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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 20 April 2009

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

### Cross-Sector Advisory Forum

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) that the First Minister wishes to make a statement regarding the cross-sector advisory forum.

**The First Minister (Mr P Robinson):** I wish to make a statement on the establishment of the cross-sector advisory forum, which is another stage in the Executive's efforts to limit the impact of the global economic downturn.

The terms of reference of the forum have been placed in the Assembly Library, and a full list of its participants is attached to the statement that has been provided to Members.

Though the impact and scale of the global economic downturn was foreseen by very few economists or Governments across the world just eighteen months ago, through our prioritisation of the economy in the Budget and the Programme for Government, we in the Executive have positioned ourselves well to seek to deal with the present difficulties. Furthermore, last December, we announced an additional series of measures and actions to help to alleviate hardship and assist the economy.

This statement is but a further demonstration of our determination to take whatever actions are open to us to combat the economic difficulties. It is also a recognition that no single group of people has all the answers, but, by harnessing the wisdom and knowledge of those most affected by the current economic situation, we can navigate our way through the present difficulties.

Members will be aware that, as the current economic crisis unfolded through the summer and into the winter months of 2008, the deputy First Minister and I held a series of meetings with banks, energy companies, energy regulators, the voluntary and community sector,

trade unions and business leaders. Our aim was to understand the local impact of the developing credit crunch and the escalation in basic commodity prices, such as food, oil and other energy sources. Then, as now, our overall aim was to do all that we can to mitigate the worst effects of the economic downturn on the people and businesses of Northern Ireland.

That goal is a massive but inescapable challenge. We have already had some success, which I attribute to a combination of factors. First, we have a devolved Administration that is fully focused on meeting local needs and solving local problems. We have an Executive that can and have used local resources and talents to bring real benefits to local people. Secondly, we have been able to manage our public expenditure to bring real financial relief to local people; for example, through the measures that we already introduced on water charges and domestic rates. Thirdly, we have listened to local people. The information, advice and ideas that the deputy First Minister and I have been able to gather from our meetings with local groups and people have been instrumental in allowing the Executive to craft our response to the crisis.

However, we believe that we must go further. To develop and build on that dialogue, we established an economic task force under the title of the cross-sector advisory forum. As Members will be aware, the first meeting of the forum was held in the Long Gallery at Stormont on 6 April 2009. At that inaugural meeting, the agenda was quite open. Our main aims were to introduce members; reach a shared understanding of our terms of reference; gather views on the enduring problems of the economic downturn; identify key strategies and actions for addressing those problems; and map out our forward work programme and work streams.

The main business of the first meeting was to hear members' views. A wide range of issues and proposals was discussed, and we will make the agreed minutes of the group publicly available. I can confirm that there was a general welcome to the formation of the group and a consensus that it will provide a useful vehicle through which to map out our best response to the current economic difficulties.

Perhaps understandably there was also some caution and concern that the forum should not simply turn into a talking shop. Let us make it clear: the deputy First Minister and I are determined that that should not be allowed to happen. We are interested in tangible outcomes, not merely words.

The forum comprises 30 members and has a current complement of five Ministers. To ensure that the future work programme is manageable and grounded in practical considerations, it was agreed that it would be useful to establish subgroups to take forward distinctive strands of work. The following seven broad areas have

been identified: infrastructure, planning and procurement; skills, training and education; hardship, poverty, debt and energy; jobs, innovation, tourism, manufacturing and employment; agriculture; banking, finance and lending; and housing and property. However, we are also keen to avoid duplication of other work, particularly that of the Economic Development Forum (EDF), and we are considering how best to take forward the work of the subgroups.

We intend to convene the next meeting of the full forum before the summer recess. However, before that, the subgroups will have met and agreed their individual terms of reference and the key issues that they intend to explore within the scope of their remits.

The cross-sector advisory forum represents a great opportunity to join up government, business, utilities, banks and community groups in the common cause of helping the people and businesses of Northern Ireland to come through the present economic turmoil. From here on, it is my firm intention that we will talk less about crisis and much more about recovery.

There was consensus at the first meeting of the forum about the need to bring forward practical measures to reinforce our social-welfare response to support people who are dealing with unemployment, debt and cost-of-living pressures. However, beyond that, we also need a clear resolve to grasp opportunities to support and sustain our indigenous talents and skills, which will be essential in allowing us to maximise and grow a diverse, vibrant and prosperous economy in the future. The forum discussion sent out a very clear signal that we need to prepare for the future by continuing to invest in infrastructure, training and skills. We need to support indigenous industry and business; we need to make the most of the advantages that we have in our natural and built environment; and we need to be agile and seize opportunities for tourism and retail that flow from the weakness of sterling.

We have encouraged the forum to challenge us, and I am confident that it has and will continue to do so. The group will provide a useful platform on which the various sectoral interests can talk, not only to government but to each other. It is our hope that the forum will become an effective vehicle for improving communication between the various interests on which our economy is built.

As the scale of the global economic challenge emerged, we did all that we could to ensure that we did not talk ourselves into a depression by talking down the economy and dampening business confidence, while always remaining realistic. This is now the time to recognise that Northern Ireland will emerge from the current economic problems and get back to growth and prosperity. The establishment of the cross-sector advisory forum underscores our conviction that we are

not helpless in the face of the economic challenges before us. It will not only be a critical friend to challenge us in what we are doing or failing to do but will work constructively with government to bring forward proposals for remedial actions. It will allow us to test that we are not only doing things right but are doing the right things to bring forward economic recovery.

As we navigate our way out of the present economic difficulties and chart our course for the future, we will, of course, keep the Assembly and the Committee informed of the work of the forum. I believe that its creation is a clear recognition of the value that we place on working together in partnership with stakeholders so that we can use devolution to help the entire community.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy):** I welcome the First Minister's statement. What role, if any, do the First Minister and deputy First Minister envisage for the proper scrutiny of the cross-sector advisory forum, and will the First Minister give an undertaking that my Committee will have a role in respect of the work of the forum?

I will now speak on a party political basis as a representative of the Ulster Unionist Party. The First Minister outlined the Executive members currently on the cross-sector advisory forum. It appears that the Ministers who attend the forum are members of the two largest parties in the Executive. Does the First Minister accept that it is important and desirable to ensure that the forum includes representatives from all the parties that form the Executive and not just the two largest parties?

Finally, given that the Chancellor has indicated that he will be looking for additional efficiency savings of up to £10 billion — that would have big implications for devolved Administrations, including Northern Ireland — has the First Minister any sense yet of whether it will or should be necessary for the current Programme for Government to be adjusted accordingly?

**The First Minister:** I thank the Chairman for his interest in the work of the cross-sector advisory forum. The minutes of the forum meeting will be made available to the Committee, and it can judge for itself what role it might wish to have in interrogating the deputy First Minister and me or any of the other Ministers. We will be happy to keep the Committee informed of the work of the forum and its subgroups.

The Member referred to the forum's current membership. At the last Executive meeting, the deputy First Minister and I made it clear to our Executive colleagues that we wanted them all to participate in the work of the forum. During the forum's first meeting, it became fairly clear that the Minister responsible for

skills would play an important part in the further considerations of the forum. However, during that meeting, there was a growing belief that the way to move forward is to create subgroups that can deal with various sectoral interests and bring reports to the whole forum. Again, that will give each Minister a role to play in relation to the various interests that exist, which might include skills and training issues, agriculture issues, or other departmental matters.

12.15 pm

The Chancellor will make a statement on Wednesday. Until he makes that statement and until we have assessed it by reading the small print, it is difficult for anybody to know exactly what impact it will have on Northern Ireland. However, if the Prime Minister intends to go back on his word that we will receive a CSR settlement that is entirely ours and will allow us, as a fledgling devolved Administration, to plan ahead for three years, or if he goes back on his indication that any savings that are made by this devolved Administration will stay here and he decides, based on the Barnett formula, to draw money away from Northern Ireland, we will be required to look at the Budget, and there will be Budget consequences. If, as the whispers from the Treasury suggest, about £150 million will come out of the Northern Ireland Budget, that will have an impact on spending.

**Mr Moutray:** I thank the First Minister for his statement. Does the First Minister care to comment on the SDLP's proposals for saving money?

**The First Minister:** I welcome the fact that the SDLP has taken an interest in efficiencies and matters relating to the Budget. It has always had the opportunity to bring forward proposals in the Executive, as it is part of the four-party mandatory coalition. The fact that the SDLP brought its proposals to the public's attention, as opposed to bringing them to the Executive, might indicate the mindset in that party — one might even think that there was an election in the offing.

It is important that all parties, not only the SDLP, look at how we can best use the resources that are available to us. To be frank, having looked at the SDLP's proposals, I see that a significant number of the better ones are proposals that my party has made in the past, proposals that have been considered by the Executive or proposals for capital spend that have been outlined already — in the Varney report, for instance.

Some of the SDLP's proposals are inaccurate and some are grossly exaggerated, but at least the SDLP is looking at efficiencies and recognising that, given that we have a finite Budget, choices must be made. The important feature of the SDLP's proposals is that that party recognised for the first time something that has been shown fairly consistently in Executive meetings,

which is that it is not simply a case of telling people what one would like to spend money on and outlining what additional funds could be used in various areas. The SDLP's paper is significant in that it identified that, if more money is to be spent in some areas in order to inflate the economy, the resources for that must be found elsewhere. The whole House needs to start examining its priorities.

Incidentally, contrary to what is said in the SDLP's statement, the SDLP did not vote against the Budget — the House accepted, and is tied to, the Budget unanimously. The Budget settlement is based on the priority in the Programme for Government to focus on the economy. Rightly and at the right time, we decided that, front and centre, the economy is our number one priority.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire.

I thank the First Minister for his statement and welcome the Executive's efforts to mitigate the worst effects of the economic downturn, particularly on local businesses. Procurement rules do not seem to be sufficiently friendly to local small and medium-sized enterprises. Could one of the subgroups look specifically at how to free up and create opportunities for local businesses to succeed in the tendering and procurement race?

**The First Minister:** That can neatly be dealt with by the subgroup concerned with jobs, employment and other similar issues. There will obviously be constraints on the number of people whom we can have on the cross-sector advisory forum. That number is currently 30, but a considerable number of other groups believe that it would be useful if they, too, had membership.

The subgroups are a good way for those additional people to be used in their sectoral interests. I am sure that, if there are sectoral interests in respect of small firms, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will be very happy to incorporate those into the terms of reference of the group that deals with employment issues, as, indeed, I am sure, will the Minister for Employment and Learning, who has a particular responsibility for skills and training issues.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I welcome the First Minister's statement, although I must correct him: he said that all parties voted for the Budget, when, at one stage, he accused the SDLP of almost bringing the House down by not supporting the Budget. Therefore, there are some inaccuracies in his comments.

In December, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister said that they would bring forward some proposals. However, we now have proposals for further meetings rather than for actions, which is very disappointing. During their recent visit to Brussels, did they reach any agreement on a relaxation of the state-aid

rules as a possible way of helping the business community? Will there be relaxation on any of the manoeuvres or help that may be given?

**The First Minister:** First, let me clear up the issue of the Budget. I have a copy of the Hansard report of the Budget debate, which I am happy to share with the SDLP if its own records are not complete. I introduced the Budget to the Assembly on 11 February 2008, and it is stated that the question was put and agreed to and that it was resolved with cross-community support that the Budget Bill be passed without any division. The SDLP should know the difference between the Programme for Government and the Budget; it voted against the Programme for Government, but it voted for the Budget.

It would have been very surprising if we had come out of the first meeting of the cross-sector advisory forum with the answers to our economic ills. I do not believe that anyone who was there expected actions to flow from the group's first get-together. In order for the deputy First Minister and me to make recommendations to colleagues and to ensure that those feed through the system, the subgroups have to give much consideration to issues, make proposals and recommendations and tender advice. There has not been action as a direct result of our first meeting other than to work out our work plan, but that will hardly have surprised anyone.

The deputy First Minister and I visited Brussels recently. We raised the matter of state aid in relation to specific projects whereby the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has been faced with state-aid issues, and we will continue to do that. During our visit, we were encouraged by the very keen interest that President Barroso and other commissioners have taken in Northern Ireland. Indeed, they were willing to put forward a task force to make recommendations on how best we might equip ourselves to compete for European funding, rather than continuing as a region that automatically receives such funding.

**Mr Speaker:** It is important that Members keep their questions related to the statement as far as possible; we have drifted slightly.

**Mrs Long:** I hope that Mr Speaker accepts that there must be clarity about the issues that have been raised. The Budget resolution, which is the key vote on how the money is to be disbursed, was opposed by a number of Members. The Budget Bill was not opposed, because that would have prevented the money from being drawn down. That clarification must be made for the record.

With respect to the cross-sector advisory forum, we welcome the statement that the First Minister has made. No one disagrees with his assertion that promoting the economy should be at the front and centre of what the Executive do and of the Programme for Government

and the Budget. However, once more, the devil is in the detail. Surely, in the changed context that we are now in, the how and the what of prioritisation must be reassessed. I want to know whether the Executive have had any discussion with the members of the forum with regard to whether the Programme for Government needs to be revisited. In the debate in the public domain, many senior businesspeople argue that it does, not to remove the economy from the top spot but to look at how economic progress can be achieved.

**The First Minister:** It is necessary for me to go back and try again. Members use terms without thinking exactly what they mean. The Programme for Government already has the economy of Northern Ireland as its top priority. There is no need to change the priorities in the Programme for Government. From time to time, there will be a need to finesse the Budget. When I was Finance Minister, I indicated during the Budget debate that we were quite happy to do that. Indeed, we do it four times a year in the monitoring rounds. In particular, last December, we recognised that we had to hold a special monitoring round to deal with the crisis. The Finance Minister is working on the statement that he will make in relation to the next monitoring round. From time to time the Budget will be redefined, as necessary. However, to do that, we must free up funding to make allocations. Such funding can come only from two sources: underspend within Departments on capital or resources or reprioritisation by the Executive.

Is there any Member who believes that there should be a reduction in the Department that his or her Minister heads? Not a single hand has gone up. Faced with that, there is a — *[Interruption]*. There is only one problem: the Alliance Party has no Minister. *[Laughter]*.

We cannot spend money that we have not got. Each Member must take a hard decision, but they cannot say that money must come out of Government Departments that their Ministers are not a part of. The situation requires the Government as a whole to deal with the issues, and it requires money to be freed up from all Government Departments.

**Mr Spratt:** The First Minister said that he was keen to avoid duplication of work with other forums that are already working in these areas. Will he indicate how such duplication will be avoided?

**The First Minister:** The particular purpose of the cross-sector advisory forum is to deal with the economic crisis that we face. The forum, therefore, has a lifespan sufficient to deal with the duration of the crisis. Its remit is to deal with the crisis itself. It is not a committee for the long haul. It is not intended to take over the role of any other committee, advisory group or body. It has a specific purpose and time reference.

On that basis, everyone recognises that their participation is based on that principle.

12.30 pm

**Mr M McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Could I welcome today's statement by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, could I also, on behalf of my party, very strongly endorse the comment contained within the statement that we are not helpless in the face of the economic challenges?

My question is, how will the cross-sector advisory group's work be taken forward? We know for how long the group will exist, but how often does the Minister envisage that it will meet?

**The First Minister:** I agree entirely with the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel — we are not helpless, and we must start, from this moment on, I think, to talk about recovery rather than crisis.

I have listened to some economists, some of whom are employed by banks, and they would depress Job if they were allowed to get on with it. It is vital that we start talking our economy up and recognise the great benefits that we have in Northern Ireland — even in a downturn, we have a low-cost economy in comparison with those of most other European countries. That should give us an advantage in getting out there and selling Northern Ireland to the business community.

At the meeting, a decision was made — I think by consensus — that the work of the cross-sector advisory forum should be taken forward through subgroups. The seven subgroups that I outlined in my statement will meet, will largely work up their own remits, and will bring forward recommendations to the parent body, if I may call it that. I think that more useful work on certain matters can be done in a sectoral format; for example, issues that relate to a particular subject matter can be dealt with, rather than through the very wide spread of matters that are discussed at the cross-sector advisory forum. The forum will get reports from each of those subgroups, and we hope that between now and the beginning of the summer, the subgroups will have met and they will have been able to report back to the forum.

**Mr I McCrea:** I welcome the First Minister's statement, as well as his previous comments on the need for recovery to bring us out of the current economic downturn. I welcome his commitment to that.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has just left; however, he asked about the implications of the UK Government's Budget. Can the First Minister give us an indication of his feelings about the Conservative Party's proposals and what impact those would have on spending in Northern Ireland?

**The First Minister:** The Conservatives have been quite open in saying that they do not believe that the Labour Government are taxing enough or cutting back on public expenditure enough. The answer is fairly clear and is on the public record: more tax and less public expenditure. That would mean shaving off a number of the programmes that exist, a reduction in the Health Service, and a reduction in our educational facilities. Those are the Tory Party's proposals and, of course, those of its colleagues in this House.

**Mr Elliott:** The First Minister highlighted in his statement a number of issues on which the forum wants to see movement and progress; for example, investment in infrastructure, training and skills, and support for local indigenous industry and businesses. All those are good intentions. However, can the First Minister outline when it will be practical to see any delivery of those issues on the ground?

**The First Minister:** I am not sure when the next questions for oral answer for the Minister for Employment and Learning will be. However, I am sure that the Member will want to ask his colleague when there will be action on the ground in the area of skills and training. I seem to have more confidence in the Minister than does the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I believe that the Minister is working hard, and he is actively bringing forward proposals to the Executive to deal with those issues. All Ministers are focused on dealing with the departmental responsibilities that they have in the context of the economic downturn. I have every confidence that the Minister for Employment and Learning will not let Mr Elliott down.

**Mr O'Loan:** I also welcome the statement and the creation of the advisory forum; I regret only that it was not established sooner. I note the First Minister's reference to many discussions with the banks, energy companies, energy regulators, the voluntary and community sector, trade unions and business leaders, and their formalisation in the advisory forum. I welcome what he said about meaningful discussions leading to action as a result of the meetings of the advisory forum.

Does the First Minister see the striving for consensus leading to action that will carry through into the political arena? I welcome his positive comments about the SDLP proposals. More broadly, will he assure the Assembly that he will take a positive and constructive approach and spirit to all the political parties' intellectual energies in addressing what he referred to as the current crisis and to the longer-term task of the Assembly to revitalise the economy?

**The First Minister:** It is worth pointing out that the cross-sector advisory forum was set up as a result of the discussions about which Mr O'Loan spoke. A number of people whom we met said that it would be

valuable to have such a group during the crisis. We took that on board and responded directly to it.

Mr O'Loan spoke about using the political intellect of other parties. The SDLP is an Executive party. Although some of its Members seem to forget that from time to time, no doubt, the Minister for Social Development reminds her party that it is represented on the Executive. At all times, the SDLP can bring proposals to, and assist, the Executive.

The deputy First Minister shares my views about wider consultation with political parties. When, as First Minister and deputy First Minister, we faced the challenge of the murders that were carried out by dissident republicans, we had a difficult decision to take on whether we should be in Northern Ireland or whether we should go to the United States to continue our business there. On that occasion, we held a meeting of the party leaders. The party leaders gave us full support; they were positive and wanted to ensure that we had a united front at such a time of crisis.

The deputy First Minister agrees that those kinds of meetings are valuable. Perhaps we can continue those meetings as we face another crisis — the financial crisis — and something useful can come out of them. It is not part of my make-up to want to disagree or to have people disagree with me. I want to find a wider consensus on how we move forward, if that can be found.

Proposals are put before the Executive at meeting after meeting after meeting, and the greater the consensus that we can get on those proposals, the better. If unanimity can be achieved when the proposals come to the House, Northern Ireland will be seen as being stronger in the wider community.

**Ms Anderson:** Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the First Minister's statement. How were members of the advisory forum chosen? Despite what the First Minister said about constraints on the number of members on the forum, will he and the deputy First Minister consider the inclusion of representatives from the social economy, not only in the sectoral format but in the plenary format? They would make a valuable contribution to such a forum.

**The First Minister:** Members were chosen by their own organisations, with the exception of four members, two of whom were recommended by the deputy First Minister and two of whom were recommended by me.

I do not have a hard-and-fast view on the size of the membership; it is only the consideration of dealing with large groups that places a constraint on its size. One of the subgroups that we have set up deals with issues of hardship, debt and community issues. There is no reason why OFMDFM cannot agree that any group that has an interest in those issues should be on

the subgroup without necessarily being a member of the broader forum.

However, there is a strong third sector in the forum, with representatives from community organisations and credit unions. Throughout the meeting, they spoke so strongly that it became clear that a subgroup had to be set up to deal with those general issues.

**Mr Hamilton:** The First Minister's statement referred to the prioritisation of the economy in the Budget and the Programme for Government. Will the First Minister tell the House what he thinks about proposals that some Members have made to re-prioritise and rewrite both documents because of the black hole that they believe exists in public finances?

**The First Minister:** I do not know anyone who has an IQ that strays into double figures who would suggest that a Programme for Government that prioritises the economy should be changed. The Executive have taken the correct decision. It is clear that that decision is the correct course along which to continue. The Budget — just like that of any other Government, anywhere in the world — can be changed as time goes on and as, on the one hand, pressures occur, and, on the other hand, there is underspend. That is what happens.

It is abundantly clear that there is no black hole in public finances. We managed to get through the previous financial year despite being told then that there was a black hole. When people talk about a "black hole", they are referring to pressures. All Governments face pressures. For example, the Executive will face considerable pressure if, on Wednesday 22 April 2009, the Chancellor takes a decision that will impact on Northern Ireland to the extent that I have outlined already. That does not mean that there is a black hole; it means that we must take decisions to deal with additional pressure.

Undoubtedly, the Minister of Finance and Personnel will come to the House and make a proposal on how to deal with that pressure. There is, however, no hole in our spending plans. When I was Minister of Finance and Personnel, I used to point out repeatedly that the level of underspend in Departments is always considerable, so much so that the Ulster Unionist Member who talked about a black hole is the same person who told us that we should increase our overcommitment in the Budget. Therefore, he wanted us to have more expenditure than we had revenue to pay for at a time when we had to try to reduce our overcommitment. Am I not glad that I did not listen to that voice at that time and that we continued to reduce our overcommitment? Otherwise, we would have been in a perilous position at present.

**Mr Shannon:** I thank the First Minister for his statement and his positive responses. He said that we

must not talk ourselves into a depression. Some Members in the Chamber are already of that mind. He also mentioned marking up the positives with practical and sustainable measures to help. Will he set out specifically the steps that the Executive have already taken to deal with the economic crisis?

**The First Minister:** It would take me quite a long time to do that in any detail. The House will be well aware that not only did the Executive put the economy at the centre of our priorities, but that since our first Budget, we have taken decisions to reduce household bills with regard to the amount of money that people must pay towards their regional rate. We froze the regional rate, not for one or two years, but for all three years of the Budget. We kept, in real terms — as inflation then was — the level of the business regional rate; we capped the industrial rate, and we were even prepared to take on Europe to ensure that.

In the wider economy, we brought forward proposals in the December monitoring round for a winter fuel payment to be made to people who are in greatest difficulty. Proposals were made for farming. We attempted to increase the amount of funding that is available for capital spend; last year, £1.4 billion was made available, and we expect that figure to increase during the current financial year. That gives an incentive to the construction industry, which, in my view, has been hit hardest by the economic downturn.

We took a decision to not proceed with water charging, which is something that would have hit everyone's pockets, including those of the most vulnerable in our community. The Executive also proposed to reduce — and eventually phase out — prescription costs. Moreover, DETI introduced a range of proposals on debt advisory services, and so on, all of which were designed to help during the economic crisis.

12.45 pm

I could outline a list three times that length — if I am encouraged to do so, I have it here. However, everybody knows that the Executive have been on the ball. That is not a party-political comment; all Ministers are striving, in their Departments, to make best use of available resources in order to assist during the economic downturn.

**Mr Weir:** I thank the First Minister for his statement. Indigenous businesses and, particularly, foreign direct investment (FDI) have a role to play during the economic recovery. Will the First Minister outline the potential for foreign investment in Northern Ireland during our present economic difficulties?

**The First Minister:** In times of economic hardship, companies often withdraw to their base. Those that want to expand often do so in their home territory rather than outside it. However, during our recent trip to the United States, the deputy First Minister and I

were pleased that Universal Studios proposes to use the Paint Hall in the Titanic Quarter to make a film. Another investment in Northern Ireland will be announced soon, and there is considerable hope of a significant jobs announcement before too long.

Therefore, even in the context of the perceived economic doom and gloom, people are bringing business to Northern Ireland. The cost of establishing business in the key areas of financial services, business services, IT and the creative industries is much cheaper in Northern Ireland than in other European capitals. That gives us an edge, and those high-value jobs are precisely what the economy needs, because they assist and boost our gross value added (GVA) and GDP. Those jobs are earmarked for growth in the economy. Even if we must endure a difficult period, we are developing the skills to do such jobs, and will be well placed, during the full recovery, to take advantage of it.

I believe that we met our job-creation targets for the financial year that has just ended. However, it will become increasingly difficult to do so again. We must accept that Invest Northern Ireland and DETI have a difficult job ahead of them, and the House should do everything it can to make Northern Ireland a more attractive place to come to, rather than playing things down and bemoaning the achievements that have been made.

**Dr Farry:** I thank the First Minister for his statement. Although there is a consensus in society that the Executive were right to prioritise the economy in the Programme for Government, does the First Minister recognise the range of views — including those of the business sector and economists — on the different ways to prioritise the economy? How will he respond if the forum requests that the Programme for Government be revised?

For example, in light of the First Minister's comment that foreign direct investment is not as viable as before, do resources need to be moved from selective financial assistance towards skills, particularly because we cannot always compete on low costs in the future? Furthermore, although I appreciate that the First Minister finds economists depressing, why are they not represented on the forum? Several skilled economists from the banks and universities could contribute. Although they might highlight some difficult truths, we sometimes need to hear those harsh realities.

**The First Minister:** All economists are not saying the same thing — they never do. One chooses an economist and receives the desired view.

The Member makes a valuable point about whether it is beneficial to have an economist, or economists, on the forum or giving advice to it. Of course, there are a number of economists within the officialdom of the Executive; we are not bereft of their advice.

I recognise that there are different ways to prioritise the economy within the general scope of growing the economy. That does not change the Programme for Government; it changes the actions that might be taken by Departments or on Budget spend. However, if one takes even the SDLP proposal — its Members will forgive me for mentioning it because they, at least, have a proposal to be discussed — even at its fullest, if one were to believe it as they have outlined it, that proposal would only mean a 1% change in the overall Budget for Northern Ireland. *[Interruption.]* I think there is some double-accounting on the part of the SDLP, which it needs to take into consideration.

There are valuable elements in the SDLP's overall proposal, but many of them are already taken into account by Government.

Most Government business has to continue. Every Department has fixed costs, about which it can do nothing. Therefore, what can be changed is very much on the periphery and is very much down to the drive and determination of Ministers in those areas. Although the Member said that there will be difficulties with foreign direct investment at present, that should not reduce our ambition to bring FDI to Northern Ireland. It should not reduce the enthusiasm of Invest Northern Ireland to go out and sell the Province as a place for people to come to. Far from reducing spend in those areas, we have to continue to pay the necessary price to ensure that Northern Ireland is before business leaders. The benefits of the decisions that they might make today, or tomorrow, may not be realised in Northern Ireland for years to come.

In relation to the Budget, we are happy to consider proposals. The economic crisis that we are facing is a standing item on the agenda of every Executive meeting. Therefore, any proposal brought forward by any Minister at any Executive meeting can be considered in relation to a re-prioritisation of spend.

**Mr Poots:** This morning, I note that one party has moved away from suggesting that the economy should not be a number one priority. I trust that other parties will join them. Do any of those who sit on the cross-sectoral group advise that the economy should not be the first priority?

**The First Minister:** It would be ludicrous for any of them to suggest, in the middle of an economic downturn, that we should do anything other than focus on the economy — it is essential that we do so. It is worth pointing out that this Assembly has a Budget to spend that is greater than that of any Assembly before. Not only were there natural increases, but two packages of funding supplemented the Budget — the last of which was to the value of £900 million. That is a massive boost, and one that would certainly not be offered today were one to go to the Chancellor.

The additional funding that is available has assisted us in the circumstances in which we are placed. We would not have been able to deal with issues such as water charging otherwise. If there are people in this House who believe that we need more money for public expenditure, and that we should increase rates and introduce water charging, let them stand up and say so.

It is no good people whinging in the background, saying that we need more money for this purpose or that purpose, unless they can identify where they will get the funding from. That is why I welcomed the SDLP's proposal. For the first time, in my view, the SDLP stopped simply asking for more money for this, that and the other, and identified the need to find those funds from elsewhere. I do not agree that all the money referred to in that proposal is available to be used for funding, but there is some measure of benefit in that debate taking place, and all the political parties putting forward their proposals. Let us see where that takes us.



## MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

### Social Security Agency — Strategic Business Review

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister for Social Development that she wishes to make a statement on the Social Security Agency's strategic business review.

**The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):** In the debate on social security offices on 9 March 2009, when the Social Security Agency's strategic business review proposals were out for public consultation, I undertook to return to the House quickly on the matter. I want Members to see that I have listened to their concerns and actively sought to address them. I also said on several occasions that I had serious concerns of my own. I am pleased to say that I am now in a position to outline the actions that I am minded to take in order to address the key concerns that were raised during the public consultation's first phase.

