
OFFICIAL REPORT

(HANSARD)

CONTENTS

Matters of the Day:
 Weekend Road Fatalities [p201]
Assembly Business [p202]
Ministerial Statement:
 Counter-Terrorism Bill [p203]
Private Members' Business:
 UTV [p206]
 Education Welfare Officers [p216]
Oral Answers to Questions:
 Education [p224]
 Employment and Learning [p229]
 Enterprise, Trade and Investment [p234]
Adjournment:
 Children's Homes in Larne [p240]

Suggested amendments or corrections will be considered by the Editor.
They should be sent to:

The Editor of Debates
Room 248
Parliament Buildings
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX

Tel: 028 9052 1135

E-mail: simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk

to arrive not later than two weeks after publication of this Report.

This document is available in a range of alternative formats.

For more information please contact the
Northern Ireland Assembly, Printed Paper Office,
Parliament Buildings, Stormont, Belfast, BT4 3XX
Tel: 028 9052 1078

ASSEMBLY MEMBERS

Adams, Gerry (West Belfast)
Anderson, Ms Martina (Foyle)
Armstrong, Billy (Mid Ulster)
Attwood, Alex (West Belfast)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)
Bradley, Dominic (Newry and Armagh)
Bradley, Mrs Mary (Foyle)
Bradley, P J (South Down)
Brady, Mickey (Newry and Armagh)
Bresland, Allan (West Tyrone)
Brolly, Francie (East Londonderry)
Browne, The Lord (East Belfast)
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)
Burns, Thomas (South Antrim)
Burnside, David (South Antrim)
Butler, Paul (Lagan Valley)
Campbell, Gregory (East Londonderry)
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)
Clarke, Willie (South Down)
Cobain, Fred (North Belfast)
Coulter, Rev Dr Robert (North Antrim)
Craig, Jonathan (Lagan Valley)
Cree, Leslie (North Down)
Dallat, John (East Londonderry)
Deeny, Dr Kieran (West Tyrone)
Dodds, Nigel (North Belfast)
Doherty, Pat (West Tyrone)
Donaldson, Jeffrey (Lagan Valley)
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)
Easton, Alex (North Down)
Elliott, Tom (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Empey, Sir Reg (East Belfast)
Farry, Dr Stephen (North Down)
Ford, David (South Antrim)
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Gallagher, Tommy (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Gardiner, Samuel (Upper Bann)
Gildernew, Ms Michelle (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Hamilton, Simon (Strangford)
Hanna, Mrs Carmel (South Belfast)
Hay, William (Speaker)
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)
Kelly, Mrs Dolores (Upper Bann)
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)
Kennedy, Danny (Newry and Armagh)
Lo, Ms Anna (South Belfast)
Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)
McCallister, John (South Down)
McCann, Fra (West Belfast)
McCann, Ms Jennifer (West Belfast)
McCarthy, Kieran (Strangford)
McCartney, Raymond (Foyle)
McCausland, Nelson (North Belfast)
McClarty, David (East Londonderry)
McCrea, Basil (Lagan Valley)
McCrea, Ian (Mid Ulster)
McCrea, Dr William (South Antrim)
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair (South Belfast)
McElduff, Barry (West Tyrone)
McFarland, Alan (North Down)
McGill, Mrs Claire (West Tyrone)
McGimpsey, Michael (South Belfast)
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)
McGuinness, Martin (Mid Ulster)
McHugh, Gerry (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
McKay, Daithí (North Antrim)
McLaughlin, Mitchel (South Antrim)
McNarry, David (Strangford)
McQuillan, Adrian (East Londonderry)
Maginness, Alban (North Belfast)
Maskey, Alex (South Belfast)
Maskey, Paul (West Belfast)
Molloy, Francie (Mid Ulster)
Morrow, The Lord (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Moutray, Stephen (Upper Bann)
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)
Neeson, Sean (East Antrim)
Newton, Robin (East Belfast)
Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)
O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
O'Loan, Declan (North Antrim)
O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)
Paisley, Rev Dr Ian (North Antrim)
Paisley Jnr, Ian (North Antrim)
Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)
Purvis, Ms Dawn (East Belfast)
Ramsey, Pat (Foyle)
Ramsey, Ms Sue (West Belfast)
Ritchie, Ms Margaret (South Down)
Robinson, George (East Londonderry)
Robinson, Mrs Iris (Strangford)
Robinson, Ken (East Antrim)
Robinson, Peter (East Belfast)
Ross, Alastair (East Antrim)
Ruane, Ms Caitriona (South Down)
Savage, George (Upper Bann)
Shannon, Jim (Strangford)
Simpson, David (Upper Bann)
Spratt, Jimmy (South Belfast)
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
Weir, Peter (North Down)
Wells, Jim (South Down)
Wilson, Brian (North Down)
Wilson, Sammy (East Antrim)

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 24 November 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MATTERS OF THE DAY

Weekend Road Fatalities

Mr Speaker: Mr P J Bradley has sought leave to make a statement on a matter that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I shall call Mr P J Bradley to speak for up to three minutes on the subject. I will then call other Members from the constituency of South Down, as agreed with party Whips. Those Members will also have up to three minutes in which to speak. There will be no opportunity for interventions, for questions or for a vote on the matter. I will not take any points of order until the item of business has been concluded. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mr P J Bradley: Mr Speaker, I thank you for allowing the House a few moments to reflect on the tragedies of the weekend, in which seven people lost their lives at different locations across Northern Ireland. South Down has suffered greatly in that five of the seven victims were from the area. On Friday night, a social worker, who was a popular young girl in the area, was killed in an accident near Meigh. The lady, Theresa McGovern, was from the Warrenpoint Road area, just a few miles from the other terrible accident that we all know about.

Four young PSNI officers who were going to assist a friend were tragically killed in a horrible accident on a notorious stretch of road between Warrenpoint and Rostrevor. My condolences and the sympathy of the people whom I represent go out to the families, relations, friends and work colleagues of all the seven people who were killed at the weekend.

Through your good offices, Mr Speaker, I ask that the Assembly join with my colleagues from South Down in paying tribute to the four young policemen who died: Declan Greene, Kenny Irvine, Kevin Gorman and James Magee, all of whom died on duty serving the people of South Down. In the early hours when

most of us were in bed, they were working for the good of the community.

We pray that those four men, and the three people who died in separate road accidents on Friday, have eternal rest. Thank you for your understanding and courtesy, Mr Speaker.

Mr Wells: A dreadful cloud of grief hangs over South Down this morning, as we remember those who died in such tragic circumstances. I express my sympathy to the families of those who died in the tragic accident that happened between Warrenpoint and Rostrevor in the early hours of Sunday morning. I pay tribute to Kevin Gorman from Drumaness, Declan Greene from Kilkeel, Kenneth Irvine, also from Kilkeel, and James Magee from Newcastle, who gave their lives while serving the South Down community.

That dreadful tragedy once again reminds us of the risks that dedicated police officers, who do so much to protect our community, take. I also extend my sympathy to the three other people who died in tragic car accidents in Northern Ireland over the past few days. Road deaths are, indeed, tragedies. As a result of those deaths, it will be a very dark and grief-ridden Christmas for many people in the Province.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I join Jim Wells and P J Bradley in expressing our sympathy to all the families who lost loved ones over the weekend. Ten people died in road accidents on the island at the weekend — seven in the North and three in the South. As other Members said, this Christmas will be a difficult one for all the families affected. My party shares its sympathy with those families. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anam.

Mr McCallister: It is with tremendous sadness that we deal with this issue this morning. I join my Assembly colleagues from South Down in extending our sincere sympathies to all those people who are today mourning for victims of road accidents.

I want to address in particular the tragedy that the Police Service of Northern Ireland has suffered. I extend our sincere sympathy and condolences to the families, friends and colleagues, including the Chief Constable, of those four young men, who served all the community with distinction. My party colleagues and I assure them that they are very much in our thoughts and prayers at this difficult time. I also assure them that they will continue to be in our thoughts and prayers and that they have our support as they face the challenging days, weeks and months ahead.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I also extend my condolences to the families of those who lost their lives in that tragic car crash. Those young officers were serving the community from which they came. They were at the forefront of the new beginning to policing. For those men to lose

their lives in the mouth of Christmas adds to the loss. Children have lost fathers, wives have lost partners, and mothers and fathers have lost sons. The impact on the South Down community has been immense — it is in shock.

Our thoughts also go out to the families who have lost loved ones as a result of car accidents throughout the island of Ireland over the weekend. My thoughts are also with the emergency services and all the members of the public who tried to assist at the scene of those accidents. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Ms Ritchie: Warrenpoint and Rostrevor are very beautiful parts of the North of Ireland. Today, that part of South Down, and the wider constituency area, is shrouded in gloom because of the tragic events of yesterday morning, when four young police officers from South Down lost their lives in the course of duty. My thoughts and prayers are with the families, relatives and friends of those four young men: Kevin Gorman from Drumaness, whose family I know very well; Declan Greene from Ballymartin, whose family members have known tragedy before as they are part of the fishing industry; Kenny Irvine from Kilkeel; and James Magee from Newcastle.

I know that the wider constituency and the people of South Down will stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the bereaved in their grief and in their loss. I offer my sympathy, my condolences and my support to the bereaved in their tragic loss and to the Police Service in Northern Ireland because they have lost four very fine young men who were doing their duty in providing protection and safety to the wider population. In all of this, we must not forget the three people from the North and the three from the South of this island who have also lost their lives because of tragic road accidents — may they all rest in peace.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last Tuesday, 18 November, during a private Member's debate on the reaffirmation of Executive matters, Mr Patsy McGlone of the SDLP referred to our party, on several occasions, as "Provisional Sinn Féin". I believe that that was out of order, and would like a ruling to be made.

Mr Speaker: I wish to address a number of issues. After each sitting, I consider the Official Report on the proceedings in question, and reflect on the expressions that have been used in the House. I have also reflected on previous rulings about whether specific references to a party were unparliamentarily. That ruling, which is set out in page 95 of the 'Northern Ireland Assembly Companion — Rulings, Convention and Practice', is that reference to a political party differs from a reference to individual Members of a party, and I have continually said that. Nevertheless, I expect Members to behave with dignity in the Chamber, and I say again to Members from all sides of the House that I expect them to temper their language and to behave with courtesy to each other during difficult debates. As a general rule, I advise the House that I expect political parties to be referred to by their proper names in the future.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Counter-Terrorism Bill

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that she wishes to make a statement on the Counter-Terrorism Bill.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I, too, offer my condolences to the members of the families who have suffered as a result of the road accidents at the weekend. When one is a member of the family of a security force member, one dreads the knock on the door, and I can only imagine what those families are going through at present. We must uphold them in our prayers over the coming weeks.

I wish to make a statement on action that I have taken to approve the inclusion of provisions within the Counter-Terrorism Bill to enable it to extend fully to Northern Ireland. The Bill has almost completed its passage through Parliament. The final debate is scheduled in the House of Lords today, and the Bill is expected to receive Royal Assent at some stage this week.

My Department was advised of a late amendment to the Bill. The amendment contained provisions that would confer certain additional functions on my Department. In the time available, it was not possible to follow the appropriate procedure and seek the consent of the Assembly. Accordingly, as a meeting of the Executive had not been arranged, I sought and received the agreement of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to the inclusion of the relevant provisions within the Bill under urgent procedure, in accordance with paragraph 2.14 of the ministerial code. In agreeing to my request, both the First Minister and the deputy First Minister quite rightly pointed out that this procedure was not a substitute for the normal requirement of seeking the approval of the Assembly. It has always been my intention to inform the Assembly of the action that I have taken on this matter.

In the circumstances, it would be useful to provide Members with some background and information on the provisions — especially those specific to Northern Ireland — that are now included in the Bill.

12.15 pm

The Bill will give the Government wide-ranging powers in their ongoing battle in combating global terrorism, and in their pursuit of the protection of the national interest and all citizens of the United Kingdom.

The amendments, which were tabled at a late stage in the Bill's parliamentary progress and which confer additional functions on my Department, concern the use of financial measures in relation to international jurisdictions where money laundering, among other

activities, is of concern to the Government. They represent a strengthening of the provisions in the Money Laundering Regulations 2007, introduced under the European Union's third money laundering directive, which has already been extended to Northern Ireland.

Beefing up of those provisions is required because the powers in the 2007 regulations do not fully address issues of international restrictions. Specifically, the Bill appoints my Department as an enforcement and supervisory authority in respect of credit unions in Northern Ireland, and as a supervisory authority in respect of insolvency practitioners authorised under the Insolvency (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 in order to ensure that those who are affected fully comply with directions issued by the Treasury under the Bill when it becomes law.

My Department already performs a similar function in Northern Ireland under the Money Laundering Regulations 2007, which, as I said, fully extend to Northern Ireland. Directions issued by the Treasury will enable it to direct UK financial and credit institutions to take various measures to address the risks posed by international jurisdictions in relation to money laundering, terrorist financing or concern about proliferation.

In the circumstances, I am confident that my action was necessary to ensure that the provisions in this important Bill include provision for, and fully extend to, Northern Ireland. I apologise to Members for it not being possible, given the timescales involved, to bring a motion before the Assembly. I assure Members that this was an exceptional case, and one which I do not foresee happening again.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): I thank the Minister for her statement. She was, in many ways, put in an invidious position by the way in which those late amendments came about. That, obviously, gave rise to the need for Treasury Ministers to contact the Minister with a view to clearing approval and assent. However, that was not able to take the form of a legislative consent motion, as is properly required in such circumstances. Although the Minister indicated her hope that this is not a precedent, the House has to exercise caution.

I am conscious that, in that regard, the Minister rightly liaised with the First Minister and deputy First Minister. It might be of assistance to Ministers if perhaps you, Mr Speaker, might consider carrying out a bespoke review of exactly this type of situation. It is no criticism of the Minister, or of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, that there should be a locus for the Speaker in a situation concerning a legislative consent motion.

I believe that I am reflecting some of the sensitivities expressed by members of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment about such matters when it

discussed something of this issue last week. Those sensitivities were purely procedural, not political, and concerned precedent. It seems to me, Mr Speaker, that you could have a role in that area.

Will the Minister accept that, although the credit union movement here has been content to have this legislation apply to it in this way, as it does to other organisations that are holding savings, some credit unions will feel a bit miffed. They are frustrated that other concerns that they have are not being addressed, and that, out of the blue, with the Treasury being particularly unresponsive to some of their concerns and needs, they find themselves brought into legislation of this nature, at this time, and in this way?

Furthermore, will the Minister agree with the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment that we want to try to ensure that more is done to meet the ambitions that the credit union movement is expressing in order to be better placed to serve its members by providing even more services?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I fully understand Mr Durkan's comments on credit unions. Although credit unions are not the beneficiaries of regulation, they will have to deal with the burden of regulation when the Bill is enacted.

I concur wholeheartedly with the Member's point that proper procedures were not followed. I was most disappointed that I could not bring a legislative consent motion to the House before the Bill had passed through the House of Lords. Indeed, when I responded in writing to the noble Lord in London who is in charge of the matter, I took the opportunity to say that, in all cases in which legislation will, in any way, alter the functions of a Northern Ireland Department, the proper procedures must be followed. Therefore, I have underlined that point fully with Whitehall. If the Member believes that more should be done, I will do more.

Just last week, and not to pre-empt the Committee's work, I signed off on a letter to the Home Office to ask its officials to have a discussion about credit unions so that progress can be made before I receive the Committee's report. That is important, because, during this credit crunch, credit unions provide a fundamental service. They must be supported as much as possible.

Mr Hamilton: Although everyone, including the Minister, will agree that the way in which Northern Ireland has been included in the Bill is unsatisfactory, the importance of its contents — being a counter-terrorism Bill — are such that it is essential that Northern Ireland be included in it. The Minister said on two occasions in her statements in response to the Committee Chairman that the proposed amendments to the Bill in Westminster will confer additional powers on her Department. Although she has explained those

powers, has she assessed the level of extra work for her officials that will be ongoing as a result?

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

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I do not believe that those powers will cause the Department undue burden. As the Member is aware, the Department already has a role to supervise credit unions. Under the Money Laundering Regulations 2007, the Department is the supervisory authority. The new measures will make the Department an enforcement and supervisory authority. Therefore, the Department will be doing work that it is already doing — if that is not too Irish a way to put it.

The Bill is an additional piece of legislation that the Department must enforce and supervise. The Counter-Terrorism Bill's provisions will also give the Department the power to impose civil penalties and to institute prosecutions when required. I must say, however, that I do not foresee that many prosecutions will be taken against, or civil penalties given out to, credit unions in Northern Ireland.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. I am confident that the Assembly will appreciate and accept her explanation and rationale for the measure and the way in which we were informed of it. On several occasions, including during her statement, the Minister has made it clear that she recognises and values credit unions' work in the community. Can she assure the Assembly that the Bill will not restrict or inhibit credit unions in providing financial services to the community, or inhibit consideration of widening their scope to provide further services?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Bill will not inhibit credit unions in any way. Last week, I had a scheduled meeting with the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions. I took that opportunity to speak to them directly. My officials have also been in contact with the Irish League of Credit Unions. Both are content with the contents of the Bill and the amendments as they apply to Northern Ireland. I do not foresee any additional burden. Any measures that the Treasury introduces will come to the Department, which will provide necessary support.

Mr Cree: I, too, thank the Minister for her statement. She said that the Bill will appoint the Department as enforcer and supervisory authority for credit unions. Will the Bill change the Department's role towards other mutual societies and organisations?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The legislation does not apply to any other mutual societies; our supervisory and enforcement role applies only to credit unions.

Dr Farry: I, too, thank the Minister for her statement. Can the Minister clarify that the source of the problem lies entirely with the UK Parliament rather than with any organ of the Assembly? Furthermore, in the absence of a formal protocol having been agreed between the Assembly and Westminster to ensure that such matters are addressed within a proper timescale, how can the Minister stand over a commitment that essentially makes provision for an exceptional circumstance?

Given that money laundering is not merely a product of terrorist organisations and is a factor of local and international organised crime, is the Minister satisfied that the long title of the Bill makes sufficiently robust provision to deal with money laundering?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As I indicated in my comments to the Chairperson of the Committee, I wrote to Lord Myners to remind him that it is this House that should be taking the lead on matters relating to credit unions. He is aware of our displeasure with how the situation has arisen so late in the day, as the result of a House of Lords amendment. Indeed, it is because the Bill was amended so late that we have been able to raise our concerns.

The Bill's long title aims to deal with money laundering, terrorist finance and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, which is of increasing concern. Additions were made to the Bill's long title on the realisation that the money laundering regulations — which are contained in the third EC directive — were not sufficient to cover those international jurisdictions. I hope that the Member agrees that it is important that we are part of those regulations. Nevertheless, I accept that the process has had difficulties.

Mr Ross: I welcome the Minister's statement and the fact that she met credit union representatives last week. Is there any evidence that money has been laundered through credit unions in Northern Ireland? Will the Minister assure the House that she will provide credit unions with all the relevant information so that there is no confusion?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: There is absolutely no evidence that money has been laundered through credit unions here. The Bill provides a precautionary principle to ensure that money does not come in from Uzbekistan or Iran. I am not sure that many credit unions do business with those sorts of countries, but a precautionary principle is provided. We will work with the two main bodies, the Irish Federation of Credit Unions and the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions, to provide the relevant information as quickly as possible.

Dr McDonnell: Does the Minister agree that this situation is somewhat bizarre and that — rather than rushing to implement the Bill — the matter should have been parked in the short term. Credit unions have

pressed for an expanded role and sought Government support and understanding in the current crisis. Credit unions want financial cover to prevent a run on their resources and to give them an opportunity to do an even better job as a useful financial hub at working-class levels in society. We have not been able to give credit unions much comfort. Yet, as people in the street will see it, we are moving to prevent al-Qaeda from lodging large sums of money in credit unions in Ballynafeigh, Newington or elsewhere in Belfast. That is somewhat bizarre.

I appreciate that the matter has largely been dumped on the Minister at short notice, but we must get to the bottom of it. On another occasion, I would urge the Minister to give stronger credit unions the opportunity to be an even greater force for good in our society. That should be the priority, rather than restricting credit unions with fantasia-land legislation that will never be needed.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I fully accept some of the Member's points. I do not envisage the credit union in Ballynafeigh having to deal with money from Iran or other such countries. It has been made very clear that we will adopt a light-touch regulation that will not place an onerous burden on credit unions.

12.30 pm

However, we will return to discussions on the opening up of credit unions. I share the Member's view that there is great potential for using credit unions, particularly at a time when moneylenders are taking advantage of people who are on the poverty line. The Executive, Assembly and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment must consider how credit unions could develop their services. Therefore, I look forward to receiving the Committee's report so that we can develop and strengthen the credit unions in Northern Ireland.

Mr Attwood: I strongly welcome the Minister's statement to the House, and she acted properly by bringing the matter to the Floor. I agree with the Minister about the great potential to develop the role of credit unions now. Given today's pre-Budget report in Westminster and the strength of the credit unions in this part of Ireland, urgent measures are required to develop the powers and responsibilities of the credit unions. Such measures could be part of the strategy to deal with the economic downturn, and they could even be a part of today's pre-Budget report and whatever emerges in the coming weeks.

