-line services. That means that the nature of some services will change, but the overall goal is that the quality of care will improve.

There are, unfortunately, those who want to have their cake and eat it. I note that the Minister of Finance and Personnel said yesterday that our large public sector will save us from the worst of this recession. However, his predecessor did nothing but complain about the size of the public sector and the nature of its inefficiency. The Members who proposed the motion have, in the past, urged the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make reforms, but now

they are ambivalent about the proposed changes. That is an unfortunate and inconsistent approach.

Out-of-hours services are being reviewed by the Department as part of wider reforms. However, the Minister has always intended to involve the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Assembly in that process, as he has done with any other reforms. Anything that is reported at this point is mere speculation. What is being debated today is hearsay and media speculation.

In addition, we have heard much about changes in ambulance cover. I understand people's concerns about the availability and effectiveness of emergency services, and that fears are often felt more acutely in rural areas. I, too, represent a largely rural area. The people of Island Magee, in my constituency of East Antrim, were so concerned about the lack of ambulance cover that they formed what was probably the first responder unit in Northern Ireland. It has been called into operation many times over the years, and has been very successful.

To put today's debate into perspective, we have just witnessed the largest single investment in the Ambulance Service in Northern Ireland's history. That is further proof, if it is needed, that devolution can make a difference. We have witnessed the creation of a new command and control centre that will deliver ambulances more quickly to people in need than was the case in the past. That cannot be denied, and it must be supported and recognised by Members today.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that despite having introduced those measures, there is grave concern in the community about the loss of man-hours and woman-hours in the Ambulance Service, which is creating a great deal of uncertainty, particularly in rural areas?

Mr K Robinson: I accept what the Member said. As someone who finished up in an emergency ambulance some years ago, I particularly appreciate the work of the Ambulance Service and the difficulties that they face as the service is stretched.

The introduction of rapid-response vehicles does not reduce the Minister's targets for ambulance response times, or for standards of care. Rapid-response vehicles are designed to improve the speed of response to emergency incidents. They will act as a supplement to the existing service, and not as a replacement; ambulances will still be deployed.

The Minister is improving efficiency and front-line services. That is what the parties in the Executive have mandated him to do. Now that he is delivering on that collective mandate, he is being criticised for it. I suggest to Members that they should urgently and constructively engage with one of the Executive's most innovative Ministers. I note that he is blushing now.

Members are always right to raise concerns. After all, that is our role in the Assembly. However, given that there is an appropriate legislation mechanism to do that and the fact that the Minister is willing to engage any such complaints that are aired in such a manner, today's debate looks like political opportunism. Do Members want the best service possible or do they want to be seen to be attacking an energetic Minister who is attempting to deliver what he was mandated to do?

2.15 pm

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an tSeirbhís Otharchairr fosta. Sílim go ndéanann sí scoth oibre ar son an phobail.

I too thank the personnel of the Ambulance Service, to whom many of us have been grateful at one stage or another. I recognise the substantial investment that the Minister has announced for the Ambulance Service, and I thank him for it. I wish to make a few points of clarification rather than of complaint.

Better co-ordination is needed between the non-emergency part of the Ambulance Service and hospital appointments; I have raised that issue with the Minister previously. A patient in my constituency arrived late for a 10.00 am appointment at the Royal Victoria Hospital, even though he had been ready for a pick up by a non-emergency ambulance since 8.00 am. In the same week, that same patient waited for an ambulance that did not arrive because the driver was taken ill. When I enquired, the Ambulance Service told me that there was no arrangement for a back-up driver to be made available in such circumstances and that patients may miss appointments.

I find it difficult to believe that patients who live 40 miles from the Royal Victoria Hospital and who depend on a non-emergency ambulance to get them there on time are given appointments that the service cannot meet. Before appointment times were issued, it would make sense if consideration were given to where patients live and to the length of journey times. It is equally incredible that no sickness cover is available when drivers are ill. Under such circumstances, patients will miss important appointments, which will cause them added anxiety and will add costs to the service.

The operation of the non-emergency service is no reflection on the drivers, who can only operate within the system that is organised by administrators. The Minister tells me that a review of that part of the service is ongoing, and I look forward to hearing from him the outcome of that review.

I too am concerned about the reduction in shift hours. My constituency is losing three eight-hour shifts in Newry and one 12-hour shift in Armagh. That will mean that only one ambulance will be on call in the

Newry and south Armagh areas during those times, which will drastically reduce ambulance cover.

I understand that the proposal is to replace ambulances with rapid-response vehicles, but those vehicles do not have the capacity to ferry people to hospital. It is ironic that, on several occasions, ambulances have arrived at the scene before rapid-response vehicles. If crews are not available in, for example, Banbridge or Kilkeel, crews from Newry are asked to cover. That could leave Newry without ambulance cover.

Mr Dallat: Will the Member agree that the poor condition of roads in many rural areas, cutbacks in maintenance and the postponement of capital programmes mean that it does not matter how good an ambulance service is as it is badly inhibited by the roads on which it must travel?

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for his useful intervention. That is the case in much of my constituency; the surfaces and orientation of rural roads is such that ambulance target times are not met.

I agree that greater investment in roads will aid the Ambulance Service in rural areas. As I said, that is a serious issue, which has huge repercussions for rural areas, such as south Armagh, where there are no ambulance stations and where crews have difficulty providing cover and responding in the golden hour after an accident has happened, under the present arrangements. If the new shift arrangements are allowed to go ahead, crews will be stretched even further.

People who live in the greater Newry area depend on a sub-standard ambulance fleet that constantly breaks down. Often a replacement vehicle is not readily available and ambulance cover is put at risk. As I said, my intention is not to carp and complain, but to raise with the Minister matters that are of concern to my constituents. I am interested to ascertain how much of the investment, which the Minister announced earlier this year, will be applied to my constituency of Newry and Armagh. I am particularly interested in finding out to what extent the service will be affected by a reduction in shift patterns. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr G Robinson: I congratulate my colleague on securing this debate on a matter that is of vital importance to the rural population of Northern Ireland. I pay tribute to the dedication and hard work of all ambulance crews and staff throughout Northern Ireland.

As Mr McQuillan said, the debate is about seeking equality for the rural population. In the twenty-first century there is no reason why an ambulance cannot be the vehicle that responds to an emergency call, and response times in rural areas should not be much greater than those in urban areas.

The hard-working rural population in Northern Ireland is often left isolated because, at present, it is without ambulance cover. We must, therefore, ensure that a speedy response to emergency ambulance call-outs is provided in rural Northern Ireland. It is fair comment to say that the Minister envisages such provision being delivered by rapid-response vehicles. As has been stated previously, perhaps those vehicles are well suited to being a first response to emergency calls in urban areas, but they are not the answer in the rural communities. They are a waste of the resources at the Ambulance Service's disposal.

Locally located ambulances will reduce response times and ensure that patients can be transferred to hospital without the requirement of a second vehicle. Mr McQuillan pointed out that the strategic location of ambulances in rural areas could be accommodated with the co-operation of local medical practices. I hope that the Minister will seek to expand such provision throughout Northern Ireland's more remote areas. I agree entirely with my colleague's remark that time is of the essence in responding to emergencies. Much is always made of the golden hour — or, as it is called now, the golden half-hour — being critical for patients. If that golden half-hour is so vital, let us strive to ensure that an ambulance is dispatched, rather an RRV.

I have said previously that, if every minute is essential in securing the best possible outcome for a patient — as I had personal experience of four years ago — saving lives and reducing hospital admissions, then the idea of strategic location of ambulances is an essential element of that concept. I fear that otherwise a life will be lost. I stand by my comments. Let us put an end to the disadvantage that people in living in rural areas feel when they require an ambulance. The Minister and the Assembly must ensure that rural communities are treated with equality. I support the motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services, and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank Adrian McQuillan for tabling the motion and Lord Morrow for seconding it. This is the third debate that we have had on the Ambulance Service since the 7 October. On each occasion, Members have highlighted the importance of ambulance services in rural communities. Just last week, the Assembly discussed ambulance services in Omagh and North Antrim, and during the debate in October other members raised concerns about their local areas, including the Ards Peninsula and Enniskillen.

On each occasion, concerns were expressed about the changes in service provision proposed by the Ambulance Service in response to the Executive's requirement for efficiency savings. I would point out to Mr Craig that Peter Robinson described them as efficiencies — not cuts. That is what we are working on. I am required to implement a 3% efficiency saving, and when Mr Robinson, as Finance Minister, talked

about those requirements, he referred to them as efficiencies. He was right to call them efficiencies; they are not cuts.

I welcome the opportunity afforded by these debates and recent oral questions, of which there have been a number, and views expressed by the general public, to confirm that the Ambulance Service proposals are not about cutting services. They are about providing a more effective and responsive Ambulance Service to the people of Northern Ireland, and increasing access to skilled paramedic care for all the people of Northern Ireland, no matter where they live.

I have said it before, and I am happy to say it again: I am committed to providing a quality, fit-for-purpose, twenty-first century Ambulance Service for all the people of Northern Ireland, including those in rural areas. Our emergency response capability will be increased by these changes, not reduced.

People are, understandably, anxious when proposals are made to change the operation of a service that they regard highly and on which they rely for help in often life-threatening situations. That is especially understandable for those in more remote areas. They will, quite rightly, be keen to get the facts out into the open so that they can consider them and make up their own minds whether they are comfortable with what is being proposed. The Ambulance Service will shortly put its proposals out to public consultation, and I encourage everyone who has an interest to read the consultation documents and make their views known through that process.

I fully appreciate that changing a service model that has been in place for a very long time might be regarded by some as a step into the unknown. A few consider it a step in the wrong direction, but they are wrong to do so. It perhaps requires a new way of thinking about what the Ambulance Service does, and what frontline Ambulance Service staff are trained to do. Paramedics do not simply snatch injured patients from the scene and scoop them off to hospital. Ambulance Service staff are skilled healthcare professionals trained to provide a range of clinical, potentially life-saving interventions in emergency situations.