First, however, I wish to reiterate what I said previously about the strategic business review proposals. Despite being relatively modest in ambition in comparison with what has already been done in Great Britain, the review has been the subject of much misinformed commentary over the past few months. Whatever else Members may have heard, the review's proposals are designed to modernise and safeguard service delivery in order to benefit customers in the local office network. That is the straightforward and simple objective. It is about improving the service for people who rely on the Social Security Agency for support, not about cutting jobs. Indeed, only recently, I set about recruiting 150 additional staff, and if we need more, we shall recruit more.

Let me restate the facts: there will be no loss of front line services for any local office or town; no offices will close; and no staff will lose their jobs. I have said, however, that the agency cannot stand still. Change is essential in order to ensure the viability of the local office network in providing a quality service.

I will now deal with the concerns that have been raised, the first of which involves staff. Despite the fact that the proposals are focused on the service provided to customers and the fact that reasonable travel provisions are already enshrined in many staff members' employment contracts, Members highlighted to me a range of potential impacts on staff who will have to travel to new work locations. Members will recall that I made it clear that I would not accept solutions that would result in large numbers of staff — some on low pay, some with caring responsibilities — having to move lengthy distances to a new place of work. That remains the case.

I am aware that the prospect of relocation is a cause of great concern for some staff. Therefore, in the next phase of consultation, I will propose a range of measures that will go a long way to addressing staff concerns. In addition to those that are already proposed, there will be two new processing centres in Lurgan and Ballymena. That measure should deal with any staff concerns in those areas. I am still evaluating the best arrangements for the centres in Strabane and Kilkeel. Substantial retraining of staff will take place, thus enabling many employees to remain in their current location and handle other work. That will mean that many staff, previously earmarked to move to a new location under the original Social Security Agency proposals, will no longer have to move.

For those who will still be expected to move, the Social Security Agency will link smaller offices with specific processing centres in order to limit travelling distances.

That clustering is aimed at ensuring, where possible, that staff who need to move have a choice of processing locations. It will depend on, for example, their home address and which office they are nearest to.

*1.00 pm*

In the minority of cases in which staff will be required to change location, I have issued a directive that travel distance will be minimised. That will apply in all but the most exceptional cases. Therefore, fears about people being required to travel long distances to their work — for example, from Enniskillen to Derry — no longer have any foundation whatsoever.

In addition, I propose to put a mechanism in place whereby the personal circumstances of all individual staff can be considered before any final decisions are taken on work locations. My officials will engage with NIPSA on the arrangements to be adopted, and there will be time for everyone concerned to find the best solutions at local level.

All in all, those are important measures that address the concerns of staff, and I hope that Members will support them. The net result is that the vast majority of staff will now remain in their current town of employment, whereas under the original proposals, the majority of local office staff would have been required to change location.

I now address the specific concerns that Members raised with respect to the impact of the change on customers — let us not forget about the people who the agency and its staff are actually there to serve. Most of the concerns about customers related to the introduction of enhanced telephony arrangements for calls to the local office network.

I am pleased to inform the House that the first phase of consultation has identified only limited section 75

impacts, and those will be addressed thoroughly through the revised proposals. As I have always said, the new telephone and appointments arrangements will be in addition to the face-to-face options that exist today. Customers who need or prefer, for whatever reason, not to use the telephone will still be able to call into their local office as they have always done. The choice is theirs. However, overall customer accessibility will be improved greatly by enhanced telephony and appointments services.

I assure Members that customers who call into any local office will not then be directed to a telephone. However, the agency's local office network already receives two million calls every year from customers, so people will no doubt welcome an improvement in that service. Some Members have argued that the changes are untried and untested; however, they already operate successfully in other parts of the agency. Members who have called on me to abandon the entire strategic business review would, it seems, have me throw out the baby with the bath water.

Many Members also raised concerns with me that the proposals were not aligned to the Bain Review or would have an adverse impact on local councils. They are wrong. The Bain Review endorses an approach to public-sector jobs that favours dispersal to a number of key hub locations to ensure critical mass of staff. I have also looked at the new council structures that are set out under the review of public administration (RPA), which sees the current 26-district-council model replaced by an 11-council model. The changes that I outlined today ensure that the strategic business review proposals are future-proofed in every way. Each of the nominated first-tier locations will have a processing centre, and so will every one of the 11 RPA council areas.

I am not aware of any other public-sector organisation that has demonstrated such a strong fit with the Executive's strategic decisions, and I look forward to seeing others follow that lead.

The next concern is around the timing of any changes — an important consideration in the context of the economic downturn. I am only too aware of the changed economic circumstances that now prevail. I recognise the need to ensure that the Social Security Agency continues to provide a good service to an ever-growing number of customers in these difficult times.

I have previously said that I would not accept disproportionate organisational disruption at this time, and that remains the case. Therefore, I intend to proceed gradually; before committing to changes across the North, I need to be satisfied that those changes will deliver the service improvement that we all want to see.

First, I intend to pilot the proposed changes in the agency's north district, to come into effect in April

2010, coinciding with the completion of the major new jobs and benefits office that is due to open in Ballymena. That will allow all of the proposed changes to be carefully tested and evaluated in a controlled manner, with any lessons learned being applied to any further rollout. That means that informed decisions can be made on the detail of the proposed changes to other districts. I recognise that this is a complex issue, and it is important to get it right.

The strategic business review will end after the consultation in respect of the equality impact assessment and my revised proposals. Change will be taken forward as part of a new initiative called customer first, which, as its name suggests, will place the customer at the heart of our work to improve the delivery of benefits at a local level.

Although much of the consultation debate to date has focused on the concerns of staff — concerns that I have now clearly addressed — I will ensure that the new initiative puts the needs of the customer to the fore. I hope that the proposals that I have outlined will gain the support of the majority of Members in the House.

As Minister, I have listened carefully to the public consultation and to the points that have been raised in the House, and I will continue to listen. My officials are currently finalising the details around the actions that I have set out, and will shortly publish that detail in the equality impact assessment document for further consultation. I have directed my officials to make arrangements to brief members of the Social Development Committee on the detail of my proposals, and to commence further consultation with agency staff and their trade union representatives.

The measures that I have outlined positively address the main concerns raised in public consultation. They represent very substantial change from the original Social Security Agency proposals, while ensuring that we can still maintain and improve the quality of service provided by the agency.

I ask those who have insisted that I abandon the strategic business review in its entirety to think again. We are a Government, and it is our job to do what is best for our people while remaining sensitive to the impacts of our decisions. If devolution is to make a difference, we must not keep avoiding difficult or challenging decisions. We must not buckle or panic just because we may be subjected to vigorous lobbying by vested interests. We must listen, but we must also act.

At a time when much of the private sector, and indeed the voluntary and community sectors, is hanging on, trying to survive, we have a duty to make sure that the public sector continues to improve its performance.

That is what I am advancing today, and I commend the proposals to the House.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Simpson):** The Social Development Committee considered the strategic business review of the Social Security Agency in November 2008 and again in January 2009.

In order to inform its understanding, the Committee heard evidence from NIPSA, and it visited a jobs and benefits office and the Belfast benefit delivery centre. As the House is aware, the Committee has voiced considerable concerns about the strategic business review and the impact that it will have on customers and staff. The Committee will, therefore, consider the Minister's revised — and, I think, welcome — proposals on limiting relocation distances for staff, the addition of new processing centres, and extended pilot schemes that are based around the Ballymena jobs and benefits office.

Is the Minister in a position to be able to indicate to the House what impact her revised proposals will have on the relocation of back-office staff? What percentage of such staff will be subject to relocation, and can she give some details about limits on relocation distances?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development for his comments and question.

At all times during this process, I was very concerned about the distances that staff would have to travel, and I articulated those concerns on the Floor of this House and in other places.

Each member of staff in job processing who has to be relocated will have their case evaluated and assessed fully by senior Social Security Agency staff, and their particular concerns will be taken on board. Within their cluster of Social Security Agency or jobs and benefits offices, they will be able to select or elect the office nearest to them in which they wish to work.

Another important consideration is that, as well as announcing two further processing centres, I indicated that there will be substantial staff retraining, enabling many to stay in their current locations and to be able to handle other work. That will mean that many staff who were designated previously for a new location under the Social Security Agency proposals will no longer have to move. That will be a substantial increase on the previous number, as I advised the Member earlier this morning.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister has touched on this particular point in her answers to Mr Simpson. She talked about substantial staff retraining, which will enable many to stay in their current location and to be able to handle other work. Can the Minister give some indication as to what that

other work might be? For example, Newry has been designated to deal with income support, so I am just wondering what that other work is.

In addition, can the Minister confirm that the pilot scheme in the south district that was supposed to start in October 2009 has been put back until 2010? It appears that the north district — and Ballymena in particular — will be the location for the pilot scheme. Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister for Social Development:** The pilot scheme will be run in the north region, and its time limit has not yet been determined. However, its outworkings will be used to determine future arrangements. It is also worth pointing out that about 80% of staff will not be moving at all and that the vast majority of the other 20% will be moving fewer than 15 additional miles in any one direction.

1.15 pm

**Mr Armstrong:** I thank the Minister for her statement, and I welcome her commitment to keep the situation under review. However, given rising levels of unemployment, will the Minister commit to securing more front line services to benefits agencies across Northern Ireland? Has the Minister deployed the 150 additional staff to the areas of greatest need? There have been many job losses in Mid Ulster.

**The Minister for Social Development:** I thank Mr Armstrong for his question. As I have stated on various occasions in the House, we set about recruiting 150 additional staff in response to the economic downturn. An assessment was carried out of where the need lay for additional staff, taking into account the greatest levels of signing on and of benefit uptake, as one equates with the other. As I pointed out earlier, if we need more staff as a result of greater job losses in the wider private sector, we will recruit more staff.

**Mr McCarthy:** I thank the Minister for her statement. She said that she listened to many people, but, obviously, she did not listen to everyone. I am not a member of the Committee for Social Development, but, as I understand it, the Committee asked the Minister to hold fire with the business review, pending the outcome of the economic downturn that we are experiencing, which is resulting in so many more unfortunate people having to sign on. The Minister has not listened to the Committee, nor has she listened to other people who spoke about holding fire. That said, I welcome her statement that there will be no forced travel for the majority of staff —

**Mr Speaker:** I encourage the Member to come to his question.

**Mr McCarthy:** I am doing my best. It is important that there is no forced use of the telephone, because, as I said, many more people are now going into benefits

offices. It is easy for the Minister to say it in the House, but will she give an assurance that people will have access to face-to-face discussions when they go into benefits offices? Some people will be going to benefits offices for the first time who do not want to be there, but they have to be there and they need to be able to talk to people face to face to get through the process.

**The Minister for Social Development:** I think that Members sometimes do not listen to what we say in the House. For the benefit of Mr McCarthy and other Members, I will say again that there will be a full opportunity for front line services and for potential claimants and existing claimants to have face-to-face contact with an employee of the Social Security Agency.

Telephony and appointments services are additional, but I remind Members that the appointments system is very beneficial. I do not want claimants who have difficulties having to go into a social security office or a jobs and benefits office and join a long queue. It does not happen in doctors' surgeries, in solicitors' offices, or in other places where people procure professional services. It may happen in other offices, but it will not happen in the Social Security Agency. Both types of services will be available to potential claimants. We all know that they suffer from a great deal of stress, they are in receipt of low incomes, and they need to provide for their loved ones, their children and their families. I have a great deal of concern for those people.

**Mr Craig:** I thank the Minister for her statement and welcome her announcement about trying to look after staff who do not want to move from their existing positions. Will she outline what will happen if an individual's personal circumstances prevent them from moving from their job location?

More importantly, I see that the Department will be carrying out a pilot scheme in the agency's north district. For how long will that pilot scheme take place, and can it be over a protracted period, allowing all of the issues to be ironed out before Province-wide implementation takes place?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I thank Mr Craig for his question, and I will answer the second part first. The pilot scheme will be operational from April 2010 in the north district, and no time limit has been set for how long it will run.

As regards Mr Craig's original question: in my statement, and in my answer to Mr Simpson, I have said that I fully understand and acknowledge staff concerns on travel and the personal circumstances that many staff — particularly women — are faced with in relation to being in receipt of low income and having caring responsibilities. Each member of staff will have an opportunity to meet with a senior member of staff and have their particular circumstances fully evaluated

and assessed. Furthermore, if staff are in a cluster arrangement, they will be able to elect, or select, the location nearest to them where they can work. Moreover, the Department is providing training and retraining for staff in certain benefit disciplines, which will ensure that many who were supposed to have had to travel — or leave their original locations — will now remain there, as retraining will be provided on the spot.

**Mr F McCann:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I also thank the Minister for her statement. In her statement, the Minister said:

“we must not buckle or panic just because we may be subjected to vigorous lobbying by vested interests.”

Does the Minister agree that those vested interests include staff, who are concerned about whether they will have a job at the end of the process, and the trade unions, who seriously dispute her Department's assertion that job losses will not be a part of the process? Will the Minister tell the House whether any jobs will go as part of the strategic business review? Her Department is proactively recruiting in respect of hundreds of outstanding vacancies across the agency. Will the Minister tell the House whether those vacancies will disappear as a result of this process?

**The Minister for Social Development:** Again, I have to question whether Members are listening: but, of course, Mr McCann entered in the middle of my statement —

**Mr A Maginness:** Mr McCann does not listen.  
[Laughter.]

**The Minister for Social Development:** I reiterate for the benefit of Mr McCann and Members that there will be no job losses and no office closures. The Department will continue to provide the services it has provided up to now. That is because our primary, and most important, concern is the delivery of services to our current and future customers.

**Mr F McCann:** The Minister has answered only one part of my question. I also asked about the current vacancies and whether her Department is proactively.  
— [Interruption.]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. As I have said in the House continually, I am not going to sit in judgement on whether a Minister answers, or does not answer, a question.

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** I hope that I have more luck than the previous Member. I thank the Minister for her statement today. As the Minister knows from discussions we have had and debates in the House, a decision to close any social security office in the Province would be regarded very dimly in any constituency in which it occurs. Indeed, in my own constituency it would be viewed as being against the spirit of the Bain Report, if not against the letter of the law. Furthermore, it would

be viewed as gross bad faith, not only by local employees, but by the Minister's constituency party there, and I am sure she would accept that.

Will the Minister put some flesh on the bones of her statement in which she has indicated that two new processing centres will be opened — one in Lurgan, and one in Ballymena in my own constituency? Will the Minister indicate how many new jobs will actually be located in my constituency and how many of them will be on a part-time and full-time basis?

As the Minister already indicated in other answers, the creation of part-time jobs is very beneficial for women employees, in particular, in the Civil Service. The creation of full-time jobs would help to address the imbalance in that workforce where, believe it or not, the most discriminated section in the community as regards Civil Service jobs at that level are Protestant male workers. How does the Minister intend to address that imbalance with this employment opportunity?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I thank Mr Paisley Jnr for his statement.

The Department assessed and evaluated responses to the consultation process, which informed the possible outcome of the equality impact assessment. As a result of the economic downturn, we decided to recruit 150 additional Social Security Agency staff across the Northern Ireland network to reflect the areas of most acute need. If more staff are required, they will be recruited in offices in which there is a particular need, because the most important priority is to ensure, and maintain, the delivery of a first-class service to those most in need.

If the Member permits, I will write to him in respect of the actual numbers.

**Mr Beggs:** The Minister is aware from the consultation of concern about the relocation of jobs from offices in Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey. She mentioned clustering — will the Minister outline in more detail how that will affect existing employees in Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey who, potentially, face moving? Will those jobs move gradually, or ultimately migrate, to Ballymena?

I am also interested in the answer to the previous question because in my East Antrim constituency, which has some of the lowest levels of Civil Service employment, there is great concern that jobs are migrating to Belfast or Ballymena.

**The Minister for Social Development:** Mr Beggs referred to Newtownabbey, which is not part of the north region. No decisions will be taken in respect of Newtownabbey until we determine the outcome of the pilot exercise in the north area.

**Mr Beggs:** What about Larne and Carrickfergus?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I was not aware that Larne and Carrickfergus were part of the Member's question. However, if they were, Larne and Carrickfergus are also part of the greater Belfast area, and they will be considered further down the line. No decision will be taken about them until the outcome of the pilot is known, the assessment is determined and the benefits, if any, are evaluated.

**Mr A Maginness:** I thank the Minister for her statement, which represents good news for staff and customers. In fact, it is like a belated Easter egg for all of us in the Chamber.

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** It is sent in the spirit of recovery.

**Mr A Maginness:** Oh, right. However, I was surprised by Mr McCann's reaction. He reminded me of a spoilt child who received his Easter egg, but did not like the colour of its wrapping paper.

In any event, this is the difference between direct rule and devolution. Remember that this strategic business plan was conceived under direct rule, is being delivered in devolution and has been changed substantially, which is to be welcomed. Will the Minister reassure the House and the public — amid wild speculation and rumours of up to 500 job losses — that jobs will not be lost but increased?

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** She was not listening — get out the Q-tips. *[Laughter.]*

1.30 pm

**The Minister for Social Development:** I agree with Mr Maginness. *[Interruption.]* I have to say that I did not get an Easter egg, but that is neither here nor there. *[Laughter.]*

There was indeed talk of job losses, much of which was ill-informed. Some of it was ill-intentioned and scaremongering. No loss of employment will result from the strategic business review. No jobs will be lost, and no offices will close. The review was never about job reductions: it was always about service improvement. The strategic business review affects only the local office network, which makes up about one quarter of the SSA workforce. It is all about improving services for the people who use them. Therefore, we are not planning any redundancies or job losses as a result of the strategic business review. However, the agency will, of course, have to meet overall efficiency targets that are set by the Executive.

**Mr Gardiner:** I thank the Minister for her statement. Can she guarantee that her proposals will be in operation by 2011, when the 26 councils will be reduced to 11?

**The Minister for Social Development:** There have been some very interesting questions today. As part of my response to the economic downturn and reflecting

its pernicious impact, I decided that the proposals — it must be remembered that they are still proposals — will be piloted in the north district, which, by and large, covers the northern part of Northern Ireland.

No date has been given for the length of time that that pilot scheme will run, so it could take some considerable time. However, we want to assess the benefits of that pilot scheme to evaluate whether it should be rolled out across the rest of Northern Ireland. I cannot guarantee that the proposals will be implemented in time for the rest of the review of public administration, but I can tell the Member that there will be a processing centre in every one of the new council areas and probably more than one in some.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I welcome the statement from the Minister, particularly the key “customer first” theme. That important theme ran through representations that I received from staff representatives in my Foyle constituency, particularly in relation to the Foyle office and services in the west and the south-west. I am sure that the Minister’s reassuring and constructive statement will be well received there.

Will the Minister reiterate that members of staff will not be expected to drive long distances between Omagh, Enniskillen and Derry, as that would have a detrimental impact on caring duties, the environment and congestion? Will she assure us that the location of centralised services will be taken into account in relation to future trends in benefit entitlements, so that staff in one location will not be made redundant while the number of staff in another location is being significantly increased?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I thank Mr Ramsey for his question. He asked about travel arrangements. On several occasions, I expressed my particular concern that staff should not be required to travel long distances to a new place of work. I know that Pat Ramsey was very concerned about that matter, particularly as it may affect people in Derry and in the west. His concerns are well understood, and I am pleased to tell him that I listened to the very strong case that he made. I assure him that no member of staff will be required to travel distances such as the distance from Enniskillen to Derry, Derry to Omagh, or vice versa. I think that Members will realise that I have listened to all concerns and have addressed them with a measure of generosity.

Mr Pat Ramsey also raised the issue of redundancies and staff losses. There will not be any redundancies or staff losses. I also assure the House that those who need face-to-face service at a local social security office will continue to receive it in the future.

Many of the jobs are in and many more will be amalgamated into benefits offices, so I will continue to work in close partnership with the Minister for

Employment and Learning to deliver the best possible service and outcomes for customers, who include some of the most disadvantaged and deprived people in Northern Ireland.

**Mrs M Bradley:** I welcome the Minister’s answer on customers. She has dealt with that matter very well. How useful was the public consultation exercise in helping the Minister to modify the previous proposals for social security arrangements?

**The Minister for Social Development:** The public consultation exercise was useful, because it reflected and confirmed my concerns about aspects of the original proposals, particularly on staff relocation and upheaval. Furthermore, it has allowed me to focus on those matters and to devise appropriate solutions.

Mrs Bradley will be aware that some Members wanted me to abandon the entire public consultation exercise, even when we were halfway through it. Those Members may not have wanted me to take on board what the public were saying. I hope that they now realise that it was absolutely right to allow the people to have their say, because what they said has been clearly reflected in the revised proposals.

**Mr O’Loan:** We are hearing about improvements to services and about a strategic vision for the implementation of the Bain Report’s recommendations for the location of public-sector jobs. Moreover, the Minister is sensitive to the genuine concerns that staff expressed. I welcome Ballymena’s designation as a processing centre, and I encourage everyone in the northern district to co-operate in the pilot scheme. What effect does the Minister envisage this series of proposals having on morale in the service?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I hope that the proposals will significantly enhance staff morale. I make no secret of the fact that I have met many members of staff throughout the Social Security Agency network. I listened to their concerns, and, in order to reflect the needs of staff members, particularly those who were concerned about having to travel long distances, the impact of the economic downturn, the need for retraining and the heavy workloads with which they must deal as a consequence of that training, I have substantially changed the proposals that were originally prescribed under the strategic business review. I hope that my proposals will go a considerable way to enhancing staff morale and that all members of staff will support and endorse them.

The bottom line is that devolution is making a difference, and I gave an undertaking to listen to staff and customer concerns. Remember that there are two players about whom we must be concerned in this relationship: we must ensure that members of staff enjoy the best possible circumstances in which to work and that existing, and potential, customers have easy

access to the best possible service, given that they are especially beleaguered at this time.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I, too, welcome the Minister's statement, particularly the news that a new processing centre will be based in Lurgan. Will the Minister be reviewing telephone call-handling arrangements, because sometimes it takes a long time for customers to get through? If there is to be increased telephone usage, customers' waiting times must be minimised by ensuring that enough members of staff are on hand to deal with the call-handling element of the business.

**The Minister for Social Development:** I take on board Mrs Kelly's comments. It is hoped that we will have sufficient staff to deal with all areas of the business, particularly those in which customers are feeling the greatest pinch. That is important.

The telephony service and the appointment system are additional provisions to the existing front line service, which will continue. Much misinformation has been flapping around about the telephony service, and, considering some of the quarters from which that misinformation is coming, it is, perhaps, ill-intentioned. However, the enhanced telephony service and appointment system will be additional to the existing options. Therefore, I assure my colleague Mrs Kelly that it will still be possible for people to go into a social security office without an appointment and be seen by a member of staff. She can take comfort and confidence from the fact that staff who are dealing with the employment support allowance are receiving many telephone calls — more calls, in fact, than was projected and anticipated. As a consequence of that, I was able to recruit more staff and invest more staff resources in that area to deal with that heavy and enhanced workload. Everything will be addressed in the most appropriate and sensitive manner.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Childcare Strategy

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech.

**Ms J McCann:** I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the lack of availability of affordable, quality childcare; and calls on the Executive to implement a coherent and properly resourced childcare strategy.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to move the motion. Sinn Féin will support the amendment, because its insertion will not change the thrust of the motion.

Childcare is an important issue for everyone in society, particularly for families. Ireland still trails other EU countries in the accessibility and affordability of childcare. There is a lack of flexible and age-appropriate childcare provision here. Despite the fact that the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people prioritised childcare, the numbers of day-care nursery places and places with registered childminders have fallen since 2002.

Although some Departments have funded childcare provision, a major deficit remains. Currently, there is only one place per 6·4 children under the age of four, and there are fewer than 40,000 registered childcare places for the 310,000 children under 12 years of age. Therefore, spaces for older children — particularly those over 10 years of age — and children with disabilities are still limited.

The provision of flexible, quality and affordable childcare that meets the needs of all children and parents is the responsibility of a number of Departments, which is why we tabled the motion. A cross-departmental approach to the issue, through the Executive, is essential to ensure that a properly resourced childcare strategy is developed and implemented. Such a strategy would have a crucial role to play in ensuring that flexible, high-quality, affordable and accessible childcare provision exists for all families who wish, or need, to avail themselves of it.

Childcare is a critical issue for women's equality, and the lack of adequate childcare places in the North of Ireland is a major barrier for women who wish to return to education or employment. Women are still viewed as the main carers in society, and that remains

the case with caring for children. Better childcare provision will enable more women to access education, training and paid employment, which would help the economy and provide women with better choices in all aspects of their life.

That choice is also important for women who choose to stay at home with their children, because they must also have access to home-based and group support services. The role and contribution of the people who offer those services needs to be recognised, as does the role of parents who choose to stay at home with their children.

Better childcare provision clearly has a central role to play in helping to reduce child poverty, given that a lack of access to affordable childcare is one of the most significant barriers to securing employment for people from low-income families or families who are living in poverty. Improving childcare provision would also enable parents who rely on benefits, for instance, to progress to better employment and, therefore, get out of the poverty trap.

1.45 pm

Recent legislation on welfare reform will see the benefit that is provided to parents — including lone parents — change to jobseeker's allowance when their child turns 12 years old. However, the absence of a statutory duty on local authorities here to service the demand for childcare facilities means that it will be difficult for parents to have access to childcare facilities while they are at work, and that is a particular problem for women.

Childcare costs in Ireland are among the highest in Europe, and parents here receive the lowest subsidies towards meeting those costs. Some European countries subsidise childcare costs by up to 75%, whereas, in the North of Ireland, the figure is still only 25%.

The tax credit system that allows relatives to become childminders is also important. In 2002, a significant shortfall in childcare places in the North of Ireland was reported, and almost two thirds of unemployed mothers said that a lack of adequate childcare deterred them from seeking work or constrained them in their choice of job.

The lack of local community-based childcare places has had an impact on families living in rural communities and low-income families in particular, because public transport might not be available to bring children to and from crèches and childminders. Therefore, some such families will be unable to access those facilities.

A recent review by a rural childcare group recommended a number of specific targets aimed at improving childcare provision in rural areas. It is important that those targets are included in any

strategy. It is also important that parents can choose between different types of childcare provision, because some people prefer crèche facilities or after-school groups while others prefer childminders.

It was reported that a 20% increase in the number of childminders would be needed if the current demand were to be met — that was reported in 2002. Unfortunately, there has actually been a decrease in the number of childminders rather than an increase, which has resulted in many parents having to employ relatives to care for their children. Unfortunately, as I pointed out earlier, relatives who act as childminders do not have access to the childcare element of the tax credit system. That is a further financial burden for people who need childcare facilities, because they have to pay for it out of their own pockets instead of being able to claim for it through the tax credit system.

A change to that system would result in more people seeing childcare as a clearly defined career that could be developed and coming forward to become registered childminders. It would ensure also that quality services are provided for children — a suitably qualified workforce is always essential for that.

In England, a transformation fund is available that provides people working in childcare with opportunities, so that a more professional early-years workforce can be established. I hope that implementing such a fund here is something that will be considered.

Differing needs exist, but they are all central to any strategy on childcare provision. As I said, children with disabilities have particular needs, as do lone parents or groups of people who are socially excluded. Childcare provision needs to be flexible and reflect the differing needs of parents, including those who do shift work or work at weekends.

There is a lack of information on what kinds of childcare facilities are available. Some women's organisations believe that it would be extremely helpful for some sort of directory to be developed providing details on the types of facilities available and the localities in which they are based.

As I said in my opening remarks, although some Departments fund childcare spaces, more needs to be done. I hope that the Assembly will support the motion, which calls on the Executive to implement a coherent and properly resourced childcare strategy. Such a strategy will ensure the availability of affordable, quality and flexible childcare provision for children and parents who need it. Go raibh maith agat

**Ms Purvis:** I beg to move the following amendment: After the first "childcare" insert

"and the lack of provision for people who require flexible arrangements to allow them to avail of working opportunities in the evenings, overnight and at weekends, particularly in the current economic climate"



I thank Ms McCann for clarifying that the amendment is an insertion to the motion and that none of the original motion will be deleted should the amendment be made. I thank also those who tabled the motion — it is an excellent motion as it relates to an important topic and is very timely.

From the outset of the debate, we need to be honest about the state of childcare services in Northern Ireland. The problems that we face are fundamental. Not only is our childcare provision “woefully inadequate”, according to a report on an inquiry into child poverty that was published by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, but, as Ms McCann outlined, the number of childcare places is actually falling.

Additionally, we appear to have no leadership on the issue. There is some dispute as to who has responsibility for this complex but critical area, and neither decision nor strategy is coming forward. That is the situation, despite the stated commitment to an anti-poverty agenda. We need a cross-departmental strategy.

In the meantime, we are struggling with outdated views on who needs childcare, why they need it, and what types of services are needed. My amendment addresses directly one area of our childcare provision that needs immediate attention: flexibility. The childcare services that are on offer here are designed largely to accommodate a nine-to-five working day. However, the traditional Monday-to-Friday eight-hour day is long gone, and for many families it never really existed. Parents are working evenings and weekends and often through the night. Many parents have to respond quickly to unforeseen developments at work or to unscheduled shift changes, and they need to make last-minute arrangements to care for their children. Even those who work regular hours often struggle to find adequate care for children during the school holidays. The lack of flexible childcare and the expense of childcare to cover unsocial hours — for those who can find it — are serious problems for parents who are struggling to respond to the demands of the current work environment and to the needs of their families.

