
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 27 April 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council

Tourism Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that she wishes to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in tourism sectoral format.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I will make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in tourism sectoral format, which was held in Dublin on 1 April 2009. Michelle Gildernew MP MLA and I represented the Northern Ireland Executive. The Irish Government were represented by Martin Cullen TD, Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism. This statement has been agreed with Michelle Gildernew, and I am making it on behalf of us both.

The Council considered a report from Tourism Ireland's chairperson, Mr Hugh Friel, on the work that that body's board has done since the previous NSMC meeting in tourism sectoral format, which was held in May 2008. The Council noted the issues that were raised at the six board meetings that were held in the interim, as well as the board's views on the impact on business of the current and emerging economic climate.

The Council noted Tourism Ireland's draft business plan for 2009, which sponsor Departments are considering in line with budgetary processes in the two jurisdictions. Both sponsor Departments will work together to finalise the business plan and to bring it forward for approval at a future NSMC meeting. A paper that reported on progress from Tourism Ireland's chief executive, Paul O'Toole, was considered. The Council noted that the worsening economic and travel

environment will have a bearing on the final visitor numbers for the year.

The Council received a presentation on Tourism Ireland's review of European markets, and it was noted that, following that review, the key strategic approach will refocus on and prioritise those source markets that offer the best potential for Ireland to increase visitor flows.

The Council also considered a paper on tourism statistics, and it welcomed the decision of the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in the Republic of Ireland to continue the household travel survey on an updated basis.

The Council welcomed the ongoing co-operation between the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the CSO on the Northern Ireland country of residence survey and the establishment of a new tourism statistics liaison group with representatives from tourism and statistical agencies from both jurisdictions and looked forward to being kept informed of the group's work.

Tourism's Ireland's annual report and accounts for 2007 were presented and noted. The Council accepted the resignation of Mr Tom McGrath from the board of Tourism Ireland Limited and thanked him for his contribution to the work of the board. It approved the appointment of Mr Howard Hastings as a director.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): I thank the Minister for her statement and for her work and that of her colleagues at the meeting.

The statement referred to the issues that have been raised at the various board meetings held since the last meeting. Are those issues subsequently reflected in the statement as regards the downturn? Can the Minister give any more indication of what is expected by way of final visitor numbers?

The Minister referred to the draft business plan for 2009 which is under consideration. How long will it be before it is finalised, and are there any particular issues that the Minister can talk about that will help us today?

As regards wider marketing, the Minister referred to the review of European markets and said that there will be a strategic approach that will refocus on and prioritise those source markets that offer the best potential for Ireland to increase visitor flows. Can the Minister say whether there is a shortlist of those source markets? Are any of them being identified as being of particular interest to this end of the island, as opposed to the island in general?

Speaking on behalf of Committee members, I am sure that they join the Minister and the Council in thanking Tom McGrath for his work at Tourism Ireland and the Tourist Board. We wish Howard Hastings all the best in his service at that level as well as on the Tourist Board.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
I thank the Chairperson for his comments and questions.

As the Member can imagine, most of the meeting on 1 April in Dublin centred on the economic downturn and similar issues, which were reflected back from the board meetings that had taken place in the interim since the last tourism sectoral meeting. From my perspective, we are trying to deal with the issue by giving Northern Ireland stand-out in tourism markets. The Member will note that I referred to the chief executive, Paul O'Toole. He will also be aware that Paul O'Toole has resigned as chief executive since that meeting. Mr O'Toole and his colleagues were working hard to give Northern Ireland stand-out in relation to European markets, particularly the competitive advantage that we have in Northern Ireland with the sterling/euro differential. Tourism Ireland has been working hard on that issue, and I will continue to support it in that work.

As regards the business plan, the Member is no doubt aware that there has been a budget in the Republic of Ireland, which has put severe pressure on all Departments. As a result of that, we are at a latter stage than we should be in relation to the business plan for Tourism Ireland. Obviously, there is a need to make efficiency savings across the piece, and that, I imagine, will include Tourism Ireland from our perspective and that of the Republic of Ireland.

There is a shortlist for European markets; from memory, Germany, the Netherlands and France are on that shortlist. I had the opportunity to go to the Berlin travel show, and when I was in Germany I was able to talk to colleagues in the industry there. We talked about areas such as cruising holidays, which we have good stand-out on, particularly in Fermanagh, which will be —

A Member: Hear, hear. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: There is no self-interest at all; the matter was raised with me, and obviously I was keen to encourage it. As the Member knows, a lot of Germans come to Northern Ireland for cruising and fishing. That has fallen off a bit, and we want to encourage them to return to Northern Ireland, especially now that we have that competitive advantage.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her statement on this important sectoral interest. I join the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment in thanking Tom McGrath for his work on the board of Tourism Ireland over the years.

The Minister referred to the chief executive, Mr Paul O'Toole, stepping down. That is a key position. Will the Minister tell us when Mr O'Toole's replacement might be sought, how long the process

might take and when we might expect a replacement to be in post?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Member for his comments in relation to Mr Tom McGrath, who has resigned as chairman of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and, as a result of that, as a director of Tourism Ireland. I pay tribute to Tom's leadership of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and for representing Northern Ireland in his own robust way on the board of Tourism Ireland. I very much welcome the fact that Howard Hastings is the new chairman of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and will represent Northern Ireland's interests, among others, on the Tourism Ireland board.

As I said, Paul O'Toole has resigned as chief executive of Tourism Ireland. In particular, I wish to pay tribute to him for his work on the Northern Ireland tourism economy. He has done that very well. Under the constitution of Tourism Ireland, the board will appoint his replacement. Having spoken with Mr Hugh Friel, the chairman of the board, I understand that a recruitment process to replace Paul is under way. A new chief executive must be in place as soon as possible, because this is a crucial time for tourism. Therefore, we urge Tourism Ireland to proceed with haste.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus go raibh maith agat, a Aire. I pass my best wishes for the future to Paul O'Toole, and I congratulate Howard Hastings on his appointment as a new director on the board of Tourism Ireland and as chairman of the Tourist Board.

Visitor numbers may be lower this year as a result of the economic downturn: has the cost of that to the local economy been worked out? There may be financial costs, and potential revenue might be lost. Are job losses foreseen as a result of the economic downturn's effect on tourism?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: At the meeting in Dublin on 1 April, Paul O'Toole was able to tell us that the forecasts for visitors were being looked at monthly. It is like a rolling forecast, because it is almost impossible to say what the situation will be in six month's time, never mind a year's time. Therefore, it is very difficult to find statistics for visitors at this time. However, I take heart from the fact that some hotels in Northern Ireland have good booking figures, and I know that the Member will do so too. Just last week, I noticed that the management of the new hotel that has opened on the site of the former Belfast Superbowl say that they are very impressed with the number of bookings that they have received from out-of-state visitors. That is very good.

We need to send a confident message to visitors, and I have been working on that with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland. We want to

say to people that, if they have never visited Northern Ireland before, this is the best time to do so, because it is extremely good value for money. However, the corollary is that we must have a good product in place for the people who do come to Northern Ireland: they must have a good experience. That is why I have been encouraged by the number of new hotels that have opened in Northern Ireland. We will continue to support them in their marketing, whether it is through the Northern Ireland Tourist Board or Tourism Ireland.

Mr Cree: As usual, the Committee Chairperson has mopped up all the questions for the rest of us. I return to the business plan, which was late this year: will the Minister tell the House whether it will contain any new strategic initiatives that will extend beyond the current year?

12.15 pm

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: We are basing our strategic plan and our forecasts on statistics, which is incredibly difficult, given that Tourism Ireland officials bring us rolling statistics. The business plan and the decision on how much money will go to Tourism Ireland has been delayed by budgetary problems in the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, we need to know how much money will come from the Republic of Ireland before we can set out a plan for the future. Given our budgetary pressures, we also need to be aware of the need for efficiencies, which must be worked into the plan.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for her statement. Like other Members, I appreciate the work that Tom McGrath has done, and I wish Howard Hastings all the best for the future.

Is the Minister aware that a visitor survey that was published at the weekend seemed to be very critical of pricing in the Republic of Ireland? Will she ensure that Northern Ireland is not associated with that survey? Will the Minister also ensure that Tourism Ireland promotes Northern Ireland fairly?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Since I became Minister with this portfolio, I have been very aware of the need to make Northern Ireland stand out as a tourist destination. Tourism Ireland has been working very closely with me and the Department on that, and it is even more important now that we have a competitive advantage in the euro/sterling exchange rate. I think that the Member was thinking about that when he made the point about pricing in the Republic of Ireland. Some operators whom we met when we were in Berlin some time ago talked about coming to the Republic of Ireland. Those people said that the Republic of Ireland is a beautiful place to come to but had become very expensive. It is important that value for money, not cheapness, is written right across the Northern Ireland tourism

brand. Along with Tourism Ireland, I am determined to do that, and that organisation knows that we need to continue to concentrate on that type of issue.

Mr Hamilton: My point follows on from the theme that Mr Neeson introduced. The recent cross-border retail phenomenon has impressed us all. Indeed, figures that one supermarket released last week estimated that it is worth in excess of £40 million to the Northern Ireland economy. That is obviously very welcome, although I am not sure whether Minister Cullen would have shared that view at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting. Will the Minister tell us how she is working to ensure that the very welcome tourists who come from the South to shop in Northern Ireland are not merely day trippers but that they add further to our tourism economy by staying overnight or even longer?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Member for his question. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board is very much engaged in that work. I am very encouraged by the fact that some of our hotels along border areas have reported big increases in visitors from the Republic of Ireland. Lough Erne Hotel in Enniskillen, for example, reported somewhere in the region of a 25% to 30% increase in visitors from the Republic of Ireland.

We need to continue to look at that and find ways to promote short stays in the first instance so that people who come up for retail therapy may decide to also have spa treatment and stay over for a night or for a weekend to avail themselves of our very good tourist facilities. That is a job of work for the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, which is very much taking it on board, and we will continue to support it in that work. The Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau is also working to attract people to Belfast as a shopping destination through, if I remember correctly, a festival of shopping, which we are helping to promote. The aim is to increase visitor numbers and the number of nights that tourists spend in Belfast. Therefore, a great deal of work is ongoing in that area, and we will continue to concentrate on that.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement on the tourism sector. It is very timely, given the economic decline. Was there any discussion at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting or in the Tourist Board about the potential for expanding the promotion of tourist attractions? I refer specifically to the likes of Lough Neagh and the Fermanagh lakes, which could be promoted together to attract people from all over Ireland who have an interest in lakes and fishing.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Nothing specific was raised in relation to Lough Neagh, but it was the subject of an Adjournment

debate in the House. That debate may have been introduced by the Member; I cannot recall. We are very much aware of the potential of Lough Neagh. We want to work with the district councils surrounding Lough Neagh, of which there are many, and that is a part of the difficulty. However, we need to promote inland waterways somehow for the German visitors. We must ensure that there is product available when they come to Northern Ireland to enjoy themselves.

Mr Wells: Like the Minister and other Members, I congratulate Tom McGrath on his work. Does the Minister accept that a unique situation faces Northern Ireland? The ducks are well and truly in line: there is a greater emphasis on holidaying at home because of the economic position; there has been a reduction in VAT; and the sterling/euro exchange rate is favourable. The circumstances are unique. Is the Minister content that her officials in the Tourist Board are ready to seize that unique opportunity, which may never recur, and to bring in a welcome influx of visitors, similar to the influx of shoppers referred to by Mr Hamilton? That sustained Newry, Strabane and Londonderry at a very difficult time. Are her officials ready to seize this opportunity to avail ourselves of those unique economic circumstances?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Member for his comments. He will have gathered from my initial comments that we are concentrating on this area, be that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board in the internal Northern Ireland market or the ROI market. The Member and other Members are aware of the successful Northern Ireland Tourist Board advertising campaign carried out recently in the Republic of Ireland. It is so successful that we have received requests from people who want to know where they can buy the music that goes along with the advertisement. It has been most successful.

I also want to look at the GB market. Like Northern Ireland, it is a sterling zone. More people on the mainland will want to stay within the sterling zone for their holidays. Therefore, we should market Northern Ireland as a place to which they should come. They may never have been to Northern Ireland before, and this is an opportunity for them to go somewhere different for their holidays within the UK. We are working with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, and we also need to work with TIL in relation to our GB marketing campaign.

Mr McFarland: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I pay tribute to the work of Tom McGrath and welcome Howard Hastings to the board of Tourism Ireland.

Why are passengers who pass through GB airports bombarded with Tourism Ireland billboards encouraging them to visit Dublin? In this time of economic hardship,

when we need every tourist that we can get to visit Northern Ireland, we should encourage our fellow countrymen and countrywomen to visit Northern Ireland instead of the Republic of Ireland.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am surprised at that comment. The advertisements that I have seen suggest the reverse. From the Republic of Ireland, there have been some rumblings that Tourism Ireland spends much too much of its time encouraging visits to Northern Ireland, rather than to the Republic of Ireland. That is what the industry in the Republic of Ireland says.

I give the Member this assurance: when I leave the House today, I will ask Tourism Ireland for statistics on its advertising campaigns to ensure that it is giving Northern Ireland the available stand-out. The Member will realise as well as I do that some visitors to Northern Ireland come here having first spent some time in the Republic of Ireland. The important thing is that we get visitors to come to Northern Ireland, and I will continue to do that. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland are looking at facilities in Dublin Airport to ensure that, when people land there, they know that they can visit Northern Ireland for a tourist break here as well. That is an important job of work.

I listen to what the Member says, and I will come back to him with statistics on advertising. It is an important issue, and we must respond.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for her statement. I, too, thank Tom McGrath for his outstanding contribution and welcome Howard Hastings to the board of Tourism Ireland. I have confidence that Howard will do the job equally well.

What are the Minister's expectations for tourism in Northern Ireland, particularly for this year? Owners of guest houses tell me that they notice a significant decline in advance bookings in recent months. I have no clear information on how the hotels are faring or the level of group bookings that may have been made months in advance. If there is a decline, is there anything that the Assembly can do to boost bookings to keep owners of guest houses and others alive until better days?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Member for his point. He is right that various types of accommodation exist in Northern Ireland, and experiences in each sector may vary. I am hearing mixed views; some hotels, as I said earlier, are doing well, but others are not doing as well. In determining the way forward, we must work with the industry, specifically to ascertain statistics.

I heard some anecdotal evidence of fewer advance bookings. However, when compared with the same time last year, there is little difference. People are not booking in advance, but they are still coming to Northern

Ireland and spending nights in bed and breakfasts and hotels. It will be interesting to see a like-for-like comparison later this year. I grant the Member that there is a difference in the number of advance bookings, but the long-term differential will be interesting.

Mr Poots: I thank my colleague Mr McFarland for highlighting the deficiencies of Tourism Ireland, which is an all-Ireland body that his party established. Will the Minister ensure that sterling's weakness against the euro and, indeed, the dollar gives Northern Ireland a key marketing advantage over the Republic of Ireland and the rest of Europe? Will she ensure that Northern Ireland has an identifiable marketing niche that will be used to enhance the tourism product and thus its saleability?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Yes; I give the Member that assurance. One would not choose to start from the current position, but we are where we are. That is why I am working hard to ensure that Northern Ireland is in a stand-out position to boost visitor numbers in markets such as Germany, France and elsewhere. People must know that Northern Ireland is a sterling zone in which they will receive a good product that is value for money.

Many people will have seen that places in the Republic of Ireland have recently been marking down prices drastically to attract visitors. However, on arrival, that value for money for visitors drops off. Therefore, we must present a tourism package to ensure that visitors to Northern Ireland experience value for money, not only in accommodation but across the board, from buying coffees to going out for an evening. It is a big job, and my Department will continue to work on it.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her statement. Given that the Minister referred to Fermanagh, she will not be surprised by my reference to Derry and its lack of international chain hotels. Will the Minister, when refocusing on and prioritising source markets, as she mentioned in her statement, take that into account? Their introduction into Derry could help to increase the future flow of visitors.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The signature project in Londonderry makes the city a stand-out. I am keen for it to be finished, because the Walled City has a unique character that must be marketed aggressively. I want people to visit the Walled City and to travel from there to the rest of the west. Indeed, I also want them to travel across to the east; I will also give that area a few visitors.

The Walled City will be marketed aggressively in conjunction with the other signature projects. To assist visitors in moving around Northern Ireland, it is important that all those projects be linked.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her statement, in which she referred to the need to:

“prioritise those source markets which offer the best potential ... to increase visitor flows.”