I endorse Mr Durkan's comment that given that an urgent procedure was required to get the Bill through at ministerial level, an urgent procedure on the Floor of the House may be required to create a parallel process to deal with such matters in future. I note that the Minister said that she does not expect a similar situation to arise again. However, the potential exists for future

rubbing points between the rightful jurisdiction of the Assembly on certain matters and the jurisdiction of Westminster on excepted matters, including terrorism. Such matters may require particular methods to communicate to the Executive and the Assembly what is, or is not, happening at Westminster. Given the future devolution of justice, I submit that there may be some deeper learning to be gained from this matter.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I agree with the Member that any use of urgent procedures is likely to apply in a similar circumstance to today. On behalf of the Executive, we are happy to work with the Assembly to determine whether an alternative mechanism is required to deal with such situations. I believe strongly that credit unions are part of the solution to some issues in working-class and other areas throughout Northern Ireland, and I hope to be in a position to make a statement about that next month.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

UTV

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

Mr McElduff: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern at Ofcom's proposals for a diminution in the public service obligations of UTV through a reduction in the minimum requirements for regional news and non-news programmes; calls on Ofcom to protect diverse, quality broadcasting through the promotion of local news and programming; calls for the extension of Ofcom's Public Service Broadcasting Review consultation period for a further three months; and further calls on UTV to suspend its restructuring and redundancy programme pending the outcome of this consultation process, and following meaningful consultation and negotiations with the trade unions representing staff at UTV.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé ag moladh na tairiscean seo, mar atá a fhios agat.

There are, essentially, two crucial interrelated issues: the future of local broadcasting in the medium and long term; and UTV's current restructuring and redundancy programme, which includes plans to axe certain locally produced programmes.

Broadcasting is not a devolved matter; powers are retained by Westminster. However, it is a major issue that concerns everyone.

People in our society value quality local news and current affairs programming and are hugely interested in public-service broadcasting. They are interested in how our society is portrayed — or not portrayed. Indeed, we are often disregarded — even anonymous — on the BBC and ITV networks. People are interested in quality local programmes that provide creative opportunities for local people and give a platform to local talent. The Irish language broadcast fund is considered a model of best practice that offers such opportunities and allows for the reflection of that unique aspect of our cultural heritage.

Commercial broadcasting faces difficult times because advertising revenue is in decline. The regulatory functions of the Office of Communications (Ofcom) include a review of public-service broadcasting at least every five years. Ofcom and UTV are at pains to highlight the fact that the current level of commercial public-service broadcasting cannot be sustained in an increasingly competitive and challenging environment. Local current affairs programmes are likely to come under pressure because of the increase in multichannel broadcasting and the digital switchover in 2012. Therefore, it is important to understand the context and the financial environment.

Ofcom completed phase 1 of its consultation earlier in 2008, and phase 2 is due to be completed on 4 December. Some early conclusions have emerged: the BBC should remain the cornerstone of public-service content with a secure core budget; audiences need a choice of providers; and a diverse and challenging media is necessary in order to avoid monopoly, particularly in the realm of news and current affairs.

BBC and UTV appreciate each other's competition. For example, Peter Johnston, the local BBC controller, said that competition from UTV's 'Insight' programme improves the quality of 'Spotlight' on the BBC. I recognise the importance of RTÉ and TG4 to viewers on the island of Ireland and in the North. During my upbringing, my father used to try to pick up RTÉ radio on a Sunday; it was described as "crackling towards Athlone".

Ofcom proposes a diminution in UTV's public-service obligations through a reduction in the minimum requirements for regional news and non-news programmes. Ofcom claims that that is a floor and not a ceiling. News coverage will be reduced from five hours and 20 minutes a week to four hours, and non-news coverage will be reduced from four hours a week to one hour and 30 minutes. The motion calls on the Assembly to record its serious concern at the proposals and on Ofcom to do its job properly by acting to protect diverse, quality broadcasting through the promotion of local news and local programming.

The quality and quantity of local news and local programming should be maintained at the current level and developed for the future. Furthermore, the motion calls for a three-month extension — until March 2009 — of Ofcom's public-service broadcasting review consultation period. I understand that Ofcom is disinclined to facilitate that extension. However, it is legitimate for Members to ensure that the consultation is comprehensive and proper, and I understand that Ofcom might consider submissions that are received slightly after 4 December 2008.

Although the consultation period is not exhausted and Ofcom's proposals are merely proposals, it appears that UTV management is taking those proposals as a given and is initiating cutbacks.

UTV management has stated that it intends to reduce employment in the organisation by shedding up to 35 jobs. It has also stated that it intends to reduce news, current affairs and local-interest programmes. We understand that the axe is to fall on the 'Insight' programme, although we are told that it will appear four times a year, making it like one's very best china. 'Insight' is a quality UTV programme that has been at the cutting edge of investigative journalism down the years. It has not always been kind to me, and perhaps not even to you, Mr Deputy Speaker; nonetheless, I

support it. 'UTV Life', 'Late and Live' and various news bulletins are also due to be axed.

People will be made unemployed — household-name presenters, some from the world of news and some from the world of sport, are being considered for unemployment. As we all know, this society places a high value on local sports coverage.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: If the Member is very brief.

Mr McCarthy: I am always brief. Does the Member agree that the least that UTV could do would be to wait until Ofcom has finished its deliberations?

Mr McElduff: The Member is 100% correct, and I thank him for that point. UTV should not go ahead with this precipitous action before the consultation is complete. That is perhaps the main point of the debate. I am speaking for 10 minutes, but Mr McCarthy encapsulated that point in 10 seconds. Therefore, I give him credit for that.

UTV has initiated voluntary severance and compulsory redundancy schemes. The internal deadline for signing up to those schemes was 14 November, then it was 24 November — which is today — and it may now be extended further. I hope that public pressure is paying off.

The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure examined the issue in fine detail. Last Thursday, it heard evidence from the unions, including the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union (BECTU). Those organisations obviously have a direct concern for the welfare of their members, but they also believe that the proposals serve to undermine UTV's ability to fulfil its public-service remit.

In the midst of all this, and as I said, people are saying nice things about the quality of UTV's programmes. It should, therefore, be pleased. Apparently, 'UTV Live' is the most watched news programme here.

We should be considering the future needs of news-coverage provision. At a time when the political institutions are bedding down, people are interested in everyday concerns; it is a false argument to claim that news coverage does not need to be at the same level as it was when the conflict was at its height. People are interested in news today, in the workings of our political institutions, in the various Departments, and in general day-to-day news. Although 4 December is a deadline and the Ofcom report is not due to be published until spring 2009, UTV is pressing ahead with implementing changes that are based on the report. That is happening before the process has been completed. Indeed, I received a memo from UTV management that states that that is the case.

We want to ensure that the consultation is real and meaningful. That is why the motion calls on UTV to suspend its redundancy programme until the consultation is complete. There is a need for a wider debate on the future of long-term and medium-term broadcasting and on what models for the delivery of public-service broadcasting are best to serve this society. The BBC is making a welcome commitment to increase local programming. The Committee has been considering broadcasting in other places, including Scotland, Wales and the rest of Ireland, and it has been discussing the possibility of establishing a broadcasting commission. The debate on the matter still has longer to run, but UTV could do a lot in the short term to respond to the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We now know that the Member has china at home.

Lord Browne: I support the motion. In its second consultation on the future of public-service broadcasting, Ofcom published a number of key findings. One of the main findings from new audience research was that that nine out of 10 people do not want the BBC to be the only provider of public-service content, either now or in the future.

12.45 pm

There is no doubt that audiences value highly public-service broadcasting alternatives to complement that of the BBC. Most significantly, most people want ITV to continue to provide regional news and programmes. However, as the Ofcom report states, pressure is mounting on the current system. We must accept that.

The Ofcom analysis confirms that commercial public-service broadcasters such as ITV1, Channel 4 and Five — as well as cable and satellite broadcasts — will continue to deliver sports, entertainment, archive and acquired programming that is made in the United Kingdom. The analysis also underlines that some types of UK-made public-service contents are, increasingly, commercially unattractive. Unfortunately, those include current affairs, nations, some regional programmes, drama, scripted comedy and factual programming for children. As we know, the situation is made worse by the growing deterioration in the advertising market since Ofcom's first consultation document was published in April 2008.

If audiences want to continue to enjoy the current level of public-service content, it is Ofcom's considered opinion that £330 million to £420 million is likely to be required in 2012. It also estimates that existing regulatory subsidies would contribute around £185 million, leaving a likely gap of approximately £145 million to £235 million. However, it is very interesting to note that Ofcom's research showed that audiences in Northern Ireland attach particular importance to programmes that are made in, or are about, Northern Ireland. That is especially true for news, as audiences

here told Ofcom that competition to the BBC should be maintained. It would not be wise for the BBC to have a monopoly of news coverage in Northern Ireland.

I think that all Members of this House will agree that Ulster Television has a reputation that is second to none in producing popular programmes. Despite growing financial competitive pressures, I hope that those productions continue. I welcome the commitment of Channel 4 to increase its production from Northern Ireland. With the BBC's proposal to produce 17% of its output from regions — with 3% of that coming from Northern Ireland — that can only help the production sector and improve how Northern Ireland is portrayed.

The Ofcom director for Northern Ireland, Denis Wolinski, confirmed that viewers in Northern Ireland value the programming that is made by UTV and BBC Northern Ireland, and that they want both stations to continue to provide local programmes. Despite the current commercial pressures that face UTV and ITV, I hope that the current levels of production of local programmes continue.

One of Ofcom's main aims is to maintain and strengthen the UK's high-quality public-service broadcasting by making sure that a broad range of television programmes is made by independent producers as well as by broadcasters, including those in countries and regions in the United Kingdom.

As we have heard, Ofcom's consultation period closes on 4 December 2008. In light of all the current responses, I call upon Ofcom to protect our local broadcasting and to extend the consultation period by three months.

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

Lord Browne: As a result, I ask UTV to suspend its proposed restructuring, pending the completion and outcome of the consultation process.

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

Lord Browne: The unions should be fully consulted. I support the motion.

Mr McNarry: At the outset, I stress that all local networks — including the BBC — do excellent work in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is unfortunate that this debate is about an issue that pertains to one specific major network in Northern Ireland.

There is a rumour circulating that UTV has ended its dispute with the unions. However, I understand that that rumour has no substance. Confusion may have arisen due to UTV having delayed the taking of any action until December. Although I commend UTV for that, the motion calls on that organisation to suspend any action until the outcome of the consultation process, which will extend well beyond December.

The issue is active in the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. Only last week, the Committee held a lengthy meeting with all the key players. Indeed, the Hansard report of that meeting should make for excellent reading, and it is a pity that that report was not available before the debate today. It is an active item in a Committee of the Assembly, charged to carry out its work. Therefore, it seems premature of the proposers — all three of whom sit on the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure — to have tabled such a motion. Is the consensus of the Committee — of which we will hear today — not sufficient to drive the issue, without the need to bring it before the House and have a full-scale debate?

All I have heard from Sinn Féin so far is an attempt to build a platform to drive that party's Irish agenda. I see opportunism here — an opportunity for “themselves alone” to look good, while leaving UTV and the integrity of public broadcasting in the background.

It is all too easily forgotten, despite the major strides made in the past decade — since my party led the way in creating peace and stability — that Northern Ireland is still recovering from the impact of 30 years of terrorist war, and that the process of the normalisation of society here still has some way to go. Our society cannot recover from the brutality and mayhem of a campaign of murder and indiscriminate savagery overnight, and that is what makes the role of public-service broadcasting here so significant. That is why it matters; that is why it is different here; and that is why the Ofcom proposal for cuts of up to 50% in public-service broadcasting commitments across the United Kingdom is inappropriate here. A commitment to protect the integrity of local broadcasting is critical and deserves to be acknowledged by all concerned.

UTV has opted for a near-40% cut in public-service broadcasting; from nine hours a week to five and a half hours a week. However, that is too much too soon. Those cuts are hitting areas that are important to the democratic process in Northern Ireland. The media plays, and will continue to play, an important role in bringing information to people in their homes through their televisions and radios. Those people are not sitting in the Public Gallery — there is no one there at the moment. Furthermore, those cuts are affecting soft-news programmes such as ‘UTV Life’ and ‘UTV Late and Live’, items that are helping with that process of normalisation. We need the media to help conduct our affairs in relation to normalisation, and to scrutinise MLAs — in the public interest — as much as we scrutinise each other.

UTV must take note of the widespread public reaction to its proposals and rethink them. This is bad publicity and bad public relations for one of our leading television networks. The public do not favour the intentions of

UTV. They want local news; they cannot let go of that. The time is wrong for UTV to be doing so.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to stick very closely to the motion under debate.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the motion; it is very timely. In 1992, Bruce Springsteen sang:

“There's fifty-seven channels and nothin' on”.

As a result of the social input to the BBC and the networked independent channels with a public-service broadcasting remit, we have always been blessed with good-quality television. I remember when we had only three or four channels and there was always something worth watching. Now we are moving towards an era where people watch television with set-top boxes and with remote controls in their hands. It is easy to waste an evening flicking between channels, looking at poor television programmes that are infested with advertisements.

The BBC and UTV stand out from the crowd. The BBC is the gold standard, and UTV has consistently lived up to that. It would be a real shame if that ceased to be the case because UTV decided to follow the crowd. The people of Northern Ireland are saying that UTV is proposing a minimalist approach to its public-service broadcasting obligations. Such a strategy seems lazy — it is about increasing financial returns on reduced investment.

None of that would matter a great deal if television were not socially and economically important and if the industry did not provide opportunities for employment and new enterprise. It is time for broadcasting to be devolved to Northern Ireland — there are real opportunities to develop the industry here.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure talked about TG4 in Galway. TG4 broadcasts a large proportion of locally produced programmes. As a result, a cluster of companies has developed in that area, which has created a range of jobs, including in scriptwriting, programme-making, acting, editing, sound, lighting, graphics, subtitling, production, company management, and so forth. There are hundreds of jobs in the area, and the companies — with development support from Government — are expanding to become export-oriented. The TG4 business model, which is about quality, expansion and opportunity, is something that we should emulate.

People in Northern Ireland are, rightly, concerned at UTV's attitude and strategy. I believe that UTV is making a commercial mistake. People here like local television production, local analysis of our political situation, and a local take on world events. World events are important to us in a different way than they are to people who live in London, because they affect us differently.

People in this part of the world also enjoy discussion. The programming at RTÉ 2 and Radio Ulster involves wall-to-wall discussion for most of the day. That is because that is what people here want — we like to talk, listen and watch people talking. If UTV goes down the road of emulating the non-public-service broadcasting channels, it will lose its differentiation and, ultimately, its competitive position. It will become a me-too operator in a crowded marketplace. Good-quality drama, music, live programming, news, sports, and current affairs with detailed analysis are life-enhancing. They are educational as well as entertaining.

From an economic perspective, another issue is that 35 important jobs at UTV are under threat. Good-quality television can give good returns for a region. As I mentioned earlier, local production companies tend to cluster around broadcasters to produce local programmes in the first instance, before going on to produce programmes for other markets. A reduction in local programming will reduce the opportunities for local, independent production companies.

The cuts at UTV seem to be paradoxical, given that production and broadcasting costs are falling because of technology. There is scope for multiple channels and lots of ways of broadcasting but, at the same time, there is a diminution in the quality and quantity of the content. In the interests of quality and local involvement in the industry, we need to send the message to the broadcasters that they must maintain local production and content. Northern Ireland is not the same as London — people here value local content and proper analysis from a Northern Irish perspective.

The people of Northern Ireland expect UTV to get into serious dialogue with the trade unions in relation to the impact on jobs. We also expect UTV to talk to members of the Executive and to the people of Northern Ireland in relation to the impact on our television services. We need to send the message to UTV that if its objective is to maximise shareholder wealth, dumbing down is a very short-term strategy that will ultimately mean that it will lose its competitive edge here and become like the rest of the 57 channels with nothing on.

1.00 pm

Mrs Long: Other Members referred to the value that the public rightly places on local broadcasting. Ofcom's research shows that Northern Ireland audiences place particular importance and emphasis on programmes that are made in, and specifically for, those audiences, and that is especially true for news programming. Audiences stated that they want UTV to maintain a competitive market with the BBC and that a single broadcaster should not be allowed to operate in the local marketplace.

Such competition is good, because it automatically drives up standards, and, over the years, Northern Ireland

has benefited from, and should be proud of, its high-quality journalism. For example, if one watches national broadcasting, or if one travels to other regions and watches regional programming, the number of Northern Ireland voices that can be heard is surprising. Those people cut their teeth here on local news programmes, shining above the rest, and went to other regions to take up fantastic jobs or were employed on national programming. Therefore, it is important that people should have the opportunity to progress their careers.

Members referred to the timing of the debate, which is pertinent, because today is the deadline that UTV set for voluntary redundancies. From a total staff of 118, UTV has been seeking 27 to 30 voluntary redundancies, which would amount to approximately one quarter of its workforce, and that is a matter for concern.

The proposer of the motion, Barry McElduff — and I apologise for not hearing all of his contribution — and Kieran McCarthy said that UTV is pressing ahead with reducing staff numbers and, consequently, some people will be gone by the time that the consultation report is completed. Putting decisions in train before completing a consultation makes a mockery of the consultation process.

Moreover, such actions suggest something else. Although Ofcom stressed that it had set a minimum threshold for local programming, the immediate reaction to that of reducing local programming suggests that minimum levels rapidly become the norm. We should be concerned about, and guard against, that.

As other Members said, the proposed cuts would result in morning and weekend-lunchtime news programmes being axed. In addition, programmes such as 'Insight', 'UTV Life' and 'Late and Live' would be axed. Although we sometimes take such programmes for granted, they often unpack, discuss and inform the public more widely about news stories, and that provides people with an opportunity to better understand what is happening in the world around them and to relate that to local circumstances. Therefore, we would lose out if such programming were to end.

It is essential to retain UTV as a strong regional broadcaster and as competition for the BBC, because, as I said, that drives up standards. UTV is not just another part of ITV; it recognises Northern Ireland's distinct broadcasting requirements, which are not reflected on other digital broadcasting platforms. We all recognise that political and investigative journalism is not cheap; however, we cannot afford to be without it. As other Members said, many digital channels increasingly produce lightweight, but cheaper to produce, programming, which is not necessarily what we need from public-service broadcasting.

Furthermore, Northern Ireland has a distinctive political culture and, therefore, reporting here must include the extra dimension that investigative journalism

provides and which is important for basic democratic discussion. It would harm democracy in Northern Ireland if there were only one platform for political debate on television.

In addition, the political context here is different. For example, the uncovering of a financial scandal involving the Conservative Party or the Labour Party would have ramifications throughout the regions, but it would not necessarily have direct implications for Northern Ireland, where people look to have improprieties in their local parties investigated. Therefore, in that context, a specific job must be done here.

Mr McNarry mentioned that the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure has been taking an active interest in this matter. Although I realise that it is not a devolved matter, it is disappointing that there was not an Executive response.

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

Mrs Long: I hope that the House will be reassured that the Executive are making representations on the matter.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. I wish to emphasise clearly that there must be further consultation on the matter. As anyone knows, many people, after returning home from a hard day's work, sit down to watch 'UTV Live'. We know that from the viewing figures, which show that 'UTV Live' is one of those programmes that people use to become clued in to what is happening. That is why we need to retain regional news and non-news programmes. We were all shocked to find that UTV might reduce its programming and would be letting some well-known faces go.

Aa' hae bin stappit bi' fowk, fae ivery wauk o' life, that er sae pit about tae larn o' tha Ofcom minded thoughts. But maer sae tae see that tha UTV heed yins wur ready tae cut bak oan staff, in spiet o' tha fact that ther haes bin nae shair desisin maed, as tae tha lang laustin o' tha progremmin, as muckle tauks ernerly quat.

I have been approached by many people, from every walk of life, who were dismayed to learn of Ofcom's recommendations. However, they were more disappointed to learn that UTV executives were prepared to cut back on staff, despite the fact that no firm decision has been made about programming viability, as the consultation has not yet been finalised. It seems to be a wee bit wrong to look at recommendations when the consultation process is ongoing.

I have some difficulty with the fact that UTV Media posted pre-tax profits of some £115 million in 2007. That is an increase of £2 million on the previous year. There is no financial need to cut back before the process

has been finished, and most definitely not before everyone has been consulted.

Even more surprisingly, the top executives received substantial bonuses and benefits to the tune of £250,000. Then there is the question of the number of staff being reduced from 118 to 83. That is just a wee bit absurd when one considers that, had the top five executives not taken bonuses and had they made do with salaries of approximately £320,000, the £200,000 in bonus and benefits that they each received would have paid each of the redundant workers an average wage of £28,000 a year — a tidy salary by any means.

For that and other reasons that have been expounded by Members, I support my constituents' calls for fairness for the rank and file in UTV. I realise that when a company is running at a loss, it must make cutbacks in order to survive, but I hark back to what I said about UTV's profitability and the fact that it made more money last year than in the previous year. If that was happening to other workers in my constituency, I would be just as concerned about their losing their jobs.

