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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

### Executive's Action Plan in response to the Barroso Task Force Report

Tuesday 21 April 2009

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

#### ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

**Mr Speaker:** During yesterday's debate on the loss of nursing posts, Mr Basil McCrea and Mr Danny Kennedy raised points of order in relation to remarks made by Mr Easton. Members can be in no doubt by now that it is unparliamentary to accuse another Member of telling lies or deliberately misleading the House. I have considered the remarks that were made by Mr Easton and the exchanges that then took place during the debate. Although at one point the remarks came close to causing concern, in the context of the exchanges in the debate, I do not consider that anything unparliamentary was said.

However, I noted the Official Report, and a number of other remarks that were made yesterday also came close to crossing the line. I once again ask all sides of the House to think more carefully about what they say in the House. I understand that, from time to time, Members will say things in the heat of debate that, on reflection, they might have said differently. However, I remind all sides of the House to be careful with their language during debates.

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) that the deputy First Minister wishes to make a statement regarding the Executive's action plan in response to the Barroso task force report.

**The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the visit that the First Minister and I and the junior Ministers made to Brussels at the end of March, just before the Easter recess.

During his visit on 1 May 2007, President Barroso announced the creation of a European Commission task force. That unique initiative was taken to support the Executive's efforts to realise the benefits of peace by achieving a step change in economic performance to benefit all our citizens. The core members of the task force are the services of the European Commission with a role to play in the economic modernisation of regions, together with the European Investment Bank.

Danuta Hübner, the EU Commissioner for Regional Policy, led Commission officials in the delivery of that work. The task force report was presented to the then First Minister and me by Commissioner Hübner in Belfast on 14 April 2008.

The first part of the task force report provides a socio-economic profile of our region, and the second part looks at our achievements in the framework of EU policies over the period 2000-06. The report gives us both a stock take on our current position and a road map for enhanced engagement with Europe. It makes suggestions for possible activities that can be undertaken over the 2007-2013 financial period to maximise the benefits to our region, in line with the EU growth and jobs strategy. The sectors covered are agriculture and rural development; education and training; employment and social policy; enterprise; environment; fisheries; regional development; research; and transport and energy.

President Barroso was clear that the task force was a long-term commitment and that it was, as he said, a marathon rather than a sprint. It was envisaged that the Commission would accompany us in this work through to the end of the current EU financial period in 2013. Over this period, European regional aid to western economies is being phased out, and we will need to rely increasingly on our own resources.

Initially, the task force assisted with the rapid implementation of the 2007-2013 socio-economic

development programmes. However, its underlying objective is to bring the region more firmly into the European networks that make up the knowledge economies, especially Commission networks that can assist the Executive to become more involved in the shaping of EU policies.

The Executive's response to the Barroso task force report renews our approach to Europe, which was first outlined in the strategy document for 2006-2010 entitled 'Taking our Place in Europe', which is a high-level, overarching framework for outward- and forward-looking engagement with the European Union.

In developing its European policy and programme priorities, the Executive want:

"To engage more effectively with the European Union, and its policies and initiatives, to help us to achieve the Executive's Programme for Government priorities, particularly in relation to growing a dynamic, innovative economy and helping us to achieve a shared, better and sustainable future for all."

Members have been provided with the web link to the Executive's document entitled 'Priorities for European Engagement', which sets out the Executive's collective response to the European Commission's task force report on the North. It includes an action plan containing our European policy and programme priorities for the year 2008-09. Copies of the document have been placed in the Assembly Library.

That document marks an important watershed, as the Executive reinvigorate our engagement with Europe. It is the first time that we have identified our collective European policy and programme priorities. That is a substantial achievement, and the Executive have established a framework for mainstreaming Europe within each Department's strategic and financial planning processes.

The action plan covers a nine-month period, from 1 July 2008 to 31 March 2009, and reports on progress to 31 December 2008. Good progress has been made against key targets during the first six months of the plan's implementation, with half of the targets having been met. For example, we have provided formal input on 12 EU policy areas of relevance to us; increased the number of projects that secure funding from competitive EU programmes; and increased Civil Service secondments to Brussels, with 10 staff placed in 2008.

The action plan was compiled on a financial-year basis. The intention behind that was to align European policy and programme priorities with other departmental activities in order to synchronise quarterly monitoring with normal business and Programme for Government reporting cycles. Biannual progress reports will be delivered by the Barroso task force working group, which is chaired by junior Ministers and attended by deputy secretary representatives from each Department.

The action plan will roll forward from one financial year to the next. At the end of each business year, annual reports on achievement will be compiled and forwarded to the Executive for consideration, along with a draft plan containing European priorities and new targets for the year ahead. Each year, in early summer, OFMDFM Ministers will travel to Brussels to discuss progress with the European Commission and seek support for the Executive's new action plan for the financial year ahead.

The Executive are committed to expanding their role in Europe. There is a strong recognition that Europe is important to us and that many in Brussels are well disposed to us. We want to build on that and continue to develop the best possible relationships with other Europeans. We are committed to playing a full part in Europe. We will continue to build influence and help shape EU policy formulation and decision making to ensure that we obtain the best possible outcomes for our citizens and businesses.

In common with the rest of the world, the Executive have considered how best to respond to the crisis in the world's financial systems and the ensuing global economic downturn. Resolving those problems will require collective action and strong alliances between regions and states across Europe. As Members are aware, the economy is the main focus of our Programme for Government as we build a prosperous, inclusive and equal society. We have seized the opportunity and are maximising the goodwill that exists towards us in Europe. That is especially important given the global economic downturn.

We will take advantage of every source of help in order to meet our economic needs and fulfil our Programme for Government objectives. We offer one of the most competitive business opportunities in western Europe. We will continue to strengthen our business links with Europe, ensuring that we are recognised as a dynamic and innovative region that is capable of securing significant inward investment when the global economy recovers.

When we presented our response formally to President Barroso in Brussels, he congratulated us on our action plan and our European priorities. Overall, our meeting was very effective, with the president reaffirming his support for the Executive and the region. He said that the Commission's services would partner us in our continued European engagement. President Barroso encouraged us to make use of all available EU instruments in taking that work forward. He said that we were ahead of many other regions, and he noted the comprehensive nature of the action plan and the impressive start that we had made.

We took the opportunity to raise a number of issues of concern with President Barroso, seeking his advice and

support. Those issues included a state aid application by Bombardier for the development of its C Series project, which is being assessed by the Commission's competition services. We briefed the president on the Executive's plans for the Titanic signature tourism project. We discussed our ongoing work to develop proposals for an international centre of excellence dedicated to peace building and conflict resolution. President Barroso congratulated us on our progress on those issues.

The president expressed his sympathies regarding the recent shootings here and gave his full support for our joint actions following those reprehensible and pointless events. He recognised the support that we received from all political parties and from wider civic society. The president outlined the widespread pressures caused by the global economic downturn and urged the innovative use of public money to address those pressures. We came away with a strong signal of his willingness to help and support us.

During our visit to Brussels, we met the President of the European Parliament, Hans-Gert Pöttering, who addressed the House last year; trade commissioner, Baroness Ashton; internal market commissioner, Charlie McCreevy; the Irish and British ambassadors to the European Union and the British ambassador to Belgium. At a reception in our Executive's office, we met a wide range of people from the EU institutions and from other regions operating in Brussels. Everyone we spoke to endorsed our strategy and made offers of practical support. Some of those offers have already led to direct interventions on our behalf by the commissioners that we met.

We were reminded of the difficulties and uncertainties around the EU institutions this year following changes in the Parliament and the Commission and the potential outworking of the Lisbon Treaty, not to mention the overriding priority of dealing with the economic downturn. Against all that, we have a solid strategy and much support and goodwill to help us implement it.

10.45 am

The key task force engagements for 2009-2010 include: a delegation of our officials to visit Brussels in the spring to work with their Commission counterparts on policy and programme content in the 2009-2010 action plan; a ministerial visit to Brussels in the summer to build support for the Executive's 2009-2010 European priorities; and a return inward visit by European officials in the late autumn to outline the new Commission's policy priorities for 2010 and to provide insight into the strategic vision and aims of the new college of commissioners over its five-year mandate.

Those key engagements, which will build on the relationships that are already in place, will help to maintain the political profile of the Executive during a

period of institutional uncertainty in Europe. Informal contacts between officials on both sides will continue and be reinforced in the months ahead.

We have made an excellent start to building closer relations with Europe. We have a comprehensive Commission stock take analysis on the extent and depth of our European relations and a high-level overarching strategy for European engagement to guide us. For the first time, we have a set of collective European policy and programme priorities and a mechanism whereby Europe is mainstreamed in Departments' strategic and financial planning processes. The publication of the Executive's 'Priorities for European Engagement: Action Plan 2008-2009' marks a step change in our relations with the European Union.

As the Barroso Commission draws to a close, we will work hard to maintain and enhance our profile in Brussels. We will ensure that we have a strong platform from which to launch future political engagement with a new college of commissioners and the European Parliament. Our engagement will be ambitious, innovative and strategic.

In the meantime, the First Minister and I are grateful to Ministers and to Members of the Assembly for their support. We will, naturally, update the Assembly on further developments as appropriate.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy):** I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement, and I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to it.

What changes, if any, did the Executive make to reflect the concerns that were raised by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in its response to the Department on the Executive's action plan and those reflected by other Statutory Committees? My Committee sent its response to the Department. How will OFMDFM ensure that it fulfils its role as the co-ordinating body that oversees the work not only of its own Department but of the other Northern Ireland Departments in its response to the task force report and implementation? What benchmarks are the First Minister and deputy First Minister putting down to measure the implementation of the task force report and its practical outworkings for the Northern Ireland economy?

The deputy First Minister will be aware of objective 7 in the task force report, which is designed to record and share the experience of peace building and conflict resolution in Northern Ireland. OFMDFM is the lead Department in developing proposals for international research into peace building, and, although there are indications that the Department is bringing that forward, no timetable has yet been provided. Is the

deputy First Minister in a position to indicate a timescale for all that important work?

**The deputy First Minister:** The Chairperson of the Committee asked several questions. The role of junior Ministers will be critical. They will be charged with the responsibility to take that forward, under our tutelage, of course. The Executive and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will be concerned about ensuring that benchmarks are put in place that accurately reflect the progress that has been made over the period.

We have much to offer our European partners on the issue of conflict transformation and peace building. In fact, at all of the engagements in which we were involved in Brussels, it was accepted by everybody that there is much interest around the world in our story of conflict resolution and transformation. It is quite clear that the European Union has contributed substantially to the peace process: £1.3 billion has been allocated across the Peace I, II, and III programmes.

We will develop proposals for an international centre of excellence that is dedicated to peace building and conflict resolution. That will allow the experience of building peace and conflict transformation in our society to be shared with other European regions and internationally. We strongly support the commitment that the Commission has shown to the development of such an international facility, which will be a legacy for our society and will enable it to support and help other nations in moving out of conflict and creating a better future for their communities. We welcome the Commission's continued support for the centre of excellence as we develop the concept and move towards the production of a business plan. We have been encouraged by other key European players to move that work forward.

In the past few days, I have been involved personally, at the invitation of a peace group based in County Donegal, in discussions with former members of the Israel Defence Forces and former Palestinian prisoners. I spoke to some 28 people who were keen to come to the island of Ireland and to listen to the experiences that people here have of conflict transformation.

All Members are aware of various visits that have been made to the Assembly. For example, two large delegations of Iraqi parliamentarians have visited this place in the past 18 months. People from the Assembly have travelled to various parts of the world at the request of others. It is not that we seek that work; the fact is that there is tremendous interest, and invitations are issued. Many members of the political parties that are represented in the Assembly have been on those trips.

All of that is work in progress. We have made a good start. Clearly, the action plan is now in place. It is

comprehensive and deals with all the issues. As we go forward, we will, obviously, continue to refine our approach and intensify our engagement, particularly through the responsibilities of Departments, as they are key players in the process.

**Mr Moutray:** Can the deputy First Minister indicate what role there is for the Province's three MEPs alongside the Executive in increasing engagement with Brussels and securing the optimum outcome for Northern Ireland?

**The deputy First Minister:** Obviously, without getting into the personalities, our three MEPs have their own responsibilities as regards their representation at the European Parliament. On every occasion when the First Minister and I engage with Europe, we seek to ensure that all three MEPs are updated on the work in which we are involved. It is fair to say that, although all three of them are intensely interested in our work, they are not always interested in engagement with us on how we deal with that work. I refer to one MEP in particular. In that regard, he does himself and the people whom he represents a disservice.

As far as the other two MEPs are concerned, it is clear that they are interested in engagement with the Executive at the level of First Minister and deputy First Minister and that they support our efforts to intensify our engagement with Europe. Indeed, they have advocated that on a number of occasions.

**Mr P Maskey:** Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh ráiteas an Aire.

Can the deputy First Minister describe the visit's success and what it has achieved in more detail? Go raibh maith agat.

**The deputy First Minister:** The visit was immensely successful. Its main purpose was to demonstrate our commitment to European engagement and to show that we fully appreciate the unprecedented opportunity that has been presented by President Barroso's task force for us to become more competitive and, thereby, enhance jobs and growth.

We gave the president our response priorities for European engagement, including the action plan that outlined our targets for May 2008 to March 2009. This is the first time that locally elected Ministers have agreed European priorities collectively, and it showed our European partners that we can, and will, play a full, collective role in Europe.

We took the opportunity to raise local concerns. In Brussels, everyone to whom we spoke is now aware of the importance of the Bombardier C Series, and people at the highest level now follow that case with our interests in mind. Furthermore, we spoke about the Titanic project's importance in regenerating the entire city of Belfast and encouraged a timely assessment of

the proposal. During all our meetings with two presidents, two commissioners and two permanent representatives, we emphasised that, despite the efforts of those who are opposed to the peace process, we can and will work together for the benefit of all the people in the region.

We expressed our desire to become more involved in European policy networks and to seek new sources of funding. Moreover, we emphasised a two-way approach that gives something back through sharing our experience in areas in which we have skills that others require. Our high level of engagement, not only during the recent visit but during all previous visits, and the fact that President Barroso took the trouble to visit here — the first time that a head of the European Commission had visited Parliament Buildings — demonstrates that people in Europe are well disposed to the situation here and are anxious to help. We appreciate that very much.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I welcome today's statement. I am sure that it is entirely coincidental that it was scheduled after the SDLP tabled a no-day-named motion to discuss the Barroso report.

The Executive's response to the report has taken almost as long as the Barroso Commission took to report in the first instance. I am disappointed about the lengthy delays. Why did the deputy First Minister's response make no reference to Commissioner Hübner's offer of a place at her Cabinet table for a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly? Will the Executive accept that offer? If so, how and when?

The Barroso report refers to the impact of the community and voluntary sector. In particular, it says that that sector had:

“proved their capacity to deliver under difficult conditions”.

However, the deputy First Minister's statement does not refer to that sector, which faces difficulties during the economic downturn. Other than through the junior Ministers, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, how will the Assembly build better relationships with Europe? Will a special Committee or interdepartmental working group be established?

The report is very aspirational. *[Interruption.]* I have one further question. All the Committees —

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

**Mrs D Kelly:** The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister asked how specific actions will be measured against outcomes contained in the Barroso report. How will we take that process forward?

**The deputy First Minister:** It is difficult to respond to that ramble. However, when some people ask questions, they are interested only in engaging in a point-scoring exercise. I prefer people to approach the matter from a genuine point of view as opposed —

**Mrs D Kelly:** I am.

**The deputy First Minister:** I do not accept that. We are involved in an important body of work, and Members will be aware that considerable work was undertaken in order to develop a response to President Barroso's report. The content of the Executive's action plan is based on input from all Departments. This is the first time that the Executive have agreed a collective European policy and programme priorities. The first Administration, which was led by the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party, did not even attempt to do that. No previous Administration for this region has produced such a document.

However, bringing together and agreeing sectoral policy and programme content is a time-consuming process.

11.00 am

We also had to put in place an implementation mechanism to mainstream Europe in each Department's strategic planning process to ensure that progress was monitored and reported back to the Executive. That has been achieved. As I said, the Executive have mandated junior Ministers to chair an interdepartmental working group to oversee implementation and provide ongoing strategic leadership. That group will identify a set of key targets for the 2009-2010 financial year that build on progress to date, and the next meeting of the group is scheduled for 30 April.

As we move forward — and taking on board some of the nit-picking in the question — the fact remains that we are now seriously engaged with the European Community, probably for the first time in the history of the Assembly. Others need to play a responsible role in supporting the work that we are doing, rather than sitting back and continually carping over issues that could quite easily be accommodated by a sensible discussion between the Executive, OFMDFM, and the OFMDFM Committee. We are quite willing to take on board everyone's points.

The issue of the voluntary and community sector is very important to us, and we have clearly shown that with the inclusion of representatives from that sector in the cross-sector advisory forum. As we move forward, the measures and outcomes will be further refined by the Barroso working group, but they will obviously have to be linked to departmental planning processes.

**Dr Farry:** I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. I am sure that he would agree that the reputation of Northern Ireland in Europe has never been greater than it is today. However, the flip side of that coin is that the pressure on us to take full advantage of the opportunity is very acute.

To return to the issue of measures, I am conscious that the Executive have targets with respect to gross

value added (GVA) conversions within the United Kingdom. Has any consideration been given to attempting to introduce GVA targets across Europe, so that Northern Ireland's performance can be compared to that of other regions of the European Union? I understand that the system has a rather unfortunate acronym — NUTS. Technically, those targets could be introduced, as it would be essentially a political decision.

In relation to the Executive's response to the Barroso task force report, great play is made of the importance of the Executive's regional economic strategy, as well as the policy on cohesion, sharing and integration, neither of which is actually in place. To what extent will the absence of those policies undermine our ability to deliver on the initiatives?

**The deputy First Minister:** The first point is certainly something that can be considered, but obviously we could only undertake such consideration in consultation with our colleagues in the European Union. We understand the importance of ensuring that we move forward in a cohesive way and in a way that clearly recognises the great challenges that exist. The challenges are great; we have consistently heard — even over the course of the past days and weeks — of situations that are absolutely unpalatable to Members, with people being attacked in their own homes.

Much work is being done. We have spoken about this issue ad infinitum at Question Time on countless occasions in the past. There is still more work to do on agreeing and bringing forward the cohesion and sharing initiative, and I believe that we will manage to do that in the time ahead. I understand the criticisms that have been made about the delay; in my opinion, those criticisms are understandable.

We must recognise that there are tremendous opportunities for us. When I hear people, particularly on this side of the House, being rowdy and not being respectful in listening to answers that are being given, I detect an anxiety that the initiative in which we are involved is seen to be very much working in the interests of the people whom we represent. I obviously do not include the Alliance Party in that on this occasion.

I also failed to answer Dolores Kelly's question about the Hübner cabinet. We took up the offer of secondment; a civil servant was seconded for five months and has worked to advance our involvement in DG Regio. Danuta Hübner will not be a commissioner next time — she is standing as a candidate for the European Parliament. There will be a new commissioner, and we will continue to intensify our engagement as we go forward. However, that can only happen with the acceptance of the new commissioner, whoever that will be.

**Mr Weir:** I wonder whether the deputy First Minister will look again at the SDLP's offer to reconsider the

Hübner appointment. After all, it may be the only route by which Alban Maginness can get into Europe in the next few months — unless he enters the UEFA Cup next year.

One of the objectives of the Barroso task force was to identify existing funding programmes of which Northern Ireland could avail itself. Will the deputy First Minister comment on the efforts being made by the Executive to take advantage of schemes that deal with urban regeneration and small businesses, such as the joint European resources for micro to medium enterprises programme (JEREMIE) and the joint European support for sustainable investment in city areas programme (JESSICA)?

**The deputy First Minister:** We have been very interested in the JEREMIE and JESSICA programmes. There is no doubt that the Departments with responsibility for those areas will seek to take best advantage of what may be offered by the European Commission as we go forward.

Support for small businesses is critical. Even though we have had significant foreign direct investment, we understand the importance of indigenous businesses and the need to support them. All Departments, and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in particular, are aware of the opportunities available to us as a result of our intensified engagement with the European Union.

**Mr McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the deputy First Minister's statement. Given the current circumstances of global economic decline, it is quite clear that every region in the European Union will be clamouring for attention. The Assembly should genuinely welcome and validate the work of the First Minister, deputy First Minister and junior Ministers in securing what is a hugely significant beachhead.

The statement was comprehensive, so I will pick up on the meetings with Commissioners Ashton and McCreevy. What issues were discussed at those meetings, and what progress was made on those issues?