I think that the Minister will agree that Londonderry has great potential to do more around the Apprentice Boys of Derry parade, and that more people and their families could be encouraged to come. What engagement has the Minister had with the Orange Order to discuss the potential that quite clearly exists? Was there any talk of the 12 July parades being developed as tourist events? There has been some discussion around the development of the Boyne site. Was there any comment on that?

12.30pm

Four flagship parades have been outlined for Belfast, Tandragee, Dromara and Coleraine; of course, I could add Bangor to that. What engagement has there been with the Orange Order to promote the tourism potential of those parades?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member will know that I believe that cultural tourism, in its totality, is a great hook to get people into Northern Ireland. It will come as no surprise to him to hear me say that I think that the flagship Twelfth parade is in Lisbellaw this year and not in Bangor.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland are in regular contact with representatives of the Loyal Orders to discuss how to promote the 12 July parades. I pay tribute to the Orange Order for its ongoing commitment to work with Tourism Ireland and the Tourist Board. Through the flagship parades, Tourism Ireland has helped to raise the profile of this year's parades, and that work will continue. I understand that considerable interest was generated last year and that, for the first time, there was a facility for people to watch the parade online. That should be very much welcomed.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Swine Flu Outbreak in Mexico and USA

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that he wishes to make a statement regarding the swine flu outbreak in Mexico and the United States.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I wish to make a statement to the Assembly on the swine influenza virus, which has been identified in seven districts in Mexico, in Canada, and in California, Texas, Kansas and New York in the United States. Possible cases are being investigated in other parts of the world, including the UK. The outbreak, which involves the swine influenza virus AH1N1, is a matter of considerable concern for public health authorities worldwide. In Northern Ireland, my officials have been working on the issue throughout the weekend. Further work is ongoing, particularly in regard to surveillance, advice to the health sector and communication with the general public.

The reported events in North America are unusual, and therefore warrant further investigation and vigilance on the part of other countries. Investigation and testing is ongoing to determine the severity of the disease and the ease with which it can spread. Those investigations are currently being undertaken by Mexican and US authorities, with the support of the World Health Organization. At this stage, however, there has been no change to the World Health Organization's pandemic alert level, which remains at level 3. It is not the case, therefore, that a pandemic flu has been declared.

Given the concern about this development, my Department and the Public Health Agency are monitoring the situation extremely closely to assess the implications, if any, for public health in Northern Ireland. There is very close liaison with the UK Health Protection Agency and UK Government Departments, particularly the Cabinet Office and the Department of Health. Officials are also working closely with the Department of Health and Children in the Republic of Ireland.

Over the weekend, I was fully briefed on the situation by the Chief Medical Officer and senior officials from the Public Health Agency, and I participated in a meeting with key health professionals. Northern Ireland has robust plans in place for dealing with situations such as this. We have worked, and are working, extremely closely with the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland to ensure that we are prepared and that the public is protected to the maximum level possible.

Flu activity in Northern Ireland is currently at a very low level. However, systems are in place to ensure early identification of the new strain, should it arrive in

Northern Ireland. At present, no cases of swine flu have been confirmed in the UK, but some travellers who recently returned from Mexico are under assessment in Scotland.

Testing has shown that human swine influenza can be treated with antiviral drugs, which, I am pleased to say, we have already stockpiled in Northern Ireland. I cannot emphasise enough, however, the simple, and potentially extremely effective, steps that members of the public can take themselves. Good hygiene, especially frequent hand washing, is very effective in combating this type of infection. That is particularly important for anyone who exhibits flu symptoms. People can also protect themselves and their families by using tissues to cover their mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing.

Although the condition is a variant of swine influenza, I wish to state strongly that people are at no risk from eating pork or pork products. Properly handled pork and cooked pork, and pork products, are safe, because the virus is not transmitted through food. There are no current travel restrictions being placed on those who plan to visit the affected areas of Mexico or the United States.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. He said that no travel restrictions are currently being placed on those who plan to visit the affected areas. Are talks taking place, or is work being done, with representatives of the travel industry to provide advice for people on things to look out for when travelling to those areas? Is any advice available about when to seek advice? Furthermore, is there a preventative vaccination that people who are travelling to affected areas can take?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No vaccination is currently available. It is a new strain, so it will take between three and six months to identify it and to start to produce a vaccine. Antiviral drugs are available, and they can be taken as soon as someone experiences the onset of the flu symptoms.

As I said, there are no travel restrictions at present. Anyone who has a concern about that should consult the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website for advice. People who are suffering from flu-like symptoms should stay at home and contact their GP, who will further advise on what should be done. The advice is what one would normally expect for flu. People should stay in their house so as not to risk infecting the public, and they should follow good-hygiene procedures such as hand washing. They should adhere to the old adage from when we were small: "Coughs and sneezes spread diseases."

Therefore, handkerchiefs and tissues should be used when coughing and sneezing. That is simple advice.

In the United States and elsewhere, the flu symptoms have, so far, been mild, as had been anticipated. In Mexico, a number of fatalities has occurred, and the World Health Organization (WHO) must understand what is causing that. It must find out whether there is something underlying that people are not noticing.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his statement and for his reassurance that his Department has robust planning in place to ensure the population of Northern Ireland is afforded the greatest possible protection. Does his Department intend to provide any guidance to GPs and surgeries on what to expect if some patients present at surgeries with a flu-like virus so that, if such a contagious virus comes here, it can be stemmed at the outset?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As I emphasised in my statement, it is not a pandemic. We are at phase 3 on the current WHO phase of pandemic alert, but that is as a precaution. We will prepare for the worst and hope for the best, and that is always the best way.

The Department, in carrying out its robust plans, has had a series of conversations and is working closely with other health Departments in the UK. This afternoon, I will have a conference call with other health Ministers. As I said, the Department is also working closely with authorities in the Irish Republic.

As far as guidance is concerned, robust plans are in place. Guidance is available and will be provided to GPs if it is not already with them. I do not want to say that they already have the guidance; however, if they do not have it at present, they will have it shortly. Of course, GPs are the first line of defence. As the winter flu period has passed, the level of flu consultations is currently low. Therefore, the best thing that people who experience flu-like symptoms can do is ring their GPs and talk to them. GPs will provide advice.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his statement and for being proactive on the issue during the weekend. If required, will he liaise with his colleagues in the NIO and the Department for Regional Development (DRD) to ensure that any resources, over and above those that are already in place at ports and places of entry, are provided to protect the people of Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My private office has contacted the Minister for Regional Development's private office to apprise it of developments. As regards the NIO, I have already had a conversation with Paul Goggins. He has offered any assistance that he can provide, should I require it. I was grateful for that conversation with him.

As I said, I will also have conversations with my counterpart Ministers in the UK. Later today, we will have a conference conversation to ensure that all of the UK population gets a consistent message and that we deal with the matter as players of the same team. I will also have close contact with the Republic's Department of Health and Children.

Mrs Hanna: I thank the Minister for his prompt statement. Certainly, we all hope that the outbreak will not progress beyond level 3.

As regards treating swine influenza in humans with antiviral medicines; will the same medicines treat the virus when it has been transmitted through human-to-human contact, as may be the case at present? To clarify what I mean: obviously, the outbreak started through swine-to-human contact. There is now concern that the virus may be passed from human to human. Can the antiviral drugs that treat the virus that is passed from swine to human also be used to treat the virus that is passed from human to human, as that may be the stage that the disease has now reached?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I understand the Member's question. The virus is transmitted from animal to human and also from human to human. There are sufficient antiviral medicines in stock to protect the population. Those drugs would be administered within around 48 hours of the onset of flu-like symptoms.

Mr Ford: I also thank the Minister for his prompt and reassuring statement, and for the work that he and his officials have done during the weekend.

First, I want to follow up the point that was raised by Mrs O'Neill. During the weekend, there were suggestions in the media that the current flu vaccine would provide some protection against this particular strain of the virus. However, the Minister appears to be saying that that is not so. Will he clarify that matter?

Secondly, the Minister talks about stockpiling antiviral drugs. Will he tell the House what proportion of Northern Ireland's population can be covered by the stockpile that his Department holds?

Thirdly, accepting that the primary concern is prevention at primary care level, with the GP, will the Minister assure the House that there are adequate resources, particularly adequate staffing in hospitals, if there were to be — and we trust that there will not be — a large number of people who require secondary care?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Member has raised three points. The Department believes that it is unlikely that the winter flu vaccine will give adequate protection against swine flu. However, we will be better informed on that matter after work that is being carried out in the United States has been completed.

This year, uptake of the flu vaccine was high, but it could be higher, and we want to increase the uptake rate. However, even if the rate had increased, it is unlikely that that vaccine will protect against this virus.

12.45 pm

The Member asked about stockpiling. In the worse-case scenario, the flu will affect 50% of the population, and I have planned for that. Therefore, I have stockpiled and purchased to ensure that we have that order of protection, although I reiterate that that is the worst-case scenario; I do not anticipate that we will need that amount of vaccine. However, it is always better to destroy excess unused vaccines than to allow people to be struck down by the virus and to get into trouble because of an insufficient number of vaccines.

We have a strong GP network that will receive the resources that it requires, because GPs are our front line of defence. If we need to use hospital beds, the entire hospital network is in place and able to respond as necessary.

Mr Easton: I welcome the Minister's announcement and credit him and his Department for their work at the weekend. Will he advise whether anyone from the Department will contact the USA, which is on the front line, for up-to-date advice on the flu epidemic? Are we using the Tamiflu drug or other virus vaccines?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: We do not have vaccines. They will take three to six months to produce. We will use antiviral drugs; people who contract the flu will receive the Tamiflu antiviral drug.

A strong network operates in the US that emanates from the World Health Organization. All countries, including ourselves and the United States, are part of that organisation and network through it. We will use that organisation as a channel of communication. As I said earlier, the existing flu vaccine, which several hundred thousand people currently enjoy, is unlikely to protect against this virus. However, we will be better informed in due course. The World Health Organization, the Department of Health in London and the devolved Health Departments will address the matter.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Presumption of Death Bill

Final Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I beg to move

That the Presumption of Death Bill [NIA 23/07] do now pass.

The Bill has reached its Final Stage in the Assembly, and, if it is passed today, I expect the legislation to be fully operational by some time in the autumn. The legislation will give the families of missing persons in Northern Ireland the opportunity, for the first time, to have the presumed death of their family member confirmed by the High Court and to have a certificate of presumed death made available to them by the General Register Office. Although a piece of paper cannot erase or even ease the suffering that families of all missing persons endure, it may help in the grieving process and bring some small measure of comfort.

The Bill that I introduced to the Assembly on 1 July 2008 is, on the face of it, not markedly different to that before the House today. However, the present Bill is better and now contains provision that allows the High Court to order the disclosure of relevant information to the court. Moreover, we have now put beyond doubt the availability of the new legislation to the families of the disappeared. The ordinary jurisdictional rules that relate to domicile or habitual residence will not apply to applications from close relatives of the disappeared. We have also made several technical adjustments to the insurance provisions that will, I hope, simplify them and allow the public to understand their operation more easily.

The Bill has improved thanks, in no small measure, to the careful and through scrutiny that it received over several months in the Committee for Finance and Personnel. I thank the Chairman, the Deputy Chairman and all Committee members for the sensitive manner in which they undertook and prioritised scrutiny to ensure that the Bill could reach the statute book as quickly as possible.

I also thank those few organisations and individuals who responded to the initial consultation paper on the draft Presumption of Death Bill published by my predecessor in January 2008, and those who submitted evidence or appeared before the Committee.

I do not intend at this stage to spell out in any great detail what the Bill does or how it does it. We have been over that ground previously, but to recap very simply, the Bill confers a new statutory jurisdiction on the High Court to make declarations in relation to missing persons, including the disappeared. The High Court may make the declaration if satisfied that the

missing person is thought to have died, or has not been known to be alive for a period of at least seven years. If the High Court makes a declaration of presumed death, the Registrar General will enter the details of the missing person in a new register of presumed deaths. The family of the missing person may then obtain a certificate of presumed death.

The effect in law of both the High Court declaration and the entering of details in the register of presumed deaths will be as if the missing person had died and his or her death been registered in the usual way.

That is all I wish to say about the Bill itself. During the passage of the Bill through its Assembly Stages, the important work of the Independent Commission on the Location of Victims' Remains has continued, and, in December 2008, the commission confirmed that it had located one of the disappeared. That is obviously a welcome development, giving fresh hope to the families of those whose bodies have not yet been found.

The families of the disappeared have recently launched a new campaign to raise awareness of their plight, and have called once again for anyone with information to contact the independent commission. I repeat what I said during the debate on the Second Stage of the Bill: I am sure that everyone in the House will wish to convey the House's support to the continuing efforts of the independent commission, and anyone with any information is urged to make it available to the authorities as soon as possible.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel's report on the Bill welcomed my Department's commitment to assist the families of the disappeared in identifying avenues of funding or practical assistance in connection with applications for declaration of presumed death. My officials have contacted a range of organisations, from the Legal Services Commission — which is responsible for both legal aid and exceptional legal aid — to the Northern Ireland Lawyers Pro Bono Group and the Northern Ireland Court Service, the latter in respect of remission of fees. Discussions will continue, and families will be kept informed of the progress made by my officials through the WAVE Trauma Centre.

At this stage, we cannot say that any specific funding package can be put in place, but officials are in contact with colleagues in the victims unit of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), and will continue to work with the victims unit to see what can be done to reach a satisfactory outcome for those close relatives of the disappeared who wish to apply for a declaration of presumed death.

Finally, I alert the Assembly to a further stage in the Bill's passage towards Royal Assent. It is my understanding that the Secretary of State will lay the Presumption of Death Bill before Parliament in accordance with section 15 of the Northern Ireland Act

1998. That is because it contains provisions dealing with reserved matters that are not merely ancillary to transferred matters. Once it is laid before Parliament, a minimum of 20 Members of either House may within 20 days table a motion that the Assembly Bill should not be submitted for Royal Assent. If no such motion is tabled within that 20-day period, the Secretary of State is free to submit the Bill to Her Majesty for Royal Assent.

Mr O'Loan: I note and acknowledge all that the Minister has said. The Bill is a necessary and valuable piece of legislation. It has general application, but it also has particular significance in relation to the disappeared. The families of the disappeared have watched the progress of the Bill with immense interest, and, it should be said, considerable concern and emotion.

There are those among the families of the disappeared who have been keen to see the legislation passed and will wish to avail themselves of it. Everything should be done — and, I think, has been done — in the terms of the Bill to make the progress of any application to the courts as easy as possible.

Anything that can be done to ease the financial burden on those families, especially measures that can be taken by the relevant public authorities, should be done to enable that to happen.

Not all the families of the disappeared will wish to avail themselves of the legislation. It should not be thought for a moment that the enactment of the Presumption of Death Bill will remove the onus on all those who can assist the families of the disappeared to recover the remains of their loved ones so that they can be given a Christian burial. That onus also remains on public authorities who have any relevant information.

Earlier in the process of the Bill, I had concerns about the issue of disclosure of information, but I am somewhat reassured by what I have learned since. It is neither necessary nor, perhaps, helpful to have a duty of disclosure on public bodies, but I still believe that anyone who has information that can assist the families of the disappeared or those who will seek to make an application under the new legislation has a moral duty to do so.

The only other issue that was of concern to the Committee for Finance and Personnel, which considered the legislation very closely, was the seven-year rule. I am satisfied that that rule can, if necessary, be readily adjusted in future without recourse to primary legislation. The Presumption of Death Bill should have the full support of the Assembly.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank Mr O'Loan for his comments. Thankfully, the great majority of Members and people across Northern Ireland will never have to deal with the kind of situation addressed by the Bill or be in a position to have to have recourse to the provisions of the Bill.

However, I trust that the Bill will provide the people who are in that awful position with some practical assistance in dealing with the emotional, financial and legal problems that arise in such a dreadful situation.

As Mr O'Loan rightly said, the greatest possible help for those families would be to have the remains of their loved ones returned so that they can give them a proper Christian burial and, in doing so, achieve closure. I will close the debate on this important issue by saying that the entire House hopes that that day will come for all those families as quickly as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Presumption of Death Bill [NIA23/07] do now pass.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Steps to Work Contracts

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

Mr Attwood: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the procurement process for the award of Steps to Work contracts; expresses concern about the management, the requirements and the conduct of the process; and calls for a joint inquiry involving the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Committee for Finance and Personnel, into the conduct of the procurement process.

I ask you to please correct the clock, Mr Speaker.