The company is running successfully and yet it has grasped the first opportunity to cut back before anything has been finalised. Any good employer values his or her staff and knows that getting rid of staff is the last possible option. However, UTV Media has taken the opportunity to cut salary costs when there is, as yet, no financial reason to do so.

News programmes are vital for everyone. Among non-news programmes, 'Lesser Spotted Ulster' is a success story; increasing numbers of viewers watch it. We must look at the issue because of that. Ofcom's report stated clearly that audiences in Northern Ireland attach particular importance to programmes, and I believe that 'Lesser Spotted Ulster' is one such programme.

There is hope that some arrangement can, and will, be reached to ensure that programming is enhanced, not disintegrated. However, UTV Media is happy to throw in the towel before the first round is over. The question is raised: had Ofcom stated that it believed that the executives should have had their bonuses axed and their salaries halved, would that have been an easier way to make cutbacks?

Another concern relates to the fact that the BBC's central office in London has stated that it intends to increase by 40% each of its regional services in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Therefore, as the BBC is upgrading its regional service and allocating extra money to it, UTV is considering another way out of the job that lies ahead.

I ask UTV Media to meet union representatives and to lengthen the consultation process by three months. UTV has catered for everyone at some stage — no matter who they may be. It is a sad state of affairs that

that should change long before there is any need for it to do so or before any alternatives have been lined up.

I support the motion and ask that the chief executives stop looking at UTV's bank balance and look at the people whom they want to let go and the people of the Province who support wholeheartedly the staff of UTV.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé ag labhairt ar son na tairisceana seo.

I support the motion. The motion addresses the issue of public-service broadcasting in a number of ways: the Ofcom review of public-service broadcasting; its immediate impact on UTV through redundancies and programme changing; and its long-term impact on the provision of public-service broadcasting, particularly current affairs, news and Irish language programming.

Sinn Féin contends that the Ofcom review of public-service broadcasting should be extended for three months, and the motion calls for that. At the meeting of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure last Thursday, we heard that the public response to the review was not as high as one would expect of such an important issue. There are many and varied reasons for that, but it must be accepted that many people do not realise fully the long-term impact that a reduction in public-service broadcasting will have. That impact will stretch across public-service broadcasting from current affairs programmes to such programmes as 'Lesser Spotted Ulster', news programmes and sports programmes, and it will be evident in the approach — already minimalist — that is taken towards Irish language provision.

There is also an impression that decisions are made before reviews begin, and the public, therefore, ask whether there is any point in making a contribution to such a review. That is why we are asking for a three-month extension to the review's consultation period.

The review of public-service broadcasting was set against a backdrop in which Michael Grade stated publicly that ITV will hand back its licence and apply for another one, which will not have any public-service commitments, if he does not get his own way. Bodies such as Ofcom have to resist that type of approach when setting limits to public-broadcasting provision. Ofcom has to see itself as the protector of public interest and consider what is required in public-service broadcasting.

In response to David McNarry's comments, the Assembly has a role to play. The Committee has an important role to play, but the Chamber is the proper place for such a debate to take place. Important as the Committee's role is, the Assembly has a broader remit, and that is why it is possible, and probable, that the motion will be passed; we have to send out a clear signal that the Assembly wants to see the highest standards possible.

There is no doubt that the staff at UTV believe that the management is using the Ofcom review as a means

of introducing staffing cutbacks and other issues. That was articulated by the union delegation, which made a presentation to the Committee last Thursday. The Committee heard also from the management side, who presented a contrary view. However, the Committee urged UTV management to put in abeyance any decision until the end of the review. They agreed to that, but we are looking for a three-month extension now, and I think that they should fulfil that also.

The desire for a broadcast commission arose from the necessary public debate on the issue, and the Committee discussed it last Thursday. The Scottish Executive have established a commission, and the Committee received evidence that all the interested parties see the commission as an important way of promoting and enhancing public-service broadcasting in Scotland. Such a commission is required here; it will benefit local broadcasting.

In our case and circumstances, public-service broadcasting has a remit beyond the North: BBC, UTV, RTÉ 1, RTÉ 2, TV3 and TG4 are broadcast in homes across the island, and they often make joint productions. Any commission, therefore, should come under the auspices of the all-Ireland Ministerial Council and ensure that we have public-broadcasting services across the island that are proper and fitting to our circumstances. I support the motion. Sin é. Tacaím leis an rún seo. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr K Robinson: I agree with the contention of my colleague David McNarry, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, that this is still a live issue for the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure and that the Committee is the best forum for related discussions. Perhaps it is premature to bring the issue to the Chamber now, but it is here, and I proceed on that basis.

I am a firm believer in regionalism, and broadcasting is no exception to that. It is a vital part of building a sense of engagement with the local community, and it is an important vehicle for building community self-confidence. Television is the major vehicle for communication, and, therefore, it is important that we take an active interest in local programming.

1.15 pm

Television is how most people receive their news and engage with the rest of the world. Not only is television a major vehicle for public awareness, it has a key role in how our community develops. I praise local television companies for their sterling work in helping to build that local sense of community and for giving the community a sense of self-worth. People in Northern Ireland used to be retiring and shy, and some of them still are — I was not looking at you, Fred. However, local television has changed that and, as one Member has already said, Northern Ireland voices are

heard all across the airwaves. We must not only preserve that; we must build on it.

I welcomed the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure's comments last week, when responding to my colleague David McNarry, that he was considering a broadcasting commission for Northern Ireland. As other Members have said, that seems to be the way that things are going in Scotland, and it is certainly worthy of further investigation. I encourage the Minister to go in that direction. Broadcasting is too important to be left out on the sidelines.

Local programming is an important imprint of our local identity and personality. It is like the high street. It is so refreshing to encounter a local unique shop amid all the high street multiples that can be found all over the nation and that make every town look exactly the same. In the same way, it is refreshing to find a local programme amid all the repeats, soaps, national plays — that always seem to be police dramas, spattered with violence and blood — and all the endless, boring low-quality reality shows. Much local programming has been of a very high quality and it has helped to vary and improve our overall television offering in the Province.

There is a lot that I could say about television advertising, but I will not digress too much into that minefield, except to ask whether advertisers are aware of the fact that it is extremely irritating to the viewer to have those advertisements blasted out at much higher decibels than the programme proceeding them. It is also extremely annoying that some advertisements have no demarcation from the programme that they are interrupting, which can make it hard to follow what is going on.

Cutting regional news and current affairs programmes from nine hours a week to just five and a half hours is a backward step, and most definitely a step in the wrong direction. It will see the loss of what I refer to as the soft-news programmes, which contain the type of positive, engaging local news items that help to build up a real sense of community cohesion.

Mr Deputy Speaker, it is the sort of programme that the Assembly could benefit from. Rather than having the hard news where the journalist stands outside and the interviewee is windswept, we could have media interviews in the beautiful television studio and suite downstairs and develop the type of news that would show the Assembly in a more positive light than is sometimes the case. I also feel that this is the wrong time to be making such cuts. This is precisely the time for local programmers to be given more flexibility, especially on news and current affairs, so that we can help people to engage more with the political process. Here I mean "political" with a small p and, perhaps, with a large P.

Local television has an important role to play in building a positive awareness of the democratic possibilities that devolution offers. That is never more

necessary now than after the recent disgraceful 22-week gap in Executive meetings.

I appeal to UTV to consider the retrograde step that it is contemplating. Just because one can do something does not mean that one should do it; just because Ofcom may allow UTV some flexibility in making cuts in local news and current affairs broadcasting does not mean that it should have to do that. I also counsel UTV to look carefully at the rates of advertising revenue that will be attracted during the well-watched programmes, and consider the overall position when that is set against some of the proposals that it has been making.

All in all, I support the motion, although with the earlier reservations that I pointed out.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the media will rush to take up the Member's suggestions.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím inniu le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo, agus gabhaim buíochas leis na Comhaltaí a thug go dtí an Tionól inniu é.

While Ken Robinson was speaking, it flashed across my imagination that maybe we should redesign the 'Stormont Live' studio for a new series and perhaps call it, 'I'm an MLA... Get Me Into There!'.

The chances are that most Members outside the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure may have been less aware of Ofcom's proposals for a decrease in the public-service obligations of UTV had it not been for UTV itself.

Many people believe that UTV has used the Ofcom proposals as an opportunity to launch a pre-emptive strike and to wield the axe on its public-service schedule and some of the more experienced staff who deliver it. Of course, UTV may deny that, but many are convinced that the fact that the UTV cuts were announced at the same time as the Ofcom proposals was more than mere coincidence. If those people are right in their belief, UTV has shown a blatant disregard for the integrity of the Ofcom consultation process and, worse still, for the views of the public here. I agree with the motion that UTV should suspend its restructuring and redundancy programme pending the outcome of the consultation process and the identification of a future model of public-service broadcasting for Northern Ireland. I also agree that the Ofcom consultation period should be extended for a further three months.

UTV has told us that it intends to deliver more current affairs coverage next year than it has done this year, and that the type and the output will change. It has told us that there will be more relevant political, cultural and social coverage; that it will deliver the key stories of the day in more detail; that there will be more current affairs programmes on UTV in 2009 and

more UTV programmes at peak times. UTV will do all that while shedding some of its most experienced, creative and expert staff. To me, the equation does not add up. How can UTV produce more and better programmes with fewer experienced and expert staff? The simple answer is that it cannot and will not.

The UTV equation delivers savings for the commercial company and, in my view, losses as regards the quality of public service that it provides. In future, UTV's public-service broadcasting standards will not be the same as they have been in the past. UTV will certainly look after itself, but the question arises: who will look after the public? The UTV pun that the "U" in UTV equals "you" will ring a little hollow in those circumstances, unless UTV waits to hear what the people of Northern Ireland think before it wields the axe.

Ofcom's own research shows clearly that the public demand high-quality competition to the BBC. In other words, the higher the quality of public-service output from UTV, the higher the standard that BBC Northern Ireland is likely to reach and the greater the choice available to the public. The danger is that Ofcom's proposals for the reduction of UTV news output from five hours and 20 minutes to four hours a week, and of non-news output from three hours to one and a half hours, will help to hollow out the kernel of public-service broadcasting in UTV and leave the public with only a shell.

UTV's argument that post-conflict Northern Ireland does not need the type and amount of news coverage that it did during the Troubles is not convincing. In fact, with the return of devolution, there is more news of a wider and more varied nature. Previous emphasis on conflict has been replaced by greater emphasis on the bread-and-butter issues, which require as much, if not more, reportage.

A model of funding for public-service broadcasting is needed, perhaps based on the Irish Language Broadcast Fund model, which would give Northern Ireland its fair share of public-service cake and underpin indigenous language broadcasting.

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

Mr D Bradley: UTV should wait and consider such a model. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCausland: Over the past 30 or 40 years and throughout the course of the Troubles, we in Northern Ireland have been well served by the high quality of the current affairs programmes that have been produced by local television companies.

All of us can think of many very good, high-quality, investigative programmes that brought information to light. Those programmes provided high-quality analysis, and we have been well served in that respect. That is

important, because although new sectors are emerging in the media, the power, importance and influence of television in our society cannot be underestimated.

Current affairs will evolve as society changes. The previous Member who spoke mentioned that we are in a post-conflict situation, which means that there will be a difference in the nature of the programmes produced and the subjects investigated. Nevertheless, the ethos, character and quality of current affairs programming are important and should not be diminished.

I am disappointed that UTV has announced cutbacks at such an early stage, because the Ofcom consultation is nearing completion. The consultation period has been too short and should have been extended — and it is concerning that the Ofcom representative Denis Wolinski told the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure that the consultation had received few responses. As that consultation is still going, and, therefore, its results have yet to be analysed, it is premature in the extreme for UTV to start making cutbacks. The cutbacks, which would remove some of the most experienced members of staff at UTV, should be postponed until the consultation has been completed.

The DUP and the Committee have held meetings with UTV. At both meetings, I listened to the presentations from UTV very carefully, but I was not convinced by reasons given for the cutbacks. I was also not convinced that the quality and character of current affairs broadcasting by UTV would be preserved. In one meeting, I said that UTV was "dumbing down" its format, which drew criticism from the UTV representative who suggested that such a remark was journalese. However, unless we are very careful, that is what could happen.

Although current affairs broadcasting will change, its ethos, character and quality must be preserved. As politicians, we are very familiar with current affairs — it is one aspect of television production that Northern Ireland is very familiar with. The investigative nature of those productions is important. Although the nature of the investigative work may change due to changes in our society, the need for it still stands. I am concerned that we will lose out, as regards the quality of UTV broadcasting of current affairs, as a result of the changes.

UTV and the BBC are the two main broadcasters in Northern Ireland; both make local productions and provide a local perspective. It is important that there is competition, so that we do not end up in a situation where current affairs productions are dominated by one provider — the BBC — and where we lose the competition and variety of perspective that UTV provides. Therefore, I support the motion.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. When discussing a commercial operator such as UTV, we should not be surprised that loyalty to the workers and the community is not present — such

a sentiment is not in the nature of commercial operators. Clearly, we do not have any great commercial pull that would stop UTV from leaving here tomorrow, if it decided to do so.

I read a report on commercial television and public-service broadcasting in Scotland, which contains some interesting facts that we could compare with our situation.

Scottish viewers watch more television than anyone else on any other part of these islands. Scottish people listen to local radio a great deal, but not so much to BBC radio. Almost twice as many of them buy daily newspapers than people from elsewhere.

The £1.5 billion that is generated from advertising depends largely on press and radio advertising, yet television advertising generated only £24 million of regional spend in Scotland in 2007. Television advertising is very expensive for Scotland and for us. In America, 32% of the advertising budget is spent on regional advertising, whereas, in Scotland, only 8.5% of the budget is spent on advertising.

1.30 pm

I thank Barry McElduff for proposing the motion. He said that the major concern is how our society is portrayed. Therefore, we need plenty of good television, and we need it to portray accurately what we are here. He suggested that Irish-language funded programming is a model of how local broadcasting could be independent of organisations such as UTV. We could consider that issue, and it could be coupled with a call for the establishment of a local broadcasting commission, which another Member mentioned.

All Members who contributed to the debate said that if there were a diminution in UTV's service, or, if it were to go completely, the major negative would be that competition would end and the BBC would have the monopoly, which it could possibly use to its advantage. Indeed, it would mean that the BBC would have no other broadcaster at which to look over its shoulder.

In a way, we are lucky that, up here, we have general access to RTÉ programmes. During Ofcom's deliberations about our requirements, I asked whether it used that access as a means of assessing how much we could do without. Ofcom is moving towards the possibility of our having an all-Ireland television broadcaster, with each region— north, south, east and west — getting its fair share.

However, the nub of our objection is UTV's proposal to axe so many jobs held by people who have been loyal to them for many years, through good times and bad. It is amazing that the organisation can be so insensitive as to issue the threat a couple of months before Christmas, but it is a measure of the kind of people with whom we are dealing. In fact, we should not be disappointed or surprised if the broadcaster

eventually walks away altogether. Indeed, Ofcom has stated that such a situation is not entirely impossible. Therefore, Ofcom must be careful when dealing with those people, because they keep an axe hanging over people's heads. It is a very difficult situation, because the broadcaster may simply decide that it can do without having the licence.

All party leaders signed a letter addressed to UTV's management, and, apart from the fact that it will use up a couple of my allotted minutes, Members may be interested in hearing what it says. The letter states:

"As political leaders we recognise the need for a robust and diverse media in Northern Ireland. It can be a vehicle for reflection, communication, investigation and analysis and has provided, in its different forms, a valuable role here over many turbulent years and can provide a similar role in years to come.

Television has contributed greatly in this regard with a strong independent sector competing with the BBC."

The issue of competition continually comes up, and it is vital.

The letter continues:

"Recently we have learned of plans by UTV in Northern Ireland to radically cutback its workforce on the back of Ofcom proposals which may allow the broadcaster to reduce some of its programming. These are minimum proposals which Ofcom has put out for consultation.

However UTV is moving ahead with its cutbacks before the consultation has ended. The process may in fact mean that the cutbacks will have gone through before any meaningful discussions conclude.

We fully understand the economic pressures UTV finds itself under but we think it reasonable that UTV should halt its plans to allow for those discussions to go ahead and also for the completion of the Ofcom consultation and final report."

That sums up what we all think.

David McNarry was churlish in his attitude to Irish-medium output. We should all welcome everything that is local, whatever it is — it promotes this place, with all its cultural and sporting diversity.

Pat Ramsey mentioned competition, as did everyone else who contributed to the debate. Naomi Long highlighted the poor timing of UTV's decision.

I was not going to say this, but Jim Shannon spoke in Ulster Scots at the beginning of his speech, and, from that point, Members on these Benches debated among themselves about whether he continued to speak in Ulster Scots. *[Laughter.]*

Fair play to Jim — I hope that we hear more Ulster Scots spoken, as opposed to speaking about it. Jim acknowledged that the BBC is increasing its local output, and I hope that that is not adversely affected by UTV's downsizing. We can all see the danger of that.

Raymond McCartney referred to the presentation from the trade unions to the Committee for Culture,

Arts and Leisure, and he reiterated our total support for the workers.

As I mentioned earlier, Ken Robinson spoke of the possibility of setting up a local broadcasting commission, which would be an excellent move.

Dominic Bradley condemned UTV's precipitous plan to lose some of its most talented and popular staff. The names of presenters who are synonymous with the programmes that they present have been mentioned. We tend to refer to a programme by the name of its presenter, and switch on the television to see whoever, rather than whatever.

Nelson McCausland spoke of how current-affairs journalists — UTV journalists among them — worked through the worst of times. He implied that UTV are saying that — as in the old phrase — the Troubles are past, and God has forgotten.

I conclude by paying tribute to one of UTV's greatest current assets: Eoghan Quigg from Dungiven.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am surprised that the Member has not mentioned Eoghan Quigg before now.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern at Ofcom's proposals for a diminution in the public service obligations of UTV through a reduction in the minimum requirements for regional news and non-news programmes; calls on Ofcom to protect diverse, quality broadcasting through the promotion of local news and programming; calls for the extension of Ofcom's Public Service Broadcasting Review consultation period for a further three months; and further calls on UTV to suspend its restructuring and redundancy programme pending the outcome of this consultation process, and following meaningful consultation and negotiations with the trade unions representing staff at UTV.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Education Welfare Officers

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

Mr McCallister: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the vital work undertaken by education welfare officers in supporting children, families and schools; and calls on the Minister of Education to take all necessary steps to resolve the ongoing pay dispute as a matter of urgency.

The dispute between education welfare officers and their employers, the education and library boards, is long running. The Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA), which represents the education welfare officers, has negotiated a settlement with the education and library boards, which is being voted on by its members. I hope that the dispute is about to end, and that this debate will help to focus minds.

The dispute has been ongoing for six years. Although the employers are the education and library boards, why has the Department of Education allowed the dispute to go on for so long without intervening?

Education welfare officers do an important job. Their main preoccupation is with attendance, but they are involved with many other children's issues. Child protection, child behaviour in schools, suspensions, expulsions, child employment and special educational needs also come under their remit. Their task is to resolve issues and remove barriers that prevent children from meeting their educational potential.

On Tuesday 18 November, we debated the issue of school-leavers who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). We discussed how an impact could be made on the one in 10 16- to 19-year-olds who are in that category. Education welfare officers play an important role in ensuring that children get the level of education to potentially lift them out of the NEET category.

Schools have their own pastoral arrangements, and teachers, in addition to their instructional responsibilities, also deal with the welfare needs of their pupils. Teachers are at the day-to-day front line of children's welfare issues, but, when problems reach a magnitude that can no longer be adequately dealt with at school, individual pupils are referred to educational welfare specialists, who work full time to resolve the problems that stand between individual pupils and their ability to benefit from their schooling. Education welfare officers deal with the more difficult and often more deep-seated

problems that call for qualifications and experience in social science rather than education.

Since the Minister of Education has come into office, she has made many pronouncements about caring for every child. In her attack on academic criteria, she has reiterated her belief that it fails working-class children and leads to underachievement across the board. However, as my party has always stated, the Minister is concentrating the majority of her efforts in the wrong place. Ensuring that children are engaged in education and that they receive the correct education from the earliest appropriate age is crucial to their success. Early-years intervention is potentially the most important aspect of achieving success from all children, regardless of their backgrounds.

Education welfare officers play a vital role in keeping children in education and engaged in the education system. They are vital to the success of countless individuals, communities and society as a whole. The potential for industrial action surrounding the dispute is real, and, if it occurs, it will have a seriously detrimental effect on vulnerable children across Northern Ireland. The Minister has the power to resolve the dispute.

Education welfare officers are professionals. They are not known for taking industrial action, so the fact that those in Downpatrick felt so incensed that they mounted a picket at Ardmore House School on 22 September shows that the failure to resolve the dispute is causing damage to the education system. Strike action was to commence on 22 September but was stood down when the boards undertook to table a fresh offer by 27 October. When that offer did not materialise, NIPSA called a one-day strike for 5 November. That strike was postponed until 19 November to allow the boards more time after they undertook to attempt to resolve the issue. The boards have finally come up with an offer and the strike action has been called off again.