In addition to flexibility, there are other serious gaps in our childcare services. If we were looking for a road map on this issue, we would find that the Shankill Women's Centre delivered one. Three years ago, the centre gathered together local women for a series of workshops to discuss education, employment, health and childcare. Even though childcare was a separate topic in those discussions, it dominated every other issue. The women of the Shankill area felt that there was no point in talking about opportunities in employment, training, education or health if childcare were not addressed first.

I have no doubt that the situation is the same in other areas such as the Falls, Whiterock and Ballymacarrett that are struggling with high levels of deprivation. The women of the Shankill called for five standards in childcare to be met. Childcare had to be affordable, of a high quality, flexible, accessible, and appropriate to need and age.

In 1999, the Department of Health determined that a family with two children that is on an average income could pay out as much as one third of that income on childcare when the children were under five years of age. Even with the Labour Government's new financial support for those families, childcare takes a significant bite out of the monthly budget.

The absence of affordable childcare is one of the most significant barriers to employment, education and training for households that are struggling financially. Many parents who would be inclined to move into paid work are not doing so because the combination of lower wages and higher childcare costs in Northern Ireland means that it does not make financial sense. It also means that, too often, families have to select childcare based on what they can afford, rather than on the environment in which they know that their child would thrive.

Research has shown that the quality of childcare services can vary significantly and that cost is not always connected directly to quality. People do not always get a better service for a higher price. Even though minding children — especially small children — is undoubtedly the hardest and most important work that there is, the wages in that field tend to be low, and the job, as a profession, is undervalued.

We need national standards for childcare and a transformation fund that will allow childcare workers to enhance and increase their professional skills and move along a clearly defined and well-rewarded career path. Such a fund could also allow childcare providers to upgrade their physical environment, programmes and services.

As has been noted, any need for childcare facilities outside the hours of 7.30 am to 6.00 pm is considered irregular. It is difficult to find adequate childcare outside those hours, and, if people can find it, they will pay a premium for it. We need to increase financial support for parents who work outside those hours. That would allow them to afford that care, and it would create incentives for nurseries and childminders to be available during what are seen as unsocial hours.

There have been proposals to amend the tax credits system to allow parents to claim childcare credits for a family member, particularly grandparents, to mind their children. That would provide immediate flexibility for a number of families, provide a small income for grandparents living on increasingly inadequate

pensions, and ideally, offer a caring and familiar environment for children. However, we need to see that proposal materialise.

Childcare services need to be local, and parents need to be able to get to them easily. I challenge any Member who has not already done so to take on the Olympic sport of trying to get on and off a bus in the rain with a toddler, an infant, a pram, and the shopping. If parents cannot get to services easily and if it takes too long to get there, the value of the services quickly diminishes.

A number of women's centres and community centres offer excellent childcare services for their surrounding areas, despite struggling with uncertainties with funding. We need to offer those programmes assured long-term funding and introduce capital grants for the development of childcare facilities in areas where there is a demonstrated need.

There is very little childcare provision in Northern Ireland for disabled children. In addition, older children are being left out: there are few age-appropriate services for children between eight and 14. That may reach crisis point in a few years if it is not addressed, when welfare reforms move lone parents from income support to jobseeker's allowance. The stated goal of those reforms is to move more lone parents into paid employment and move children out of poverty. However, if childcare is not dealt with, instead of helping those parents to move on and up, we will simply pull away a safety net, and there is a real risk that we will make their situation worse rather than better. The Childcare Act 2006 requires local authorities in England and Wales to meet the new demands for childcare that will be created by welfare reforms, and the Executive need to take immediate action to ensure that the same happens in Northern Ireland.

The gaps in childcare provision that the women of the Shankill identified are real barriers to parents, especially to women, re-entering the workforce. It is not only employment that is hampered by insufficient childcare services. All the programmes that Ministers have proudly outlined in the Chamber over the past few weeks to improve education, skills training, health and well-being and community services will be undersubscribed by parents of young children — by women in particular — if the need for affordable childcare is not addressed.

We have marginalised childcare because we have failed to appreciate its full impact on our society and our economy. We have approached it as an optional policy issue, mistakenly assuming that it is about accommodating the wishes of women who choose to be in paid employment rather than stay at home with their children. However, for the majority of families in need of childcare it is not a matter of choice. Those

parents need quality, accessible, affordable childcare, not because they would like to work but because they have to work. For many households with two wage earners, the second income makes all the difference. At best, it generates some flexibility in their finances, but for many families the second wage quite simply keeps them out of financial dire straits or even poverty.

For lone parents, the lack of affordable childcare is the primary barrier to employment. There are nearly 92,000 lone parents in Northern Ireland, caring for 150,000 children. Eighty-seven per cent of those families are headed by a mother, and 60% of lone parents are in debt. We need to stop treating childcare and the quality and accessibility of childcare services as though they were luxuries to accommodate a lifestyle option. They are matters of necessity and, in many cases, survival.

Let us also continue to dismantle the myths that childcare is a women's issue or that every family has a granny who is ready and able to step in and mind children while their parents are at work. Those are outdated and misguided perspectives that create hurdles to delivering quality childcare.

The dearth of appropriate childcare seriously inhibits skills development, further education, innovation and entrepreneurship by and for women. We are in a recession in which people are carrying vast amounts of personal debt, and impeding the ability of parents, particularly women, to maximise their earnings will only slow our recovery. Insufficient childcare support is inhibiting business growth and innovation, and we are fighting for economic recovery with one hand tied behind our back.

My amendment is meant to help to expand the picture of childcare —

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Member to bring her remarks to a close.

**Ms Purvis:** — and I hope that my colleagues in the Chamber can support it and that we can work with the Executive to deliver the proposals.

**Mr Kennedy:** I speak on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party; my colleagues and I are happy to support both the motion and the amendment. Childcare is a matter that every parent has to deal with at some stage. Yet, no matter how desperate their need for childcare, they will always be most concerned that the childcare is good and that they are leaving their children with people who are properly trained and in an environment that is safe and secure.

It is vital that in seeking to improve its affordability and accessibility, we do not lose sight of the need for childcare to be exemplary. I am glad that the motion makes that point.

2.00 pm

The quality of childcare increased in the first six years after the publication in 1999 of 'Children First — A Policy Statement', but we must ensure that standards do not slip. The motion's call for the Executive to provide a childcare strategy is depressingly familiar. The motion's origins lie in last summer's OFMDFM report on child poverty. That report followed the 2005 review of 'Children First', which claimed to represent the beginnings of a strategy when it was first published in 1999. Unfortunately, such a strategy has still not been published.

In the report, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister called on the Department to increase the level of good-quality, affordable childcare; to improve the level of appropriate, affordable childcare for children who are less able; to improve access to affordable childcare in rural areas; to reduce the length of time that it takes to become registered as a childminder; to reverse the decline in registered childminders that some parts of Northern Ireland are experiencing; and to enhance the training and development of staff who work in early-years settings. All those areas are definite priorities as we look at childcare, and if implemented, they will go a long way to solving many of our society's varied problems.

Childcare can play a large role in early-years development. Adequate early-years provision improves the academic attainment of children in schooling. Affordable childcare, therefore, plays a vital role in allowing parents — particularly single parents — to get back into work if they wish to do so. It also helps by reducing spend on benefits and by adding to the economy's productivity. Adequate childcare provision is a necessity for a society that wishes to be as productive and as driven by equality of opportunity as it possibly can be.

As we have done with so many other issues, we have consulted and reported on the issue of childcare almost to death over the past 10 years. The motion and the amendment are reasonable, and what is called for is badly needed. However, it is not a new call for action, because we have known for the past decade that action is needed. The issue highlights that devolution is best for Northern Ireland and can work for the people of Northern Ireland. It puts local Ministers, who have the necessary time and resources, in charge of the matter.

The Committee's view, and my own, is that the time for studies, reports and consultations is over. That has been done, and endless pages of analysis and policy already exist. It is now well beyond the time for the Executive not to be doing what they were elected to do, and what they promised to do. They must make a difference for the people of Northern Ireland by providing adequate and proper childcare.

**Mr Shannon:** I support the motion and thank the Members who brought it to the Chamber. I shall focus on the introduction to the Northern Ireland Childminding Association's (NICMA) briefing paper, 'Childminder Start-Up Package', which states:

"The right for families to have access to affordable, quality childcare is fundamental to Northern Ireland's future economic prosperity, to tackling child poverty, and to achieving the best possible outcomes for all children."

I wholeheartedly agree with that statement, as I am sure do many other Members.

Long gone are the days when the majority of families could get by on one wage, with many mums staying at home to look after the children. Most working mothers in the Province do so out of necessity rather than desire. In most families, both partners must work in order to pay the mortgage. Maternity leave entitles mothers to a few months' pay, but what happens after that? The bills do not take a break simply because a mother has had a child. Indeed, as the proud grandfather of a beautiful baby girl, I know that the bills increase, and I am not just referring to the Northern Ireland football kit that we bought for her when she was born.

Whor daes this lae maist mithers? Haein tae gaun bak tae wark is tha ansur. Whau dae ye lae yeer wane wi? Thee ser sum femelies, which er extended, an fowk caun rely oan freens tae mien the wane. This is a guid blessin; hooaniver, a' muckle nummer o' haems daenae hae this oapshin, an tha next best thing is tae pae fer a regestered chileminder tae tak caer o' yer wane fer ye.

Whuther this is in tha foarm o' haem caer er state-provided nursery schuills an play centers, ye need tae mak shair that yer wane is safe en that ye er abel tae lae it wi' peese o' mien. Tha proablim is that ther is a shoartage o' regestered chileminders an this lack is gittin wor.

Where does that leave most mothers? They have to go back to work, but with whom do they leave their children? Some families are extended, and mothers can rely on relations to mind their children. That is a real blessing; however, a large number of families do not have that option.

The next best option is to pay for a registered childminder to take care of children for you. Whether by using home care, state-provided nursery schools or play centres, one must make sure that one's child is safe. Parents must have peace of mind when they leave their children. The problem is the shortage of registered childminders in Northern Ireland, and that shortage is getting worse.

Registered childminding is by far the most popular and affordable form of full-time childcare in Northern Ireland; it accounts for some 76% of the full-time places and 44% of all childcare places. There was a

90% drop in the supply of places with registered childminders in the three years to March 2006.

NICMA has told me of its proposals for helping to solve the problem of day care for children. They are constructive, and entail the Executive funding an innovative childminder start-up package. That is a positive way to address these issues. The package includes childminder start-up grants to encourage more individuals to choose childminding and to go through the registration process. The grants will help with the cost of setting up and registering as a childminding business. They will be of particular benefit in areas of social deprivation in which childminding provision is low. Individuals in such areas find the start-up costs associated with becoming a childminder — such as buying equipment and insurance — particularly difficult to meet. Another constructive suggestion is for the provision of one-to-one mentoring support for individuals as they go through the registration process. NICMA has also suggested the provision of a personal adviser to support new recruits. Those are good and important suggestions.

In the survey of parents and childcare in Northern Ireland, it was shown that there was a clear shortfall in the provision of childcare places, particularly in rural areas and in eastern parts of the Province — and, indeed, in the area that I represent; it would be wrong of me not to mention that in the Chamber today. A 20% expansion in the number of childminders is needed to meet the demand. There has been a significant increase in the use of unregistered childminders, which increases the potential risk to children. The proposal requires only £300,000 annually for an initial period of three years. It would enable the roll-out of the childminders' start-up package across Northern Ireland, with priority given to the areas most in need of childminding provision.

Something must be done. I ask the Minister to consider seriously and as a matter of urgency the implementation here of schemes that have been implemented on the mainland. They have done it there, and it has been successful. Let us see whether we can do the same here.

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

**Mr Shannon:** If we are to reach our full economic potential, we must ensure that all those able to work are doing so, and childminding is important in that.

**Mrs M Bradley:** I support the motion and the amendment.

Childcare is important from the perspective of child, parent and service provider. It is a tool essential to bringing us all out of this economic downturn. We are experiencing a great shift in attitudes: there is now an acceptance that equality plays a part in all aspects of life, including childcare. Any provision must be child-centred and suitable for the needs of the workforce

during this difficult economic period. A flexible and equality-driven service must be the core of any strategy, and such strategies must be open, transparent and contributed to by all Ministers. In the delivery of such a service, there must be a strong interdepartmental element.

The cost of childcare is too great for many families. We need affordable provision that encourages parents to get back to work and dispels the belief that it is not worth working because one will only work to pay for one's childcare. If we get more people back to work, we stand a better chance of stimulating the economy by increasing the disposable income of working parents, rather than increasing the number of those dependent on benefits.

The fiasco of the working tax credit, and all the controversy that goes with that, is really off-putting for many people who are considering going back to work, together with the fact that the childcare element of it is not available if the carer is a relative. That is the case for many people in Northern Ireland, where, for example, many grandparents provide childcare. The lack of places is high on the complaints list, as is the need for a more flexible service to fit the needs of the flexi-worker.

It is essential that the Assembly take on board the need for investment in childcare provision if we are to see a return on the economy and the rebirth of a more flexible and more accessible childcare system that is open and available to all. We must speculate to accumulate in this particular instance. It is only through utilising that attitude that there will be any valuable change for our constituents and their families. The lack of funding in early-years and special-needs childcare is a real problem, and one that will continue to rear its head until properly dealt with. I hope that the Minister of Education will take that problem on board and consider it accordingly.

The choice element is vital if parents are to have peace of mind when they place their child in a crèche or childcare environment. The upshot is that we should reap the benefits in the long term and get the chance to provide care for primary-school children who, according to many studies, are not really receiving age-appropriate childcare at the minute. If we can provide age-appropriate after-school care, we may — and I stress “may” — see a shift in the attitudes of our pre-teenagers and, in the long run, may even see a more respectful generation.

I think that it is obvious from today's debate and the various contributions that childcare requires a properly considered strategy with interdepartmental contributions. Such a strategy should develop a healthier economy and a more stable and happier family environment and have the interests of the child at its heart. Childcare

must be local, quality, flexible and accessible. That is what we need to provide, and it is up to the Executive to provide it. Constituents who are the parents of disabled children or children with special needs are blindsided when it comes to childcare and, often, can only access some respite care but not permanent childcare.

I request that all Ministers take heed of what has been said today and act accordingly. The scoping exercise being carried out by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister needs to be delivered and needs to be delivered soon. I support the motion and the amendment.

**Mrs Long:** I thank the Members who tabled the debate for bringing the issue before the House. The issue of accessible and affordable childcare is something that we need to concentrate on. I support the motion, which calls for a coherent and, perhaps most importantly, properly resourced strategy. I also support the amendment, which highlights the need for such a strategy to take into account irregular and flexible working hours. People do not always work nine-to-five or family friendly hours, and that has to be taken into account when we try to provide a strategy. If people do indeed want to be able to work, they have to have the flexibility to take the employment that is on offer.

During the OFMDFM Committee's study of child poverty, it was stated time and time again by contributors and witnesses, and highlighted in the research, that the best way to alleviate poverty and to break cycles of deprivation is to increase access to employment. Although the benefits system has been, and continues to be, amended to try to mitigate poverty and alleviate its worst effects, if significant step changes are to be achieved in people's living experience, increasing stable employment is the only option. Certainly, it is key to improving outcomes. However, it was just as frequently recognised that the lack of affordable and flexible childcare was a major limiting factor affecting access to training in preparation for work, access to employment, and people's flexibility within employment.

Research carried out by the Equality Commission — I think in 2003 — was brought before the Committee. It suggested that 67% of women stated the lack of affordable childcare as a factor in preventing them from taking up paid employment. Not only that, it showed that over 25% of mothers were constrained in the hours that they could work due to childcare, and a further 20% were limited in the jobs that they could take. It is not just about getting a job; it is about getting equal access to well-paid, stable employment, and to promotion opportunities once in employment.

That has an impact on the family and on the individuals whose personal aspirations can be frustrated and thwarted. It also has implications for the wider

economy, because people have skills and talents that cannot be fully harnessed by the economy due to that constraining factor.

2.15 pm

Indeed, we were told that the current provision was woefully inadequate, and that where it existed, it was sparse and often expensive. The Committee took that point on board in its discussions. However, that was not the only problem. There has been a lack of strategic direction coming from the Executive in what is a key aspect of the Programme for Government's pledge to support the economy.

In 1999, the 'Children First' childcare strategy first emerged. It was reviewed in 2005 and a final report was published. We are now in another review situation, but an active strategy encompassing the preschool and school-age aspects of childcare is not in place.

In 2007, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) considered rural issues specifically. Undoubtedly, there are rural aspects to childcare, but it is not purely a rural issue. The problem of being able to gain access to childcare can be exacerbated by geographical factors, but the issue is much wider. Also, it is unclear as to how those recommendations are feeding into the process of producing a strategic overview for the entire Executive.

People in multiple deprivations and with other family factors are further disadvantaged when accessing childcare, and that was shown in much of the research. Also, people from a low-income background, those who work part time, those who work outside traditional work patterns, and families in which one or more family member has a disability, find access to childcare incredibly difficult. If the family member with a disability happens to be a child, it can be more difficult still. Legally, they have the right to access, but often a parent is required to be present in the childcare facility. That, in itself, prevents that parent from seeking employment.

Clear lines of responsibility are lacking, and that must be addressed. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) were involved originally; DARD and OFMDFM also have some input. However, there is no clarity regarding the lines of responsibility for school-age childcare, and that was highlighted repeatedly during the study undertaken by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Both Departments came to the Committee a week apart and said that it was not their problem. The matter must be clarified and pressed home with those Departments.

I suspect that the debate will raise little that is not already known and acknowledged. However, a

measure of its usefulness will be in the appropriateness of the Executive's response.

**Mr Spratt:** We debate this important matter in the context of falling levels of childcare provision in Northern Ireland. Between 2002 and 2007, the overall number of day-care places fell by 1%, and places with registered childminders are down by 17% since 2002. That is deeply worrying and it is, without doubt, an important matter that must be addressed in the Province.

Quality affordable childcare is essential in allowing the development of a modern workforce. Women, including mothers, are a key element of the workforce, and as a Province, we must utilise all our resources, including human resources, to reinvigorate the economy. However, there is currently a huge barrier preventing that from happening. Sixty-seven per cent of women refer to the lack of affordable quality childcare as the main barrier to entering employment. That is no fault of theirs: it is the failure of the system. That must be addressed, and barriers to employment must be removed.

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member accept that since the decision was taken to end the Executive programme fund for children, a gap has materialised that no Department, or Departments collectively, co-ordinated by OFMDFM, have filled? The extended schools programme is only partially funded, and that other stream of funding has ended. Will the Member accept that a considerable period has elapsed since that decision was taken and that, as yet, the gap has not been addressed by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member will have a minute added to his time.

**Mr Spratt:** It is a cross-departmental issue. Some Departments have washed their hands of it, and I will touch upon a particular example of that, which has occurred in my own constituency.

The Members who tabled the motion are seeking to tackle the problem through an Executive-led strategy. By doing so, they are seeking, what I believe to be, the responsibility of their party colleague, the Minister of Education. Although there is no doubt that if the necessary investment were made in that key provision, children's learning skills would improve, unsurprisingly, all that has come from the responsible Minister has been another failure to act in children's best interests.

Let me provide a brief example of such a failure. Let me take Members to the Sandy Row area of my constituency, where the Kids Into Training and Education project — the KITE project, as it is known — has suffered at the hands of the Minister of Education. That fantastic project, which, every week, serves hundreds of kids in one of the most deprived areas of Belfast, has been refused funding by the Department of Education. I must say that I concur with the sentiments

of local pastor Paul Burns who said that the Minister, like Pontius Pilate, has washed her hands of the whole affair. Not only has the Minister refused to help those kids, but, in doing so, she is barring local mothers who depend on KITE childcare from going out to work. Despite that, the Minister claims that the issue is nothing to do with her Department.

Thanks to money from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which was allocated through the Department of Health, the project is now being funded for a period of time through PlayBoard. Fortunately, those bodies recognise the importance of such a project in my constituency. It is time that the Department of Education and, indeed, all Departments consider the importance of projects and the vital work that they do in those communities, particularly in areas such as Sandy Row.

Present in the Chamber today are mothers who, without childcare, could not do the work of an Assembly Member and public representative. More must be done to give women such as those mothers in Sandy Row freedom to enter the workforce and realise their potential. As individuals, they will benefit, their family units will welcome the extra income, and everyone will benefit from the contribution that women make to Northern Ireland's growing economy.

My party and I support the motion and the amendment.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt ar son an rúin agus an leasaithe.

The motion concerns economics: it is about the economics of our society. I will quote from the statement provided earlier by the First Minister on behalf of himself and the deputy First Minister:

“This statement is but a further demonstration of our determination to take whatever actions are open to us to combat the economic difficulties...by harnessing the wisdom and knowledge of those most affected by the current economic situation, we can navigate our way through the present difficulties.”

If the Executive are able to manage a properly funded and resourced childcare facility in the North, it will go a great way towards helping us to navigate our way out of our current economic difficulties, because the people most affected by the downturn — those who live in socially deprived areas — are those who find it most difficult to find childcare facilities. As the statistics and reports that have already been mentioned, and which I will not repeat, demonstrate, there is a requirement for greater investment in childcare facilities.

Indeed, in the statement that she made prior to the debate, the Minister for Social Development outlined her proposals for the reconfiguration of social security offices. One of the deepest concerns among the agency's workers, particularly those who are female, is that if they are forced to travel long distances to work,

or their rotas are changed and they are unable to access childcare facilities, they may have to leave their jobs. Therefore, the issue affects a wide range of people in both our workforce and our potential workforce.

There is a deficit in rural childcare facilities, and that has a wide effect. I know many parents in rural areas who drive past their local rural primary school into the town and then go to work. They send their children to urban primary schools because they have more chance of accessing childcare facilities after school hours there than they do in the rural community. That means that rural schools are affected, and that has a knock-on effect across society.

Workers in childcare professions must be both looked after and paid adequately. As Dawn Purvis said, there must be a professional element to their training and to the achievement of professional qualifications to ensure that the profession, which provides a vital service to society, is cherished.

At this stage of the debate, many points have been rehearsed, and I do not intend to repeat them. I support the motion and the amendment. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Speaker:** As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when Mr Moutray will be the next Member to speak.

*The debate stood suspended.*

2.30 pm

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

## Oral Answers to Questions

### OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question 1 has been withdrawn.

#### **Discrimination/Inequalities: Section 75**

2. **Mr Butler** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what assessment it has made of the effectiveness of the Equality Commission in addressing discrimination and inequalities among section 75 categories. (AQO 2467/09)

**The First Minister (Mr P Robinson):** I was wondering, Mr Deputy Speaker, how you were going to be referee and striker at the same time with question 1.

As the funding Department for the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) is accountable for the commission's business activities and resourcing arrangements. In that context, the deputy First Minister and I approve the commission's three-year corporate plan. Our Department must also approve the commission's annual business plan. It also carries out reviews every five years or so, with the next review scheduled for 2009-2010.

The commission reports to OFMDFM quarterly on its performance on progress made towards achieving the aims, objectives and targets contained in its annual business plan. In turn, OFMDFM officials consider the contents of those quarterly reports and request further details where appropriate. Our officials also meet bimonthly with commission staff to discuss various issues, including the outworking of the business and corporate plans. Formal meetings at senior management level take place quarterly.

For the financial year 2007-08, the commission set 23 targets of progress: 18 of those were met, two were partly met, and three were unmet.

**Mr Butler:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh fhreagra an Aire.

I thank the First Minister for his reply. The question relates to the effectiveness of section 75. Local

government is an area of particular concern. There are two approaches to section 75: a complainant can go to a local authority — or whatever offending body — and lodge a section 75 complaint; or the Equality Commission can generate its own review of section 75. Is the First Minister concerned by the fact that during the years of the Equality Commission's existence, it has not generated a single section 75 complaint against any local authority and that it is left up to individuals? That is a weakness.

**The First Minister:** I am not sure that I recall any successful legal action relating to section 75. Part of the commission's work is to give advice and assistance so that organisations do not fall foul of section 75 requirements. Schedule 9 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires the Equality Commission to keep the effectiveness of the duties imposed by section 75 under review.

The Equality Commission is not appointed by the deputy First Minister and me; it is appointed by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Given that the Secretary of State has section 75 responsibilities, he should keep account of the effectiveness of the organisation that he appoints. For our part, we have a pay and rations requirement for our Department and the commission. We can approve or not approve the commission's corporate and business plans, but we are limited because we do not appoint the organisation in the first instance.

**Mr P J Bradley:** What is the First Minister's assessment of the Equality Commission's role, particularly in relation to age discrimination?

**The First Minister:** I was going to try to get through this question and still be ministerial. My views on the Equality Commission are fairly well known. It is always difficult for a body that is not itself representative to carry out its role. The duties of the Equality Commission are set down in law; if it is believed that breaches of the requirements of section 75 have occurred, people can have redress through the courts. As I said before — though it is not always the only indicator of whether there have been breaches of section 75 — there have not, in my view, been any successful legal actions with regard to section 75 requirements.

**Mr McCausland:** I thank the First Minister for his answers. There is a statutory obligation on the Equality Commission to be reflective of the community in Northern Ireland. What is the First Minister's assessment of the Equality Commission's record in that regard, given that it has, in my view, failed in its obligations towards the unionist and Protestant community in the appointment of commissioners and in its record as an employer?

**The First Minister:** I can go along that road for 50% of the way. The other 50% has to take the form of

a stricture on the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, because it is he who appoints the members of the Equality Commission, rather than the commission itself. It is not a representative body, and one situation flows from the other. If a body is not representative, its staff get out of kilter and there is a cold-house feeling, which has a rolling impact. It looks dreadfully bad if the Equality Commission has to put its own requirements to the test. Some 30% of its staff is Protestant, which is clearly not reflective of the community. Urgent action is required, and simply placing an advertisement here and there is not enough. The Equality Commission is required to show equality in its own staffing arrangements and in the commission itself.

### Domestic Violence: Children's Strategy

3. **Mr Poots** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what assessment it has made of the impact of domestic violence in the context of delivering the children's strategy. (AQO 2468/09)

**The First Minister:** The 10-year strategy for children and young people aims to deliver improved outcomes across six main areas. We recognise the potential impact that violence in the home may have on achieving the high-level outcomes of being healthy and living in safety and with stability. However, the strategy does not repeat or replicate actions that emerge from other cross-cutting strategies.

Through implementation of the strategy for children and young people, we will work to ensure that the rights and needs of children and young people in Northern Ireland are properly addressed in emerging action plans under cross-cutting strategies such as the tackling violence at home strategy, which has been published by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and which addresses domestic violence and abuse. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) chairs the inter-ministerial group on domestic and sexual violence, which was established to ensure the involvement of key service providers and voluntary and statutory partners in this area. The junior Ministers represent OFMDFM on that group because of the potential impact of domestic violence on children.

In addition, an inter-agency regional steering group, led by DHSSPS and the NIO, was established to examine the issues around prevention, protection and justice, support, and training and development for practitioners. Senior officials from OFMDFM's gender and sexual orientation equality unit are represented on that forum. That strategic group feeds into the inter-ministerial group, working together on all the issues that are associated with domestic violence, sexual violence and abuse.



**Mr Poots:** I thank the First Minister for his response. Does he agree that the former SDLP Member for Lagan Valley and current Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People would be better advancing children's interests in the home and with regard to domestic violence, rather than pursuing parents who care about their children?

**The First Minister:** Everyone knows that resources are extremely limited and that the best use must be made of them. It is clear that the court case to which the Member alluded — and the appeal against that judgement — cost a considerable amount out of a budget that would otherwise have been available for other child support services.

Everyone can make their own judgement on whether that was good value for money. Both cases were lost; therefore, there was no positive outcome for the Children's Commissioner.

**Mr Gardiner:** Has the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister considered asking the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety to consider the overall mental-health implications of incidents of domestic violence on women?

**The First Minister:** The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety leads the group that deals with those issues; therefore, it would be more appropriate to put any questions about the details of that to him. The responsibility of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is determined by two factors — the first is whether an issue relates to equality and the second is whether it relates to children. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has responsibility for dealing with issues that relate to domestic violence.

**Ms J McCann:** Given that OFMDFM has responsibility for the elimination of gender-based violence, and given that some people who experience such violence have no recourse to public funds, will the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister consider initiating a special fund for those families that have no access to public funds, so that they can access support services?

**The First Minister:** I am quite happy to look at that issue in more detail. Such people might have access to legal aid and legal support in other circumstances. The deputy First Minister and I are happy to look at the issue in the first instance, to see how extensive it is and whether it can be dealt with under existing systems.

**Mrs M Bradley:** What additional resources has OFMDFM provided for the children's strategy? Does that Department intend to again bring into force a package of measures for children and young people?

**The First Minister:** It is a mistake to think that the measures relating to children and young people were

funded entirely by OFMDFM — a range of Departments has responsibility for the issues involved. The principle of removing the duplication of services — which is important because administering the duplicated services incurred a cost and so used up funds — and allowing Departments to take the lead responsibility in the areas involved has meant that money that would otherwise have been tied up in administration in OFMDFM is going to the Departments

Those issues are a priority for OFMDFM, because of the Department's cross-cutting nature. However, every Department, by its nature, has some responsibility for those matters, whether it is the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety or the Department of Education, and Ministers must ensure that those issues are prioritised in their Departments.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I know that this is the first Question Time since before the recess, but I remind Members who want to ask a supplementary question that they need to rise in their places to get my attention.