I will make some preliminary remarks before I get to the heart of the motion. I want to ensure that there is no doubt about the scope of the motion. It is six or seven years since the current public procurement arrangements in Northern Ireland were put in place. Annually, in excess of £2 billion of public funds may be used for public procurement exercises. Concerns have been raised in some places about a range of public contracts, particularly in relation to Steps to Work. Given the number of successful challenges to our procurement policy that have been taken through court proceedings, it seems timely to take the process into a new phase.

1.00pm

I reassure the House and the Minister that the object of the motion is not to circumvent a principle that the Minister outlined to me in a letter in September last year, when he said that there was a need for a:

“procurement process to satisfy the principles of EU law, particularly with regard to non-discrimination, fairness and transparency.”

The purpose of the motion is not in conflict with that declaration of principle nor with the requirements of EU procurement policy. Neither is it the intention of the motion to create an insular and protectionist approach to public procurement policy in Northern Ireland. The motion is not intended to do any of that.

Businesses in the North, of whatever nature, need to be stretched and challenged in respect of the service that they provide and the contracts that they might be awarded to ensure that they offer efficiency, effectiveness and value for money. The motion is not some attempt by a politician or the Assembly to cry after the Steps to Work milk has been spilt.

In August of last year, before the Steps to Work contracts were awarded, I wrote to the Minister for

Employment and Learning to flag up issues of principle that I believe needed to be satisfied when it came to the procurement exercise, to ensure that the issues that have arisen subsequently may be mitigated or would not arise at all. This is not a motion in which we are crying over split milk; it reflects some of the concerns that existed in and around the time of the procurement exercise. That is the purpose of the debate, and I hope that the Minister and others are reassured of its intention.

To explain what is at the heart of some of the concerns around the Steps to Work contracts, I will give three or four examples. When one organisation that was awarded contracts under the procurement exercise was tendering for the contracts, it made explicit how it intended to proceed. In its submission for the tendering process, that organisation stated that it was its:

“intention to act as Managing Agent, subcontracting out the majority of the provision and ‘filling gaps’ where required.”

When a contract for Training for Success, Steps to Work or any other public provision in the North is being awarded, there is an obligation on those managing the procurement process and on government to probe what those sorts of words mean and ask whether it is appropriate that an organisation that is bidding for work outlines in its opening statement its intention to subcontract out the majority of the work. That may be consistent with procurement policy, but I ask — a joint Committee inquiry should also ask — whether that is the best way to proceed.

If that is the best way to proceed, a second question arises about that procurement exercise: what is the quality of the submission that is expected at the tendering stage in respect of the subcontracting proposals? I know of a tenderer who was awarded a contract worth millions of pounds over a number of years, but, when that contract was awarded, all that was outlined regarding the subcontracting proposals was a letter of support — just like the one that I have referred to already — indicating in minimum terms what the subcontracting arrangements might be in the future. In that instance, unsolicited letters of support that were sent out to trade organisations in Northern Ireland, some of which some received the letter only two weeks before the deadline for tendering submissions, in May of last year were regarded as a sufficient basis for the procurement unit to conclude that there was evidence of a subcontracting relationship and allowed the contractor to be awarded preferred status. Is that a process that is fit for purpose, given that the Assembly previously endorsed the Committee for Employment and Learning's report on Training for Success, which dealt with subcontracting relationships?

The report states that the Central Procurement Directorate should put in place:

“mechanisms to ensure that stated agreements in contract bids are supported with formal written documentation clearly demonstrating the willingness of third-parties to be considered as part of the substantive bid (and which provide details of the level of resources agreed to be provided)”.

That is what the Committee had endorsed by the Assembly. It seems to me, however, that, when it came to a subsequent procurement exercise, the Central Procurement Directorate endorsed a preferred status to contract bids on the basis of a letter of support. That does not stand up to what the Assembly previously endorsed, namely that details of the level of resources agreed to be provided should be outlined in sub-contracting arrangements.

My third example is that, when preferred status was granted to one organisation three weeks before those contracts went live, that organisation had one member of staff in Northern Ireland and no training accommodation here. That organisation, having had no involvement in the North, had little or no knowledge of local and regional employment opportunities, which was the essence of the tender process's requirements. When that organisation went live three weeks later in its Steps to Work training provision, which, according to Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) officials, was required to be fully operational when the contracts went live, it was still interviewing dozens of people to provide the services that it was contracted to provide. When the contracts went live, people in Northern Ireland who were contacting that organisation were referred to offices in England and were then given a mobile telephone number to ring to pursue their interest in taking up Steps to Work.

My fourth example concerns the rigour and capacity of the evaluation process. Departmental officials signed off evaluations several weeks after the evaluation process had been undertaken, and there was little information in the documentation about the basis on which officials had made decisions on which contracts should be awarded. There is a need, especially given the McLaughlin and Harvey court case last year, to re-examine how processes are managed, whether they are exhaustive and detailed, and whether all relevant information is recorded on that documentation. That is the essence of some of the thinking behind the motion, which will, I hope, attract support.

There is, of course, another reason why we should send out a message about procurement: to inform those who tender for contracts in the North that there will be accountability on the Floor of the Chamber for what happens to ensure that the billions of pounds that are spent on the public good in Northern Ireland are spent properly, efficiently and effectively.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Before I get

into the substance of the motion, may I congratulate the Member on the birth of his new baby? I hope that he is not losing too much sleep, although it does not seem as if he is. I also hope that the Member is carrying out his fair share of night feeds.

Mr Attwood: Every morning.

Ms S Ramsey: I will check that out to confirm that it is true.

Mr Attwood outlined the Committee's significant concerns around how the procurement process for Steps to Work was handled, and individuals and organisations have approached Committee members, including me, to express concern and dissatisfaction with the process. Mr Attwood is by no means unique in that regard — everybody on the Committee was contacted in one way or another. I remind Members that I brought the issue to the Committee at that time, and we discussed concerns about the process. The Committee had face-to-face meetings with the Minister and the permanent secretary, and we sent correspondence to the Department on the issue.

I cannot stress enough that the Committee has considered the issues with Steps to Work, and it has sought to have those concerns addressed. Mr Attwood highlighted some of the processes that the Committee was involved in during its inquiry into the Department for Employment and Learning's Training for Success programme, which has been touched on today. We are worried that some of the issues around procurement came out of the Training for Success programme and went into the Steps to Work programme.

The Committee was convinced that there was a need for a broader assessment of the public procurement process. We contacted the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and I spoke to the Chairperson of that Committee about the issues a number of times. The Committee for Finance and Personnel is seeking to scrutinise the whole issue of public procurement policy and practice in the North.

The remit of the inquiry includes looking at ways to increase the access of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and social economy enterprises to public procurement contracts and to maximise the economic and social benefits to local communities from those contracts as a result. I have no doubt that other Members will raise the issues affecting their constituencies.

At our Committee meeting on 21 January, we agreed that the most practical approach to making public procurement policy and practice more user-friendly to local SMEs and social economy enterprises (SEEs) is for the general policy and practice to be reviewed. We could be revisiting other departmental policies and programmes every other week, so we agreed that, unless we dealt with the policy and practice of

procurement now, we could be dealing with it every other week or month. We need to get to the crux of the matter to ensure that we are coming at it from the point of view of what local communities need, while ensuring that we are dealing with the issue of procurement once and for all.

Our Committee made a submission to the Finance and Personnel Committee's inquiry, and we highlighted issues that we had identified in both the Training for Success and Steps to Work programmes on the issue of procurement. Our Committee is conscious that the Committee for Finance and Personnel will examine issues at the heart of the public procurement process as part of its inquiry, and I am sure that the Chairperson will remind us of that. The inquiry is ongoing, and it is only now considering written submissions.

We are also very conscious of the fact — Mr Attwood has also mentioned it — that there are still live issues around the procurement process for the award of Steps to Work contracts, as one contract has still to be awarded.

I am in no way seeking to oppose the motion *per se*, but I suggest that we wait until we see whether the outcome of the Finance and Personnel Committee's inquiry addresses our concerns, especially about Steps to Work. It would be a duplication of work and resources for our Committee to attempt to pre-empt the recommendations that will flow from the Finance and Personnel Committee's inquiry. Based on the wording of the motion, it is my understanding that Mr Attwood would like the issues involved in the management, requirements and conduct of the procurement —

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

Ms S Ramsey: The issues that are being highlighted today are very relevant, but I ask the House to give us time to see the outcome of the Committee for Finance and Personnel's inquiry. Go raibh maith agat.

1.15 pm

Mr Newton: As Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I have no objections to the motion. It is appropriate to point out — and the point has been made by the Chairperson of the Committee — that there is a live issue around the awarding of one of the contracts. Therefore, I am conscious of and concerned about debating the issue at this time, before all of the ramifications of that contract have been settled.

I imagine that, when DEL put Steps to Work out to tender, every Member of the House was contacted by community groups in their constituency. Those groups were concerned that, having delivered community-based programmes through community-based projects

and having satisfied the Department's requirements, they would lose the contracts to deliver Steps to Work to organisations with a more sophisticated approach, larger budgets, greater expertise in certain areas and the ability to put a tender together on a more professional basis. They had stood by the communities during the Troubles, and now that there was a relative peace they found that they were unable to tender as effectively as those other organisations.

I suppose that the requests from many Members to see efficiency in all levels of Departments prompted the need to reduce the number of tenders, and allowing one point of contact for the delivery of a contract by DEL largely took us down this road. In an attempt to improve the programme, the Department put the contracts out to tender as it had to do under EU rules and regulations.

My feelings on the issue are very much in line with the approach taken by the Chairperson and the majority of the Committee. In the search for contractors of a sufficient size to be commercially viable for potential suppliers, each of the 10 contracts that went out for delivery in the Steps to Work programme was intended to be awarded to a single contractor with the right to employ subcontractors, delivering such elements of provision as required to meet the conditions of the contract. That was made quite clear within the contracts. From that arrangement, the Department gained a single point of contact, and the lead contractor took sole responsibility for all aspects of delivery and compliance with the operational guidelines of the programmes, including the quality of provision, which was to be delivered in line with the Department's Success through Excellence strategy.

Concerns were raised in the Committee following contact from community groups, and every party represented in the House has questioned the Minister in plenary meetings on the Steps to Work contracts. Indeed, departmental officials appeared before the Committee on 8 October 2008, and every member of the Committee present at that meeting pursued the issue of Steps to Work and the concerns that were being raised via their constituency offices.

I was approached by those who were concerned about some of the language used in the contract document, and I wanted an assurance that all efforts had been —

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

Mr Newton: I wanted an assurance that all efforts had been made to engage with community groups. I was assured that there had been three large, well-attended meetings where community groups were permitted to question the Department.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Member for West Belfast, Mr Attwood, for bringing the issue to the Chamber. However, my party and I do not fully understand the purpose of the motion.

It cannot be denied that the procurement process for Steps to Work was difficult: indeed the issue is ongoing in Foyle. However, it has been addressed by the Minister for Employment and Learning on a number of occasions and by the Committee for Employment and Learning, which encouraged the Committee for Finance and Personnel to carry out a review of public procurement in general. The Committee for Finance and Personnel has already held evidence sessions, and we await its findings.

Public procurement is a complicated business, but it is worth pointing out that ultimate responsibility for it lies with the Department of Finance and Personnel, through the Central Procurement Directorate. It is also worth pointing out that the rules by which procurement decisions are made were created in 2002, when Mr Attwood's party leader, Mark Durkan, was Minister of Finance and Personnel. Procurement is also subject to EU laws, and we are often restricted by EU guidelines.

From Mr Attwood's speech, I discern that he is concerned that local businesses are not being given the best opportunities to obtain Government contracts. That concern is shared by the Ulster Unionist Party and by many businesses in Northern Ireland. I hope that the Committee for Finance and Personnel's review will set out how improvements can be made in that area while staying within European law. During this time of recession, it is crucial to give local companies the best opportunity possible within the rules. Is the SDLP, which appears to be the most pro-European party in this place, arguing for us to scrap the single market?

A recent CBI questionnaire showed that 46% of respondents found it difficult to obtain information on forthcoming tenders. Figures such as those are not encouraging, and it is obvious that improvements are needed in certain areas. However, as has been stated, the Committee for Employment and Learning has already examined the specifics of the Steps to Work procurement process, and the Committee for Finance and Personnel is addressing the issue of procurement more generally. I am sure that, on publication of the Committee for Finance and Personnel's report and if deemed necessary, the Committee for Employment and Learning will address the issue again.

Let us not forget that the Steps to Work programme is operating successfully throughout Northern Ireland and that it offers innovative and crucial opportunities to people recently made redundant and the long-term unemployed. Although I recognise Mr Attwood's concern, I fail to see the need for his motion.

Ms Lo: I thank Mr Attwood for proposing the motion, and I share a lot of the concerns that he expressed. However, I agree with my three colleagues on the Committee for Employment and Learning that it is premature to call for an inquiry, given the legal implications and the fact that the Committee for Finance and Personnel is considering the procurement process.

Lessons must be learnt from Training for Success and Steps to Work, and better procurement processes are needed. Although we do not want to limit the award of contracts to just local businesses, which is protectionism, goes against free trade and is not allowed under EU legislation, there must be a more common-sense approach, which is not just based on value for money. Most importantly, we must establish whether the needs of signatories to the programme are being met.

Although large multinationals may have the competence to write excellent application forms for contracts and to satisfy the criteria on methodology, we need to scrutinise them thoroughly to assess whether they can deliver on the ground. To say that they are just managing agents leaves me asking a big question about their competence to deliver the programme.

The Department's timescale for setting up the programme was crazy. Training for Success was such a rushed job — even DEL staff have admitted that the programme was totally rushed. The timescale for Steps to Work was incredible. We issued a call for tender on 22 April 2008, for which the closing date was 6 June 2008. At that stage, many groups had already complained about the short time available in which to prepare their bids. The preferred bidder was announced in mid-August 2008. Some of the bidders from England rushed into advertising positions in order to fulfil promises.

The formal contracts were awarded to eight local areas on 17 September 2008, with an expectation that the programme would start on 29 September 2008 — 12 days after the contracts were awarded. How on earth did we expect those programmes to operate properly and smoothly? How could any group, be it local or English, have started the programme efficiently? Did we expect people to work in tents?

Mr McCarthy: And use mobile phones?

Ms Lo: Yes, as Mr Attwood said earlier.

Staff had to be recruited and then trained to operate the programme, which was supposed to be person-centred. Staff need proper training to understand the programme and individuals' needs. Twelve days in which to recruit and prepare staff is a nonsense. I really question DEL's thinking in that instance. We should have called for tender and prepared for the process well in advance of April 2008, especially since the programme was supposed to be live a few months later.

Mr Hamilton: I will not dwell on the Steps to Work programme or the process that led to the awarding of contracts, because, frankly, I know little or nothing about it. That is a rare admission of a lack of knowledge on my part. Instead, I will talk more generally about the procurement process in Northern Ireland and about some of the issues that are frequently raised about the process, which do not exactly stand up to scrutiny when considered.

Several Members mentioned that the Committee for Finance and Personnel, of which I am Deputy Chairperson, is conducting an inquiry into the procurement process in Northern Ireland. We are doing that because we are very aware of the concerns that are frequently expressed about public procurement in Northern Ireland. One cannot escape noticing the various legal challenges that have been launched, as well as the controversy that has built up around the likes of procurement frameworks and the cases that have already been mentioned.

As a Committee, we are also mindful of the economic downturn and the desire to assist local firms in trying to avail themselves of as much public procurement in Northern Ireland as possible, whether that be the record levels of £1.6 billion of investment in capital infrastructure or the countless other millions in revenue expenditure. The Committee is aware of those considerations. Indeed, rather than just paying lip service to them, it intends to get stuck into the matter by conducting an inquiry.

1.30 pm

From time to time, there are legal challenges to our procurement process, as there are in any part of the world. If one were to look at the evidence that has been submitted to the Committee for Finance and Personnel since, say, the start of April 2007, one would see that there have been legal challenges costing approximately £3.9 million. Given that, one could not but be concerned about the process. However, although that figure looks bad and is certainly too high, evidence from industry experts indicated that Northern Ireland is far from being the worst region in the UK and Ireland. Such evidence came even from members of the legal profession, who, one could say, have an interest in saying that the process is shoddy and not fit for purpose.

Indeed, those experts cited an example that sticks in my mind. Even before putting a contract out to tender, councillors in a large city in the north of England indicated to whom they wanted that contract to go. The procurement process began, and, lo and behold, the contract was awarded to that very company. That is the sort of shoddy practice that we see elsewhere. Although we may have difficulties with our procurement process, as everybody does, we are certainly not as bad as that.