One development has attracted more attention than others: the increased use of rapid-response ambulance vehicles (RRVs) manned by a single paramedic. Each accident and emergency ambulance has a single paramedic and a medical technician — generally the driver — and each RRV has a single paramedic. Paramedics in RRVs and in accident and emergency ambulance are equally skilled and trained, and all the equipment in an accident and emergency ambulance is in an RRV. An RRV is not, as someone on the DUP benches said, a first-aid box on wheels. I cannot remember who said that, but the same people might

say that Ambulance Service personnel are great people and then go on to talk about them driving around in first-aid boxes on wheels. That is the type of remark that I regard as scaremongering and scurrilous because our personnel are not about driving around in first-aid boxes on wheels.

The RRV is in contrast to the two-man ambulance service. RRVs have been in use in Northern Ireland for more than four years. That development represents a move towards a model of service that has been applied extensively in England, Scotland and Wales, and has been proven to work. It has been said that the rollout of RRVs has been halted in Wales. In fact, it was trade union opposition to the change that slowed the expansion of that service model in Wales. However, it is used extensively in Scotland and England. There is no evidence whatsoever that patient care is compromised, or that increased use of the RRV represents a less effective or less responsive emergency service. As RRVs allow us to put more paramedics on the ground, and enable them to reach emergencies more quickly than a traditional ambulance, that model offers a better chance of saving lives.

The Ambulance Service's proposals will increase paramedic cover by more than 9,000 hours in the northern division, 3,500 hours in the southern division, 7,000 hours in the western division and by almost 8,000 hours in the eastern division. That is what must be done if we are to improve the responsiveness of the Ambulance Service.

2.30 pm

Demand on the Ambulance Service rises between 8% and 10% per annum. That figure is growing all the time, and we must cope with that fact. Members have mentioned, and I have seen at first hand, the work that RRVs do. I know the importance of getting vital medical assistance to the scene of an accident as quickly as possible so that treatment can be administered. I must restate that when an emergency call is made, an RRV and an ambulance are dispatched simultaneously. That is not a waste of resources but is done in order to achieve the best possible response and to get the appropriate medical care to the patient as quickly as possible. When someone is injured, time is of the essence.

Each RRV is equipped with the same life-saving equipment as an accident and emergency ambulance, and it will typically get to the scene more quickly. That is even truer in rural areas than it is in urban areas. RRVs offer greater efficiency, because, once at the scene, paramedics can assess whether an accident and emergency ambulance is required. That illustrates a solution to the problem that is 10% of emergency calls not requiring an accident and emergency ambulance. In such cases, the RRV can stand down the ambulance, allowing it to be directed to another call.

The focus of the debate is on out-of-hours ambulance provision. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as out-of-hours for the Ambulance Service. The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service provides pre-hospital emergency care 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. The level of cover provided varies during any 24-hour period. Peak-demand times are from 11.00 am to 4.00 pm, with a further peak occurring in the evenings and at weekends.

The Ambulance Service's job is to ensure that the number of emergency vehicles on the road at any time, day or night, is sufficient to handle demand. That is what the Ambulance Service does every day, using a detailed statistical analysis of the pattern of calls to anticipate where resources should be deployed.

I have informed Members of the considerable investment that will be made in the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. Over the next three years, £12.1 million will be given in revenue funding and £17.4 million in capital funding. That money is available for reinvestment only as a result of the 3% efficiency savings that were achieved in the comprehensive spending review. As I announced recently, that marks the start of an investment of almost £100 million in capital funding over the next 10 years.

In the first three years, that money will buy the Ambulance Service 60 new accident and emergency response vehicles, 60 patient-care vehicles and 26 RRV vehicles. In the longer term, it will enable the Ambulance Service to replace its vehicles and equipment regularly, so that the average age of its fleet will be no more than two to three years old at any time.

Before I made that announcement, I committed to an investment of £3 million over the next three years to improve emergency response times in Fermanagh and Tyrone. That money is on top of the announcement that I made on capital spending. It will provide an additional ambulance and crew in Omagh and Enniskillen, enable 24/7 cover for the Castlederg area and support the roll-out of paramedic-led thrombolysis services for heart-attack victims.

All that adds up to our having a modern Ambulance Service, which is what the people of Northern Ireland deserve, and I intend to ensure that they get it. It has long been recognised that the quicker that patients receive care, the more likely they are to survive. In many ways, it is as simple as that.

As changes are made, skilled ambulance staff will not find themselves sitting in fixed ambulance stations. Instead, there will be an increasing number of paramedics dynamically employed in key positions so that when a call comes in, they can get potentially life-saving care to the patient as quickly as possible.

Providing emergency services for people who live in more remote rural areas brings significant challenges,

about which we must be realistic. It must be acknowledged that, in more remote areas of Northern Ireland, it is difficult to meet the target response time for a life-threatening incident. No matter how many resources that we make available to the Ambulance Service, local geographic conditions and road infrastructure will, at times, prevent an accident and emergency ambulance from reaching the scene of an emergency within that eight-minute target time.

A responsive ambulance service is vital. In recognition of that, I will continue to seek improvements in response times throughout Northern Ireland. Indeed, in my priorities for action for 2008-09, I have set the Ambulance Service a target for meeting response times for category-A calls of 62.5% in each health and social services board area.

Targets focus on times, not on outcomes. That is an important distinction. The aim is to get appropriate medical care to patients as quickly as possible.

Mr McCarthy: Can the Minister convince Members that the Ambulance Service is provided with up-to-date navigation facilities so that paramedics know where to go when they must respond to calls in remote rural localities? Do they have the necessary up-to-date, modern facilities to get them to their destinations?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Indeed I can, because that is exactly where most capital investment in the Ambulance Service goes. Other Members have had the opportunity to visit Ambulance Service headquarters to see that equipment in operation. Having the necessary technology and investment in place maximises ambulance availability in rural areas.

The Department has introduced additional ambulance deployment points and rapid-response vehicles; new technologies, such as geographic information systems and digital mapping; new computer-assisted dispatch systems; telephony systems and digital-radio systems; and new automatic vehicle-location and satellite-navigation systems to ensure that the nearest Ambulance Service resource reaches an incident by the shortest possible route.

My Department has also explored the feasibility of rolling out volunteer first-community-responder schemes in rural areas. I must make it clear from the outset that first responders are not a substitute for the Ambulance Service — their role is to complement available resources. Again, the aim is to get appropriate medical care to patients as quickly as possible. First responders are local people who live and work in the community and are trained in first aid, cardiopulmonary resuscitation and the use of defibrillators.

I hasten to add that first-responder schemes are not unique to Northern Ireland — they have been introduced successfully in the UK. Such a structure is particularly

useful in areas such as the glens of Antrim, where a first-responder scheme is due to start soon. When someone in the glens of Antrim suffers a heart attack, a short amount of time — perhaps only a few minutes — is available to get life-saving care to that person. In those circumstances, what that person needs most is for someone to arrive quickly and to use a defibrillator to stabilise the rhythm of his or her heartbeat.

That scheme is about to be rolled out in the glens of Antrim and its local communities. A team of volunteers, Moyle District Council and the Dalriada urgent-care GP out-of-hours service have all been involved. I congratulate all of those parties. That pilot scheme has been established, and will be rolled out regionally. Priority will be given to the most remote localities, in areas such as Fermanagh.

I must emphasise that ambulances are no longer simply patient-transport services. Forty years ago, ambulance provision typically consisted of two men with two stretchers who drove to the scene, put the patient in the back of the ambulance, and drove him or her to hospital. Now, ambulance provision consists of skilled paramedics with modern equipment who travel to injured people as quickly as possible in order to provide life-saving support. The quicker that happens, the better.

The fact is that rapid-response vehicles can provide life-saving treatment faster than accident and emergency ambulances, although accident and emergency ambulances must take over that treatment. I have seen that in operation. That is particularly important in areas where access is more difficult. Rural communities will continue to have the emergency response that they need at all times of the day and night, and will not, in any way, be disadvantaged as a result of current proposals.

Indeed, the number of paramedic hours will have risen dramatically by more than 60,000 hours per annum by the end of year three.

Lord Morrow: The debate has, mainly, been useful, and the majority of Members have understood the aim of the motion. I thank the Minister for his response. Like other Members, I condemn attacks on ambulances responding to emergency calls or other calls. Today's society has absolutely no consideration, and young thugs attack ambulances when paramedics are carrying out their duties and attending to patients who desperately need hospital treatment. The Assembly has, today, sent a strong message that it utterly condemns such bad behaviour.

Contributions to the debate were, generally, constructive. Some Members think that raising issues constitutes a personal attack on the Minister, the Department or a service. That is, of course, not the case. The purpose of today's motion is to seek ways to

improve the Ambulance Service for the urban and rural population in Northern Ireland.

Adrian McQuillan pushed the right buttons and addressed the core of the matter. The sad reality is that ambulance response times in rural areas are increasing rather than decreasing, whereas the opposite is the case in urban areas. That should not be the case. Mr McQuillan made a valid and important point. He said:

“Table 4.20 in the ‘Health and Social Care Inequalities Monitoring System Second Update Bulletin 2007’ shows that the median response time for rural call-outs in 2004 was 14 minutes, but that rose to 14.3 minutes in 2006. The median response time for urban areas during the same period fell from 7.3 minutes to 6.6 minutes.”

Referring to the Minister, he continued:

“I am more concerned about the reliance and importance that he places on the purchase of rapid-response vehicles (RRVs). I can see the value of RRVs in urban areas, but I fail to see their real use in rural Northern Ireland. Many others share the view that they are nothing more than an attempt to reduce statistically the response times in rural areas by using an estate car that cannot transport patients to hospital.”

That assertion was not challenged.

Furthermore, Mr McQuillan said that an ambulance and an RRV must be mobilised in order to take a patient to hospital. He called that approach “a total waste of money”. I agree with that comment; there is wastage, and I trust that, on reflection, the Minister will consider how to improve the situation.

I am beginning to think that John McCallister lives up a tree. I thought that he was previously a farmer, but I am starting to think that his farm must be located in east or south Belfast. He told the Assembly that all is fine. That might be true in the leafy suburbs of south Down. I do not know because I do not live there. However, when he is not busy, he should, perhaps, have a wee look around County Tyrone, where there are no acute-services hospitals. I suspect that he did not know that that service is disappearing.