### Climate Change and Sustainable Development

4. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when it will publish the strategy on climate change and sustainable development. (AQO 2469/09)

**The First Minister:** Following an earlier written response to him, the Member will be aware that we have initiated a review of the first sustainable development strategy that was produced by the previous Administration. Our objective is to produce a new high-level strategy that will align more effectively with the Executive's Programme for Government.

We have the first draft of the new strategy, which we are continuing to study. In the near future, we hope to be in a position to circulate a draft of the new strategy document to stakeholders in Government and to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, before initiating a wider public consultation. Naturally, the new strategy will take climate change into account, within the broader principle of living within environmental limits. However, responsibility for climate change policy lies within the remit of the Department of the Environment (DOE) and is subject to a decision by the Executive.

**Mr Gallagher:** I thank the First Minister for his answer. I received a written response to my question on the matter in February 2009. Given the increasing importance that many Governments around the world, particularly those in London and Dublin, give to the development of low carbon technologies and other efficiencies, does the First Minister feel that the longer

we wait for a sustainable development strategy, the greater our economic disadvantage will be?

2.45 pm

**The First Minister:** I do not accept that, because we are not without a strategy. The existing strategy — that is, the 2006 strategy — will remain in place until it is replaced by the updated strategy, which will take account of our Programme for Government policies and targets. We are upgrading the policy, but the strategy is in place already, and we are working to it.

I believe that all parties in the House are particularly committed — as are the Executive — to the reduction of carbon emissions. We have set ourselves targets on that in our Programme for Government. The public service agreements are being advanced by various Departments, and a range of Departments is doing a lot of work to meet the Programme for Government targets.

**Mr T Clarke:** Will the First Minister tell us whether the lack of a published strategy means that Northern Ireland is operating in a void when it comes to sustainable development?

**The First Minister:** That is not the case. I could list what all the Departments are doing on sustainable development. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in particular has been proactive in the work that it is doing on a wide range of areas. The Department of Finance and Personnel, the Department of the Environment — obviously — and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development all have a role to play. They all continue to pursue the requirements of the Programme for Government.

The strategy, which I hope will be available fairly soon, will update that which was left by the previous Administration and will take into account the targets and requirements of our Programme for Government.

**Mr Beggs:** Has the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister considered how the Programme for Government's commitment to reducing our impact on climate change is being affected adversely by views that the Minister of the Environment has expressed? What latitude does a Minister have to express views that will detract from those objectives and that will detract ultimately from any strategy that may be agreed? Has the First Minister had discussions with the Minister of the Environment about the matter?

**The First Minister:** Let us be clear: the Programme for Government was approved by this Assembly and supported by the Executive. It is, therefore, the policy of the Executive and this Assembly. The views to which the Member refers are academic views that were expressed by the Minister about how climate change comes about. There is no question in the Minister's mind as to whether there is climate change; the question is whether it is man-made.

I think that the scientific evidence is on the side of those of us who believe that man is having an impact on the climate, and that, therefore, there is a necessity on the part of the Executive to deal with those issues. Even if it were not so, I have to say that the possibility that it were should be enough to alert any responsible Executive to take whatever measures they can.

## Special Economic Taskforce

5. **Mr McElduff** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the special economic taskforce will take proper account of the infrastructure needs of Tyrone, Fermanagh and other areas west of the River Bann. (AQO 2470/09)

**The First Minister:** The Programme for Government and the investment strategy set out clearly that promoting a regional balance and addressing existing regional disparities is a key objective for the Executive. That is crucial if we are to promote and facilitate economic growth and social progress across Northern Ireland.

Members will be aware that the deputy First Minister and I have set up a task force called the cross-sector advisory forum to allow us to continue dialogue with key stakeholder groups and to tap into the well of local economic — and other — talent in Northern Ireland. The forum, which is chaired jointly by the deputy First Minister and me, has 30 members. It has been established to address particular issues and to make recommendations for addressing the problems that are arising from the current economic crisis.

The terms of reference and details of the membership of the group have been placed in the Assembly Library for information. The first meeting of the forum took place on 6 April 2009. The infrastructure development of areas west of the Bann, and, indeed, of all parts of Northern Ireland, is considered in the investment strategy for Northern Ireland. Naturally, the forum's remit will take account of the impact that the economic crisis is having across Northern Ireland.

**Mr McElduff:** Tá mé buíoch den Aire as a fhreagra.

I am grateful to the First Minister for his answer. The importance of the infrastructure to our economy is implicit in the question. I want to highlight the fact that businesses west of the Bann face additional hurdles, including poor broadband access in many communities and a generally poor roads infrastructure.

Will the First Minister and deputy First Minister encourage the forum to take a special look at the economic needs of businesses west of the Bann?

**The First Minister:** The deputy First Minister, who represents a constituency west of the Bann, is unlikely to allow the concerns of the region to go unheard. As for infrastructure: Northern Ireland was in advance of

any other country in Europe with regard to broadband access capability. That is now being upgraded, and, happily, will be coming into the north-west of the Province, and there should, therefore, be considerable advantage from that.

As far as roads are concerned: I assure the Member that, during my time as a roads Minister — which, admittedly, was some years ago — I used to get accused of spending too much money west of the Bann, and most of the road improvements and — *[Interruption.] [Laughter.]* Oh, yes: if anyone looks, they will see that more money was spent west of the Bann during that period than was spent east of the Bann. However, I very much doubt whether the current roads Minister is discriminating against the west of the Bann on those issues.

We want the whole of Northern Ireland to enjoy prosperity. The goal of the Executive is to ensure that the benefits of devolution filter down to not just every strata of society, but to every location in Northern Ireland, and it is in the interests of us all to ensure that the communities west of the Bann have all the advantages of devolution.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Does the First Minister agree that in order to respond to the current crisis in the economy across Northern Ireland, it would be better to carry out an urgent review of the Programme for Government and the Budget rather than waiting several months for the outcome of a set review?

**The First Minister:** That question covers territory that I covered in my statement earlier today. I again say that I cannot see any logic in anyone suggesting that we should change our Programme for Government, given that it has, as its priority, the growth of our economy, which is precisely what anyone would do if they were starting with a blank piece of paper today.

Of course, the Budget will change from time to time, and there will be priorities that each party — and, indeed, each Minister in the Executive — may well want to put forward. We are open to proposals as to where reductions can be made in spending so that increases can be made in other areas. I do point out to the Member, however, that there has been a higher spend on capital projects in Northern Ireland during the past year than there has ever been, and we are planning to do even better in the next 12 months.

**Mr K Robinson:** I listened with interest to the exchanges about the roads system west of the Bann. I went down to have a look at it myself on Friday, and was mightily impressed — *[Interruption.]*

Yes, right down as far as Enniskillen, Tommy.

Has the First Minister considered the disproportionate impact of the recession on the East Antrim constituency, especially since 10% of employment

comes from the relatively safe public-sector sources, compared with the UK constituency average of 20%, and the Belfast average of 53%? What steps does he intend to take to address that inequality east of the Bann, and, specifically, in East Antrim?

**The First Minister:** I can recall that when I was Finance Minister, the Member for West Tyrone always used to tell me that because of the number of people working in the public sector in the Omagh area, there was a necessity for more public-sector jobs to go to that area. Actually, on a travel-to-work basis, there were more people working in public-sector jobs in his constituency than anywhere else in Northern Ireland, including in Belfast, per head of population of economically active people. The worst of the whole of Northern Ireland was that general Larne catchment area. My argument had consistently been that that was an area where we should start looking if we are displacing jobs from the centre of Belfast.

However, much has to do with infrastructure, and the Larne area has a very important facility with the ferry, which is a very important means of communication with mainland Britain, and it is vital that the roads to and from the port are improved.

I am sure that the Member is as glad as I am that the Government of the Republic of Ireland are still committing themselves to giving funding for the road improvement, which will help that area's economy.

## Climate Change

6. **Mr Ford** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to report on cross-departmental Executive policy in relation to climate change.  
(AQO 2471/09)

**The First Minister:** During the recent debate on the Act on CO2 advertising campaign, the Member for South Antrim Mr Ford rightly stated:

“If we are going to deal seriously with climate change, it must be looked at by the entire Executive.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 39, p214, col 2].*

The Member will know that the Programme for Government already provides an expression of the Executive's intention in that regard. In that document, we stated clearly and unequivocally that we are aware of global and local threats to our natural and built environment, and that it is clear that climate change is a serious problem facing the world. That position has not changed. Our Programme for Government has put in place commitments, actions and targets, which all Departments support, to tackle the problem of climate change.

**Mr Ford:** When Ministers give their responses, I am flattered when they quote the Members who asked them questions. I had hoped that the First Minister's

response would have had slightly more on policy and less on aspirations. Nevertheless, given that he has told Mr Beggs that any responsible Executive would take whatever measures they could on climate change, and given the range of responsibilities across different Departments, will he explain how he can deal with the fact that the DOE Minister has a policy of doing the absolute minimum that is required by law?

**The First Minister:** DETI recently provided funding to extend the work of the Department of Energy and Climate Change on low-carbon solutions for households and communities to Northern Ireland. Work is due to start this year on a renewable heat strategy, and a submission on the subject will issue shortly to the Minister.

Energy used for heat accounts for around 50% of carbon emissions in the UK. It is vital to tackle that in order to help to constrain climate change. Invest Northern Ireland funds the Carbon Trust's activities in Northern Ireland, and the sum for those activities will be £13.4 million for 2008-2011.

Invest Northern Ireland is developing a renewables strategy, and a position paper is scheduled for June 2009. Four substantial energy-from-waste projects were approved in 2008, with support totalling approximately £13 million. DETI continues to provide funding for Action Renewables to provide free technical advice to households and communities on renewable-energy technologies, and it offers a signposting service to the low-carbon building programme.

From July 2006 to March 2008, DETI provided £10.8 million in funding for the Reconnect programme to allow householders to install micro-renewable technologies. That resulted in the displacement of 54.4 MW of fossil-fuel-generated electricity and heat, which resulted in a CO<sub>2</sub> saving of 21,074 tons per annum. A reduced VAT rate of 5% is available for small-scale renewable technologies and for technologies that generate electricity. I could go on, because I have a list of about six pages, but Members might lose patience with me somewhere along the line.

I will now address the remarks made about the Department of the Environment. It is progressing work on adapting to the unavoidable effects of climate change. The Department has set up the Northern Ireland climate change impacts partnership (NICCIP) with businesses, non-governmental organisations, the voluntary sector and Government representatives to improve understanding. The DOE continues to work with Whitehall and other devolved Administrations in the UK to inform public policy in Northern Ireland. It would be very hard to assess why there would be a detriment to one advert's having been stopped by a Minister who did not want to run a national UK advert

here because he felt that such matters should be decided by the devolved Administration.

**Mr Spratt:** Will the First Minister confirm that his position on climate change is consistent with that in the Programme for Government?

**The First Minister:** It would not have been included in the Programme for Government had it not been consistent with the position that my Executive colleagues and I hold. Indeed, the position as outlined in the Programme for Government flows directly from the DUP's election manifesto of 2007, to which all Members of the party are obliged to keep and uphold.

The DUP has supported climate-change legislation at Westminster and has called for year-on-year targets to reduce carbon emissions. It has been suggested that there is no consensus on the scientific evidence; I do not care too much whether there is consensus or not. However, I do believe that it is appropriate for the Executive to take action and prepare for any eventuality.

3.00 pm

## REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### Bus Stops/Timetables

1. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister for Regional Development what action has been taken to provide bus stops and bus timetables in rural areas since he came to office. (AQO 2486/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The provision of bus stops is an operational matter for Translink. However, I have been informed that in the past five years, 306 bus shelters have been erected in rural areas through a contract with Adshel. In addition, Translink has continued to improve facilities for passengers by providing timetable information, improving signage where required and making repairs to existing bus stops.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response and the work that his Department has carried out to date. Indeed, recently there has been a great increase in the number of bus stops, of bus stop signage and timetables in rural areas of north Antrim.

Will the Minister tell the House what his Department's policy is in relation to the provision of bus shelters? Furthermore, what percentage of bus stops have shelters?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department's Roads Service entered into a 15-year contract with the bus shelter provider Adshel in 2001 to provide approximately 1,500 bus shelters across the

North. The provision and maintenance of those shelters is funded by Adshel through advertising revenue at no cost to the Department. All councils, with the exception of Fermanagh District Council, have signed up to that contract, which restricts them from providing advertising shelters from any other source. All councils, in addition to Translink, are permitted to provide additional non-advertising bus shelters at their own expense.

When my Department receives a request for a bus shelter, it consults Translink to ensure that there is either sufficient usage or potential for future public-transport growth at the proposed stop. That ensures that the best use is made of the limited resources available.

Since Translink does not maintain central records on the number of locations of bus stops, it is not possible to provide the percentage information requested by the Member.

**Mr Burns:** Although bus stops and shelters are very important and play a vital role, bus transport itself and the lack of transport in rural areas are key factors. I call on the Minister to provide more transport in rural areas.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I am not sure that the Member actually asked a question; however, my Department is striving to provide more transport in rural areas. Not only is Translink required to fund loss-making services in rural areas, it also provides rural community transport across the North.

If the Member wants more transport, I will be happy to hear him in Budget debates argue that the Department for Regional Development (DRD) rather than the Department for Social Development (DSD) should receive more money.

**Mr McCallister:** Since a review of Translink's passenger charter is due in the next few years, will the Minister examine the need for buses to stick to their timetables not just at the beginning and end of journeys but also at the stops in between, as is the case at present? Does he agree that such a change could improve reliability, particularly in rural areas?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** A central aim in departmental policy is to get more people to use public transport. As the representative of a rural area, I am conscious of the provision of public transport in rural areas and of the need to improve public transport continuously to achieve our aim of getting people out of their cars and into public transport. Therefore anything that can be done to improve that would certainly be examined.

As the Member said, Translink's passenger charter is up for review. If mechanisms come forward during that review to improve service, particularly in rural areas, I would be happy to examine them.

## Water Charges

2. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the impact on his budget of the deferral of water charges to 2011.

(AQO 2487/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** On 20 November 2008, the Executive unanimously decided that there would be no household water and sewage payments in 2009-2010. As that was a collective decision, the Executive must decide how that cost will be met, and the June monitoring round will provide an opportunity to do that.

As part of the recent strategic stocktake, DRD identified that some £200 million of additional funding would be required for 2009-2010.

The Executive have not yet made a decision about the funding of water and sewerage services in 2010-11 and beyond.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he accept that he will implement water charges in the very near future? If so, how does he propose to do that?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** As I outlined in my initial answer, that is a position for the Executive to take. When Members were first elected, the Executive decided to defer water charges for a year and to set up an independent panel, which brought forward a series of recommendations. We have yet to take decisions on all those recommendations, after which there will be a period of consultation.

The Executive decided to defer water charges further until 2010. Therefore, the Executive must decide how to meet the cost of that, because there is a very real cost to the provision of water and sewerage services. In that year alone, I estimate that cost to be in the region of £200 million.

Would that it were in my gift to decide how the Executive will find £200 million for the necessary investment in water and sewerage, but I am afraid that it is not. It is in the gift of the entire Executive, which is why it is an Executive decision. If there were to be any change beyond 2010-2011, the Executive must pay for that by finding the money across Departments and services or by other means.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given the Minister's answer to the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr Elliott, will he confirm how much more domestic customers would have paid if water charges had not been deferred?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The average cost was some £200 per household. However,

those calculations were based on what would have been paid last year and the previous year.

Water charges had been proposed during direct rule, and their deferral has had an impact on households, because they have not yet had to meet those bills. It has also had an impact on the Executive, which have had to find the money to pay for that service. We are investing about £1 million a day in necessary improvements to the water and sewerage infrastructure, which had not received proper investment for at least 20 years. We are playing catch-up and making substantial investments.

Households undoubtedly made financial savings as a result of the Executive's decision. The Executive had to find the money to meet those costs and must soon decide how to meet the future cost of water and sewerage services.

**Mr Dallat:** In an attempt to be positive, may I ask the Minister to look into his crystal ball and suggest that the appointment of a new chief executive to Northern Ireland Water shortly will replace the floods of burst pipes — and the associated shambles — with new rainbows of hope for the future? On reflection, will he assure Members that there will be no separate water charges?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I look forward to the appointment of the chief executive. The Member knows from his time on the Committee for Regional Development that the current chairman has been acting as chief executive and, in my view, has done a very good job.

As I said in response to the previous question, in the past two decades, there was no investment in the water and sewerage infrastructure. Consequently, we have a substandard system in which more than £1 million a day is being invested in improvements. During the time that it will take to improve that system, leaks and other issues will, inevitably, arise. However, we are making a substantial investment.

The Executive must decide whether people will be billed at all for water and sewerage services. Having covered the cost of that over the past two years, the Executive must decide how to proceed in the future. All other decisions will flow from that.

**Dr Farry:** I am grateful for the Minister's confirmation that the Executive deferred water charges before knowing how that decision would be funded.

Does the Minister believe that the Executive's approach to water charges helps or hinders Northern Ireland's efforts to avoid the efficiency savings that the Chancellor is set to implement on Wednesday 22 April? In the event that the Chancellor requests at least £450 million in cuts to the Northern Ireland block grant,

does the Minister feel that the decision to forgo water charges for two years is sustainable?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Executive knew that, if the cost of water were not to be collected from households, the only other place from which that cost could be met was from the Executive — they would have to dip into the Budget in order to pay for that. That was quite obvious — there is no other third party or fairy godmother to pay for all that or to improve the infrastructure to the required standard.

Regardless of what the Treasury decides, we have our block grant. Ahead of the return of devolution, we strongly argued about the sort of investment that was needed here — particularly in relation to water, sewerage and a range of other issues — to sustain the return of devolved Government. We will continue to argue that case.

I do not think that we will make our decision based on how we think that the Treasury may feel about us or may regard the decisions that are taken. We have to assert our independence. Although the Treasury is responsible for allocating the block grant, we have some dignity in being able to make our own decisions. Were we to find that we are not able to make decisions on how we spend the money that is allocated to us, that would present a very significant challenge for the Executive and, perhaps, for this institution as a whole.

I look forward to hearing what the Treasury has to say, but I certainly know that I will continue to argue for independence in our decision-making.

### Water Supply Difficulties: Ards Peninsula

3. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he is aware of water-supply difficulties in the Ards Peninsula in the past few weeks, particularly the recent incident that left many homes without water for four to five days; and to outline the reasons for these disruptions and what action he is taking to ensure that this problem is fully resolved. (AQO 2488/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the disruption to water supplies in the Ards Peninsula that occurred on Saturday 21 March 2009 was caused by a major defect in the mid Ards trunk water main, which supplies service reservoirs in the area. Problems with air in the water-main network hindered the prompt recovery of the system. Nevertheless, the supply was restored to the majority of customers on Monday 23 March 2009 and to the remaining customers on Tuesday 24 March 2009.

Northern Ireland Water (NIW) is currently undertaking a review of the incident together with any other associated problems with the water-distribution system in the area. In view of the frequency of the interruptions to the supply, NIW is investigating the possibility of implementing further infrastructure improvements to improve the continuity of water supply. I asked the acting chief executive of NIW to write to the Member when the outcome of the review is known. I express my regret and sympathy to the people who were affected by the disruption. It is my sincere hope that that will be the last of the problems that they encounter.

**Mr Shannon:** On behalf of the people of the Ards Peninsula, I accept the Minister's apology. It was absolutely chaotic that farmers were unable to use water to feed their cattle and sheep; that young mothers were unable to put water in milk for their newborn babies; that elderly people were unable to make a cup of tea; that people were unable to flush their toilets; and that they were unable to wash, shower or wash their clothes. In the middle of all that, there was no system whatsoever for the distribution of bottled water.

When the taps were turned on afterwards, the water in this bottle is the water that came out. It is not vodka, and it is not lemon-flavoured.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind Mr Shannon that Members are not permitted to use visual aids. The Member should ask a question.

**Mr Shannon:** Will the Minister assure the people of the Ards Peninsula that a system will be put in place to address the continual breakages, and that there will be a back-up plan that will be better organised? Will he also assure us that, in future, there will be no 50% supply of water to the houses in the Ards Peninsula, which we have endured since Christmas?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I accept what the Member is saying about the difficulties that the breakdown in supply caused to the people of the Ards Peninsula. As with any major incident that occurs, NIW carries out a review of the effectiveness of its response. There are obviously issues regarding its response as well as the breakdown. Any lessons that are learned should be put to good use to ensure that subsequent responses are improved upon.

NIW accepts that there is an ongoing problem and that major work may be required to ensure that a disruption does not occur again. A review is being carried out, and NIW will be in touch with the Member and any other elected representatives in the area to inform them of the outcome.

**Mr McCarthy:** I will show this picture to the Minister.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Visual aids are not permitted.

**Mr McCarthy:** That is water that should be going through people's taps, and Alderman Shannon outlined the problem. That water was on the road. Indeed, it occurred on a dozen roads on the Ards Peninsula. Alderman Shannon said that the situation cannot be allowed to continue any longer. The system must be repaired. Northern Ireland Water acknowledges that there is a big problem, but it needs funding to improve the system so that that does not happen again. Not only do we have to speak on behalf of the residents, but we have to speak on behalf of businesses.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member must ask a question.

3.15 pm

**Mr McCarthy:** We are trying to encourage tourism — we have caravan parks and all sorts of things — so we must ensure that funding is in place —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Minister, do you wish to reply to that answer? *[Laughter.]*

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Sometimes, that is a very attractive proposition. *[Laughter.]* Again, as I said to the previous Member who spoke, I deeply regret what happened, and I know that NIW is looking carefully at that, what action is required, and what action is required of it by way of response.

The Member said that NIW requires money for investment, but it already has a substantial capital budget. Of course, the company is undertaking a significant catch-up exercise due to underinvestment over a number of decades. Nonetheless, a substantial capital budget is available. NIW must identify areas in which breakdowns are commonplace, and those areas must then be given priority treatment. As I said, there is an ongoing review, and Members will be informed of its outcomes and of the actions that will be undertaken as a result.

**Mr Cree:** I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I do not have any props. The Minister will be aware of the recent water-quality scare in the greater Belfast area. Is he content that correct procedures were adopted? Should that sort of thing happen again, will the Minister guarantee that customer safety will be balanced against customer convenience?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Although customer convenience is important, customer safety is always the number one priority. With respect to the event to which the Member referred, an analysis was carried out on routine samples taken from the Dunore Point water treatment works over the weekend of 11 and 12 April and a potential quality issue was identified. It takes approximately 24 hours to analyse samples.

Early on Tuesday 14 April, when the results suggested that there might be a problem with water quality, NI Water, in consultation with a consultant in

communicable disease control, issued a precautionary boil-water notice. The notice was issued through the press, media and Internet, and homes that could potentially have been affected in the greater Belfast area and in Antrim and Down were alerted.

Subsequent water samples, which were tested by NIW at an independent laboratory later on Tuesday, all returned satisfactory results, and that confirmed that the water supply was safe to drink. In consultation with the health authorities late on Tuesday evening, the boil-water notice was lifted. NIW staff worked through the night to remedy the problem.

Nevertheless, I have asked officials in the Drinking Water Inspectorate to investigate why the initial analytical results were incorrect and to identify what steps can be taken to ensure that the risk of a reoccurrence is minimised. I sympathise with all those who were affected, and I regret any disruption or inconvenience that the incident caused. However, I am sure that everyone agrees that when there is even a minimal risk to the health and well-being of the public, it is sensible to take precautions, such as issuing a temporary boil-water notice.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I refer Members to page 85 in the Assembly Companion, which refers to the use of visual aids. No visual aids are allowed in the Chamber.

### Millennium Way, Lurgan

4. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister for Regional Development what priority he has given to the completion of Millennium Way in Lurgan. (AQO 2489/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** As the Member may recall, in response to a previous written question, I advised that the Malcolm Road to Gilford Road extension of the Millennium Way in Lurgan is one of a number of proposed highway improvement schemes that were identified in the 'Sub-Regional Transport Plan 2015'. The 'Investment Delivery Plan for Roads' identifies funds totalling £109 million over the next 10 years for those improvements and for those in the 'Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan 2015'.

However, the funding profile in the investment strategy does not accommodate those improvement schemes until the middle-to-late part of the 10-year period. Work is still to be concluded on a prioritised, non-strategic major improvement programme. Therefore, at this stage, I am not in a position to give an indication of the priority that will be afforded to the scheme.

**Mr Moutray:** I thank the Minister for his answer, however, given that properties in Lurgan were vested decades ago to allow for the construction of the Malcolm Road to Gilford Road link, it is disappointing that nothing has happened. The link is vital for that

part of the town, because it will help to alleviate traffic congestion in the town centre. Given that Lurgan has suffered economically over the past number of years, I ask the Minister to instruct his Department to prioritise that badly-needed scheme.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I understand what the Member said. I have been to Lurgan to meet business people, and we discussed that key route.

I will be talking to representatives of Craigavon Borough Council later this evening, and I am sure that the same issue will arise at that meeting. Millennium Way will have to compete for priority — as will many other road schemes in many other towns. The final prioritisation has not been done, and I will bear in mind the Member's comments.

We informed business people in Lurgan that any potential developer contributions would have a significant impact on the scheme. We will keep an open mind on that in the future. Any information relating to developer interest that emanates from the area will be taken into consideration as well.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I note the Minister's comments about developers, but I do not think that such interest is realistic in the current economic downturn. Not only is there a long-finger approach to Millennium Way, but is it not the case that there is a £50 million shortfall in the southern division's budget? Given that the Minister has met the business leaders — and considering that Millennium Way will not be completed in the foreseeable future — will he ask his departmental officials to look at other measures that might alleviate traffic congestion?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** All Departments balance their budgets as best they can and prioritise according to greatest need. Therefore, there is no question of a project being long-fingered merely for the sake of it. People want to see the development of projects in every town in the North that I visit, and we try to prioritise as many of them as we can.

I met people from Lurgan Forward, and they suggested a range of traffic alleviation measures. Roads Service had further discussions with them on those measures, and perhaps we will receive more information on that issue this evening when we talk to councillors from Craigavon Borough Council. However, I know that Roads Service will be willing to look at any measures that will help the flow of traffic in and around Lurgan.

**Mr Gardiner:** The Minister will be aware of Millennium Way in Lurgan and its successful contribution to the town, but it is not yet completed. I urge the Minister to put speed on that and to try to ensure that it is completed as soon as possible.



What discussions has the Minister had with the Minister of the Environment, Sammy Wilson, in relation to planning policy statement 5 (PPS 5) and the completion of projects in the Banbridge area and other such towns?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** As I mentioned in my response to a previous question, I am aware of the importance of Millennium Way. I know that it is unfinished, and I appreciate the priority that the locals want to see applied to its completion. I have not had any discussion with the Department of the Environment (DOE) Minister about Banbridge and PPS 5.

### Fly-Posting

5. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on his policy in relation to fly-posting. (AQO 2490/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The responsibility for regulating the display of advertisements, including fly-posting, falls to the Department of the Environment. However, inappropriate outdoor advertising has the potential to impact significantly on road safety and the environment. Under the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993, my Department's Roads Service has the power to remove unlawful advertising signs from within the curtilage of the public road.

The implementation of that policy, together with successful prosecutions, has resulted in a reduction in the number of unlawful advertising signs being erected within the public road boundaries, especially in the Belfast area.

Roads Service regularly removes fly-posters from its traffic signals, street lighting and cabinets. Although district councils have no statutory duty to remove such posters, they have the power of removal. I understand that some councils have requested that that statutory duty be included in the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act, the enactment of which is programmed for 2011.

**Mr Lunn:** I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware of the public perception that Roads Service is inclined to prosecute easy targets and to ignore the more difficult cases. A church that is advertising a car boot sale is liable to get fined before something more sinister is addressed. The Minister mentioned the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993. Does the Minister agree that, in the future, the removal of fly-posters should be the responsibility of the district councils, to which he referred?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I do not agree with the suggestion that Roads Service targets easy prey. It is unlikely that sinister advertising will

have a name attached to it or that the name of the individual who has responsibility for its display will be included. Not only are people putting up directional signs, but they are putting up signs that are advertising their businesses or promotions.

That is not the purpose of road signage. It is supposed to be to assist someone to find a place on the last step of his or her journey; it is not intended to replace other directional information. People are now putting signs up that advertise events, their business or some kind of promotion. When such signs impinge on road safety, Roads Service has a responsibility to take them down and fine those involved.

I recently met some MLAs, and we discussed the issue with particular reference to rural businesses. I accept that there is a need to discuss the policy and to talk to business organisations. The proliferation of business signs sometimes becomes unsightly, especially in the countryside — I am more familiar with the border area — and it has a detrimental impact on our ability to present this place as a green land that is attractive to tourists.

There is an opportunity, and perhaps an obligation, to address the issue. I have undertaken to talk to Roads Service about that and to talk to business organisations about trying to manage the issue better. That way, we should not end up fining some of the charitable people who want to provide some useful and charitable service or event and we can deal in some way with the increasing proliferation of signs along the roads.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Minister for his reply. Has he formed any view as to whether he is minded to heed the representations made by those in local government who seek greater powers over fly-posting?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My general approach to that issue is to transfer to local government as many powers as is sensible. Obviously, the discussions about the review of public administration (RPA) have not concluded. I know that during Holy Week, in the lead up to Easter, there were further discussions about the detail of the powers that will transfer, and those discussions have yet to be concluded. As I said, my general approach has been to be supportive if local councils feel that they want to exercise certain powers, and if it makes sense for those powers to be transferred. I do not see any reason to stand in the way of that.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I welcome the Minister's comments on the issue. It is a hugely important matter that affects many towns, cities and rural areas. Fly-posting is a blight on many communities.