I also examined some of the experiences that are associated with contract awarding in Northern Ireland. The perception that it is exceptionally difficult — indeed, nigh on impossible, as some suggest — for local firms to get their hands on some procurement contracts in Northern Ireland does not stack up whenever one considers the evidence. From the start of February until the end of March 2009, the Central Procurement Directorate, which is caught in the headlights of Mr Attwood's motion, awarded 45 out of 54 — 83% — of contracts to local firms. We must bear in mind that that is only one centre of procurement excellence. The monetary value of the contracts awarded by that one centre of procurement excellence was £3.2 million. Everyone would agree, particularly in these difficult economic times, that that is a sizeable chunk of money. I picked up that evidence from the Central Procurement Directorate's website, and, if one were to delve into its history, I am sure that one would discover similar stories. In fact, given that that is only one centre of procurement excellence, the overall figure for the others would probably be much higher. Moreover, the proportion of contracts awarded to local firms is much better here than in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel's inquiry was mentioned, and there is nothing that has been said in the debate that that inquiry will not touch on. In fact, I expect fully that those specific and general matters will come up in evidence and will be mentioned in the report. Therefore, given that the inquiry is ongoing and that it will afford ample opportunity to carry out the sort of work that is mentioned in the motion, I see no merit to the motion. The issues that have been raised are serious and of the utmost importance, and they deserve to be considered in the context of that inquiry.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo. I support the motion, and I thank Alex Attwood for securing the debate.

Many Members will recall that Sinn Féin secured an Adjournment debate on this very subject last year, when the issue became a source of considerable controversy in my constituency in Derry. At that time, it emerged that a local consortium of training organisations had lost out on a vital tender to deliver the Steps to Work programme in Derry. The consortium had been providing that training for years, and it was stunned when the contract went to an English firm. That happened despite the well-grounded fears that the successful company had neither the capacity nor the proven track record to deliver such a service. Sinn Féin challenged the Minister about that decision directly, and its representatives on the Committee for Employment and Learning challenged departmental officials. Indeed, I acknowledge that the Committee Chairperson, Sue Ramsey, raised the matter

first. Eventually, the decision was overturned, but Raymond McCartney and I warned that that pattern would be repeated throughout the North, and we called for a review of the procurement process that allowed that to happen.

We were determined that the same thing would not happen again, and we tried our best to avoid a repeat of the fiasco by raising our concerns when another major contract to provide training for mechanics was awarded to the Carter and Carter Group, another English firm. At that time, it was clear that the Carter and Carter Group lacked the capacity to deliver, and it was in severe financial difficulties. Sinn Féin vigorously opposed the decision to entrust the Carter and Carter Group with training our young people. Fortunately, the decision was overturned eventually, and, shortly afterwards, the Carter and Carter Group collapsed. However, both those examples show that there is something wrong with a procurement process that allowed such appointments to be made in the first instance.

I acknowledge that Alex Attwood, along with Raymond McCartney, Sue Ramsey and me, has been highlighting and challenging the Steps to Work debacle. It is hoped that this debate can assist the process of instituting the type of inquiry that is needed, and I acknowledge that work by the Committee for Finance and Personnel is ongoing.

The tendering process relating to such contracts should be carried out in an open, transparent and fair manner, and the standard of service that we are aiming to deliver at the other end should be central to the process. We are not talking only about numbers on a balance sheet; contracts should not go simply to whoever is cheapest. In many cases, the successful bidder will be entrusted with training our young people for the workforce. They will be creating tradesmen and tradeswomen for the future. We may be in a recession now, but that will not always be the case; today's young people will rebuild our economy. Those young people deserve the chance to gain first-class skills and training, and their well-being should not be placed in the hands of organisations that are unfit for purpose.

The Department for Employment and Learning has been providing training for years. I am aware that the Minister for Employment and Learning is not in the Chamber, but, given the debacle that I have outlined, it may well be time that he went back to the classroom. Tá sé thar am ag an Aire gabháil arais go dtí an seomra ranga.

Mr Shannon: I wonder whether it was necessary to have today's debate, and other Members have touched on that point. I understand that the motion was tabled some time ago, so perhaps that is why the debate is being held.

Members are aware of the worthy goals that are set out in the Steps to Work programme. Everyone would and could hang their hats on the process and on the objectives that it sets out to deliver. It aims to assist people who depend on benefits to get by, and, importantly, it sets out to help people who have disabilities and those who are in need of therapeutic employment but who, in some cases, are restricted in what they are able to do by health problems.

I had questions about the scheme and whether it could deliver. Although its goals were admirable, I felt that many people were unable to work and felt pressed to return to work when, emotionally and physically, they were not ready for that step. Aside from that concern, however, has the scheme delivered? Has the procurement process succeeded in doing what it set out to do? I am not sure whether that has been clarified to its full extent. Perhaps the Committee will consider those questions in the future.

I am concerned about community groups and their involvement, as is my colleague Robin Newton, who mentioned his concerns in his contribution. Many questions must be asked about the tendering process. Some of those questions appear in Members' information packs. Members have already tabled questions for oral and written answer, and Members have asked other questions during today's debate. Among those questions are: how was the tendering process carried out; was it done fairly; was it transparent; and did it deliver? The Committee will be able to answer those questions, and, ultimately, the Minister should take on board those answers.

Members who wear another hat — as I do on Ards Borough Council — are aware of the tendering process. Regardless of whether a tender is 10 minutes or 10 days late, it is late. If a tender does not adhere to the criteria, it is outside the guidelines; it is as simple as that. In the case of the Steps to Work programme, it is a pity that the procurement process has thrown up many questions and that a golden opportunity to help people with disabilities and on benefits to get into work has not been fully realised.

Cud a' jist pae tribuet tae tha woarkers en staf at tha Sooth Eastern Reginal Coelege in tha Airdes, fer ther help in takin fort tha Steps tae Woark skeem? They er baith profesinal an aproachabal an caun still mak shair that tha skeem is delivered.

I pay tribute to the staff at the South Eastern Regional College in Ards for their help in delivering the Steps to Work programme in that area. They were and are always professional and approachable and can still ensure that the scheme can deliver.

Lots of questions have to be asked, and they are significant enough to place a large question mark over how the tender process was put together and, importantly,

how the procurement process was introduced. However, I urge caution. I understand that an inquiry, as other Members said, has already been started by the Committee, and action is taking place. I feel that that inquiry will ask the questions and get the answers. We should let that process run its course and deliver its conclusion first.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: In listening to the debate, I cannot help but wonder what the point is in bringing it to the House at this time. In view of the fact that an inquiry is ongoing and the fact that a very good programme is working very well for young people, the motion should not have been brought to the House today.

We in the Ulster Unionist Party are proud to be behind the Steps to Work programme and to have delivered it for Northern Ireland. It may have its problems and face some difficulties, but, at the present time, we should consider the effect that such a debate will have on the young people who are involved in the programme. What confidence are we in this House giving to them today?

The programme provides much-needed help and support for those who are unemployed, and it provides access to an experienced adviser to guide them through the process of returning to work. It also provides them with access to training courses and programmes that will improve their skills base and employability. Furthermore, it provides them with a small but vital financial aid during their period of unemployment. Are we giving them confidence today as they work through this phase of their lives?

Some of the contractors who have been engaged with the programme are from the private sector, and, as we have just been told, at least one contract was awarded to a college. Many contractors provide support and training through a period of unemployment to those who need it. As far as I understand, the private-sector companies have excellent track records of providing similar services in other parts of the world. Why, then, are we today questioning work that is already going to be examined and that, at present, seems to be developing well?

The issue of the procurement process has been pushed before and rightly so. There should be transparency and openness. The Committee for Finance and Personnel is investigating the public procurement process, and that inquiry will surely fulfil the needs of the motion. Why then, are we debating it today?

It is worth noting that the Steps to Work procurement exercise was conducted by DFP in line with public procurement policy that was adopted by the Executive in 2002. It is a good procurement policy, and it serves taxpayers well. As far as I can tell, it has done nothing but a good job. The contracts that were awarded for the delivery of the Steps to Work programme have been in

operation for some months now, and by all accounts, they seem to be working satisfactorily.

The motion is largely superfluous. As I said, the Committee for Finance and Personnel is already conducting an inquiry, which will identify and seek to resolve any issues that exist.

I am afraid that I cannot support the motion.

1.45 pm

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Member for proposing the motion. There may not be consensus on the wording of the motion, but most Members have talked about the difficulties, problems and concerns, not just with the Steps to Work programme, but with procurement in general. One thing is certain; it is in the public interest that Members have an opportunity to discuss and highlight the issues and ensure that, where there are difficulties, Ministers make the changes necessary to improve performance.

I want to reiterate some of the points that Mr Attwood has, rightly, introduced. There are concerns about the potential for suboptimal delivery were a Steps to Work contract to be awarded to a company that, on paper, has a good track record of delivery but has no experience, track record or presence here. Suboptimal delivery will mean a raw deal — not a good deal — for the unemployed, who are entitled to high-quality, work-related training.

Will the Minister assure Members that all companies that have been awarded the Steps to Work contract are able to deliver, particularly those that have little physical presence here? Most Members have alluded to the fact that such companies have minimal experience of and no relevant contact with Northern Ireland.

Another concern is that competent Northern Irish organisations with a track record in the management and delivery of training are failing to win contracts. That should be a concern to all Members. Small companies here are, typically, smaller than their British and European counterparts. That has its advantages and disadvantages. However, it is important that those companies are strategically placed to win contracts. If the failure of Northern Irish organisations to win contracts is reflected across a range of Government procurement activities, which I suspect it is, we need to look at the way in which various Departments work, particularly with Invest Northern Ireland, to ensure that local companies are better prepared.

Given that local companies have lost out considerably, there seems to be something badly wrong with the criteria, the process or the preparation. Many local companies are second- or third-tier subcontractors, which means that the opportunity to reap the multiplier effect as regards Government spending is lost.

Will the Minister outline how his Department works with Invest Northern Ireland to ensure that as many outsourcing contracts as possible are won by local companies? How much of the value in total contracts is being captured by local companies?

My final concern relates to my constituency. Martina Anderson has already mentioned the fact that the final award of a contract in Derry was to Rutledge Joblink and that that has been put on hold because of the objection of a locally based organisation. The Minister may not know about that, but I am sure that officials from the Department for Employment and Learning could inform him about it. The delay in implementing the contract is disadvantaging unemployed people in the Derry area. I have spoken to representatives from a range of professional, community-based organisations that currently deliver the New Deal programme and are keen to deliver the Steps to Work programme. Will the Minister shed light on the process and outline when a final decision on the contract will be made?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Although I wish to contribute to the debate as Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I should, at the outset, point out that my Committee has not had an opportunity to consider the proposal, nor has the Committee been briefed on the Steps to Work programme, which falls, primarily, within the remit of the Committee for Employment and Learning.

Members of the Committee for Finance and Personnel will have noted that the Committee for Employment and Learning has already raised concerns about the procurement exercise for the Steps to Work programme. Those concerns were referred to in a submission that the Committee for Employment and Learning made to my Committee's ongoing inquiry into public procurement policy and practice.

The Committee for Employment and Learning, as well as highlighting its concerns with the process around the tendering and awarding of contracts for the Steps to Work programme, suggested that my Committee's inquiry might also consider measures to ameliorate the situation whereby EU competition rules create circumstances in which an organisation can bid for contracts in areas in which it has no proven infrastructure or record of provision. That has been referred to already, when Mr Attwood proposed the motion.

The Finance and Personnel Committee's ongoing inquiry is strategic in nature and aims to make recommendations to the Department of Finance and Personnel for improvements to public procurement policies and processes for the purpose of increasing

access to opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises and social economy enterprises. It also aims to maximise the economic and social benefits for the local community, while taking account of the principles that govern public procurement.

The inquiry will also consider the nature, extent and application of social clauses in public contracts. The Committee has received 33 written responses to its inquiry, including a response from the Committee for Employment and Learning. The Committee is due to begin its consideration of those responses when it meets this Wednesday, with a view to calling witnesses to present oral evidence.

Importantly, to supplement the oral and written evidence received during the inquiry, the Committee will commission external specialists to conduct primary research into the end-user experience of local SMEs and social enterprise committees in tendering for and delivering public contracts.

Given the wide scope and the strategic focus of the inquiry, it is unlikely that the procurement processes for individual contracts will be examined in great detail. That is not an issue that falls to the Minister or the Department that my Committee scrutinises. However, my Committee is likely to wish to include consideration of the general concern around the difficulties that EU competition rules create for local SMEs and social economy enterprises, or — this may be more relevant — the interpretation that the Central Procurement Directorate and others may apply to those rules and the steps that can be taken to address those issues.

Without wishing to pre-empt the Committee's forthcoming considerations, I anticipate that the ongoing inquiry by the Committee for Finance and Personnel is likely to cover the general points of concern that have been identified already by the Committee for Employment and Learning.

Speaking on behalf of my party, I too wondered why the motion was being brought forward at this stage, given the inquiry that my Committee is involved in. I remind the Member of the provisions of Standing Order 64, which provides the two Committees with the procedural option of working together more closely and formally on that issue or related issues of joint concern should that prove necessary in future. However, the Assembly can support the general principles of the motion, because it draws attention to important concerns.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): As Members who have taken part in the debate are aware, Steps to Work is a new programme that has replaced the Department for Employment and Learning's New Deal programme, and it offers support

services to assist the long-term unemployed to gain employment.

To remind Members of the background to the programme, the Department for Employment and Learning established a working group in January 2007 to review alternative contractual models to the model used by the New Deal programme and to recommend a model to deliver Steps to Work. One objective of that review was to recommend a contractual model and procurement strategy that would reduce the number of contracts and service providers that the Department was required to manage and that would have more effective legal control of the contracts for the Steps to Work programme and an efficient mechanism for monitoring and managing those.

The review recommended a prime-contractor model. Prime contracting is a model that is recommended by the Office of Government Commerce for managing large supply chains, for example, in construction contracts, which require input from specialist contractors. It removes the burden of unnecessary bureaucracy from subcontractors, permitting them to focus on delivering outputs.

It is recognised by the Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply as a model of best practice procurement that can generate significant efficiencies in the supply chain, which is extremely important in our current economic climate. Therefore, most people will welcome and endorse the application of modern procurement techniques to deliver best value for money and assist Departments in achieving efficiency savings in their procurement expenditure.

As some Members have highlighted, public procurement processes are guided by the principles of the Northern Ireland public procurement policy, which was established by the Executive in May 2002. Public procurement processes are also regulated by European Union procurement laws. The majority of public procurement is carried out by centres of procurement expertise to ensure that the principles are effectively embedded in procurement processes. In the current straitened times, I am sure that the Assembly will be especially pleased to hear that that has resulted in value-for-money savings of £250 million over the last three years. That is a very significant amount of money in the context of public expenditure.

The procurement of the Steps to Work programme was managed by the Central Procurement Directorate. It is one of the recognised centres of procurement expertise and applies the appropriate policies and procedures. The key principles of public procurement are fairness, transparency, non-discrimination and competitive supply. CPD endeavours to ensure that all procurement processes utilise best practice techniques to satisfy those principles.

The procurement process for the Steps to Work programme was a competitive tendering exercise. It is Government policy that goods, services and works should be acquired through competition unless there are convincing reasons to the contrary. Competition promotes economy, efficiency and effectiveness in public expenditure, and it is a very important and useful means of ensuring that the market is fully tested. Procurement through competition remains the best way of achieving best value for money, and it assists in demonstrating transparency and integrity.

The principle of transparency relates to the clarity and openness of the procurement process and not directly to what is being procured or who is supplying it. In short, transparency in public procurement is intended to ensure that there is no unnecessary secrecy or lack of openness. To ensure that the procurement process for Steps to Work satisfied the concept of transparency, a series of market-sounding information events were held in Belfast, Armagh and Limavady. Interested organisations were briefed on the content of the new programme and given an overview of the proposed contractual model and the procurement process prior to the publication of the invitation to tender.

The invitation to tender clearly defined the contract objectives, requirements and outputs and stated the evaluation criteria. Those criteria were predetermined by representatives from the Department for Employment and Learning who have experience and expertise in the delivery of the programme. All tenderers were notified of the outcome of evaluations promptly, and, within the bounds of commercial confidentiality, they were offered the opportunity of a debriefing on the outcome of the tendering process. That informed the suppliers of the relative merits and demerits of their tender offer and will help to facilitate better performance in future competitions.