**The deputy First Minister:** To Commissioner Ashton, we explained the issue of the Bombardier state-aid application, as well as the importance of timing, the wider benefits of supplier contracts and the balance for the Netherlands and Italy. She understood the importance of those aspects clearly. Following that meeting, Baroness Ashton discussed the Bombardier application with the Commissioner for Competition, Neelie Kroes, and made her aware of the importance of the matter to us. It is too early to say whether that conversation will have a positive result. There are legal issues that have to be worked through, but Members can be assured that our views are being listened to.

We also highlighted our strength as an investment region with a young, well-educated workforce and a

competitive cost base in comparison with the rest of western Europe. Baroness Ashton said that it is important to raise our positive profile, because many other regions are represented in Brussels. She said that she would support future visits and expressed a desire to visit this region.

Commissioner McCreevy was also very supportive of the Bombardier state aid application for its CSeries project. He explained the importance of a full investigation into large-scale projects to ascertain whether they included elements that were incompatible with the single-market rules. However, he also undertook to raise the issue with the Commissioner for Competition's staff, to avoid the scenario whereby the project might be relocated to north America should the current application take an inordinately long time to be approved.

Commissioner McCreevy was less successful in predicting the winner of the Grand National; he offered the name of a horse that failed miserably in the race. By the way, Commissioner McCreevy is well noted for his knowledge of horse racing.

**Mr Elliott:** I will not comment on that last part of the deputy First Minister's response.

In his statement, the deputy First Minister said that President Barroso referred to the recent terrorist murders in Northern Ireland. Has the task force carried out any assessment of the impact that those murders might have had on the economy here and on European Union investment in particular?

**The deputy First Minister:** In our recent engagements with President Barroso, as well as with President Barack Obama and the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, we dealt with the terrible events of last month in which three people lost their lives. It is significant that people in Europe are not fazed by any of that. Like their American counterparts, they were encouraged by the way in which all the political parties here came together to make it quite clear that that type of activity should stop and that it is totally unacceptable.

During our visit to the United States, the First Minister and I met key people who are involved in the film production industry. Based on our ability to reassure people about the situation here, Universal Studios announced recently that it will shoot a film in the Titanic Quarter in Belfast, with an investment of some £10 million and job opportunities for hundreds of people in Belfast.

Later today, the First Minister and I hope to make a further announcement that is even more significant, because it will demonstrate the willingness of another US company to make an even bigger film here in the future. If the project is successful and goes to plan, it will provide a much greater opportunity for longer-term jobs over a prolonged period.

Therefore, the leadership of all the parties in the Assembly has clearly reassured people in the United States of America. As a result, people have steadied, and film production companies have announced, and will announce, projects that will undoubtedly benefit people here in the time ahead.

Yesterday, the First Minister referred to the prospect of an announcement being made in the weeks ahead that is even more significant than that of Universal Studios and the announcement that will be made later today. That will be hugely significant, because it will involve a company from the United States of America that is also based in western Europe seriously investing in our project in the North.

Therefore, people are not fazed by what happened. They recognise that it was a real challenge for the institutions and that we have risen to that challenge. I believe that the European Union and the United States will continue to support us and that, in the end, we — the builders and constructors of our new society — will prevail over those who seek to destroy society.

**Mr A Maginness:** Despite Mr Weir's Cassandra-like prediction, I assure the deputy First Minister that when I am elected on 8 June 2009, I will engage fully with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

It is proper and necessary that MEPs do that, and it is also proper that the Assembly co-operates with the European Union in order to develop relationships. My party certainly supports and welcomes today's statement, in so far as it goes. Although the statement is lacking in some detail, it is nonetheless a positive first step towards building that relationship.

The development of a relationship between ourselves and Europe is dependent on everybody's working together. That means not only those in the Assembly, but those in the Executive. How do the First Minister and deputy First Minister propose that all Departments be involved in the fullest development of policy and co-operation in the European Union? I see that as the key element in moving forward.

11.15 am

**The deputy First Minister:** We have a comprehensive action plan that the Executive supported unanimously. For the first time, our strategic priorities for Europe have been set out, and I think that the plan is a good indication of how this Administration is bedding down.

Our main challenge as a region is to achieve a step change in relations with Europe. I agree fully with what the Member said about the importance of that relationship. We need to speak with one voice, giving the same message across a range of European institutions on those matters that are of the most importance to our citizens.

We should engage in a positive, proactive and forward-looking manner that demonstrates our capabilities clearly. To achieve that, we need to mainstream European policy and government so that it is not viewed as an add-on matter. There should be seamless integration between local, regional and national approaches, as well as joined-up engagements across sectoral policy areas.

We need to progress our agenda through a period of institutional and leadership change in Europe that is set against the backdrop of global economic recession. As we all know, that will not be easy, but we have friends in Brussels, and we have the network and expertise to develop the relationships that are of the most importance to us.

Over the months ahead, the Barroso task force working group, which is chaired by junior Ministers Kelly and Donaldson, will refine our strategic approach to arriving at a set of key targets for the 2009-2010 financial year so that the progress that has been made already over the life of the current action plan can be built on. Of course, we expect that all Ministers will play a full role in trying to take as much advantage as we possibly can for the people whom we represent.

I know that the McGuinnesses all come from the same clan — they are descended from the Lords of Iveagh in County Down — so I do not think that even in his wildest dreams, the Member will imagine that I have any expectations that he will be returned as an MEP in the election. Certainly, the Derry McGuinnesses will vote for another candidate.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the deputy First Minister's very comprehensive statement. Will he define and characterise the main challenges ahead, specifically in the remainder of the 2009-2010 financial year? What are the real priorities that we should be knuckling down to work on?

**The deputy First Minister:** I explained in my previous answer that we have a comprehensive action plan, and I think that it is significant that the Executive supported it unanimously. It sets out our strategic priorities for Europe and indicates clearly how things are moving forward in this Administration.

As I said, our main challenges are to achieve a step change in our relations with Europe and for us all to speak with one voice, giving the same message across a range of European institutions. We have to recognise that the European Union cannot be an add on or an afterthought; it must be something that is taken very seriously indeed.

As we go forward, we will need to progress our agenda through a period of institutional and leadership change in Europe. It is a time of change here, and it is a time of change in Europe. I think that the greatest challenge that we face is the economic downturn,

which affects everywhere, not just here. I think that I stated before in the House that on a previous visit to Brussels, some very senior people in the European Union told us that they expected unemployment levels in Spain to reach around 20% by the end of this year. Therefore, ours is not the only region that is facing difficulties.

The economic downturn is a major challenge for us, but we have the Programme for Government, and a Budget, which will, obviously, be impacted upon to some extent by whatever comes out of the Budget in London tomorrow. The Executive will have to reflect on that and decide how best to take matters forward.

The big challenge, however, is the economic downturn, and we believe that building our relationships with the United States of America and the European Union is a hugely beneficial project in which to be engaged, particularly when we can see that there are opportunities that can bring assistance to our people at a time of economic difficulty.

**Mr McCallister:** The deputy First Minister said:

"European regional aid to western economies is being phased out and we will need to rely increasingly on our own resources."

Does that mean that nothing new is coming from the European Union; that we have only a limited window of, perhaps, the next four to five years in which to get some of that funding drawn down from the EU; and that we will have to rely much more on our own resources? Is that not a very worrying trend, in that, as Europe looks more eastwards, we can be almost forgotten about and sidelined?

**The deputy First Minister:** All of us are conscious of the fact that European Union enlargement has had a significant impact on funding and on the European Union's approach to the distribution of its funds. The EU has made it clear that it is prepared to continue its support for us until 2013. That does not mean that there will not be anything new or further for us.

Our job is, obviously, to continue to build our relationships and to intensify our engagement with the European Union. There are all sorts of future opportunities for us, and I believe that we can make important cases to the European Union that will be supported. However, that will depend on how innovative and imaginative our proposals and suggestions are, because we clearly know and understand that we will be involved in a rolling process. Our relationship with Europe will not continue until just 2013; it will continue well beyond 2013, and I believe that we will continue to take advantage of that relationship, even in the aftermath of the end of the funding stream, which is designated to end by 2013.

It comes down to making best use of the resources that Europe is making available to us, ensuring that they are invested in a way that brings real benefits to



the people whom we represent, but not for one minute accepting that 2013 is the cut-off point. We will continue to advocate, to make a case and to build the relationship, and I believe that we will continue to benefit from that relationship.

**Ms Anderson:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for the statement. The task force referred to a facility for peace-building and conflict resolution. The deputy First Minister, in his response to the Chairperson of the OFMDFM Committee, spoke of his efforts to assist others with peace-building and conflict resolution, and every now and again, he should know how much that is appreciated. We would like to commend the deputy First Minister for the work that he and many others are doing in that area. Will a conflict resolution facility be situated at Long Kesh?

**The deputy First Minister:** It is quite clear from speaking to people, not just in the European Union but throughout the world, that there is an intense interest in how conflict was resolved in this part of the world. When President Barroso came here two years ago, he clearly indicated that he regarded the establishment of a conflict resolution centre as important to the European Union.

As we go forward, we will have to do so on the basis that the Maze/Long Kesh site is of regional significance. In order to ensure its potential, we intend to develop to the full the site's economic, historical and reconciliation opportunities.

The delivery vehicle that will take the development forward will build on the work previously undertaken by the all-party Maze/Long Kesh consultation panel, utilising all elements of the site, including the listed buildings.

There is widespread European Commission support for the development of an international facility, which would take forward the key element of the EU strategy for promoting peace and transformation in member states, new joining states and internationally.

The peace-building transformation project would be recognised as a significant legacy to the European Union's peace investment here, and it has been increasingly shown around the world that sites that were previously linked with conflict are being recognised as key components of peace-building and reconciliation processes. Examples of that can be seen at Constitution Hill in Johannesburg, the World Trade Center site in New York and the ESMA space for memory and human rights in Buenos Aires.

The First Minister and I have indicated how we intend to move forward at the Maze/Long Kesh site in respect of putting in place a development commission to come forward to the Executive with proposals. I am as keen as anyone else to see what recommendations

are made, and, no doubt, when the commission is established, it will give serious consideration to how best to utilise the site in the interests of our economy.

**Mr O'Loan:** I, too, welcome the positive and very pro-European position presented in the report. It is not something that we have always seen from the deputy First Minister's party. There is a reference in the report to President Barroso's urging of the innovative use of public money to deal with the economic downturn and the barriers that EU rules on state aid may present to that. I am talking on a much wider front here than in the Bombardier C Series instance. EU rules on state aid already present a hindrance to certain measures that members of the Executive want to bring forward. Did Ministers go with a list of areas where there are such problems, and did they discuss the significant problem that state-aid rules may present if we use those innovative methods, as we need to do?

**The deputy First Minister:** On a number of occasions during this morning's contribution, I referred to the fact that we discussed the issue of Bombardier. However, more generally, we recognise and accept the challenge that has been put before us in respect of the need to use public money wisely.

President Barroso is obviously a politician of huge standing in Portugal and in the European Union, and he understands the importance of accountability and of people recognising their responsibilities as political leaders to ensure that that money, which is the people's money, is spent wisely and in the interests of the people.

Therefore, the issue was discussed in a general sense. However, as we move forward, through our intensified relationship with Europe, we need to continue to recognise that the issues that the Member articulated this morning are of concern to people here, as they relate to building our economy. As we go forward, we will continue our engagement with Europe in a fashion that will, hopefully, bring benefits to the people whom we represent.

The economic recovery plan being discussed by the Commission is about relaxing barriers. That is important, particularly in a time of economic downturn, not only in respect of our relationship with Europe, but in the context of how we work with our situation here. We must continue to reflect on that, and, hopefully, put in place measures that will see us being in a position to counteract the worst effects of the economic downturn. However, I agree with the Member that it is important that we deal with those issues in a way that will get us a result.

However, the European Union has its rules and competition regulations, and all member states must abide by those. At the same time, if those rules and regulations can be changed or refined, we, as an Administration, have a responsibility to make the case.

11.30 pm

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Educational Underachievement

**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 to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

**Dr McDonnell:** I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the threat to future prosperity and well-being posed by educational underachievement in many communities; and calls on the Executive, and the Minister of Education in particular, to produce a cross-cutting departmental action programme designed to tackle educational underachievement.

I thank the Deputy Speaker, the Speaker and the Business Committee for giving the House the opportunity to have the debate today. I also thank the Minister of Education for her attendance.

Educational underachievement is one of the most serious and important issues faced by society, and it is an issue that we must tackle and solve. Although an hour and a half is a good starting point, we need much more time to deal with the issue in its fullness.

Educational underachievement is one of the biggest challenges and threats to the political, social and economic stability of our society. Although the damage and the lasting effects of it may not be realised for 10 or 15 years, nevertheless, I believe — and many will agree with me — that it is a serious threat. Huge swathes of our children and young people are living in disadvantaged areas in predominantly, but not exclusively, loyalist working-class areas. They are being failed severely by our political system and with respect to educational achievement.

When many of those children are asked what they would like to be when they grow up, some as young as seven have told me that they want to be like former paramilitaries or drug dealers. That is because when they look around them they see that those who are living on the edges of crime have a lot of money and drive big cars. In other primary schools, principals have told me that children as young as seven are having suicidal thoughts. Furthermore, those principals are deeply concerned that an increasing amount of staff time is being taken up with social-welfare work, such as completing disability living allowance (DLA) forms for parents, rather than with teaching.

A tremendous amount of good work is being done in our schools, and I recognise the valuable work that is being carried out by principals, teachers and other school staff in supporting our children and young people. However, in spite of all of that good work, we still have the very serious problem of low educational attainment and underachievement, particularly in socially deprived areas. If we ignore the severity of that, we do so not just to the detriment of those children, but also to the detriment of our society 10, 15 or 20 years down the road.

Figures from the Department of Education show that 4,500 of our children leave primary school without adequate literacy and numeracy skills. Almost half of our young people — 47% — are unable to attain at least a grade-C pass in English or maths at GCSE level. The horrifying reality for those children and young people is that they face a very bleak economic future in which they are at serious risk of underemployment or of succumbing to crime and criminal activity.

The problem with educational underachievement and low achievement is that they are complex and multifaceted issues. If we are serious about tackling them, and about helping those children, we must have a multifaceted, cross-departmental approach that is led, I hasten to add, by the Department of Education.

Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation clearly demonstrates that most children's school experience is determined by the level of disadvantage they face in the communities from which they come. On average, the higher the level of deprivation in the local community, the lower the proportion of school leavers who will enter further or higher education. All existing research confirms that there is a direct link between disadvantage and educational underachievement. Eligibility for free school meals, high levels of unemployment, single parent households and parents with low educational achievement are factors associated with children's poor educational achievement. Therefore, any cross-departmental action programme must have a strong anti-poverty element.

Attempting to address educational underachievement without taking cognisance of and addressing social deprivation is, in my opinion, a waste of time and effort. It is like seed falling on stony ground; it will not grow. It is like putting a sticking plaster on the symptoms without trying to deal with the root cause. If social deprivation, as one of the major causes of educational underachievement, is not addressed as part of a coherent strategy, we will be simply ensuring that the vicious circle of underachievement continues into the next generation and into the one after that unabated.

Getting to grips with educational underachievement in the home is a priority. In order to succeed, a cross-cutting departmental action programme must be

brought into every child's home. Otherwise, underachievement, or low achievement, will not be tackled.

The key is to identify children at risk from the moment they are born, or shortly afterwards, and to deliver an effective early-years support service to help parents improve parenting and early learning. The case for a proactive, interventionist support service is strongest in the case of young parents, particularly teenage parents — a high proportion of whom are, unfortunately, found in areas of severe social deprivation.

Time and again, active parental involvement in a child's education has been shown to improve that child's attendance and achievement at school and to encourage a much more positive attitude to school and learning. It is vital that we create the circumstances in which all parents are involved and engaged with their children's school and learning as much as possible. Schools should take steps to encourage parents, engage with them and make them feel welcome and at home in school. It has been proven that information evenings and coffee mornings have, in many cases, helped and encouraged parental involvement.

Where possible, when a child is having a particularly difficult time, schools should also have a home liaison officer to help teachers assess that child's level of development and build a positive relationship with the parents outside the school setting.

A lot can also be done in the school. The quality of a school plays a fundamental role in the fight against underachievement. I believe strongly that there is a need for a co-ordinated cross-departmental action programme throughout all our primary schools, because children's life chances are determined by the quality of education they receive. Elements of that action programme must involve better funding for primary schools, targeted and focused directly on disadvantaged low-achieving pupils. Indeed, it should not just be focused on low achievers, but on potential high achievers who are underachieving.

A crucial element for success is to have a better pupil:teacher ratio in disadvantaged areas and struggling schools — I cannot emphasise that point enough. No child in a disadvantaged area should be in a class with more than 20 pupils in it.

Another strand should be the implementation of a linguistic-phonetics programme to improve the literacy and numeracy levels of children who are struggling to reach even basic standards. Linguistic phonetics is a cost-effective alternative to reading recovery and has been proven to raise standards, particularly in schools in disadvantaged areas.

Better funding must be provided to help special-needs staff to provide the essential emotional and mental support that troubled children need, although that funding needs to be efficiently and effectively

targeted. Where it is needed, a safe cooling-off room should be provided in schools to ensure that children with severe anger-management issues and mental and emotional pain can find a secluded space.

Another suggestion is that schools could work with community health organisations to provide children with relaxation classes and support of that nature. The extended schools programme includes breakfast clubs and after-school clubs, where after-school activities provide children who live in unstable circumstances — such as unstable families — with some security and refuge.

I know that I am running out of time — I have a few seconds left. There is a lot to be done. I appeal to colleagues across the Assembly to make this issue a priority.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member should bring his remarks to a conclusion.

**Dr McDonnell:** Research shows that educational underachievement costs our community in the region of £1 billion each year in lost earnings. That should be enough of a reason to deal with this issue. The effects of underachievement in education lead right through to the failings and difficulties found in our economy.

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

**Dr McDonnell:** I urge others to support this motion.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey):** My opening comments will be as Chairperson of the Education Committee, and then I will make some comments as a Member of the House.

In February 2008, the Education Committee received a briefing from the Department of Education about the consultation on a policy for school improvement, 'Every School a Good School'. The Committee provided an interim response to that consultation, which is available on the Committee's website. I will highlight some of the points that the Committee raised and the responses that were given at the time with regard to tackling educational underachievement.

The points that the Committee raised include the following concerns: not enough credence is given to socio-economic impact; there should be more encouragement of good practice and more effective use of existing school data; and there should be a proper balance regarding board of governors' interventions or non-interventions on failing school performance. Currently, the number of funding streams that are available to schools stands at 57 — that needs to be dramatically reduced so that there can be a reduction in the non-teaching time that we have in our schools. A needs-based analysis approach should be used to direct more funding to schools in disadvantaged areas.

At its meeting tomorrow, the Committee will question senior officials from the Department of Education

about how those and other points are reflected in the final school-improvement policy document, which I understand will be published very soon. That is well overdue, as the consultation period on the policy closed some 13 months ago. Similarly, the Committee awaits the Department's final strategy for raising achievement in literacy and numeracy. The consultation on that piece of work closed almost five months ago. Prior to that, the Committee questioned members of the literacy and numeracy task force that was set up following the Public Accounts Committee inquiry into the £40 million that was spent — or, I should say, misspent — on numeracy and literacy.

That is the factual position with regard to the Education Committee. I now speak as a Member of the House. I am sure that we will hear the Minister of Education saying how much she places the blame for poor educational performance in socially and economically deprived areas on academic selection and how she sees that as a conspiracy to prevent children from such backgrounds from attaining educational success.

11.45 am

However, we should refer to research that the Department carried out in 2008. 'Literacy and Numeracy of Pupils in Northern Ireland: Good Practice in Literacy and Numeracy in British and Irish Cities' records that out of seven suggested reasons for the long tail of underachievement in Northern Ireland, in only one is the transition between primary and post-primary education described as "problematic", and it does not identify specifically the transfer test. Indeed, the first key finding of the 2008 study concluded:

"The empirical evidence shows that there are clusters of underperformance, firstly in schools in Belfast, and, secondly, in the controlled sector. Care should be taken however in drawing conclusions from these high-level patterns as the factors impacting on attainment are complex and interactive."

The underachievement of boys is one area that must be addressed, and that was highlighted in the 2008 data. One way to address the problem would be to deal with the poor representation of male teachers, particularly in the primary sector.