Although the offer did not meet all of NIPSA's requirements, the union has recommended it to its members. Education welfare officers and their union have been acting responsibly; the education and library boards and the Department of Education seem to have acted irresponsibly by not coming forward with reasonable proposals. The dispute has lasted for six years. The settlement will be backdated to 2002, and NIPSA's case has finally been accepted. I would like to know what prevented the authorities from pursuing that much more speedily.

1.45 pm

On 21 September 2007, in reply to a question from Alex Easton on the subject, the Minister of Education, Caitríona Ruane, stated that this was an employee matter. The Minister reiterated that position the following month in answer to a question from Mitchel McLaughlin.

However, in answering those questions, she also outlined — in some detail — the way in which jobs in the education and the social-services sectors are evaluated, the difference between the two, and the mechanisms for determining pay levels in the two sectors. The Department of Education provides the direction and sets the rules and regulations under which education and library boards operate, and the Minister bears the final responsibility for the boards' conduct.

Let us remember that two years ago, Caitríona Ruane's predecessor suspended members of the South Eastern Education and Library Board. In circumstances in which the education and library boards fail to act collectively, the Minister has the power to call them together to effect a resolution. It is not only Caitríona Ruane who has failed to act; her direct rule predecessors failed to do so. They should have acted a long time ago to co-ordinate a resolution to the long-running dispute. Education welfare officers are important professionals who do valuable work in the education sector, and it is a disgrace that this long-running dispute has taken so long to resolve.

This sorry tale supports the need for the reform of the educational superstructure that has been envisaged — that is, the creation of a single education and library board. However, that idea has so far not been realised under the review of public administration. We tabled the motion because we want the issue to be resolved. Since the motion was tabled, we are pleased that progress has been made towards finding a resolution.

We want education welfare officers to be paid fairly for the important work that they do, and we want to create a situation in which they can do that work without being distracted further by an industrial dispute.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): I draw Members' attention to the work that the Committee for Education has done on this matter. It was brought to the Committee's attention when it met education welfare officers on 1 October 2008. A delegation came to Stormont as part of a strike-day protest to seek a resolution to an outstanding pay claim and to express concerns about their employment, retention and remuneration in the education and library boards.

On that occasion, the delegation highlighted that education welfare officers are recruited as qualified social workers and that if their pay claim were accepted, they would still receive £2,860 less than their social-worker counterparts. They also emphasised their concern that factors such as salary may have a bearing on the number of education welfare officers who resign for reasons other than retirement or maternity considerations. The Committee raised the delegation's concerns directly with the Minister when she appeared before the Committee on 1 October. Subsequently, we

wrote to the Department about the timescale for the business case's progress through the Department of Education and the Department of Finance and Personnel.

The Committee received an assurance from the Department of Education that it would use its best endeavours to ensure that the business case was processed by Government within a four-week period from 26 September. I understand that Government largely approved the business case and that a final offer went to NIPSA on 3 November. However, it appears that when NIPSA sought clarification on the offer, things came off the rails.

The Committee had raised previously with the Department and the five education and library boards its broader concerns about the timescale of the implementation of those National Joint Council national pay agreement reviews. That timescale often runs into years. Many Members have had particular experience of that with the education and library boards in their constituencies. The response from the Department was that rather than shortening the present procedures, it providing enhanced training to the staff involved was the best way forward.

That training was provided in September 2008. However, the Committee has doubts that it will produce results, and it will continue to monitor the implementation of the pay agreement reviews. The Committee has, in fact, written back to the Department to raise its concerns about the issue.

I wish now to speak as the DUP spokesperson on education. I welcome the fact that we have had an announcement from the NIPSA trade union, whose bulletin of 19 November 2008 states:

“While it is accepted that this offer falls short of members expectations it is the best that can be achieved at this point in time.”

I understand that NIPSA members are to be balloted on that recommendation. We should await the outcome of that ballot in order to see the result. I concur with the proposer of the motion in his criticism of the Department and the Minister of the way that these matters are handled. It is not acceptable that there is always a division, almost a Red Sea division, between the Department and the education and library boards when we encounter crises of pay and employment. This is not the first time that we have been in this situation: there were similar issues with classroom assistants, and Movilla High School. On every such occasion, the Minister and the Department use whatever means and mechanisms that they have in order to try to blame someone else for not being able to come up with the goods. Therefore, I concur with the Member's criticism of that issue.

Furthermore, more training is not the best way to resolve these issues. Decisive action is required, and in

a timely way that reflects the needs of the particular individuals, organisations or groups in the education and library boards that need to be paid.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome NIPSA having put an offer to its members, and that it is being balloted on. This is, perhaps, one occasion in which the less said, the better. It is now time for education welfare officers and NIPSA members to make their minds up about the offer, and decide whether they agree with it. I hope that they do.

I welcome, too, the fact that NIPSA suspended its strike action on a number of occasions when the negotiation process was going on. There was a delay by the education boards in forwarding a business case to the Department of Education and to the Department of Finance and Personnel. There was, at times, a lack of clarity around that business case, but NIPSA acted responsibly and held off on its strike action until those matters were clarified. It is important that NIPSA members be allowed to make their own assessment of the deal, and vote on it according to their wishes.

It is interesting to note from the proposer of the motion that part of the motion is simply about criticising the Minister. I do not think that any of the evening news presses will be stopped to announce that Mr Storey is also criticising the Minister. However, it will be even more interesting to see the divergence of views when the next health strike is upon us, when health trust workers are out properly calling for better wages, proper working conditions, and long-term job security. The Members opposite will, no doubt, tell us that the Health Minister is not the employer of those workers, that the trusts are their employers, and that the Health Minister cannot deal with it, because that statement has come from the Benches opposite on several occasions.

Mr B McCrea: I understand the point that Mr O'Dowd is making, and it is well made, but will the Member clarify his position in response to the two Members present — does he think that it is acceptable for the Minister or the Department to hide behind red tape, and to distance themselves from the resolution of those disputes?

Mr O'Dowd: It is not a case of hiding behind red tape. There is legislation in place as to who employs staff in those various sectors, including in the health system. In my opinion, the Minister acted responsibly in this matter. She ensured that the business case, which was delayed, was delivered, and delivered properly, that it was processed expeditiously, and that an offer was made quickly to the unions.

All Departments face protocol issues, and there will always be chances for political opportunism and for Members to attack one another across the Floor. I assure Members that that will always come back to haunt us.

There are many industrial issues in public services, which, quite correctly, public-service workers want to see resolved. However, let us not build up the expectation among public-service workers that politicians can ride roughshod through the protocols that govern employment legislation. Our role is to ensure that finance is made available to the Departments so that wage claims can be met accurately. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion, and I commend the Members who tabled it.

Éirím arís le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Comhataí a thug an rún faoi bhráid an Tionóil inniu. Tugaim ard-mholadh do na hoifigigh agus do na tuismitheoirí agus don dea-obair atá ar bun acu.

I pay tribute to the work of education welfare officers. As a teacher, I have worked with them and know the value of their work. Education welfare officers work not only with young people but with their families, offering appropriate support, advice and backup. Those officers work with pastoral teams in schools and are uniquely placed to provide a conduit between home, school and the external agencies in a way that helps to provide the best possible outcome for the young people under their care.

Education welfare officers are in a position to intervene at an early stage and arrange the appropriate support, whether that be a counsellor, home tutor, a social service intervention or alternative education. They intervene before difficulties in a young person's life become insurmountable. Early intervention is the key to avoiding even greater difficulties at a later stage in a pupil's life. In crude terms, education welfare officers save the system huge resources. Without their dedicated work, many young people might end up in juvenile detention and, indeed, later on, in prison.

The present pay dispute goes back to February 2002, when a pay and grading claim was lodged. After negotiations, a job evaluation exercise was carried out. Unfortunately, the wrong questionnaire was used in that process, necessitating a further exercise that proved to be fruitless. The boards subsequently agreed on a business case to the value of two increments, including spinal column point 32, which effectively meant one increment. Not surprisingly, the education welfare officers rejected that offer and believe that employers have a basic misunderstanding of their role in the education process.

The problems faced by young people in our society have become more complex. The work of education welfare officers has become akin to that of a social worker, requiring a much greater range of professional and personal skills and knowledge, and a higher degree of legal knowledge and responsibility, particularly in relation

to child protection. A social work qualification is now a requirement for the education welfare officer post.

Education welfare officers believe, quite rightly, that the changed situation should be reflected in their remuneration. The education welfare service's workforce planning review, which was commissioned on behalf of the education and library boards, found that the majority of education welfare officers are female, under the age of 40 and generally satisfied with their job. However, 70% of them have considered leaving the service, citing salary levels and better job opportunities elsewhere as the main reasons. That may explain why there is evidence of unmet demand in the service.

A main recommendation of the study was a review of the salary, terms and conditions of education welfare officers, as there is evidence that present salaries compare poorly with competitor posts.

The Education and Training Inspectorate has attested to the professionalism of education welfare officers. It has acknowledged the high standards that they achieve and their professional attitude and commitment to the education and welfare of pupils whom the service supports.

2.00 pm

Education welfare officers are considering the present offer, which goes as far as spinal-column point 35. If they accept it, employers should not view that as the end of the matter; rather, it is an interim solution. If the service is to retain skilled professional people, it must be ensured that they are remunerated in such a way as to make staff feel valued and make them want to stay in the service. A LeasCheann Comhairle, tacaím leis an rún. I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Lunn: My party is content to support the motion, in so far as it goes to call on the Minister to take necessary steps to resolve the dispute.

At the outset, it is worthwhile to put on record my party's support, and, I am sure, that of all Members, for education welfare officers. During the past few days, social workers in general have been given a bad press in the UK media. It is grossly unfair to blame those who operate on the ground for administrative incompetence elsewhere. People go into social work and education welfare because they have a vocation. We must be thankful that they do so, because the job can be extremely trying — it is a mobile, multi-skilled environment, which is linked with alternative education provision, building community links, assistance in decision-making for children who have special needs, and even some legal matters.

Undoubtedly, therefore, a detailed outcome from a review of education-welfare provision in Northern Ireland would be welcomed. In her response, the Minister may provide information on that. I am sure

that I speak for all members of the Committee for Education when I say that we are keen to help in any way in which we can. Although there has been some discussion between the Committee Chairperson and the union involved, the matter has not been formally discussed in Committee.

The broad issue is that frequent clashes have taken place between education boards and unions, particularly NIPSA. The same problem occurred during the dispute with classroom assistants. Certain matters do not help the situation, such as the fact that a clear linkage exists between education and social work in general, which includes health. The Minister of Education must liaise with other Departments. Members trust that the progress that, happily, started on the afternoon of Thursday 21 November will continue.

There also appears to be ongoing clashes between education boards and people who work in the education system. Education boards must meet, rather than hand over power to commissioners. I hope that the Belfast Education and Library Board will not fall on its sword in the way in which the South Eastern Education and Library Board did, and then blame everyone else for its inactivity. There is also a major disparity between some union demands and the Government's ability to deliver. The Executive must deal with those matters directly and urgently.

There is also ongoing disconnect between the boards and the Department. I hope that the Assembly will receive details of how the new education and skills authority will resolve that. To that end, my party welcomes the Executive's announcement that the first education and skills authority Bill is to proceed. We also hope that it will receive a speedy passage through the House, although I will be mildly surprised if it does.

My party seeks an urgent resolution to those issues so that the service can be maintained at the highest possible standard. It is always a matter of concern when people feel that they are poorly treated and when recruitment to the service is becoming difficult. I am not in the best position to judge the level of poor treatment or recruitment difficulties; however, the fact that industrial action has been taken shows that, obviously, feelings run high. The issue is not so much about pay as it is about job security. Again, that echoes the classroom assistants' dispute.

As a consequence of that, three actions are necessary. First, the Minister must explain in detail what she is prepared to do, what funds are available and what her long-term plans for the service are. Secondly, the boards must explain their position. Finally, it must be recognised that not all the unions' demands are necessarily reasonable. In fact, some are too vague to judge. The issue is not one of good cop, bad cop but of seeking consensus. From the Assembly's

point of view, the Executive and education boards must function in order to bring about a resolution.

There is a new economic reality with regard to the amount of money that is available, and it would have been helpful if the Executive's Budget had left more room for manoeuvre. There is also an issue of general public-sector reform, but children are the most important consideration. The earlier the intervention, the more effective the process of ensuring that children — as far as possible — can go on to lead normal and productive adult lives.

Investment in children's welfare now — and, therefore, investment in the education welfare service — will pay dividends later. We support the motion as it stands, and we look forward to detailed comments from the Minister about what action she will take to ensure that the necessary resources are in place to bring about a full and fair resolution for all sides involved in the dispute. It is an industrial dispute between NIPSA and the education boards and involves about 150 people.

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

Mr Lunn: I support the motion.

Mr G Robinson: I have received letters and emails from constituents regarding the education welfare officers' pay dispute. I find it impossible not to sympathise with them, and I support their case for having the prolonged pay dispute settled at the earliest possible moment. It is encouraging to hear today that a settlement of that long-running dispute may be imminent.

It also gives me pleasure — as the motion asks — to recognise the vital work that is undertaken by education welfare officers. The job that they do to ensure that children attend school, that parents are aware of their responsibilities, and that young people receive the best education available should not go unrecognised or unrewarded.

In September, in a response to my colleague Mr David Simpson's question for written answer, the Minister stated:

“The qualifications held by an individual are not considered, but rather the knowledge and skills required by the post that are necessary for its satisfactory performance. No direct comparison of the pay scales of EWOs is made with other comparable grades in other Departments”.

How does the Minister know that those grades are comparable unless she has compared them? Even the Minister must admit that grades have to be compared to be comparable. Furthermore, why are the qualifications of an individual not examined? Surely, individuals' qualifications are the basis on which interview panels select candidates for final interview. I would appreciate the Minister's clarification on those most basic of procedures, and, more importantly, her

clarification of the situation in respect of the education welfare officers' pay claim.

It is unfortunate that education welfare officers have been subjected to such a prolonged pay dispute. Those people are trying to provide a positive education experience to children who, otherwise, may not be granted a positive experience of the best education system in the world. Education welfare officers should be given a fair deal that will provide them with encouragement and a sense of appreciation in carrying out their difficult and essential job. The dispute can only be resolved by paying education welfare officers a professional wage for a professional job. A resolution to the long-running dispute must be found urgently. I support the motion.

Mr K Robinson: I place on record my personal recognition of the valuable work that education welfare officers have carried out, particularly over the past 30 troublesome years when they have been placed in some extremely dangerous situations. I congratulate the Minister on having a full box of officials present in the Chamber today. I trust that that is a portent of the importance of the need for a speedy resolution to the matter.

We are engaged in a war for the hearts and minds of young people that we cannot afford to lose. We are waging that war against enormous odds, with the forces of what passes as popular culture ranged against us. Engaging young people with the education process is one battle in that war, and education welfare officers are the foot soldiers who need our support in that battle. The investigation of children's absence from school and the promotion of good attendance is a major and recognisable aspect of the role of education welfare officers. The education welfare service undertakes several other important duties that relate to child protection, child employment, special educational needs, suspensions, expulsions and general child behaviour in schools.

The education welfare officers work closely with schools and families to resolve attendance issues and difficulties between home and school. It is important that the officers maintain an appropriate balance in helping to resolve difficulties between schools and families. Mediation, therefore, is probably a more accurate description of their role than advocacy. I again put on record my amazement at the interpersonal skills that education welfare officers bring to some situations. Their mandatory role is in the background, but, when faced with a family's difficulty in getting a child out of the home and into education, they can forge a great interpersonal relationship to help them to get over what can be a difficult hurdle.

Schools can refer to the education welfare system any pupil whose poor attendance causes major

concern. The education welfare officer contacts the parent or carer and offers support to try to improve the situation. If there is no improvement, the officer must organise meetings between parents, social workers and, perhaps, others. Ultimately, if the child's attendance does not improve, a court order may be applied for. I can tell you that sitting in a court and watching that process is far from pleasant.

Does the work of Northern Ireland's 150 education welfare officers receive the kind of official support that we might expect? What is officialdom doing to bolster or to maintain the morale of those front-line workers? It appears that the employers have a case to answer over their treatment of the education welfare officers. Apparently, the pay situation has become so bad that, on 1 October, the 'Down Democrat' described the education welfare officers as being at the end of their tether.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member agree that the Minister appears not to value the work of education welfare officers? I refer Members to a question for written answer that I tabled, AQW 2151/09. In response, the Minister stated that the attendance data for 2006-07 and 2007-08 are "currently being collected", but that the initial outputs will not be available until "the end of February 2009." Does the Member agree that it is scandalous that it takes such a long time to provide that information? Is he aware that clear evidence exists of a relationship between poor attendance at school and education outcomes? As a former headmaster, is he surprised to hear that? Is he aware that in some wards the attendance rate of between 10% and 15% of children is less than 85%?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has one extra minute.

Mr K Robinson: Those words are music to my ears.

I thank my colleague for his detailed interjection. He highlighted the relationship between education attainment and attendance, stressed that all sectors of education must work together, and pointed out that we are dealing with social welfare problems, unemployment and other matters of which Members are aware.

To return to the 'Down Democrat' — and to what better official organ could I return — as far back as 22 September, the education welfare officers working in the South Eastern Education and Library Board walked out and mounted a picket outside Ardmore House in Downpatrick. That action was called after 100% of education welfare officers voted in favour — it appears that they are indeed at the end of their tether.

If we are, as George Robinson suggested, on the fringe of a settlement, I welcome that. The education welfare officers must have reached the point at which they felt that they had to fight not only for the right to be paid a proper rate for the job, but to protect the

children in the area covered by the South Eastern Education and Library Board. The officers stated that the pay of education-based social workers has fallen well behind the level of their colleagues in social services. Education welfare officers employed by the five education and library boards were due to start industrial action, organised by NIPSA, on 22 September. That initial action was averted when the five boards said that they would table a fresh offer by 27 October. That offer was not made.

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

Mr K Robinson: I will; that was a very quick minute.

On 5 November, NIPSA called for a one-day strike. Yet again, the strike has been averted, and I appeal to the Minister: will she please interject some realism into the situation and resolve it as quickly as possible?

2. 15 pm

Mrs M Bradley: I support the motion. Welfare officers undertake work that is necessary in schools and with families. They help teachers to deal with behavioural problems and bullying, and assist children with special needs. Indeed, they are almost social workers.

The Minister must address those workers' problems urgently. I hope that she will tell the House how she intends to deal speedily with that matter in order to ensure that welfare officers are not forced to take steps that give them no pleasure. Schools cannot afford to lose that support. The problem was not created by welfare officers and must be resolved sooner rather than later. I urge the Minister to act quickly to ensure that welfare officers do not take action and that children, teachers and staff in schools do not lose that much-needed service.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to put on record my appreciation of the work of the education welfare service, particularly the work undertaken by education welfare officers. We all know the importance of regular school attendance. A child or young person must be present in order to take full advantage of the service that schools offer, and we must support people whose job it is to promote regular school attendance. That will improve educational outcomes and ensure that every child and young person experiences success in education and achieves his or her full potential.

Is é an tSeirbhís Leasa Oideachais agus na hoifigigh leasa oideachais a bhíonn freagrach as freastal rialta ar scoil a chinntiú agus a chothú.

The education welfare service and education welfare officers are tasked with promoting regular attendance at school, and schools turn to those people

when a young person's attendance pattern gives cause for concern. The education welfare officer works with the school, the young person and the family to discover why regular attendance is a problem and to develop and implement a plan to produce a sustained improvement. As Members have said, staff must be highly skilled in working with young people individually and in their family-group situation. Non-attendance can be a presenting symptom of a more deep-seated difficulty. The education welfare officer must work with the young person to establish a relationship of trust and confidence in order to address the problem together.

Tá oifigigh leasa oideachais ann chun tacaíocht a thabhairt do na daoine óga is leochailí, dóibh siúd a ndéantar máistíneacht orthu, dóibh siúd atá i dtrioblóid leis an dlí, dóibh siúd a bhfuil fadhbanna acu le mí-úsáid substaintí nó alcóil, dóibh siúd a bhfuil freagrachtaí cúraim nó tuistithe orthu, dóibh siúd ar íospartaigh mí-úsáide iad, dóibh siúd atá gan dídean nó atá sa chóras cúraim, agus do na daoine sin atá míshásta amach is amach lena bhfuil le tairiscint ag an chóras scolaíochta.

Education welfare officers support vulnerable young people who have been victims of bullying, have been in trouble with the law, have problems with substance or alcohol abuse, have caring or parenting responsibilities, have been victims of abuse, are homeless, are in the care system or are simply disenchanted with school.

Education welfare officers offer an effective and appropriate way forward for those young people and work closely with other agencies and statutory, voluntary and community organisations to lever down additional support in order to help the young person to re-engage with education. Multi-agency working is essential to support effectively vulnerable children and young people and is an integral part of officers' daily routines.