CPD advised the Department for Employment and Learning throughout the development of the invitation to tender, which ensured that the requirements of the tender would promote fairness in the competition and would not result in unnecessary restrictions to potential suppliers, particularly new market entrants, which is very important in the context of the EU procurement laws. A total of 17 tender offers were received, and those were assessed against the published criteria by a representative panel from the Department for Employment and Learning with the necessary knowledge and experience of the programme to identify the offers that demonstrated best value for money. The panel was advised by representatives of CPD to ensure that the principles of fairness, transparency and non-discrimination were maintained.

All tenderers were notified of the outcome at the conclusion of the evaluation processes. In line with the recommendations of the Committee for Employment

and Learning, the preferred bidders were only issued with formal contract awards following confirmation from the bidders that formal agreements were in place with all their proposed subcontractors. The procurement process in the Foyle area is ongoing, but contracts have been awarded in nine out of 10 areas, and CPD has been advised that the service is being delivered satisfactorily.

It should be noted that, as other Members have stated, public procurement is regulated by EU law. Those laws state that the courts are the appropriate mechanism for a review of a procurement process in regard to non-compliance with the procedures laid down by law. The courts are where bidders who feel aggrieved at their treatment in the procurement process should go. Therefore, the Assembly's review of the conduct of the procurement process should look primarily at any perceived failure in the delivery of best value for money in accordance with the principles of the Northern Ireland public procurement policy.

This has been already mentioned on a number of occasions, but I know that the Committee for Finance and Personnel is engaged in important and valuable work in that area, and we look forward to the outcome of that work.

2.00 pm

Specific issues were raised in the debate. Mr Ramsey asked about the current state of play in Foyle. As he is aware, a contract is yet to be awarded for there, so, until that procurement process has been concluded, I am unable to comment further. As I have always said when answering enquiries about live procurement exercises, be they in response to questions for written answer or oral answer, it is not possible for me, as a Minister, to comment.

Mr Attwood asked a number of questions about subcontracting. Officials from the Department for Employment and Learning made no stipulation that a prime contractor should provide a particular level of service. The contract model that the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) decided on was to engage directly with a prime contractor, who would then subcontract elements of service provision to maximise the range of services and choice to clients across contract areas. The prime contractor would also be contractually responsible for the management and maintenance of those subcontractors' performance. DEL's intention, under the Steps to Work contract, was to rationalise the supply base, which it has direct responsibility for managing and controlling. Under the previous set-up, DEL dealt with more than 100 contractors. Therefore, to improve the quality and consistency of service delivery across contract areas, that approach was adopted.

Mr Attwood asked how it was possible for a company that does not currently have a presence in Northern Ireland to be awarded a contract. As has been mentioned on a number of occasions, his party is probably the most enthusiastically in favour of the European Union, and all that flows from it. Therefore, I do not need to remind the Member that the principles of the single economic market are based on the free movement of services within the EU and that it is not legally permissible to require organisations to have a presence in the member state where services are to be delivered at the time of tendering, or to have previous experience of operating in that member state. Such action would be regarded as being discriminatory against tenderers from other member states.

Any contracts that were awarded to organisations not currently based in, or operating in, Northern Ireland were conditional, and they required their operation to be functioning before the contract's commencement date. Obviously, that situation could be remedied to ensure that we do not end up in the position about which some people have complained, but that would entail our signing up to a rather radical reform of policy that ran contrary to our membership of the European Union. I am interested to hear whether the SDLP wants to go down that line.

A number of Members, including Mr Hamilton, Mr McClarty and Mr Ramsey, raised the issues of general public procurement and of giving firms and companies equal access to contracts. We are committed to making unprecedented levels of capital and procurement investment. We have introduced a number of measures to assist local firms, including small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), to avail themselves of procurement opportunities. Those measures include the introduction of eSourcing NI, which is an electronic procurement portal.

Members should note that recent figures show that more than 95% of public-sector construction-works contracts in Northern Ireland are awarded to local firms, the majority of which are SMEs. That provides a significant boost to the local economy. When that figure is compared with equivalent figures in other United Kingdom devolved Administrations, indicative figures from Wales reveal that, historically, less than 50% of contracts are awarded to local firms. In Scotland, the equivalent figure is under 60%.

Those comparisons demonstrate the importance that I and the Executive place on local industry, companies and businesses, particularly SMEs, at this particular time. Over 95% of contracts in Northern Ireland are awarded to local companies, compared with 50% in Wales and 60% in Scotland. It is a matter of action and delivery, not talk. The actions that I have outlined speak louder than any words that could be uttered by Members in the House.

I am grateful to everyone who took part in the debate.

Mr Attwood: I welcome all the contributions to the debate. Although the motion is not intended to divide the House, I reaffirm the approach required of the Assembly to the Steps to Work contracts, and, I daresay, to others: to get to the bottom of the issues that have now arisen, an individual, dedicated inquiry must be conducted into what did, or did not, transpire. For several reasons, the Assembly should never foreclose on the option to examine particular contracts, because a dedicated examination can draw out the hard experience of procurement in the North.

I noted carefully the comments of the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, whose contribution was most helpful. However, he said that the ongoing review of procurement in the North is strategic, not specific. He confirmed that that is the case by saying that the examination of particular contracts is unlikely. Rather, there will be an interpretation of how the Central Procurement Directorate considers certain matters, and general points of concern will be raised.

However, the procurement policy in the North must be reconfigured to make it more fit for purpose and able to deliver all the objectives that everyone seeks to achieve. To do that, the particular points of concern about what happened during the Steps to Work procurement exercise must be examined and the specific lesson must be learned. Therefore, I am convinced that the model of a particular inquiry into Steps to Work is the way to proceed.

I say that particularly in response to the Minister's comments. His outlining of the processes and what happened, in general, during the procurement of Steps to Work was helpful. However, when one takes a step back from what the Minister said, one finds that he did not fully address the key questions. The current procurement process involves appointing prime contractors, because it is easier for the Government to work with them than with dozens, if not hundreds, of other contractors. However, once appointed, the policy of those prime contractors is to subcontract the work to other companies, some of which subcontract again. Is that sensible? Is that the intended purpose of the current procurement process?

The danger is that rather than creating a more efficient relationship, there is, ultimately, little or no relationship between the Government and a family of subcontractors. A potential consequence of how the process for Steps to Work was handled is the culture of the subcontracting of subcontractors, which defeats the purpose of the new procurement process and possibly creates a new mischief therein.

The Assembly should be telling people that a qualitative process of procurement operates in the North. Therefore, should a contractor with one member of staff and no accommodation in the North start to recruit two weeks before a contract goes live, because it would not otherwise be fit for purpose in time, such activity would stick out like a sore thumb.

I disagree with anyone in the Assembly, or in any training organisation in the North, who concludes that a procurement process is fit for purpose if it ends up with that outcome two weeks before people who are in desperate need of Steps to Work training can start. That is not to say that I oppose EU procurement proposals or that that model of procurement is not the right one. However, if we consider the qualitative assessment of whether that model achieves the desired outcome, how can we be satisfied that a process that means that an organisation that has one member of staff, no accommodation, and, on the day that it goes live, can be contacted only on one mobile phone number, will deliver what other Members referred to as training and support for people who desperately need it?

I am curious about one or two comments that have been made today. It surprises me that any member of the Committee for Employment and Learning would say that Steps to Work is working, given that seven months after it was introduced, we have received no qualitative proof that that is the case. I remind Rev Coulter that that is the situation. It is only this month that the independent inspectorate has begun to inspect how Steps to Work is being delivered. I hope that Rev Coulter and other Members are correct in saying that Steps to Work is being delivered and that the training is fit for purpose. However, no one can draw that conclusion today, because no one — not in the House, not in the Committee for Employment and Learning, not even the Minister — has been advised by either DEL officials or by the education inspectorate that that is the case.

Mr Ramsey was right to say that there is no consensus on the mechanism to deal with the issue. However, comments that were made by Mr Shannon, Mr Hamilton, Ms Anderson and Ms Lo — indeed, comments from Members across the Chamber — show that seven months after the Steps to Work contracts were awarded, collective and individual doubts remain. That is the reason that Mr McClarty was wrong to say that the Minister has answered all questions on the matter. If that is the case, why do so many Members have questions about what has happened with Steps to Work and about what has happened in the seven months since late September when the contracts were awarded? If, as Mr McClarty said, the Minister has dealt with the matter and there is to be an inquiry, why do we all have questions? The reason is that we do not

have proof that Steps to Work is working and that we know that specific issues remain unresolved.

I welcome the DFP review. I think that it will add to our understanding of procurement and improve procurement mechanisms in the North. However, if someone were to ask me whether I thought that that review will deal with the Steps to Work issue, I would say no. There are many reasons for that. One is that the inquiry, as the Committee Chairperson indicated, will not only not be able to look at particular contracts, but it will be stopped from looking at them because of the ongoing risk of legal challenges. Despite a series of letters to the Minister, a lot of my questions remain unanswered, because officials continue to advise the Minister that there is a risk of legal action on certain contracts.

Not only will the DFP review not deal with specific contracts, but, in my view, there is a culture in Government and in DEL that there may be a risk of legal action so we do not deal with stuff. To some degree that is understandable, but I think that that is wrong. There is a middle way. The middle way is to answer proper, challenging questions on specific contracts, and, if necessary, have an independent inquiry into those contracts, as well as the more global review that the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel outlined.

2.15 pm

I believe that that is the way to go, even if that is not the general feeling of the House, because — as much as any other reason — a few weeks after issues were raised about various contracts, a senior representative of a training organisation in the North came to my office with a person from a lobbying organisation and said that political pressure from the likes of me represented an attempt to undo a procurement process. Subsequently, I wrote to the chief executive of that lobbying organisation, who did not even acknowledge receipt of the letter. That speaks volumes about the attitude of some to the political authority that rightfully resides in this Building.

Question put and negatived.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

STEM Subjects

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

Mr Butler: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the decline in the number of students enrolling in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects; notes the commitment in the Programme for Government to increase by 25% the number of students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds at graduate and postgraduate level, studying STEM subjects by 2015; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to bring forward proposals to ensure this commitment is delivered.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá mé iontach sásta go bhfuil seans agam labhairt ar an tairiscint an-tábhachtach seo inniu.

This debate concerns the decline in the uptake of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects by students in recent years, how that decline can be reversed, and how the commitment in the Programme for Government to increase the number of students who study STEM subjects can be delivered.

International research shows that the decline in the uptake of STEM subjects is a problem that is far from exclusive to the North of Ireland. Although the education system plays a major role in the number of students who take STEM subjects, factors outside the education system have also influenced the decline of recent years. The global consensus is that enrolment for STEM subjects has been in decline for over a decade. Research from as early as the 1960s showed that one third of students made a decision on whether to study science subjects by the age of 12.

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

There are many reasons for the decline in the uptake of STEM subjects. Many of those who have researched the decline have seen the issue of why young people switch off from STEM subjects at an early age as a complex and multifaceted problem. Factors include: teaching qualifications; recruitment and retention; the content of the science curriculum; the way in which science is taught or assessed; the alleged difficulty of the physical sciences; influence that is exerted by the media, parents, student peer groups inside and outside school and career advisers; and the nature and extent of students' interaction with science, inside and outside school.

Bearing in mind the global challenges facing the economy, particularly in science- and technology-based industries, the place of STEM subjects in the education system has become increasingly important in recent years. However, that sits against the backdrop of a decline in the number of students who are choosing key STEM subjects, problems of teacher supply, a comparative lack of integration among the components of STEM, and a need to better develop the links among schools, further education and industry, particularly in respect of careers advice.

It is not only here that the decline in the uptake of STEM subjects impacts on the economy through the loss of a skilled workforce in the science and technology industries. Those problems are echoed throughout Europe and the USA. The opportunity exists for any country that can reverse that decline to gain a competitive advantage.

The Assembly must also be mindful of developing countries, particularly the so-called BRIC countries — Brazil, Russia, India and China — and the increase in their STEM education on a great scale, which is creating well-educated workforces that are capable of exploiting their low cost base.

That presents a substantial challenge to our efforts to attract science- and technology-based businesses into the economy. In particular, research has shown that developed countries do not place a high value on science and technology. By contrast, in developing countries, a STEM-related career is frequently considered by many people to be a route to life improvement.

I understand that the South of Ireland, Scotland and England have already set in motion strategies and policies to grow the STEM skills base in those countries. I also understand that a review of STEM subjects is being carried out here through partnership between the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education. Hopefully, the Minister will provide some indication of the contents of the review's report today. I welcome that.

It must be acknowledged that some positive steps have been taken to halt the decline of STEM subjects; for example, Queen's University's initiative to provide scholarships of £1,000 to students who apply to science courses. The initiative that has been taken by the Education Minister, Caitríona Ruane, to lift the cap on teacher-training places and to allow more teaching graduates to take up science courses is also welcome. The Stormont Executive have also given additional funding to both the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and the Department of Education to fund projects that are associated with STEM subjects.

Increasing the STEM skills base is imperative for economic growth. Unless more young people study the

various STEM subjects, there is a risk of a serious shortage of people who are qualified in those subjects at all levels in the workforce. That is particularly important in the present economic climate, where the focus and emphasis on training and skills has shifted to retention of existing jobs and to trying to survive the current recession. The Assembly must ensure that it trains and skills its way out of the present economic difficulties.

Last year, Martin Murphy, the head of the largest technology company here, Hewlett-Packard, warned that the North's ability to compete on the global stage and to attract overseas companies is being compromised by increasing skills shortages. Subjects such as maths, physics and chemistry are important to global companies such as Hewlett-Packard because they form the basis of careers in computing, IT, and engineering which are essential to their operations.

Certain perceptions of STEM subjects help to explain why people do not take them up. It is perceived that it is more difficult to obtain good grades in STEM subjects than in other subjects such as arts and humanities. Moreover, research shows that pupils do not perceive science subjects to be the passport to lucrative, interesting and glamorous jobs. Many young people also have a poor image of STEM subjects and place little value on their ability to get them safe jobs, with stable incomes and stimulating careers about which they can be passionate.

It is also considered possible that some degree of student reluctance to pursue careers in science and technology may lie as much outside the school environment, in wider society. There is a necessity for current role models who are young, normal, fun and scientifically literate. The transition from primary to post-primary school has also been seen as a negative experience for many pupils who want to take up science. Attention must be focused on demonstrating that STEM subjects are no more difficult than other subjects.

Negative views about success in STEM subjects have become associated with unacceptable stereotypes. The attitude that science is boring has led to a perception that people who enjoy or succeed in STEM subjects are, or might be, geeks and nerds. Those subjects are not considered funky.

Teachers are an important resource for STEM students who have to make study and career decisions. It is said that high-quality, inspirational teaching is the strongest influence on positive attitudes towards STEM subjects. However, research shows that many STEM teachers are not confident about acting as career guidance counsellors. Many career advisers have humanities or social science backgrounds, and some

research has shown that only 10% of career advisers have a science degree.

The media has been accused of characterising STEM subjects negatively and perpetuating stereotypes that highlight the alleged degree of difficulty associated with attaining good qualifications in a STEM subject. Parental influences can also affect student uptake. Such influences include parents' educational backgrounds, their occupations and their aspirations.

STEM subjects must be rebranded, re-imaged and re-imagined for the benefit of young people and students. We must alter the public image and perception of STEM subjects and use bold, creative and innovative design to compete with messages from the world outside school, in which young people prefer to dwell. The re-imaging of STEM subjects should target primary-school pupils, as that will enable us to address the matter before the decline in motivation and interest in STEM subjects takes hold.

The Executive's target to increase by 25% the number of STEM graduates and postgraduates by 2015 is very challenging, and would require an additional 1,600 students to enrol in such courses each year for the next seven years.

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

Mr Butler: That is a big task but, if we are to succeed, it must happen. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Post-Primary Transfer: NICCE

1. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister of Education what action she will take on the decision of the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education to introduce an academic test for the 2009-2010 post-primary transfer procedure. (AQO 2526/09)

Academic Selection: Catholic Sector

7. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Education for her response to the decision by the Catholic sector to end academic selection. (AQO 2532/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will answer questions 1 and 7 together. Question 1 is factually incorrect: the Commission for Catholic Education did not decide that an academic test should be introduced. In my answer, I will outline why that is the case, but I wish to make that point first.

Cuirim fáilte roimh an ráiteas a d'eisigh roinnt mhaith príomhoidí ó scoileanna Caitliceacha neamhroghnacha ar na mallaibh a thug tacaíocht ghlán shoiléir don treoir ar aistriú 2010 a d'fhoilsigh an Roinn.