Among other factors that militate against genuine improvements is the Department's apparent obsession with having positive-only reporting, in which platitudes are more important than achieving real standards in skills such as calculation and grammar. It is unfortunate that we have a Department and a Minister that do not want to standardise testing in all our schools. Instead, we have a patchwork-quilt approach, which, depending on which area people examine or which set of statistics they use, gives different answers at different times. That is not a standardised approach.

Other factors that militate against —

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

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:** I have much more to say, but, undoubtedly, we will come back to this matter. Suffice it to say, the DUP supports the motion.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I speak in favour of the motion.

I shall begin by quoting from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy, Lifetime Opportunities, which states:

"The most important factors that influence a child's life chances are education and skills. To enable all young people to take full advantage of employment opportunities, we need to target support and arrange appropriate interventions aimed at increasing opportunities for young people to gain knowledge, skills and/or experience."

Since coming into office, the Minister of Education has implemented and overseen many changes that are based on equality and on improving outcomes for the young people who are going through our education system. All young people should be given the best — and all — opportunities to succeed, as well as the support that is necessary to nurture their aspirations in life. Presently, too many pupils do not reach their full potential, and there are still schools in which performance could be better. That fact was borne out by the recent Education and Training Inspectorate report, which we discussed not so long ago in the Chamber.

Every school is capable of, and should be striving for, improvement in teaching and learning. In order to harness that further, the Minister will launch the 'Every School a Good School' policy, which is pupil centred and has equality and improvement at its heart. It will ensure that every young person has access to a high standard of education, and it will tackle the barriers that prevent some young people achieving their potential.

The policy mentions strengthening links with the community, and when moving the motion, Alasdair McDonnell talked about how important it is to get parents and the community involved. Some parents may not have had a positive experience in education, so we must work with them to raise their aspirations for their children and to maintain a positive engagement with learning.

Much good work is being done in the field of early-years education. As we all know, learning starts before a child enters formal education in primary 1. I visited recently the Little Flower Nursery School, which is in my area and which is an excellent example of the good work that is being done in that sector to prepare children for the formal education that lies ahead of them. I welcome the fact that the Minister is

developing an early-years strategy to provide a curriculum for our youngest students.

Other programmes —

**Mr Storey:** I welcome the Member's comments about the early-years strategy — the nought-to-six strategy — but does she not agree that by the time that we see it, it is probable that a lot of children will have left school and gone on to university? We have been waiting for that strategy since the Assembly came back.

The Committee for Education expected to receive a report at tomorrow's meeting, but we believe that we will receive only a two-page summary, and that nothing is happening.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention, but, surely, it is more important to get the strategy right than rush it along merely to suit his own needs.

Other programmes that have been implemented by the Minister include the revised curriculum and the entitlement framework, which ensure that young people have access to a wide range of subjects. Those programmes have been implemented in conjunction with the Department for Employment and Learning in respect of students aged 14 to 19. Therefore, cross-departmental work is ongoing. There are a number of public service agreement (PSA) targets in the Programme for Government, and we look forward to them being met.

There is also a literacy and numeracy strategy, which aims to address the startling statistics that have been debated many times in the Chamber: that too many children are leaving primary schools without reaching adequate levels of literacy and numeracy. The strategy also deals with the fact that too many children leave formal education with five, or fewer, GCSEs.

Children with special educational needs — those children who need additional support over and above that of their peers.

**Mr Storey:** *[Interruption.]*

**Mrs O'Neill:** Who in the Executive is delaying it? The current special educational needs system is piecemeal and inconsistent. In fact, individuals in some board areas have to wait for up to four years for an assessment. I believe that the proposals that the Minister of Education has put to the Executive are being held up by the DUP.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. I ask Members to not engage in exchanges across the Floor. Members should talk through the Chair, and they should challenge papers when they are speaking — not when another Member is speaking.

**Mrs O'Neill:** The Minister of Education has tabled proposals at Executive meetings, but the DUP is holding them up; it is holding up £25 million of additional investment for children with special educational needs.

**Mr Storey:** *[Interruption.]*

**Mrs O'Neill:** The truth hurts. The DUP should stop blocking those proposals and the changes for children who need additional support.

The changes that I have outlined briefly — as well as many others — are excellent initiatives that are being taken forward by the Minister, and they will assist in preparing children and young people for the challenges that they will face in life. They will tackle educational underachievement and put equality to the core of education. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank Dr McDonnell for proposing the motion. It reflects what we in the Ulster Unionist Party have been saying for some time: that the main battle in education in Northern Ireland is educational underachievement. The Assembly has wasted huge amounts of collective energy and time going round in circles on the transfer procedure, while most children are being failed by the system before they reach the age of 11.

It is clear that the Minister of Education, and others, have taken their eyes off the ball in the process. In pursuing an ideological crusade against grammar schools, the Minister has ignored the children whom she claims to want to help the most. However, as I am sure the debate will highlight; the removal of academic criteria and the destruction of the system that is in place will not be the golden ticket that will ensure that boys and girls from socially deprived backgrounds, and others, will not suffer educational underachievement and the lifelong difficulties that it brings with it.

Only a co-ordinated approach that tackles educational and social problems will solve the problem. We need to ensure that children are given greater support in the classroom, after school and in the home to increase opportunity and improve social mobility in Northern Ireland. However, it appears that in spite of the Minister of Education, the performance of schools in Northern Ireland has been improving, and it is true to say that our system, in many respects, is the envy of many other areas throughout the United Kingdom and further afield.

However, there is still a large proportion of children who leave school without adequate qualifications. Statistics show that that trend is linked to social deprivation. The more socially disadvantaged an individual's background, the more likely it is that he or she will fail. That applies to children who go to grammar or mainstream secondary schools. Only 37% of socially disadvantaged pupils achieve a level-2

qualification. In primary schools, test scores and attainment gaps between high and low socio-economic-status children widen as the children develop, with the most significant increase between the ages of five and 10.

By the age of 11, children who attend schools that have higher levels of deprivation are less likely to have reached level 4 at Key Stage 2, compared to 11-year-olds on average. However, those figures will not be changed by removing the use of academic criteria or by putting in place a postcode lottery system for our schools, which are two measures that the Minister has proposed.

We need a co-ordinated approach that provides support in the home; preschool facilities and opportunities; better primary-school funding; extended schools programmes; and raising the bar across post-primary education. In addition, the Executive must get their act together to tackle poverty, especially child poverty.

Unfortunately, very little of that has happened. Yesterday, we debated childcare strategy, which raised many issues that are relevant to today's debate — the two are almost inextricably linked. The nought-to-six-year-old strategy was specifically mentioned. I hope that the Minister will tell us today that that early-years strategy will soon be in place; that it is not simply another consultation document and that it will deal with areas that can be delivered as soon as reasonably possible.

The disparity in funding between primary and secondary schools has resulted in unacceptable standards in many primary schools. Early intervention is crucial to improving the life chances of many children. We need the comprehensive nought-to-six-year-old strategy that I talked about.

Professor James Heckman comprehensively highlighted that the life chances of individuals and the success of our overall strategy and economy in the long term is reliant on correct and consistent educational support being made available.

We need a co-ordinated approach to tackle educational underachievement, and we need to secure long-term funding for that plan. I call upon the Minister of Education to start to tackle the underachievement that she claims to care so much about. Furthermore, I call on her and others to make a commitment to social mobility and the improvement of life chances.

I support the motion.

**Mr Lunn:** The Alliance Party welcomes and supports the motion. However, I am sure that I am not the only member of the Committee for Education who, on seeing the Order Paper, had a quiet inward groan at the thought of another education debate. This one,

though, is timely and constructive. It goes right to the heart of the problem and covers all aspects of the education debate as it highlights that the outcome of our education system is educational underachievement, particularly amongst young boys.

The failure of our system to enable every child to realise his or her potential is at the heart of the problem. We constantly hear about the 25% of children who leave school without qualifications, many of whom, for various reasons, give up trying before they even reach school-leaving age. We also have the stigma of failure that is attached to the 11-plus, which, I hope, is now consigned to history.

I listened with interest to Mr Elliott's comments about our school system being the envy of the world. If that is the case, why are we having this discussion? He cannot have it both ways. The top end may be the envy of the world, but the bottom end is a national disgrace.

The extent of that failure has been highlighted in reports from the Audit Office, the Public Accounts Committee, the chief inspector of schools and a 2008 report by PricewaterhouseCoopers. That last report highlighted various issues, including the lack of parental involvement in children's education and the shortage of positive role models, which Dr McDonnell mentioned. It also mentioned the lack of male role models, including fathers and male teachers, which Mr Storey mentioned. The report's final comment was that there should be a more joined-up approach across the Executive and the Assembly to ensure that all Departments and related agencies work together towards improving literacy and numeracy skills. That is the thrust of the motion, and, as it comes from PricewaterhouseCoopers and the SDLP, it must be right.

The motion and the report point to the basic problem that if people cannot read and write to a decent standard at an early age, they cannot learn properly. If children cannot transfer from primary to secondary level equipped with those basic skills, they will struggle through secondary level into adult life. They also risk having difficulties with employment, social interaction and self-esteem. Dr McDonnell's motion refers to that threat existing in many of our communities.

*12.00 noon*

That is also the reason why so many of our employers had to recruit from abroad during the good times of the past few years, because suitably trained school leavers were not coming forward. Employers are not expecting graduates or Einsteins but people trained in certain skills to an appropriate level. One of our major employers set up a school to teach English to foreign workers and discovered, to his amazement and pleasure, that just as many local people were taking up the offer because, having obtained employment, they discovered that they were also lacking in basic literacy and numeracy skills.

I believe that the Minister recognises those problems and is trying to address them in her various initiatives to date. However, it is a slow process, and it will take time. One cannot do a handbrake turn when driving an oil tanker. There should be a gradual reallocation of funding to early-years provision and, perhaps, a re-evaluation of programmes such as Reading Recovery and linguistic phonics. Dr McDonnell thought that one was better than the other. I do not know, but both are underfunded, and we are not really doing a good job. Those programmes should be re-evaluated, with the major goal of improving standards at our secondary schools.

I acknowledge teachers' performances and efforts at all levels. Nothing that I say should be taken as a criticism of teachers, because they really do their best. However, we need to align skills, which should be taught with employment demands in mind. All those matters are on the agenda in addition to, I hope, the continuing nonsense of separate school systems and the cost of that division.

I agree with the proposer that there is a need for all Departments — notably DEL, DSD, DHSSPS and DE — to work up programmes to give every child the opportunity to realise his or her full potential. They cannot all become professors or Einsteins, but we should be able to ensure that they leave school with a sense of achievement that they have done their best and that the school has got the best out of them.

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

**Mr Lunn:** I support the motion.

**Miss McIlveen:** When I read the text of the motion, I was reminded of the debate held in the Chamber in March 2009 on a motion tabled in my name and in those of my colleagues Mr Storey, Mr McCausland and Mr Poots concerning the recent report from the chief inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate. The text of that motion provided the Minister with what my party and I believe is readily achievable and absolutely necessary to address the deficiencies in our education system, deficiencies that the Minister chooses to ignore and that often worsen through reductions in funding in key areas.

The Minister deflects public attention away from those issues by playing a game of distraction with the issue of academic selection. In his report, the chief inspector states that we are failing substantial numbers of our children and their families, and he should be levelling the blame squarely with the Minister. When we discover that one fifth of our children cannot read, write and count to an appropriate standard after seven years of primary education, we know that action must be taken. Every school is not a good school if those are the results. Without the basics of reading, writing and numeracy, how do we expect those children to achieve

their potential? How do we expect those children to feel engaged in education, and how can we expect discipline, good attendance and good results when they are disadvantaged before they even begin their secondary education?

Time and again, I have referred to the lack of investment in early years. As Mr Elliott said, that was the topic of yesterday's debate on childcare, which is inextricably linked to today's motion. Many places offer excellent facilities, but funding is limited. I will not rehearse the statistics again, but it is widely accepted that early-years learning will improve a child's learning skills. However, it remains disappointingly low on the Minister's priority list. The chief inspector's report advises on nursery provision, half of which is deemed to be very good or better. However, in the voluntary and private sectors, that level drops to one third, which is hardly a ringing endorsement. What has the Minister of Education done to address that problem? She has been fighting the good fight against the post-primary elitist schools by using the politics of distraction. The problems can only be tackled pre-secondary school and by creating a good foundation for learning pre-primary school.

In the debate in March, the DUP called on the Minister to place greater focus on early-years and primary education and to address the low levels of funding and the pupil:teacher ratio. We suggested that she should encourage greater parental involvement and place greater emphasis on early intervention and on numeracy and literacy. I repeat that call today.

As other Members have asked, where is the strategy for children under six years of age? Why is the Minister not ensuring the capacity and capability of parents to support their children's education through an appropriately funded extended schools programme? Where are the proposals to address the problems with the teacher:pupil ratio at primary level and the chronic underfunding of primary schools?

When we discover that children who are entitled to free school meals are twice as likely to leave school without any qualifications, that care-leavers are 20 times more likely to leave school without any qualifications and that as few as 23% of pupils from the most deprived backgrounds achieve five or more GCSEs in contrast to 64% of pupils across Northern Ireland, we realise that, instead of tackling inequality, the Minister is exacerbating the problem through her failure to address those issues. I wonder how many debates we must have on this issue before the Minister will take the appropriate and necessary action.

I am happy to support the motion, because the Minister clearly cannot tackle the issue by herself. As the Education and Training Inspectorate's chief inspector said in his report:

"It is the least we can do for the generations of children and young people who will succeed us and judge us by our actions and not our words."

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also support the motion. I apologise to the House, because I must leave the Chamber to return to a Committee meeting after I speak.

This debate is welcome, and, as Dr McDonnell said in his opening remarks, it is unfortunate that only one and a half hours was scheduled for it. However, this topic is not only being debated in the Chamber, it is being debated in the Committee for Education and in the Department. In my view, every piece of policy and legislation that goes through the Department is about tackling educational underachievement and ensuring that we build a world-class education system.

As a Member who spoke earlier said, we do not have a world-class education system. The Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, Mr Elliott, stated that we have an education system that is the envy of the world. People are not flocking to our shores to learn from our education system. I may have missed seeing such people on my travels, but, judging by my experience in dealing with education over the past year or so, they are not coming here to study our education system. We are looking at examples of education systems from around the world that have moved on or that are using educational methods that are about tackling educational underachievement and which, in turn, are tackling social disadvantage.

As the motion states, we need a cross-cutting response to educational underachievement but not because, as Ms McIlveen said, the Minister cannot deal with or "chooses to ignore" the issue. I simply cannot understand that statement. Why would any Minister choose to ignore educational underachievement? Ms McIlveen may disagree with the way in which the Minister is dealing with the issue or with the policies that are being brought forward, but she cannot stand over the statement that the Minister "chooses to ignore" the issue. She cannot stand over that statement — that is political, not educational, underachievement.

As regards the co-ordinated response that is required, education is somewhat like health. If you wish to improve the health of the nation, you must deal with all aspects of people's lives, such as housing, the environment, safety measures, employment, etc. The same applies to education. If we are to improve the educational outcomes of disadvantaged societies, we must improve the daily lot of people in those societies in order to give communities and individuals the momentum to move forward and ensure that they have the skills and advantages that are necessary to improve their educational outcomes.

I represent one of the most disadvantaged wards in the North: Drumgask, in the Craigavon area. In that ward, there is an estate called Ardowen, which was built around 40 years ago. Only a small number of children from that estate has ever gone to university. The local community came together and set up a homework club using funding from Europe, DSD, the council and other sources. That homework club is staffed by volunteers and is held every night of the week. It serves children from that disadvantaged community and the local Travelling community, many of whom are receiving help with homework at night for the first time. The advantages of that club for that society will be seen in 10 or 15 years' time, and such schemes should be promoted across disadvantaged communities.

Neighbourhood renewal is another way to offer co-ordinated assistance to disadvantaged communities. Therefore, work is being done. We should do whatever we can to co-ordinate work to ensure better educational outcomes for those in disadvantaged communities.

I also recognise the work that is being done by our educationalists. Many primary schools and post-primary schools in disadvantaged communities have given advantages to thousands of children through education. Those schools have given children the chance to develop into everything that they can become, and they have given them the light and hope of education. *[Interruption.]* I am more than happy to let the Member speak, if he so wishes.

**Mr B McCrea:** I am struck by the dichotomy in the view that the Member puts across. On the one hand, he says that our education system is failing, that it is not world-class and that it is not good. However, on the other hand, he says that there are really brilliant people in education who are doing really brilliant things. I challenge the Member to tell me which schools in his constituency are failing and what he is doing about it.

**Mr O'Dowd:** We are always engaged in lifelong learning, and, if the Member could learn to listen to the whole debate, he would find out what I am going to say. I am on record as saying in previous debates that we do not have a world-class education system but that we have world-class educationalists who have created many opportunities for many children in the system. Schools that are failing our children need to be challenged —

**Mr B McCrea:** Name them.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Thankfully, I could not name one school in my constituency that is failing.

**Mr B McCrea:** Are there are no failing schools?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Mr Deputy Speaker, is there a possibility that you could intervene?



**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Members are given time to speak and to have their questions answered. It is important that we do not have an exchange such as this across the Chamber. Mr McCrea, you will be given time to speak at a later stage.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am glad to say that the schools in my constituency have strong leadership, and that is important. However, I welcome the fact that the education and skills authority will challenge schools that do not have strong leadership and that are failing our young people, because those schools deserve to be challenged. Those schools also deserve to be supported, but, if they continue to fail our young people, the leadership in those schools should, and will, be changed. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr K Robinson:** First of all, I declare an interest as a governor in two primary schools in Newtownabbey. Educational underachievement is a subject about which many people, including the Minister of Education, profess a concern. However, that concern is nothing but empty rhetoric unless we, as an Assembly, and particularly those charged with executive responsibility, do something about it.

We in the Ulster Unionist Party have consistently argued that the Education Minister has had an obsessive interest in post-primary transfer to the exclusion of all other issues and that it is an unhealthy preoccupation with little or no end product other than total confusion. That pursuit of a political agenda that stands little chance of achieving broad consensus has led to the lack of adequate movement on educational underachievement, which we in the Ulster Unionist Party consider to be the most pressing issue.

Educational underachievement needs to be tackled at its root — in the early years of schooling and, indeed, even before that. Getting the issue right at that stage will do away with the need for expensive and piecemeal remedial action to be undertaken later at primary, post-primary and third-level education and into adult life. That action has not always been the success that it should have been.

It is true that the performance of schools in Northern Ireland has been improving. The number of post-primary schools in which fewer than 40% of pupils obtain five GCSEs at grades A to C — or the equivalent qualifications — has reduced significantly, and the number of schools in which fewer than 20% of pupils achieve that level has reduced by half. However, in 2005-06, 63% of year 12 pupils obtained five or more GCSEs, or equivalent, at grades A to C, which is a level 2 qualification. This means that, in the same year, 37% — 9,158 pupils — did not achieve five or more GCSE passes or equivalent at that level.

12.15 pm

Five or more GCSE passes at grades A to C, or the equivalent, is recognised as the qualification that puts an individual on the employment or further education ladder. Without that level of qualification after 12 years of compulsory education, young people are left at a disadvantage, both in education and in the labour market. Reports by the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee also show that the problem of poor literacy and numeracy in schools has not been addressed effectively. Too many young people are leaving school without having achieved the appropriate level of performance.

As was said by Members who have spoken previously, the issue of educational underachievement is complex. Dr McDonnell is to be congratulated on bringing this issue before the House. The motion rightly identifies the need for cross-cutting action by the Government. UK statistics for 2005-06 show that 29% of children in Northern Ireland — 122,000 of them — live in families whose incomes are below the poverty line, that is, 60% below the median income level. Moreover, around 10% — 44,000 children — live in severe poverty.

Educational disadvantage begins at an early age. The Department of Education's research indicates that preschool children from higher socio-economic backgrounds in Northern Ireland already show signs of higher cognitive behavioural abilities than children from poorer backgrounds at that early stage. Young children who live in areas of high deprivation, in inner cities and in the massive relocation estates in the towns around Belfast, score less well on verbal skills, early number concepts and general cognitive skills. They also show less progress in sociability and co-operation. Therefore, even before disadvantaged children start their formal education, they are already playing catch-up with those from more affluent backgrounds.

As the proportion of children entitled to free school meals increases, the proportion achieving grade A decreases. Pupils of schools which have the lowest proportion of children entitled to free school meals are over two and a half times more likely to achieve a grade A than those in schools with a band of the highest proportion of children in receipt of school meals.