Although the service focuses primarily on pupils with attendance difficulties, it has, in recent years, begun to focus on preventative work. Education welfare officers work with school staff to review attendance information, and to identify ways of spotting problems early. They work with schools to develop policies on attendance and to ensure that all parents appreciate the value and importance of regular attendance. They also assist schools in developing strategies to sustain the positive message about attendance. All of that is vital if the drive to improve standards is to be sustained. Education welfare officers are valued for the contribution that they make to that objective. I have recently attended many prize-giving ceremonies, and was delighted to see the importance and high priority that schools attach to awarding high attendance.

We are all in agreement about the valuable role played by education welfare officers, and questions were asked about what steps are being taken to settle the pay and grading dispute. In accordance with the current pay-remit approval process agreed by the Executive, a pay and grading business case aimed at addressing the current dispute was presented by the boards to the Department on 29 August 2008. The Department must be satisfied that the business case is robust, consistent and evidence-based before approval can be given for the boards to proceed with a formal offer to the trade union side. The initial business case was not sufficiently robust, and a revised business case was received from the boards on 10 October 2008. Additional information was requested on 28 October, and the boards' response was received on 30 October. The revised business case was given urgent consideration, and Government approval was granted on 3 November 2008. Members can see from that timescale that I made a priority of ensuring that the issue was resolved.

The boards tabled their formal settlement offer on 3 November, which, they consider, will achieve the objectives of the business case, namely: reduce the turnover rate in the education welfare officer grade; retain younger staff as they become experienced; increase the pool of internal candidates for management positions; reduce the number of recruitment exercises; improve the success rate at filling vacancies; attract experienced candidates from the other services; and improve staff morale as the education welfare service operates with full complement.

I understand that NIPSA recommended on 19 November that its members accept the offer, and that the union is organising meetings in order that its members can vote on the offer. I am pleased that the union has recommended acceptance, and hope that that will enable final agreement to be reached and salary arrears to be paid as soon as possible.

Trevor Lunn adverted to the importance of the creation of the education and skills authority; I, too, welcome the decision taken by the Executive on Thursday. I look forward to the matter coming before the House tomorrow, when I will make a statement in relation to it. I think that we will all see improvements in a wide range of areas, and I welcome the Member's comment about the education and skills authority. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when Mr Basil McCrea will conclude and wind up the debate on the motion.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would be happy to conclude in the seven minutes remaining, if that is the mind of the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I would be extremely happy if you could do that in the time available.

Mr B McCrea: I will do that, subject, of course, to an absence of unnecessary interruptions.

A couple of points were made during the debate. The most pressing issue, I imagine, is to recognise the value of education welfare officers — a point that was made by many Members. It is somewhat disappointing that the dispute has gone on for so long.

I take the point made by Mr O'Dowd that there are legislative reasons for the distance between the Department and the education and library boards, but I share the frustration of Mr Storey and Mr McCallister — we must find a better way to resolve such issues faster. It is simply not the right way forward for the Department or whoever to do a Pontius Pilate on this matter. If the system is not right, we, as Members of a legislative Assembly, should fix it.

I was struck by a comment that Mr O'Dowd made. I am really disappointed that he is not here, so I will direct my point to Ms Ramsey instead. There was an issue about which he said "the less said the better". I intend to quote that to him several times in the not-to-distant future. I see that Mr O'Dowd has just returned to the Chamber, which is really handy. During his contribution, he managed to attack a Minister who was not here and to defend a Minister who had not been attacked. He singularly failed to praise education welfare officers, which is what the motion is about. However, that is probably because he was trying to save time.

It fell to Mr Dominic Bradley, who once again delivered a professional speech, to outline the basic case. The problem is that education welfare officers need to have a social-work qualification, yet they find themselves being paid less than those who are in that field. That seems unfair, and it is no wonder that 70% of them are considering looking elsewhere.

Mr Lunn took us into some interesting territory. He took a bit of a sideswipe at NIPSA and then highlighted the difficulties that exist between the education and library boards and the Departments. He said that he hoped that the education and skills authority will resolve those issues. If that is a way in which to streamline our decision-making process, so be it. However, I am very reluctant to endorse the education and skills authority as I do not yet know what the proposition for it contains. The Education Committee raised fundamental concerns about that body; indeed, its size and organisation seem to be wholly inappropriate. I remain to be convinced, and I

do not think that the House should push legislation through just to get things finished by Christmas.

Mr George Robinson quite rightly recognised the contribution that education welfare officers make. He did so very well, and I thank him for that. My colleague Ken Robinson highlighted the really important matter of interpersonal skills, which is the real issue that should come to the fore.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Perhaps the most telling part of the debate came in an intervention by my colleague from East Antrim. The Education Minister is keen to highlight statistics, particularly the number of GCSEs or qualifications that are achieved by people from poor backgrounds. In the Northland ward in Carrickfergus, in which only 25% of people achieve GCSE grades A to C, the truancy rate is 15%. In the Gortalee area, in which the truancy rate is 10%, only 17% of people achieve five GCSEs. However, in other wards that have truancy rates of 1·8% or 3·6%, between 70% and 80% of children achieve five or more GCSEs. We should not be selective when we quote criteria or statistics. The education welfare officers know that the most important part of their task is to get the children to school on time and to ensure that they have aspirations that are sufficient to allow them to take advantage of the system. That is the key issue that must be addressed.

Education welfare officers deserve our full and unconditional support. We urge the people who are involved in the matter to get it resolved quickly. If there are problems with our decision-making process, I look to colleagues in the Executive to remove those hindrances as soon as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the vital work undertaken by education welfare officers in supporting children, families and schools; and calls on the Minister of Education to take all necessary steps to resolve the ongoing pay dispute as a matter of urgency.

Mr Speaker: The House will take its ease for a few moments before Question Time.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Education and Skills Authority (ESA)

1. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Education how the establishment of an education and skills authority will improve outcomes for learners, particularly among young Protestant males. (AQO 1274/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Is gnéithe ríthábhachtacha de straitéis fhoriomlán mo Roinne iad comhionannas, ardú ar chaighdeáin, agus soláthar oideachais ard-cháilíochta. Trí chur chuige comhsheasmhach trédhearcach is féidir linn a chinntiú nach bhfágtar páiste ar bith i leataobh, agus go mbíonn comhdheis ag gach uile dhuine óg éirí leo sa saol, beag beann ar chúlra sóisialta, ar chine ná ar inscne.

Equality, the raising of standards, and the provision of a high-quality education system are core elements of the overall strategy of my Department. Through a consistent and transparent approach, we can make sure that no child is left behind and that every young person — regardless of social background, race or gender — has an equal opportunity to succeed.

Too often, young people who are most let down are those who are already contending with barriers to education. Such groups of children include those from poorer backgrounds, Travellers, young people with special educational needs or disabilities, and those from minority ethnic groups — particularly those whose first language is not English or Irish. Although many pupils in our schools achieve great things, there are still far too many children who do not receive the help and support that they need to reach their full potential.

In respect of the performance of pupils who left primary school last year, one child in five moved into post-primary education without having achieved the expected levels of literacy and numeracy, namely Key Stage 2, level 4. At GCSE level last year, 47% — almost half of young people, or some 12,000 pupils — did not achieve at least a grade C pass in English and Maths. That is despite the fact that good passes in GCSE English and Maths are often what unlock access to further and higher education and well-paid jobs.

That level of underachievement presents real challenges for boys. In 2006-07, 44% — some 2,313 — of Protestant boys — left school with less than five

GCSE grades A* to C, while the figure for Catholic boys was 41%, or 2,564 pupils. When disadvantage is taken into account, in 2006-07, 79% — or 519 Protestant boys — left school with less than five GCSEs grade A* to C, while the figure for Catholic boys was 64%, or 895 pupils. Underachievement is also a real concern in respect of girls, some of whom will go on to face other barriers throughout their school and adult lives, including teenage pregnancy, sexual violence or gender inequality.

We must raise the aspirations of young people because, at present, there is a poverty of aspiration in many of our working-class communities, which is causing real problems. Educational underachievement among our young people can also lead to many other problems, including poor health and well-being, a lack of self-esteem and, in some cases, dealings with the criminal justice system.

Under the education and skills authority, there will be a significantly increased focus on the professional development of teachers and an enhancement of leadership skills among principals and boards of governors. Together with the Department's key policies on transfer, literacy and numeracy, special-education needs and teacher education, those factors will provide the overall improvement in educational standards that we all desire.

All of us — politicians, parents, communities, schools, education and library boards, and the Department — must work together and focus on educational outcomes. Together, we can ensure that no child is left behind and that every young person, regardless of social background, race or gender, has an equal opportunity to succeed.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat. The figures that have been outlined by the Minister will clearly be of concern to the entire House. There is a responsibility on all of us to ensure that those figures are improved. Will the Minister tell the House how the school-improvement policy will be used to tackle underachievement?

The Minister of Education: School improvement is one of the keys to tackling underachievement. The policy makes it clear that all schools are capable of improvement and sets out how the Department plans to deliver improvement at every level of our education system.

The first steps will involve identifying the causes of low performance in schools and providing a range of support to help an individual school improve.

For example, in one board area particular schools are doing very well at English but less well at maths. In such instances, we would put in an intervention to support whole-school teaching in relation to mathematics, or vice versa if the problem was with English language.

The policy sets out interventions that can be taken when evidence suggests that performance could be better, or that, despite support, improvement is not evident within an acceptable period. As I said, there is a shocking level of underachievement in our system that is unacceptable to all Members in the House. Our first priority must always be to promote the needs of all our children, not to protect or cosset institutions.

We must have a zero-tolerance approach to underachievement, and we need to have measures in place that will enable us to tackle underachievement. We are looking at all the consultation documents within our 'Every School a Good School' policy, some of which are very good. We are studying carefully a lot of the approaches suggested, and we welcome everyone's support in relation to that.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin.

In light of the present economic climate, what assurances will the Minister give the House that the savings that ESA is predicted to deliver will be realised and will be passed on to front-line services, where they are badly needed?

The Minister of Education: I thank the Member for his question, which raises an important point. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an cheist sin, nó is ceist thábhachtach í.

One reason why we are establishing the ESA is to streamline administration and ensure that we get money into the front line. My Department has £50 million on an invest-to-save basis. When introducing such a major policy that involves reforming a system it is important to have resources to invest in order to benefit from savings at a later date. However, we need to be clear about the key message, which is that money needs to go into the front line. Improving standards for all our young people and getting money into the front line are the key drivers behind the establishment of the education and skills authority.

Mr B McCrea: I am always most impressed by the Minister's ability to read minds — she can turn unerringly to a particular page in her notes to answer a supplementary question. Perhaps she will do the same thing for my question.

Will the Minister state whether ESA was part of informed ministerial debate at the recent Executive meeting? Further, will she state whether her ministerial colleagues had sufficient time to read the relevant documents, and is she confident that she got agreement at the last meeting of the Executive so that she can make a statement tomorrow?

The Minister of Education: We had a very useful discussion on the establishment of the education skills

authority during the last Executive meeting. I welcome the support of Members in the House, some of whom will be giving me more feedback today. I will be making a statement in the House tomorrow. As I said, there was a very good discussion during the last Executive meeting. It is very important that there is no delay in bringing the relevant legislation through the House. This is a very important — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: This is a very important area of reform, and I hope and expect that no party tries to delay—

Mr Kennedy: Delay?

Mr B McCrea: You have delayed for five months.

Mr Speaker: Order, order. If Members ask supplementary questions, or multiple supplementary questions, they must allow the Minister to answer.

The Minister of Education: I will be making a full statement in the House tomorrow. It is important that the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) work together to establish the education and skills authority because it has an impact on both Departments. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Play Facilities: Children with Autism

3. **Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Education what discussions her Department has had with other Departments to address the lack of adequate play facilities for children with autism in West Belfast.

(AQO 1279/09)

The Minister of Education: Ar dtús, b'fhéidir gur chóir dom a mhíniú gurb iad boird oideachais agus leabharlainne Bhéal Feirste agus an oirdheiscirt atá freagrach, sa chéad dul síos, as forbairt a dhéanamh ar áiseanna do pháistí a bhfuil uathachas orthu i mBéal Feirste thiar.

I must clarify that, in the first instance, responsibility for the development of facilities for children with autism in West Belfast lies with the Belfast Education and Library Board and the South Eastern Education and Library Board.

I therefore liaised with the boards' chief executives, who informed me that children from West Belfast who have autism will continue to avail themselves of the excellent facilities that are available at several modern and forward-looking special schools, at which a high proportion of the pupils in attendance are on the autistic spectrum.

Two of those schools — Harberton Special School and Cedar Lodge Special School — are newly built,

state-of-the-art facilities. Although they are a few years older, Oakwood Special School and Glenveagh Special School are modern and well equipped and have high pupil-to-staff ratios. Staff in those and in other special schools, such as St Gerard's Education Resource Centre, and in special units such as Holy Trinity Primary School, which is for children with moderate learning difficulties, are highly trained and experienced in meeting the needs of children with special educational needs, including autism. Representation was made to me about the condition of St Gerard's Education Resource Centre, and I asked my officials to liaise with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and St Gerard's about that situation. I do not think that conditions in that centre are acceptable.

Oakwood Special School provides a highly regarded autistic spectrum disorder outreach service, offering advice, support and training to all schools in West Belfast, where educational psychologists and specialist autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) teachers continue to develop effective, collaborative working practices with their colleagues from the health and social care trusts. An excellent example of that is the provision of diagnostic and assessment services in the recently opened Carlisle Health and Care Centre, which is the new main health centre for north and west Belfast. That centre provides post-diagnosis, multi-disciplinary, multi-agency advice and training for parents, teachers and assistants on how to promote in schools and in the community the academic and social well-being of children with ASD.

In addition, many of the board's ASD support service staff have begun recently to avail themselves of the specialist training opportunities that Middletown Centre for Autism has been equipped to provide. In common with children throughout the island of Ireland, children from West Belfast will be able to avail themselves of facilities at the Middletown Centre for Autism, particularly its education assessment service, which will open in spring 2010 and which will consist of: multi-disciplinary assessment; the provision of comprehensive guidance about children's individual education plans; and a multi-disciplinary learning support service that will take children who are referred for residential placement and who pose significant challenges to their existing provision or setting.

On a North/South basis and as part of the cross-border, parent, community and school partnership programme under Peace II, the Department has developed recently an excellent resource entitled, 'Through the School Gate'. That includes, for children with autism, the strategy 'Coping with the Change from Home to School'. That resource will be available shortly on the Department's website for all parents and professionals.

On a more general note, the Department of Education continues to work closely with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to develop the autistic spectrum disorder strategic action plan, which the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) issued recently for consultation.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that it is important that children with autism and, indeed, all children with special educational needs, have the resources that are necessary to meet their needs? Furthermore, what is the total amount of money that is being spent on special-needs education throughout the North of Ireland?

The Minister of Education: I agree with Jennifer McCann about the importance of resources. Go raibh maith agat.

In 2006-07, approximately £171 million was expended in the North of Ireland on the provision of education services for children with special educational needs. That includes approximately £141 million that the education and library boards expended on special schools and a sum to meet the additional costs of statemented children in mainstream schools and units. That figure also includes £24 million for children who do not have a statement of special education need. Further amounts of £2 million and £3.8 million respectively were provided to schools in the voluntary-grammar and grant-maintained sectors to meet the costs of pupils with statements. To date, an additional £82 million has been provided for the implementation of the code of practice on the identification and assessment of special educational need.

Furthermore, £53 million was made available in the 2005-06 to 2007-08 period — through the 2004 spending review and the 2006-08 Budget and priorities— to support children with special needs.

2.45 pm

Mr Attwood: Returning to the matter of West Belfast, I say to the Minister that children with autism and other special needs require a wide range of support. Much good work is being done to provide that support in West Belfast by St Gerard's Educational Resource Centre, Oakwood School and Assessment Centre and other places. However, in taking things forward, will the Minister examine why constituents of mine and of other representatives in West Belfast must take their children to Newry in order to receive dedicated support for educational and wider emotional needs, to the point that it is hitting them hard in their pockets? Will she consider enhancing the facilities at St Gerard's, Oakwood and elsewhere in West Belfast, so that children in that constituency do not have to

travel 40 or 50 miles to Newry in order to get the support that they should get in Belfast?

The Minister of Education: I agree that it is very important that the children of West Belfast and from right across the North of Ireland get the support that they need. In a very extensive answer to the main question, I outlined the range of support that exists throughout the North, in West Belfast, in Belfast and throughout the island of Ireland.

For me, one of the most exciting projects to come forward is the Middletown Centre for Autism, and parents understand the importance of that project. All the different policies in relation to autism have interconnected roles to play, but the Middletown centre plays a different role; it specialises in research and identification. At times, people will have to travel to it from places such as Cork and Belfast.

I agree with the Member. I presume that he was asking about children travelling daily. The needs of those children must be met as close to home as possible, within their local communities. However, special-needs provision is a specialised area, and I am sure that Members will understand that.

Mr Buchanan: I will move the discussion from West Belfast to West Tyrone, where there are huge gaps in the education system for children with autism. Will the Minister outline what her Department is doing to address the gap in educational provision for children with autism in West Tyrone? What financial provision has she made to the Western Education and Library Board to enable it to address that need?

The Minister of Education: I welcome the Member's question. It is very important that we have equality of provision right across the Six Counties. It is unacceptable that provision is lacking in any area. The Member will know that, a couple of months ago, I opened new autism-specific classrooms in mainstream schools in three different areas in the Western Board — in Derry, Fermanagh and Tyrone.

We must ensure that there is equality of provision, and the establishment of the education and skills authority will be important for that, because we cannot have a rural/urban divide. That said, an enormous amount of money has been spent in all the different board areas in relation to children who suffer from autistic spectrum disorders. I will provide the Member with detailed information on the exact amounts of money and the Department's plans.

Mr Speaker: Questions 4 and 5 have been withdrawn.

Pupils with Autism

6. **Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister of Education to detail the ways in which her Department presently

co-operates with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to school pupils who are autistic. (AQO 1301/09)

The Minister of Education: Bhí teagmháil ag an Roinn Oideachais leis an Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí maidir le forbairt an phlean gníomhaíochta straitéisigh um neamhord speictrim uathaigh a d'eisigh an Roinn Sláinte le haghaidh comhairliúcháin ar na malluibh.

The Department of Education has been liaising with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on the development of the autism spectrum disorder strategic action plan, which was recently issued for consultation by DHSSPS.

That ongoing liaison has included providing a detailed response to the independent review of autism services report — particularly in relation to the Middletown Centre for Autism, about which I have personally met Lord Maginnis — and the participation of Department of Education officials in a consultation event on the draft ASD action plan and ongoing discussions regarding the recommendations of the Bamford Review.

A senior-level liaison group between the two Departments has been operational over the past year also. It provides an important forum for senior policy advisers to share developments on areas in which both Departments have an interest and to address the needs of children and young people with special needs, including autism.

In addition, the Department of Education is a member of the DHSSPS-led ministerial subgroup taking forward key priorities in relation to provision for vulnerable young people, including the provision of care for children with autism.

The Middletown Centre for Autism is an important strategic development in the education of children with ASD, and the DHSSPS is a member of the interdepartmental steering group.

As a result of the ongoing departmental co-operation in relation to autism, there are numerous examples of co-operation between the education and health sectors at education and library board and health and social care trust level. There are regular meetings between board psychologists and trust staff to discuss ASD issues and review provision for individual pupils. For example, if a child has been referred for statutory assessment of his or her special educational needs, the board and the trust will contribute to the multi-disciplinary assessment.

The inter-board autistic spectrum disorder group, which was established in 2002 to advise the regional strategy group on special education needs and the Department of Education on issues relating to ASD,

liaises regularly with representatives from the trusts. At those meetings, discussions are held on a range of topics relating to autism: the diagnostic assessment of children and young people; parent training; support for community services; joint training arrangements; and joint strategic planning.

Mrs Hanna: I thank the Minister for her detailed response. Will she provide details of some of the specific actions she will take in co-operation with DHSSPS, including action on the early-years provision?

The Minister of Education: The Member will be aware of the report of the task group on autism. Furthermore, we have provided funding for autism-related training in the pre-school sector — for teachers, classroom assistants, qualified early-years specialists and relevant education and library board staff. We have provided the education and library boards with resources to enable staff to undertake accredited training in applied behavioural analysis.

We have also been involved in the formation of the inter-board autism spectrum disorder group that I mentioned earlier. It advises the regional strategy group on special education needs and the Department of Education on issues relating to ASD, and it promotes commonality and consistency of approach in relation to the identification, assessment and delivery of services for children with autism across the five education and library boards. The group is also helping to develop cross-border training for board staff and schools in a range of autism strategies.

The inter-board autism spectrum disorder group has developed an ASD strategy. We have also produced classroom resources to support positive interventions for children with ASD, and we are doing that on a North/South basis. There is, therefore, good sharing of practice and resources. The Department of Education, in partnership with the Department of Education and Science in Dublin, also advanced the arrangements that were necessary to enable the Middletown Centre for Autism to begin offering services in December 2007. That marked an important development in the delivery of educational assessment for children with significant levels of autism.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will be aware that the autism sector wants legislation. However, it has been suggested that for ASD the key obstacles to progress are the lack of regional cross-departmental strategies and funding as each Department prefers to produce its own action plan or strategy. Will the Minister assure the House that she will not put obstacles in place in her Department? Furthermore, will she liaise with other Departments and urge them to do likewise?