I welcome much of the statement from the Commission for Catholic Education, which restates its opposition to academic selection at the age of 11 as a means of transferring to post-primary education, and I note the call for all schools in the Catholic sector to move to an alternative form of transfer. I welcome the commission's call for schools in the Catholic sector to follow the transfer 2010 guidance as fully as possible.

I note the commission's recognition of some of the risks involved in the operation of breakaway tests: the risk of discriminating against a child or groups of children; the risk of children having to sit multiple tests; and the risk of distorting the statutory curriculum. All of those risks and others can be avoided if the transfer 2010 guidance is complied with. Indeed, many educationalists have asked whether it is possible to operate breakaway tests without discriminating against children. That is a valid question.

I also welcome the recent statement issued by principals of non-selective Catholic schools offering

support for the transfer 2010 guidance produced by the Department of Education. I note in particular the comment:

"The availability to schools of the minister's admissions criteria makes testing superfluous and unnecessary. Our schools have no difficulty with such criteria, nor should any Catholic post-primary school".

I also highlight the opposition of the trade unions, including all teaching unions, to academic selection. Teaching staff should consider carefully the advice that their unions are providing in response to any pressure that may be applied to them to facilitate the testing of children by breakaway grammar schools.

Consultation on the recommendations contained in the transfer 2010 guidance ends today, with consultation on an equality impact assessment on the guidance continuing until 4 June 2009. After responses to those consultations have been considered carefully, a final version of the guidance will be produced.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for her response, although I do not accept much of its content. Does the Minister have even a modicum of pity for the northern bishops, given the predicament in which she has now placed them?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister of Education: The northern bishops are well able to speak for themselves, which they have done. As I said, I welcome the contribution that they have made in relation to the ending of academic selection. It is important that all schools follow the advice of the Catholic bishops, and, indeed, of the Catholic secondary schools.

I want to make the Assembly aware that many primary schools throughout the North of Ireland are very concerned at the attempts by some grammar schools to encourage primary schools to deviate from the curriculum. Last Friday, the primary-school principals of Newry and Mourne sent out a unified message in opposition to academic selection. There were more than 46 principals present at a meeting from which was issued a statement that the primary school principals of the Newry and Mourne area are opposed to academic selection.

Another important point made in that statement was:

"As our statutory legal duty is to deliver the Revised Curriculum, this prevents us from using teaching time or school resources to prepare for, or facilitate, any transfer tests. Deployment of staff and school resources will be for the Revised Curriculum only. If schools were to set aside the Revised Curriculum in order to prepare for tests, we would be failing in our statutory duty towards our children, notwithstanding the possible legal consequences."

That was the stated view of 46 principals in the Newry and Mourne area.

I am also aware that 37 school principals attended a meeting in Donaghmore on Friday 24 April and that

many primary-school principals in places such as Coleraine and Lisburn are standing up and being counted. They are making sure that the children whom they teach have the best possible access to the primary curriculum.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus go raibh maith agat, a Aire. Is the guidance on academic selection merely saying “at your own risk”?

The Minister of Education: No, it is not. The Department’s guidance does much more than that. It defines the aims and objectives for the whole process, which are clarity, robustness and equality. It communicates important changes in the law, recommends a menu of admissions criteria and defines and illustrates the recommended use of those criteria. It recommends key measures, including equality of access for those who are entitled to free school meals and those who are outlying applicants. It does not recommend academic admissions criteria but sets out, neutrally and factually, what constitutes responsible use of such criteria.

Leis seo a rá ar bhealach eile: is creat iomlán iontrálacha é an treoir; má chloítear léi, cinnteoidh sí soiléarthacht, láidreacht agus comhionannas sna hiontrálacha, agus ní bheidh aon chrannchur postcód ann.

In other words, the guidance is a complete framework for admissions. If the guidance is followed, it will ensure clarity, robustness and equality in admissions, and there will be no postcode lottery. For the first time in decades, there will be a fair admissions process for children transferring from primary to post-primary education.

Mr Poots: I note that the Minister did not take the opportunity to correct Ms Anderson’s incorrect question as she did after Mr McClarty’s question. I also note that the Minister — *[Interruption.]* Yes, I am asking a question, Ms Anderson. I also note that the Minister indicated that she welcomed most of the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education’s statement. I wish that she would welcome all of it. To do that, she will have to accept some form of testing for the next number of years, as the commission has recommended. As Minister of Education, will she continue to fly in the face of the commission and reject its views?

The Minister of Education: I am sure that the Commission for Catholic Education will be bemused by DUP support. I want to clarify some points, and I will read directly from the commission’s statement in case there is any lack of clarity or if some parties do not understand what it said. First, the commission:

“restates its position ... that the current system of academic selection at age eleven is no longer an appropriate way for children to transfer to Post-Primary school.”

The statement continues:

“All Catholic Post-Primary schools should give full consideration to the guidelines on admissions criteria issued by the Minister for Education on 2nd Feb 2009.”

Let us remember why there is no regulation. It is because the party opposite refuses even to discuss the issue at Executive meetings. The commission also states:

“In the absence of a regulated system of Post-Primary Transfer, the Commission accepts the view of the Working Group that an academic test may be appropriate in the short-term, particularly for those Post-Primary schools which are oversubscribed.”

However, there is a sting in the tail:

“Those Catholic schools which opt to make use of such testing should ensure these tests: Do not discriminate against any groups of children; Will avoid children having to sit a multiplicity of tests; Will be used for only a very limited period of time; Will not involve any distortion of the statutory KS1&2 curriculum and; Will focus on English and Mathematics”.

Anyone who is involved in education has to ask whether children can be put through high-stakes tests at the ages of 10 or 11 to determine entry into post-primary education without discriminating against them. I do not believe that we can do that.

Mr O’Loan: Does the Minister agree that, having failed to reach consensus on education reform, she has washed her hands of responsibility and walked away from the situation, leaving parents, teachers and pupils to pick up the pieces? Does she further agree that the Commission for Catholic Education’s decision to permit entrance examinations reflects that view?

The Minister of Education: There are 1,238 schools in our education system in the North of Ireland, including preschool units, primary schools and special schools, and I take seriously my responsibilities for every child in our education system.

The Member’s question has a very narrow focus. I will not continue with a system that supports only 40% of our children. We have an opportunity to ensure that every child has a fair chance and to get rid of inequalities in the education system once and for all. I note that the Member’s party claims to be against academic selection, and I welcome that, but I would like to hear more vocal support from that party for finally removing inequalities from our system.

I urge the Member to reread the Commission for Catholic Education’s statement and the statement from the Catholic post-primary-school principals, who have been clear in asserting that there should be full and unequivocal support for the Minister’s guidelines and that their full and immediate implementation should follow the consultation period in all Catholic post-primary schools.

If anyone thinks that the only people who are opposed to academic selection are from the Catholic sector, nothing could be further from the truth, as the Members opposite well know because many principals have made representations to them. I welcome the support from across the board to bring equality into the system. I noted Dawn Purvis's comments on the matter in the Chamber last week, which were very well made.

Post-Primary Transfer: Entrance Tests

2. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Education what advice she is giving to parents and teachers of Year 6 pupils who will sit entrance tests in an unregulated system. (AQO 2527/09)

Entry Criteria

10. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Education what assessment she has made of the impact on P5 and P6 pupils of schools opting to use examination as one of their entry criteria, in addition to the proposed 2010 guidelines. (AQO 2535/09)

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 2 and 10 together.

Léiríonn an treoir um aistriú 2010, a soláthraíodh chuig bunscoileanna, an measúnú atá déanta agam maidir leis an tionchar diúltach atá ag an aistriú acadúil iarbhunscoile ar eispéireas oideachasúil páistí iarbhunscoile.

The advice that I have provided to primary schools and parents in the form of the transfer 2010 guidance reflects my assessment of the distorting impact of academic post-primary transfer on the education experience of primary-school children. The guidance therefore seeks to support primary schools' delivery of the primary curriculum in the interests of children and parents. I have written to the parents of all P6 children to the same effect.

I met primary principals in Tyrone, where I was accompanied by Stanley Goudie, the chief inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate. One of the points that he was at pains to make to the principals was that primary schools represent a sector in their own right; they are not just a stepping stone to post-primary provision. The message to primary schools is that they should not be obliged or pressured in respect of post-primary schools' admission arrangements.

Primary schools understand that their role, as outlined in legislation, is to continue to provide an excellent primary curriculum to children. Their role is not to serve the narrow interests of the admission

arrangements of one group of post-primary schools. Teachers' unions are also providing that message to their members. For example, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) has advised its members against involvement in the administration, preparation, supervision or marking of entrance tests.

My message to parents is one of assurance that they have no need to put their child through an entrance test. The transfer 2010 guidance recommends that no school operate such a test. If all schools follow that guidance, all parents and children will be served by a fair system of transfer for the first time.

Mr B McCrea: The Minister may not favour selective transfer criteria, but she is selective in the facts that she states. She is selective in the people that she quotes and in the way in which she deals with the issue. She is, in fact, discriminatory, and is dealing unfairly with many people in our society.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member come to his question?

Mr B McCrea: What advice will she give parents who will be discriminated against by her free-school-meals criteria, as highlighted by the equality impact assessment that stated that 62% of pupils who are in receipt of free school meals are from the Catholic tradition —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I must insist that the Member come to his question.

Mr B McCrea: Only 29% of such pupils are from the Protestant tradition. She is sectarian, she is trying to divide us, and she will not succeed in destroying Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Education: The best way to deal with that rant is to look at the facts, which are not selective. There are 28 post-primary schools in Belfast: 12 grammar schools and 16 secondary schools. The 12 grammar schools educate 54% of the children attending the 28 schools. The 16 secondary school educate the remaining 46%; 3,010 of the desks in the 16 secondary schools are empty, an average of 188 empty desks per school.

2.45 pm

The Member claims to be interested in children who are entitled to free school meals and stated children: in the 16 secondary schools, 35% — one in three — are free-school-meal children, and 278 children are stated, which is an average of 17 per school. In the 12 grammar schools, 5% — one in 20 —

Mr B McCrea: Those are merely selected facts.

The Minister of Education: The Member does not even want to listen to the answer because he knows that he has no answer here. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The Minister has the Floor.

The Minister of Education: He has no answer. Let us deal with the issues that are before us, rather than pretending that they do not exist. In the 12 grammar schools, 5% of children — one in 20 — get free school meals, and 95 children are statemented.

I have the statistics here for Antrim, Armagh, Down, Derry, Tyrone and Fermanagh. We can pretend that there is not an issue and continue to act in the way in which the Member is acting, throwing out comments willy-nilly, or we can deal with the facts. I am going to deal with the facts, and I am not going to allow children to be discriminated against.

The Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that they must not interrupt the Minister when she is answering questions.

Mr Neeson: I want to clarify the role of the Alliance Party, which wants to see change and has tried to support the Minister over recent months in trying to bring about change. However, does the Minister not realise that what is being proposed at the moment has created a great lack of clarity about the future. The Alliance Party is opposed to long-term selection —

The Deputy Speaker: Does the Member have a question for the Minister?

Mr Neeson: Will the Minister accept the proposals that were put forward by my colleague Trevor Lunn to delay the changes for two years?

The Minister of Education: I welcome the fact that the Alliance Party is opposed to academic selection, and I would ask it to continue to work closely with my Department in bringing about the end of academic selection.

The Member talks about delaying the proposals. The 11-plus was brought in decades and decades ago. The people who are calling for delay are the people who are facilitating the minority who are trying to block change. There will be no delay, because we cannot continue to fail children in the numbers in which we are failing them. There are 12,000 leaving our schools every year without English and Maths GCSE, or Irish and Maths, depending on which subject they are studying. That is simply not acceptable. We have to look at other countries that are dealing with underachieving and how they are dealing with it. We have to look at the success stories — Finland, Poland and different countries that are bringing about changes for all children. I am not prepared to sit on my hands and continue to fail children.

My other point, which the Alliance Party knows, is that I brought forward compromise proposals. The two parties opposite refused to discuss them, refused even to put them on the Executive's agenda. That is how

much they cared about reaching consensus. They were mistaken in believing that they would block change or stop me and my Department from moving forward. That is not the case; we are moving forward. The proposals have been out for consultation, and we are now moving forward in the best interests of every child in the North of Ireland.

Mr McCausland: The Minister referred on a number of occasions to equality and inequality. When she appeared before the Committee for Education on 1 October 2008, she was asked to provide the Committee with examples of educational, social or sectoral inequality in the current system. Will she explain why, in spite of repeated correspondence and in spite of being asked at a subsequent meeting, she has failed, after six months, even to answer such a simple question? She talks about inequality, but she does not even know what she is talking about.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, if there is a question there, will you respond?

The Minister of Education: I do not think that there is a question there, but I will say that, after two years, I am still waiting for proposals to come from the Committee. That says it all.

Mr McCausland: You cannot answer the question. That is the problem.

The Minister of Education: There was no question.

Mr Molloy: Will the Minister clarify whether the Assembly's failure to bring about and agree new regulations will mean that children will have to sit a number of unregulated tests?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. Ní bheidh oiread agus aon teist amháin le déanamh ag aon pháiste, má chloíonn scoileanna leis an treoir.

No child needs to be forced to sit breakaway tests, and, if schools follow the guidance, no child will have to sit a test at the age of 10 or 11. That is what we are working towards. There is no educational case for a test, and international evidence is clear on that. Not only do many non-selective systems produce better results than are found here but international surveys regularly conclude that attainment gaps and extended underachievement are characteristics of selective systems. I ask all educationalists to join with us and be part of the dynamic change that is happening in our education system. This is about putting equality at the core of our system and ensuring that every child gets a fair chance.

Counselling Services in Schools

3. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Education what funding is provided to primary schools and

special schools for the provision of independent counselling services in schools. (AQO 2528/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá folláine agus leas mothúchán daltaí ina bpríomhthosaíocht agam. Tá tacaíocht ghairmiúil chomhairleoireachta ar fáil do gach duine óg in iarbhunscoileanna ó bhí 2007 ann.

The emotional health and well-being of pupils is a priority, and I know that it is a priority for the Member who asked the question. Access to free, professional counselling support has been available to all young people in post-primary schools since 2007. Young people may access the service through self-referral or school referral. The service is provided to 230 post-primary schools, all of which have access to half a day of counsellor time every week.

The service costs £1.8 million per annum. Last year, I secured an additional £2.5 million, with £1.7 million available in 2010-11, to allow us to begin to extend the programme to promote pupils' emotional health and well-being in the primary and special-education sectors. The expansion will focus on developing pupils' resilience and coping capacities, and it will include access to appropriate therapeutic interventions, which may include independent counselling support.

A study has been undertaken to determine the nature and level of need in our primary and special schools, as well as the interventions that are appropriate to the age and abilities of children and young people. The final report is expected to be delivered by the end of April 2009, and the results of the research will be used to inform a policy framework for appropriate support service development. Given all those factors, it may be necessary to look at a targeted support model, rather than one with universal access, as well as age-appropriate models for the younger children. I thank the Member for his question and for his interest in the matter.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for her answer. What is her interim assessment of the uptake of the service? Is it adequate? Does the Minister have any plans to increase the funding that is available, if possible, particularly to schools in marginalised areas where needs are extremely high? We are all aware that the demand for that type of support service in marginalised areas is high and may not be availed of as much as is possible.

The Minister of Education: I will reply to the Member in writing detailing the uptake. I agree with him that providing the funding is a very important intervention by the Department. The Department has completed a review of special needs and inclusion, and it is a very thorough piece of work. It is with the Executive but, to date, the party opposite has refused to allow it to be tabled, which could jeopardise £25 million of additional money that I have sought. It is very important that we get that funding and that we

get the policy on the table, because it is a very important policy. I urge all Members to support me in ensuring that that is put on the Executive's agenda.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister talked about the support that is available in post-primary schools, and I welcome that support. She also touched on the expansion of that support to primary schools. Why have special schools and primary schools been treated differently to date?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. A child's age and his or her ability to articulate and understand are key to any intervention. Therefore, therapeutic support must be tailored to the individual child. It must also be flexible, age-appropriate and suitable for the child's stage of development.

Primary and special schools can and do buy in counselling and other therapeutic supports, if they consider that children will benefit from them and to determine the most appropriate and tailored support for children given their age and ability. Research is being undertaken to determine the level of need in our primary and special schools, and the final report from that research is expected by the end of April 2009. Those results will be used to inform a policy framework for appropriate support-service development.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Portadown College

5. **Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Education whether she will agree to departmental officials visiting Portadown College to view and discuss the board of governors' preferred option of building the new college on its existing location. (AQO 2530/09)

The Minister of Education: Mar a dúirt mé le linn na díospóireachta atrátha faoi Portadown College — Coláiste Phort an Dúnáin — ar na mallaibh, tá níos mó obair á déanamh ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Deiscirt ar an mbreithmheas eacnamaíochta.