A wide range of issues must be confronted, including an end to composite classes. I recently received a report from the Minister which showed that we have a horrifying number of composite classes, particularly in primary schools in built-up areas. Managing school budgets without ring-fencing teachers' salaries — they can account for over 90% of the budget — forces schools to artificially reduce their teaching workforce in a way that is detrimental to the educational attainment of children who most need that

help in those schools. We must reduce class sizes, and we must therefore give children greater individual attention. That at least will be a start in addressing educational underachievement.

Unfortunately, I have run out of time.

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

Underachievement is currently defined by the Department of Education as the non-attainment of five GCSEs, including English and maths. There is a huge spectrum of possible reasons for underachievement, including the low aspirations of pupils and their parents, who may not encourage their children to succeed. Home problems and learning difficulties are perhaps the most common factors accounting for underachievement. I discussed the problem with the principal of a primary school in my constituency, and I was shocked to learn that there is a strong likelihood that even departmental guidelines can contribute to underachievement among pupils. The constant changes in the educational system and the rigid dictatorial guidelines are not conducive to providing stability and allowing effective and consistent measures to be put in place and monitored.

The ever-present black cloud of behavioural difficulties that plagues our classrooms proves that there are not enough proper resources to tackle those problems. Behavioural difficulties filter down through the classrooms, causing problems for teachers and pupils, while creating and nurturing, through avoidance, a difficult educational future for the disruptive child.

Yesterday, we debated the need for a childcare strategy. Today's debate is similar, in that investment in the early years of our children lives is vital if both aspects are to be developed and improved on. If we are to make progress, it is essential that the causes and the issues surrounding underachievement are given due consideration and properly constituted for. That will entail, in particular, an absolute commitment from the Minister of Education to work with all the relevant Ministers to tackle the problem head-on and, in order to dispose of the problem, to invest where required.

Professor James Heckman is a firm believer in early-years intervention, and that is where the remedy to the issue of underachievement lies. Many social problems, such as crime, teenage pregnancy and school drop-out rates, together with adverse health conditions, can be traced back to low skill attainment and poor academic ability. According to Professor Heckman's research, lack of investment in early years shows:

"early interventions ... have much higher economic returns than later interventions, such as reduced pupil:teacher ratios, public job training, convict rehabilitation programs, tuition subsidies or expenditure on police."

Underachievement and early intervention cannot, and should not, ever be divorced when confronting this topic.

I stand firmly with my colleague Dr McDonnell, and I thank him for bringing such an important motion to the House. I fully support his call for an action programme to deal with the serious issue of educational underachievement.

**Mr K Robinson:** Does the Member agree that another element that contributes to underachievement is the lack of stability in the teaching profession in inner urban areas, where, because of financial constraints, schools do not know what their budget will be, other than for one year? The ability to attract high-level young teachers to those areas and to retain them is being diminished as a result of that.

**Mrs M Bradley:** I thank the Member for his intervention, and I agree with what he said. That was a very important intervention.

I feel that it is important to add that when — if — an action programme is produced, it will be incumbent on the Minister of Education and, indeed, the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide the appropriate funds to facilitate the recommendations therein.

As a member of the Committee for Education, I have listened to witnesses, many of whom are school principals, tell us some of the problems that they face. Let me tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I felt very sad about the situation when I went home. I really believe that educational underachievement is one problem that we must face head-on and seriously tackle. I urge the Minister of Education to come up with an early-years programme quickly, so that we might do whatever we can to alleviate the problems that exist.

**Mr B McCrea:** We have talked about educational underachievement many times, and, I must say, I do not expect anything to change. The Minister of Education has spoken, and no one has listened. She is now largely irrelevant, isolated and alone, with no one to listen to what she has to say. However, the problem of educational underachievement, as outlined by my colleagues on the SDLP Benches, is still with us. There have been Sinn Féin Ministers of Education for some time now, and very little progress has been made. Those people who say that something is not right with the schools estate must ask where the responsibility lies. I hear repeatedly from the Minister of Education that it lies with her. She has failed the people of Northern Ireland, the children of Northern Ireland, and the Assembly.

I take issue with some of my colleagues' comments. Some Members say that we do not have a world-class education system. I want those Members to name names from their constituencies. Does Mr Lunn think that Wallace High School, Rathmore Grammar School, Fort Hill Primary School, Lisnagarvey High School,

Friends' School or Dromore High School is failing? Name names if a school is not working. Perhaps it is not the schools but the teachers who are not working. If that is the case, let us say which of our teachers are failing children. The teachers whom I know are working really hard. Perhaps it is not the teachers but the headmasters that are failing. Let us point the finger and say what the problem is. The argument that we do not have a world-class education system is completely incoherent. The reason why those schools are oversubscribed is that they are very successful. Northern Ireland produces better results than anywhere else in the British Isles, and, although I do not have the exact criteria to hand, we are told that the top end of our schools do really well on a world-class scale.

Educational underachievement has nothing to do with the 11-plus. The problem lies at the 11-minus stage. The problem is not to do with primary-level schools or teachers; it is to do with the trouble that people face in their early years. Nowhere is that more obvious than in the provision of funding for primary schools. The Northern Ireland Primary Principals' Action Group has said that for the Minister of Education to acknowledge that there is a huge problem but to do nothing about it is unacceptable. That group argues that the strain and stress on its members, who work in primary schools, is unacceptable, and the Minister ought to be making an argument about that.

That argument can be extended to nursery and pre-primary education. Proper intervention is required, and people must be gathered together to try to tackle the issues. We get a deathly silence from the Minister, and it has got beyond a joke. I heard a good joke the other day about the Minister of Education who wanted to get of rid one 11-plus and ended up with two. What is that all about?

**Mr Storey:** The Minister is very good at lecturing us — for instance, she uses Scotland as an example of a place that moved away from a selective system some time ago. However, only last week, the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, Fiona Hyslop, said that an estimated 30% of second-year senior school pupils were classified as being well-established or better at the expected level of maths. Therefore, the Scottish Government have failed, even though they changed their system. All we have heard from the Minister is that all will be well if we change the system. Basil McCrea is right: Sinn Féin has had responsibility for education since 2000, and it has delivered the abolition of the 11-plus but not the abolition of academic selection.

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

**Mr B McCrea:** I agree with the Chairperson of the Education Committee. The facts destroy all of the

political rhetoric and ideology that comes from Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin has no notion about education because its members did not bother to understand the facts. They come out with some standard Marxist line about equality as if that is the answer to everything. Equality does not work in this context because, although all children are valued equally, they are not all equal. What we need is intervention, where people —

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** *[Interruption.]*

**Mr B McCrea:** I am happy to give way if the Member wants to stand up on her feet to say something. The point is that the Member, her party and the Minister are failing the people of Northern Ireland. They are unable to come up with —

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr B McCrea:** I will.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I will not take up much of the Member's time. I simply want to remind him that the Ulster Unionist Party signed up to section 75 and to the equality implications of the Programme for Government. Is that party changing from that position, as part of its new journey into conservatism? *[Laughter.]*

**Mr B McCrea:** The Member fails to understand the problem. It is not that all children are equal; it is that all children have needs that must be provided for. Children should be treated equally, but they are not all equal. The mindless following of the idea that all children are equal is the problem with Sinn Féin's entire education strategy. That is doomed to fail. It is a failure. Your party is a failure. The people of Northern Ireland will see that, and they will rue the day that they put Caitriona Ruane into that role, because she is an absolute, utter joke.

**Ms Purvis:** Follow that, as the saying goes.

I support the motion. The Programme for Government and the Budget have been the subject of much discussion in the Chamber in recent weeks. Many, including the Progressive Unionist Party, advocate revisiting the Programme for Government to adapt it to the current economic realities.

Therefore, it is important to have a quick look at the Programme for Government's vision for educational achievement. The current goal is to ensure that, by 2011, 68% of school leavers achieve five or more GCSE passes at grades A to C, including maths and English. That seems to be a somewhat modest and realistic goal, but those figures require closer analysis when put in the context of where we are now. Currently, 63% of students achieve five or more GCSE passes at grades A to C, but only 51% of those include English and maths. That is a gap of 17% from the Programme for Government's goal, which is a sizeable difference. More significantly, the Department of Education tells us that only 37% of pupils from socially disadvantaged

backgrounds will reach that level of educational achievement. That figure is horrifying. If children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds alone needed to achieve the Programme for Government's target, there would have to be a massive shift of 31% within two years. I do not doubt that those children are capable of achieving such a goal. However, I wonder whether the current education system could ever get them there.

12.30 pm

The point is not to condemn the Programme for Government's targets for educational achievement; they are decent targets. The point is that, once you scratch the surface, start to examine the details of why educational achievement levels are so low and examine closely who is failing and being failed by the system, you must call into question some of the policies that are advocated by parties in the Executive, which appear to completely contradict the Programme for Government's goals for education.

I speak specifically about other unionist parties in the Chamber and their undying allegiance to academic selection. For years, some unionists in the Chamber have called for unionist unity. I ask those Members where their sense of unity is. Where is their sense of responsibility for the whole unionist community, not only the privileged few? How can any form of unity ever be possible when the two largest unionist parties in the Chamber — those who have a responsibility — insist on maintaining a system of severe division in the unionist community, a system that impacts on every level of life for the members of the unionist community, especially young men? That is the tragedy.

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

**Ms Purvis:** The Member will have his opportunity to speak.

Boys and young men are being left behind in shocking and dangerous numbers by the current education system. Young Protestant men are top of that table. Despite all that those young men have to offer the world, that is where unionist leadership has left them.

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

**Ms Purvis:** The Member will have his opportunity to speak.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** It is clear that Member does not want to give way.

**Ms Purvis:** It leads them to fail and to fail for life. That is not only unkind and hypocritical; it is unsustainable. The Programme for Government puts the economy in the top spot; it is the number one priority. How can one square that circle if one happily condemns the majority of kids from disadvantaged backgrounds to leaving school without qualifications

or skills? How will those children participate in the grand new economy? What will be their role and their job?

The Assembly cannot hope to build a thriving local economy without an equitable society. Inequality is not only wrong; it is expensive. The current practice of academic selection institutionalises inequality. The problem has become so severe that it has bled well beyond the boundaries of the education system and now, as the motion rightly states, the only way to address educational underachievement in young people — especially young men — is through a comprehensive, genuine, well-resourced and rapid multi-departmental action plan.

I support the motion and call on my colleagues in the Chamber to do the same, particularly those who are members of other unionist parties. I urge them to stop supporting a system that undeniably prevents all young people from achieving their full potential.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the next Member to speak will be the Minister of Education, who will respond to the debate.

*The sitting was suspended at 12.34 pm.*

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

2.00 pm

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** We return to the motion on educational underachievement. I call the Minister of Education, Ms Caitríona Ruane, to speak when she is ready.

**Mr K Robinson:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Are we allowed to continue? Is the House quorate?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** My understanding is that we are allowed to continue until my attention has been drawn to the absence of a quorum.

*Notice taken that 10 Members were not present.*

*House counted, and there being fewer than 10 Members present, the Deputy Speaker ordered the Division Bells to be rung.*

*Upon 10 Members being present —*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Now that we have a quorum, we can proceed. For the second time, I call the Minister of Education, Ms Caitríona Ruane.

**The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As Members know, since becoming Minister, I have made it an absolute priority to tackle underachievement and to raise standards and equality in all our schools.

Díríonn an rún seo aird ar na hiarmhairtí dochracha a bhaineann le tearcghnóchtáil, don pháiste, don teaghlach, don phobal, don gheilleagar i gcoitinne agus don tsochaí. Sa lá atá inniu ann agus dúshláin eacnamaíochta romhainn ar fad, tá sé níos tábhachtaí fós go gcuirtear deireadh le tearcghnóchtáil.

The motion highlights the damaging consequences of underachievement for children, their families, their communities, and for our whole economy and society. The proposer of the motion, Dr Alasdair McDonnell, outlined that situation graphically. In these challenging economic times, raising educational standards and eliminating underachievement are more important than ever. I look forward to continuing to work with Executive colleagues on our Programme for Government — and with all those who are involved in education — to deliver an education system that provides the skills that all our children and young people need.

My Department works with the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Social Development. We know that the issues that we face are complex and cross-cutting, and work has started — led by the Executive — that will tackle those problems in a cross-cutting way. I am determined to press that work forward.

New political structures are in place to make decisions that will address those issues. The issues of educational underachievement and raising standards are top of the agenda in the Assembly, the North/South Ministerial Council, the British-Irish Council and other fora in which I work. The North/South literacy and numeracy working group will meet tomorrow to take that work forward, because, as I have said on many occasions, underachievement is an area of co-operation and concern across this island.

We have much to be proud of in our system. I say that consistently. Our system provides top-end qualifications to our most able pupils. However, too many children leave school without reaching high levels of achievement, and too many do not have the qualifications that they need.

We have heard that getting five good GCSE grades, including maths and English — or maths and Irish, depending through which language one is studying — is recognised as one of the keys to entering further and higher education and to getting well-paid jobs. However, almost half our young people — 48% — do not achieve those grades. What is more, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to achieve at that level. Some 27% of them get five good GCSEs, compared with 60% of their more advantaged peers. That is a statistic of which we have to take note. However, the problems begin much earlier.

Bíonn páiste as gach cúigear ag fágáil ár mbunscoileanna gan an leibhéal litearthachta agus uimhearthachta tuartha a bhaint amach. Go bunúsach, níl sé sin sásúil ná maith go leor.

Almost one child in five leaves primary school without having achieved the expected level in literacy and numeracy. That figure is simply not good enough.

Our system has been described as being world-class. Yes, we have some world-class practice and some world-class practitioners. However, when we benchmark ourselves internationally, using the programme for international student assessment (PISA) survey, our performance is average, and our international ranking appears to have slipped in recent years.

I note selective quoting by Members who refuse time and time again to acknowledge the damage that academic selection has done to our education system. I will not even try to respond to some of those Members. Dawn Purvis responded to them, and I hope that they will listen to what she said.

Ag ardú ionchas, ag ardú caighdeán do gach dalta, agus ag déanamh cinnte de go mbíonn gach scoil ina scoil mhaith: sin é an fócas atá ag mo Roinn.

Raising expectations, raising standards for each individual pupil and making every school a good school — that is my Department's focus. This morning, I met

with governors from all over the North of Ireland. I stressed again and again, as did Will Haire, the importance of raising standards for every child, and putting equality at the core of our education system.

I believe passionately in equality, and in equality for all children: no matter what community they come from; no matter what race or sexual orientation they are; and no matter what their ability or disability is. Equality must be the cornerstone. It concerns me when I hear some Members make glib statements about equality. I thought we had moved far beyond that. Let those Members explain to the people whom they represent why they are opposed to equality.

I will shortly publish 'Every School a Good School', our new school-improvement policy. My officials and I, along with education leaders, had the opportunity to talk to principals about the new policy at a recent series of school-improvement conferences in Derry, Belfast and Armagh. A real sense of passion and commitment was evident at those conferences. People from all sectors and from all types of school attended. Ultimately, we all need to work together — preschools, primary schools, post-primary schools and community organisations — if we are to deal with these challenging times.

Trevor Lunn is absolutely right when he says that we cannot change the education system overnight, but we can at least turn the oil tanker around. We must get the system on the right track, because unless we make the necessary changes, it will continue to go down a cul-de-sac. As always, Trevor made a very thoughtful contribution, which I wish to acknowledge.

What we need to do — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order, please.

**The Minister of Education:** We need to ensure that our children are learning in settings that are characterised by good leadership, an ethos of aspiration, excellent teaching, and strong links among schools, parents and the community. Dr McDonnell spoke about the role of parents, which is absolutely crucial in all this. It is very important that parents form part of the solution. Schools should be settings that are committed to excellence, equality and inclusion, and to tackling the barriers that prevent young people from achieving their full potential.

I want every school to be a good school, but we cannot accomplish that goal without making the radical reforms that our system needs. Those who do not understand the links between our current selective system and underachievement have failed to see the major problem in the system. It is only one of the problems in our system, and of course we need to start earlier, but it is a major problem, and it must be tackled.

When I was appointed as Minister of Education, I inherited a system that was designed 60 years ago. It

was a selective system that put the needs of 40% of children above the needs of all the rest and is clearly not fit for the modern world. In condemning the majority of our children — many of whom are already strongly disadvantaged — as failures, it is unjust and fundamentally wrong.

How did the 11-plus serve this year's admissions process? For the benefit of those who defend academic selection, let us look at some of the statistics. If some Members have heard them before, I will repeat them, because they are obviously not listening closely enough. Look at — *[Interruption.]*

It is interesting that a party that is so committed to dealing with disadvantage and underachievement has two representatives —

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

**The Minister of Education:** I will not give way. The Member has already had his opportunity.

There are 13 post-primary schools in Derry. I will look at Derry City, Fermanagh and Belfast. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Order. I am sorry, Minister; please take your seat. I have already asked Members to make their remarks through the Chair. I do not mind the odd intervention; I understand the cut and thrust of politics, but this is well beyond it.

**The Minister of Education:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. There are 13 post-primary schools in Derry, of which four are grammar schools and nine are secondary schools. The four grammar schools educate 43% of post-primary pupils who attend schools in the county; the nine secondary schools educate the remaining 57%. In the grammar schools, 13% of children are entitled to free school meals, compared to 41% of the children in secondary schools. In the grammar schools, 28 children have a statement of special educational needs; the secondary schools educate 300 children with statements of special educational needs. Those figures do not even take demographic decline into account.

What about Fermanagh? The situation is even worse there. There are 14 post-primary schools in Fermanagh: four grammar schools and 10 secondary schools. Pupil numbers in Fermanagh have fallen to such a degree that its four grammar schools now educate half the county's post-primary pupils. The 10 secondary schools educate the other half. As a result, one quarter of the desks in the non-grammar schools are empty.

Some 7% of children in the grammar schools in Fermanagh are entitled to free school meals. In the secondary schools, that figure is 20%. Nine pupils in grammar schools in Fermanagh have a statement of special educational needs. There are 109 such pupils in the secondary schools. Thanks to the 11-plus test and the selection process, Fermanagh has a fundamentally

divided post-primary-school system, in which 10 schools absorb all the various challenges in the area. The story is the same across the North.

In the 2008-09 school year, 77 out of 135 children in Holywood's four primary schools transferred to grammar schools. In the seven primary schools serving the Malone Road in Belfast, the corresponding figure was 214 out of 235. However, in the three schools that largely serve Belfast's Sandy Row area, 11 out of 79 children transferred to a grammar school. In the three primary schools that largely serve the Shankill Road, the corresponding figure was 10 out of 104. In the seven schools that serve the Falls Road, 49 out of 284 pupils transferred to a grammar school.

We can look at those statistics and do something about them, or we can pretend that they do not exist and pretend that we are dealing with underachievement. We must deal with the issues in our system if we are to make change. Some say that change will damage our system; some say that it will create chaos and confusion. Thirty years ago in Finland, opponents of change said the same thing. Finland is now top of the international standards rankings. Poland has been able to change its education system within a very short period, and it is shooting up the international rankings — not just for a few children, but for all its children.

Primary schools will no longer be seen as stepping stones to post-primary schools. They can now get on with their job — one of the most important jobs in society — of educating our young children.

2.15 pm

I agree with every Member who said that preschool education and primary education are fundamentally important — of course they are. Learning starts long before formal education begins: it starts in the womb. The first three years of life are critical, and proper care, nutrition and stimulation are essential for successful learning in the future.

From the age of three, children become more aware of their place in the community. They need to develop social skills, as well as early literacy and numeracy skills. My Department is developing an early-years strategy. We have also made changes to the curriculum. Members on the Benches opposite were very critical of that revised curriculum. However, I notice now that there is little criticism of it; people have heard that teachers like it.

My Department is working with the Department for Employment and Learning to bring about a more co-ordinated approach to learners who are aged between 14 and 19. We have a literacy and numeracy strategy, the aim of which is to deal with levels of literacy and numeracy in the most disadvantaged communities.

Tá an straitéas seo bunaithe ar an dea-chleachtas atá inár scoileanna, le teagasc den chéad scoth a chur ar fáil do gach páiste. Agus, má tá an páiste ina díth, gheobhaidh sé nó sí tacaíocht phearsantaithe sa bhreis.

We know that, too often, underachievement in literacy and numeracy is linked to social disadvantage. I commissioned the achieving Belfast and achieving Derry initiatives because of the serious problems with underachievement in some urban areas. Those programmes were introduced in September, and I am determined that they will bring about real improvements.

We have also commissioned a review of special educational needs and inclusion, and I look forward to those matters being discussed by the Executive. Violence against women and children, sexual violence against girls, disability, and disadvantage are some of the barriers that may exist in children's lives outside school, and some children go to school without having had those problems addressed.