The implementation of effective legislation is necessary, and that should be done in conjunction with the Department of the Environment. The only way to

deal with the serial offenders that we are talking about — the nightclub owners and others who consistently abuse the law — is to take them to court and fine them. That would act as a deterrent.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I accept what the Member says. There is an increasing number of signs, and they become unsightly and are damaging to the environment. They also damage our ability to promote ourselves. However, during what are difficult economic times, we have to strike a balance when going after businesses, fining people and taking the signs down. There are also resource implications for Roads Service when its workers actually go out and take the signs down and then have to chase up businesses to fine them per sign.

There is a need for a discussion about the issue, because businesses obviously have a need to provide some sort of directional signage. Some of them do that, particularly in rural areas. However, there is a difference between that and advertising. At one stage, protocols were agreed. That was certainly the case with estate agents, who probably use signs more than any other businesses, particularly on Roads Service equipment. Those protocols had some effect, but that seems to have drifted. It is time for another discussion with business organisations — both rural and urban — about signage and what we can do about it.

### Regional Transportation Strategy

6. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the proposed review of the regional transportation strategy. (AQO 2491/09)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department has started to review the regional transportation strategy and aims to issue a draft document for consultation in July. It is anticipated that the review will be completed by 2010 in order to help inform the next comprehensive spending review. As the review impacts on a number of Departments, I have circulated a paper to the Executive. I intend, if that paper is endorsed, to then make a statement to the Assembly.

**Mr Ford:** I thank the Minister for providing the news that the review is under way. Can he give us any indication as to the likely balance of expenditure between roads and public transport? There are clearly needs for road improvements in many rural areas. However, in recent years we have seen much money spent on roads in greater Belfast, which has added to the commuter problem rather than diminishing it.

3.30 pm

**The Minister for Regional Development:** There is a need for road spend in rural areas, but there is also a

need for strategic corridors connecting towns and cities, which is part of the major road spending programme that is under way. The Member will be aware that the majority of our public transport uses the roads; therefore, it is not a clear case of one versus the other. Spending on the roads improves public transport services. For example, the creation of quality bus corridors and park-and-ride facilities allows buses and other modes of public transport more space to move about in urban areas, which improves those services.

Having said that, I should say that, when the major routes are completed — work on most of them is either under way, or there are plans being advanced for their completion — the debate will shift towards the issue of the contribution to and the reduction of emissions. I have started that shift internally in the Department. The debate will then move on to the issue of greater investment in public transport.

## CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

### Regional Art Gallery

1. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to invest in a regional art gallery. (AQO 2506/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell):** My Department supports, in principle, a regional art gallery. I am aware that the absence of a national gallery is viewed by many as a significant gap in Northern Ireland's cultural infrastructure. However, the necessary funding for such a facility has not been secured under investment strategy for Northern Ireland II. Before any decision can be made in that regard, considerable preliminary work is required, including the development of a feasibility study to identify, consider and cost possible options. A business case will also have to be progressed through the approval process.

In the development of any future plans, the Department will work in partnership with National Museums Northern Ireland and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

**Mr Gallagher:** There is significant potential for increasing tourism and for boosting confidence among our own artists. I understand what the Minister says about funding; however, given that this is a time when those who are interested in property should be thinking seriously about it, can the Minister give us any idea about the cost implications of an original arts centre?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I thank the Member for his question. The short answer is yes. However, I hesitate to give the Member the figure

for providing such a gallery, as it represents a significant investment and has been estimated at anywhere between £30 million and £70 million. A national gallery is a strategic objective of the Arts Council and is specified as such in its five-year strategic plan.

From looking at the examples of other nation states and regions, we have seen the benefits that a national or regional gallery can bring in relation not only to tourism, as the Member rightly identified, but also job creation. In considering which locality to invest in, inward investors would view as an asset a national gallery of some significance, whether that is of Guggenheim or Tate proportions or something similar. We need to think along those lines. However, as I said in my initial response, we need to develop the business case. The Arts Council has identified the need for such a gallery; the task of obtaining the resources to establish it will fall to me or to my successor.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given the competing pressures in his Department and the calls for funding that it faces — for example, for the development of community arts or funding for sports facilities — how much priority does the Minister allocate to the establishment of a regional arts gallery?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** As I said earlier, the provision of a national gallery is a strategic objective of the Arts Council. If the Arts Council tells me, as Minister, that that is at the upper end of its priorities and it wants to see provision made for that from whatever budgetary allocations that I can obtain, it is my job to respond to that. However, speaking on a personal level and on a level of departmental responsibility, we must seek to achieve that objective in the shorter term, rather than in the longer term.

Having said that and returning to my original answer, I should say that funding for any objective for which there is currently no provision but which could require anything between £30 million and £70 million is going to be difficult to obtain. However, “difficult to obtain” is not a reason for not proceeding. It is an objective and a priority, and I intend to pursue it as such.

**Mr Elliott:** In the context of the creation of major exhibition space, does the Minister have any concerns about the obvious threat to the Titanic project that is posed by a similarly themed project based in Southampton?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I do not have any concerns about competing projects. The Titanic project is a particular priority; it is being pursued, and I trust that it will be seen through to its logical conclusion. It will be of significant benefit, not only to Belfast, but to the whole of Northern Ireland. Any other projects of similar scale and size or which

seek to cater to similar demographic groups should, I imagine, seek support as and where they can. I do not draw the conclusion that the Member is, perhaps, inviting me to draw, which is that one project should be developed at the expense of the other.

## Library Authority

2. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether the establishment of the Northern Ireland library authority has proceeded as planned.

(AQO 2507/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The Northern Ireland library authority assumed responsibility for the public library service on 1 April 2009, as planned. The chief executive is in place, senior staff positions have been filled, new finance and IT systems have been set up, and staff have transferred to the new authority. Work has begun on the procedures and programme for the library authority board.

This is a significant new era for a valuable public service, which, henceforth, will be known as Libraries NI. I look forward to a fruitful relationship with the library authority as we work together to develop the service to the public and to ensure its continuing relevance in these changing times.

**Mr Shannon:** It is very important that the new library service in the Province relates to all communities. Many people are asking — it is important that the Minister responds to this question today — how the library service will make itself relevant to the whole of the Province and, specifically, to the areas that have libraries.

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I thank the Member for a very relevant question about an authority that has been established for only the past three weeks. It is important that the service that Libraries NI will deliver has local relevance and importance. Its organisational structure provides for senior staff at director and business-managerial level to be located in the areas that they serve. Board meetings will be held throughout Northern Ireland in order to provide opportunities for board members to visit different local libraries and to meet staff and users. In addition, in order to ensure that the library service takes account of local needs, it will establish four pilot local engagement groups, which will bring together representatives of other organisations — statutory, community and voluntary — including the local council in each area. In due course, the library authority will also play an active part in the community planning process.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am glad that I caught your eye, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to the Minister for his earlier answers. Has he any concerns or does he see

any disadvantages arising from the separation of education and library governance when it comes to keeping educationally relevant book collections, considering that schoolchildren are major library users? If so, how does he intend to address such concerns?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The chief executive, chairperson and other members of the Libraries NI board would be content to meet MLAs or any public representatives who have concerns such as those outlined by the honourable Member. My understanding is that the new authority does not have any concerns about access to the libraries as they are envisaged.

I recommend that the honourable Member and, indeed, everyone visit their local library. Some of the new libraries are fantastic resources and provide access to excellent services, not just for schoolchildren but for the wider community. I have visited a number of the new libraries, including Bangor library, where I launched the new authority on 2 April. I recommend that MLAs and the wider public avail themselves of the services that libraries provide. I also recommend that MLAs hold discussions with members of the Libraries NI board if they have any concerns that there may be a contradiction or problem. I do not envisage any problems, and no such issues have been raised with me prior to today.

**Mrs M Bradley:** How will the Minister ensure that there is a connection between the library authority and schools? School libraries were always supplied by libraries in the main library service; how will the Minister ensure that that relationship remains for the benefit of children?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I thank the Member for her question. I understand that the authority is already doing that. Indeed, we had a live video link-up with a school in the Western Board area at the authority's official launch on 2 April, and a number of primary-school children took part. The new board, its officers and members are acutely aware of the need to ensure that schools are an integral part of the library service. They realise that a first-class service must be provided to children of school age as well as to adults.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question 3 has been withdrawn.

## Community Development Through the Arts

4. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what support the Arts Council provides to organisations not previously engaged with the arts to encourage community development through arts.

(AQO 2509/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The Arts Council recognises the important contribution that the arts can make to community development. That is demonstrated by the support and funding that the Arts Council provides for a number of community-focused arts programmes including Re-imaging Communities, the small grants programme and Start Up. The Arts Council actively seeks to target and engage with new audiences and to increase participation in the arts; that is a central theme of its five-year strategy.

The Arts Council has provided £2.71 million of funding between 2004-05 and 2008-09 through the Awards For All programme. Through that programme, the Arts Council has directly sought to increase community-based arts activities and improve access to the arts among the most disadvantaged communities. The programme has recently been re-launched as the small grants programme, and £500,000 will be made available in 2009-2010.

The Re-imaging Communities programme was launched in 2006, and £3.8 million has been made available through it to date. That programme aims to help people to feel part of the community in which they live by using art as a vehicle to enhance the physical and natural environment and remove displays of sectarian aggression and intimidation. Last December, an evaluation of the programme found that only 18% of organisations that had received funding had previous experience of arts-related work.

The Arts Council administered the £100,000 Start Up programme in 2007-08. That programme sought to provide support to organisations that had not previously availed themselves of Arts Council funding. The Arts Council has allocated a further £50,000 in the current year for a similar seed-funding programme to encourage community groups to initiate arts programmes.

**Mr A Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for that pretty comprehensive response. Can he provide information on any specific methodology that the Arts Council might use to address areas of social need, for example?

3.45 pm

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I refer the Member to the Arts Council, which has responsibility for that matter. In my response to the Member, I made the relevant point that we found that the current Re-imaging Communities programme ascertained only three months ago that fewer than a fifth of the organisations that had received funding stated that they had previous experience in arts-related work. By and large, a lot of that programme work is done in areas of socio-economic deprivation. However, only 18% of the communities that had availed themselves of the funding indicated that they had previous experience in

that type of work. That is an indication of the type of success that has been attained.

Through the Arts Council, we must try to ensure that there is improved access to and delivery of the programmes in the local communities so that they can move away from the manifestations of violence that exist in some working-class areas. Thankfully, those communities want to work themselves away from those. We need to support them, and the Arts Council is not averse to ensuring that that is the case.

**Mr Spratt:** The Minister provided statistics on the Arts Council and funding. Will he reiterate how much funding will be made available during 2009-2010 to encourage community development through the arts?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** It is important that we ensure that people understand the extent of the efforts that are being made to ensure that community development through the arts is a success. The Re-imaging Communities programme has a budget of £600,000 for 2009-2010, and £500,000 will be made available through the Arts Council's small grants programme. The Arts Council will make a further £50,000 available through a seed-funding programme that encourages community groups to initiate arts programmes.

Those amounts may seem reasonably small, but we can judge their success in the communities that have availed themselves of them by looking at how they have helped to transform those areas. Previously, even up to two or three years ago, there would have been manifestations of violence, murder and intimidation on gable walls, but much of that has been replaced by murals and arts programmes that manifest the background, history and culture of the communities but without the violence. That is a mark of the success of those programmes. I have given details of the amounts of money that go into them, and I hope to replicate them year on year to ensure greater success in the future.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire an n-aontaíonn sé liom go n-imríonn na healaíona tionchar an-láidir — agus dea-thionchar — ar dhaoine de gach aois a bhíonn páirteach iontu; agus go n-imríonn na daoine sin féin dea-thionchar ar na pobail ina bhfuil siad ina gcónaí iontu? An n-aontaíonn an tAire liom, mar sin, gur fiú agus gur ceart tuilleadh infheistíochta a chur isteach in ealaíona pobail?

Does the Minister agree that, from the point of view of personal development, the arts provide a powerful and positive influence on those in the community who participate in them? Those people in turn exercise a positive influence in their own communities, and in some cases that leads to a flowering of those communities. Does the Minister agree that community arts warrant being an even higher investment priority?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** Yes.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Question 5 has been withdrawn.

## Violence at Sports Grounds

6. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how his Department monitors violence at sports grounds. (AQO 2511/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is not responsible for monitoring violence at sports grounds. Violence involving spectators is a reserved matter and is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Office. Violence involving players at sports grounds is a disciplinary issue for clubs and sports governing bodies.

**Mr McCarthy:** I thank the Minister for his reply. Does he agree that the delay in the introduction of the Football (Offences) Act 1991 is hindering games taking place — regardless of the venue — without violence being perpetrated against anyone?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I am cognisant of the issues that surround the Member's question. It is only a few months since we saw evidence of violence in a Northern Ireland sport stadium on what was, it has to be said, a very rare occasion. However, when violence does occur, it can be serious. To that end, my officials have had meetings with NIO officials, and, recently, I met Mr Paul Goggins MP, the NIO Minister with responsibility for that issue. I am content that he appreciates the need for progress, and I am in correspondence with him. I trust that we will shortly be in a position to make even speedier progress in order to get a satisfactory resolution so that firm and effective action can be taken against those who perpetrate such activities.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a thabhairt don Aire as an fhreagra sin.

I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he have discussions with football and other sports bodies about earlier kick-offs to offset any potential for violence outside sports stadiums?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** In other parts of the UK, for matches that rate highly for potential difficulties, earlier kick-offs have ensured that problems have been minimised if not eliminated. We all know what we are talking about: less time during the day for alcohol to be consumed. The more time that there is to consume alcohol before a major game, the greater the chance of difficulties, problems and, on a few very rare occasions, violence. Therefore, the earlier the kick-off, the more likely it is that people will be prevented from doing that. Those are issues that the governing bodies must resolve, because they decide the kick-off times. That is usually done in

conjunction with the police, particularly for higher-profile games. I hope that that will continue and, where earlier kick-offs are required, I suggest that they be availed of.

**Mr B McCrea:** The Minister told us that violence at sports grounds is not his responsibility. However, does he accept that well-designed stadiums and venues play a significant role in health and safety? Given that his Department will be involved in the refurbishment of many leading sports venues, has he issued any guidance on that matter to the appropriate authorities?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** The Member raises two separate issues. First, there is the issue of a statutory provision to deal with those who engage in activities that all of us would regard as illegal and violent; that is the responsibility of the NIO. Secondly, there is the issue of the responsibility for stadia provision. We have to ensure not only that, where possible, we have the safety and comfort of spectators uppermost in our minds but that those stadia — where large numbers of people are involved — are constructed in such a way as to make it exceptionally difficult for anyone to engage in illegal activity. We are examining that issue, and I hope to be able to make some progress on safety at sports stadia in the not too distant future.

### Ulster Scots: Underfunding

7. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the total level of underfunding of Ulster Scots compared with Irish, over the past 10 years. (AQO 2512/09)

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** Since the inception of the North/South Language Body in 2000, the amount of funding provided to the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge by my Department has been based on approved actions in the agencies' business plans together with associated staffing costs. Since 2000, approximately £44 million has been allocated to Irish-language projects and initiatives, and £16 million has been allocated to Ulster-Scots projects and initiatives. That includes funding to Ulster-Scots organisations and projects, such as the Ulster-Scots Agency and the Ulster-Scots academy implementation group.

Funding for Irish-language projects refers to Foras na Gaeilge, Colmille, the Irish-language broadcast fund and the Gaeltacht Quarter. The figures do not include funding that is available from departmental mainstream programmes for projects that may have an Irish or Ulster-Scots language or cultural dimension that cannot be separated from the primary funding objective.

**Mr Moutray:** I thank the Minister for his response. Does he see parity of funding as being critically

important to the development of Ulster-Scots heritage, culture and language?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I am grateful for the Member's posing a supplementary question that allows me to develop the theme of funding in the two instances. I outlined the funding that had been made over the past eight years, which indicated a disproportionate investment in Ulster Scots of only £16 million, while £44 million was spent on the Irish language. However, in the past three years the funding allocation from my Department for Ulster Scots has almost doubled from £1.5 million to £2.9 million. In the same period, the funding allocation from my Department to Irish has increased from £6.4 million to £6.8 million, an increase of 6%. There is some considerable way to go to get the parity that is required.

In other contexts, members of some political parties talk about the long term. I assure them and the honourable Member that I am in this for the long term and that the imbalance will be rectified. The disparity is not sustainable, and it cannot be defended, argued for or renegotiated. We are working to eliminate the disparity, and we have made significant progress. I intend to continue, and I hope that I will have the support of all honourable Members for eliminating that disadvantage.

**Mr Brolly:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given the relatively higher status of the Irish language under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the obviously greater level of participation and interest in the Irish language here, the Minister is incorrect in describing the relative amounts of funding as an imbalance. In fact, Sinn Féin contends that, because of that status and level of participation and interest, funding to the Irish language is not proportionate.

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. However, I am afraid that all that the question does is attempt to defend the indefensible. That cannot be done. The status of Irish and Ulster Scots is clear. Under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, the Irish language is in category 3, and Ulster Scots is in category 2. My aim and objective is to ensure that Ulster Scots attains the same level that the Irish language has. It could well be argued by Ulster-Scots groups — I hope that it is — that, in order to attain that status, they need additional funding, not less funding.

4.00 pm

I hope that the honourable Member and those who believe in and support his view re-examine their position on the matter, just as they have had to re-examine their position in other contexts. To discriminate against Ulster Scots is indefensible and will not be tolerated by my Department. I intend to ensure that

parity is achieved. I hope and expect that I will get support for that parity from all honourable Members.

**Mr O'Loan:** Does the Minister not agree that although Irish and Ulster Scots each has a valid place, each has quite a distinct profile as regards its use and historic body of literature, and that, therefore, simple equation of the number and types of projects is simply not a sound policy?

**The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:** It never ceases to amaze me that whenever nationalists put forward arguments for equality in different contexts, they simply demand it and dismiss as irrelevant all subject matter that attempts to explain why inequality exists. When the tables are turned, however, and inequality is absolutely apparent, even to a blind man on a galloping horse, they attempt to say that it is a different matter. It is not different. Equality will be obtained and achieved. If people do not like that, it is their tough luck.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** That concludes questions to the Minister. I ask Mr Shannon to remove the exhibition, as it is no longer required.

## PRIVATE NOTICE QUESTION

### Job Losses in Manufacturing Industry

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Speaker has received a private notice question, in accordance with Standing Order 20, to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I advise the House that, generally, when dealing with a private notice question, only the Member who tabled the question and the Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of the relevant Committee is called. However, given the issue's importance, the Speaker has agreed that each party will be given the opportunity to ask a supplementary question.

**Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide an update on the loss of jobs at Visteon, Shorts/Bombardier, FG Wilson, Nortel and other companies; and on what steps are being taken by her Department to protect the rights of workers and the manufacturing base in Northern Ireland respectively.

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster):** From the outset, I want to reiterate that the job losses that have been announced during the past few weeks by Bombardier, Nortel, FG Wilson and, of course, Visteon are a matter of great regret. My thoughts remain with the employees and families who are affected.

Coming so close together, those announcements underline the impact of the global recession on Northern Ireland and illustrate how much market conditions have worsened during the past few months. I met Bombardier to hear and understand at first hand the reasons behind its redundancies. I am due to have a further meeting with the company's senior management at the beginning of next week.

Invest NI is currently engaging with FG Wilson in respect of significant training and R&D initiatives which offer opportunities to redeploy and retrain skilled labour as an alternative to redundancies. The company is also developing a comprehensive training plan for Invest Northern Ireland's consideration, the focus of which will be on enhancing FG Wilson's skill base to ensure that its products and processes remain amongst the most competitive in the world.

In the case of Visteon, trade union officials from Unite continue to discuss the current situation with the corporation. I have had useful meetings with trade union representatives since the closure — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. The Minister has the Floor. Members must resume their seats. I am sorry to interrupt your remarks, Minister.

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I have had useful meetings with trade

union representatives since the closure of the factory was announced.

In respect of Nortel Networks, Invest NI continues to meet and communicate regularly with both the company's administrators and its management. Speculation continues that Nortel may be able to attract interest in the sale of its core wireless-equipment business to other major blue-chip companies. We are also, therefore, working to ensure that we can promote fully the Monkstown campus's capabilities to take advantage of any new foreign direct investment (FDI) opportunities that may arise.

Unfortunately, in the majority of those cases, redundancies have been a necessary evil and have been made in order to protect the long-term interests and employment potential of major local operations, with Visteon, obviously, being the one to which that does not apply.

The employment rights of workers who have been made redundant by their employers are set out in the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, which is, as Members will be aware, the responsibility of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL).

If those workers feel that their rights have been breached in the execution of those redundancies, they can avail themselves of the services of their trade union, employee legal representatives or the Labour Relations Agency and seek the appropriate advice and guidance that could, ultimately, lead to redress through an industrial tribunal. The interpretation and application of employment law is, ultimately, the role of the chairmen of the industrial tribunals and fair-employment tribunals, who are members of the independent judiciary appointed by the Lord Chief Justice.

It is important that we continue to protect our manufacturing business base and ensure that when market conditions improve, Northern Ireland businesses are well placed to capitalise rapidly. Collaboration is a necessity, and I am working closely with my colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning to identify, as a matter of urgency, any new policies and schemes that could be introduced within the powers and resources that are available to the Executive. That work focuses on the provision of practical support and advice as well as implementing training and reskilling programmes and assistance.

As Members may be aware, I recently announced the establishment of a manufacturing advisory group as a subgroup of the Economic Development Forum (EDF). Trade unions suggested that idea to me recently, and it has received broad support from other members of the EDF. I can announce today that Mark Nodder, managing director of Wrightbus, has agreed to chair that subgroup, and work is currently under way to develop the terms of reference and agree membership.

Those arrangements should be in place in the very near future, and I expect the first meeting to be held shortly.

On an international scale, the Government continue to take action to bring stability to the financial markets on which all businesses depend. We are in constant dialogue with business about how to alleviate the current difficulties. However, people must realise that there is no easy fix and that the measures will take time to have an effect.

**Mr Attwood:** I thank the Minister for her presence this afternoon, and I acknowledge that, during the recent difficult weeks, she has been available in person and by phone. Given that Ford and its subsidiary Visteon have benefited from millions of pounds of grant aid over many years for operations in Northern Ireland, does she consider it unacceptable for Visteon to get up, go, and close its doors? It is a slap in the face for the company's workers, who, during many difficult years, always turned up to work for Ford in this part of the North.

Furthermore, is she concerned that the actions of Visteon and Ford, in denying their obligations to workers and by setting up subsidiary companies, could become a model for other international companies that operate in Northern Ireland and which might do likewise in the future? Finally, what contact has the Minister, and other levels of Government, had with Ford in America in order to ensure that Ford and Visteon honour their obligations to the 200-odd workers in west Belfast?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I had useful meetings with SDLP and Sinn Féin delegations about the issues that the Member mentioned. I heard, at first hand, how hurt the workers felt about their treatment by the management of Visteon, which, rather than announce the news themselves, left that task to the administrators. I empathise with the workers' feelings. However, we must now consider ways to help those people.

I have made several attempts to speak to Ford in Europe — I forget the gentleman's name — but have, unfortunately, been unable to connect with him. I will continue to try to contact him about issues that are within my remit. I encouraged trade union representatives to continue to seek legal advice and to continue to work with their unions. Furthermore, I urged them to look to their contract, which they showed to me, particularly the element that said that their conditions would mirror those of their Ford counterparts — I think that that was the term that was used. I understand that Unite continues to engage with Visteon and Ford, and Government will continue to monitor the situation and do what we can.



**The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan):** I thank the Minister for the details that she has outlined in answer to the question. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment recognises that these are serious difficulties for any Minister to have to confront at the rate at which events have unfolded in recent times.

Will the Minister indicate whether she is content with the degree of economic intelligence available to her and her Department in advance of some developments, and whether she is looking at ways of improving the advance warning that the Department might have? What other interventions are she and her Department looking at in trying to ensure more effective support for firms and workforces that face such situations? Is she considering relaxations of specific EU state-aid rules in order to allow us to help in ways that have been ruled out in the past and to restore some of the supports that were available in the past?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I thank the Chairman for the points he has made. In relation to the first of those issues, I am satisfied with the economic intelligence available insofar as it goes. However, some of the companies involved — I am thinking of Bombardier in particular — are quoted on stock exchanges, and we do not have the information as quickly as we would like, but we understand why that is so. The information is provided to my Department as quickly as it possibly can in the circumstances. To be fair to all of the companies — Nortel, Bombardier and the other company — they have all been in constant contact with my Department, and are working with us. They are trying to find ways of reskilling their people as an alternative to redundancies.

I had a useful meeting with the Minister for Employment and Learning last week, and we are looking at ways to refocus on the provision of practical support for those people who find themselves in difficulties, and for those companies that are economically viable in the medium to long term, but are facing short-term difficulties. Those are the companies with which we need to work, in order to find ways in which to keep those people on board in the short term. The Minister for Employment and Learning and I hope to make an announcement in relation to those issues in the near future.

**Mr Hamilton:** I join with the Minister and others in expressing my concern at the job losses, particularly those at Bombardier Shorts, which most directly affect my constituency and constituents. Does the Minister agree with me that those job losses underscore the importance of the CSeries project? Given the importance of the manufacturing sector to the Northern Ireland economy despite these job losses, can the Minister confirm that she, her Department, the Executive and Invest Northern Ireland remain committed to the

manufacturing sector in Northern Ireland, and will she outline how that commitment is manifested?

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** In relation to Bombardier, the CSeries project is on schedule. My Department and I are working closely with the company to make sure that that new, highly technological development that is taking place here in Belfast goes ahead. There was some confusion in some of the media reports of the Bombardier job losses that they were in some way linked to the CSeries project; they are not. The jobs that will be lost at Bombardier are as a result of the current global recession, and Bombardier has revised its current aircraft production rates downwards. That has nothing to do with the development of the CSeries; in fact, the CSeries development shows that the company is looking to the future. It is providing a new aircraft that will be fit for purpose for the latter half of the twenty-first century. We should take that as a sign that the company is here, and is here to stay.

Indeed, FG Wilson confirmed today in a statement that it remains absolutely committed to its plants in Northern Ireland, and refuted any allegations to the contrary. Those companies are here in Northern Ireland, and want to stay in Northern Ireland, because they know the value of the workforce and the skills base here.

However, those companies are facing a short-term downturn. The Government must find ways to help them, which is why I am having talks with the Minister for Employment and Learning, in the hope that we can bring forward a package to help the manufacturing sector in particular, which, as we know, lost 2% of its base in just one week. That was a huge hit, and we must provide a rapid response that will help the manufacturing sector.

4.15 pm

**Mr P Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat. We hear that the administrators are trying to take action against the Visteon workers to remove them from the site. Perhaps the Minister's Department could look at clawing back some of the money that Invest NI gave to Visteon over the years. We should send out a clear message of support for the workers in the Ford Visteon plant in west Belfast in the hope that the administrators will call off their attempt to remove them. Dialogue is the only way forward in this case, and Sinn Féin urges that.

Gerry Adams MP, along with other colleagues and the Minister, met the Visteon employees to discuss the situation at the plant. That situation is a massive blow to west Belfast and other areas. However, it is easier to sustain existing jobs than to create new ones. On that basis, what is the Minister's Department doing to sustain existing jobs and create new jobs? Go raibh maith agat.

**The Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I hear what the Member says about the administrators at Visteon, and I agree that dialogue is the way to sort out those difficulties. He referred to clawback: Invest NI provided Visteon with financial assistance in 2003 for the development of a fuel rail, and of that offer, £97,210 was paid. In that instance, the letter of offer contained clauses to protect our investment, and clawback will be invoked if we feel that there is a need for it. Having looked at the situation briefly, it appears that that will be the case.

As regards what the Department is doing to sustain jobs, I hope that the Member understands that my talks with the Minister for Employment and Learning are based on practical issues, and on supporting economically viable firms that may not be able to sustain jobs in the short term. I hope that we will be able to do something about that in the short term.

We will continue to look for new jobs and new foreign direct investment (FDI). I met Invest NI international staff this morning in Belfast and I told them that this is a good place in which to do business because of our skills levels and our people. We still need investment from abroad, and there is a need to go out and sell Northern Ireland as a place to invest in. Although I totally agree with the Member about sustaining jobs, there is also a need to look for new FDI.

**Mr K Robinson:** I thank the Minister for her replies up to now. She will recall that I have spoken to her and written to her, and to Sir Reg Empey, expressing my concerns about looming job losses. Unfortunately, we are now dealing with real job losses. Retraining and upskilling will work in some instances, but the approach of some employers has been less than helpful, and we heard about examples of that from other Members. What can the Minister and the Executive do to continue to pursue management to ensure not only that they respond to the positive moves that she is making through the Executive, but to value the work, skill and loyalty that has been put in over the years by existing workforces?

We must retain those workforces; we must ensure that firms survive the economic downturn and that the workforce is there to give the Northern Ireland economy the lift that it is going to need at some point in the future. Will the Minister assure the House that those issues are being considered and will be addressed?