As I indicated during the recent Adjournment debate on Portadown College, the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) is undertaking further work on the economic appraisal. The SELB is remodelling the original preferred option to provide a replacement school, with a new technology block and sports hall to be built on the school's existing playing fields. It is essential that the appraisal principles are applied correctly and that the decision on how best to provide suitable accommodation for pupils at Portadown College is based on a robust business case. To that end, the appraisal must include and thoroughly assess a full

range of viable options, and I hope that that work will be concluded quickly.

In June 2007, departmental officials visited the school accompanied by officers from the SELB. They are familiar with the school site. Since then, officials met board officers in March 2009, and there will be a further meeting following receipt and consideration of the revised economic appraisal if necessary.

I am aware of the views of the board of governors on the preferred location for the new school, and those views have been reflected in the appraisal. However, it is the appraisal process that determines how best to approve suitable accommodation for current and future pupils of Portadown College.

Mr Simpson: Does the Minister agree that the alternative being put forward by the board of governors will provide far better options for safety, traffic flow, car parking and sporting excellence than the proposal currently on the table?

The Minister of Education: As I have said, there is a process in place. That process must run its course, and it would be inappropriate for me to comment on any of the options at this point.

Mrs D Kelly: Outstanding replacements and repairs that are needed in schools in Craigavon such as Craigavon Senior High School, St Michael's Grammar School and Tannaghmore Primary School and across the borough such as St Patrick's College in Banbridge. Will we have any assurance from the Minister that we will see any of the work commencing during this financial year? Furthermore, will she give us definitive dates for those works to be completed? Will she assure the House that it will not be the case that those who shout loudest get?

The Minister of Education: It is certainly not the case that those who shout loudest get: the Department has a capital build programme. I will write to the Member about all the schools that she has named, as it would not be appropriate for me to go into the detail of each of those processes at the moment.

Mr McLaughlin: The Minister has already alluded to the importance of the economic appraisal process. Will she explain why that process is taking so long?

The Minister of Education: Rinneadh roinnt leasuithe ar an mbreithmheas eacnamaíochta ó shin, agus shocraigh an bord ar chruinniú ar 4 Márta go ndéanfaidh siad níos mó obair air.

A newbuild for Portadown College was included in the new starts announcement of 1 March 2006, and the SELB indicated in April 2007 that it wished to pursue a fundamental change to the recommended option in the economic appraisal for Portadown College. In doing so, the SELB wished to take account of potential additional provision to be provided by the Sports

Council and DCAL. Indeed, Members have previously encouraged my Department to work with DCAL and other Departments when making provision. That is one of the reasons for the process taking so long.

3.00 pm

The economic appraisal has been revised several times. At a board meeting on 4 March 2009, an undertaking was given to complete some further work, including the consideration of a replacement school on the existing playing-field site. As I said earlier, the concern is to ensure that all parties involved prepare and agree a robust, defensible appraisal.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Queen's University/Stranmillis Merger

1. **Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he has informed Queen's University, Belfast and Stranmillis University College that a merger date of around September 2009 is not possible, and to outline their response. (AQO 2546/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I recall answering a very similar question last month.

Although I have not informed Queen's University or Stranmillis University College that a merger date of around September 2009 is not possible, I previously stated that I have made it clear to senior management at Queen's University and Stranmillis College that key steps must be taken before any merger is approved. Those steps include the Assembly's endorsement. The completion of all those steps, rather than any desired deadline, will determine the timetable for any proposed merger.

Given that we are now at the end of April and stages such as a public consultation have not yet begun, it is now my view that a merger by September 2009 is impossible.

Mrs Hanna: I thank the Minister for that response. With the outcome of the teacher-demand module not yet published, and given the concern around the proposal, will he assure me that he will take his time to ensure that the merger is subject to a very balanced, strategic, long-term assessment?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I have given that assurance to a number of Members, and I am happy to repeat it. The business case has arrived in my Department and is being dealt with there. It must go to the Department of Finance and Personnel, before returning to my Department for policy consideration. My Department must then take a view

on it, and we shall then discuss the business case with the Committee. After that, a consultation process must occur before legislation is introduced.

The Member knows that all those processes will be followed. I indicated that I will not seek accelerated passage for the legislation. The merger decision will take whatever time it takes, and we must make up our own minds on whether we believe the proposal to be viable, helpful and beneficial or whether we believe otherwise.

Mr Poots: If it is not to proceed by September 2009, will the Minister give a commitment to the House today to include St Mary's College in the merger in order to do away with the separate system that is currently in operation, thereby fully integrating third-level education?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department has reacted to a proposal that the board of Stranmillis College put to it, but it has received no proposal from the board of St Mary's College. Therefore, at present, we have nothing to which to react. However, I know that, with financial help from the Department, St Mary's is carrying out research on the way forward for the college. Of course, any proposals from the college will be treated exactly the same as the proposal we received from Stranmillis College.

Mr K Robinson: Would a delay beyond the speculative start date of the 2009-2010 academic year have financial implications for either Queen's University or Stranmillis College? Moreover, given the outstanding and unique site that Stranmillis College occupies, and its proximity to Belfast city centre, what safeguards would be put in place to ensure no disposal of land or property takes place that might be against the public interest?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I assure the Member that, should Stranmillis College cease to exist, any land that it currently owns will be under the control of the House and the Department. Members have written and spoken to me about that matter, which is obviously of great concern, because the land bank is very significant. There are no circumstances in which we would not have control. Legislation is required to dissolve the college, at which point we have the authority and the power to intervene specifically on the land issue.

As far as financial implications are concerned, I introduced conversion funding for the colleges last year. I promised that that would apply in the next academic year, so I do not anticipate that any additional financial difficulties will arise from a delay in that process. As I have said on a number of occasions, it will take as long as it takes.

Global Downturn: Employment Services

2. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what additional employment services will be made available to address the large number of workers recently made redundant due to the global downturn. (AQO 2547/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department is increasing capacity in the employment service to allow it to cope with the effects of the economic downturn. In order to meet demand, 130 additional front line staff are being recruited, and, where appropriate, jobs and benefits offices are working overtime. Workers who have recently been made redundant are eligible for entry into Steps to Work, the Department's main employment programme. Arrangements have been made to allow apprentices in the construction, motor vehicle and engineering sectors to complete their training if they are made redundant. Redundancy services and job clinics are available for companies that are affected by the downturn. We will continue to monitor the situation to identify any additional measures that may be appropriate to meet rapidly changing circumstances.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. Will he inform us whether his Department, perhaps in conjunction with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, has given any consideration to resurrecting Enterprise Ulster or the Action for Community Employment (ACE) scheme? Those were very fruitful, and they did a tremendous job in the community. Such schemes would give the ever-increasing number of unemployed people the opportunity for a fresh start.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member will be aware that Enterprise Ulster was wound up in the past few years and that the ACE programme operated very effectively for quite some time. All forms of assistance are being considered. I recently met the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Together with her officials and Invest NI, she and I are working on proposals that will bring direct help to companies and employees who are being put on short time or are being threatened with immediate redundancy. Our focus is on bringing forward such proposals, and we hope to do so within the next few weeks.

We are moving into a very changing situation, so all options have to be considered. We have regard to what is happening in other parts of the United Kingdom and further afield. Setting up bodies is a time-consuming exercise because, for instance, one has to consider the legal basis on which they would operate. People want as quick a response as possible, and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I are focused on those areas.

Mr Ross: The Minister will be aware that many of those who have recently been made redundant are from F G Wilson in Larne, and many of them are welders. He may not be aware that welders need to be coded every six months. For welders who are in jobs, their employers do that; however, those who are out of work for up to six months need to be coded independently. A number of people have come to see me because they have had difficulty in finding anywhere in Northern Ireland to get coded; they have, therefore, had to pay out of their own pockets to travel to GB to get that done. Employers are also finding it difficult to find local people who have the relevant certificate.

I have written to the Minister about the matter. Could he use his Department's offices to ensure that there are places in Northern Ireland where welders who are out of work can get the necessary coding?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am aware of the issue with regard to welders, and I will shortly write to the Member in that regard. There is no doubt that F G Wilson, and other companies that we would have regarded as blue-chip, have been under enormous pressure. As the Member knows, there has been a series of layoffs and pay-offs over the past six or nine months.

I appreciate the point that the Member makes. If it is clear to the employment service that a particular piece of training is likely to lead to an individual finding a job for which there is a need, there is no doubt that advisers will be very flexible in the offers that they can make.

I will have to be absolutely clear that the qualification process for coding is adequate. However, I will contact the Member about that in due course.

Mr B McCrea: What is the Department's assessment of the success to date of the Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS) programme?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As the Member will know, that programme operates in a number of areas already, and there is a wide range of provision. The Steps to Work programme is our primary tool, and as well as LEMIS, we have the Pathways to Work scheme for those who were on incapacity benefits. Given that some of the projects are pilot schemes, there are early signs of positive responses in areas where the schemes have to reach those who are far away from the labour market.

LEMIS operates in north and west Belfast, Londonderry and Strabane, and it targets long-term unemployed people who are far away from the labour market. In 2008-09, it exceeded its job-outcome target by just over 12%, which equates to 449 confirmed job outcomes for clients against a target of 400. That was achieved against a background of rapidly rising unemployment. Therefore, we are confident at this stage that the system is working. However, it will have

to be monitored over a longer period of time, after which the next challenge will be to assess whether to extend it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Redundancies in Small Manufacturing Companies

4. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assistance he is making available to persons recently made redundant from small manufacturing companies in the current global downturn. (AQO 2549/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: We offer those who face redundancy or who have been made redundant recently, including those in small manufacturing companies, the opportunity to avail themselves of redundancy clinics on the company's premises, where that provision is available. With partner organisations, including the Social Security Agency, Invest Northern Ireland, local enterprise agencies and further education colleges, we provide information, advice and support to assist workers to find alternative employment or to access retraining or upskilling.

In addition, on Monday 6 April, I met with Minister Foster to discuss what assistance our respective Departments could provide, and, with the aim of offsetting the need for redundancies, I am considering actively proposals to encourage employers to provide training for people who have been placed on short-term working.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for his response. I am very much aware of the co-operation that exists between his and other Departments. To what extent are the regional colleges providing courses and training for people who have, unfortunately, been made unemployed?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am pleased to say that there has been a positive response from the regional colleges. Many of them have drawn up option menus that are specifically related to their local areas. Through those option menus, people, particularly those on short-time working, can avail themselves of opportunities to attend courses when they would otherwise be at work.

Each college has drawn up its own proposals, and I have no doubt that the colleges will play a major role in implementing the proposals that Minister Foster and I are considering. For example, they are able to provide on-site services to individual employers. Therefore, they are resources that we are glad to have. We appreciate the work that they do, and now that the industrial dispute in the colleges has been settled, I am confident

that they will be able to concentrate their efforts where they are needed at this time, which is on doing what we can to upskill our workforce in the hope that we can take advantage of the upturn when it comes.

3.15 pm

Mr Cree: Will the Minister confirm that a special package of assistance is being provided to unemployed people who want to start their own business?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Such a system is in operation. The Member will be aware that Invest NI has successfully promoted its Go For It campaign over recent years. As part of the Steps to Work programme, the Department provides help in compiling a business plan, the support of a business adviser and business training at a local enterprise agency. That provision operates through Invest NI's Go For It campaign.

After receipt of that assistance, individuals who wish to start their own business may test trade for a period of up to 26 weeks, while receiving a weekly allowance from the Department and continued support from a business adviser. Therefore, if an individual decides to set up his or her own business, he or she will have at least six months in which to see whether it works. During that time, the Department will continue to support the individual financially. If that does not work out, we will have to go back to the drawing board and look at how such people can be assisted.

Therefore, there is a six-month period in which people can test out a business and during which they will receive an allowance and the continued support of a business adviser.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. A number of small manufacturing companies have gone out of business, or are in the process of doing so, in my constituency. Off the top of my head, I can think of one company that has reduced its workforce from 30 to two. That workforce comprised a mix of people who now require retraining, and they range from those who have 10 to 15 years experience to apprentices.

What assistance can the Minister provide to companies that are making staff redundant in such vast numbers to ensure that we will have a skilled workforce in place and that people will be trained and ready to go back into business when the good times return? Perhaps some experienced members of the workforce will be able to go back into the manufacturing business and start again.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I are examining that area. We are looking at companies that have to lay off people or put them on short-time working, for instance. Mrs Foster and I are trying to find out whether we can develop a system whereby

people who are off work one or two days a week could be provided with training on the company premises by that company or by a training provider.

We want to find ways for my Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, through Invest NI, to help. We have had to work our way around state-aid issues, but I think that we have found a solution to that. We wish to discuss those issues with our Executive colleagues, and it is hoped that we will be in a position to bring forward firm proposals shortly.

Work is, therefore, at an advanced stage. We know that time is short and that people are under a lot of pressure, but it will be our aim to offer support to companies that it is believed have a viable future. However, an element of judgement will be required. If we have to use our discretion as to whether particular companies are helped, mistakes will be made and perhaps some companies that will be offered assistance will not make it through the recession. I am laying down that marker in case, at a later stage, someone informs us that a company that we helped has since failed.

There will be risks, but we have to balance those against the chances of losing the expertise and skill of a workforce, because it is important that our companies still exist when the recession is over. Therefore, I ask the Member to be patient for another few weeks until we bring forward our proposals, which it is hoped will make a positive contribution to assisting our manufacturing sector in particular.

Social Security Agency: Strategic Business Review

5. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he has had with the Minister for Social Development in relation to the proposed changes in social security offices under the strategic business review. (AQO 2550/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Minister for Social Development has kept me advised of the progress that is being made by the Social Security Agency on its strategic business review, because our Departments share and provide a range of joint work that is focused on employment and welfare services in the jobs and benefits offices. My Department will continue to provide services from all those offices.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his response. Given that the review's proposal is to encourage telephony and discourage face-to-face appointments, is he concerned that footfall in jobcentres may decrease?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I regret to say that there is no drop in footfall at the moment. I have so far recruited an additional 48

members of staff, out of a total of 130, to deal with the upsurge in applications and requests for advice.

The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) is not withdrawing its services from any of its offices. There are 35 offices, approximately 26 of which we share with the Social Security Agency, and a few jobcentres are stand alone. We have no proposals at this stage to depart from any of those sites.

Certain benefits, including the new employment and support allowance, are telephony based. However, they are benefit claims. We use face-to-face interviews and put people in touch with an adviser who can help them to seek additional training. We make our offerings in the centres as flexible as possible. A number of the measures regarding this issue that the Chancellor announced in his Budget speech have already been taken here. Indeed, some of the measures that were announced last week were measures that were scrapped, a number of them not more than a year ago. We did not go down that road. So, we already have most of the schemes.

I am confident that we will continue to provide a full service from all our jobcentres. The Minister for Social Development and I spoke just last weekend and are keeping in close touch on those matters. Clearly, the availability and accessibility of many jobcentres is important. We are also looking closely at one or two new sites to give us the option of moving, because in some cases the premises and their locations are unsatisfactory.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the Minister's answer. I also welcome the Minister for Social Development's announcement about the strategic business review and her assurance that there would be no job cuts and that staff will be treated properly when moving to other locations.

Will the Minister reassure the House that in no circumstances will there be a complete substitution for face-to-face contact between customers and officials? It is important to maintain that human contact, particularly with people who have difficulty in articulating their problems.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member made a number of important points. Telephony services have been introduced for a number of benefit applications. However, the Member has to understand that most of our main programmes are interview based. In the majority of cases, it is not possible to assess a client over the telephone, although that does not mean that there cannot be telephone contact. A programme such as Pathways to Work is built around six mandatory interviews.

In fact, we have been increasing the number of interviews required because we feel that it is the only way in which an adviser can make an assessment of an

individual client. We have no plans to substitute our service. By and large, is not possible for the service to be dealt with in the same way as an application for a benefit.

It is important that the client be able to speak to someone who can offer specific help, and because a benefit operates within certain legislative guidelines it is probably more suitable to telephony. Trying to assess a client's abilities — or lack of abilities — and what might be good for the client cannot, realistically, be done by telephone. Therefore, I can give the Member the assurances that he seeks.