Therefore, it is important that we deal with such problems early and that we have that inclusion agenda as part of our education system. The reform programme ensures that those barriers are addressed early in order that children can fulfil their potential.

Last week, I launched a policy to support newcomer children, so that they, too, have a fair chance in our society. It was a wonderful launch, and I pay tribute to Botanic Primary School, which is doing such tremendous inclusion work. Also we have set up a task force for the Travelling community, which faces some of the worst outcomes in society. Recently, in Newry, we had a good North/South conference that focused on Traveller education and the lessons that can be learned from dealing with those issues.

I thank Dr Alasdair McDonnell for tabling the motion. He mentioned extended schools, and I welcome the support from all sides of the House for the extended schools programme.

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

**The Minister of Education:** I am delighted to say that we can continue with that programme, because it is very important. Go raibh maith agat .

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá an-áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht seo faoi chúrsaí oideachais, go háirithe faoin bhaint atá idir an tearcghnóthachtáil oideachasúil agus an bochtanas.

I am pleased to be taking part in this debate on the important issue of the link between educational underachievement and social deprivation. I thank my colleague Dr McDonnell for tabling the motion.

Dr McDonnell described the issue as one of the biggest challenges — socially, politically and economically — that faces us at present. I agree with that point.

He quoted several interesting statistics. For example, he said that 4,500 children leave primary school with poor standards of literacy and numeracy and that 47% of post-primary children are not achieving a C grade in English and mathematics. He also referred to the research of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that clearly shows that there is a strong link between levels of deprivation and educational underachievement.

Dr McDonnell said that a strong anti-poverty approach to the issue is needed. He also said that there is a need for a cross-departmental effort to stop this vicious circle from continuing. Dr McDonnell mentioned several actions that he thought could be effective as part of that cross-departmental effort: the positive effects of active parental involvement in children's education; better funding for primary schools targeted at areas of social deprivation; a reduction in the pupil:teacher ratio; the use of linguistic phonics programmes; and the continuation and enlargement of the extended schools programme. He also mentioned that around £1 billion is lost to the economy in potential productivity each year because of educational underachievement.

Mr Storey, speaking on behalf of the Education Committee, referred to the Committee's scrutiny of the school improvement policy 'Every School a Good School'. Although there are many positive elements in the policy, I contend that we must look beyond schools if we are to raise standards. School-based actions alone will not have the required effect of improving educational achievement.

When one examines the complexity of social deprivation, one can see that many elements are involved. Quite often, those include poor health; low income; parental unemployment; poor housing; family size; lone-parent status; ethnic grouping; and lack of fluency in English or Irish. Those are only some of the many factors that contribute to social deprivation and educational underachievement.

Schools alone are not in a position to address all those problems. They can contribute towards the solution, but they cannot be the final solution. It is abundantly clear that a cross-cutting strategy is needed — as the motion states — with the Department of Education taking the lead, working in conjunction with other relevant Departments: the Department for Social Development, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Although academic selection may not be the sole cause of educational underachievement, as some Members have

pointed out, there is strong evidence that it compounds the problem. A Queen's University study by Gallagher and Smith pointed out that academic selection tends to produce a disproportionate number of schools that combine low ability and social disadvantage in their enrolments. That compounds the problem of educational disadvantage.

It is unfortunate that we still have academic selection, albeit that it is an unregulated and privatised version. Despite the fact that the Minister has told us, on many occasions, that the 11-plus has come to an end, academic selection continues. We must work to reach agreement on that issue and ensure that the negative effects of academic selection are removed from our education system. I believe that there is possibility for agreement around age 14 and that that particular possibility has not yet been properly explored or exploited.

Mr Elliott referred to the work of the Nobel economics laureate James Heckman, whose name is becoming one of those heard most frequently in the House. Nonetheless, his work is important and relevant to this particular debate. Professor Heckman's work indicates the very clear educational and economic benefits of early intervention and of early childhood education. His work highlights that persistent patterns have strong effects. He states that the benefits are not limited to intellectual gains; that there are benefits in social performance and general lifetime achievements as productive adults.

The early-years workforce deserves maximum investment, and I hope that the Minister's nought-to-six strategy, when she brings it forward, will reflect that. A transformation fund, such as is available in England, is needed in order to ensure that we have the best-qualified early-years workforce possible.

We are all aware of points that were made in Northern Ireland Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee reports, and those issues need to be addressed. So far, we have not heard from the Minister about how she intends to tackle those problems. We need a literacy and numeracy strategy, because the system is not delivering. Although a literacy and numeracy strategy would address those problems, the need for such a strategy is evidence that our system is not working as it should be. Mr Robinson said that that type of action was expensive and piecemeal. It might be a solution in the interim, but in the long term, we must work for a system that produces results that mean that we do not need add-ons such as literacy and numeracy policies.

Dr McDonnell and others clearly outlined the measures that are needed in order to raise achievement, and they could form the basis of an effective strategy. One element is proper investment in pupil:teacher ratios and in early-years and primary education. We need a strong and highly co-ordinated cross-departmental approach



that engages all the relevant Departments that I mentioned earlier. Actions should not be solely school-based but directed towards family and community, and they should help to raise the value that families and communities in socially deprived areas place on education.

It is also useful to link local schools with industry in order to help to reinforce the links between education and employment. We need to tackle poverty, and we also need to secure employment for socially deprived areas. We need to break down the silo mentality in some Departments in order to ensure that we are in a position to tackle the multifaceted nature of complex problems such as educational underachievement.

In the words of the OFMDFM anti-poverty strategy:

“Policy must break the cycle and the process that results in children who are born into poverty developing into underachieving young people”.

That work must come from the Department of Education but must be backed up, where necessary and relevant, by the work of other Departments.

I obviously support the motion, and I thank all those, including Dr McDonnell and the Minister, who contributed to the debate. I hope that we will see co-ordinated action on this issue in the very near future. Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly recognises the threat to future prosperity and well-being posed by educational underachievement in many communities; and calls on the Executive, and the Minister of Education in particular, to produce a cross-cutting departmental action programme designed to tackle educational underachievement.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Social Housing

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

**Mr Cobain:** I beg to move

That this Assembly notes, with concern, the Department for Social Development's recent priority change which gives greater emphasis to the refurbishment of social housing, as opposed to redevelopment; further notes the huge detrimental effect this will have on the most vulnerable people in our society; and calls on the Minister to provide social homes fit for the twenty-first century throughout Northern Ireland.

I believe that this issue ranges somewhat further than social housing, so I will spend the first couple of minutes explaining the context of the motion.

*2.30 pm*

A number of weeks ago, the DUP tabled a motion on the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009, and its members praised their Minister for bringing forward proposals to freeze rates for the next three years. However, there was no mention of the people who are so poor that they do not need to pay rates: the working poor, near-benefit level families, pensioners and people on disability living allowance. I was never taken with that scheme, which basically uses pensioners to subsidise multimillionaires. Nevertheless, the movers of the motion identified what the Executive were doing for the community — not for the whole of it but for part of it.

I will now talk for a few moments about what the Executive are doing for people who do not pay rates, because they are socially and economically deprived; in other words, the poor. The Executive identified a number of targets in the Programme for Government to deal specifically with poverty: severe child poverty was to be halved by 2010; child poverty was to be eliminated by 2020; and pensioner poverty was to be dealt with over the incoming years. That is all drivel.

The number of children living in severe poverty is rising, the number of children living in poverty is rising, and the number of pensioners living in poverty is rising. On average, 70% of boys who are eligible for free school meals leave school with five GCSEs or less. We spend day after day arguing about academic selection — and we did it again today — but there has never been a debate about children who are marginalised in schools and who have been failed by the education system.

More than 1,000 people die every year from cold-related illnesses; in other words, they freeze to death.

However, the Executive cut the warm homes scheme, and they are spending less on warm homes this year than they did last year.

We were told in the Programme for Government that 1,500 new social and affordable homes were going to be built. A number of weeks ago, the Minister corrected me to tell me that we did not need 2,500 new homes, as I had said, but that we needed 3,000 new social homes.

**Mr McQuillan:** Does the Member realise that his party has two Ministers on the Executive? What are they doing to uphold what he is saying?

**Mr Cobain:** If the Member was interested in people who are living in poverty, he would challenge his Ministers to see what they are doing for those people; however, he is indulging in point scoring. People in our community are living in poverty. This is about point scoring, not about facing the issues.

We were told that we needed 2,500 new social homes, and the Minister told me that we needed 3,000 new social homes to meet the need. We are now in an economic crisis, and those numbers are going to rise, so there will be more housing pressures and growing numbers of homeless people. That is what is going to happen, and the Executive are doing nothing for those people.

The point that I want to raise today relates to the issue of building new homes and refurbishing homes. I am old enough to remember the previous period of refurbishment in the 1970s and 1980s; instead of knocking down the slums in Belfast, the Housing Executive refurbished them. The slums that were refurbished in the 1970s and 1980s are the same slums that people are living in today. In the Woodvale area and the Shankill area, which the Minister visited, people are living in slums.

The Housing Executive carried out an economic appraisal, which concluded that those houses needed to be knocked down and rebuilt. However, the Department, together with the landlord in that area, has been dragging its feet for almost three years. Naturally, the landlord does not want to knock those houses down, as he will only be able to put back 40% of what he knocks down. Therefore, he wants to keep the slums up, with people in them, so that his revenue streams can continue.

Older people live in those homes who cannot climb the stairs. Therefore, they sleep, wash and toilet downstairs. Those are the conditions that we have in the twenty-first century in Belfast, and the Department, instead of knocking them down and building proper twenty-first century homes, wants to refurbish them.

An environmental architect now works in the Department for Social Development (DSD). That architect wants to retain some of those houses because of their environmental advantage, in some sense. Of

course, he does not live in one of those houses; he probably lives in a £400,000 house elsewhere. No one will refurbish homes in the Woodvale area. The Department and the housing associations will knock those homes down and build proper twenty-first century homes for the people who live in that area.

The people who live in that area are not rich. Many of them are on benefits, and many are pensioners. However, those people deserve the same as everybody else in our society. This is not an Executive for the haves and not for the have-nots.

Members talk about social justice, but do nothing about it. I have said that before. Individuals and Back-Benchers must stand up and be counted on these issues. The people who we are talking about today do not have a voice and are dependent on those in this Chamber standing up and speaking on their behalf. We must break this politburo-type Executive.

People like Mr McQuillan talk about the fact that the UUP has two Ministers on the Executive. I do not care about how many Ministers the UUP has on the Executive. If it is wrong, it is wrong, and this is wrong. The reason why it is wrong and the reason why people like Mr McQuillan do not care about it is because those people are poor and come from a generation that is poor. However, the days of those people not having a voice in this Chamber are over. I am speaking to people here —

**Mr F McCann:** On the back of the issue of refurbishment versus newbuilds, there are elements that must be taken into consideration, particularly the recent decisions to cut multi-element replacements and maintenance. Does the Member agree with me that if those issues are not dealt with, more and more houses will fall into disrepair and will need more money spent on them in the long-term?

**Mr Cobain:** I thank the Member for his point. It was one of the issues that I missed, and I am sorry for that. Indeed, there are no cyclical maintenance schemes any longer. The warm homes scheme and disability adaptations have also gone. We may be getting 1,500 new homes, but we will not be getting any further maintenance or adaptations. That is the sort of society that we are living in.

In conclusion, there is a historical precedent for not carrying out refurbishments on homes. It is a waste of public money. It was a waste of public money 30 years ago and it is a waste of public money now. However, and more importantly, what one is left with is a tarted-up slum, not a lifetime home —

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

**Mr Cobain:** As far as those of us in the Chamber with a social conscience are concerned, the days of refurbishing slums are over.

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

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Simpson):** The Social Development Committee received a ministerial briefing on 26 March 2009, in which the Minister advised the Committee of the budget constraints that she faced and of the impact that they would have on housing-related maintenance and refurbishment programmes and the social housing development programme.

We are all aware that the funding of housing programmes was based on an expectation of significant capital receipts from house and land sales. The majority of the Committee agrees that the funding difficulties that those programmes now face are the inevitable consequence of the so-called credit crunch and the collapse in house and land values. The Minister has advised the Committee of her plans to deal with those difficulties.

The Committee understood that funding was to be concentrated on the delivery of the social housing development programme, with a view to achieving the relevant public service agreement (PSA) target to provide 10,000 social and affordable homes by 2013. In order for the Minister to live within her budget, she decided to cut back on maintenance and refurbishment programmes, such as the decent homes programmes.

The Committee welcomed the Minister's decision to deliver on the social housing development programme in 2009-2010. Having said that, the Committee sought details of where houses are to be built or bought under that programme. The Committee is also seeking clarification on procurement issues that, it is understood, may affect the social housing development programme.

Needless to say, the Committee was greatly concerned about the impact on householders and contractors of the decision to reduce housing maintenance and refurbishment programmes. The Committee supports the view that all social housing should be fit for the twenty-first century and should be healthy homes that comply with the decent homes standard. Social homes should also be energy efficient to ensure that income-poor tenants are not also fuel poor.

Finally, the Committee believes that social homes should set a quality standard that the private-rented sector follows. In that way, it is hoped that the greater number of families and individuals who are dealing with homelessness or housing stress, or living in unfit accommodation, will experience the benefit of better housing.

The Committee has sought further information on how the Department will maintain stability between

redevelopment projects and refurbishment and maintenance programmes. Nevertheless, the Committee welcomes the debate. The House should be aware that the Committee recognises the difficult decisions that the economic situation has thrust upon the Minister and the Executive as a whole.

**Mr F McCann:** I think that the Member will agree that, over the past two years, there have been lengthy debates in the Committee on social housing, and that questions have been asked. Councillor Cobain — rather, Assembly Member Mr Cobain; that was another of his hats — mentioned the situation in Woodvale. There are other areas throughout the North in which residents are pushing for old homes to be demolished and more modern ones to be built. However, does the Member agree that the present approach seems to favour refurbishment, which means that in 30 years' time we will be back in the same situation?

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development:** Yes, I understand where the Member is coming from. I agree that we do not want to be back in the same situation in 30 years' time. We do not want to be in that situation in the first place, but, unfortunately, that is where we find ourselves.

The Committee is also concerned about changing priorities within the social housing programmes, and it awaits with interest the report on the housing conditions survey, which I understand is due to be published this May.

2.45 pm

That report will allow the Committee to evaluate the impact of those changes. The Committee will scrutinise the Minister's plans in the light of the survey and assure itself that all reasonable alternatives have been considered and that mitigating measures are employed to limit the impact that the changes will have on householders and the employers.

**Mr F McCann:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a chur in iúl do na Comhaltáí sin a thug an rún os comhair an Tionóil inniu.

I thank the Members who moved the motion. This issue goes to the heart of housing provision. Three weeks ago in the Chamber, my colleague Carál Ní Chuilín moved a motion on the redevelopment of a number of streets in north Belfast that are known locally as upper long streets. The houses in those streets have outlived their usefulness as units of accommodation by many years, and residents and tenants' associations have campaigned actively to have them replaced with modern housing. I understand that the Minister has met representatives from the upper long streets in the past several days, and I hope that their representations and considerations are taken on

board. Their campaign has been long, and we hope that their vision and dreams come true in the near future.

I spoke to one of the proposers of this motion when that debate took place, and I learned that he was concerned about the direction that the Minister and her Department were going in and the decisions that they were making. That direction and those decisions condemned residents to living in outdated accommodation. Her decision flies in the face of her recent assessment of the Village area of Belfast, when she rightly said that redevelopment was the only course of action. I commend those from the Village who fought a lengthy campaign to have their area redeveloped and the houses there replaced with decent housing. Perhaps the Minister will explain the difference between her stance on that area and her position on others.

I remember that some years ago I was involved in the campaign to have the Divis Flats complex demolished. I also remember the efforts of the Housing Executive to force refurbishment, rather than redevelopment, on residents. Residents resisted those efforts, just as they did in areas such as the Rossville Flats in Derry, the "Weetabix" flats in the Shankill, and the Unity Flats in Carrick Hill in Belfast.

One argument against refurbishment is its long-term cost. That is because it does not represent good value for money. In fact, the lifespan of a refurbished unit is only half that of a newbuild house. There is clear evidence of that in my own area of the Falls. Two old streets were totally rehabilitated over 20 years ago, but they are now in need of major works again. That calls into question how the Department for Social Development's housing policy and budget are operating, particularly when one takes into account the recent decision to cease multi-element housing-improvement schemes, including work on kitchens and other replacements. The decision to not allocate money to such schemes will cost more in the long run when continued deterioration has an impact on other parts of those houses.

Not only could that freeze put 1,000 people on the dole, but much of the work that was to be carried out in that sector was being done for health and safety reasons. I question whether the Minister is taking that fact into consideration when she makes decisions that will have an impact on the health and well-being of many tenants.

Will her decisions on those issues start to erode the good work that has been done over the years in creating decent house standards and energy efficiency? What will be the cost of picking up the pieces here? The Minister said that social housing newbuild is her number one priority. If that is the case, why does she insist on refurbishing outdated housing over constructing newbuilds?

Sinn Féin has always argued that more resources are required to address the serious shortage in social housing, but we also believe that the direction that the Minister has taken — which has caused many schemes to be delayed or suspended — is storing up trouble for the future. She refers constantly to newbuild social housing and to putting the construction industry back to work, but she then buys houses on the open market and buys apartments from developers who have difficulty selling them. That was demonstrated when the site of the Curzon cinema on the Ormeau Road was purchased — that matter was mentioned in the media recently. Was that cost-effective? Did it provide the type of family accommodation that is required for the area, or could the money have been better used to redevelop those areas to which the motion refers? Perhaps the Minister will explain that situation to the House.

Many of the areas that ask to be redeveloped do not make the decision to do so lightly. It is usually when an area has been neglected over many years and has fallen into decline that people ask that demolition and redevelopment be considered. In all instances of redevelopment that involve inner-city areas, many of the places to be redeveloped are socially deprived. It is of prime importance that the wishes of residents and their representatives are taken into consideration. We need to communicate with those residents, rather than telling them that we know what is best for them.

We should listen to their concerns and ideas for the future because, after all, many of them have invested a lifetime in their areas and have a good understanding of the type of housing and infrastructure that is required and that many of us take for granted. Ultimately, we have a responsibility to provide the type of housing that people require, and that is what we must do.

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

**Mr F McCann:** I am finishing off now. We should not be persuaded into taking what is on the developers' shelves, and then have to spend more money trying to make those fit the requirements of the waiting list. Ultimately, if housing is of poor standard, it is impractical to refurbish it.

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

**Mr F McCann:** I support the motion.

**Mr Burns:** I agree that we must provide social housing that is fit for the twenty-first century: no one disputes that that is what everyone wants to see. People have the right to have a roof over their heads, no matter who they are or where they are from. However, the motion seems to suggest that the Minister does not want to demolish old houses, redevelop rundown areas or build new homes and that she prefers to give a few houses a coat of paint. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The motion also states that the Minister is getting her priorities wrong and has made bad choices. That is totally untrue. The motion, as it stands, misses the point. I make that very clear. The Department for Social Development does not have enough money to do what needs to be done. The Minister is doing her best to make savings within her budget, but the fact is that, for the most part, the DSD is a spending Department. More money must be found for the DSD budget. I do not mean that the Minister should wait for a few handouts from the monitoring rounds; I mean that there must be a review of the entire Budget and of the Programme for Government — and I am sure that I do not have to dwell on that subject too much.

I am not trying to blame the Finance Minister for the global economic downturn. In fact, he is probably feeling the pressure most within his Department. However, the DSD will face a £100 million shortfall this year and a £100 million shortfall next year, mainly due to the collapse of land and property sales. There is no way that the Minister for Social Development will be able to make up that shortfall on her own. If the Finance Minister does not come up with more money, very tough choices will have to be made. A £100 million shortfall could mean that thousands of planned new homes will not be built and that badly-needed redevelopment and regeneration will not take place in some areas.

In addition to cutbacks in newbuild and redevelopment, what other cutbacks might be required? Will we have to cut back on the co-ownership scheme, the warm homes scheme and the mortgage rescue scheme as well? If we are serious about hitting the Programme for Government's targets, the DSD must have more resources.

Although we all know this, I will repeat it anyway — building new social housing and repairing existing houses not only helps people in housing stress and homelessness but is by far the best way that the Assembly can help the construction industry and give the local economy a boost. The Minister should not be asked to choose which policy to implement; she needs enough money to implement them all.

The Assembly and the Executive must see that there is a black hole in the housing budget, and something must be done about it quickly; it cannot be ignored.