That area should, at least, have an adequate ambulance service. Mr McCallister castigated some Members for getting at the Minister. I am not getting at anyone. I am not interested in that tactic, and I do not play that game.

He should not judge others by his own standards. However, when a certain Department is allocated 51% of the Budget expenditure, expectations of that Department are greater. Mr McCallister should keep that in mind.

2.45 pm

Tommy Gallagher spoke generally in support of the motion because he understands rural people — Mr McCallister take note — he lives among the rural community and understands what makes it tick. Mr McCarthy spoke in general agreement with the motion and educated us on what lonens are — well done, Mr

McCarthy; but some of us had cottoned on. He, too, said that waiting to be collected causes a patient extra trauma, stress and strain and that that is all part of rural living.

Tom Buchanan pointed out that there are gaps in the provision of ambulance services. He is absolutely right; there is a big gap in County Tyrone — I am sure that the Minister will address that gap in due time. Mr Buchanan also spoke about the removal of acute hospital services in County Tyrone, and that is something that those of us who are rural dwellers and who represent rural constituencies will continue to flag up.

Claire McGill spoke at length about the response times of ambulances. She mentioned the eight-minute supposed response time and challenged the Minister and the Assembly to consider that issue. It needs to be considered, because all too often no proper consideration is given to the road infrastructure in rural areas. We are not discussing motorway driving; we are not even discussing class-A roads. Some ambulances have to weave their way along narrow lanes and roads, which is dangerous and takes a great deal of time. Those are the issues that cause concern.

The criticism levelled against Jonathan Craig was unfair, as I think that he was speaking metaphorically — he made the point that it is all very well to have a well-equipped ambulance but that the important issue is response time. The Minister has not convinced me that he is totally satisfied that the issue has been dealt with properly.

Dominic Bradley spoke about a patient living some 40 miles from the Royal Victoria Hospital and said that sometimes ambulances arrive before the rapid-response vehicle, which is interesting. I, too, have heard of occasions on which the rapid-response vehicle arrives after the ambulance. That raises the question of whether there is a duplication of services that needs to be addressed.

This is not about getting at the Minister or his Department — it is about dealing with an issue that people are speaking about day and daily to their elected representatives: to their MLAs, their MPs, or their district councillors. Those are issues that need to be tackled, and I hope that that will happen as a result of what is said in the Assembly today. We need not sit back and think that all is well and that everything runs like clockwork, because sometimes it does not.

Adrian McQuillan quoted a crew member who described the rapid-response vehicles as a weapon in public confidence rather than a useful tool — that is not an MLA speaking; it is a member of an ambulance crew. Those issues need to be dealt with. There is room for improvement, and I trust that as a result of what has been said in the Chamber today, the Minister and his Department will address those issues. Every party, with the exception of the Ulster Unionist Party,

supports the motion. We will see whether the Ulster Unionists will want to divide the House on the issue.

I suspect that that party will not divide the House, because it will look absolutely and utterly foolish if it does so on an issue that affects its constituents on a daily basis. Given that acute services are being downgraded in hospitals such as the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital and the South Tyrone Hospital, services will not be the same in the entire county of Tyrone. That being the case, we expect nothing less than an effective, efficient Ambulance Service.

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

Lord Morrow: I was going to continue, but my time is up.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that rural communities are adequately provided for during periods of 'out-of-hours', and are not disadvantaged due to the reorganisation in the provision of ambulance cover.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Reaffirmation of Executive Matters

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have been advised that there will not be an Executive response to the motion. That being the case, I will not call any member of the Executive to speak in that capacity. If any member of the Executive indicates that they wish to speak during the debate, they will be called as a private Member and should contribute from the Back Benches.

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 the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr O'Loan: I beg to move

That this Assembly reaffirms its resolution of 16 September 2008; and welcomes the call by leaders of business, manufacturing and construction for an early meeting of the Executive to discuss the delivery of key objectives, including a prompt roll-out of capital and regeneration projects, reform of the planning system, increased investment in education and skills for workers, reform of the public sector to reduce bureaucracy, a review of available resources to assist innovation and export, improvement of energy efficiency, investment in the development of renewables and the publication of overdue Delivery Implementation Plans for health and education facilities.

I must confess that I am disappointed that no Minister from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) will respond to the debate. That would have been proper courtesy to the proposers of the motion and to the Assembly.

Someone who worked in public services for some years in Northern Ireland said recently that their experience of public services was that there was:

“an aggression that is unnecessary in civilised situations.”

If I am critical of some of our political developments and parties, I stress that it is more in sadness than in anger.

It seems that white smoke has risen from the headquarters of both the DUP and Sinn Féin today — separately, of course. However, I think that our motion still has a great deal of relevance because we can analyse what has happened and we can say something about how we hope the Executive will move forward.

I will set some context for the discussion. Among the many everyday activities that occur here and the sometimes petty squabbles that we have, we can lose sight of the bigger picture. We are attempting to govern in a very difficult situation. We are emerging from 40 years of conflict. A great deal of pain, animosity and resentment that resulted from that conflict is still around. Those issues did not come directly from the conflict, which itself arose out of a deep division that is still with us. That division goes

back for centuries. It is still here, and it strikes to the heart of every element of our social fabric.

That places a major responsibility on all parties here. Government here will work only if our talents are pooled. We need to respect our differences and make space for each other, and we need to be prepared to change.

Unionist and nationalist parties have responsibilities. The Democratic Unionist Party made a big decision in May 2007. Throughout last year, on many occasions, people said that they never thought that they would see the day.

There was a feeling that things had changed; that everything was possible. We can make some comparison with the mood in America following the election of Barack Obama. There was a real feeling of “Yes we can.”

However, that mood began to change, and it seemed that the DUP started to become unsure of its ground. For myself, I felt that the rot set in one day early in the present mandate when — as Members may recall — Peter Robinson repeated the mantra, “four-party mandatory coalition”, and his entire party chanted that mantra behind him. That was a totally inadequate stance from any party in that Executive, and it was particularly bad coming from the largest party. It was a statement that that party was here under duress, and that it did not want to be here under the present form of Government.

However, nothing has been mandated here that has not been mandated by history. People may see the weaknesses of the present form of Government, and there may be validity in that view. However, it is the only workable form of Government at this time, and it requires everyone to be involved for it to deliver. I ask DUP members to fix their eyes on the target and not to be diverted; to make clear, as they seemed to have made clear last May, that they, as unionists, have come to terms with the rest of the people on this island; and to stop looking in the rear-view mirror at Jim Allister. That can all be left behind — it has all been left behind. Make it clear that you have done so.

Sinn Féin is contributing hugely to the current underachievement. That party constantly mouths the words of equality, but in truth it has a view of Irish citizenship that is primitive in the extreme, as it does not encompass everyone. Furthermore, Sinn Féin has no real concept of equality. It has not shown a real place for unionists, and there have been many incidents and statements in the past 18 months that illustrate that point. Above all, that party has not come to terms with the enormity of the conduct of the republican movement over the past 40 years. Sinn Féin must face up to its past.

Recently, several people have said to me, “well, at least we are not killing each other.” Is that the best that we can do? It is not. We must achieve real change in

our political culture. I have a real fear that the best that we can achieve here is mediocrity; that, even if we can keep the show running, that is the best level at which we will operate in relation to public services and the state of our economy; and that we will still be wasting so much energy on internal political friction that we will not be engaging in real, meaningful activities and will not be able to achieve real outcomes. To do better, we need everyone to fully embrace the system and co-operate to make it work.

The motion is based on an open letter from business leaders — the Institute of Directors, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), Northern Ireland manufacturing, and five construction bodies. For them, the writing of such a letter was an unusual step as, for a considerable period, they have usually kept their heads down and not involved themselves in the political process. The fact that they felt it necessary to issue that letter demonstrates the seriousness of the situation. They state that we are entering a recession, and that the challenge for us in the Assembly is to reduce the severity and duration of that recession.

They talk — very interestingly and importantly — about confidence. Clearly, there has been a massive worldwide loss of confidence; that is at the centre of many global problems. Furthermore, they state that the Executive have a key role to play in restoring local confidence, and that what the Executive do will influence business, investment decisions and the wider community. They want strong leadership and bold action.

3.00 pm

The leaders of business, manufacturing and construction are very specific in their requests — they spell out eight areas of work that, taken together, form an excellent agenda for urgent action. We have summarised those in our motion. Those areas of work include the rapid roll-out of investment strategy capital projects and the major regeneration projects, and dealing with the delays in building health and education facilities. Just today it was reported in the news that 28 schools are awaiting repairs that are seriously overdue and that our school capital estate needs repair work totalling £217 million. Those business leaders want to see our public sector reformed and our planning system made fit for purpose.

Now that it seems that the logjam has been cleared, we must learn the lessons from it. Our partnership Government must be made a virtue, not treated as a deadweight. We must get on with the real task of Government. I ask all parties to show leadership and give confidence back to our people — that is what they want from the Assembly, and it is time to give it to them.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and as a member of various

all-party groups in the Assembly that deal with issues such as child poverty and fuel poverty, I can say firmly that it is essential that the Executive meet. The Executive must rubber-stamp the actions that some individual Ministers have been working on to help the people of this Province.

For too long, the Assembly has been held to ransom. The people of Northern Ireland are anticipating the time when our Ministers will meet. As Mr O'Loan said, it seems that the white smoke has arisen. However, that is relevant not only to the two largest parties; it is good news for everyone in the Assembly. It came as no surprise to me that the leaders of business, manufacturing and construction have called for the Executive to meet. They are facing financial ruin, and it is the duty of all in this Chamber to do everything in our power to ensure that that does not take place. We must be seen to be doing all that we can.

Aa' nummer o' developers goet in touch wi' me a shoart tiem ago, whau ask't me tae meet them alang wi' tap plennin ofichers tae tauk about waes in which tha plennin set-up cud be changed tae heft developers, whiel still lukin efter tha publick suroons. It wuz cleer fae that meetin, that as things staun, oor biggin industrie is in an unstudy posishun, an as weel it wull shairly tak maer than new plennin rules tae turn things aroon — but plennin wud be a helpfu' step in things getting better.