**The Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I thank the Member for his question. He is absolutely right; there is only so much that Government can do. I hope that Sir Reg Empey and I will be able to offer packages in the near future, but employers must play their part and, as part of those packages, offer retraining and reskilling to their staff.

That is a big commitment for them. However, indigenous employers in particular have told me that they want to retain their staff. William Wright of Wrightbus said that the redundancies that he announced some time ago were the first that he had ever had to make. That is a big wrench for someone of his standing.

We will certainly work with employers. We will tell them that they have a responsibility to the community — as I said, most of them take that responsibility seriously — and that we want them to work with the Executive so that we can keep people in their jobs in the short term. By doing so, those firms will be ready when the upturn comes, in the medium to long term. In fact, this represents an opportunity for employers to provide their staff with new skills and training, and we hope that they will see it as such.

**Mr Neeson:** I thank the Minister for her reply, and I acknowledge her efforts in dealing with the problems that have arisen. As the Minister knows, many of the people whom the job losses have affected live in east Antrim. I, therefore, have a personal interest in what is happening.

First, is the Minister satisfied with all the work that Invest NI is doing to deal with the problem? Secondly, can more be done to assist research and development, the creation of new products and the development of further overseas markets?

**The Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** I am glad that the Member mentioned a number of issues. He is absolutely right: we need to raise a number of issues with those firms. That is exactly what we are doing with companies such as FG Wilson. Invest NI has engaged with FG Wilson on training and on new research and development initiatives, and to help it to find new markets for its goods. That is the type of work that we are doing with those companies.

FG Wilson is considering a number of offers of R&D support, and we hope that we will have several R&D projects with the company in the near future. That demonstrates FG Wilson's willingness to do work in Northern Ireland and its commitment to Northern Ireland, which it spoke about in the press today. I have no doubt that it wants to keep its staff in place, as do the other companies, apart from Visteon. Bombardier Shorts and Nortel are here for the long term, and we want to work with them to ensure that they can stay for the long term.

**Ms Purvis:** I thank the Minister for her answers so far. I also thank her for her focus on securing and developing the manufacturing base in Northern Ireland. More than 2,000 job losses have been announced in the past month, the majority of which are from companies in my constituency, including Bombardier Shorts and Hughes Christensen.

First, what use is being made of the EU globalisation fund to reskill and retrain those people who face redundancy? Secondly, apart from clawback, will the Minister clarify what lessons can be learned about the investment money that Invest NI gave to firms for research and development? Products that are researched and developed in Northern Ireland should also be produced here, and not moved out by companies, a point to which other Members referred.

**The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:** The latter issue is a difficult one, because it is only when a company moves research and development to another country that one realises that is what exactly it was planning to do. However, we will continue to apply due-diligence tests to the amount of money that we give to those companies in order to ensure that they remain in Northern Ireland.

Concerns have been raised with me about the use of research and development money in Visteon, and the fact that that money went to South Africa to develop a product that is now being used there. Obviously, that is of great concern to us, and we will pursue clawback, if that is the procedure that we need to use.

We have looked into whether we can avail ourselves of the EU globalisation fund. Unfortunately, however, the scale of the job losses in Northern Ireland is not huge in European terms.

Such job losses are not considered huge in European terms: that would entail the loss of tens of thousands as opposed to thousands of jobs. We have looked at the EU globalisation adjustment fund, but I am afraid that it does not appear that we can avail of it. That is not to say that we will not continue to engage with Europe.

Earlier, the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment said that we should consider relaxing some state-aid rules. We are doing that, and I apologise for not responding to that earlier. We are engaging with Europe and are looking at ways in which we can be more creative with our schemes, and we hope to be able to say something about that in the near future.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Childcare Strategy

*Debate resumed on amendment to motion:*

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the lack of availability of affordable, quality childcare; and calls on the Executive to implement a coherent and properly resourced childcare strategy. [Ms J McCann]

*Which amendment was:*

After the first "childcare" insert

"and the lack of provision for people who require flexible arrangements to allow them to avail of working opportunities in the evenings, overnight and at weekends, particularly in the current economic climate" [Ms Purvis]

**Mr Moutray:** I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate today. Childcare is a pertinent issue that requires due attention from the Executive and from the Assembly as a whole. It is important that we reflect on the Programme for Government and that the Executive placed our economy at the heart of it.

The lack of affordable quality childcare will continue to hamper economic growth and prosperity. If we do not address the issue, we will widen the gap for parents, particularly women, who seek to return to education or employment. Although such a strategy will cost the taxpayer a considerable amount initially in the provision of affordable childcare, the cost will be clawed back, as the provision of childcare will enable parents to return to work or education.

My constituency of Upper Bann, particularly my home town of Lurgan, has been economically deprived for some years. Better childcare funding would improve Lurgan's economy, as it would encourage parents back into employment and learning. Childcare services not only benefit children by improving their lives and social skills, they generate economic benefits by supporting parents in moving to work, education and training.

Childcare is an essential part of today's society, whether it takes the form of childminders, out-of-school nursery clubs, day nurseries or playschools. However, it needs direction. It is important that the House recognise that childcare services are needed not only for young children but for those of school age. We continue to promote lifelong learning and endeavour to reduce unemployment, particularly in the current climate; therefore, a high standard of local childcare facilities is essential.

The Employers for Childcare charity said that no one Department is accountable for the provision of funding; that reinforces the need for the Executive to adopt a multi-faceted approach. Like my colleagues, I call on the Minister of Education to address the issue and the need for childcare beyond pre school places.

The Education Minister has a key role to play, and she has shied away from this issue for too long. She has not given priority to early-years learning, and I call on her to act on this debate and to prioritise the matter.

It would be remiss of me not to mention that, as the Northern Ireland Childminding Association said:

“Childminding provides care and learning for children aged between 0 – 14 years.”

It is important that we do not fall into the trap of thinking that childminding stops at four or five when a child starts school. Childcare is often needed for after-school hours to meet the work patterns of parents in this very different society. That is an important factor that needs to be addressed in the strategy.

Many valid points were raised in the Chamber today, and it has been demonstrated that there is a need for better and more childcare provision across the Province. There is a need for a strategic, coherent, long-term, cross-departmental solution. I support the motion.

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

4.30 pm

**Mr Elliott:** I give a warm welcome to the motion and the amendment. Unfortunately, I and many in this Chamber have listened for many years to the issues surrounding quality affordable childcare. We have heard much in this Assembly about the economy being at the heart of the Programme of Government, and, although it may not be totally obvious, the economy is at the heart of this motion and the debate on it.

The provision of childcare is something that we need to develop and that needs to be progressed as part of the Programme for Government. Any investments in childcare will be repaid in the form of economic and social development. Such investment should, therefore, be included with the economy as a top priority for the Executive. That would help to progress not only the economy but affordable quality childcare, and vice versa. The two work very much in tandem.

Work must be available for those who want and/or need it, and those who want to work must be brought back into a working environment. That would be a start in achieving equality and getting more parents back to work, and I must put on record that I am pleased that some employers now have much more flexible working arrangements. Unfortunately, that is not the case with all employers, but a lot of employers now provide a flexibility in working arrangements that is vital for many parents.

Once parents find work, the next issue that they face is of finding quality, affordable childcare. I know that it has been mentioned, but, coming from the rural community of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, I must touch on the rural aspect of the childcare issue. The issue is particularly acute in rural areas, as they have a

dispersed population, less-developed infrastructure, a lack of public transport and a reliance on using cars. That means that limited and isolated childcare provision can have a particularly devastating impact on the families, individuals and children living in those areas.

I welcome the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development's rural development programme and the establishment of the rural childcare programme as part of her Department's anti-poverty strategy. However, there is still a real need for improvement in that area, and a joined-up approach between Departments is vital. I believe that it was Mr O'Dowd who earlier explained some of the importance of that. There are areas in which, if Departments worked together, the situation could very easily be improved. For example, in the area of education, it may be possible to improve transport to schools or the transport that is available for children who need to go to childcare facilities, perhaps directly from school.

I want to ensure that Members are aware that childcare is not simply about a place for parents to leave their children when they go to work. That is important, but childcare is about much more. The early years are a vital and essential time for the development of children, particularly those aged from 0 to six years and even older. That is why the quality of childcare is absolutely vital.

We in the Assembly have waited far too long for an early years strategy. For many months, we have heard that such a strategy is coming and is soon going to happen. I was told quite recently that it is now imminent. I truly hope that it is imminent, and that it comes forward sooner rather than later.

**Mr D Bradley:** The Member referred to quality childcare. Does the Member agree that childcare is about much more than child minding; that it is, in fact, one of the basic building blocks in the education system; and that those involved in childcare should have the best qualifications available? Does the Member further agree that a transformation fund, similar to that operating in England, is an appropriate way to enhance the expertise of those involved in the childcare workforce here?

**Mr Elliott:** I thank Mr Bradley for those comments. Of course, I agree with his sentiments, which are very close to my heart. Obviously, child minding is an essential part of childcare, but it is also about child development, and it is in that respect that I hope that the early years strategy will resolve at least some of the issues that have been debated today.

I also hope that the strategy will not sit on a shelf gathering dust for years without being progressed and implemented. We heard earlier about all the consultation documents. The issue has been consulted

to death, and what we want is action. We want affordable, quality childcare for parents who need it.

In England and Wales, the decision has been taken that, where there are gaps in the market, local government should be responsible for plugging the hole and providing adequate, quality, affordable childcare. We need to think seriously about the possibility of replicating such provision, tailored to our own needs in Northern Ireland, and, failing that, the Government need to develop a strategy to intervene in the failed market. Many charities and other non-profit organisations would be capable of stepping into the breach if they were resourced more fully and appropriately by the Executive and by councils.

**Mr Beggs:** I declare an interest as a member of Horizon Sure Start in Carrickfergus and Larne. I, too, support the motion and the amendment.

As other Members have said, there have been many childcare strategy documents over the years. In 1999, there was the Department of Health's review of Children First, and, in 2007, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister raised the issue in its investigation into child poverty.

The key words in today's motion are that it is now time to:

“implement a coherent and properly resourced childcare strategy.”

It is not just about producing a fancy document; it is time to actually deliver something. In fact, it is past time. There have been too many theoretical documents; it is now time to do something on the ground.

As I said in an earlier intervention, there was a funding mechanism in place, and that was the Executive programme fund for children. However, our former Finance Minister — who is now First Minister — decided to bring that to an end in order to improve efficiency and effectiveness. Members are aware of the gaps that have been left in their constituencies, because the reality is that the funding mechanism that has replaced it has not been working. Supposedly, Departments were to pick up the projects and continue to fund them, but, clearly, that has not been successful.

I suspect that that is the case because children's issues and childcare issues are cross-cutting in nature, and they do not affect only one Department. Therefore, when Departments prioritise their funding, childcare issues do not come top of the list. Therefore, funding applications have not been as successful as they would otherwise have been if there had been a mechanism in place to prioritise the overall benefits to several Departments. Other Members have also mentioned that issue.

I wish to specifically mention a Skool's Out project in my constituency. A relatively small amount of seed money has enabled that project to provide a successful breakfast club and after-school club. It has been living piecemeal. However, in an area of need, it has delivered

one of the objectives of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister: improved community relations. The project is based in an area that has had a troubled past, yet the children, parents and the management committee come from a cross-community background, and it has contributed to greatly improved community relations in the area.

In respect of community regeneration, that area suffered from houses having to be knocked down because of antisocial elements and other difficulties. Therefore, the project is actually contributing to regeneration in the area — a DSD function.

A major benefit of such clubs is the educational output of homework clubs that assist children in educational attainment. After tabling a question on that matter, it appears to me that that is a key responsibility of the Department of Education. However, equally, our junior Ministers are responsible for children and young people's issues. Either way, the Executive are responsible, and we do not wish to push the problem from pillar to post. We need a resolution.

There is also a health impact in respect of providing good childcare, and the education that comes with it. Therefore, there is a role for the Department of Health.

At a recent Investing for Health conference in Northern Ireland, the Chief Medical Officer for Scotland indicated the importance of investment in those early years to remove health inequalities. Therefore, a major impact can come from investing in our young people.

I support the comments made earlier by Dominic Bradley about how important it is to invest in the young. I also remind Members of Professor James Heckman, Nobel laureate economist, who is working with organisations in Northern Ireland, and whose essential message is that we should invest in the young because it makes economic sense.

Clearly, we need to create a method of joining up the dots; we must not have separate Departments passing the buck. The junior Ministers are ultimately responsible for these issues, and the Office of the First and deputy First Minister, if it does not like the children and young people's fund, must invent something that works similarly. If they wish to rebrand that fund — if that makes them happy — I do not mind. However, we require a mechanism that ensures that the funding that children need will flow, meaning that parents will be able to return to work knowing that their children are safe and are being educated.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I call Mr Alex Attwood. I remind the Member that the time for debating the motion is almost up. I would prefer that he not give way to any other Members.

**Mr Attwood:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I advised my colleague Mr Bradley of that very point before I rose to speak.

I also welcome the motion. A strategy on childcare will be outlined in the near future, and one of the standards against which I will judge any such strategy is the very sensible but moderately costed proposals of the Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA). Over a year ago, that organisation outlined proposals, which would cost only £300,000 a year over a three-year period, to address the lack of child-minding places across the North. Indeed, the SDLP recently tabled a motion in the Business Office that urged the Executive and individual Ministers to implement NICMA's proposals. We must judge forthcoming proposals against that standard.

I say that because, in Northern Ireland, child-minding places account for 76% of full-time day care and 44% of all childcare. NICMA, which is well placed to give good advice, has recommended that the Executive make an intervention of £300,000 a year over three years to begin to undo the evidence of the last three years and make more child-minding places available. That sensible and moderate intervention should be implemented.

If that recommendation were taken up, it would mean two things. First, it would introduce grants in the North similar to those that exist in the Republic of Ireland of perhaps as little as £600 or £700. Those grants would enable people to take up child-caring duties, attain administrative experience, buy equipment and acquire the insurance necessary to keep children in their home. It would also provide for mentoring on an individual basis for new childminders.

The consequences of that — this would be music to Mr Elliott's ears, were he present in the Chamber — would address the needs of areas of the North where child-minding is in the most acute need. That would address the needs of areas of Derry such as Creggan, Brandywell and the Bogside. That would address the needs of areas of south and east Belfast such as Blackstaff, the Mount and Shaftesbury, and it would address the needs of areas of County Fermanagh, including Belleek, Garrison, Newtownbutler and Rosslea. The moderately priced intervention proposed by NICMA would create jobs, opportunities for women to get back into work and new child-minding places in the areas of most acute need. I suggest to the Assembly that it is against that moderately priced proposal that we should judge the Executive's proposals, if and when they come to pass.

4.45 pm

Secondly, we should do something in our own gift about childcare. All Members employ staff, and, without going into issues about those staff, we do not get

childcare support provision for staff in our individual offices. Members of the permanent secretariat in the Assembly and Assembly Members get support, but our office staff, who provide a service to our communities and constituents, do not, through the Assembly provisions, get any support for child-minding. I have many issues with the Assembly Commission, but it should take this matter forward with urgency.

Having said all of that, I must declare an interest. As some Members may know, 20 days ago my wife gave birth to our second child, Anna; and the issue of childcare support and child-minding will be acute for me within the next year.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Everybody knows about the baby by now. *[Laughter.]*

**The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle and congratulations — for the childminding, that is.

I am pleased to respond to the motion and on the important issue of childcare. The Programme for Government commits us to ensure access to affordable, quality childcare, improve educational outcomes for the most disadvantaged and work towards the elimination of child poverty. The important contribution that adequate and affordable childcare can make to reducing poverty was also highlighted in the recent report on child poverty by the OFMDFM Committee.

As junior Ministers with responsibility for children and young people, Jeffrey Donaldson and I are tasked with driving forward the strategy for children and young people. The strategy's aim is to ensure that all children and young people fulfil their potential, and evidence suggests that childcare is a key element in achieving that objective.

The gender equality strategy also recognises the role of childcare in actively promoting an inclusive society and in achieving equal value for paid work and equitable participation in unpaid work. The Beijing "Platform for Action" identified the lack of appropriate and affordable childcare as a factor preventing women from achieving their full potential, and the Equality Commission's statement of key inequalities reached the same conclusion. There are many good reasons for wanting to improve the quality, affordability and accessibility of childcare, and there is a strategic importance in improving gender equality, advancing the social welfare agenda, improving the life chances of children, reducing child poverty and improving the economic prospects of the whole community.

Notwithstanding the current economic downturn, there has been a long-term trend for more women and parents to enter the workforce. As a result, childcare has become an increasingly important public policy issue. Access to good childcare is key to achieving a

range of Government objectives. It enables parents, particularly lone parents, most of whom are women and who are in a group at highest risk of poverty and social exclusion, to move into work, training, education, or, if they so wish, to increase their working hours.

High-quality childcare provision, which every Member has mentioned, can have a positive impact on children's educational and health outcomes and can enhance development and skills. It affords options for children, parents and families to help lift individuals and families out of poverty and social isolation.

For employers, supporting parents to balance work and childcare responsibilities can improve staff morale and retention; improve returns on training; and reduce staff turnover and absenteeism. It can also enhance an organisation's financial performance, productivity and ability to adapt. For society, it supports increased employment and social cohesion — something that a number of Members have mentioned.

Local and international research shows that quality childcare forms the basis of better outcomes for children and the economy. However, research also shows that the best outcomes come from a delivery system that is coherent, organised and strategic. As other Members have said, the system that we have at the moment could, at best, be described as fragmented.

The future prosperity of our economy depends on investment in key areas. Childcare is one such area. We already lag behind some of our Scandinavian neighbours in the approach to delivering childcare, and we must discover what we can learn from those countries that are recognised as Europe's "best in class". However, we do not lag behind only Scandinavia. As a number of Members mentioned, we also lag behind provision in Britain and the South of Ireland in many respects.

Many Departments play a direct or supportive role in the provision of childcare: the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to registration and inspection; the Department of Education in relation to extended schools and early-years education; the Department for Employment and Learning in relation to childcare for those who are engaged in training; the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in relation to creating job opportunities; and the Department for Social Development in relation to funding for women's centres.

Policy must be responsive to demographic, social and economic changes. However, the challenges are substantial. We need to ask some hard policy and operational questions. How, for example, can we devise a system that incorporates high-quality registration and inspection regimes with childcare-workforce planning? How can we respond to the local circumstances of areas with diverse needs or to the needs of families

with preschool children or post-primary children in urban or rural areas? That was something that our rural colleagues also raised.

From the labour force survey, we know that over 230,000 parents who work have children who are under 12 years of age. In that figure, 144,000 parents have children who are under six years of age, but there are fewer than 50,000 registered childcare places. Research sources as diverse as the labour force survey, the millennium cohort study and the Northern Ireland Childminding Association all paint a similar picture. Parents want and need quality childcare that fits with their working lives and supports their children's educational, social and emotional development.

Therefore, we must consider how to best provide childcare services that meet quality standards, are affordable, do not create disincentives to taking up employment, and fit in with the diverse family structures and working patterns of a modern economy. They must be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the working patterns and unique circumstances associated with the current economic downturn, including those seeking to enter or re-enter the labour market. That is easier said than done.

The constraints are very real and include legal issues and considerations as well as the fragmentation of policy responsibility. However, those constraints should not be allowed to divert us from making improvements, because there is an additional imperative beyond the educational and economic benefits of childcare. There are wider benefits to aim for, including the general well-being of our children and their parents.

I strongly believe that robust research evidence is the fundamental basis for good decision-making in government. I am glad to be able to tell the Assembly that the next meeting of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people will discuss a paper that considers the options for the future of childcare here. Although I cannot pre-empt the outcome of those meetings, the issues include whether and how to reshape the childcare vision, strengthen local capacity to provide childcare services, and maximise the synergies among the statutory, voluntary and community sectors, as well as the important role of the private sector and employers in the provision of childcare. Those are issues that Ministers will have to consider how best to address. Several Members raised the issue of disabled children. I assure them that the paper on childcare provision will address the particular needs of those children.

What I have said thus far has described the potential value of childcare, along with the constraints and the imperatives that demand future improvements. That is not a task for government alone. The views and opinions of key stakeholders need to be obtained to

ensure a participative approach to secure development and delivery.

Children and young people need to be directly involved in designing the process. As junior Ministers with responsibility for children and young people, we will continue to ensure that they have the opportunities to be heard and to make their views known on issues that affect them. We established and chaired the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people with the support of all the Ministers in the Executive, the NIO and the Court Service. It is a cross-cutting issue, so all Departments are represented so that they can discuss who has the responsibility or cross-responsibility for childcare services. Departmental attendance is very important.

The subcommittee also provides us with a mechanism for ensuring that cross-cutting children's issues are kept high on the agenda and are tackled with a joined-up approach. Childcare by itself is not a panacea for the eradication of child poverty or the revival of future economic success. It is but one important strand among many. We need to keep focused on a joined-up approach, one that provides leadership and strategic vision, if we are to improve on the current situation. That means putting childcare higher up the policy agenda.

I look forward to reporting back to the Assembly on the outcome of the work that the ministerial subcommittee on children is doing in this important area. Indeed, that subcommittee will meet shortly.

Members stipulated five points about the strategy. It should be: coherent; flexible; not limited to nine-to-five hours; of good quality; and, as our rural colleagues continually — and rightly — remind us, cognisant of the extra pressures that people in rural areas face. With respect to the implementation of the strategy, two Members — Jim Shannon and Alex Attwood — mentioned NICMA. We are aware of that matter, and it will be included. Go raibh maith agat.

**Ms Purvis:** I welcome the support from all sides of the House for the motion and the amendment. As I said, the amendment is intended to expand on the motion in order to reflect the reality of the type of childcare that is needed to address child poverty and to help our economy across the board.

I thank all Members who spoke; all-party support for quality, affordable, accessible and flexible childcare that is age- and need-appropriate — in other words, it is geared towards early-years children, children with disabilities and school-age children — is not in doubt. It is somewhat disappointing that the media seem to be uninterested in a fundamental social policy issue such as this that affects our economy and those living in abject poverty and that also unites this House.

As several Members said, including Mr Moutray and Mr Elliott, childcare facilities are not places for

people to dump their child while they work a shift. They play an important role in a child's development, especially during his or her early years. We know how crucial the early years are in educational achievement and, therefore, in future employment and earning opportunities. In these tight economic times in particular, we must be creative so that people can be helped to make the most of any earning and training opportunities.

We heard from all sides of the House about how a fully funded childcare strategy could help our economy. In order to ensure that such a strategy delivers for parents and carers alike, it must include good-quality options that are accessible, affordable and flexible. I welcome the junior Minister's announcement of further consideration of the matter through the ministerial subcommittee, and I urge it to bring forward a strategy as soon as possible. As Ms Naomi Long said, there is nothing new in the debate, and its outcome will be measured by the response to it.

I shall finish by congratulating Mr and Mrs Attwood on the birth of Anna and Mr Jim Shannon on the birth of his granddaughter.

**Ms Anderson:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

I support the motion and the amendment. I, too, welcome the support of all those Members who spoke.

For women in particular, the lack of suitable, flexible and affordable childcare is one of the most significant barriers to their participation in the labour market. Many Members made that point. Although childcare is a parental issue, as my colleague Jennifer McCann said, more often than not, responsibility for it falls to mothers. Childcare is very much an equality issue; it is about social and economic equality, because those who are on low incomes — the working poor — and those who live in areas of high deprivation have the greatest difficulty in accessing affordable childcare.

As Jennifer McCann, John O'Dowd and Tom Elliott stated, childcare is also about rural equality. The rural childcare stakeholder group's report, which the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development commissioned in 2008, acknowledged the difficult circumstances that women and families face when attempting to find affordable, accessible childcare in rural areas.

As Stephen Moutray said, be in no doubt that the lack of affordable childcare is a massive problem for countless families across the North of Ireland. That reality is borne out by the evidence that Members gave. For instance, in June 2008, there were 92 day-nursery places here for each 1,000 children aged nought to four.

In England, however, there were more than double that number. My colleague Jennifer McCann also reminded Members that childcare is subsidised by 75% in some countries in Europe, compared with a mere 25% here.



5.00 pm

A survey undertaken by the Equality Commission in 2003, which MLA Naomi Long mentioned, found that almost one quarter of employed mothers were constrained in the hours that they worked by childcare problems. A further 20% stated that they were constrained in their choice of job by childcare needs. The working-age economic activity rate for women without dependent children is 73%, and the corresponding rate for women who have three or more dependent children is 45%. Some 67% of women cited the lack of affordable, quality childcare as the main barrier to their seeking employment. Therefore, the lack of childcare is not only failing our children, but, by creating another barrier to employment, it is failing our prospects of economic growth.

Tom Elliott spoke about the need to relate childcare with the economy, and Members should bear that in mind. Despite that, Children in NI pointed out that as far back as 2002, it was estimated that childcare provisions needed to be increased by 20% to meet the demand. However, as Jimmy Spratt said, we are debating this issue at a time when the number of childcare places is falling steadily, rather than increasing. Jimmy Spratt and John O'Dowd called for more childcare provision, as did many other Members.

Unless action is taken now, affordable childcare will continue to become increasingly unattainable for the vast majority of children here. Alex Attwood told us about his daughter, and he said that he had a vested interest in childcare provision. Jim Shannon does not want his beautiful grandchild growing up without her mother having access to childcare provision.

*[Interruption.]*

Mr Shannon does not want his grandchild's mother to have inadequate childcare provision. In Ulster Scots, he said that the wane needed to be minded in a safe place, which is something with which all Members will agree. Tá sé an-tábhachtach go mbíonn páistí in áit atá slán dóibh.

Proper support and resources should be put in place for the Women's Centre and the many voluntary organisations that provide childcare in our communities. Mary Bradley talked about the fiasco around working tax credit and called on all the Ministers — and I noted that it was all the Ministers — not only to take heed of what was being said in the Chamber, but to act responsively and to address the issue.

Action needs to be taken to develop childminding recruitment and retention strategies to ensure that parents have sufficient choice and affordability. We must support those parents, mainly mothers, who choose to stay at home to care for their children in the early years, by providing access to appropriate home-based and group support services. The only way that

we can achieve that — and the only way that we can achieve the level of childcare provision that is required in the North of Ireland — is through the kind of coherent and properly resourced strategy that the motion and the amendment call for.

We cannot pre-empt the outcome of the ministerial subcommittee discussion on childcare, but we hope that it will address the issues that have been raised in the Chamber today and take account of the recommendations of the child poverty inquiry. Dawn Purvis quoted from the OFMDFM report on child poverty, and all the members of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister agreed that the provisions were woefully inadequate.

Danny Kennedy and Naomi Long stated that the findings of the report need to be dealt with sooner rather than later, and I recommend that the ministerial subcommittee consider the OFMDFM Committee's report on child poverty and the recommendations that dealt with childcare. The Executive must take ownership if the ministerial subcommittee report is to have any kind of impact. It must be implemented on a genuine cross-departmental basis.

Despite some comments in the Chamber today, I am mindful that the nought-to-six-year-old strategy is being developed by the Department of Education. I am also mindful that the Minister of Education, along with OFMDFM, will be represented at the World Forum on Early Care and Education, which will be held in Belfast this year. That forum will have representatives from more than 70 countries, and more than 1,000 people will be in attendance. Therefore, work on the issue is being rolled out by Ministers through their departmental remits.

From my experience through the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's inquiry into child poverty, I know that the lack of affordable childcare is a huge issue for a massive number of families and stakeholders. There is a need for a cross-departmental approach, as opposed to its being the responsibility of just one Minister. Stephen Moutray and Roy Beggs said that it was cross-cutting in nature. We need to acknowledge that and take into account that it is the responsibility of many Ministers and the Executive in their totality.

I welcome the fact that childcare provision has been made a priority by the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. What we need to see is those priorities being turned into effective action with real and meaningful change. That was reflected in many of the comments made in the Chamber today.

We look forward to hearing from the junior Minister when he reports to the Assembly on the outcome of the ministerial subcommittee's discussions and to hear specifically how many Departments were represented

and what kind of commitment each of the Ministers or their representatives gave at those meetings.

I support the motion and the amendment. Go raibh míle maith agat.

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

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

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the lack of availability of affordable, quality childcare; and the lack of provision for people who require flexible arrangements to allow them to avail of working opportunities in the evenings, overnight and at weekends, particularly in the current economic climate; and calls on the Executive to implement a coherent and properly resourced childcare strategy.

**Mr D Bradley:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During the debate on world autism awareness day, which was held on 31 March 2009, Mr Savage made a remark that could be construed as meaning that Members benefited financially from their work with the charity Autism Northern Ireland. Members of the all-party group on autism, and Autism Northern Ireland itself, expressed extreme concern to me as chairman of the all-party group about the import of those remarks. Therefore, I ask that the Speaker examine those remarks and rule whether there are grounds for asking the Member to withdraw them.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member may know that that was not a point of order. However, I will refer his remarks to the Speaker.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Loss of Nursing Posts

**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 in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

**Mrs I Robinson:** I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to reject plans to cut 722 nursing posts, given his pledge to the Assembly to make efficiencies rather than cuts, and to re-direct resources towards front line patient services.

The amendment seems to ignore the fact that the efficiency targets are demanded by the Treasury and are non-negotiable, even if we wish to make special dispensations. Efficiency savings are supposed to be about doing things better, not about getting rid of key facilities. Waste, bureaucracy and poor performance have to be tackled.