**Mr Lunn:** The Alliance Party supports the motion, because there is nothing in it with which we profoundly disagree. However, we would like to hear more about some aspects of the motion, if the opportunity arises. We think that the clash between redevelopment and refurbishment depends significantly on local circumstances.

We want the Minister to provide social housing that is fit for the twenty-first century, as the motion requests. However, it would be a major surprise to me if that

was not her plan. The Alliance Party does not accept that refurbishment will have a detrimental effect on the most vulnerable in our society. Surely, that depends on circumstances. Housing is not only about the present; the future sustainability of housing is another major issue.

We cannot escape the implications of the Budget. Although a higher budget allocation would enable her to pursue redevelopment rather than refurbishment in more cases, the Minister must operate within her allocation.

To achieve a higher allocation now, the Alliance Party has stated on more than one occasion that it would raise more revenue from the public to invest in public services. That could be done by raising rates in line with inflation and not running with the £400,000 rates cap, for example. We have also stated frequently that we would make our case for funding to the Treasury by accepting a need to cut the cost of division over the current Assembly term. That would include making some hard decisions on such issues as the closure of leisure centres, the amalgamation of schools and the shifting of funding from urban roads and into public transport.

The electorate may judge whether it wishes to invest in public services now or accept underinvestment alongside low rates, but one cannot have both. The other parties continue to advocate more spending, but they continue to fail to explain from where the money for that would come.

Not everyone is convinced by the neighbourhood renewal concept. It is, undoubtedly, well intentioned, but it seems to be a policy that has been transferred from England and that will not necessarily work in all of our local circumstances.

Part of the argument for neighbourhood renewal and for opting for increased refurbishment over redevelopment is that it helps to preserve the identity of local communities. However, it is noted also that it saves money. Ultimately, refurbishment is often used as a cost-cutting measure — that is implied in the motion, and we agree with that being done in many cases.

**Mrs Long:** I accept the Member's comment about maintaining the coherence of local communities. I am sure that he will agree that that can also be achieved by the careful decant and relocation of residents during rebuild programmes. That has been done — albeit with more success in some situations than in others — and should be a top priority when those issues are being considered.

**Mr Lunn:** I do not disagree with that. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to the issue; every case is different. However, there are undoubtedly cases when refurbishment is not only the cheaper option, but the better option. There are parts of Northern Ireland where the character of an area very much exists in its

heritage, and it is in such instances where the people who live in an area do not realise what they have until it is gone.

The preference for redevelopment should not be seen as universal. It is possible to refurbish properties in such a way as to make them fuel and carbon efficient.

I would like clarity on the “huge detrimental effect” that is mentioned in the motion; however, I see that the proposer of the motion has left the Chamber. It is assumed that those words apply to vulnerable people. There will always be cases in which a whole area can be regenerated — partly through redevelopment and partly through refurbishment. It may be that that requires strong community leadership that is able to explain why refurbishment is acceptable for some properties and redevelopment is suitable for others.

The Alliance Party will support the motion; we will live with it. We would like to hear a lot more about the universal detrimental effect on vulnerable people and about how the proposers of the motion intend to finance the redevelopment that they are calling for. Although we welcome the issue being raised, we would have preferred a motion that does justice to the complexities of how social housing priorities should be reformed within current budgets.

3.00 pm

**Mr Shannon:** Everyone in the Chamber is well aware of the issue of social housing; it is not the first time that the topic has been debated. I spoke before of the fact that some 3,000 people in Ards are on the waiting list for social housing, 900 of whom, in the town itself, are in priority need. Need will not be met simply by renovating existing buildings, although that is still necessary, but by investing in long-term solutions, and the Minister knows that.

The Minister attended a sod-cutting ceremony at a social housing development on the Donaghadee Road in Newtownards in January. That development consists of 40 units and will take a number of people in the Ards area off what are extremely long waiting lists. As the Minister and I know, what makes that development even more special is the fact that Sky Developments, the company responsible, has ensured that the units will be carbon-neutral. Therefore, that company is doing its part to provide homes and to help the environment. Energy saving, which is part of the issue, is involved. Legislation that is in place puts us ahead of many other EU countries, and such developments point to the fact that we in the Province are aware of our environmental responsibilities and try to face up to them.

The homes are designed to perfection, and, although it was a long time coming, the sod-cutting was certainly worth the wait. The benefits are there for many to see, and they will be realised through the allocation of the properties later this year. Sky Developments has a

reputation for building superior housing at affordable costs. Through its work, we can see that houses that save energy can be built keenly, and that is something that the Minister should be promoting. More such housing would lead to a reduction in waiting lists in that area, and that could be replicated everywhere else. The desire and the need is there, and companies such as Sky Developments have the know-how and the ability to produce superior, environmentally friendly housing at affordable rates, and the Minister must tap into that market.

Las week A wus aa a plennin maetin aa Airds Council where thair wur 38 options tae pit aff oan the schedule – monie o’ thaim wur plens fer hoosin schemes at wur provisionally maarked fer social hoosin – hits gyely important at the Meenster’s Department waarks wi’ the Plennin Service fer tae mak siccar at social developments ir gien aa needfu’ hefts tae mak’ siccar at the plens ir wi’ in what bes acceptable tae the Plennin Service an’ at they ir passed.

Last week, wearing my councillor hat, I attended a planning meeting. The schedule for the meeting had 38 options to defer, which was the largest number for a long time. Many of those options involved plans for housing developments that were provisionally marked for social housing. It is of great importance that the Minister’s Department liaise with the Planning Service to ensure that social developments are given all the necessary help to ensure that the plans are acceptable and that they are passed.

A large amount of the work that is handled in my office concerns the Housing Executive. In my area, some families have waited for years to be housed, and there is no hope of that happening in the current climate. Others are in homes that are badly in need of upgrading, and I understand that the Minister is trying to deal with those issues. Those people cannot afford mortgages or private rental taxes. On their behalf, I ask that the Minister ensure that newbuilds become a priority.

I also want to comment about extensions for people with disabilities. I was in touch this morning with the Housing Executive grants office in Dundonald, which covers Ards, north Down and Castlereagh. I was informed that that office has been unable to pay for any of the extensions that have been completed for people with disabilities. Some 60 such extensions are on the books, and the office has no idea of what to do. There is a meeting tomorrow, so perhaps the Minister can tell us whether it will result in that money being made available so that grants for those extensions can be paid out, allowing the scheme to continue.

I have questioned the Minister on many occasions about funding for grants for extensions for people with disabilities. It is now becoming clear that new methods can be used to resolve such issues. A good method is

the pod scheme, which is a ready-made extension that can be attached in two parts. It takes three weeks to complete, instead of the normal 12 weeks. That scheme demonstrates that other ways of producing extensions at a suitable price are available.

The Minister has other options, and she must look at them. This is a serious issue and one that will not be resolved without serious consideration. The Minister must ensure that homes are built and that everyone is looked after. She has a budget, and she must do the job.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Although Fred Cobain is not in the Chamber, I thank the proposers for tabling the motion. Fra McCann has already mentioned and the Minister already knows that Gerry Kelly and I met two residents groups here yesterday. Refurbishment and redevelopment are needed in those areas.

Trevor Lunn referred to preserving the identity of local communities. There are a lot of Victorian properties in North Belfast. In the past, it was often the community and the tenants who fought to preserve the character of some of those old houses and buildings. However, in this case and in many other cases, we are talking about houses that are over 150 years old. They were refurbished in the 1970s, and that refurbishment was meant to last for 20 years. However, matters have moved beyond that. We are talking about quality-of-life issues, rather than maintaining the Victorian character of a street. Mr Lunn took an intervention from his colleague that clarified that issue. Quality of life is the main concern. The motion deals with the social-justice issue of ensuring that those in need of social housing are placed in homes that are fit for purpose and fit for the twenty-first century.

The other important aspect that needs to be clarified by the Minister is the confusion around special adaptations for vulnerable tenants and people with disabilities. Jim Shannon referred to that matter. I understood that those adaptations would be honoured and that outstanding contracts would be carried through. The issue was raised in the Committee for Social Development and, perhaps when the Minister is replying to the debate, she will clarify the situation.

Thomas Burns referred to the Minister building brand new homes, as opposed to bland homes. I think that the Minister would take exception to that. However, I understand that he was talking about trying to boost the construction industry.

Small and medium-sized enterprises have hardly been mentioned — the small contractors whose livelihoods depend on Housing Executive contracts to maintain and repair houses. Those contracts will go, and that is hugely disappointing. That should be resisted, and all MLAs should make more of that issue. We are talking about small businesses that have been at the heart of

communities, although very few are taking on apprenticeships.

**Mr Shannon:** Does the Member agree that part of the problem is that many of those small developers diversified from building houses to building extensions for disabled people to keep themselves going through this lean time? The key issue is the importance of the flow of money.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** That is a key issue. Fra McCann said that, if there were no maintenance and repair programmes, houses would eventually fall into even greater disrepair and we would be left with a bigger bill. Setting aside the issue of money, it is not just the bill at the end; it is the quality of life for the people who have to live in the houses. If repairs are not carried through, we will not nudge but push more people into fuel poverty, and that is a big concern.

There can be no contradiction of the fact that there is a connection between poor housing and ill health, poverty and inequality; those factors are all interlinked, and that is no accident. Most members of the Committee for Social Development have raised that issue on various occasions, especially during our inquiry into poverty.

All Members will acknowledge that the Minister has inherited a Department that has seen underinvestment and one that has not done much for social housing. However, the Minister now has responsibility, and she must meet the challenge of ensuring that social homes are built, that houses are maintained and repaired and that they are suitable for the twenty-first century. That is why I struggle to understand the Minister's actions. She said:

“give me the money, and I will build the houses.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 22, p134, col 1].*

We gave her the money, and she handed £90 million back. That is a circle that cannot be squared. The money was surrendered.

As Fred Cobain said, this issue is all about people who cannot speak for themselves. It is about people who live in poor housing in some of the most deprived communities in our constituencies, and we need to stand up for them. If we cannot provide people with housing that is fit for the twenty-first century, we are relegating those people and creating a legacy of poor housing, poor health and poverty. That is a legacy that I am not prepared to carry for Margaret Ritchie — or any other Minister, for that matter. I thank Fred Cobain and Billy Armstrong for tabling the motion, and I support it.

**Mr Craig:** I will not rehearse the reasons why social housing is important, but there are some interesting statistics that I will outline. For example, there are 38,000 households on the waiting list, 20,000 of which are in urgent need of housing and 7,500 of which are classed as homeless. That tells us everything that we

need to know about social housing — a huge demand for it exists.

Until the recent credit crunch or economic crash — whatever one chooses to call it — house prices here were among the fastest rising in the whole of the UK. Speculators were buying up land left, right and centre, and housing associations could not afford to buy it. That situation has completely turned around since the crash. However, that change has brought equal pressures to bear. There is now huge pressure on Government spending, and sales of existing Housing Executive houses have also crashed, as people face the twofold pressures of difficulties in obtaining mortgages and, due to job uncertainties, a lack of cash to spend on purchasing homes. That has led to huge difficulties for the Housing Executive, as a whole income stream has disappeared off the radar almost overnight.

A large portion of that income was being used for maintenance. There is a hole in the budget and there is no point in sitting here and denying it; it exists, and we must re-profile Government expenditure to allow for it.

The economic crash has unexpectedly brought some strange opportunities. Land prices are at an all-time low, and now is the perfect time for housing associations to purchase land, even if only to bank it for the future development of social housing.

**Mr F McCann:** The issue of land has been raised in the Social Development Committee a number of times. Committee members have asked about whether, rather than buying more land, the Department could build houses on strategically placed land that is owned by the Department or the Housing Executive. That would certainly have a great impact on the price of each unit built.

**Mr Craig:** The Member has raised an important point. Do all Government offices own land that could be used for building social housing? I do not know the answer to that on a Province-wide basis. I know that in my constituency there is, unfortunately, no such land. That has been a massive issue for the past five to seven years. That is why the opportunities for housing associations to purchase new land are so important in my constituency.

Other issues exist as a result of the huge downturn in the market. All of a sudden, developers are falling over themselves to build social housing. In fact, they are trying very hard to offload their existing housing stock as social housing. Some of that housing is suitable, and some of it is not. However, those are huge opportunities for social housing that have been brought about by the economic downturn, and the Department ought to cash in on them.

3.15 pm

However, there are huge challenges ahead. How do we fund all of this? Do we refurbish or rebuild? That is not a terribly important question. I welcome the fact that we are debating social housing, but the thought occurred to me that a house has to be brought up to the latest building specifications and regulations, regardless of whether it is refurbished or rebuilt. That mechanism will take care of a lot of the fuel poverty issues anyway.

It is an interesting debate, and only the Minister can answer the question of how we move forward with a restricted Budget and meet the social housing targets that were agreed by this Government and — let us face it — this House.

**Mr Armstrong:** The motion addresses issues surrounding how our regional Government and we as a society help the most socially deprived people. The Ulster Unionist Party is dedicated to helping people from socially deprived backgrounds and ensuring that they are given the opportunities and capabilities to improve their situations. The current economic climate shows that circumstances can lead people into poverty and deprivation. Unfortunately, it can often be very difficult for people to get out of that situation.

There are areas in Northern Ireland with cycles of deprivation, and we must work together to break those cycles. This morning, we heard how educational underachievement can create a cycle of underachievement. Similarly, cycles of people living in unfit accommodation can have an impact on families' ability to get out of poverty. The Ulster Unionist Party recognises that there are arguments for refurbishing houses which take into consideration sustainability and heritage issues. However, there are many houses in Northern Ireland that are not fit for purpose.

Our roads have many potholes and are in a desperate situation, and, just as we need new roads, we need new houses. Furthermore, we must look at the heritage that our parents left for us. If they had merely repaired old houses, we would not have been left with the good houses that we have today. Regardless of how much refurbishment they receive, some houses are too old and are inappropriate for families to live in in the twenty-first century — they are not fit for purpose. The situation in many areas of Northern Ireland is acute, and we can no longer ignore the plight being endured by too many families.

I recognise that the Minister for Social Development is facing a very difficult Budget position. However, in the face of that pressure, we must not revert to policies that will potentially fail the people who are most in need of our help. Northern Ireland has some of the most socially deprived areas in western Europe, which is a statistic that we should no longer accept. Adequate and appropriate housing is crucial to regenerating



deprived areas. I urge the Minister not to revert to the wrong policies as the financial pressures increase, because that approach could be more expensive in the long run.

**Mr P Ramsey:** As an SDLP Member, I welcome today's debate. The people here are committed and passionate about social housing, because we all represent many constituents who have a high dependency on it. As other Members have said, the Minister who is responsible for social housing has a poisoned chalice at times of crisis and when, as Jonathan Craig said, the Budget is so restricted. However, a lot of those comments do not reflect the terminology of the motion.

The SDLP cannot support the motion, because it is based on three inaccurate assumptions. Number one: the SDLP does not accept that there has been a "priority change" with respect to demolition and newbuild versus refurbishment. Number two: the motion assumes that redevelopment is always a better option than refurbishment, but we all know that, in real life, it depends. Number three: the SDLP also takes issue with the motion's implication that the Minister is not providing social homes that are fit for the twenty-first century throughout Northern Ireland. I will talk about those assumptions for a few moments.

First, it is the SDLP's understanding that there has been no change in policy or priority with respect to newbuild housing or refurbishment. There is, however, as many Members have said, a major hole in the Budget, caused by the collapse of the housing market. That means that people are not purchasing their Housing Executive properties as they did previously. As a result, Housing Executive revenue was down £80 million last year. That is a serious amount of money that the Minister could have spent on modernisation and refurbishment. Revenue will fall by a further £100 million in the next two years. Given those circumstances, which affect other Departments as well, one might have expected that there would have been a new Budget or, as was said by a Member on the DUP Benches, a "re-profiling" of the existing Budget and a re-profiling of the Programme for Government and a new investment strategy. The SDLP has been making those points for months.

On the second point, the SDLP is concerned at the assumption that redevelopment is better than refurbishment. Is it always better from social, economic and environmental points of view? The answer to that question is that it depends on circumstances and on what the people in those areas want.

**Mr Craig:** The Member has misinterpreted something that I said earlier, and I would not like the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give me a clip round the earhole outside the Chamber. *[Laughter]*.

I said that we might need to re-profile the Minister for Social Development's budget. Whether we have to re-profile the entire Government's Budget to readdress the issue is something that only the Executive can decide. It is not something on which I would dare to comment. They have the wisdom to make up their own minds on that. However, as Mr Lunn said earlier, we need to look closely at how we should re-profile the DSD budget. That is what I was getting at.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I accept the Member's point, although I clearly understood that he called for re-profiling. Anyway, that is beside the point.

From a social point of view, redevelopment can mean the break-up of communities and friendships. From an environmental point of view, one must take into account many factors, including the embedded energy content of an existing home; the energy savings that can be provided through refurbishment and retrofitting; and the energy consumed during refurbishment. Those considerations must be set against the energy used in demolition and in producing building materials in new development. Of course, there is also a consideration of cost: which gives better housing return per pound spent, retrofitting or redevelopment? All those considerations are complex. As Trevor Lunn said, the complexity of housing is immense because it affects people in so many different ways. The decision on whether to refurbish or redevelop needs careful, case-by-case consideration, especially when money is so limited.

The third point is the quality of new homes. I have seen newbuilds being constructed. They are built to a very high specification as regards quality, energy conservation and micro-generation. They are probably of a higher specification in building quality than most private-sector homes built across Northern Ireland at present. The Minister provides very high-quality newbuild homes in Northern Ireland and squeezes every pound that she can out of her budget.

As to the economy, there is no doubt that refurbishments, newbuilds and rebuilds can create employment in dire circumstances, when unemployment is high. At the same time, it creates long-term, high-quality housing infrastructure. However, for the Minister to do that, she clearly needs more money. That will require a new Budget, a new Programme for Government and a new investment strategy. I ask why the DUP and Sinn Féin are so opposed to doing that, but the answer is no great mystery.

**Mr G Robinson:** There is no doubt that social housing is one of the most critical issues in Northern Ireland today. The Housing Executive acknowledges that in the 'Northern Ireland Housing Market: Review and Perspectives 2009-2012', in which it states that:

“there is an annual requirement for ... 3,000 additional new social dwellings ... to meet both ongoing need and address the substantial backlog which has arisen since 2001.”

Those words show just how great the need for additional homes — I stress the word “additional” — is in Northern Ireland today.

The best way to address that backlog is through a combination of newbuilds and redevelopment. Refurbishment is not the entire solution, but it does, to a lesser extent, play an important role. The Minister's Department has placed a great deal of emphasis on the receipt of house and land sales in order to increase her Department's spending power. We must learn that those receipts cannot be a dependable source of cash flow in future. However, we must deal with the need of today. The motion calls for more emphasis to be placed on the redevelopment of our housing stock. Without that emphasis, I cannot see the Housing Executive being able to make the necessary moves forward to provide housing stock.

I am sure that every MLA has had the same experience as I have in dealing daily with constituents who require housing. Too often, I have had to inform constituents that, because the waiting lists are so long, the prospect of their acquiring accommodation is remote. Too often, I have had requests for help owing to difficulties with what is, thankfully, a very small number of private landlords. It is true, as the motion states, that those same constituents make up what could be termed vulnerable groups. As a matter of urgency, the Minister must seek solutions to the social housing problems. I support the motion.

**Mr McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Assembly has expressed its commitment to supporting the Minister in her endeavours to tackle the shortfall in social housing. That shortfall is one of the many legacy issues that the Assembly and its Executive have inherited. We should recognise that, in the past financial year, substantial additional finance was allocated during the in-year monitoring rounds, and I expect — indeed, I hope — that that will continue. Improving the standard of the existing housing stock is a related issue, and it calls for massive expenditure from the Minister and the Housing Executive. Even in the best of circumstances, those would be very difficult issues to resolve.

Members referred today to the fact that, in many debates, the Minister has pointed out that, even with the incremental additions gained through the monitoring process, her budget does not and cannot stretch to meet her targets as set out in the new housing agenda. The explanations for that should be considered objectively. It is neither reasonable nor sensible to blame the Minister for the collapse in the housing market, the credit crunch, the collapse in the sales of Housing Executive properties, which have sunk to such negligible levels,

or the wider issue of the collapse of land and property values, which has impacted on the receipt of surplus asset projections.

As has been said repeatedly, social housing is a priority for all the parties. Given the current financial and economic realities, it is one sector in which last year's aspirations and targets are unlikely to be met. An ultimately sterile blame game could emerge as one, perhaps predictable, response to the difficulties. However, the people who are in need of housing and the people who are affected by the related crisis in the construction trades are entitled to a measured and strategic response from the Assembly to those challenges.