I was contacted recently by a consortium of developers who wanted to meet senior planning officers to discuss ways that the planning system could be changed to help developers, while still protecting the public and the environment. During that meeting it was clear that, as things stand, our construction industry is in a very precarious position and that it will take more than new planning regulations to turn things around. However, reviewing planning would be a helpful step towards that industry's recovery.

Last week, I was heartened to hear the statement that Sir Reg issued, saying that he was working to ensure that apprenticeships do not lose out in the short term, as the current problems could leave us with a skills dearth in the long term. However, as we all know, a statement is not enough; actions must be taken. It is imperative that the Assembly and the Executive use their strength to ensure that the best proposals are made and are put into action quickly, so that people on the ground will see the difference. This afternoon's motion is very helpful and raises many issues that could be discussed.

Every Department has a nod for what particular needs it must meet, and that seems to be a scary prospect for some. However, I have every confidence that we will be able to pull things back for Northern Ireland and, with a lot of hard work, return to an

economic high. I believe that our Minister of Education still has time to do the right thing by our children, if she will listen to the teachers and the parents. I know that our Health Service, although it already provides a high quality of care, has the potential to deliver a first-class care system.

I trust that our Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will continue to deliver initiatives to encourage foreign investment and small businesses alike. I am sure that the Minister for Social Development can meet the needs of the everyday person who needs a little help. I have faith that our Minister of the Environment, Sammy Wilson, can and will ensure that we are as self-supporting as is possible.

Despite our small size, we have the potential to be a great nation, and we just need two ingredients: belief in ourselves and hard work. I do not have time to raise all the points that I would like to. Just as a working nation needs a working Government, a thriving nation needs a thriving Government. We must work together so that we can thrive — the time for that is long overdue. The Executive will meet soon, but that does not mean that the problems will be solved.

Much hard work is required to pull us out of the economic slump into which we appear to be slipping. Nevertheless, I have every confidence that DUP Ministers have been working hard behind the scenes to ensure that there is a plan of action. Of course, as the well-known saying goes, no man is an island. We cannot achieve our aims alone, and that is why I am glad that the DUP is ensuring that our best interests are maintained on the mainland by providing strong representation in the House of Commons.

It is very important that the Executive meet. It is of greater importance, however, that the Ministers and their Departments are aware of their duties and are prepared to carry them out. I look forward to the announcement shortly that the Executive will meet, and I wait even more anxiously to discover what Ministers have planned during this time of waiting. I support our tradesmen, businessmen and workers, whether on the streets or in offices. I support our children in their classrooms and the teachers who teach those children. I support the motion.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion, which — although somewhat redundant as a consequence of today's announcement that the Executive will meet on Thursday — provides an opportunity to discuss some of the proposals that have been called for and the commitments that will be required to deliver them.

All Members are keen for the Executive to meet, and all Sinn Féin endeavours during the past months were aimed at resolving the issues that prevented that from happening. Sinn Féin acted thus because it was

determined to ensure that the institutions deliver real change for all the people — those who live in poverty; working families that are struggling to keep a roof over their heads; pensioners who are forced to choose between eating a decent meal or heating their homes —

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: No. We acted thus for the businesses that are being forced to the wall and for communities that are being damaged by crime and antisocial behaviour.

Last weekend, I attended a charity function held by the Federation of Small Businesses, and I spoke to many people who understand the importance of equality and of partnership arrangements. It is taken as given that the Assembly must deliver real change for those who need it most. Therefore, let us ensure that the Budget that we have is used effectively and efficiently to bring about the change that the pensioners who were here yesterday demanded and that the young people who were here yesterday evening want to see.

In order to implement the proposals in the motion and to bring about the changes that people in society — young and old, Protestants, Catholics and others — are demanding, we must fully commit to, and utilise, equality impact assessments. Sinn Féin believes that the economic downturn can be tackled only if the Executive is founded on equality and partnership and when people's needs are equally cherished, regardless of where they live or for whom they vote. Until now, we have had nothing close to that.

All the difficulties of recent months emanated from the refusal of some, and the inability of others, to accept the basic principles of partnership and equality in Government. That is at the heart of the matter. The Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews review are predicated on the principles of equality and parity of esteem, and that is why Sinn Féin is determined to see those agreements implemented — people deserve nothing less.

The debate about the transfer of policing and justice powers had less to do with confidence in the community than with a lack of confidence among some unionist parties in the Assembly. Moreover, the debate was about some people's refusal to accept that nationalism has a right to decide how it is policed and how justice is administered.

Sinn Féin is not prepared to allow the rights and entitlements of the people it represents to be ignored, as they were under a previous Executive, when, during his time as deputy First Minister, one of the motion's sponsors — who is not yet in the Chamber — failed to stand up to rejectionist unionism or for the people who suffered most from years of neglected infrastructure, and who still fails to stand up for Derry. Sinn Féin has stood up for equality and for the people whom it represents.

Valuable progress has now been made, and I welcome wholeheartedly the fact that the Executive will meet on Thursday. However, much more work is still to be done, and only time will tell whether all the parties in the Chamber share Sinn Féin's view that the needs of all the people across the North are paramount — no matter from where they come, whom they represent or for whom they vote. We have something to build on now, and I endorse the measures that are described in the motion and the proposals of the deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, to tackle the economic crisis as part of an economic package to assist those who are in greatest need as a consequence of the current recession. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: I am sorry that the attendance in the Chamber is so low. Twenty-four hours after the Assembly supported an Ulster Unionist Party motion calling for the Executive to meet immediately, I welcome the news that the Executive will meet on Thursday. *[Laughter.]*

However, it is astonishing that the DUP/Sinn Féin differences over policing and justice seem to be the sole issue that prevented the Executive from meeting — no other issue is mentioned in the documents that were released today.

Mrs Long: Does the Member agree that that is particularly strange, given Ian Paisley Jnr's contention in the Chamber yesterday that there would be no carve-up on an Executive meeting on the basis of policing and justice only?

Mr Kennedy: That question remains unanswered. That being the case, one must ask why policing and justice was not sorted out between the DUP and Sinn Féin in their separate meetings. Such an arrangement would have allowed the Executive to meet to agree a common approach to address the impact of the worst economic downturn since the 1920s. What have the past 152 days been about?

Given that there is no mention in the documents of education, the Irish language or the national stadium, do we have any guarantee that one or all of those issues will not become another excuse to return the Executive to suspended animation? Are we to conclude that the DUP and Sinn Féin have engaged in another series of side deals and that they will do so again? Where is the guarantee that the people of Northern Ireland can expect uninterrupted Government between now and 2011?

Where is the accountability in a system in which the DUP and Sinn Féin, without consulting the Assembly or Executive, can be "minded" to appoint an Attorney General for Northern Ireland and to then name that person? Where too is the DUP's spoken guarantee that policing and justice will not be devolved until the conditions and circumstances are right? What

happened to Nigel Dodds's not-in-a-political-lifetime timescale?

The promise to commence a process of building confidence in order to achieve cross-community buy-ins is a sop to Sinn Féin; it will be given whatever it has demanded, and the selling job will follow. Sinn Féin stamped its foot last June, and the DUP has now bought it off.

What about the other issues that Sinn Féin complained about? Is Martin McGuinness in a position to inform the Assembly that Sinn Féin is prepared to accept collective Executive accountability on the matters that are outstanding?

The decision to call the Executive to meet on Thursday is a small, albeit important, step in the right direction. However, there is a problem in that it is only one solution to only one dispute between the DUP and Sinn Féin. We are in the run-up to Christmas, and one can only hope that that does not turn out to be an unappetising mixture of fudge and humbug.

3.15 pm

It should be noted that Northern Ireland plc cannot recover or get the last 152 days back. While the rest of the world reacted to the present global economic crisis, Government in Northern Ireland was forced to stand still. Time will tell whether our inability to react has cost us dearly. It has been argued recently that the United Kingdom is one of the worst-placed major economic powers to deal with the crisis due to our unprecedented levels of debt. I argue that Northern Ireland, due to the inability of Sinn Féin and the DUP to work together, is now the least-prepared region in the United Kingdom to deal with the recession.

It is imperative, now that the impasse has been overcome, for Sinn Féin and the DUP to ensure that that situation never happens again. I support the motion.

Mrs Long: I welcome the fact that we are having this debate in the context of reassurances given publicly by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister that the Executive will meet this week and will continue to meet weekly until the backlog of Executive business has been cleared. As was stated at length during yesterday's debate in the House, it is the absolute minimum that we as Members, and the public who elected us, have the right to expect from all the parties in the Executive.

Over the coming weeks, when we have had adequate opportunity to consider and reflect on the details of the proposals that have ended the five months of stalemate, and when we have seen their totality — for I fear that we have not seen their totality in the statements today — we will be better able to judge whether those proposals are worth welcoming.

The proposals that have been set out today will ultimately be judged on whether they deliver sound and effective governance arrangements for the devolution of policing and justice, and not on whether they provide a sufficient fig leaf for Sinn Féin to go back into the Executive and continue to work with the DUP — at least for the meantime — in the face of overwhelming public criticism. We have all lived through faltering Administrations, and so the uninterrupted functioning of the Executive, to which the deputy First Minister referred today, is key. Often, the so-called constructive ambiguity that got those Executives back on the road was the very same destructive lack of clarity that drove them off the road and into a ditch only months later. For the sake of the public, I hope that we are not re-entering such a phase in this Administration, and on that I concur completely with Danny Kennedy.

The revolving-door Assembly is no longer an option. Stability and durability count, particularly where community confidence, which is key to the delivery of the completion of devolution, has been so fundamentally undermined by the shambles of the past few months. The agreement that has been reached will also be judged on what the Executive deliver in the coming weeks and months, not simply on party-political and partisan agendas to satisfy their core constituencies and fend off their main detractors, but for the benefit of the whole community.