The Minister of Education: I will make sure that the Department of Education liaises with other Departments. In my answers to previous questions, I

described the way in which Departments are working together — and I am sure that Members do not want me to repeat them. It is essential that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education work together. The Middletown Centre for Autism is an important project, and it is interesting that it is funded jointly by the Department of Health and Children and the Department of Education and Science in the South of Ireland. In the North, to date, it has been funded by the Department of Education. It is important that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education participate in this important project, because it will have major benefits.

I agree absolutely with the Member; both Departments must work together on autism.

Mr McCallister: Does the Minister accept the importance of early intervention, stability and routine for those children with autistic spectrum disorder? Does she also agree that, for many parents of autistic children with wider family commitments, making travel arrangements can be difficult? Will she explain why she did not site the centre of excellence in Belfast, where transportation, access to major hospitals and accommodation would have been a considerable advantage?

The Minister of Education: I am surprised at the Member's question, given that he comes from south Down. I come from a rural part of Ireland — County Mayo — and I have never subscribed to the idea that everything has to be situated in the capital cities. I am surprised at the question and a little disappointed. The Bain Report highlights the importance of the provision of a range of services being spread across the North of Ireland.

The centre of excellence at Middletown, which is a North/South project, is in a very good location for the North of Ireland. People travelling from Derry, Antrim or Belfast have a certain distance to travel, and people travelling from Cork have a certain distance to travel. The Southern Government are putting money into it, both from the Department of Health and Children and the Department of Education and Science.

I hope that the Member is not saying that children from Derry, who would have further to travel if the centre were located in Belfast, would not be able to travel to Middletown. We must shift from the mindset that everything has to be located in Belfast or Dublin. I welcome the fact that we have the centre of excellence. The important issue now is for all Departments to work with us on the project.

Mr Speaker: Question 7 has been withdrawn.

Post-Primary Transfer

8. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Education what meetings she has had with post-primary school principals about her proposals for post-primary transfer published on 15 May 2008. (AQO 1290/09)

The Minister of Education: Bhuail mé le príomhoidí na n-iarbhunscoileanna ar bhonn rialta chun plé a dhéanamh ar mo thograí faoin nós imeachta aistrithe i rith fhorbairt na dtograí seo agus ó foilsíodh mionchuntas orthu ar 15 Bealtaine 2008.

I have met post-primary school principals frequently to discuss my proposals for the transfer procedure, during the development of the proposals and since their detailed publication on 15 May 2008. I have received considerable support for the proposals during those discussions, and, even where disagreement has been evident, there has been a recognition of the need for change.

I have met a wide range of post-primary principals and associations: the Association of Head Teachers, the Catholic Heads Association and the principals of controlled grammar schools. I have also had meetings with individual schools and with representatives of the Association for Quality Education. Most recently, in the past two months, and in recognition of the key role that principals play as school leaders, I have hosted seven dinners with post-primary principals in Belfast, Enniskillen, Newcastle, Newry, Limavady, Ballymena and Derry on the subject of post-primary reform, including my proposals for post-primary transfer. I will meet principals in the Cookstown area this week. Those dinners have been very useful, and we have had two-, three- and four-hour discussions, where everyone was able to put forward their viewpoint. The vast majority of principals right across the North of Ireland support the change.

I remain willing to consider any constructive suggestions that might improve my proposals, and I will continue to seek consensus in order to achieve a legislative framework to underpin them. However, if agreement on a way forward is not forthcoming soon, I must — and will — bring to an end the current uncertainty over the post-primary transfer by issuing guidance to assist schools with the development of admissions criteria for transfer in 2010.

3.00 pm

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Undersubscribed Further Education Colleges

1. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many further education courses were

undersubscribed in the 2008-09 academic year.
(AQO 1220/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): As can be seen from their prospectuses, colleges run a large number and variety of courses. In addition, there is an element of continuous year-round enrolment on certain further education college courses. It is, therefore, not yet possible to provide details of courses that might be undersubscribed in 2008-09; that picture will emerge only at the end of the academic year.

Mr Ross: The Minister is aware that courses that are undersubscribed are generally cancelled, and that, therefore, those who have made the grades to get on those courses miss out. Likewise, a number of people, including a young man in my constituency, failed to get on to a course by only a tiny number of points and thus missed out. Would it not be sensible for further education colleges to fill undersubscribed courses with students who failed to get on the course by a tight margin? That would be an alternative to cancelling the course altogether, which leads to all the young people who applied missing out.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I understand the Member's point. When colleges decide whether courses are viable, numbers are an issue. On some occasions, when a significant number of pupils has applied, two classes can be run, provided, for health and safety reasons, that the classes are not too large. Clearly, there will always be some tensions at the margins.

If the Member wishes, I am happy to take his specific case up with the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges to find out whether it has any corporate policy in place. It may be that where two colleges both have a shortage of pupils for a particular course, combining the two classes would be a viable alternative. Perhaps such a class could be taught in one of the 760 outreach centres, if access is an issue.

I am happy to consider that matter, because, obviously, we do not want to prevent our young people from attending courses. If the Member cares to bring the specifics of the case that he mentioned to my attention, I will happily take the matter up not only with the college in question, but with the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges to ensure that there is a Province-wide response.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I apologise as I did not hear the Minister's response in full. Will the review take on board the Committee inquiry into teacher training? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am not sure that we are on the same page. I was answering a question on how many further education courses were undersubscribed in 2008-09. I said to the Member that

I am very happy to take the issue up with the colleges and their Northern Ireland-wide body to ensure that there is a consistent position across the Province.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister confirm that his Department still provides substantial public funding to the colleges to fund both recreational and hobby-type courses?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Yes, we do. In recent years, the emphasis in the further education sector has been on, perhaps, more economically directed achievements — indeed, that is one of the principal tools of economic development. Nevertheless, thousands of people still take up recreational courses, towards which a minimum of 5% of college spaces and funding is directed. Such courses will play a continuing and important role, particularly as colleges consider their wider community responsibilities.

Teacher Training Review

2. Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide a timescale for the completion of the Teacher Training Review.
(AQO 1251/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I received the draft policy framework paper for consideration on Friday. The timescale for completion of the review from now on will be determined by a number of factors, including consideration by the relevant departmental Committees, other Ministers and the Executive, and the public consultation period.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that the subject of continuous professional development is crucial to the successful review of teacher training?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Minister of Education and I have been discussing and corresponding on that issue for some months. It is crucial that we improve the quality of continuous professional development for teachers. That is an issue that I have given much attention to, particularly in the past year.

In answer to a question that Mr Ford asked me some time ago, I said that the Government performance in the review had not been their finest hour. It has taken a long time to get to the present position, and I received the draft policy framework paper for consideration only on Friday. I am examining it closely, and continuous professional development is one issue that I will be looking at to see whether it has been properly addressed. I assure the Member that my Department and the Department of Education will bring the draft

paper to the House, the respective Committees and the community as soon as possible.

Continuous professional development must be at the core of the review, because it will improve quality. We already have a good standard, but we invest less of our resources in continuous professional development for our teachers than the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr Easton: How does the Minister intend to address the religious imbalance between the numbers of Protestant and Catholic students being trained for teaching positions in Northern Ireland? Students from Catholic backgrounds comprise 53% of teaching students and those from Protestant backgrounds comprise 47%. Will the Minister reassure the House that he will correct that imbalance?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The decisions that students take about the professions that they follow is primarily a matter for them. The balance in the community background of teaching students will vary, and the current figures are not sufficiently unbalanced to cause huge concern. Nevertheless, we are sensitive to any pressure that we receive from the teacher-training colleges that run into difficulty.

As I am sure the Member is aware, our problem is that there is a substantial pool of teachers — from all backgrounds — without full-time permanent positions. That is the area of concern that exercises me. I will examine the Member's concerns. However, the big problem that we face is the large number of teachers without full-time positions.

Mr Ford: I suppose that I should express gratitude to the Minister for answering a question that I asked some weeks ago because John McCallister asked a similar question.

The Minister just mentioned the problem of the large number of teachers without full-time permanent jobs. How much money is being spent on training excessive numbers of teachers and, in particular, on maintaining a disproportionately high number of teacher-training institutions in Northern Ireland, rather than moving to a more integrated and shared model?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Minister of Education takes the decision on the number of teachers that are trained each year. The Department for Employment and Learning funds the two teacher-training colleges and determines the number of non-teaching places in them. Queen's University, the University of Ulster and the Open University make up the third, fourth and fifth providers of teacher training.

We have been examining that situation with the Department of Education. I want to achieve a situation in which continuous professional development could be accommodated in our teacher-training colleges, which are centres of excellence.

If one considers satisfaction ratings, output and student responses, it is evident that the colleges are producing very high-quality teachers. I do not think that anyone would challenge that.

Last week, the Assembly debated its concern about the number of people who are not in education, employment or training. We know that our schoolchildren are underperforming at all levels, and that is one of the few areas where we need to make more effort to catch up with our competitors, given that large parts of our population do not have the essential reading and writing skills. Therefore, I understand the Member's point, and I flagged up the issue earlier in the year when we examined student numbers. However, I will await the decision that the Minister of Education will make in January on her assessment of the numbers.

We introduced a new, more realistic funding model. The total number of students enrolling in the colleges has gone down over the past number of years; nevertheless, it is our intention to ensure that the quality remains high, because those students will teach our children eventually. Therefore, there are fewer investments that we can make that can have a better payback.

Queen's University/ Stranmillis University College: Merger

3. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if Queen's University, Belfast and Stranmillis University College have agreed that their target date to merge in August 2009 is not feasible.
(AQO 1303/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am aware that Queen's University and Stranmillis University College have a target date of August 2009 to complete their proposed merger. I made it clear to senior management at Queen's University and at Stranmillis University College that key steps must be taken prior to any merger being approved. Those steps include the Assembly's endorsement of legislation. The timetable for any proposed merger will be determined by the completion of all those steps rather than by any desired deadline.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his response. Does the Department for Employment and Learning have an open mind about the merger, or is its mind fixed and committed to it rather than to permitting the college to be independent? I ask the Minister to please state his feelings about the position. Departmental officials indicated to the Committee for Employment and Learning that there was a bias towards a merger rather than towards keeping an open mind on the matter.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I assure the Member that, as far as I am concerned, we are reacting to a decision that the board of Stranmillis University College made. I have no fixed view on the matter. The Department received the business case in the past couple of weeks, and its economists have studied it to establish whether it meets green book standards. It must then be assessed by the Department of Finance and Personnel as part of the checking process, after which it will come to my Department for its view.

I have made it clear to Stranmillis University College and to Queen's University — and I have said previously in the House — that it would be very difficult for any recommended merger to occur by August 2009, especially as I have already given the commitment to the House that I will not seek accelerated passage for the legislation. Therefore, if any proposal is to emerge, it must happen through the proper processes. We must take our time over it — it cannot be rushed. However, I have no predisposition towards a merger or otherwise.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Have the Minister or his departmental officials had any meetings or discussions with Stranmillis University College since it submitted its business case? If not, are there any plans to have discussions in the future?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I have had no discussions with Stranmillis University College. The matter is at an early stage, and the report is being checked to ascertain whether it complies with green book standards. However, that has nothing to do with the wider issues. The report is being checked simply to establish that it contains all the information that is required in order for the Department to make its assessment.

That may involve communication between the Department and the consultants who wrote the report, but I have had no engagement with the college at this stage and it is likely to be some time before that will take place.

3.15 pm

Ms Lo: The Minister is aware that the Committee for Employment and Learning is taking evidence on the proposed merger, and there is, clearly, a lack of adequate consultation with staff and students. Would the Minister agree that a proper process should now take place so that staff and students are adequately consulted?

The Minister for Education and Learning: I am aware of the Committee's concerns on that matter. I read a letter that was copied to me by the chairman of the board of the college — which, I am sure, the Member has seen — in which he outlines a number of

steps that have been taken, and others that will be taken, to improve the consultation process. It is essential that the process is improved, because we are talking about people's livelihoods, futures and jobs. When people read and hear these things, it must sometimes seem to them that such processes are above their heads. Therefore, I support any move to maximise consultation between the college and all levels of staff, whether academic or ancillary.

Student Loans

4. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment whether 3rd level students have greater difficulty in accessing student loans due to the current economic situation or the personal financial profile of the student.

(AQO 1308/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Northern Ireland's third-level students should have no greater difficulty in accessing student loans or maintenance grants as a result of the current economic situation. Rather, a change in a student's personal financial profile, resulting in a reduction in household income, may result in an increase in the amount of support available.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer, but the information that I have, and which I will pass to him, indicates that some students are having difficulty in obtaining student loans. Given the possibility that students, like others, are suffering from the current downward turn in the economy, is this not the year in which to put university fees on hold rather than increasing them?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department does not control university fees. It controls the loans and maintenance grants available each year to assist students.

At present, if household income changes by more than 15%, an in-year review of the individual's case can be triggered. However, that trigger-point will change to 5% in the next academic year. Reviews may be triggered when someone in the household loses a job, and sadly, in the past 48 hours we have had two examples of job losses: at Calcast in Londonderry, and at B/E Aerospace in Kilkeel, where 95 jobs have been lost. I am happy to discuss those matters with Members for those respective constituencies and to pursue them as best I can.

However, with respect to particular cases, there is sufficient flexibility to take job losses into account. If the Member refers me to specific cases, I will take them up with him and pursue them. Shortly, we will announce the formal launch of the student fee and

student finance review. All those matters can be taken into account at that stage.

The inflationary increase in university fees will also apply to maintenance grants. That happens each year, so there is nothing unique about what is proposed for this year as opposed to other years.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am glad that the Minister has answered that question, and I appreciate that he has mentioned the review of student finance. At what stage is that review; how close is the Department to signing off the review's terms of reference; and how close is the Minister to announcing the identity of the chairperson of the review?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I could be in a position to do that in a matter of days. I am waiting on some correspondence, but the Department is at a very advanced stage. We have identified the stakeholders that we believe should be involved, and we have received correspondence from a range of stakeholders, including the National Union of Students, the Union of Students in Ireland, education and library boards, and others. Scoping is at a very advanced stage. I am meeting Ms Ramsey next week to discuss that matter, and I would like to think that I will be able to inform her further then. However, the Department is very close to launching the consultation.

Mr Elliott: I am concerned about the method that is used for assessing financial support for students. I understand that, in England, there have been difficulties with meeting the expenditure levels. What differences are there between the method that is used here and the English model, and how are we coping better — if, indeed, we are coping better?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: There are differences. The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills last year announced changes whereby it would put its students in a more favourable position than our students in that people with an income threshold of £60,000 a year would be entitled to a partial grant. In the past few weeks, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills had to backtrack on that, and it is reviewing the decision that it took in the summer of 2007 because it suddenly realised, I believe, that it was beyond the Department's ability to finance it.

My Department has concentrated on maintaining a differential of £500 between what we offer as a maintenance grant in Northern Ireland and those that are offered in the rest of the United Kingdom. Therefore, our maintenance grant is £500 higher, and we have kept to that because one of the best ways to continue our relative success in attracting students from disadvantaged backgrounds is to increase the maintenance grant. We have done better, but the

review will decide whether we can do better still. The Department with responsibility for that in England has suddenly discovered that it has not been possible to do what it thought it could do, and it has had to backtrack.

Steps to Work: Tender Bid

5. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the reasons why a tender bid for Steps 2 Work resulted in a preferred contract status being offered to TWL despite it having only one member of staff and no accommodation facilities five weeks before the contracts went live. (AQO 1311/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: At the time of tendering, TWL submitted an implementation plan, which addressed the issues of staffing and premises. That was assessed by the evaluation panel as fully meeting the requirements of the Steps to Work provision. Steps to Work aims to promote work as the best form of welfare for people of working age by providing an individually tailored, work-focused service to help all clients to overcome their barriers to work.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his answer. Although he said that the tender process complies with procurement requirement, it flies in the face of what is reasonable and sensible to award contracts to a company with one member of staff in Northern Ireland five weeks before the contracts go live and which openly stated that, even if it got contracts, it would subcontract most of them and merely fill in the gaps. Does the Minister not, therefore, agree that awarding contracts that are worth millions of pounds in those circumstances does not create the confidence that Steps to Work will be effectively delivered?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I assure the Member that rigorous processes are in place to ensure the quality delivery of the services that are provided. The Member must understand that we are dealing with a European-wide procurement policy, to which the Executive signed up in 2002. My Department relies on the Central Procurement Directorate, a centre of procurement excellence of the Department of Finance and Personnel, to oversee and guide it through the legislative processes. Anyone in the European Union is entitled to apply for those contracts, including those from a different part of a member state or from outside that member state. Under European law, we cannot deviate from that openness. I have to be very careful because there is still the potential for legal proceedings.

Having taken advice from the Departmental Solicitor's Office, I am very restricted in what I can say. I do not wish, in any sense, to deprive the Member of an answer, but we must bear in mind that people are

examining what is being said as part of their consideration of whether there was undue influence. Therefore, we must be careful about what we say. However, I can say that there will be rigorous follow-up. If there is any evidence that a contractor has failed to provide a high-quality service under the terms of the contract, that contractor can be removed. The contract makes provision for that. If that were proven to be the case, I would have no hesitation in doing so.

Steps to Work: Extension

6. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if TWL or other Steps 2 Work contractors have been given an extension after the formal award of Steps 2 Work contracts on 17 September 2008; and if deadline requirements to provide his Department with details of customer information, number of referrals and caseload details have been varied to give contractors longer periods of time to comply. (AQO 1297/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: No extensions were granted after the contract-award letters were issued on 17 September. TWL and the other lead contractors were operational by 29 September, the date on which Steps to Work commenced. There was no requirement for Steps to Work contractors to supply client details to the Department. It is important that we deal with the present situation. We all know that there has been a downturn in the economy. It is time to start focusing on what we can do to assist the people who have been affected by that downturn to move into other work.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for his answer. There is a vast ocean of difference between the “undue influence” that he has referred to and legitimate inquiry into how contracts are awarded. Members across the House, including senior members of the Minister’s party, have concerns about how the Steps to Work contracts are awarded. Given the evidence that exists, does the Minister not think that it is time an inquiry was launched into the Steps to Work procurement to determine whether everything was proper and whether the outcomes best serve the delivery of Steps to Work across the North?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: First, I think that we all share the same objective, which is to ensure that the end product — the service provided to those who need it — is of the highest possible quality. That is our common ground. I am aware of Members’ concerns, and I do not dispute those. However, in a wider context, the question is about whether everything was done properly. Of course, I understand that. However, I return to my point about the possibility of legal action. At this stage, I am not even clear about that, because the Central Procurement Directorate, in the Department of Finance

and Personnel, actually conducted the procurement. Leaving that aside, and given that the potential for legal action is still unresolved, the Department would be in severe difficulties if it were to launch an inquiry.

I understand exactly what Mr Attwood and other Members are saying. However, I must listen to the clear legal advice that I have been given, which is to be extremely careful about what we say and do at this stage. I ask the Member to continue to be patient. We are in a process. Until the potential for legal action is disposed of, I am very restricted in what I can say on the matter. That is not an attempt to obfuscate or to delay an answer. That is the advice that I have been given. What else I am supposed to do?

Mr Cree: We are in danger of being bogged down in the intricacies of public procurement. Surely the point of a training scheme is to reduce the number of people who are unemployed. Given that aim, will the Minister outline some of the merits of the Steps to Work programme?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Undoubtedly, the objective of the Steps to Work programme is to reduce the number of unemployed people. What Steps to Work offers, and what previous schemes have lacked, is flexibility. The programme offers a menu-based approach to helping people. Hundreds of people have already being referred through the new contracts.

Sadly, it appears that the numbers with which we will have to deal will be increasing, not decreasing. The key is flexibility. We will evaluate the scheme at a very early stage. This is a continuous process; we will not leave the scheme for years, then come back and say that it did not work out.

There is continuous evaluation of the scheme. The Department is aware of my concerns and of the interests of a variety of Members about the Steps to Work programme. I assure the Member that the Department will be concentrating on output to make sure that the service provides what the client needs.

3.30 pm

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Plans to Attract Tourists

1. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans she has to attract tourists from Europe in light of the global economic downturn. (AQO 1331/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): Attracting tourists from Europe is the responsibility of Tourism Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. The Tourist Board markets Northern Ireland locally and in the Republic of Ireland, and Tourism Ireland has responsibility for overseas marketing. I believe that a combination of the clear strategic direction that has been adopted by both organisations, and a continuation of the tactical flexibility that has been displayed in 2008 will best position Northern Ireland to meet the likely challenges of 2009.

There has been a greater focus on exploiting various media opportunities in Europe, and there has also been increased activity with the trade and with carriers in the market. Current campaigns focus strongly on increasing the number of short-break holidays during the shoulder season. The campaigns include advertising, direct marketing, familiarisation trips, sales blitzes in key cities and press evenings.