Unfortunately, the Minister's response to the need to meet efficiency targets has been to punish the community by enforcing stringent cuts on front line services and attempting to palm the blame off on other people. Recent events have shown that Mr McGimpsey's smoke and mirrors routine of trying to claim credit for all that is good about his Department's performance, while trying to blame everyone else for controversial or unpopular decisions, has run its course. It is of no further use, and the Minister stands before us exposed as lacking the imagination or determination to deliver, in a real and meaningful way, on the efficiency agenda. The Health Minister can no longer have his cake and eat it.

A Department that spends millions of pounds on travel expenses should not be threatening to put older people out of their homes; a Department that wastes millions of pounds on bonuses and artwork should not be threatening more than 700 nurses with the axe; and a Department whose postage costs £7 million is not beyond efficiency savings.

I saw a recent press release from a Member making disparaging comments about our call for efficiencies in that area. That is exactly the sort of closed-mindedness that I am talking about. If we do not start looking for efficiencies in this bloated bureaucracy, it will inevitably lead to the cuts in front line services that the Minister has put forward.

The Minister hailed the budgetary allocation awarded to his Department as a great success. Members will remember that debate, because prior to that the Minister had washed his hands of accepting the Budget allocations in the first round. He made great play over not having his fingerprints on the allocation in the first round.

On 22 January 2008, when the final Budget had been agreed by all the Ministers of the four parties, Mr McGimpsey said in a press statement:

“The final budget allocation is a good news story for the Health Service. ... in light of the financial circumstances facing the Executive, I believe it is the best outcome possible.”

He puffed out his chest and claimed that he had done a great job. Indeed, his party colleagues slapped him on the back for his claim to have gained extra money. That being the case, they cannot now adopt the position claiming that health should be immune from the need for efficiencies, or that more than 700 nurses need to be axed because of spending plans forced on the Minister by malevolent outsiders. Either the Minister got a good deal or he did not. He cannot have it both ways.

Recent history has shown that Mr McGimpsey has undergone a remarkable, rapid transformation from the Bevanite, cradle-to-the-grave, Minister — and every other cliché he has deployed to describe himself — to the Minister for cuts. Gone is the man who welcomed the president of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions to his party conference; to be replaced by axe-man McGimpsey, cutting away at our front line health services.

On 2 May 2008, he said —

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

**Mrs I Robinson:** No, I will not.

On 2 May 2008, he said:

“To start to make cuts is not what people voted us in to do”.

Just a couple of months ago, on 2 February, he was adamant:

“No cuts will be made to front line services.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 37, p154, col 1*].

How did we get to this point? We are here because the Minister is trapped in headline-chasing mode, which is doing the people whom he should be working for a disservice.

The sole determining factor in whether an issue becomes “top priority” for the Health Minister appears to be whether he is speaking to a group of people with an interest in the subject, or whether it is receiving specific media attention at the time. For example, take eating disorders. The DUP, in common with other parties in the House, consistently states that there is a need to improve the care available for people who suffer from eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. We all exhorted the Minister to do more to help those

who were suffering owing to a lack of provision, but we were repeatedly given the brush-off.

5.15 pm

The only thing that managed to elicit a response from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on that issue was his overriding desire to avoid negative publicity. Only when the BBC started to ask questions did the Minister announce the creation of a tiny unit. The Minister, speaking on the radio, suggested at one point that we could have one dedicated bed in each trust area. How on earth would that contribute to the development of an effective state-of-the-art service? It would not even touch on the problem.

We have seen that pattern from Mr McGimpsey before. He is, of course, perfectly happy to claim the credit for initiatives, such as free prescriptions, yet he tries to blame other people for his decision to axe 700 nursing posts and to close residential homes for the elderly as part of his programme of cuts — a programme that the House, including Members from his own party, has rejected.

Since he became Minister, Michael McGimpsey has stated in his press utterances that no fewer than five subjects are his top priority: suicide prevention; healthier lifestyles; improving access to mental-health care; high-quality health facilities; and health provision in the south-west. That is government by press release, lacking in strategic vision, or capacity —

**Mr Spratt:** He does not like other people doing that.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. All remarks must be made through the Chair.

**Mrs I Robinson:** — for new or fresh thinking.

Mr McGimpsey, it seems, is more interested in chasing headlines and in building up his media profile than in tackling the serious issues in our Health Service. Instead of describing an issue as a top priority every time the media ask questions — [*Interruption.*]

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. There appears to be a problem. I wish to make it clear to everybody that remarks must be made through the Chair.

**Mrs I Robinson:** I will repeat the last part, because it is important. Mr McGimpsey, it seems, is more interested in chasing headlines and in building up his own media profile than in tackling the serious issues in our Health Service. Instead of describing an issue as a top priority every time the media ask questions, Mr McGimpsey would do better to spend his time devising serious policies that are designed to improve all healthcare fields in Northern Ireland.

It is an off-the-cuff suggestion, but if the Minister would like to sit with me in an accident and emergency facility, in any hospital in Northern Ireland, on any given day or evening, I would be happy to sit with him

and let him observe exactly what sort of crisis our Health Service is in. A reduction in the number of nurses and professionals on the floor of those A&E units does not bear thinking about — A&E units can barely manage as it is.

I throw down that challenge to the Minister: any day or night, at any time, I will sit with him in the accident and emergency unit of his choice, in order to let him see what pressures our Health Service front line staff are under. I support the motion.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Before I call Mr McCallister to speak, I repeat that all remarks will be made through the Chair, and I insist that the debate be conducted in that manner.

**Mr McCallister:** I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after “Safety” and insert

“to review proposals from health and social care trusts to reduce nursing posts, including requesting from the Executive that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is exempt from the comprehensive spending review efficiency savings process thereby devoting more resources towards front line patient services.”

This debate is essentially about the DUP’s political priorities. Some people in the DUP would rather play politics with our Health Service than maintain a consistent or credible position that has the best interests of the Health Service and the people of Northern Ireland at its heart.

Since the draft Budget was debated in late 2007, the proposer of the motion and some of her colleagues have done nothing but attack the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on every possible occasion, not with the interests of the Health Service in mind, but in an attempt to discredit a Minister who is, despite their sniping, actually delivering.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr McCallister:** As the record will show, that is much to the DUP’s shame.

There is a significant gap between the size of the health budget in Northern Ireland and that in England. Even the DUP made that clear in 2005 when its manifesto called for a 20% rise in health spending. However, the DUP did not deliver anywhere near that level of increase when it got into a position of power. At the end of the current CSR period, that gap will be somewhere in the region of £600 million, but despite that huge gap, the DUP is silent on the issue.

Indeed, the proposals in the previous Finance Minister’s original Budget would have made the situation even worse. Thankfully, the Health Minister, along with thousands of people who work in the Health Service, fought for, and won, extra resources, despite the aggressive opposition to that from Mrs Robinson and some of her colleagues.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr McCallister:** Due to the extra money that was secured, the Health Minister has been able to announce a series of new measures, such as initiatives to deal with cervical cancer and provide breast screening and extra cardiac operations, to name but a few. Ultimately, that money will save lives, yet some people in the DUP oppose the Minister getting a single penny extra; they really should be ashamed of themselves.

As everyone knows, the DUP wholeheartedly —

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

**Mr McCallister:** No one in the DUP ever gives way to me.

**Mr Easton:** I promise that I will.

**Mr McCallister:** Can you believe a DUP promise? *[Laughter.]*

As everyone knows, the DUP wholeheartedly supported efficiency savings. In case some on the DUP Benches have forgotten, every single DUP Assembly Member marched through the lobby in support of efficiency savings. The DUP’s pathetic attempt to now distance itself from any efficiency-saving proposals smacks of crass political hypocrisy.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr McCallister:** The DUP not only supported efficiency savings, it advocated reform. In the ‘News Letter’ on 28 November 2007, Mrs Robinson stated:

“In order to continue defending almost half the budget being directed to just one sector with any credibility, we must be able to point to radical reform and modernisation.”

Once again, the DUP’s glowing sentiments appear to be at odds with the record of what it actually did.

Some in the DUP have opposed the Minister when he has attempted to meet the Executive’s targets. When he introduced radical reforms and modernisation programmes, there was DUP opposition that was led by Mrs Robinson, who sniped from the sidelines and opposed the most progressive parts of the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill when it was proceeding through the House.

I must question whether some people in the DUP are serious about health and ask whether, when bringing pointless motions to the Floor of the House, they really have the welfare of the people of Northern Ireland at heart. We hear nothing in such motions about Peter Robinson emphasising the importance of efficiency savings; nor do we hear anything about efficiency savings in DUP-led Departments or about the waste of resources that is, in many instances, emanating from those Departments.

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

**Mr McCallister:** Perhaps even worse than that is the DUP's opposition to Northern Ireland's new Public Health Agency. That is a radical initiative that the rest of the UK and Europe is watching with interest; however, what did our heroes in the DUP do about it? They predictably, but no less disgracefully, opposed the new agency in both the Committee and the House. Where was Mrs Robinson's call for radical form?

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

**Mr McCallister:** Briefly.

**Lord Morrow:** I suspect that the Member is in support of the amendment. *[Laughter.]* Does he recall that when the health budget was uplifted to in excess of 50% of the overall Budget for running Northern Ireland, the Minister categorically stated that he was very happy and content and that he had fought a good fight to obtain a budget of that size? Will Mr McCallister take that into account in his comments?

**Mr McCallister:** I am more than happy to comment on that, because it touches on what Mrs Robinson said earlier. The Minister was stating the fact that it was a better settlement than that which the DUP wanted him to be given. Indeed, for months, the DUP campaigned against a single penny extra being given to the Minister of Health and his Department.

When the DUP was in opposition, before devolution, it wanted a 20% increase and was critical of increases as small as 9%. However, when it reached a position where it could do something about the funding of the National Health Service in Northern Ireland, it dramatically failed to do anything. The Minister and Members on this side of the House agreed that the uplift was very welcome, in comparison with what every DUP Member wanted the Health Service to be run on. That is my simple answer.

Members also had to sit through the spectacle of the DUP attempting to defend smoking advertisements at points of sale. Those advertisements predominantly affect children and have the potential to place a great financial burden on the Health Service in Northern Ireland. The Ulster Unionist Party will not be lectured by a party whose record on health has been completely discredited.

The proposal to reduce the number of nursing posts is simply a proposal. Many of the trusts' proposals have just arrived on the Minister's desk, and no final decisions have been taken. My party fully understands the concerns expressed on this issue. The Minister will examine those proposals closely before taking any final decisions. I was grateful to the Minister for his recent decisions regarding Skeagh House and Slieve Roe House.

However, if the amendment were passed today and agreed by the Executive, that would mean that such a

proposal would not have to be implemented in the current CSR period, which will allow proper time for real change to take place. If the DUP is serious about what it says, it will have no problem in supporting the amendment. If it does not want efficiency savings and does not deal with the consequences of what it has proposed and agreed to, it must reverse its position.

Let me be clear: Ulster Unionist Party Members are not against efficiency savings. We believe in an efficient and effective Health Service, but we have concerns about the size and pace of some of the changes that are required in such a short period. Having listened to those on the front line, including UNISON and the RCN, we know that our amendment has the support of front line health workers.

If Members support the amendment, they will charge the Minister with reviewing the proposals and making a case for exemption in the current CSR period. I appeal to all Members to listen to our health workers and to support the amendment, thus allowing proper time for real and meaningful change. After all, when it comes to health, we are dealing with individuals' lives.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion, which is closely linked to the motion tabled by the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and debated in February, which called on the Minister to ensure that efficiency savings did not impact on front line services. In that debate, all the arguments were well rehearsed about the impact that proposals would have on front line services, particularly in relation to job losses, closure of residential homes and lack of domiciliary care. The Minister was left in no doubt about Members' concerns.

Today's motion focuses on the loss of nursing posts based on the trusts' current best estimate, which is that 722 nursing posts will be lost. In a briefing paper supplied by the Royal College of Nursing, it is clear that the RCN supports the reform and modernisation of health and social care services. However, it is also clear that much work remains to be done by the trusts to build the confidence of the public and the healthcare workforce in the new health and social care services. The manner in which the trusts have progressed the proposals and consulted has been fragmented and confused to say the least.

In Committee, we examined how the savings are to be made and how they are likely to impact on front line services. We received evidence from a combined delegation of trade unions, who told the Committee that there was a severe lack of information for its members. We raised that issue with the Minister and with the trusts. In fact, in a previous debate in the House, the Minister recognised that that was a problem and told us that it would be rectified. However, that has

obviously not happened, because we are debating the issue again.

In its briefing paper, the RCN states that it is still not aware of the details on the loss of nursing posts and where they will occur, and it has absolutely no idea of a time frame. That is totally unacceptable, and I call on the Minister for clarity on those matters.

5.30 pm

The UUP's amendment is, I believe, an attempt to protect its Minister. The UUP fails to recognise that the CSR proposals are a British Treasury-driven initiative. We are not masters of our own economic destiny. If Members had voted for the motion that was tabled by my party colleague Mitchel McLaughlin, which called for more fiscal autonomy for the Assembly, perhaps we would be in a different situation.

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

**Mrs O'Neill:** No, I have only a short time left.

The Health Department has a unique arrangement with DFP, which allows it first call on money made available at each monitoring round. We all welcome that. To go down the route of making the Health Department exempt from the CSR process sounds great, idyllic and the best thing to do. However, that would have a knock-on effect on other Departments. All Ministers struggle to meet the CSR demands and all Ministers have targets to meet. We all need to realise where we are. The amendment would have an impact on the other Departments. Where would we take the money from? Should we take it from social housing or from education? We would have to take it from another public service. That would be a hard decision, and one that the Executive would have to make.

We need Michael McGimpsey, the Minister of Health, to step up and do the job that he has been appointed to do. In an earlier debate in February on efficiency savings in the Health Service, he made it clear that he has the final say in all those matters. The trust proposals come to the Minister for his approval, and he said:

"If formal consultations do not produce a clear position, cuts will simply not get through." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 37, p316, col 1*].

On that basis, I urge the Minister to examine in detail the proposals that are being put forward by the trusts, and to reject any measures that will result in cuts in nursing posts, as that would have a direct impact on front line services. I support the motion.

**Mrs Hanna:** The SDLP is sympathetic to the spirit of the amendment, but it believes that no Department can be totally exempt from efficiency savings. However, there should be no cuts to front line services. I have sympathy with the Minister in trying to balance a budget for such a demand-driven service, but I believe that the

proposers of the motion are engaged in a bit of a cynical exercise. Rather than point-scoring, I would like to have heard some proposals for savings from the Chairperson of the Health Committee that would ensure that there will be no reduction in nursing posts, which is what the motion is about. Have the proposers of the motion asked their colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he has reviewed his comprehensive spending review policy with regard to the impact on employment and services? Indeed, do they have any suggestions for saving resources?

There is a fundamental contradiction between the loss of nursing jobs and the stated aim of the comprehensive spending review to free up resources to reinforce front line services. Speaking as someone who was a nurse for all too many years, there is nothing more front line than a nurse at the bedside of a desperately ill patient, or a nurse in the community who is an essential member of a primary care team.

I recognise that the reform and modernisation of health and social services is a never-ending and ongoing challenge. We support the Minister's intent and his commitment towards an ever-greater focus on positive public-health promotion. It is not just about treating the consequences of ill health, it is about appropriate care in the community.

We recognise that the comprehensive spending review efficiency targets have been imposed on the Health Minister in an arbitrary fashion. The SDLP also recognises that given that the health budget accounts for almost half of Executive spending, there must be greater efficiency and enhanced productivity in the Health Service.

The trusts must put in place robust workforce development plans to ensure that registered nurses are adequately trained for the new service delivery that is expected of them. The planned cuts and redeployment of staff will have significant training and professional regulatory implications.

Nurses cannot be treated like pieces on a chessboard: a nurse cannot be taken out of an acute ward and shifted into community nursing without appropriate training, induction and support, or into mental-health nursing without statutory post-registration induction, education and support. Adjustments will certainly be required in the clinical mix among doctors, registered nurses, allied health professionals and care assistants. However, the casualization of nursing skills, which occurred so disastrously in the Thatcher era, cannot be repeated. So much was lost, and we are still trying to regain that ground.

The Royal College of Nursing has produced credible evidence to show that the critical role of the ward sister and other nurse managers is being undermined by the proposals. In some hospitals, ward managers are being

asked to work across too many wards and too many locations. When that happens, the role of nursing ward managers as clinical leaders and patient advocates is undermined.

There is a continuing reduction of specialist nursing posts and a tendency to place inappropriate and unpaid leadership responsibilities on band 5 and 6 registered nurses, particularly on night duty staff. Senior nursing posts should be created in every acute hospital, which might convince nurses that their concerns are being listened to.

All changes must, of course, keep section 75 in mind. Any changes must be implemented with equality, integrity and probity, and, at all times, they must put patients' interests first. The bottom line is that there should be absolutely no reduction in front line services and in nursing posts, as has been stated in the motion.

**Mr McCarthy:** The Alliance Party members will not, and cannot, support policies initiated by the Executive or the Minister to cut the number of front line nursing staff. Despite repeated denials by the Health Minister, that will be the end result. We will support the motion and oppose the amendment, because we do not believe that cutting front line positions is necessary to attain the efficiency-saving targets as outlined.

The Minister was correct when he said that his baseline budget was inadequate. We agreed with that, but he is wrong to try to suggest that cuts in front line provision are necessary to operate within that budget. By playing politics with front line staffing positions, the Minister is only harming the case that he made for a higher budget, which we supported at the time. We appeal to the Minister and the Executive to halt the process and to stop immediately the loss of over 700 nursing jobs throughout Northern Ireland.

Any person who has been in hospital for any reason must have seen at first hand that all the nursing staff are completely overworked, almost to the point of exhaustion. The Health Service needs more qualified nurses to carry out the duties that they are expected to perform in the interests of the patients whom they serve.

Of course the Alliance Party wants efficiencies and savings to be made across all health provisions and in all Departments.

**Mr Kennedy:** Tell us. Where are they?

**Mr McCarthy:** Listen. Give us a chance.

We accept the many advances in the administration of health techniques in almost every aspect. We also acknowledge the increase in demands on the Health Service; again, that is despite all the preventative measures that have been taken and despite people's having been educated to look after their own health. Where there is demand, in our opinion, it is incumbent

on Government to provide — as our own Health Minister has said repeatedly — a world-class Health Service. That cannot be achieved by reducing the number of nursing staff by over 700.

In preparation for the debate, I expect that all Members will have had the opportunity to read the comments of the Royal College of Nursing for Northern Ireland, which has been mentioned already. It has made many comments, among which is that nurses are at the front line in delivering care to patients and that the reduction of their number by 700 will have a disastrous effect on their professional ability to deliver the first-class service to which we all aspire.

The reduction of 700 nursing posts cannot be delivered by voluntary retirements or by what is called "natural wastage". The consultation process was confused and fragmented. The RCN, as the authority for the nursing profession in Northern Ireland, must be listened to and worked with in order to ensure that bad decisions are avoided before it is too late.

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

**Mr McCarthy:** No, I am racing on here.

Recently, increased costs to the Health Service have been revealed — *[Interruption.]* Listen, chaps.

**Mr Kennedy:** Listen up.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. Some Members appear to have forgotten my earlier pronouncement that all remarks must be made through the Chair. Continue, Mr McCarthy.

**Mr McCarthy:** Recently, the vastly increased cost to the Health Service of hefty compensation claims due to medical negligence has been revealed. How does that occur? If that is the case at present, what could it be in the future when the number of nursing staff is reduced by around 720? That places even more responsibility on fewer staff. Is that not a recipe for even more mistakes and more compensation claims to be made?

What about the extra cost to the Health Service of having to rely more on agency staff? The director of the RCN said recently on that issue that you cannot get much more front line than a nurse and that the college is greatly concerned about the impact that the reduction in nursing posts will have on patient care.

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

**Mr McCarthy:** No. Nurses want to provide good care to patients.

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

**Mr McCarthy:** Did a Member want me to give way? *[Laughter.]*

My party is concerned that the loss of those 700 jobs will have a detrimental effect on care throughout the community.

**Mr Buchanan:** In rising to support the motion, I make it clear from the outset that my party will neither give credence to nor support the amendment. It is one of the most ludicrous and ill-thought-out amendments that I have ever seen brought to the Floor of the House. It contradicts everything that the Minister has said previously.

Of course, that is nothing new from a party for which “delivery” is not a word in its vocabulary. To suggest, as the amendment does, that the Minister should review health trusts’ proposals to reduce nursing posts rather than reject totally plans to cut 722 nursing jobs, as is demanded by my party’s motion, beggars belief. The Assembly now has clear evidence that that party speaks with a forked tongue: it sings from two entirely different hymn sheets.

I remind the Minister and his party that he has, on several occasions, given his pledge, both to the Health Committee and on the Floor of the House, that efficiency savings in his Department would not affect front line services. On 10 February 2009, the Minister reiterated his position in the House when he said:

“Let me make it clear — efficiency savings are not cuts. That is why, when I became Minister, I considered, and threw out, what had been proposed under direct rule”. — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 37, p315, col 2*].

5.45 pm

If the Minister is true to his word, he will have no alternative but to reject outright any plans to cut 722 nursing posts. The message from nursing staff in hospitals across Northern Ireland is crystal clear — they are already overstretched and under pressure. All Members will agree that nurses provide front line services to patients at bedsides or in the community. Therefore, the suggestion of reviewing the trusts’ proposals to reduce those front line staff flies in the face of any previous commitments or promises that the Minister gave to the House.

**Mr Easton:** The Minister also said:

“The final budget allocation is a good news story for the Health Service.”

The Ulster Unionist Party says that it does not have enough money, yet, at the time, the Minister announced that he was happy with the Budget. Is that not a contradiction?

**Mr Buchanan:** I thank the Member for his input; there is ambiguity in the Ulster Unionist Party’s stance. The Minister must come clean and outline his true position on those issues to the House.

The second part of the amendment calls for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public

Safety to be exempt from the comprehensive spending review efficiency-savings process thereby devoting more resources towards front line patient services. I remind the Minister and Members from the Ulster Unionist Party that the comprehensive spending review was not plucked out of thin air or dreamed up by a member of the Executive. It was handed down by the Treasury as a mechanism to reduce over-bureaucracy in Departments in order to enable them to operate more efficiently, enhance productivity and free up resources for reinvestment into front line services.

**Mrs I Robinson:** I thank the Member for giving way. As the Member will be aware, despite the fact that the comprehensive spending review was Treasury orientated, the Executive agreed that if the Department of Health realised — or bettered — the 3% savings, it would retain those extra moneys. No other Department received such benefits.

**Mr Buchanan:** The Member is correct; no other Department was afforded that benefit. The Minister said that the additional funding will:

“save lives and transform the lives of thousands more.”

He said that without those efficiencies the Department would be unable to deliver all the new service developments around cancer, mental-health and learning disabilities, because the efficiencies are paying for those developments.

On the one hand, the Minister says that the efficiencies will pay for those new services; on the other, his party says that the Health Department should not be part of the comprehensive spending review. One part of the party does not know what the other part is doing. Moreover, it should be noted that other Departments must rebid for any efficiencies from the pot. As the honourable Member Mrs Robinson said, the efficiencies in the Health Department return directly to that Department to be reinvested in front line services.

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

**Mr Buchanan:** I support the motion.

**Mrs McGill:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate. My party colleague Michelle O’Neill outlined our position on the motion and the amendment. The debate raises the profile of nurses’ significance in society and highlights how Members value their work.

However, there is some ambiguity about the figure of 722 jobs. It would be valuable if there were some clarity about where that number came from in the first instance, and whether those 722 posts will disappear completely.

The Minister has said on occasion that these are not cuts. Other Members have referred to that. I am prepared to accept that what the Minister has said is



the truth — that these are not cuts; they are changes to front line services. However, the point is that we need to know whether the changes to the front line services will enhance the service, or will change it in such a way that patient safety and health would be adversely affected. I am prepared to accept what the Minister has said, but there is ambiguity, and we need some clarity on that.

In the briefing from the RCN, which has already been mentioned, reference is made to the Minister's comments of October 2008. The briefing states that the RCN generally supports the direction of travel of the modernisation. We all do. Perhaps I should not generalise in that way, but many of us accept the modernisation. As the spokesperson for the RCN said on another occasion, we are not against change for the sake of being against change, but we do need to establish exactly what the effect will be, whether these truly are efficiency savings, and exactly what the situation will be in the ward.

The RCN briefing made the point that there are issues related to training. If a nurse, for example, has to shift from one particular area of work to another, when and how will that training take place? I spoke with a representative of the Western Health and Social Care Trust this morning, and raised that issue. I am not sure that the way in which that will happen — moving from one area of work to another — has been sorted out. There has to be some type of time frame for that. I would welcome clarification on that from the Minister.

My understanding is that 350 nursing posts are under consideration in the Western Trust area. That was mentioned at a meeting of the Health Committee when Mr Easton raised the issue with Elaine Way. The issue of reinvestment was raised, which will involve 216 posts in the Western Trust, leaving 134 posts unfilled. I am keen to know where those 134 posts will go. I understand from a report produced by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) in relation to clostridium difficile and nursing shortages in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust that there is a direct link between nursing shortages and infection. I would welcome some clarity about those 134 posts. Will we notice that gap in the Western Trust? My reading of the issue is that that has not been managed in a uniform manner across the trusts. When I spoke to the representative of the Western Trust today, I got some reassurance on how it was being managed. We in the west will be keen to follow that up.

Before finishing, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I want to state, as have other Members, that we value the work that nurses do. We do not want to put them under extra pressure. There is not enough money for everything. The Minister himself has said — and I could not agree more — that there have been years of underfunding here. As the Minister said, that is unacceptable. The

difference between here and England amounts to £600 million —

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

**Mrs McGill:** I welcome today's debate. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

**Mr Poots:** Here we go again with the Ulster Unionists. If one had taken out the references to the DUP from Mr McCallister's speech, it would have been reduced in content by around one third. He made the usual cry of give us more money and we can do the job. He should not take on the job of rocket scientist, because anyone could claim that if they were given more money, they could do a better job.

We want to see the Minister do a good job with the money that he has, and cutting 722 nursing jobs does not represent doing a good job.

My wife is a nurse, so I should declare an interest. It is not that the proposed cuts will have a personal consequence for me, but they will have a consequence for the thousands of people who benefit from the service that Health Service nurses provide.

Mr McGimpsey has yet to challenge the Appleby Report. I want to hear today whether he will say that the Appleby Report is not fit for purpose. Professor John Appleby said that Health Service productivity in Northern Ireland was 17.4% less than that in the rest of the UK. As a consequence of that, it was determined that £280 million of savings were there to be made. If the Ulster Unionists are going to challenge that, and say that the Appleby Report is not up to scratch and that they want to take it apart piece by piece, I want to hear them do that. They have not done that to date.

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

**Mr Poots:** I am happy to give way. Let us hear what the Member has to say about the Appleby Report.

**Mr McCallister:** Will the Member also accept that one of the key elements of the Appleby Report was to do with public health, and the need to engage the population and urge them to look after their health better by tackling drinking, obesity and all those problems that lead to huge health inequalities? However, that lot voted against the Appleby Report in the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and in the Chamber.

**Mr B McCrea:** And smoking.

**Mr McCallister:** Smoking as well. The DUP supported that. If we are to debate the Appleby Report, let us debate it all.

**Mr Poots:** It appears that Mr McCallister's answer to all this is to create another quango that will cost more taxpayers' money. Over the past 10 years, although the health budget has doubled, we have seen administration and management costs rise by 33%. The

money has gone not to the front line but to administration. That is where Mr McGimpsey must start looking, because that is what efficiency savings are about. They are not about cutting nursing jobs or services for senior citizens —

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

**Mr Poots:** Yes, in a minute.

It is about tackling the difficult issue of administration and management costs. *[Interruption.]*

I will give way to Mr Kennedy now.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order, please. Let us restore order in the Chamber. I am keen that everyone be present for the vote, but one or two Members' participation in it is looking a bit dodgy. I ask all Members to make their remarks through the Chair.

**Mr Kennedy:** I thank the Member for giving way. At least we now have clarity on the DUP's position. Apparently it wants to protect the 722 nursing jobs. It is doubtful whether the party is under pressure to do so, but the DUP effectively wants to sack hundreds of Health Service employees. Will the Member confirm that that is his party's position?

**Mr Poots:** I thank Mr Kennedy for his intervention. That is why I like to give way to the Ulster Unionist Party. He does not want to do away with administrative positions, which are of no help to people in the front line, but he wants to sack the nurses. Let us get that message out. This is what the deputy leader of the Ulster Unionist Party is saying today: sack the nurses and keep the pen-pushers in their jobs. That may be the price that the Ulster Unionist Party is prepared to pay, but it is not the price that the DUP is prepared to pay, nor is it the price that Members from the other parties are prepared to pay.

Over the period in question, Mr McGimpsey's Department will get a 3·8% increase each year. The Health Service is not being cut; it is receiving increases above inflation whether Mr McGimpsey likes it or not. The efficiency savings that should be made would be ploughed back into the Health Service.

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

**Mr Poots:** Yes; I always welcome the opportunity to give way to Basil McCrea.

**Mr B McCrea:** Does the Member agree with the statement that Mrs Iris Robinson made in the House of Commons, in which she described the direct rule health budget increase of 9% as insufficient? Does he agree with her when he says that Northern Ireland has suffered years of underinvestment? Does he agree with her when she says that to get up to the same funding levels as England, we need a 20% increase? Does he agree with those statements? Will he support our

Minister in getting more money for our people and our Health Service?