In its motion, the SDLP listed many of the issues on which urgent progress is required, and the Alliance Party concurs with those. However, the motion fails to mention — as did the original motion of 16 September — the need to deliver on the shared and better future that was promised in the Programme for Government. Although it has been a long time since the draft cohesion, sharing and inclusion strategy was with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, we need, even more urgently, evidence of real cohesion, sharing and integration in the Executive. The last few months have shown that work to build a shared and better future is needed not only on the ground — as we are so often reminded — but at the very heart of the Administration. I am not sure that cohesion, sharing and integration played much of a part in the resolution of the current difficulties, considering that at least two parties whose members form part of the Executive were not, apparently, party to those discussions.

Ultimately, success is not the delivery of an agreed statement today, although that is a step in the right direction; it is the Executive delivering on a coherent shared agenda in the weeks and months to come. Throughout this debacle, we have remained focused on achieving a sound, durable and fair resolution of the difficulties that the Executive faced. Our aim has been

to be constructive, even in our criticism, and to urge delivery and progress on behalf of the public, who have demanded so much in these financially difficult times.

Owing to the backlog of Executive business over the past five months, and the serious financial context in which calls for action have been made from the business and voluntary sectors, the Alliance Party's chief whip, Kieran McCarthy, has today written to the Speaker to ask for additional plenary sittings. That could be done through the scheduling of additional sittings during sitting weeks or by delaying the Assembly's Christmas recess. That would ensure that the five-month backlog of business is cleared for the public's benefit.

We are ready for business, and business is waiting for us. The question remains whether the Executive are ready to do business.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Poots: The value of a devolved Administration lies in whether it makes a difference. If we are to move away from direct rule dithering, it cannot be to a situation in which there is devolved stagnation. Ultimately, that situation has existed, to some extent, over the past five months, as a consequence of the actions of one party — not two parties, as Mr Kennedy suggested. Thankfully, there was a Programme for Government and a Budget that enabled Ministers to carry out a limited amount of work.

Unfortunately, one party in the Executive voted against a key aspect of the Budget. Therefore, taking lectures from that party is not particularly agreeable. I will accept one lecture from Mr O'Loan, however, and that is about looking in the rear-view mirror at Jim Allister. Having watched how the SDLP was so busy looking in its rear-view mirror at Sinn Féin for many years that it did not notice that it was being overtaken, I will not be concentrating on Mr Allister. He is so far behind that I would need a magnifying glass in order to see him.

In respect of the motion, I note that the SDLP was pointing out problems —

Mr A Maginness: Why is the DUP so obsessed with Jim Allister? He is not a Member of the House. He is a former member of the DUP and a Member of the European Parliament, but why is the DUP so obsessed with him? Can the Member explain whether that is pathological or psychological?

Mr Poots: I am happy to. The Member's colleague Mr O'Loan brought Jim Allister into the equation, not me. I responded to those comments. Therefore, the Member should place the blame on his colleague.

There is much that we must deal with, and there are many aspects of the motion that I support. The planning system that has been inherited by the

Assembly is symbolic of a Belfast metropolitan plan that was introduced in 2001 and is nowhere near a conclusion. The Magherafelt area plan is nowhere near conclusion; it took seven years for a planning decision on Sprucefield; a hotel project in my constituency of Lisburn waited four years for a planning decision; and John Lewis has submitted three planning applications in three years, which have not yet been dealt with. There is a raft of work to be done by the Minister of the Environment to deal with those issues. In education, our schoolchildren are enduring decrepit facilities, and 28 capital projects remain outstanding.

The south-west hospital was to be completed in 2010, but the tendering process has not even been completed; therefore, there is no prospect of that happening. The women and children's hospital that was to be in place after the closure of the Jubilee Maternity Hospital by a Sinn Féin Minister will not be in place until 2018. A full generation of births will take place in that hospital without adequate facilities in place.

There is a particular Department that the SDLP omitted to mention, namely the Department for Social Development. Of course, the SDLP seem to think that —

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member obviously does not want to give way.

Mr Poots: The SDLP seems to think that DSD is run by "little Miss Perfect", who never does anything wrong and always does everything right. However, that Department's response to the social housing crisis has been pitiful. There are 2,000 people in my constituency who are on the housing list and who are under pressure, but new builds are not even in double figures. That crisis is not being responded to or dealt with. The urban regeneration programme demonstrates that DSD might easily be described as the "Department for Belfast and Londonderry", because no other town or city in the Province receives significant funding from that Department. That must be dealt with by the Minister for Social Development.

Mrs M Bradley: Does the Member accept that the Maze prison site was in his gift when he was a Minister? What did he do about that?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Poots: I am shocked and surprised that some Members think that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure had responsibility for that project — it was the responsibility of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

I am glad that Mr Kennedy is in the Chamber, because I do not like saying things about people behind their back — I prefer to say them to their face. Mr Kennedy spoke about the decision today, a decision that is welcome and represents progress. When Mr

Kennedy faithfully followed his former leader Lord Trimble, his party regularly made concessions to Sinn Féin demands. On this occasion the DUP was tested and did not blink — Sinn Féin has returned to the table and agreed to the terms that were available to it five months ago.

Whether or not Mr Kennedy likes that, the truth will come out in time. He can have his fudge and humbug for Christmas, but the stuffed turkeys of the Ulster Unionist Party may not enjoy this Christmas. Mr Kennedy tried to cast doom and gloom on a day when everyone should be looking forward.

The SDLP motion, as far as it goes, is good: the Executive should be allowed to get on with their work, and the Department for Social Development should help with that.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As has been pointed out, the motion has been overtaken by events, which probably explains the sparse attendance in the Chamber. I am sure that all MLAs and parties — even the SDLP — will welcome today's development.

As I said previously in the House, there is no reason for any party to continue to refuse to recognise that Sinn Féin and the DUP were negotiating on genuine issues. During the peace process, many difficult issues that had created or sustained conflict and division in our shared but conflicted society were identified, negotiated and resolved through agreement. The announcement today is another welcome step along the road to an agreed future.

However, as other Members said, there are still issues to be resolved and agreed on. It is incumbent on all the parties to address those issues, which we all know exist, in an attempt to find solutions. Our society has been riven with conflict and division since partition; therefore, it will take time to resolve all the issues completely.

Mrs D Kelly: Have the restrictions on nationalists applying for the post of policing and justice Minister been removed?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McLaughlin: There should be no such restrictions. It is up to parties, particularly if they have been awarded a sufficiently strong mandate, to try to ensure that there are no restrictions. If parties have been denied that mandate, they may have to take their oil.

The DUP and Sinn Féin addressed the issues that were creating obstacles to the fair, full and efficient functioning of the Executive on the basis that they would continue until a solution emerged. That is the formula that the DUP and Sinn Féin recommend to other parties, particularly those that had an opportunity

to adopt such an approach but which singularly failed to do so. We will address and resolve the outstanding issues — there will be equality of outcome, parity of esteem and equality of opportunity for all sections of our community.

3.30 pm

Mr B McCrea: The Member has sorted things out very well, and I did not notice whether he blinked, but Mr Poots will be watching him carefully. Does the Member need any more help from the rest of us at this end of the Chamber on issues such as education or the Maze stadium, or can Sinn Féin and the DUP sort out everything on their own?

Mr McLaughlin: I can say with some confidence that we could address all those issues, but it would be better if we could work with all the parties, including the SDLP and the UUP.

I did not introduce the matter to the debate; nevertheless, before the hiatus in the Executive, which, fortunately, has been resolved, the SDLP Minister agreed budget proposals. However, the SDLP repudiated her and voted against an agreement that she had made. If that is the kind of help that the Member is offering, we can manage without it.

This is an important day. The motion addresses urgent issues that need to be addressed. All parties can now say with hand on heart that they have the opportunity to deal with them, as a space has opened up between us. We also have to address other issues, and if we can address them on a cross-party basis, we should do so.

However, some parties have adopted a quasi-oppositional role, so they will seek to be negative no matter what is put before them. They will seek to undermine and to play party politics on issues that do not require such an approach, and they have made that mistake many times. If there is one lesson to be learned from the episode that caused the blockage of the Executive meetings, it is that there are triple locks and vetoes all over the place and that people should be very careful about introducing them.

Mr Hamilton: Like my colleagues, I welcome the motion. It is not an exhaustive list, but on first reading, one would think that it covers all the issues, especially given the length of it. It touches on many serious issues that the Assembly and the Executive must deal with.

The motion is important and it deals with serious matters, but it has been superseded by events. I am surprised that the proposer of the motion or some other Member has not taken the credit for getting the Executive to meet on Thursday. Indeed, if his party — *[Interruption.]*

The proposer's party leader may suggest that the arrival of the BBC's 'Question Time' in Belfast is

somehow responsible for getting the Executive to meet. No doubt someone will claim that today's events have come about as a result of the tabling of today's motion.

I want to touch on some important issues in the motion, and I wanted to talk about the partnership that many Members have spoken about, because it is an important issue. However, I am not sure how some people define the word partnership; sometimes there is no actual partnership in the definition of partnership. Nevertheless, there are important issues.

The current financial predicament teaches us as a global community, and not just as a community in Northern Ireland, that the country must sink or swim together. There is no way that one community will be able to ride out economic problems while the other community suffers. We sink or swim together.

Those are important, mature points that require discussion as we move forward. I wanted to dwell largely on those points, but, given that it is a serious debate that deals with serious matters, some of the unfortunate comments made by Mr Kennedy cannot go without response. My party and I will not take any lecture from the Member on the issue —

Mr Kennedy: You used to be a Member of our party.

Mr Hamilton: Yes, I used to be. I, and others, sought to lecture Mr Kennedy and his colleagues at that time. Perhaps they should have listened to those lectures. Had they done so, they might not be sitting at that end of the Chamber, and could still have been sitting at this end. They ignored the advice that was given, and they paid the price. I will not take any lectures from Mr Kennedy or other Members from his party on this matter. It is funny how that party's stock critical response deviates —

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to the Member for the advice that he gave to my party in the past. Perhaps he will illuminate the House, and tell us what advice he has given his current party on the way forward, and on partnership. Is there any blinking going on? What is happening? How many deals have you done now, Simon?