The motion addresses a concern around the Minister's approach to the financial and economic realities — realities that, I think, cannot be denied. As I said, she did not create those realities, but they have an impact on her ability and that of other spending Ministries to deliver on the Programme for Government targets.

I support the motion; however, I do so to be constructive. The Minister is entitled to our critical support in dealing with a very challenging brief and Department. Therefore, I urge her to consider how best we can maximise the value-for-money aspect of what are very finite resources under tremendous pressure. That might be the concern behind the motion, and that was reflected in some Members' comments. I do not agree with all the comments that were made, but a thread of concern ran through them that the Minister and perhaps the Assembly are not responding to the crisis in the most appropriate fashion.

3.30 pm

There is an inextricable link between the difficulties in the housing sector and the provision of new social housing stock. It is an absolute requirement, as far as we can afford it, to deal with the existing and growing waiting list. The modernisation or redevelopment of existing housing stock is also a priority, as is the refurbishment of social housing stock where appropriate.

All that costs money, and while factoring those arguments into the financial equation, we should also factor in the direct benefit to economic well-being. The issue has cross-departmental implications, which have been absent from the debate. I describe it as an investment in recovery, and we must familiarise public opinion with the direct benefits to the economy of maintaining in employment those in the construction industry and allied associated trades. If those two issues were linked, perhaps people could see the opportunity for a more collaborative and supportive approach. That is a win-win scenario.

I commend the motion, and I commend some new and strategic thinking in addressing the problems. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

**The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):** I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate. I welcome the opportunity to respond to each of the contributions, not least because it gives me the opportunity to clarify and correct some of the issues that were raised. I shall try to address all the questions and points that Members raised, and I assure the House that I will study the Hansard report and write directly to any Member who raised an issue that is not covered in my response.

The motion refers to a “recent priority change” in my Department that favours refurbishment over redevelopment. I must admit that I was not aware of that change, and I thank the Members for bringing that phenomenon to my attention. It is, of course, a nonsense. There has been no priority change or policy shift. From my first day in office, my priority has been to address housing need wherever that need exists. I have already brought forward change that will deliver the most modern social housing ever seen here, and I have re-prioritised my budget to ensure that we provide housing solutions that support those in greatest housing need.

However, it is too simple to say that, in meeting that need, we must adopt a singular approach. That is my fundamental difficulty with the motion, which suggests that redevelopment is the only answer to the housing problems that afflict many communities. That suggests that our only option is to demolish old homes and build new ones. Everyone knows that, when one demolishes, one can put back only a proportion of what was taken away.

**Mrs Long:** Will the Minister give way?

**The Minister for Social Development:** Let me continue.

At a time of record long waiting lists and record high housing stress, I wish to increase the supply of housing across the North. Therefore, I will not sign off automatically on demolition orders simply because it is convenient to do so. Houses should be demolished only if they are no longer fit to live in and cannot be brought back into use. Unfortunately, that has not always been the case, and demolition has often been sought without proper consideration of alternatives through refurbishment and regeneration.

Recently, I met representatives from the Royal Society of Ulster Architects, and I was impressed with what they had to say about the restoration and retrofitting of existing homes. In January 2009, the Government launched a retrofit for the future competition, which is specifically aimed at improving energy efficiency and the environmental performance of the housing stock. In fact, a conference on that very

subject will be held in Belfast in May 2009. We must not close our minds to the new opportunities that it might bring.

Fred Cobain — who, I note, is no longer in his place — is supposed to be the demolition and newbuild enthusiast. I ask him whether he recognises the expression:

“It is old but it is beautiful”.

Members will be aware that refurbishment is often dismissed as being a sticking-plaster solution that buys only a short-term reprieve from the inevitability of demolition. That is not necessarily the case. There can be significant refurbishment that is more akin to rebuilding, such as when external facades are maintained, but all internal structures are restored and replaced. In such a scenario, three old houses can become two new houses, and their historic appearance is retained, which is not a sticking-plaster solution. That has yet to be tried in Northern Ireland, and I am minded to pilot it in a suitable area.

I also recognise, however, that full-scale redevelopment is often the only realistic way forward, and, in some cases, that involves total demolition. Usually, redevelopment involves a combination of demolition and refurbishment. The motion fails to recognise that it is not simply a case of redevelopment or refurbishment, because one can complement the other.

I refer Fra McCann to what is happening in the Village area of south Belfast. Plans there include proposals to demolish 580 homes, refurbish a further 730 and put back 270 new homes. That is a perfect example of how refurbishment and redevelopment can be delivered side by side.

There are also plans to refurbish the seven tower blocks that are known as the “Carlisle multi-storeys” in the north of the city. Plans there will certainly not all involve the demolition and redevelopment of those seven blocks. I fail to see how the refurbishment of those seven blocks will have a huge detrimental effect on tenants who live there. Perhaps the Members who proposed the motion will clarify that matter.

We must also listen carefully to people who live in communities where major improvement works are planned. We must ensure that the proposed work will support and develop those communities rather than disperse and break them up. We must examine the long-term benefits and sustainability of our work. There can be no doubt that better housing leads to better communities. We must not lose sight of the wider benefits that our intervention can bring about, particularly in many of those areas that already suffer from high levels of poverty and social exclusion.

Setting aside the debate on refurbishment versus redevelopment, I think that Members need to be aware

that the resources that I need to deliver those improvements are simply not available at present. Currently, there are 15 separate economic appraisals with my Department, each of which seeks approval to deliver a wide variety of work throughout those areas, many of which have been mentioned during the debate: for example, Tigers Bay, which was mentioned by Mr Cobain. Only a few weeks ago in the Chamber, the Assembly debated plans to improve the housing stock in the upper long streets.

The combined cost of all those improvements is over £125 million and is, undoubtedly, rising. I understand that more economic appraisals are heading my way. Members will, by now, be aware that, because of the collapse of the land and property market, the DSD budget had a shortfall of £80 million in 2008 and faces a further shortfall of £100 million in 2009 and 2010. That has created huge pressures in the housing budget, which Members must recognise will impact directly on many of those proposed improvement plans.

I am not sure that people have got their heads around the housing budget shortfall. Even if we play with newbuild targets and squeeze maintenance budgets, little money will be left to fund redevelopment. Furthermore, people need to get real about the unit costs associated with some redevelopment proposals that come my way. I can build three, or, perhaps, four, newbuild homes on a greenfield site for the cost of a single home in some of the north Belfast redevelopments that have been recommended to me. That factor alone — and I recognise that there are many others — brings the Girdwood Barracks site increasingly into focus as part of the overall solution in lower north Belfast.

During the economic downturn, we have a wonderful opportunity to support the local economy and, at the same time, address housing need by funding a programme of improvements to our housing stock. I have made that case to my ministerial colleagues, and I welcome Members' words of support today. I heard the comments of Jonathan Craig and Mitchel McLaughlin and those of my party colleagues Pat Ramsey and Thomas Burns. Without funding, the whole debate on refurbishment and redevelopment is, in many respects, meaningless.

Mr Cobain and Mr McCann mentioned the warm homes scheme, disability adaptations and multi-element improvement schemes. This year, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive will have over £140 million available for maintenance, improvement and refurbishment programmes. Moreover, the warm homes scheme has not been stopped. Anybody who makes that assertion is wrong.

Mr Cobain referred to the environmental architect —

**Mr Cobain:** Will the Minister give way?

**The Minister for Social Development:** I will continue, because I have started. The Member was not present at the beginning of my response and missed most of the contributions.

DSD has no environmental architect. The Department receives professional and technical advice from Department of Finance and Personnel colleagues from the Central Procurement Directorate. David Simpson referred to energy-efficient homes. The new housing agenda introduced the most environmentally friendly housing ever built in the social sector. Code 3 sustainable homes are now 25% more energy efficient than ever before. That links clearly with my work on fuel poverty.

I want to re-emphasise that the Village is in line for refurbishment and redevelopment. As I said earlier, Mr McCann seems to miss that point. I want to make it clear that I support redevelopment and refurbishment wherever that meets the need. The two concepts are not mutually exclusive. Trevor Lunn highlighted the debate about refurbishment versus redevelopment, and he wanted to hear more about that matter. I agree entirely with Pat Ramsey; there is no one-size-fits-all approach. We must assess each scheme on its own local merits. The motion is fundamentally flawed, because it does not allow for local solutions to local housing problems.

Jim Shannon and Carál Ní Chuilín referred to disabled grant extensions. Yet again, the Housing Executive has been given its budget, and it must prioritise how it will be spent. Disabled facilities grants are awarded on a statutory basis, and, if the applicant meets the criteria, the Housing Executive will have to consider how to meet that need within its budget. I have not stopped those grants.

Other Members mentioned reprofiling the budget. I agree with Mitchel McLaughlin; we must do our best with what we have. However, I currently have a significant amount of economic appraisals before me at a cost of £350,000 per unit. If we demolish and build new homes, I will be confronted with those costs, which, given my budget, are simply too high at the minute.

3.45 pm

The wording of the motion is unfortunate. There has been no policy change. In fact, I do not think that there is any disagreement between the Members who have expressed their views today and me. I will support demolition and redevelopment when that is the best way forward. Equally, I will support refurbishment when that is the best way forward. Each set of proposals must be assessed on its merits, and we should not be constrained by a one-size-fits-all approach.

I am proud that social housing across Northern Ireland today is among the best in these islands. I pay tribute to those who have worked tirelessly over many years to raise standards. Of course, there is still much

more to do. If the resources are available to me, I will invest them wisely in the sort of improvement programmes we have discussed here today. I am already committed to delivering the most modern social housing ever built here, and to meeting the needs of those in greatest housing need. I will not rule anything out in my desire to deliver on that.

However, there is an argument to be won about putting housing on a proper financial footing, and I hope that the proposers of the motion, when winding up the debate, will recognise that housing redevelopment does not lend itself to quick-fix solutions or ill-tempered slogans. A mature discussion is required; one that is grounded in the reality of our financial situation. I look forward to the support of every Member in the House, and every Minister around the Executive table, to put housing on a sound financial footing once and for all.

**Mr McCallister:** It has been an interesting and useful debate — although the Minister may not entirely share that view.

My colleague Mr Cobain opened the debate by setting the scene of the entire social-justice agenda and outlining the areas in which the Assembly and Executive are failing to address many issues and some targets. Other Members backed that up. We are not going to meet our targets for the alleviation of child poverty, fuel poverty and pensioner poverty. Some of the Programme for Government targets are simply unrealistic. Reference was made to the need for up to 3,000 social homes, and the difference between redevelopment and refurbishment.

Mr McQuillan, in an intervention, asked Mr Cobain what our party's Ministers were doing about this. In the area that I am most involved with, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety supported schemes such as Home Start, which actually make a real difference in the most deprived communities. Perhaps Mr McQuillan will take that on board and begin lobbying his own party's Ministers for more finance, resources and action on the social justice agenda.

Mr Simpson outlined the view of the Committee for Social Development, and set out some of the issues relating to the collapse of property values. He commended the real effort being made to make newbuilds energy efficient, which, as the Minister pointed out, is having a major impact on helping address fuel poverty.

Mr McCann spoke about residents living in outdated accommodation. He mentioned the long-term costs of refurbishment, and that that is probably not always good value for money in the longer term. Buildings end up being refurbished for 20 years, and 30 years later they need to be completely rebuilt. It is not useful for public money to be spent in that way. Redevelopment tends to be a better outcome.

Mr McCann criticised the DSD budget: of course, more resources are needed. He also criticised the purchase of some homes from the private sector for social housing, and supported the view that, in deprived areas that need social housing, there must be consultation with residents and local elected representatives.

Mr Burns did not support the motion, but he made some useful points about the pressure that the housing budget is under. We all accept that that pressure will continue and that the housing budget will be a major issue as we move forward, and, in particular, into the next comprehensive spending review period. Mr Burns and the Minister mentioned shortfalls of £80 million rising to £100 million against a fall in receipts to the Housing Executive. That will have a major impact on the housing budget, particularly in light of the vast sums of money that will be available to the Minister, and on meeting housing need.

Trevor Lunn spoke about redevelopment and refurbishment for local circumstances; Mr Ramsey spoke on a similar theme. Mr Lunn mentioned the Alliance Party's desire to make the hard choices of raising taxes, closing leisure centres and amalgamating schools. In doing so, however, as my colleague said at the start, he would hit some of the families that we most want to help. Closing leisure facilities, for example, could increase problems in health inequalities.

**Mr Lunn:** We were talking about a priority change that might involve some hard choices about, for example, the cost of division. Will the Member address the point that although the motion refers to a recent priority change by the Department, the Minister clearly stated that a priority change is not involved? That would cause us to change our view of the motion.

**Mr McCallister:** I was about to address the Minister's comments. I was relieved to hear the Minister say that there was no priority change, but I was concerned when she later said that she was not opposed to refurbishment and that in some cases it was a much better alternative. It sounded slightly as if she wanted the best of both worlds, and that is what concerns us.

Mr Shannon said that 3,000 homes are needed in the Ards area and that refurbishment alone would not help to reach that goal.

**Mrs Long:** I thank the Member for giving way; I will be brief.

I am slightly concerned because the debate was about refurbishment versus redevelopment, but then expanded into how to provide new homes, which is a separate issue. Redevelopment leads to less housing stock than would be the case with refurbishment; that has been the experience across Belfast, and it has caused major problems. Increasing the number of social housing units is a separate discussion about newbuild.

**Mr McCallister:** Those issues are linked to how we address the entire social justice agenda. Overall, a better quality home can be obtained in a newbuild development, which will be more energy efficient and will help to reduce fuel poverty. A newbuild home is the best long-term option for spending public money. That is what the motion is about.

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

**Mr McCallister:** Well, all right. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Craig:** I thank the Member for giving way. Perhaps he can answer some of my questions.

I would have thought that whether a property is refurbished or demolished and rebuilt is for the architects or builders to decide; ultimately, it is a financial decision. Is it cheaper to refurbish or to knock down and rebuild?

I am at a bit of a loss as to why we would do away with refurbishment, especially of historic homes. That worries me. For 30 years, I lived in Hillsborough, which has lots of historic buildings, and I do not want those types of houses to be demolished; rather, they should be refurbished. Whether the Minister gives a direction on the matter is academic, given that it is the architects and the engineers who surely make the decision.

**Mr Shannon:** Your time is up.

**Mr McCallister:** I see that Mr Shannon is trying to replace you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr F McCann:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McCallister:** Oh, all right. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr F McCann:** Mr Craig's argument is an interesting one. However, the quality and standard of houses in some areas of Belfast are far different from the quality and standard of houses in Hillsborough.

**Mr McCallister:** One would certainly hope so, because Hillsborough is a very different setting. *[Laughter.]* Mr Craig is probably in enough trouble with his party after calling for the reprofiling of Government spending, which almost bordered on calling for the Budget to be redone. He might have clarified what he said, but I think that Mr Ramsey heard him correctly; he called for the reprofiling of Government spending — that was the phrase that he used. Mr Craig may eagerly await a clip on the ear from the Finance Minister.

Members generally agreed that we need to do much more to address the need for social housing. The Minister assured the House that she did not change the priority as regards refurbishment or redevelopment. However, we definitely support the building of new homes. That should be the priority, because it is the best use of public money.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I am terribly sorry, Mr McCallister, I cannot give you any extra time after all those interventions.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly notes, with concern, the Department for Social Development's recent priority change which gives greater emphasis to the refurbishment of social housing, as opposed to redevelopment; further notes the huge detrimental effect this will have on the most vulnerable people in our society; and calls on the Minister to provide social homes fit for the twenty-first century throughout Northern Ireland.

*Motion made:*

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

## ADJOURNMENT

### Dunclug Action Plan

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately 10 minutes.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish to speak about the Dunclug action plan, which is close to my heart. I have grave concerns about it at present, because of the failure of its implementation. The action plan was launched more than two years ago, and many people had looked forward to its implementation as an opportunity to turn the area around and to address the high levels of crime, antisocial behaviour and other problems in the area.

The present design of the estate is in no way ideal. The action plan rightly states that the present layout — coupled with litter, debris, vacant and derelict properties, vandalism and graffiti — creates a sense of danger in the heart of the estate. When the plan was launched, Dunclug was ranked as the fourth worst area for crime and disorder in the Six Counties. In a survey that was carried out at that time, almost one quarter of the estate's residents said that they did not feel safe living in the area. Even more concerning is the fact that 50% of those living in the area said that they did not feel safe when they ventured out at night.

Following the murder of Michael McIlveen in May 2006, Dunclug estate received unprecedented media attention. Media outlets highlighted the physical, social and community cohesion problems that existed there. Numerous interviews portrayed a community living in isolation, fear and deprivation. The images from the estate also confirmed the poor physical condition of the area.

For many years, the Dunclug residents' association had called on the Department for Social Development to intervene. It finally received a response from the then British direct rule Minister, David Hanson, who paid a visit to the estate in August 2006.

He made a return visit in November 2006, when he announced the Dunclug action plan. During his engagement with local community workers and volunteers, Minister Hanson promised that there would be ministerial ownership of the action plan's implementation. That followed previous announcements by the Housing Executive of large-scale actions or projects to enhance the physical condition of the estate, which never

materialised. The action plan involves DSD and the Housing Executive providing at least £5 million of new money for Dunclug from 2007 to 2011.

*4.00 pm*

The Minister for Social Development has promised that she will take ministerial ownership of the Dunclug action plan. Following her visit to the estate on 26 September 2007, which I welcomed at the time, she met with local stakeholders from the voluntary sector and impressed on them her commitment to drive forward the actions in the plan. Those actions seek to address key concerns about the physical condition of the estate, crime and antisocial behaviour, community cohesion, and, centrally, youth issues in the Dunclug estate.

The plan was formulated in a manner that was meant to instil confidence in a community that had, until then, been given no hope whatsoever. The 21 actions in the plan were put together in a co-ordinated fashion; not by accident, but in a sequence that could be seen to deliver tangible results to residents in the area. That, in turn, would have seen a gradual improvement in the quality of life, as well as a considerable improvement in life chances for residents of the estate.

Area-at-risk funding was used for social impact projects. A dedicated youth officer and a drugs outreach officer were tasked to Dunclug for a two-year period. There was also the successful parents and kids together (PAKT) project, which was to be continued for a further two years. The youth officer used his post to win over the hearts and minds of some of the most at-risk young people in the area and carried out sterling work, which I have seen.

Many other aspects of the Dunclug action plan were used to incentivise the youth to buy into the scheme, including the physical regeneration of the area that those children call home. Unfortunately, the youth officer's post ran out in March 2009, with precious little of the high-visibility work in the action plan being carried out.

The new play park could have been the catalyst for change. However, it has failed to materialise on time. Even though the action was to be implemented by June 2008, the play park is still not in a position to be put in place. The residents' association, along with the youth development officer, worked together to gain the support of local youths with the promise of the delivery of the action plan. That was a difficult task. According to community workers, the youth now feel betrayed by their own community leaders and those responsible for delivery. That is an unfortunate situation.

The drugs officer was tasked to help those suffering most from drug-addiction, and to help their long-suffering families and friends. Qualitative information from the officer, the most reliable of sources, suggests that between 8% and 12% of the people residing in Dunclug could be

using heroin. The post is due to end on 31 October 2009. The drugs problem and subsequent crime associated with the area is due to resurface on a much more significant level if that post is allowed to elapse.

The PAKT programme, which ran prior to the action plan, has also now expired. It was used to help those most vulnerable in the community. Parents were helped to gain skills to improve the quality of parenting. Single mothers gained much-needed support and security through more hands-on tasks with their own children in a safe environment. Those most at risk in Dunclug gained significant confidence from those projects.

The action plan was truly an excellent piece of work, with a design to improve the estate with the help of the voluntary and statutory sectors. The community bought into the plan over the past three years; in particular, the improvements to street lighting, the demolition of a number of problem properties, and the areas-at-risk package, which provided some signposts for hope.

The question now is whether the Minister and the Department have missed the best opportunity, in over two decades, to make one of the most deprived areas in the North a place where residents could feel comfortable and safe and be proud to live. Phase one is a key part of the plan, and its desired outcomes, as stated in the plan, are:

“To create a stable and pleasant environment free from graffiti and flag flying in which all residents can feel safe.”

That phase was to be completed by the end of this month, and there is now a great deal of disillusionment in the community, as well as doubt about whether that vital work will be implemented at all. The Minister for Social Development must deliver on those commitments as a matter of urgency. She promised action, and we need to see those social problems addressed. Excuses are simply not good enough in this quite dire case.