**Mr Poots:** Basil McCrea called me "Mr Angry" earlier, but he does anger even better. We must tackle issues such as bed blocking and those consultants who use hospital facilities to operate semi-private services in the Health Service.

We do not need to be endangering the lives of expectant mothers by closing maternity units such as the one in Basil McCrea's Lagan Valley constituency. I put it on the record today that the Royal Victoria Hospital, Antrim Area Hospital and Craigavon Area Hospital are not fit to cope with additional births.

6.00 pm

If Mr McGimpsey proceeds with his plan, he will be putting the lives of expectant mothers and their children at risk as a consequence. We need to tackle those issues. Mr McGimpsey is pleased to tell the public that he can provide more money for Herceptin, free prescriptions and IVF. I am happy with all of those decisions — however, I am not happy if they are taken on the back of sacking nurses and doing away with 722 nursing posts. The Ulster Unionist Party may be proud of that, but I am wholly opposed to it. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. The Deputy Speaker is allowed to be heard. The business on the Order Paper has not been disposed of by 6.00 pm. In accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow business to continue until 7.00 pm or until business is completed. Again, I hope that all Members will still be here for that.

**Mr Gardiner:** Political distrust is a very unpleasant commodity. The political distrust that lies behind a whole string of DUP motions in the Assembly is clear for the entire electorate to see. For the DUP Finance Minister to impose 3% efficiency savings on the Health Service here and then for Mrs Robinson, the DUP Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, to lead a series of debates criticising the Health Minister when he tries to implement those efficiency savings is a deeply cynical thing to do.

This is playing political games with difficult decisions that affect people's lives and only demonstrates the failure of partnership Government, rather than the efficient discharge of the scrutiny function rightly placed with the Assembly Committees. Bringing endless political point-scoring debates to the Floor of the Assembly — with the name of Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety appended to them — fatally undermines the partnership that should exist between the Committee and the Minister; a partnership that is designed to procure the best results for patients and users of the Health Service.

Unfortunately, such petty political point-scoring is what we in the other parties have come to expect from the so-called lead party of Government. To the ordinary voter, of whom I am one, it simply looks like a political set-up or game — cut the Minister's money and then criticise him every time he tries to make efficiencies.

Frankly, the scale of the problems that face us in the Budget, public spending, job protection and creation are so great that this kind of political distrust that the DUP indulges in is deeply damaging to the whole process and credibility of government here. It is about as far away from statesmanship, and giving real and responsible leadership, as one can get. This is coming from a party that is playing politics when real leadership is needed, a party that has failed to recognise what even the dogs in the street know — that there is a hole in the Executive's finances that the DUP Finance Minister has failed to deal with for the past seven months.

That is why I strongly support the amendment that my honourable friend John McCallister proposed today. It reflects the realities of the situation in the Health Service, and not the 'Through the Looking-Glass' events that the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety presented.

There have been years of underfunding in health and social care, and there is already a £600 million funding gap between Northern Ireland and England. We need almost £300 million per annum to make our services match those delivered in England and another £300 million to match the investment that those services will receive this year and next.

**Mrs I Robinson:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Gardiner:** No, thank you.

Instead, the reality is that the DUP, using its voting strength in the Executive, has imposed savings on the Health Minister of £700 million over three years. That masks the total failure of the DUP, when it entered Government through its close partnership with Sinn Féin, to negotiate a peace dividend from the United Kingdom Government. The DUP said that it would not enter Government without such funding, but it did. It was only because the Health Minister fought for extra funding that he was able to secure a significant increase in available resources over the comprehensive spending review period.

Without that extra funding, there would have been no development of services such as the introduction of bowel-cancer screening, which will save up to 70 lives a year; an additional 700 heart operations and procedures each year; the introduction of the human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccination against cervical cancer, which kills around 40 women each year; remote monitoring for up to 5,000 patients, and an addition of 200 units in respect of community —

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

**Mr Gardiner:** Let the DUP proposers of today's original motion tell that to the electorate.

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

**Mr Gardiner:** I support the motion. *[Interruption.]*  
Correction: I support the amendment.

**Mr Gallagher:** I acknowledge the commitment and professionalism of our nursing staff across Northern Ireland. They are, as I have said, true professionals. They are the people who make sure that patients are treated with care, compassion and dignity, whether in their home, in a community setting, in primary care, or in hospital, as is often the case.

It is a disgrace that we are now in a situation whereby more than 700 nursing posts are to be lost. Whether the UUP wants to blame the DUP, or the DUP wants to blame the UUP, this matter is so serious that it needs to be sorted out between the Health Minister and the Finance Minister, because they both have a responsibility from which they cannot escape.

Despite the fact that nurses are such a key group of workers, we know that when these proposals were taken forward by the trusts, there was very little real, meaningful and true consultation with the nurses on the ground. That has only added to the frustration that many of them currently feel.

The Western Health and Social Care Trust, as Claire McGill has mentioned, will lose more than 130 posts, and we have been told by the health authorities — at a number of different levels — that that will be taken care of through natural wastage. We are asked to believe that it will be all right. The reality is that I have had nurses come to me in recent months — well-trained, highly-qualified nurses, some of them at intensive-care level, and many of them young — who have had notification in writing that their contracts are coming to an end. They do not know what the future holds for them.

Instead of cutting nursing jobs, we should be challenged by the task of finding some alternative means of employing them, if it comes to that. I agree with the Chairperson of the Health Committee that there are areas of need. She referred to eating disorders, and I agree that the level of care for people with eating disorders across Northern Ireland is appalling.

With regard to mental health, the situation is perhaps slightly better, but there is a great deal of room for improvement.

If some of those nurses are now to leave our hospitals, there must be appropriate and well-resourced training so that they can move into other settings, because, at the end of the day, they are the people who will take

the pressure off the Health Service — the primary-care and secondary-care sectors in particular — and will, with appropriate treatment, screen out many patients before they get to other levels. Therefore, we need more resources if the worst comes to the worst here with regard to working in hospitals.

We have arrived at this point because some Members voted for the Budget, which contained the comprehensive spending review measures; unfortunately, we are now living with the consequences. I notice that the Deputy Chairperson of the Health Committee described the efficiency savings as British-inspired. Yes, it is a Gordon Brown initiative and in that sense it is British-inspired, but it is here because that British-inspired initiative was voted through by Sinn Féin. Therefore it is time that we all look at the Budget afresh.

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey):** I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to this debate, not least because it once again highlights the major challenges faced in delivering millions of pounds in efficiency savings.

As I have said many times, all Northern Ireland Departments must achieve £790 million of efficiency savings by March 2011; for my Department, that equates to some £344 million by 2010-2011. That is £700 million over three years, which is a huge task.

Members are aware of trusts' proposals — and I emphasise that they are proposals — to achieve the necessary efficiency savings: proposals that have been the subject of considerable public concern. The motion calls on me to reject plans to cut more than 700 nursing posts; it suggests that those proposals are cuts and not efficiencies.

In our drive towards changing the way in which health and social-care services are provided, nurses will play a vital role in delivering more care in the community: that is what the population wants. I am committed to investing in the front line, but we need to realise that the front line is moving into the community. I have demonstrated that by providing extra funding for the management of chronic diseases, reform of mental-health and learning-disability services, and more community services for our growing elderly population.

Therefore, I welcome this debate on the vital contribution of the nursing profession. However, how sad it is once again to witness attempts by some in the DUP to use the debate as yet another political point-scoring exercise — that, in spite of the fact that the decision to make efficiency savings was made by the Executive and all parties, including the DUP.

I have to ask: is that selective memory loss or just an unwillingness to wake up and face the stark reality that achieving efficiency savings is a major and difficult task for the Health Service. It is hypocrisy of the highest order for the same people who are asking for efficiency

savings to criticise me when I try to make them. Such actions highlight yet again how some are prepared to play politics with the Health Service at any cost.

Let us be absolutely clear: a DUP Finance Minister proposed the efficiency-savings process, and the DUP enthusiastically supported it at the Executive and in the Assembly: the comprehensive spending review process has the fingerprints of the DUP all over it.

I am confident that the direction of change for services for older people, for mental-health care, for hospital services and for health and social care is change for the better. However, I have concerns about the speed and scale of that change.

Just look at the responses to the public consultations on the trusts' proposals that generated such widespread political debate, media coverage and campaigns. The huge response to those proposals stands in stark contrast to the eerie silence on proposals from other Departments, and it reflects how valued and essential health and social care services are to the public. I have always said that health and social care services must be more efficient and effective in how we use our limited resources. Today, patients access services of the highest quality more quickly than ever.

6.15 pm

Health continues to lead the way in the reform demanded under the review of public administration (RPA). The RPA will result in a reduction of almost 1,700 managerial and administrative staff, and it has already seen the number of senior executives fall from 180 to 65. In total, the RPA will bring about £53 million in savings every year.

Although it has taken some time for Members to waken up to the impact of achieving £700 million in savings, I am delighted that the penny has finally dropped. I only wish that their concerns had been raised when I was battling to secure extra moneys for vital services as part of the Budget settlement. Let me remind the Assembly what was said at that time: the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety insisted that I should accept the Budget as originally proposed. She was so committed to the cause that she even got herself thrown out of the House over it. Indeed, she even claimed that, in a bid to save money, the Mater Hospital should shut, and the new hospital for Downpatrick should be mothballed. At a time of economic recession, can anyone explain to me why I would want to get rid of 1,300 jobs in the Mater Hospital, including almost 600 nursing posts?

In addition, Mrs Robinson's colleagues said that it was outrageous for me to request more resources over and above the draft Budget, and they claimed that there was a significant element of farce about my battle to increase funding for health. Let me tell the DUP that there is no farce in putting patients first and ensuring

that more money is devoted to health. The DUP's inherent failure to recognise that the demand for health services is rising and urgent investment is required is the only farce around.

When will some Members on the DUP Benches waken up to the fact that their Minister controls the purse strings? Instead of scaremongering and sniping from the sidelines, why do they not talk to their Minister about getting more money for the Health Service? Have any of them even raised it with their Minister of Finance and Personnel? No, they have not.

I welcome calls to exempt the Health Service from efficiency savings. We have to provide 3% efficiency savings on the block grant, but there is no law that says that it has to be by Department. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has the largest share of the Budget, but it also has the greatest need. Our population is continuing to grow, we have an increasingly elderly population, and expectations for improvements in health and social care are rising. That means that we need to make the most of our limited funds, and we are doing that.

Trusts already have proposals to deliver £140 million of savings a year from increased productivity, including reductions in absenteeism, reduced energy costs and agency spend. That is in addition to the £53 million already being achieved through reduced management costs under the RPA. To think that we are ignoring such potential savings is naive in the extreme.

The motion is about the reduction in the number of nursing posts. Health and social care is delivered by people, and almost two thirds of our spend is on staff costs. It is also naive to assume that efficiency savings of that magnitude can be achieved by simply tinkering with the system. People who make such claims need to live in the real world. We cannot achieve efficiencies of that scale without their having an impact on how our staff deliver services to meet ever-changing needs. However, over the past 12 months, I have worked closely with trade unions, the Royal Colleges and trust management to minimise the impact on staff. That is because nursing is fundamental to high-quality healthcare.

Nurses deliver care across all settings and to all patients. Shifting our focus from providing care in the acute sector to providing it to people in their own communities means that there will be fewer staff delivering hospital services. It also involves nurses bringing their skills and expertise to treat and care for people in their own homes

I am determined to protect the welfare of staff who serve with commitment and professionalism, and that is why I have made it clear that I do not expect compulsory redundancies. I am also committed to maintaining the number of nursing students, and I have invested an extra £2.2 million to providing support to

students in the clinical areas. I have addressed shortages of midwives by increasing the number of midwifery students and making more resources available to increase capacity.

However, the debate should not simply be about the number of nurses. Indeed, and instead, our focus should be on what is required to deliver an effective service and what is required to deliver safe and good-quality care. If we are reducing our reliance on hospital beds and are making better use of support staff and focusing on preventative care, we must be prepared to adjust the workforce numbers to match the work that is required.

The Appleby Report made it clear that there was real scope to deliver hospital services that improve the quality of care and allow us to target resources to those most in need. My Department is ensuring that that happens, and that is largely what we are talking about now. In fact, all of the Appleby recommendations are under way or have been implemented. However, Professor Appleby also considered that Northern Ireland required uplifts of 4.3% each year in the funding of health and social care in order to meet increasing levels of needs, rather than the 1.2% that was granted by the Executive —

**Mr Poots:** It was 3.8%.

**The Minister of Health, Social Service and Public Safety:** No; the 3.8% refers to the National Health Service in England — you were referring to the wrong Health Service, Mr Poots. *[Laughter.]*

Professor Appleby therefore recommended that there must be some way around the implications of the Barnett formula in relation to health and social care if the assessed funding requirement was to be delivered. How unfortunate that that was the only recommendation from the Appleby Report that has been ignored. The uplift that was provided to health and social care was only around one quarter of what Professor Appleby recommended as necessary. Therefore, some Members from the DUP must go out and quote from the Appleby Report, so that they will ensure that that recommendation is implemented. The one recommendation from the Appleby Report that is not being implemented is the financial one; that is, the one that I have just talked about.

I must ask why it has taken so long for some Members to grasp the fact that the Health Service needs enough money to meet the ever-growing demands of the public. I make no apologies for fighting hard and against considerable opposition in attempting to secure extra funding as part of the Budget settlement —

**Mrs I Robinson:** Will the Minister give way?

**The Minister of Health, Social Service and Public Safety:** That extra money ensured that I was able to introduce essential service developments such as bowel cancer screening and an extension to breast

screening programmes, to name but a few of those developments that will transform, and save, lives.

It is true that I described the final Budget settlement as being as good as it could get at that time; however, I also said that it is still not enough, and I will continue to fight for more.

At a time of recession, when so many people are struggling with financial pressures and unemployment is rising, the demands on our Health Service will increase. Now is the time for investment. Without adequate funding, how else can we address the years of historic underfunding of our health and social care systems? How else can we begin to close the £600 million funding gap between Northern Ireland and England? How else can we ensure that people in Northern Ireland have the same access to healthcare as is the case in the rest of the UK?

Let me make it absolutely clear: I am not arguing that the Health Service should not be attempting to make efficiency savings. Rather, given that the needs of my Department are so much greater, I ask why we are being asked to do so much in such a short period of time. We simply cannot give anymore; there is no slack in the system. Indeed, Dr William McCrea recently sent me a letter in relation to this matter, in which he asked me to apprise him of the extent of the proposed cuts. Furthermore, he expressed his support for the views of his constituents in asking that the National Health Service be exempt from the Executive's comprehensive spending review. *[Interruption.]* That is a letter from a sincere individual who is not playing politics. The date on the letter is 30 March 2009.

Why do the sick and needy have to pay for years of underfunding of our Health Service? After all, when it comes to health, we are dealing with people's lives. It is time for everyone to face up to their responsibilities. It is not as if I have not warned everyone of the difficulties that the Health Service faces in trying to make those efficiency savings.

Yes; in respect of our capacity, we are managing at the moment. However, we are at our limit. If we are to continue to protect the quality of care that is provided, we cannot give any more — we must get real. The debate is not just about numbers of nurses; it is about the healthcare of our current population and that of future generations. I would like more time to deliver those changes, but I do not have it.

As Minister, I am determined to do the right thing, to reform and to modernise in order to deliver the services that people need. Those are the criteria against which I will consider these proposals. I will also consider the remarks made by Members today.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr B McCrea:** Mr Poots referred to his family connections in the nursing profession. He knows that I also have family connections, because they nurse together. He knows that my partner's sister is a nurse and that my brother-in-law is a nurse. He knows that we on these Benches hold the nursing profession in the highest possible honour.

Mr Poots also knows — because others have spoken about the stress that nurses find themselves under in the National Health Service — the amount of work and responsibility that falls to them, which is why I fully support the Minister's quest for additional resources to look after the heroines and heroes in our Health Service who need it most. Let no one be in any doubt that we in the Ulster Unionist Party absolutely and fundamentally support the nursing profession.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr B McCrea:** I congratulate the DUP on its ability to play clever politics, to be sleekit, to take something and to turn it round, and to use the motion in order to play on people's fears. I acknowledge the DUP's ability to pour poison and invective on those who are standing up and fighting for the people of Northern Ireland and for the Health Service, as the Minister is expected to.

I also admire the DUP's ability to rewrite history. I admire the fact that somebody said — and I am happy to take an intervention, if anybody wants to tell me where this text came from:

“Northern Ireland has suffered from relative underfunding for decades...more than 20% extra spending per capita on health care is required to achieve the same level of service as in England.”

Who said that? The DUP manifesto in 2005 did.

“The Health Service in Northern Ireland has suffered from long-term under-funding relative to the rest of the UK.”

Who said that? The DUP manifesto in 2007 did.

In March 2005, describing the direct rule health budget increase of 9% as insufficient, who said the following?

“The extra money does not allow for any new service development. Proposed allocations will not even allow trusts to stand still. In fact they are being forced to withdraw services.”

**Mr McCallister:** Iris Robinson.

**Mr B McCrea:** Iris Robinson; that is correct. Now, the DUP is turning round and saying, “by the way, live within your means.”

That is rank hypocrisy. In fact, it is not just hypocrisy; it is duplicitous double-talk from a party that is duping the people of Northern Ireland. When it comes to health, I look at the DUP's partners in crime on the Sinn Féin Benches, and I must say that, while I acknowledge its right to be in Government, I despair of that party's ability. This idea about — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

For the benefit of all Members, including those who have recently arrived in the Chamber, I asked that all remarks be made through the Chair. I intend to see out the debate in that way.

6.30 pm

**Mr B McCrea:** I give way to Mrs Iris Robinson.

**Mrs I Robinson:** I thank the Member for giving way. First, the speech that you quoted was from me. I was arguing in the House of Commons —

**A Member:** Through the Chair.

**Mrs I Robinson:** Pardon?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I think that a Member was suggesting that you speak through the Chair, Mrs Robinson.

**Mrs I Robinson:** I am sorry — I will try. I was speaking in the House of Commons. Of course, one makes the case when fighting in the House of Commons when one does not have an Administration in Northern Ireland. That is what my speech was about.

On the subject of manifestos, I remind the honourable gentleman that it was his party that said that it would not enter into government with Sinn Féin/IRA unless and until guns were handed in. *[Interruption.]*

There is a difference: we got the guns. If we are talking about manifesto promises, that party is the biggest hypocrite.

**Mr B McCrea:** I thank Mrs Iris Robinson for her excellent intervention. It demonstrated duplicity, doubletalk and rewriting of history, among all the other invective. Sinn Féin keeps saying that it will increase taxes, but who will pay those taxes?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Who said that?

**Mr B McCrea:** OK, perhaps Sinn Féin does not want to increase taxes. However, that party demands fiscal responsibility, so if it wants more money for the Health Service, it will have to fight for it.

I listened to the Alliance Party come out with more motherhood and apple pie and promises of how it would make cuts. However, not one example was given. All I hear is political immaturity. It is time for people to get — *[Interruption.]*

It is not often that I cannot command the Floor, but the Alliance Party is doing its best to prevent me from doing so. When it comes to the issue, we, as 108 MLAs, will collectively have to start making tough decisions. It is absolutely appropriate that when cuts of 3% across the board must be made, there will have to be change. Members need to recognise that.

I conclude by rejecting the terrible position that the DUP has taken.

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

**Mr B McCrea:** I commend the Minister of Health for fighting for all the people of Northern Ireland, and for fighting, as he should do, for our Health Service.

**Mr Easton:** The House will consider little of more importance than the subject that is under discussion. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety would do well to listen. Trusts' potential loss of 722 nursing posts will, if not reversed, mark a seismic mistake of ministerial folly.

Our National Health Service is world-renowned for its expertise. Many in the House, me included, can testify to its surgical and medical expertise. At the core of the service stands the distinguished profession of nursing, which is a vocation. Many of our nurses have distinguished themselves by the care that they give. They deserve to be treated fairly, and they deserve the respect that is due to them. We all know that many nurses — including my sister, who is a nurse in Lagan Valley Hospital — go above and beyond the call of duty in their commitment to their patients. I am at a loss to fathom how 722 nursing posts can be axed without a critical negative impact on front line services.

The Northern Ireland director of the highly respected Royal College of Nursing has already informed us that, if 722 posts are cut, patient care will be damaged and further strain will be placed on an already pressurised workforce. Proposals to cut the number of nursing-ward or team managers, to force them to work across multiple locations and to downgrade their roles are unacceptable threats to patient care and client safety. Those proposals must be revoked.

A report by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority suggests that the loss of the nursing posts will cause an increase in healthcare-acquired infections. The RQIA report contains powerful messages about how inadequate nurse staffing levels contributed to the spread of infections, yet the five trusts wish to add to that danger by doing away with 722 nursing positions.

That eloquent analysis places none of us in any doubt about what the motion is about: protecting front line services and enhancing, not damaging, patient care. Does the Minister think that he knows better than the Royal College of Nursing? Does he expect the House to believe that he knows better than the men and women who daily provide services in an increasingly pressurised workplace?

The Minister's logic that one can cut 722 posts and not hinder front line services defies reality. I challenge him to go to hospitals, treatment rooms and homes in which district nursing services are being provided to witness for himself the pressures that nurses are under and to appreciate the fact that many nurses are regularly working unpaid overtime. The Health Service has

many demands, but, frankly, the Minister's cutting of 722 nursing posts will only add to the problems faced on the front line — it has no part to play in solving those problems.

I have asked the Minister to direct his attention towards areas that can contribute to the solution and increase productivity, and I make no apology for reiterating that. Every time they are mentioned, he seems to pooh-pooh them. I said that he must address the level of non-attendances at outpatient clinics, which stands at 196,000 — he has not done so. I said that he must address some of the 14,000 cancelled clinics — he has not done so. I said that he must address the alarming cost of medical negligence claims, which amount to £14 million — he has not done so. Furthermore, he must address the £6 million cost of independent sector providers, and whether it is really necessary to pay management consultant fees of more than £100 million. Consider the £40 million cost of employing agency staff: if one is getting rid of nurses, it does not make sense to re-employ them as agency staff at twice the price. Strategically, the Minister is in error in his belief that cutting 722 nursing positions will not detrimentally impact on front line services.

**Mrs I Robinson:** Would he also add to that lengthy list the fact that —

**Some Members:** Through the Chair; that is a conversation.

**Mrs I Robinson:** I cannot keep my eyes from that end of the room. [*Laughter.*] Dream on.

The Minister should also take cognisance of the amount of money that is spent each year on locums. Last year, I believe that they cost almost £700,000.

**Mr Easton:** I take on board the points raised by the Member, and there are plenty more statistics that we can read out if the Minister wants us to do so.

Better front line nursing cannot be achieved with fewer nurses. Consider the pressure that they are under already. Put simply, this is not rocket science. I suggest that the Minister takes a reality check. Do not take my word for it; take the words of nurses:

“the proposals will damage patient care and place further strain on an already pressurised nursing workforce.”

The loss of 722 nurses will damage front line services. The Minister should remember — to use a metaphor — that he will do what it says on the tin. He said efficiencies, not cuts; he said resources would be directed towards front line services —

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

**Mr Easton:** No, you would not do it for me, so tough.

On close examination, the amendment reads:

“to review proposals from health and social care trusts to reduce nursing posts”.

The amendment does not guarantee those nursing jobs; it only seeks a review. Furthermore, it asks the Executive to accept:

“that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is exempt from the comprehensive spending review”.

Is the Ulster Unionist Party asking us to break the law and go against the directive from Westminster, which we had no choice but to accept? What is equally amazing is that the Ulster Unionist Party is asking us to go against its own Health Minister, who supported the Budget in the Executive, stating that he was satisfied with the Budget and that it was a good day for health in Northern Ireland.

Even if we were legally allowed to exempt the health budget from the comprehensive spending review, what would that mean? It would mean that all the efficiency savings identified by the Minister would not have happened and that all the extra money he was given would not have been given. It would mean that the Minister would not get first refusal on the first £20 million handed back, which amounts to an extra £60 million over three years. No other Department gets that extra money, and failing to get it would mean that the Minister would not have been able to announce all those new services, including free prescriptions.

Those new services came about as a result of record investment and the size of the budget that the Minister got, and that would not have happened if the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety had been exempt from the comprehensive spending review. Before the Northern Ireland Assembly was up and running, the health budget was £3.982 billion. By the end of the three-year Budget period, it will be £4.491 billion, which is £500 million more for health — a record investment in health in Northern Ireland.

The amendment from Tweedledum and Tweedledee is a smokescreen; it cannot be done. If it could be done, the other Departments would have to find savings to make up for the shortfall; DSD would have to stop benefits, and there would be no money for community groups; DARD would have no money for grants for farmers; DRD would have no money to repair roads; DEL would have to close colleges — I am sure that the Ulster Unionist Party would not want their Minister to have to do that — and DCAL would have to stop money for community events.

In tabling the amendment, the UUP has shown itself to be financially inept and financially unstable. It is no wonder that the Ulster Unionist Party is in so much debt and almost broke. When one looks at the state of the finances that Basil McCrea received from the Assembly, one will see that he had to fire some of his



own staff because of his financial ineptitude. Let us get real; let us save the nursing jobs.

I will try to get through some of the points that were raised during the debate. On the one hand, Sammy Gardiner praised the extra money, but, on the other, he wanted to do away with the extra money by doing away with the comprehensive spending review. I would be glad to see him coming through the Lobbies with us to support the motion.

Tommy Gallagher said that the Health Minister should speak to the Minister of Finance and Personnel. However, I submitted a question for written answer in which I asked whether the Health Minister had raised the subject of efficiency savings on nursing and residential care homes, and I was informed that he has not even raised it in the Executive; he has not even bothered to do so. That shows you what the Minister thinks of nursing jobs and residential homes. He has not even bothered to raise the issue at the Executive.

Minister McGimpsey complained about all the parties supporting the comprehensive spending review, which he supported. It is a pity that the Minister was not concerned enough about the nursing positions to raise them at the Executive.

I did not take any notes on Basil McCrea's contribution, because I do not think that he was talking about health.

John McCallister said that the DUP was opposed to the new health agency. When debating the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill, DUP members did not oppose a new health agency; we wanted to keep it within the new regional board.

**Mr McCallister:** They voted against it.

**Mr Easton:** No, they did not. Mr McCallister needs to tell the truth to the people of Northern Ireland, because that is not true. Members can check the record.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order.

**Mr B McCrea:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think that I heard the Member say that Mr McCallister has to tell the truth. I ask him to withdraw those comments.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I was already on my feet to do exactly that.

**Mr Easton:** DUP members were accused of voting against the health promotion agency during debates on the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill, but we did not. Therefore, Mr McCallister did not provide the truth. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. I need to hear the explanation from the Member.

**Mr Easton:** Mr McCallister stated that the DUP voted against the new health agency. We did not vote against the new health agency, so what he said was inaccurate; it is not true. Mr Deputy Speaker, you can

check the Hansard report, and you will see that the DUP did not vote against it. I will not be apologising.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr Kennedy:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Following the debate and once the Hansard report is published, I ask you to reflect on what was said by Mr Easton and decide whether his comments were parliamentary.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I will refer the matter to the Speaker, who will make the decision.

**Mrs Long:** Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It would be helpful to have clarification, because, if I heard Mr Easton correctly, he asked Mr McCallister to tell the truth. That is not necessarily an accusation that he was doing anything otherwise.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** That is precisely why I have decided to refer the matter to the Speaker, who will be the final arbitrator.

**Mr Easton:** I am happy to await the Speaker's ruling.

Michelle O'Neill supported the motion and called on the Minister for more clarification on the plans and to step up and do his job. Kieran McCarthy said that the Minister was playing politics with nursing job cuts and called for them to be stopped.

Tom Buchanan said that the UUP was speaking with forked tongue. I am not sure whether it was the Conservatives speaking or the UUP, so he is correct on that. Claire McGill wanted to know about the confusion and ambiguity from the Minister on efficiencies in savings in front line services.

6.45 pm

Edwin Poots said that the lives of expectant mothers and, potentially, those of their babies were at risk because of the trusts' proposals for maternity services. The Chairperson of the Health Committee, Iris Robinson, talked about the smokescreens and mirrors that the Minister —

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

**Mr Easton:** The Committee Chairperson also said that there are not enough nurses in accident and emergency units. Furthermore, she challenged the Minister to go with her to see that that is the case.

I support the motion.

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The Assembly divided: Ayes 9; Noes 51.*

AYES

*Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McFarland, Ms Purvis.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Gardiner and Mr McCallister.*

**NOES**

*Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr Brady,  
Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan,  
Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke,  
Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Durkan,  
Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton,  
Mrs Hanna, Mr Irwin, Mrs Long, Mr A Maginness,  
Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann,  
Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland,  
Mr I McCreagh, Dr McDonnell, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone,  
Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr Moutray, Ms Ni Chuilín,  
Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Mr P Ramsey,  
Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson,  
Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey,  
Mr Weir.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Buchanan and Mr Easton.*

*Question accordingly negatived.*

*Main Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to reject plans to cut 722 nursing posts, given his pledge to the Assembly to make efficiencies rather than cuts, and to re-direct resources towards front line patient services.

*Adjourned at 6.58 pm.*