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

Mr Hamilton: One piece of advice that I will certainly give to my colleagues is not to let the honourable Member anywhere near finance. There has been some talk of the Executive expediting big financial projects. The Member is able to expedite his own finances far too quickly throughout the year.

I will not take any lectures from the Member's party on the issue of policing and justice — far from it. The UUP agreed the devolution of policing and justice powers by the mid-point of the last Assembly, in 2005. Indeed, it would have led to the appointment of a Sinn

Féin Minister. That is where the spectre of Gerry Kelly having control of policing and justice powers came from — because Mr Kennedy and Basil McCrea's party agreed to it. Mr McCrea was not even a member of the UUP at that time; he is a johnny-come-lately.

Mr Kennedy: That was a political lifetime ago.

Mr Hamilton: I hear the call about a political lifetime. I appreciate that, on average, a political lifetime is much shorter for members of the Ulster Unionist Party than it is for some others. Those Members are being either deliberately disingenuous on this matter or just being downright dishonest.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member define what a political lifetime is in the DUP? What is the definition of several political lifetimes? That comment was attributed to the First Minister.

Mr Hamilton: If the Member had allowed me to continue, he might have got an answer. Perhaps it would not have satisfied him, but it would have been an answer.

The point that Mr Dodds made about political lifetimes was about Sinn Féin, and the Member knows that full well. It was not about policing and justice powers per se; it was about giving responsibility for the devolution of policing and justice powers to members of Sinn Féin. That point was made very clearly, and to say anything otherwise is to be deliberately disingenuous.

Danny Kennedy has trotted out a stock party response to the events that have taken place elsewhere today, even though he knows that what has been agreed today is good, not only for unionism, but for the entire community. I am glad that there is now an opportunity to move forward and to deal with some of the serious issues mentioned in the motion and with other issues that face the Executive and this country.

Mr Elliott: Today's announcement goes some way towards answering some of the questions that were asked yesterday. However, there are more questions to be asked about what was not said today. That is the crux of the matter.

I do not wish to be mean about today's development, and I want to give it a fair wind. I appreciate that progress has been made and that an Executive meeting will take place on Thursday. Progress has been made over the past few years, and we have gone from "over my dead body" and "not in a political lifetime" to "maybe sometime in the near future". I am pleased that progress has been made, at least.

It is unfortunate, however, that over the past five months, we have had minority rule in the Province. We have had minority rule by Sinn Féin, which has held the process, the political institutions and Northern Ireland to ransom. It has done that in the same way

that the republican movement held Northern Ireland to ransom for almost 40 years through its terrorist activities in the Province.

What is going to happen with regard to all the issues that have not been mentioned in today's announcement? My colleague Danny Kennedy mentioned them earlier.

Where is the progress in education? Where is the progress on the Maze stadium and the entire Maze project? I am deeply interested in that issue, and I would be surprised if Mr Poots, Basil McCrea and company were not also interested. What will happen with divisive issues such as the Irish language? We have not heard what will happen with that. What side deals have been done alongside the document and the process? Only time will tell.

Over 12 months ago, we heard about the financial package that was coming with the deal. Where did that package go? It went somewhere else, but it certainly did not come to Northern Ireland.

Mr B McCrea: It went to Lehman Brothers.

Mr Hamilton: Mr McCrea's record on unemployment suggests that he is almost a one-man Lehman Brothers.

Mr Elliott knows full well that a financial package worth over £1 billion was successfully negotiated prior to devolution. Can he remind the House what financial package his party requested in 1998? The Member himself opposed the deal in 1998, but perhaps he can cast his mind back and tell us what his party negotiated for Northern Ireland at that time.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr Elliott: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Mr Hamilton was a member of my party at that time. Perhaps he will correct me if I am wrong, but, as I remember, he was opposed to sharing power with Sinn Féin at that time. Not only was he opposed to power sharing in the Executive, but he was opposed to power sharing with two First Ministers in the Assembly. Now his party has gone into the Executive with five Sinn Féin Ministers. Mr Hamilton has said that he will not take any lectures from the Ulster Unionist Party; I will not take any lectures from you, Simon.

Let us focus on where the blame lies. It is unfortunate that the Republican movement has held the process to ransom. I want a commitment from it on education, which I have not heard today. Where are we going on education? I would be surprised if other Members do not hear similar questions to those that I hear about what will happen to next year's P6 pupils. They are left with a dilemma that has not been answered by the document, and I have not heard a way forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the Member to deal with the motion, not with the document. The debate should be on the motion.

Mr Elliott: I am dealing with the motion; the issue of education is of key importance to it. Several Members have mentioned that issue.

Where will the next stalemate in the process come from? Now that we have got over this stalemate, can we expect another one in less than a year's time, or after more than a year? I am concerned that unless the issues are tied down now, there will be a carve-up between the two larger parties in the institution, this place will be brought into stalemate once again, and, eventually, this place will come down. In the early 1980s, republicans plotted to break out of the Maze Prison. I wonder whether they are now plotting to break out of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Dr McDonnell: I support the motion, to which my name is attached. It is a useful, honest and genuine motion that reflects the needs, expectations, hopes and demands of the community that has elected all of us to the Assembly.

None of us should need reminding of the fact that the world is in a financial and economic crisis, which, perhaps, we should better have seen coming. Nevertheless, when the crisis hit a few months ago, it did so with an impact much greater than anyone expected, and that impact continues to inflict damage. The damage is, in many ways, beyond our control.

3.45 pm

Our crisis is similar to that which exists in the many other parts of the world where people face growing unemployment, negative housing equity and a whole series of other factors, all of which can lead people to become depressed and to despair for the future. However, we have compounded our share of the global problem with a self-inflicted political crisis that is — for many Members and the vast majority of the public — neither understandable nor justified.

Like many others, I am delighted that the crisis appears to have been overcome today. However, I am not sure whether I want to bet my shirt on the crisis not being resurrected again at an appropriate time. My concern is that the Executive have not met for 152 days, which is almost five months. Therefore, let us be glad, grateful and thankful that they will now meet.

However, we must not forget the lost opportunities and the terrible waste. We must ensure that, whatever our differences, be they party political or otherwise, we do not throw the baby out with the bath water. That is what has happened for the past five months. We have allowed individual and party differences to build up and to hold political progress to ransom.

I know that there has been much blinking and winking by certain Members in the Chamber — some may even have been “ginking” — but we do not need to get into that. What we do need is a clear, honest and open process, whereby we work together to solve mutual problems.

At least 28 new school buildings are badly needed. Other schools also require maintenance work; however, those 28 schools are the ones that are in the worst state of repair and need replacing urgently. Replacement of those schools should have begun 18 months ago when devolution was restored. A backlog of high-priority, and absolutely essential, school maintenance work — amounting to some £200 million — exists and must be cleared.

I have visited schools in my constituency and elsewhere. A few weeks ago, I visited Sacred Heart College in Omagh, and to say that the place is falling down is an understatement. The school should have been replaced long ago; it is falling down and requires urgent repair. The responsibility for doing that comes back to the Assembly and the Executive, to which we nominated Ministers. Having a dysfunctional Executive has led to a delay in necessary short-term maintenance work and medium- to long-term replacement work.

Aside from the needs of schools, 60 items of Executive business are blocked in a pipeline. I am told that there is a backlog of 15,000 planning applications because of PPS 14. I am told that some 1,000 small and not-so-small businesses have gone bankrupt in the past few months. Some 33,000 people are now on the dole, while another 10,000 construction jobs will be lost by next March. The Maze project, if we are to get it together, will create 10,000 jobs and offset those job losses in the construction industry.

Some 160,000 —

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

Dr McDonnell: Some 160,000 households are living in fuel poverty. Last but not least, the 11-plus crisis is affecting 15,000 primary-7 children, and it will soon affect 15,000 primary-6 children.

We must get our act together. We must unite for a common purpose, in order to ensure that the people who elected us get a fair deal.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I welcome the fact that the Executive are to meet at last on Thursday. The view that people on the street hold is that maybe, just maybe, the politicians are catching themselves on. I will focus my comments in particular on the construction industry, which covers a multitude of businesses, from large development firms to small-house builders, local builders and jobbing tradesman.

The focus of the Assembly and the Executive should be on tradesmen and operatives — the people who do the hands-on work on the building sites — many of whom have been left with large debts because of unpaid bills.

I have a particular concern about the social role of the building industry in rural areas. Building workers in the cities are often concealed behind hoardings; all we see is a crane. If anyone were to stand at any major road junction or roundabout west of the Bann, where most of our constituencies and homelands lie, they would see the vans heading east at 6.30 am, albeit in decreasing numbers. In the mornings, men can be seen in high-visibility vests and dusty boots, waiting for their pick-up with their lunch boxes under their arms. There are hundreds, even thousands, of them, and at 6.30 pm, they can be seen coming home again. Entire villages and rural communities are absolutely dependant on those commuting builders.

The building industry soaks up unemployment in places that no other industry can or ever will reach, and it is extremely disappointing to read the projections that the CBI has released, which state that, potentially, another 10,000 of those jobs could be lost. Construction work — and nothing else — is a supplement for part-time farming, making it viable across the North. It has a unique social function, and that is why it is deserving of unique support through public policy.

Mrs D Kelly: Dr McDonnell clearly outlined the reasons why the Executive should be up and functioning. Does the Member share my concern that the reason that the Executive were not functioning was more to do with sectional party interest than the public good?

Mr McGlone: I do not think that anyone could come to any other conclusion. The average 5' 8" — the people whom we are talking about — were the meat in a cynical political sandwich. That is not good enough; we must see movement.

We must ensure that any measure that is implemented in support of the building industry reaches the vast army of tradesmen and building workers. There are two mechanisms for doing that. As has been mentioned, ‘The Irish News’ today published a list of high-priority repair and maintenance work needed in our schools — there are 28 projects worth more than £1 million each. Those projects incorporate some smaller jobs, some worth just a few thousand pounds. The great benefit is that that work is spread right across the North, at hundreds of sites. That work has been budgeted for and is urgently needed. Backlogs can be brought forward, but we need a functional Executive in order to do that.