The first part of the action plan is vital, as it deals with the physical condition of the estate and is key to creating a stable and pleasant environment for the people of the area. That is why it is so important that phase one of the plan is implemented. The flats need to be demolished, and a new link road between Dunclug Gardens and Dunclug Park would facilitate a new public transport route, which would radically change that environment and reduce the sense of ghettoisation that exists. Importantly, it would also reduce the opportunities for antisocial elements to carry out criminal acts.

Those who work in the community and voluntary sector in Dunclug are at the end of their tether. Youth work is being cut back significantly, the action plan — or, rather, the “inaction plan”, as locals call it — has been hampered by delays, and the major problems in

the area such as vandalism and antisocial behaviour continue unabated.

We have a duty to ensure that that part of Ballymena is given the support that it so desperately needs. A common complaint that I hear is that there are not enough facilities and amenities at the top end of the town, and that the Ballymena North Business and Recreation Centre is a white elephant as far as people are concerned, because no one can afford to use it. The cinema, the bowling alley and fast food restaurants, etc, are all on the other side of town, and many young people simply do not feel safe going to those places. That is a fact, and there is an onus on us all, as elected representatives from all sides, to try to bring about a situation whereby no young Protestant or Catholic person feels intimidated by going into certain estates in the town.

Even over the weekend, a number of houses were attacked in the Millfield area, just beside Dunclug. The majority of those houses have Protestant residents, and I have serious concerns that certain elements are trying to make inroads into that area. The implementation of the action plan would go some way towards ensuring that those elements do not create the social problems that they have already visited on the area in recent years. All in all, that is a significant piece of work, and a lot more needs to be done on all sides to bring down those social barriers.

If the media crews that swarmed over Dunclug in 2006 were to revisit the estate, they would probably conclude that its physical condition has deteriorated further. They would also confirm, through interviewing residents, that little or nothing has changed for the better in the years since the Dunclug action plan was announced.

Barry Gordon, who was chairman of the Dunclug Partnership, greeted Minister Hanson and Minister Ritchie when they last visited Dunclug. He praised them both, and stated that he believed that change would be implemented. After Mr Hanson’s visit, he said:

“The Minister came to Dunclug in August. He saw for himself the problems that the area is facing. Now, he has delivered. ... I am looking forward to seeing the Action Plan being delivered on the ground and making a difference to Dunclug.”

The failure to deliver on key aspects of the action plan has now seen Mr Gordon and his family being driven from their home in Dunclug by the very people from whom Mr Gordon tried to protect that community.

Barry Gordon’s belief that the full implementation of the action plan would disarm criminal elements in the estate was probably correct. The abysmal failure to implement the plan and create a safer and more stable environment in Dunclug has resulted in his family having to leave the estate due to intimidation. His story



demonstrates that the Dunclug action plan has failed to deliver real social change in the area.

I conclude by urging the Minister to look again at that piece of work and to prioritise it, because there are a number of social problems in the Dunclug area. It is one of the most deprived areas in the North. However, there are criminal elements trying to get a foothold there, and if we do not nip the problem in the bud now, the havoc that those elements will wreak on that community will be ten-fold in a matter of years. Therefore, it is important that the issue is nipped in the bud, the action plan is implemented, and the people in Dunclug are given the better quality of life to which they are entitled. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

**Mr Storey:** I am glad that the Member has clarified what his Adjournment debate is really about: it is about the action plan and, even more, it is about creating a political opportunity to have a go at a Minister.

That is regrettable. I am always the first to stand up in the House and have a go at most Ministers on any issue; however, it would be more responsible for the Member to work with the Minister to overcome the problems that Dunclug faces.

Before I get into the detail of what I want to say, I listened to the Member continually make reference to others and to outside elements and other people coming in; it is always someone else who is doing something. It is as though he and his colleagues have lily-white hands in all that has gone on in Dunclug. When you create a monster and you use and abuse people's fears, and other people then decide that they are going to muscle in, you cannot, like Pontius Pilate, wash your hands and walk away, saying that it is nothing to do with you and that it is not your problem.

I wish that the Member opposite would start to show some courage and leadership and face up to the reality that things that were done in the past created the environment for the very people about whom he is now complaining about having come into the area. If the Member and his colleagues had not set that context, there might be a different situation in Dunclug today.

I want the plan to be implemented, and I will come to some of the details of it in a moment. Unfortunately, Dunclug has endured some dramatic headlines in the past, and some incidents have cast a sinister, sad and sorry cloud over the residents who have to live in that area. Let us not forget about the people who live in Dunclug who are committed to it. Unfortunately, many others have had to leave that area of Ballymena, and reference was made to one individual in particular.

When I was researching for today's debate, I thought that it would be useful to search some of the recent headlines about Dunclug; I read of drugs-related stories, dissident republican activity, parading controversies, and many others. Furthermore, Dunclug has had to

contend with issues relating to its physical condition, such as crime, antisocial behaviour, community cohesion and youth activities. Indeed, the draft Dunclug action plan referred to it as a community in crisis. That is how it was when we began to look at the problems in the area.

I do not deny that Dunclug has had its difficulties and has faced many challenges. It was built in the 1970s, and the estate suffered from the beginning. There was an absence of access for cars between the different parts of the estate, and traffic and traffic flow causes us concern. That was compounded by the presence of parking courts, framed by the rear of houses with high fences, which created a feeling of neglect and of being hemmed in. That feeling of neglect was, in turn, intensified by litter, debris, vacant and derelict properties and by evidence of vandalism and graffiti. That fostered the crime and antisocial behaviour problems in the estate, which, unfortunately, led to decline in many areas.

In November 2006, I wrote a joint letter, along with my North Antrim colleagues Ian Paisley Junior and Dr Paisley, to the then direct rule Minister, David Hanson. In that letter, we said that we believed that it is essential that the package addressing the physical condition of the estate, crime, antisocial behaviour and youth community development be brought forward as a single package and not piecemeal.

We raised other issues, including the play park, street lighting, vandalism, policing, CCTV, school projects, school clubs, partnership with local churches and youth work, and we spoke of the need to ensure that projects should be local, viable and credible. All those points remain as valid today as they did then.

As I have said, I will not try to deny that Dunclug has had problems to contend with. There remains much to be done, and that brings me to the issue of the action plan. We must keep a sense of perspective about the mammoth task to be undertaken in respect of that plan.

When we received the most recent update from DSD on that plan, it was interesting to see on page after page that many measures are "being delivered". However, one matter is described as "non-deliverable", and it is unfortunate that the Member who secured the debate ignored that because he happens to be in a position to do something about it. Sometimes, it seems that he lives in a state of denial about being a member of the Policing Board. Perhaps he lives in some type of tent, because when one raises policing issues with him, it seems as though it is not his responsibility, but someone else's, even though he sits on the Policing Board.

What is "non deliverable" in respect of Dunclug? According to the most recent DSD update on the action plan, an Assistant Chief Constable:

"has clarified that due to the shortfall in the comprehensive spending review (CSR), the Chief Constable presented a number of

options to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. A number of these have been agreed including the decision not to recruit the PCSOs during this CSR 3 year period up to March 2011.”

What has the Member opposite done as a member of the Policing Board to bring about the policing that we have asked for and desire in Dunclug? There is no point in simply singling out the Minister for Social Development.

**Mr McKay:** I have raised that issue with the local police commander. We have undertaken a lot of work on policing in the area. For example, I recently attended a meeting about drugs in the north of Ballymena, and I will continue to raise such issues at the Policing Board. I ask the Member whether his party colleague for the area Ian Paisley Jnr has raised that issue.

**Mr Storey:** I do not live in Ian Paisley Jnr’s pocket, but I know the hard work that he does and has done in North Antrim, I am sure that he will continue to raise all such issues in relation to not only Dunclug, but Ballymena and the entire constituency. However, we must ensure that we not only have rhetoric, but delivery. That is the real issue, and that is where we must focus our appeals to the Minister.

There is another matter where the Member opposite could use his influence. The Department of Education holds responsibility for funding the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB). However, there was a delay in the granting of the board’s budget, and there has been a subsequent delay in making the allocations that the board will have to fund the Youth Service. Gordon Topping, the chief executive of that board, wrote to me at the beginning of March and made it abundantly clear that because of that situation, the board is still awaiting a decision on a funding application for two paid leadership staff at the drop-in centre in Dunclug for two nights a week for 48 weeks a year, and paid leadership for the Young Ones youth support scheme for one night a week. Mr Topping added that there would be an opportunity to apply for funding when the Department of Education confirmed the budgets for the Youth Service community relations scheme and intervention schemes.

Therefore, the Member should ask his colleague the Minister of Education what she can do to help to alleviate the problems in Dunclug. Although I am saying to the Minister for Social Development that we need to progress and deliver on the action plan, I am equally saying that we need action from the police, the NEELB, and all political representatives of North Antrim. Such action will ensure that the efforts of those who have a different agenda and who would pull Dunclug down — and have done so over the years — are minimised.

Let us, as the Member opposite has said, offer a signpost for hope. That is what leadership is about. I

challenge Mr McKay, the elected representatives of Ballymena, the Minister and other representatives in the House to ensure that we can deliver on the Dunclug action plan.

**Mr O’Loan:** It is unfortunate that an Adjournment debate on a constituency issue should be acrimonious, but that is not of my making. I find it most unfortunate that the real social problems of Dunclug are used for what I regard as political opportunism, which is, fundamentally, what has happened this afternoon.

There are serious problems in Dunclug. It is a run-down estate with significant social disadvantage. Every indicator says that. A couple of years ago, a very stark statistic found it to be the fourth worst area for crime in Northern Ireland — the estate has a history of decline.

Unlike any Member here, I lived in Dunclug some time ago and know it well. I have been in many houses in Dunclug. I have seen its decline. Like others, I have found it very sad to witness the estate going into decline without any serious attempt in the original stages to arrest it.

A tendency then developed for many of the most settled and upwardly mobile families to move out. The result has been that many families and households in Dunclug have significant social problems. Therefore, we see many of the problems associated with a disadvantaged area — unemployment, health problems, educational underachievement, a lack of social cohesion and social capacity, and significant drug use and dealing. We are all aware that there have been a number of deaths due to serious drug use in the estate. There is graffiti that is generally political, and flag-flying that is associated with marking out territory.

That is why we all welcomed the Dunclug action plan that was originally launched by the then Minister, David Hanson MP, who visited the area and took the situation seriously, for which he is due credit.

As has been said, that plan was announced at the end of 2006 and includes 22 actions that were scheduled to happen by March 2011. There was a total investment of £5 million that — contrary to what the instigator of this debate said — did not all come from DSD; other bodies were involved. The action plan involves physical refurbishment, particularly the Housing Executive estate strategy, which represents about half of that total expenditure, and social projects.

The current Minister has given her full support to the plan. She visited the estate very soon after her appointment. She heard of the problems directly, and it was clear that she understood and sympathised. She has given her full commitment to the implementation of the plan, which gave new hope to Dunclug. The Housing Executive told me that it could let houses in Dunclug that it had previously been unable to.

Much has been done. The Minister wrote to me on 22 February to say that five actions had been completed and 13 were being implemented. As I said, it is important to note that funding was coming from other bodies. The Police Service has been mentioned, but Ballymena Borough Council is also heavily involved. Two actions are not proceeding, one of which was to be funded by the PSNI. As Mervyn Storey rightly pointed out, the police could not find that funding. Sadly, and to my regret, Ballymena Borough Council's application to the re-imaging communities initiative failed.

I pay tribute to many of the projects, but — and I will probably refer to this again — the physical side is difficult in Dunclug, and the social side even more so. Therefore, projects that do good work on the social side must be especially lauded, and I want to pay particular tribute to the parents and kids together project that has done tremendous work with families most in need of support. I also pay tribute to the choices youth project, which has also done invaluable work. It must be recognised that it is part of their design that some of these projects are time bound and that they are intensive initiatives that, in due course, hand over to the statutory agencies.

It is not the case that nothing is happening. Two major actions are about to start — the refurbishment of Dunclug community centre and the provision of a new play area. The total value of those projects is well over £300,000. To say that the magnificent Ballymena North centre that was created through a council initiative, with the involvement of a considerable number of other partners, is contributing nothing is an abuse of the facts and contributes nothing to the debate.

There is genuine concern about the progress of the Housing Executive's estate strategy, which, as I said, is the major physical refurbishment of the estate involving the housing and streetscape. As far as I know, it could start by the end of this financial year, but only if the money is available. If Members want to help in relation to that matter, there is something that they could do in their own parties. They could make a contribution in the political system to ensure that the housing budget in DSD is made a reality. It is absolutely contradictory to call for Dunclug's physical state to be dealt with and not do what can be done, which is to give real political support towards making that money available.

I will take no lessons from Sinn Féin in relation to supporting Dunclug. Its role has been significantly divisive in that area, particularly its history through the residents' association, and — in years gone by — putting up flags in the estate, which started a considerable number of years ago.

That role has now been taken over by others, and there is a section of the youth that is not responsive to Sinn Féin or to any political leaders — certainly none

in this House. Those youths cause enormous hardship and difficulty, but it is right to say that the role of Sinn Féin over the years has been far from constructive there. The leadership that it provided has not been good, and the party knows very well that it has significant difficulties with personalities.

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

**Mr O'Loan:** If I thought for a moment that this debate had a serious purpose, I would give way. However, the person who called for the debate is simply attempting to use the problems of Dunclug for his own political pretext. For that reason, I will not give way to him for an instant.

It is due, in part, to Sinn Féin's activities that the atmosphere in Dunclug has become significantly uncongenial for many Protestant families. I regret that a number of them have left the estate.

There is a huge amount of work to be done in the estate. The ending of some of the social projects is regrettable. However, the PAKT project is seeking further funding, and I hope that it will be successful. Although the current phase of the youth project may have ended, the North Eastern Education and Library Board has stepped in and is offering significant support. To say — as was said in the initial speech — that nothing has been done or improved is a travesty of the truth.

The physical part of the work needs money, but even that, difficult as it is, is the easy bit — getting the social fabric right is the hard bit. I would love to see some sensible political co-operation on the plan rather than simple point scoring, which is how this debate started.

**The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):** I thank all Members who contributed to today's debate. I welcome the opportunity to respond to each of the contributions that were made; not least because it gives me the opportunity to clarify and correct some of the issues that were raised. I will try to address all the questions or points that Members raised. I will also study the Hansard report, and if I have left any questions unanswered, I will write to the Member concerned.

The Dunclug estate in Ballymena faces many challenges, not only in housing and regeneration, but in health, environment, drugs, crime, community division and general deprivation. If we are going to address those challenges successfully, all the agencies will have to work together along with the community and public representatives — the very point that was raised by Mervyn Storey and Declan O'Loan. Therefore, it is very disappointing to hear the promoter of the Adjournment debate turn Dunclug into a solely DSD issue around which Mr McKay engages in cheap party-political point scoring. Dunclug deserves better than that.

The action plan for the Dunclug estate in the north of Ballymena was launched in November 2006 and covers a four-year period between January 2007 and March 2011. The plan seeks to improve the physical condition of the estate, address crime and antisocial behaviour, and improve community cohesion and facilities for young people in the area.

4.30 pm

As the Minister for Social Development, I have reviewed the Department's priorities, and during a visit to the Dunclug estate in September 2007, I stated my commitment to ensuring that the actions in the plan are implemented. I welcome the significant progress that has been made, and I assure Members that my officials and I will remain committed fully to working with other Departments and stakeholders to ensure that the plan is implemented in full.

I am pleased to advise Members that nine actions in the plan have been completed. Those include new entrance features for the estate; a full-time community beat officer for the area; the extension of activities that are offered by the council's community sports programme; a minority-ethnic needs audit; the establishment of a Housing Executive housing support and regeneration office in the estate; and the extension of Sure Start activities into the area.

Through the areas at risk programme, my Department has provided funding of more than £139,000 to deliver a youth outreach programme in the estate. As Members will be aware, that programme is time bound. However, I am glad that the North Eastern Education and Library Board has made an offer to the local community to continue delivering that service in the area.

In addition, more than £106,000 has been provided to deliver a parents and kids together project in the estate, and more than £103,000 has been provided for drug and alcohol outreach support. I am also pleased to report that a further 10 actions are being implemented. Those include a youth-justice agency; an early intervention programme and a parents' support service; a school-based initiative to develop greater collaborative working between schools in the area; and a peripatetic support teacher for children from the Travelling community. Also included are additional community development work; a refurbishment of the community centre; new street lighting and footpaths, at a cost of more than £1.5 million; a new play park for the estate; and a £5,000 fund for community-based projects. To date, 13 projects, at a value in excess of £219,000, have been approved through the fund.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has started work already to demolish a number of properties that were blighting the estate. So far, 48 units have been demolished, and work to demolish a further 28 is well

advanced. The completion of that work will support the wider regeneration of the estate.

With regard to further phases of the NIHE estate strategy, a detailed economic appraisal has been prepared. That has the potential to deliver real improvements to 264 homes that are in both private and public ownership throughout the estate. The proposed works include a range of internal and external repairs and renovations to homes; enhanced access to courtyards; improvements to main spine routes in the estate; and some general restructuring that, when delivered, will cost more than £2.6 million and will bring real improvements to the lives of those who live, work and play in the area.

The economic appraisal is still being assessed, and I understand that the Housing Executive is working to address queries that the Department of Finance and Personnel raised. I am assured that answers will be forthcoming, and I look forward to having the necessary approval for that work as soon as possible thereafter. However, even with approval, we must try to find the resources that are required to deliver the work.

By now, Members will be all too aware of the funding shortfall that is facing housing as a result of the collapse of the land and property market. Over the next two years, housing will be left short to the tune of £200 million. That loss of revenue means that the Housing Executive must reprioritise its work and start only those schemes for which funding is available.

Although the next phase of work at Dunclug has been identified as a high-priority scheme, the funding for its delivery is not yet secure. Without additional resources, the Housing Executive does not believe that it will be in a position to deliver the work before next March.

I assure Members that I will continue to press my ministerial colleagues for additional resources to make up for the massive shortfall in the housing budget, and I will continue to make the case that investment in housing is needed — not only for vital social reasons, but for strong economic reasons.

Members will be aware that I am not merely calling for more money. Recently, my party published proposals on how to find the extra money that is needed for housing and other priority areas. I invite Members across the House to explore those proposals further.

I regret that the lack of funding has affected other actions in the action plan. The piloting of police community support officers has been delayed due to a shortfall in PSNI funding, and Ballymena Borough Council's application to the Arts Council's re-imaging communities programme to remove political graffiti in the estate was unsuccessful. The proposal to provide closed-circuit television on the estate may not proceed either without the necessary funding.

Progress has been made on 19 of the 22 actions. Despite funding difficulties, that represents a remarkable start to making a difference in the estate and in bringing about the sort of improvements that Members have talked about today.

I will touch briefly on some of the issues that were raised by Members, particularly those raised by Daithí McKay. However, my response may simply be a re-emphasis of what I have said already. The areas at risk programme, through which the youth worker, the drugs outreach worker and the PAKT worker were funded is time-limited. All parties were made aware of that from the outset, and, as stated previously, I welcome the effort of continued youth support in the area. I encourage Mr McKay to work with the community to ensure that the offer of support from the North Eastern Education and Library Board is taken up.

The funding package for the play park is in place, planning permission has been received, tenders have been advertised and work will proceed as soon as possible. I am pleased to say that my Department has been able to provide funding of more than £138,000 to ensure the completion of the play park.

Mr McKay referred also to the lack of facilities in the north end of Ballymena, and he said that the Ballymena North project is a white elephant, because it is too expensive for locals to use. The Department recognises the need for good-quality facilities in Dunclug — that is why we have committed £138,000 for the refurbishment of the community centre in the middle of the estate. If there are concerns about the Ballymena North project, they should be addressed to Ballymena Borough Council.

I restate to Members and to the people of Dunclug my commitment to ensuring that all actions in the Dunclug action plan are implemented. I want to complete the much needed housing improvements in Dunclug — and in similar estates — as soon as possible, so I will continue to press my Executive colleagues to put housing on a firm financial footing.

I thank those Members who contributed positively to the debate. I assure them that my Department, the Housing Executive and I will continue to work closely with the local community and with all the other stakeholders to keep them up to date on progress with the proposed improvements for the Dunclug estate. That is the best signpost for hope that the Assembly, the Executive and all the agencies can give to the people of Dunclug, because that is what they deserve.

*Adjourned at 4.40 pm.*