The Tourist Board ran a spring campaign in the Republic of Ireland in order to increase awareness of Northern Ireland as a tourist destination. It also ran a gateway campaign from June to September. An autumn campaign is currently running, and there are also plans for a Christmas campaign.

Year-to-date figures from January to June 2008 show an encouraging 19% increase in visitors from the Republic of Ireland, and an increase of 28% in Republic of Ireland holiday and leisure visitors. That increase was no doubt helped by recent exchange-rate fluctuations. Based on the Tourist Board's occupancy surveys for the hotel, guest house and bed and breakfast sectors, Republic of Ireland visitors to serviced accommodation in Northern Ireland have increased by 26% from January to August 2008, reaching 133,000.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her very detailed response. Does the Minister agree with me that we in Northern Ireland are failing to make the most of our industrial heritage, and that our tourism product would be greatly enhanced by better promotion of the Irish linen industry around Lisburn, Newtownards and Dungannon? Our European visitors may also be interested in our rich maritime heritage, including the Titanic project.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I hope that the Member accepts that our rich maritime heritage is covered by one of our five signature projects: the Titanic signature project. Those projects are the way in which the Tourist Board is taking our tourism product forward in the next couple of years, and into the future. It is not just a matter of the location of signature projects; it is also a matter of providing signposts. It is my hope that, in the Titanic

Quarter, we will be able to point to the Linen Quarter in Lisburn, and provide signposts to other industries. We are not just looking at the Titanic project and maritime history; we are also pointing to other industries in Northern Ireland. That is currently being developed.

There is a lot to be pleased about in those figures, especially the figures from the Republic of Ireland. Those have no doubt been enhanced by the exchange rate, and we should make the most of that while it lasts.

Mr Hamilton: I am sure that Mr McCarthy would agree with me that those signposts in the Titanic Quarter should point to Comber as well.

Mr McCarthy: And to Newtownards.

Mr Hamilton: Yes. The Minister has outlined the importance of tourism to the local economy — indeed, it was the main plank of our Programme for Government and Budget, and has been well invested in. One of the key themes in attracting people to Northern Ireland was business tourism. Obviously, the business sector is taking a bit of a hit at present, but will the Minister outline some of the work that is ongoing to try to maintain that focus on business tourism in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Business tourism is one of the planks on which we are driving forward. We believe that we have a good product to sell in that sector. In October, we hosted the Northern Ireland Business Tourism Expo in Belfast. There were 11 buyers from the French and German markets who met Northern Ireland trade representatives and went on familiarisation visits throughout Northern Ireland.

I was delighted to be involved with the announcement last week that the world conference on early-years education will be coming to Belfast next year.

That is a tremendous coup, considering that Northern Ireland was up against South Africa and Hawaii to host the event. Perhaps early-years workers from Northern Ireland would rather go to Hawaii than stay here, but we are absolutely delighted to have that event in Belfast. Eight hundred delegates and their spouses will come to Belfast and stay for up to a week; there is a great deal of spin-off from that event for wider tourism potential.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On Friday, I was at a tourism conference in west Belfast, which Tourism Ireland and the Tourist Board attended. Is the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) doing enough to promote cultural tourism? How can cultural tourism be joined-up with tourist attractions in the North of Ireland?

Simon mentioned business tourism, and we see vast number of shoppers with Southern-registered vehicles.

Are there any promotions around that with regard to cultural tourism? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: We should be aiming at getting those shoppers who come to border towns such as Newry and Enniskillen to stay overnight. Cultural tourism is an important part of what the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, and indeed Tourism Ireland, is doing. People are looking for something new and different when they come to Northern Ireland, and it is good that we can give them that variety.

A couple of weeks ago, I went to the World Travel Market in London, and I was very pleased to visit some of the Northern Ireland people who were promoting Northern Ireland as a good place to visit. Northern Ireland was up against places with a huge budget for selling their tourism wares, such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi, but I was pleased to see that people were visiting the Northern Ireland stands and looking at what is available. I hope that cultural tourism will provide that little bit of interest that will make people come here.

Assistance for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs)

2. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what strategies her Department has in place to assist SMEs in the context of a UK-wide recession. (AQO 1255/09)

5. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what actions she is taking to enable businesses to survive the current economic difficulties. (AQO 1247/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 2 and 5 together.

In response to the increasingly difficult global economic conditions, Invest Northern Ireland has developed a programme of actions and initiatives designed to enable its clients to tackle the impact of a sustained economic downturn. In particular, it has focused on cash-flow management, cost reduction, and improving production efficiency.

In the past two months, Invest Northern Ireland has held six seminars, offering local companies practical advice on coping with the credit crunch. More than 250 businesses have attended those seminars, and the feedback has been extremely positive. At the first seminar in Belfast, I launched Invest Northern Ireland's £5 million accelerated support fund, which can make fast-track advice and assistance available to client companies that are suffering the adverse effects of the downturn.

I therefore assure Members that against the difficult economic backdrop Invest Northern Ireland is working with the companies and entrepreneurs whose business strategies and investment decisions are essential to progressing towards the targets in the Executive's Programme for Government.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for her detailed response. Has she had any discussions with the Finance Minister on the possibility of pressing the Prime Minister for a review of corporation tax, now that Mr Brown appears to recognise that the changed economic climate demands urgent action?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As the Member will know, that has been on the agenda for some time. Although it was essentially ruled out by Varney II, it will come before us again when the Executive make their official response to Varney II. Make no mistake about it: if we can get anything more from the Chancellor, I am sure that the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister will continue to push for it.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Minister for her reply. Will she and the Minister of Finance and Personnel take action to ensure that banks make credit facilities easier to obtain for SMEs?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: How banks are dealing with their customers was discussed at the Executive meeting last Thursday. I know that that is a matter of grave concern for many Members.

The Member will be aware that the Chancellor made an announcement on 30 October 2008 regarding money from the European Investment Bank. Although at present, only three banks administer that money throughout the United Kingdom — Barclays, Alliance and Leicester and Close Brothers — DETI and the Department of Finance and Personnel are in discussion with Her Majesty's Treasury in order to determine how that money can be disseminated throughout Northern Ireland by its banks.

It is important to say that we are also in discussion with the banks on the small firms loans guarantee scheme, which has existed for some time. Unfortunately, the scheme's take-up has not been as good as we would have liked. Certainly, it is hoped that banks will become more involved in the scheme in future.

Mr Durkan: Obviously, questions that have been asked refer to current economic difficulties and the wider recession. Certainly, that picture has been compounded by the news of job losses at Calcast and in Kilkeel.

Further to the Minister's point about banks, will she ensure that — as well as encouraging them to be

positive and responsive towards firms' liquidity needs — Invest Northern Ireland is not over-exacting when it seeks loan repayments from firms? Some firms that face pressure for loan repayments from Invest NI have reported that they already experience difficulties with banks and with changed trading conditions.

It is a bit much for Government to lecture banks and other agencies to be responsive and on what action to take — the Whitehall Government say that they have told Revenue and Customs to be flexible and responsive towards firms — when some firms report that Invest NI has been unsympathetic towards their particular difficulties. Will the Minister examine that issue?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I certainly will examine that issue. If the Member has any specific details, I hope that he will share them with me. As he says, rightly, there is absolutely no point in Government lecturing banks about being flexible, when an arm of Government or a non-departmental public body is being inflexible. If there are any specific instances that he would like me to examine, I will certainly do so.

I join with the Member in expressing disappointment about the loss of Calcast jobs. I am sure that he will accept that that is entirely a consequence of what has happened to the American car industry. That does not, however, make dealing with the matter any easier, especially at the present time of the year.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Minister for her responses. Will she detail the role of local enterprise companies to help the development of small and medium-sized enterprises? I am mindful that a strong one exists in Omagh — the Omagh Enterprise Company — at the Gortrush Industrial Estate. How are such small and medium-sized enterprises typically supported by financial assistance from the Department?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I had the opportunity to visit the Omagh Enterprise Centre. The Member is correct; it is a strong centre that makes progress, in particular, through innovation and incubation centres for small businesses. I commend greatly the work that it does.

Part of the Department's work to help businesses has been to consider what it can do to help those that are not Invest NI clients, of which there are quite a few. It has examined whether the enterprise-agency network, for example, can help some of those businesses. As the Member is aware, a network of around 42 local enterprise agencies exists throughout Northern Ireland that offers a broad range of training and development. The network provides access to low-cost facilities to businesses if they fall into difficulties with rent, and so on. Therefore, I hope that

enterprise agencies will be able to help Government to help businesses that are not Invest NI clients.

Domestic Energy Price Increases

3. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given the recent increases in domestic energy prices, what assessment she has made of possible future reductions in energy costs.
(AQO 1325/09)

12. **Mr Ross** To ask the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what scope there is for the reduction of electricity prices in light of falling oil prices.
(AQO 1225/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will respond to questions 3 and 12 together.

My Department is in continual contact with the Utility Regulator with regard to energy prices for both domestic and business customers. The downward trend in wholesale oil, coal and gas prices during the past several weeks has presented the Utility Regulator with an opportunity to review Phoenix Supply Ltd's retail gas prices and NIE Energy's retail electricity prices.

Both Phoenix Supply Ltd and NIE Energy purchase a significant proportion of their energy requirements in advance in order to help ensure price stability; however, I am hopeful that it will be possible to secure price reductions in January 2009.

3.45 pm

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for her answer. The price of oil has recently fallen from a high of \$147 a barrel to \$50 a barrel. In real terms — even allowing for an adverse movement in the value of the pound against the dollar — oil costs less than half of what it did a few weeks ago.

Does the Minister agree with the commonly held view that the recent dramatic rises in electricity prices — which were attributed to rising fuel costs — should now be reversed? What action does the Minister propose to take in conjunction with the regulator to ensure that those cuts are implemented quickly? The Minister mentioned January 2009 as a possible date for a price reduction. Urgent action is required because fuel poverty and the dread of electricity bills are among the biggest problems that are faced by people here.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I wholeheartedly welcome this morning's announcement that the regulator will reassess electricity prices. As the Member knows, and as I said in my first answer, a lot of advance purchasing is required to provide energy in Northern Ireland. The Member is right that oil prices have come down very quickly, but they can go up very quickly as well. All

things being equal, I am hopeful that there will be a price reduction in January 2009 — that is the timescale to which the regulator is working. By next week, I hope to have received Douglas McIldoon's report on NIE's most recent 33% price hike. I will share that with the House as soon as possible thereafter.

Mr Ross: We should take heart from this morning's good news that the Utility Regulator will review electricity prices here. What steps can be or have been taken to minimise the possibility of future price hikes?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As the Member knows, the Department — unfortunately or fortunately, depending on how one looks at it — does not have a direct role in determining energy prices. Those prices are worked out between energy companies and the regulator. The Department will remain in continuous contact with the regulator and energy companies to try to drive those prices down. However, we are subject to world economic circumstances — from which, it must be remembered, we are not isolated.

In the long term, we need to use more renewables, have a greater security of supply, and be less reliant on fossil fuels. Indeed, the President of the European Parliament made similar points about climate change and security of supply this morning. I intend to proceed with greater use of renewables. We have launched a strategic energy framework for a scoping exercise. I hope that Members will be involved in that scoping exercise, because the strategic energy framework will be a crucial document in the future.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for her answers. What are the Minister's proposals for cost-effective alternative energy methods to be used in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Those proposals will be assessed in the context of the strategic energy framework, which — as I have said — has been launched for a scoping exercise. I hope that Members will be involved in that scoping exercise. The energy framework will consider the entire scale of energy sources — wind turbines, onshore wind, offshore wind, and so on. We are also assessing the use of biofuels, which cuts into the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) responsibilities. I will chair an interdepartmental working group on energy matters, which will ensure that a joined-up approach is taken to any issue that affects more than one Department, and that we move forward in a strategic way.

Manufacturing Sales: West Tyrone

4. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to help

manufacturing sales in the West Tyrone constituency, given the current economic climate. (AQO 1239/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: A major objective of Invest Northern Ireland's corporate plan is to increase its client companies' sales outside Northern Ireland. To that end, the agency offers its clients a range of support to help improve their productivity and international competitiveness.

The Passport to Export scheme, for example, assists trade programmes and services by providing export and sales skills, market visits and research, and in-market support. All those elements help businesses to access the global market and exploit sales opportunities.

During the past three years, 90 people from West Tyrone have participated in such programmes. Several West Tyrone companies have travelled on recent trade delegations to Saudi Arabia and India, and one company from the area is participating in a mission to China. At the beginning of November 2008, 14 companies participated in a quality and tendering seminar in Omagh, the aim of which was to help them to take advantage of tendering opportunities presented by the 2012 Olympics.

Several companies from West Tyrone use Invest NI's Tenders Electronic Daily, which provides details of Europe-wide contracts of interest to them. That excellent service enables client companies to maximise and exploit the significant tendering opportunities available from public procurement contracts.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. Given the economic climate and the slowdown in sales, what are the prospects for manufacturing?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Given the state of the economy, the Member is right to sound a note of caution. In the last quarter for which figures are available, manufacturing rose by 1% throughout Northern Ireland. However, I am not singing about that because it may not be the case in future. There is a perception that manufacturing is always in recession, but that is not the case; some excellent companies are working hard on innovation, and on research and development.

On Friday, I visited a firm in Fivemiletown that had secured a £6-million contract because it had spent money, time and energy on research and development and innovation. In doing so, the company secured the jobs of its workforce in Fivemiletown for some time to come, and I was delighted to be part of that.

In seeking to make progress in future, innovation and research and development are key elements in any sector, particularly in manufacturing. My Department and Invest NI will help in any way that we can through innovation vouchers, grants for research and

development and trade missions to emerging markets in Saudi Arabia. As I said, a trade mission is in China, and I understand that a company from West Tyrone is among those attending.

Mr Gardiner: What plans are being prepared to assist the regeneration of manufacturing, which, in a difficult market, is suffering from high energy costs and the effects of the credit crunch?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I hope that I partially answered the Member's question by saying that although there may be a perception that manufacturing is in recession most of the time, in the last quarter there was 1% growth in manufacturing. I accept that many large companies, and I can think of some off the top of my head, are suffering greatly due to huge electricity bills. The Department is, therefore, considering introducing competition to that market. The Department is also considering bringing gas into the west of Northern Ireland to provide companies there with a different supply source; a study of that has begun and will continue.

The price of energy continues to be a huge issue for large manufacturing companies. The Department invested £4.9 million in the Carbon Trust to help firms to come to terms with energy efficiency and to determine whether there is any way in which it can help. As was announced earlier this year, Ulster Carpet Mills in Mr Gardiner's constituency has made great strides in energy efficiency, and I hope that more companies will avail themselves of that help.

Incandescent Light Bulbs

6. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans she has to ban the sale of incandescent light bulbs. (AQO 1263/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I have no plans, nor have I vires, to ban incandescent light bulbs. The United Kingdom Government's initiative to phase out incandescent light bulbs is voluntary and extends to Northern Ireland. Major retailers and energy suppliers are leading the initiative that will result in energy-efficient light bulbs replacing their least efficient equivalents on shelves over the next four years.

Mr McKay: I thank the Minister for her answer. The British Government's work has not gone far enough. The banning of incandescent light bulbs in other parts of Europe has led to a significant reduction in carbon emissions. Does the Minister agree that mandatory measures are necessary?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I do not accept that mandatory measures are necessary. Officials from the Department for

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and other Ministers have met patient support groups — including Lupus UK and the Skin Care Campaign — and medical professionals to discuss the effects of fluorescent lights on health. Introducing mandatory measures is not the way to go; the voluntary code is proper and correct. DEFRA will continue to monitor the situation in the coming months.

Mr McClarty: Does the Minister have plans to introduce an attractive subsidy scheme to encourage domestic consumers to purchase energy-saving appliances?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Energy Saving Trust does a tremendous job to make available energy-saving light bulbs. The voluntary code is preferable because people who suffer from lupus could be at risk if a mandatory ban was introduced. I am happy to raise that matter with DEFRA, which takes the lead on such issues, and respond to the Member in due course.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister outline whether there are health issues associated with the use of energy-efficient compact fluorescent bulbs?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I hope that I have made it clear that there are associated health issues, particularly for people who suffer from lupus. Although only a small proportion of our community suffers from that disease, it is important to acknowledge that they would suffer greatly if a mandatory ban was introduced.

Redistribution of Reduced Requirements

7. **Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she has had with Invest NI in relation to redistributing the reduced requirements in its resource budget, due to the impact on investment decisions by foreign direct investors because of the economic downturn, to help develop (i) small- and medium-sized enterprises; and (ii) social-economy enterprises. (AQO 1265/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My officials work closely with Invest NI to ensure that its budget management is fully responsive to the Government's budgetary monitoring cycle. Invest NI operates in a demand-led environment and manages its budgets in accordance with obligations outlined in its corporate plan. When necessary, it redistributes funding to address business pressures.

The economic downturn has, understandably, led to a reduction in its client activity levels. Therefore, Invest NI has, in the year to date, prudently surrendered £30 million, which will be used to address other Government pressures. The Department of

Finance and Personnel works closely with the Executive to ensure that funding that is surrendered in-year is redistributed based on the needs and priorities of individual Departments.

Invest NI clients, of which the vast majority are small- and medium-sized enterprises, must submit new development plans or implement existing plans within agreed timescales in order to draw down funding. The current economic conditions have led to a significant reduction in the project pipeline and have deferred, or slowed down, existing plans.

Invest NI offers assistance to new projects or expansion projects from its client base that are considered viable and additional, and offer value for money. Therefore, the reallocation of funding to any business area, including social entrepreneurship projects, must be driven by an identified business need and client demand.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given the likelihood that the worldwide economic recession will affect foreign direct investment, does the Minister agree that we must focus on steadying local businesses in order to secure employment and keep those businesses afloat? Does she expect the review of Invest NI to reflect the importance of stabilising and developing local SMEs and social-economy enterprises?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I do not accept that assertion. The Department is already considering how to help indigenous companies. As I have always said, although foreign direct investment is important — and will remain important — to the country, we will also support indigenous companies. In any event, they are not mutually exclusive; foreign direct investment often provides jobs and opportunities for local businesses that, without that investment, would not have existed.

Therefore, I do not accept the premise that Invest Northern Ireland has been considering too much foreign direct investment; the facts and figures — which are available to anyone who is interested — show that there is a balance between foreign direct investment and indigenous companies.

4.00 pm

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Children's Homes in Larne

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately eight minutes.

Mr Ross: I am grateful to the Business Committee for allowing me the opportunity to raise this important issue. In the past, I have found Adjournment debates to be especially useful, particularly the debate that I secured on health provision in East Antrim, in which all MLAs from the constituency took part. I must, therefore, give credit where credit is due to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, because he listened to the concerns that were raised on that day by the East Antrim representatives. It is to be welcomed that the Minister has made funds available to build new health centres in Larne and Carrickfergus, and that an acute rehabilitation and palliative care unit for elderly patients will be retained at Inver House. That is an example of how constituents, health workers and politicians can get together to highlight a constituency matter that is of great importance to everyone in the area. I hope that this afternoon's debate will be no different.

A couple of weeks ago, Mr Brian Fleming of the Princes Gardens children's care home in Larne visited my constituency surgery. Like many people in Larne, he was concerned that, under the comprehensive spending review, the Northern Health and Social Care Trust's proposals aimed to close the children's home in Larne. There are currently seven mainstream children's homes in the Northern Trust, but it has recommended that the Princes Gardens home in Larne should close. That would leave a significant gap in the provision of residential services for children and young people, and those over the age of 12 will have to try to find space in Magherafelt, Antrim, Ballymena or Portrush. It is hardly ideal for troubled young people from Larne, who will be asked to move away from their families, friends and work or school arrangements. That is potentially very damaging, and experts say that it should be avoided at all costs.

The staff at the home believe that their jobs are safe; that is not their primary concern. They are concerned about the well-being of the children, as we should be concerned this afternoon. The staff have built up a fantastic team at Princes Gardens, and they have a

level of expertise that is unrivalled in any other home in the trust. Members of staff at Princes Gardens have trained in Northern Ireland and have travelled to the mainland to train with experts in GB. The result is that the facility has built a great reputation for its capabilities and care expertise, as the knowledge base of the staff is significantly advanced. Many of the more challenging and difficult children, who are going through very difficult times in their lives, are sent to Princes Gardens because of the level of care that is on offer there. The staff have won awards for the level of team spirit and co-operation between the staff and the young people, as well as rating highly in inspections.

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

Princes Gardens has earned its reputation by providing excellent care and achieving noticeable successes in providing care, control and high levels of supervision in a therapeutic environment for young people who are deemed to be the most likely offenders and who have been difficult to manage in other settings. It would be highly disruptive if children were asked to move. There are sound arguments for keeping the home in Larne open. The reasons for keeping the home open certainly outweigh the reasons for its closure, even if it is in need of some maintenance.