My colleague touched on another backlog: the 1,500 planning applications for houses that are stuck in the pipeline because of PPS 14, the ban on rural housing. Each build would contribute between £50,000 and

£100,000 to the construction-supply sector, the maintenance sector, and other tradesmen. Every site adds up to several years of employment in rural areas where there are no other employment options.

It has been hinted that Gordon Brown will radically increase investment in social housing newbuilds. That may allay some of the concerns of those Members who have said that our Minister is not doing enough. Our Minister would build many more houses — I am not second-guessing that; she has said it often enough — to try to meet the existing demand for homes, to try to give more work to the construction trade and to get more work done in our community, if she had the money. Who was the Finance Minister? Which members of the Executive refused to offer more money when a formal request was made? It was the DUP members.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: I am sorry, Edwin, I cannot give way; I will not get any extra time.

I have spoken to my colleague Margaret Ritchie, who has taken soundings from Whitehall about that additional investment. The Assembly and the Executive can inject dynamism into the building trade — all it takes is political will and co-operation from relevant Ministers. Hopefully, we are now back in business.

Some Members have spoken in support of the motion, such as Mr Shannon. I listened to Martina Anderson, who went some way to be critical of the SDLP, but what is new about that? Whenever one throws a stone, one can expect one to come back.

She said that the SDLP had failed to stand up to rejectionist unionists when it came to people's rights and entitlements. Could that be coming from Provisional Sinn Féin, the same party that negotiated that no nationalists need apply for the post of justice Minister? Could it be coming from the same Provisional Sinn Féin that conceded not one, but three, DUP vetoes at St Andrews? That party did not stand up to the DUP but cowed over and fell at its feet. Could that be the same Provisional Sinn Féin that has had a total inability to deliver unity to the people of this island across a growing gulf of division that it has perpetrated and sustained throughout the years? That is a fact — let us face that reality.

Danny Kennedy and Naomi Long said that they hoped that the Executive meeting will be a step in the right direction. Naomi Long made special reference to her meetings with the voluntary sector. She also referred to the importance of that sector.

Edwin talked about direct rule dithering. What have we had for the past four months if not DUP and Sinn Féin dithering? It absolutely beats me.

Edwin also talked about the votes against the Budget, and yes, the SDLP voted against the Budget, and — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Comments must be made through the Chair.

Mr McGlone: There were major issues to do with water charging, education, childcare, and the voluntary sector. Some of the people sitting here were the first ones who went out crying to those sectors.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: No, I will not Edwin; it will eat into my time.

Those people went crying to those sectors, saying that it is awful what the nasty Executive have done to them. Who were those people? They were the DUP and Sinn Féin. They drove those cuts through against those communities, who face those issues at the coalface. I will not hear anything about the shortcomings of the SDLP when others have a huge mote in their eye to the point of being blinded.

Another interesting point was made; indeed, Edwin has been a great source of information today. He confirmed to us —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Members to address other Members by their surname.

Mr McGlone: If Mr Poots does not mind, I do not mind. He let the cat out of the bag when he confirmed that Provisional Sinn Féin has rolled over to the DUP again on the devolution of policing and justice. No nationalists need apply, again — thank you. *[Laughter.]*

Moving on to Mr McLaughlin — *[Interruption.]*

That “thank you” was in inverted commas; standing up for nationalists — that is really good.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McGlone: I listened intently to what Mr McLaughlin said, and there is a need for inclusive Government, inclusive talks, and for reaching agreements. The only problem, as he said, is that there are triple locks all over the place. Who negotiated those triple locks at St Andrews? It was the aforementioned Provisional Sinn Féin.

Mr Hamilton said that someone might take credit for getting the Executive to meet. I have to say to Mr Hamilton, who has disappeared — I am sorry, he has moved; I thought that perhaps he was moving this road. I have to say to Mr Hamilton that not much credit is associated with getting people back to the work that they are supposed to be doing.

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

Mr McGlone: I will conclude by saying that we must get back to the appropriate level of co-operation in the Executive. I believe that that is what the public is asking us to do. It is not an option to do nothing or to have no Government. We must get on with it now in the interests of the wider community. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly reaffirms its resolution of 16 September 2008; and welcomes the call by leaders of business, manufacturing and construction for an early meeting of the Executive to discuss the delivery of key objectives, including a prompt roll-out of capital and regeneration projects, reform of the planning system, increased investment in education and skills for workers, reform of the public sector to reduce bureaucracy, a review of available resources to assist innovation and export, improvement of energy efficiency, investment in the development of renewables and the publication of overdue Delivery Implementation Plans for health and education facilities.

4.00 pm

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Sexual Assault in South Belfast

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members must resume their seats. I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak and all other Members will have approximately seven minutes.

Ms Lo: Fifteen minutes? Wow.

In Northern Ireland, the number of recorded rapes has increased from 292 in 2001-02 to 457 in 2006-07. However, the rate of conviction for rape after trial decreased from 28.2% in 1994 to 19% in 2005.

Police figures for South Belfast show that during the seven months between April and October 2008, 23 rapes have been reported to the PSNI. Nine of those reported incidents have been forwarded to the Public Prosecution Service (PPS); four people have been charged; two incidents were deemed “no crime” after investigation; and seven incidents are currently being investigated.

The PSNI stated that the rate of reported sexual assaults in South Belfast is no worse than that of anywhere else in Northern Ireland, despite the fact that it has a vibrant night-time economy, and that there is no evidence that a “uni-rapist” lurks in the area. It is important that residents are not alarmed unduly and that disproportionate fear about sexual crime in the area is not raised. However, it is equally important to strike a balance in the dissemination of relevant details in order to inform the public in a responsible and preventative manner.

In fact, 32% of reported rapes are committed by the victim’s partner; 22% are committed by someone whom the victim knows; 8% are committed by total strangers; and 8% are false allegations. Between 70% and 80% of rapes are not reported. Most rapes occur in private premises, often under the influence of alcohol, but rarely involving drugs.

Northern Ireland’s attitudes towards what constitutes rape or sexual assault must be examined. An Amnesty International survey of students in Northern Ireland on violence against women, published in September 2008, made some appalling findings: 44% of respondents believed that a women is totally or partially responsible for being raped or sexually assaulted if she is drunk; 46% believed that she is responsible if she has behaved

flirtatiously; 48% believed that she is responsible if she has failed to say no clearly; 30% believed that she is responsible if she is wearing revealing clothes; 33% believed that she is responsible if she has had many sexual partners; and 47% believed that she is responsible if she is alone and walking in a dangerous or deserted area.

Often, blame for this horrendous crime is put on women. The survey's findings reflect attitudes that are shown throughout society and among people in Government, policing and the criminal justice system. A cultural change is needed in how sexual crime against women is viewed. Public opinion must be won in communities, schools, colleges, youth clubs, and in the public and private sectors for the fact that violence against women — in whatever form, including rape — is totally unacceptable.

Universities alone cannot cause that societal change; it must be integral to education from an early age, and an emphasis on equality and respect between genders must begin in the classroom.

Sex without consent is rape. No means no. Young people need to be aware that the consequences of committing such an offence can be life imprisonment. Moreover, women of all ages must be educated about personal safety and responsibility, particularly in the context of health and alcohol.

Acquaintance rape — that is rapes by husbands, partners, family members or recent acquaintances — forms the majority of rape and sexual-assault cases. It is important that women are cautious of going home with strangers, and they should be encouraged to report such incidents to ensure that perpetrators are arrested and sent to prison. Several programmes in South Belfast, primarily run by the PSNI and the students' union at Queen's University, offer women services in prevention, protection and support. Forty additional officers have been drafted in after the establishment of the PSNI's rape crime unit in April 2008. Furthermore, more than £500,000 has been invested in forensic-science technology and other resources that will better equip the police to tackle that crime.

I commend the students' union for establishing a proactive security programme that ensures safety on its campus, at night, for its staff and students. The union's plans — in partnership with others — to act before Christmas are timely and will increase awareness of personal protection among students. Furthermore, the students' union is considering co-ordinating a bus service for students, which will be welcomed by students and their parents. Although good local schemes are tackling the problem, the Executive must provide a strategic response.

Northern Ireland's members of End Violence Against Women (EVAW) produced a report in 2007 called

'Making the Grade?' in order to assess Government initiatives on violence against women, including rape. The report concluded that, although there have been positive developments, there is no underlying strategic approach in all Departments to address violence against women. DHSSPS consulted on the strategy in order to tackle sexual violence and establish subgroups, which are working on action plans. The report suggests that the Executive should reframe their policies and take into account a draft strategy entitled 'Tackling Violence against Women', which was issued for consultation in 1999 by then Secretary of State, Mo Mowlam, but has never progressed beyond that stage. I understand that EVAW intends to meet with Ministers, and I urge the Executive to consider its request for a co-ordinated Government approach to tackling violence against women.

In addition to a statutory response, some practical improvements can make a quick difference in South Belfast. A visible police presence will deter crime, including sexual assaults. Residents are concerned that neighbourhood policing has diminished over the years. There were, previously, 22 officers in the area; that figure has been reduced to five or six. Therefore, it is important that the PSNI increases the police presence, particularly in the dark, wintry months. CCTV can deter all types of crime, and overhanging foliage can be pruned back to increase visibility for pedestrians. Moreover, better street lighting will enhance security.

Personal alarms are now freely available in police stations, the City Church, the SOS Bus in Shaftesbury Square, Stranmillis College, and other places. It is important that young people, who may be leaving home for the first time, are well prepared, and know how to keep themselves safe.

Mr Spratt: I thank Anna Lo for bringing this important debate to the Assembly. I know that all public representatives in south Belfast have been very concerned in recent weeks about high-profile incidents of sexual attacks in the city centre, and the university area of South Belfast in particular.

Two weeks ago I attended the presentation of a comprehensive and challenging report by Detective Superintendent Karen Baxter at a meeting of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. During that presentation, we were told that in B district, which covers the South Belfast area, there had been 21 reported rapes and attempted rapes between 1 April and 30 October 2008. Some of those incidents became very high profile, and received a considerable amount of press coverage.