Those are the reasons that I am so concerned about the trust's proposal that the Princes Gardens home in Larne should close, replacing the service with what it claims will be a service of salaried foster carers and support workers to give enhanced support to those foster parents. I recognise the important role played by foster parents, not just in this case but across Northern Ireland. However, in many cases, it does not work. Foster parents do not always have the knowledge required to care for some of the most difficult children, and, furthermore, there are very few foster parents willing to come on board. In fact, there is a real shortage of foster parents throughout Northern Ireland, not only in East Antrim.

The Minister highlighted the need for more foster carers on 12 May 2008, mentioning that almost 200 young people are waiting to find a foster home. It is young people who are the same age as those being looked after at Princes Gardens who are most in need of finding a home, and the closure of Princes Gardens would add to that problem. The Fostering Network estimates that an additional 5,000 foster carers are needed across the United Kingdom in order to avoid children being shunted from one home to another and split from any normality in their lives.

The Fostering Network Northern Ireland and the British Association for Adoption and Fostering report a massive shortfall in the number of foster carers, and say that at least another 350 are needed. I pay tribute to all those families who decide to take young people into

their families and provide care for them. Realistically, however, we must recognise that there is a shortfall in the number of families that are available, and that many people are reluctant to take in the most troubled of young people.

It is also difficult to provide the level of supervision that is required. Many foster parents across Northern Ireland report that the level of support and assistance is nowhere near the level that is required. Ideally, young people should be cared for in the security of a loving family, but the number of foster carers who are needed is simply not there. There are cases in which those arrangements do not work out, and that can be even more distressing and disrupting for young people. Therefore, the view that the trust can close Princes Gardens and will be able to find foster parents for all of the children is not realistic.

Princes Gardens in Larne has a proven quality of service. I understand that it has the lowest running costs per head of any trust's children's unit. It also has full capacity at a time when many of the other children's homes in the trusts are some of the time — if not all of the time — operating at a 50% rate of occupancy. The trust argued that children and young people will be moved to other facilities near by, but that is not always practical or, indeed, possible. Although there is a facility nearby in Carrickfergus, Barn Court caters for children up to only the age of 12. Therefore, the children cannot be transferred from Larne to Carrickfergus if they are over 12 years old.

It is very disruptive and unsettling for young people to be moved away from the area from which they come; or the area in which they have family, friends, they work or go to school, as I mentioned. Therefore, just as foster carers are not necessarily the answer, nor is transferring children to Portrush or Magherafelt.

As in the case of Inver House, it is imperative that local people have their say about this matter — even if fewer people will be affected by this decision. The trust is conducting a public consultation about the proposed closure, and I encourage as many people as possible to contribute with their views.

I thank the Business Committee for allowing me to raise this issue, and I thank the Minister for being in the Chamber to respond. Just as he listened to the concerns that we outlined in relation to Inver House, I hope that he will again listen to the concerns that I raised — and which other Members will undoubtedly raise — in respect of Princes Gardens home care, and that he will take the decisions necessary to ensure that that facility stays open

Mr K Robinson: I thank my colleague Alastair Ross for raising this important issue. Unfortunately, there seems to be a trend in the Larne area in that all Government agencies seem to see us as a wee bit of an

easy touch for reducing their presence. The proposed closure of Princes Gardens Children's Home is another example of that trend.

Mr Ross eloquently made the case for those children. Those young people are at a very difficult stage of their lives — their teenage years. They have not had the best of life experiences up until now. Through its trained staff, that home gives them a fairly steady degree of stability and normality. Unless we invest in such provisions, the costs and consequences for society further down the line can be quite high and, in some cases, horrendous.

I appeal to the Minister: if he talks to his colleagues in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust as successfully as he did about the Larne and Inver House situation, a bit of reality and normality might be brought to this issue. The children's home is small — it currently caters for eight young people. We accept that the building is not in the best condition. However, it is sometimes not the setting in which care is given — be it educational care or, as in this case, residential care: it is the quality of the interpersonal relationships between the staff. We heard how highly trained they are and how the inspection reports reinforced that fact.

Mr Ross: The Member mentioned the state of the building. Does he agree that many of the young people like the fact that the building does not look like other care homes around the country, and that that gives them more of a sense of belonging?

Mr K Robinson: I readily accept that fact. It is like that comfortable old shoe: you really should throw it out, but, boy, has it got some hidden benefits. So, yes, I accept the Member's point.

The Minister has been very active in acquiring a fairly hefty slice of the block grant towards the health budget, for which I congratulate him. However, this is a unique case in which a small amount of money devoted to a small number of young people can have a major impact and bring major change to their lives. Those young people are at a stage when they will grow up, make relationships and have families along the way. This is an opportunity to intervene and to stop the vicious circle in which people have been short changed by society.

The building is like my old shoe — it is comfortable, but it is not the most scenic thing on the block. There are a small number of children involved. The trend now is to place children in foster care if possible. However, realistically, not enough people are volunteering as foster parents to provide the number of foster places required. Moreover, it is the nature of the beast that if a young child of tender years is presented to potential foster parents, that child will score more highly than a teenager. Teenagers go through emotional turmoil at the best of times and, given the

backgrounds of some of these young people, their stresses and strains are, perhaps, higher. It is a very brave and skilled foster parent who can step forward into this breach, and there are not too many of them around. It would be better if there were more, but realistically there are not enough.

Given the public furore that erupted in Larne over the Larne and Inver announcements earlier this year, I am taken aback that the Northern Trust has not approached this consultation process with a little more sensitivity. There is a very raw nerve in Larne and the surrounding areas, and a very bad experience of dealing with officialdom in the past.

At this late stage, I would ask that the Northern Trust return to the consultation process and humanise its approach a little. Although there is a financial imperative on the trust and a potential future movement in the care arrangements for young people, the trust also has a responsibility to realise the great support that there is for this care home in Larne. I ask the trust to look at that, and I ask the Minister to show, when the consultation process is completed, the same generosity of spirit and purse that he has previously done in other parts of East Antrim. We recently received a welcome £29 million boost. Princes Gardens provides a front-line service, and, for a very small amount of money, that front-line service could be maintained and built on. I will not say that some of the improvements to the building are cosmetic, but some of the capital schemes that might be put up as an argument against retaining the home are too elaborate. The physical difficulties could be addressed for a much lower sum of money.

Again, I thank Alistair Ross for securing the debate today. It is very topical that the issue is being debated now while we still have time to change the outcome of the consultation process. I appeal to the Northern Trust to examine the human factors involved, over and above the financial factors.

I have always placed my reliance on the humanity of the Minister, who is not a million miles away from me. I am sure that when the proposals do emerge — and I hope that they are much more positive than the indications suggest — he will examine those proposals from a human perspective. A pound spent now in preserving the high-quality care provided by this residential home could save tens, hundreds or perhaps thousands of pounds further down the line.

Mr Neeson: I appreciate the matter being raised in the House and thank Alistair Ross for securing the debate today. As on many occasions in the past, all of the MLAs who represent East Antrim have co-operated collectively to deal with an important issue. That reflects well on how we, as Assembly Members for

the constituency of East Antrim, feel about this particular issue.

The proposal to close Princes Gardens follows the comprehensive spending review carried out by the Northern Trust. The home has a very good reputation in both the statutory and voluntary sectors. It caters for eight young people aged between 14 and 17. It is a settled unit which has received favourable inspection reports in recent years.

4.15 pm

It is important that young people in Larne remain in a normal and settled environment. If there are problems with the fabric of the building, I believe strongly that it is incumbent on the trust to carry out the necessary renovations and improvements, which would be cost effective. I appreciate the Minister's recent announcement about plans to create new health and social care centres in Carrickfergus and Larne. Princes Gardens provides an important, specialist, social-care service — it is a vital front-line service.

The consultation period ends on 19 December, and a decision is to be made by the Minister in March of next year. I appeal to the Minister to listen to the issues raised in the Assembly today and take them into consideration when reaching his decision. It is vital also that he listens to the concerns of the staff from the facility and the young people who use it.

We all co-operated in relation to the Larne and Inver issue, and there was a fairly positive outcome from that. I hope that, once again, as a result of all of us standing together in the Assembly, the Minister will respond in a positive way.

Mr Hilditch: I also thank my colleague Mr Ross for securing this Adjournment debate, as it provides the opportunity to highlight the predicament facing Princes Gardens Children's Home and its proposed closure. As we have heard, the closure is one of the trust's responses to the comprehensive spending review. Therefore, the decision is based purely on financial reasons rather than any practical or operational matters.

Historically, the children's home has served its purpose well and is well respected by the voluntary and statutory sectors. As Sean Neeson indicated, it is a settled unit that caters for eight teenagers and has the confidence that goes with having received a number of inspection reports that we have heard about in recent years.

As we are all aware, we are in the middle of the consultation period. That period will end in the middle of December, with the Minister making his final decisions in the spring. Therefore, it is timely that the matter is being discussed by the House today. At a time when Departments are trying to halve child poverty by 2010 and improve the overall welfare for children in

Northern Ireland — none more so than the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — it is imperative that the Minister considers the effect that the closure of children's homes will have on those objectives.

I understand that providing a foster home for children is the preferred option and that, under most circumstances, it provides them with a loving and safe family home life. However, that is, sadly, not always the case. It has happened — in the past and more recently — that some of the eight children catered for by Princes Gardens have ended up there as a result of their foster placements having broken down.

Many children have always lived in children's homes, and they find it impossible to adapt to a family way of life and are unable to settle in a strange home. Such children may never have lived with their parents nor had a structured home life, making it impossible for them to become comfortable in a situation that the rest of us take for granted as normal. Other situations can arise that require homes such as Princes Gardens to be called upon — for example, difficulties involving short notice with foster parents or situations involving families with three or more children.

We are very aware of the planned expenditure for East Antrim and welcome the Minister's investment in safeguarding other areas of the Health Service in our constituency. However, I ask him to consider ways to save Princes Gardens Children's Home and provide the necessary funding to safeguard its future. That home has existed for over 20 years, has an excellent reputation and is a valuable asset to the trust. During those 20 years, the home has provided children with a safe and secure environment in which to grow up. I am also interested to hear what steps the Minister will take to increase the number of foster-care parents in Northern Ireland, and I look forward to hearing his response on both matters.

Mr Beggs: I, too, thank the Member for securing the debate on children's homes in Larne, and I am also aware of the proposal to close the Princes Gardens Children's Home. It is useful to have the debate so that the issues surrounding that matter can be flagged up.

I have one minor criticism about the title of the topic for the Adjournment debate — I am aware of only one children's home in Larne. Furthermore, it would be better if we concentrated on the children, rather than on buildings or establishments. However, I appreciate that Assembly staff, rather than the Member, may have selected the title of the topic. Therefore, I am glad that during the debate Members have concentrated on outcomes for the children, because they are more important.

As Members said, the comprehensive spending review earmarked the Princes Gardens Children's Home for closure. At any one time, the home looks

after eight children of secondary-school age, and one of its great successes is that it quietly blends in with the surrounding area. As Members said, the home does not stand out as a children's home. Children quietly get on with their lives, aided by the support that is provided, and I compliment the home's staff for enabling that to happen.

The home has received favourable Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority inspection reports, so it is recognised as providing good-quality care. Indeed, the staff and children in the home recently won a Voice of Young People in Care award for two years' success in having the best team spirit among adults and children. That spirit should be cherished, and great care must be taken with any proposal that might change it, because such relationships are important in order to improve the outcomes for young people in care. Furthermore, that quality of service is recognised by the fact that places in the home are frequently in demand and that it is normally full, which, as other Members said, means that it benefits from lower running costs.

Unfortunately, the education outcomes for children in care are not as we would wish. Recently, a 'Newsnight' report indicated that only 12% of children in care in England and Wales achieve five or more good GCSEs, whereas the average overall figure is 60%. Therefore, we must bear in mind that there are advantages to placing children in quality foster homes. It is important that any foster home provides a stable environment; however, as Members said, all too often, such environments result in frequent movements and instability for children, and that is another reason why great care must be taken when considering any proposals to change existing arrangements.

In 'The Future of Health and Social Care Services in the Northern Trust: Engagement and Consultation Programme', the trust indicated that it wishes to ensure:

"Family support and early intervention services are strengthened.

Extended foster care so that more care can be provided outside residential homes."

As a result of that, the trust plans:

"To increase the number of foster carers across the Trust area ... Reduce the number of residential places for children in children's homes".

However, reducing the number of children's home places will not guarantee that foster carers will be available. Given that there is a shortage of foster carers who are able to take children, it would be foolish to consider closing the Princes Gardens Children's Home before establishing the required amount of stable, foster-home placements. We must focus on the best needs of the children concerned. As I said earlier, too often, unfortunately, children and young people

experience frequent movement between foster parents, and that is a cause of instability. Closing a home should not result in further instability in children's lives.

Members said that the poor fabric of the building was a reason being given for closing the home. However, that should not be the sole reason for change. The good quality of the staff and the service that they provide are more important considerations. There is little point in providing a state-of-the-art building elsewhere if the team spirit — the successful working relationship — that has been built up is put at risk.

Therefore, I would have thought that equal importance should be placed on the quality of staff employed in the home.

As other Members said, the proposal is to close the Larne home and move the children who require care-home support to Ballymena or Antrim. Again, that would not be in the children's best interests, because they would have difficulty in continuing their education in schools in Larne and Carrickfergus if they were moved to a home so far away. It is important that the children's educational outcomes be considered carefully.

As other Members have also said, the proposal is another example of services being withdrawn from Larne. It comes on top of the Housing Executive's recent decision to relocate jobs, the threat to close the local Department of Agriculture office and the local government proposals under the review of public administration.

It appears that services are retreating from Larne, and East Antrim is in danger of being left with second-class provision in a wide range of services. Therefore, it is important that those children who need care-home support receive it, preferably in a stable foster home — should that be available — or in a care home that can provide them with a stable environment in which they can continue their education and maintain relationships with family and friends.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank Alastair Ross for requesting an Adjournment debate on this topic. It is clear from Members' comments that the comprehensive spending review (CSR) and its impact on health and social care services remain matters of concern for many people. Naturally, people focus on the effect that the proposed changes will have on their local area — in this case, the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area — and the impact that the CSR proposals will have on the delivery of children's services in that area, in particular on residential care facilities for children in care.

As Members will be aware, the Executive Committee have set a target of 3% efficiency savings per annum for each Department. All the resources that are released by my Department through greater

efficiency will be reinvested in health and social care. If efficiency savings are not achieved, all the planned investments in existing commitments and new services cannot happen. That includes investment in more family support services, adoption services, and support for children in care and children leaving care.

It is important to set the matter in context. In Northern Ireland, spending on personal social services and community expenditure on children amounted to £133 million in 2004-05. That is approximately £287 for every child aged 17 or under. That amount is 29% less than is spent in England, 33% less than in Wales and 44% less than in Scotland.

That is the situation that I have inherited, but it is one that I am determined to improve. To that end, I have invested £22 million of additional funding in children's services over the CSR period, and that will support services that will promote modern, community-based interventions to avoid the need to place children in care or on the child protection register.

That additional investment is very welcome, but it is not enough to close the gap in funding for children's services between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. That is one reason why I fought so passionately for resources during the draft Budget debate and discussions.

Children need permanent and loving families, and for those who cannot experience that safely at home, it is essential that we can provide an alternative family environment. In Northern Ireland, around 2,400 children are being looked after by the five health and social care trusts. Around 280 of those children are in residential care in the 55 registered children's homes across Northern Ireland.

The outcomes for children in care are often much poorer in comparison with their peers. For example, more than half of care leavers had no qualifications, compared with only 3% of Northern Ireland's school-leavers; and more than a quarter of female former care leavers aged 19 in 2005-06 had at least one child — a figure that is more than seven times higher than that in the general population. Care leavers are more likely to experience homelessness, become involved with drugs and alcohol, or become victims of crime. They are also more likely to experience long-term health problems — including mental ill health — throughout their adult lives.

4.30 pm

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is funding a range of targeted initiatives to improve those outcomes. They include investment in schemes to help children in care to gain more qualifications and to improve their employment prospects. In addition, I am investing more funds in helping young care leavers to prepare for adulthood

and to enable more of them to continue living with foster carers. I want to ensure that those young people have the same opportunities to cope with living in the modern world as their peers do.

Early intervention through family support can help families to address issues so that, ultimately, a child may not need to go into care. That is why I am investing heavily in early-intervention family support services over the next three years.

Two thirds of children in care live with foster carers. Historically, however, there has been a shortage of foster carers, and that is why there has been a substantial drive to recruit more. The numbers have increased by about 300 over the past two and a half years, and we have plans to increase those numbers by a further 125 over the next 18 to 24 months. The aim is to ensure that children are matched more effectively with carers and, thus, ensure that the number of placement breakdowns is reduced. At the same time, financial support to foster care, training and, for example, out-of-hours advice and support have been increased significantly.

Residential care is the placement of first choice for some children, many of whom prefer not to live with a foster family. However, we also know that some children who live in residential care lived previously in fostering arrangements that broke down. The increases in the number of foster carers, combined with greater availability of family support, should reduce the demand for residential care places while, at the same time, offering more overall permanent choice for children in care.

In line with that direction, the Northern Trust produced a consultation document, 'Modernising Health and Social Services', in which it set out its proposals for the future of services for children. In that document, the trust proposed to increase the number of foster carers across the trust areas, as foster families can provide a more secure and stable family environment in the child's own area; reduce the number of residential places for children in children's homes; and, in tandem with that, the trust is developing a range of suitable alternative options, including salaried foster carers.

There are six statutory and one voluntary children's homes in the trust area. In order to deliver on its proposals, the trust is consulting on the future of two of its directly managed residential units for children — the eight-bed Princes Gardens in Larne and Cherry Lodge in Randalstown, which has three beds. That would reduce the number of residential places from 77 to 66. Both of those homes are in a poor state of repair; they are no longer fit for purpose and would require significant capital investment to bring them up to the standards that children in care deserve.

It has also been the trust's intention to recruit additional foster carers before the proposed closure of Princes Gardens by 31 March 2010. There is no way that the children who are in care will be left with nowhere to go, and no decisions will be made until there are suitable alternatives to residential care.

By investing in foster care, family support services and other initiatives, the trust believes that there will no longer be a need for Princes Gardens and Cherry Lodge. More important, the changes are about better providing better and more responsive services, which will fully meet the needs of children. Fostering works; foster care offers more flexibility and the potential to place more children closer to home so that they can maintain contact with their families and friends.

I have met groups, including the Fostering Network. I have spoken to foster carers and heard the experiences of children who have been fostered. Foster carers do a tremendous job. Some of them care for dozens of children, providing them with a warm and loving family environment. Many children who have been fostered remain close to their foster carers long after they have left to start their own lives.

However, there will always be a need for residential care. The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has a current and planned investment in those services over the next four years, which includes the replacement of Carnview Children's Home in Newtownabbey, and a new facility at Spring Farm in Antrim by March or April next year. The trust also intends to replace current facilities at Ballee Adolescent Unit in Ballymena with an intensive support unit that will cater for six young people between the ages of 12 and 18. I understand that my Department is awaiting an updated business case from the trust to enable those projects to be taken forward.

I am well aware that the range and quality of children's homes needs to be kept under constant review to ensure a diverse, high-quality range of provision that is fit for purpose. To that end, my Department is undertaking a regional review of residential childcare to look at the strategic direction of residential childcare services. The aim is to provide greater support for staff to meet the therapeutic needs of young people and greater support for young people themselves to give them greater opportunities, including education and employability.

The 'Care Matters in Northern Ireland: A Bridge to a Better Future' consultation, which was published in 2007, is aimed at helping and supporting those children on the edge of care, those who are in care, and those who are leaving care. I am hopeful that the outcome of that review will inform a strategy for improvement in residential childcare services that will

deliver high-quality standards of service and ensure positive outcomes for all our vulnerable children.

It must be remembered that before final decisions are made, all the trusts have to consult and, where necessary, carry out impact assessments, which will ensure that services provided will not be adversely affected. Final decisions will not be made until March 2009 and will be made in conjunction with my Department.

Children in care already face many disadvantages in their lives. We have the same responsibility to them as any other parent has to their children, which is to ensure that every one of those children has the opportunity to realise his or her full potential. That begins with the right to live in a safe and stable family environment.

Adjourned at 4.37 pm.

Published by TSO (The Stationery Office) and available from:

Online

www.tsoshop.co.uk

Mail, Telephone, Fax & E-mail

TSO

PO Box 29, Norwich, NR3 1GN

Telephone orders/General enquiries: 0870 600 5522

Fax orders: 0870 600 5533

E-mail: customer.services@tso.co.uk

Textphone 0870 240 3701

TSO Shops

16 Arthur Street, Belfast BT1 4GD

028 9023 8451 Fax 028 9023 5401

71 Lothian Road, Edinburgh EH3 9AZ

0870 606 5566 Fax 0870 606 5588

TSO@Blackwell and other Accredited Agents

ISSN 1463-7162

Daily Editions: Single copies £5, Annual subscriptions £325

Bound Volumes of Debates are issued periodically during the session: Single copies: £90

Printed in Northern Ireland by The Stationery Office Limited

© Copyright Northern Ireland Assembly Commission 2008

ISBN 978-0-339-50297-0