There is a responsibility on us all, not only public representatives, but also the media, to deal sensitively with such issues. Those incidents need to be exposed and highlighted, but sometimes, in media terms, some

of the incidents are over-egged. That can cause serious frustrations and problems for the police and everyone else, in that the incidents are taken totally out of context and out of profile. Indeed, one incident that was reported and became very high profile, later turned out not to have been a rape, as was reported. Therefore, there are dangers, and all of us have to bear responsibility, and be sensitive when becoming involved with that type of issue.

South Belfast does not have the highest number of incidents in Northern Ireland, nor the lowest, but 21 such incidents over that period is far too many. The other distressing statistic given in the presentation by Detective Superintendent Baxter was the fact that up to 40% of crimes such as rape and serious sexual assault are not even reported to the police. That is something that occurs in all policing areas throughout the United Kingdom, and, no doubt, in the South of Ireland, too. Due to the very nature of the investigations that have to be carried out into such incidents, sometimes victims feel that they cannot report those rapes. It is a sad indictment of the system if women feel that they cannot come forward, and, in many cases, do not have the support to come forward.

There are certain factors that are specific to the South Belfast area. First, there is a large student population, with Queen's University in the very heart of the city. Secondly, there is a vibrant nightlife which stretches from the city centre, up the Dublin Road to the Malone and Lisburn Road areas, and around the Holylands area, where many students and young people live. There are also many nightclubs in the South Belfast area, which bring economic benefits to the area, but also cause specific problems that the police and others have to deal with.

4.15 pm

In an area in which those factors are prevalent, there is an onus on several groups to take appropriate actions to reduce risk. There is a very clear onus on the Police Service to deal with any incidents and to reassure the public. In the wake of the most recent attacks, I and other Members from South Belfast met local police commanders and outlined very deep concerns. I am very concerned about the low number of visible police patrols in the area. I firmly believe that a greater number of visible police patrols should be very seriously considered. The police need to reassure the public with a very clear presence, particularly when pubs and nightclubs are closing in the early hours of the morning.

There is also a responsibility on individuals to reduce risk. Last week, the Assembly debated the dangers of the misuse of alcohol. Unfortunately, the effects that the excessive consumption of alcohol has on people are all too apparent if one walks along the Dublin Road on a Saturday night. I appeal to those

who go out for a good time to drink responsibly. Young people do not need to get drunk to have a good night out. It is important that we get that message across.

The Queen's Students' Union and other places have done some good work, but I was amazed that many young people, particularly young females, were still out on their own in the early hours of the morning last week. The police have very clearly advised young people to stay in groups — particularly when going home in the early hours.

The PSNI has done a lot of work in that area, for which it deserves credit. A rape crime unit was established in April 2008, which involves some 50 officers at three sites around the Province. That unit has dealt with the problems of sexual assaults and rapes. Clearance rates have improved over the past few months, which is encouraging. The police should be encouraged to do all that they can to tackle that problem in the future. People who have had a serious crime committed against them should be encouraged to report it to the police, and they should be assured that they will be treated very sympathetically.

There is much more that I could say about this issue, but I realise that my time is up. I know that others will make similar points. It is a serious problem that all of us should tackle together as representatives of the area, as should people in all areas of Northern Ireland.

Dr McDonnell: I thank my South Belfast colleague Anna Lo for bringing this important issue to the House. As an elected representative and as somebody who has lived in that part of Belfast for a long time, and as a parent, I — like so many others — have been shocked and alarmed at the recent apparent spate of sexual attacks in South Belfast.

The safety of women — young and old — on our streets has to be a priority. If their safety cannot be taken for granted, we are in difficulties as a society. They must be in a position to take that safety for granted, and it must be guaranteed at all times.

There are difficulties with discussing this issue because of its high sensitivity. People should be free to walk the streets alone at any hour of the day or night. In a civilised society, they should be free to take decisions that are convenient and suitable to them at any time. Unfortunately, that is sometimes not the case. When issues such as threats of sexual attacks arise, people become very frightened. We have to differentiate between what people are entitled to, what we would like to see and what is prudent or sensible.

In suggesting that people are careful and cautious, I am not suggesting that that is the preferred way, but immediate action is required to tackle the problem and to ensure people's safety.

The spate of attacks occurred recently, and I happened to be in discussion with the police at the time. As a result, we managed to convene a high-profile, round-table meeting at Queen's University, at which several political parties were represented. We attempted to hammer out an action plan, and I found that useful because students, Queen's University, the PSNI and several key Government agencies were involved. Interestingly, private landlords, and even taxi drivers and publicans, appeared – reflecting, perhaps, the beginnings of a solution or the beginnings of, at least, a vigilant method that might be used to reduce the risk of attack, and make south Belfast a safer place in which to live and socialise.

The only way to proceed is to co-ordinate our efforts, share information and work together in order to improve personal safety and reduce the number of assaults or threats of assaults. Information is the most important tool in that effort. We need to be furnished with accurate information. People in the community need to know what the threat is, how serious it is, from where it is coming or from where it is likely to come. It is only when people are fully informed as to what the risk is and from where the threat is coming, that they can take the necessary steps to protect themselves.

The most important message that emerged from the meeting at Queen's University, which was attended by some 50 people, was that women are not under the greatest threat of sexual attack on the street, but in their own homes at the hands of someone that they know – or, perhaps I should say, someone who they do not know very well but who they have met before. The sensationalist media coverage that emerged suggested for a time that some sort of lone masked or camouflaged predator was emerging from dark entries. That was not the case, and it must be put on the record that in all cases the attacker was known – maybe not well known – but was known to the victim.

We must reduce the fear and the paranoia that a predator is stalking our streets, because that is absolutely not the case. There is an onus on us all to dispel that myth and to ensure that the facts emerge. We must eliminate the fear and panic, and replace it with common sense, awareness and understanding. Furthermore, there is a common misconception that the attacks are happening in only student areas. That is not the case, as a horrendous recent ordeal of a woman in Donegall Pass proves.

Women, whether young or old, deserve to live in relative safety, and to be free from the threat of any sort of attack. However, we must find a way and means of ensuring, discreetly, that they are given enough information to be aware of where the threats are and how to defend themselves. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, there should be an appropriate level of police support and sympathy if an attack occurs.

It is vital that South Belfast becomes a safe place to be and to live, and there is a much work that can be done, working in a broad partnership. For example, as the proposer of the debate suggested, Roads Service can deal with issues such as street lighting and overhanging trees, with which I am in agreement. However, one of the interesting things to have emerged is that taxi drivers have assured us that they will remain vigilant and help out in any way that they can. It would be beneficial if taxi drivers could be organised to inform their depots, or perhaps university wardens if around the university area, if they see a young woman in a vulnerable state and being accompanied by someone who appears as a risk or danger.

We must share information and look out for each other. The Housing Executive and landlords have talked about using closed-circuit television, which could be very useful.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I know that my time is up. An awful lot can be done to deal with this issue. I thank Anna Lo for securing the debate, and I thank you for the time that you have allowed me. Sexual attacks are never justified in any circumstances. We must continue to look for ways and means to minimise the opportunities for attacks.

Mr McGimpsey: I speak in this debate as an MLA for South Belfast and I thank Anna Lo for securing it. I want to deal with two areas: the incidence of sexual assaults, and the management of sex offenders. Both issues affect South Belfast.

The figures for sexual assaults are stark. Over 80% of all sexual assaults go unreported. Of those that are reported, only around 6% result in convictions. The issue is very serious, but we are only beginning to see the edge of it because, as a result of victims' reluctance to report attacks, we are unable to gauge properly what is happening. The overwhelming majority of victims are female. Such statistics are shocking. Sexual assaults are prevalent in South Belfast and throughout Northern Ireland.

Incidents of sexual assault have a connecting theme relating to nightlife and the misuse or unsafe use of alcohol, which can leave victims vulnerable to that type of criminal. South Belfast has more than its share of evening entertainment, nightlife and premises with late licences. I have witnessed that — I stood outside the students' union at Queen's University during freshers' week and watched large numbers of young people coming out who were literally falling down drunk. Another problem is that alcohol is so cheap and is sold in a manner that promotes huge levels of consumption.

The problem is particularly concentrated in South Belfast because of the nightlife there and the large numbers of young people who come into the area to

study at Queen's University. The problem also affects local communities. What I find particularly worrying is the very low rate reporting of the crime and the low rate of convictions for it.

Another consequence of sexual attacks is the possibility that the victim can contract a sexually transmitted disease. Females may face very serious consequences if they are not seen by medical services immediately. Therefore, it is not only the violence of the assault that makes it such an important issue and one that must be dealt with urgently.

I join Jimmy Spratt in saying that the police do their best in South Belfast, given the resources that they have; however, they face a huge problem. I welcome the fact that city-centre policing has been divorced from South Belfast policing, as that allows the complement of officers in South Belfast to remain reasonably static to deal with the peak hours in South Belfast, rather than being reallocated to other areas, such as the Odyssey, for example. The Odyssey is another problem area — the nightlife, the misuse and unsafe use of alcohol, and the consequent sexual crime.

4.30 pm

The management of sex offenders is another important matter affecting South Belfast communities — whether in the Village, Sandy Row, Taughmonagh or Annadale — and constituents constantly bring that to my attention. Although the number of sex offenders housed in South Belfast is not overwhelming, they are concentrated more there than in other constituencies.

Alasdair McDonnell will remember, for example, how a planning application for sheltered housing in Ventry Lane, on Dublin Road, turned out to be for a hostel for sex offenders. South Belfast community representatives are gravely concerned about the authorities' decision to concentrate hostels in the middle of an area that already combines a large number of licensed premises with a busy nightlife. As well as lower-risk sex offenders, the Ventry Lane hostel houses category 1 offenders, who pose the highest risk of all. There is serious concern about the concentration of risk; it is not fair that local families be put at risk like that. Community representatives perpetually raise those deeply-held concerns and, next week, I will raise the matter with Paul Goggins.

Adjourned at 4.32 pm.

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