Queen's University/Stranmillis Merger

6. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment he has made of the potential advantages of the merger between Queen's University, Belfast and Stranmillis University College. (AQO 2551/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As I have stated before, the proposed merger must go through a number of key steps prior to any merger being approved. The first stage is the approval of the economic appraisal. The appraisal will set out the advantages, as well as the drawbacks, of the proposed merger in both financial and non-financial terms. My officials are dealing with the appraisal at present, and I am not in a position to comment until that process is complete.

Mr Easton: Can the Minister reassure me that before any merger is considered fully he will address the inequalities between Protestants and Roman Catholics as regards the balance of those from the Roman Catholic community above those of the Protestant community who are being trained? Will he also give me an assurance that he will tackle the Catholic certificate of education, which is leading to inequality for Protestants who are trying to get jobs in primary schools?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I have told the House on a number of occasions that the merger will not be rushed. The Department will make an assessment and take into account all the issues, including those that the Member has raised with me on a number of occasions, both in person and in writing. It will then go to the Department of Finance and Personnel. If that Department approves the business case, it will come back to my Department for a policy discussion and approval. We will then have a discussion with the Committee. If, after public consultation, the Department decides to move to legislation, it will go through all the Stages in the House without accelerated passage.

The Member will have every opportunity to make his own judgement on any proposals that may emerge, and there will be a full legislative process. All of these matters will be addressed throughout the process. I know that the Member is concerned about balance issues, other Members have raised ethos issues with me, and so on. All of those matters will have to be taken into account in any assessment that I will make before I come to any conclusion.

Mr Gardiner: Will the Minister confirm that if the business case passes all its technical scrutinies in the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Finance, his ministerial judgement on the merit, or otherwise, of a merger will also allow for any factors that have changed since the summer of 2008, such as the University of Ulster's York Street proposals?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Several things have intervened since then; that has been one and the economic situation has been another. Universities, as with other institutions, are, to a large extent, governed by finance. We will have to make an assessment of all of those matters. It will be looked at comprehensively, and there will be an opportunity for Members to debate and discuss those matters fully if it reaches the legislative stage. Concerns can also be raised at the consultative stage. No opportunity will be lost to give people the opportunity to put their case.

3.30 pm

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Renewable Energy

1. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether steps will be taken to facilitate cross-border trade in renewable electricity; and if she intends to introduce a mechanism to allow subvention or inducements to be paid to renewable energy generators on a cross-border basis.

(AQO 2566/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I am conscious that the current subvention arrangements for renewables, here and in the Republic of Ireland, have the potential to limit the extent of cross-border trade in renewables. The incentive mechanism for indigenous renewable energy in Northern Ireland is the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO). In order to be eligible for support under the NIRO, renewable electricity must be produced and consumed in the region. I understand the same to be the case for the Republic of Ireland's

renewables support scheme, the renewable energy feed-in tariff (REFIT).

Any changes to the way in which renewable projects are considered for support to take account of the cross-border dimension would require the co-operation of the Governments in London and Dublin; would require legislation; and would have to take account of the legitimate expectations of existing generators who have strategic plans that are based on the certainty of the NIRO continuing. I have no plans to change the current arrangements.

Mr Attwood: The Minister and the Governments in London and Dublin should have plans to change the current arrangements for subventions. Given that the target is to generate 15% of our energy from renewables within 11 years, that we have an all-Ireland grid, and that there are proposals to strengthen that all-Ireland grid, is it not time that the current, mutually exclusive arrangements for subventions, North and South, are adjusted to create subventions that enable the North to take renewable energy from the South —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member ask a question, please?

Mr Attwood: — and vice versa? Does that not make sense? Is it not time to act in that way?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I hope that the Member will recognise that the NIRO has been very successful to date in reaching targets, and renewable energy generation has doubled since it was introduced in 2005. However, he is right to suggest that we need a much bigger contribution from a wider range of renewables for our overall energy strategy. That is one reason why we recently introduced the concept of banding to the NIRO; that will incentivise renewable energies that are, perhaps, not as in vogue as wind energy.

I listened to the Member's views on having a single mechanism for the whole island. However, that view was not expressed by the majority of consultees during the recent revision of the NIRO legislation. I understand where the Member is coming from when he makes such a suggestion: it sounds neat and attractive, but, frankly, we must think about those who have made investment decisions about renewables in Northern Ireland, and I do not want to send out a signal to investors that we will start chopping and changing the system. I simply will not allow that to happen.

We need more renewable energy. I will not allow anything to jeopardise potential investment, and, therefore, I reiterate my answer to the substantive question: I will not change the arrangements at present.

Mr Hamilton: The Minister will be aware of the many innovations and technological advances in the renewables sector in Northern Ireland, such as

movement on tidal-energy potential and compressed-air storage, among others. Will the Minister outline how reforms to the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation might better allow us to tap into the obvious renewable-energy potential that exists in Northern Ireland rather than obsessing about cross-border co-operation?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member will know that we brought in a banding system at, I think, the beginning of this month to deal with the wide range of renewables that are available, and he mentioned some of them. I hope that the banding support will give greater incentive to those less-developed technologies and that that will allow investors to see Northern Ireland as a good place to invest in such new technologies. We are talking about tidal, off-shore, and wind generation, as well as bio-energy. The Member mentioned compressed-air storage, and the old salt mines off the coast at Larne have been targeted as a site for that.

There is a high degree of consistency between all three UK obligations, and as well as sending out the signal that we will not chop and change, we must avoid the possibility of gaming between the obligations — between the countries of the United Kingdom. That is why I am satisfied that our policy is the right way forward, and that is why we are sticking to it.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Minister have any plans to harmonise the renewable obligation certificates in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland? Is she satisfied that the single electricity market is working to the benefit of domestic and commercial users in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I do not have any plans for harmonisation, because there are two different systems involved. One is a feed-in tariff, and the other is what we have here in the United Kingdom. We cannot harmonise the Northern Ireland renewables obligation certificate (NIROC) and the renewable energy feed-in tariff (REFIT), because it would be impossible, technologically, to do so.

The single electricity market is working well, and the first report from the regulators indicates how well it is working. However, I want to see more competition in that market as there is room for improvement in that regard. We need to concentrate on competitiveness in the single electricity market, and that is essentially what we are doing. We will consider competition when we look at our strategic energy framework, which, as Members will know, will be consulted on in the very near future.

Indigenous Industry: Funding

2. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether additional monies will be made available for grants, loans or loan guarantees for indigenous industry. (AQO 2567/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest Northern Ireland's budget is allocated to specific programmes, the outputs of which are designed to deliver the agency's corporate plan targets. Between its formation in April 2002 and March 2008, Invest Northern Ireland offered £399 million worth of assistance to locally-owned companies in support of developed projects compared to £347 million worth of assistance that it offered to externally-owned companies during the same period. Therefore, since Invest Northern Ireland's formation, approximately 53% of its assistance has been committed to locally-owned businesses.

A more detailed examination of the statistics shows that Invest Northern Ireland made 14,151 offers of assistance during that period, of which 12,928, or approximately 91%, were made to locally-owned businesses. That clearly shows that the vast majority of Invest Northern Ireland's time and work is targeted towards the indigenous business base.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does the Minister agree that, given the current economic climate, it is particularly important that viable companies do not go to the wall due to temporary cash-flow problems that have arisen as a result of the recession? Has her Department given any thought to reallocating moneys normally used to subvent overseas investment? Overseas investment is clearly not forthcoming, and those moneys could be reallocated to different budgets to provide loans, or loan guarantees, to small and medium-sized enterprises.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Member for his question, which follows on from an SDLP document that made some points about Invest Northern Ireland holding cash reserves. Invest Northern Ireland does not hold cash reserves, and it is not allowed to hold cash reserves. Invest Northern Ireland's general reserve balance consists mainly of the agency's long term investments in its client companies in the form of loans or shares. A requirement to distribute those reserves as per that SDLP document would, effectively, require Invest Northern Ireland to withdraw support from its client companies by calling in loans and liquidating investments. I am sure that that is not what the Member wants me, or Invest Northern Ireland, to do in the current circumstances.

The Member also asked what the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) is doing to bring schemes forward. If the Member was listening

earlier, he would have heard about the discussions that I continue to have with the Minister for Employment and Learning. We are very hopeful that we will be able to bring forward a package in the very near future. My Department is also looking for state-aid clearance for a working capital scheme, which we hope to have in place in the next couple of weeks.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister officially for a recent meeting that she had with me and representatives of Magherafelt and Cookstown district councils.

Will the Minister detail the work that Invest Northern Ireland is carrying out with businesses in the mid-Ulster area? As she knows, concerns were expressed at the meeting regarding the ongoing crisis faced in mid-Ulster.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: That meeting with Mr McCrea was very useful. It gave me and the Invest Northern Ireland team the opportunity to set out a number of initiatives that are operating currently, as well as some new ones that are designed to give financial support and practical advice to small and medium-sized businesses in the mid-Ulster area.

The Member knows that many firms in that area have availed themselves of the accelerated support fund. That support is still available and it is used by local firms. Mid-Ulster is an area of excellence in engineering and construction. The North Western Regional Office has delivered some specific programmes in the mid-Ulster area, including Construct for Growth, a pilot programme operating in the construction sector. It is holding a construction and engineering breakfast seminar in mid-June. It is also helping companies to look further afield for work. Recently, eight companies from the construction sector travelled to Paris to look for work.

A company from the Upper Bann constituency has obtained a construction contract for work going on at the Paint Hall in Belfast with some of the very successful investments that we had there recently, including 'Your Highness' from Universal Pictures and 'Game of Thrones' from HBO. There are opportunities; the challenge is finding them. I will continue to support Invest Northern Ireland as it seeks those opportunities for firms in mid-Ulster and elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Local enterprise centres play a vital role in supporting small and medium-sized enterprises and local businesses, which are the mainstay of our economy. Is the Minister satisfied that local enterprise centres are adequately funded or properly resourced to provide the necessary support?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Member for his question. I agree that the enterprise agencies and centres provide a good grounding for companies. On Friday past, I was pleased to open a new set of six workspaces in Clabby,

County Fermanagh, of which three have been let already. I am pleased to be attending the enterprise agencies' annual general meeting this Thursday, at which I hope to interface with many of the enterprise agencies and listen to the specific issues that they may want to raise with me.

As the Member knows, the Go For It programme went out to tender recently and the enterprise agencies were successful in that. I am pleased with that, and Invest Northern Ireland will continue to work with those enterprise agencies so that not only will the Go For It programme be successful, but those who have been through that will then go through the Growth programme and move on to become Invest Northern Ireland clients.

In the past, people entered the Go For It programme but there was not so much flow between that programme and Invest Northern Ireland. I do not want to see that happening; I want to see Invest Northern Ireland linked into the Go For It programme, so that companies can grow and have potential for export. I reiterate that, as the Member knows, I recognise the work that is done by local enterprise centres.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for her answer. Is the Minister aware that banks and major financial institutions continually change their policies as to how and when they give out loans? Farmers are finding it very difficult to get loans to purchase farm machinery so that they can upgrade, which is especially important coming into the harvest time.

Only today, I received a letter from agents who were turned down for a loan. The excuse given was the age of their machinery. Those agents have never missed a payment on a loan. Is the Minister aware of the difficulties faced by farmers in that situation?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am aware of the difficulties faced by small businesses, be they in the agricultural sector or other sectors. That is the reason that I and the First and the deputy First Ministers continue to meet the banks on a one-to-one basis.

We consider it important to present genuine cases to those banks, but to do that requires evidence. Previously in the House, I called for Members to provide evidence of alleged sharp practices that could be presented to the banks. I repeat that call, and if Members have issues with specific banks, they should bring the evidence to us, and we will take up the case with the banks concerned.

3.45 pm

Corporation Tax

3. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether there is a strategy and structure in place to take advantage of the 12.5% corporation tax in the Republic of Ireland, for the purposes of new industry, in areas located close to large centres of population in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 2568/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

In recent years, Invest Northern Ireland and IDA Ireland have co-operated, to their mutual benefit, on several activities. However, the pursuit of foreign direct investment (FDI) is one key aspect of the agencies' work in which they continue to be in direct competition.

It is also important to recognise that Invest NI and IDA Ireland have different propositions. The latter promotes Ireland's corporation tax rate, which appeals to major corporations that seek to neutralise and optimise their tax position, whereas Invest NI promotes Northern Ireland as a cost-competitive location that is close to, and culturally compatible with, its customers. The different propositions mean that IDA Ireland and Invest NI target different companies and may work in different sectors.

However, both agencies recognise the importance of co-operation when mutual benefit can be generated for the two jurisdictions. Co-operation is, therefore, directed at areas of common interest in the business-operating environment, such as communication, infrastructure, skills, legislative policy, business environment, and knowledge and research. The north-west business and technology zone (NWBTZ) is an excellent example of the approach in practice. It is a cross-border business and technology zone that harnesses the synergistic — Members should try saying that word — benefits of linking the educational research institutions, graduate pools, business clusters and enhanced property solutions in Londonderry and Letterkenny. All are linked by a high-specification telecommunications network.

The zone will ultimately enable the region to compete more favourably for, and to secure, value-added inward investment. When investors subsequently choose to locate in the zone, the population in the wider region, from both jurisdictions, will be able to take advantage of the opportunities created.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for her answer. She will be aware that, in the light of the recent shabby behaviour and ill-treatment of workers by companies such as Visteon and Nortel, most Members are trying to think creatively, perhaps even latterly, outside the

box. If a 12% corporation tax zone were to be set up in or near Belfast, the Assembly could make try to make some use of it. Inward-investment opportunities may be being lost because of the rate of corporation tax here. Is there any way in which we might piggyback that situation?

Is there a chance, through joint working, to create some leverage to persuade those companies that demand a corporation-tax rate of 12%, and will not come here without it, to locate on the border? Companies located in Buncrana, Monaghan and Dundalk will employ people from Derry, Enniskillen and Newry respectively. Does that suggestion provide an opportunity for the Assembly to work to find jobs that would compensate for the current drastic levels of redundancy?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

I thank the Member for making those points. I have no difficulty with his thinking laterally. As I said, the problem is that, in seeking FDI, there are two completely different propositions. Therefore, my Department is considering areas of co-operation, such as on infrastructure and the telecommunications network, which, as the Member knows, has been upgraded.

Only last week, significant FDI was secured from the Republic of Ireland. I am glad to be saying that in the week after it happened. We announced the creation of 77 new jobs with Intune Networks, a Dublin firm that decided to invest in the Linfield Industrial Estate in the Member's constituency of South Belfast. Eircom NI announced that its new headquarters will be situated in Forsythe House in the city centre, creating 30 new graduate jobs, with 30 more over the next 12 to 18 months.

Opportunities are being taken — this is a good, cost-competitive place to come. The two companies that announced last week that they were coming here were great advocates for investment in Northern Ireland. They spoke much better than I could on the subject. They talked about the level of skills, about the people and about why Northern Ireland is such a good place in which to do business. I am happy to tell the Member that we are securing FDI from the Republic of Ireland, and that we will continue to do so.

Mr McFarland: What discussion has the Minister had with her colleague the Finance Minister, and the Treasury in London, with a view to lowering corporation tax in Northern Ireland so that companies can improve their chances of surviving the present economic crisis?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

I do not know whether the Member knows of the Varney Report — he should have had the opportunity to read it by now. Over the past six months, I have had no discussions with the Minister of Finance and Personnel on that issue, because I am concentrating on

the issues that I referred to in my previous answer. It is a different proposition from that in the Republic of Ireland; we are looking at the cost-competitive nature of Northern Ireland, the value of our skills, the people that we have, and the fact that we have the youngest population per head in Europe. We are a very good proposition. I will not talk down the economy of Northern Ireland; there is much to be proud of. I wish that others would recognise that, stop talking down the economy and stop asking for handouts.

Tourism Signature Projects

4. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the total amount of funding that has been secured or allocated to the five tourism signature projects as outlined in the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's corporate plan. (AQO 2569/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The capital amount of £75.1 million that was allocated under the Programme for Government to the five tourism signature projects, as outlined in the final version of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's corporate plan, 2008-2011, is broken down as follows: the Titanic and maritime heritage signature project, £43.5 million; the Causeway Coast and glens signature project, £15 million — £9 million for the visitors' centre and £6 million for the Causeway coastal route; the Walled City signature project has an integrated development fund (IDF) allocation of £9.1 million; the Mourne signature project, £4 million; and St Patrick/Christian heritage signature project, £3.5 million.

Mr F McCann: Does the Minister not agree that it might be a mistake not to deal with the five projects as co-equal priorities, especially when it comes to eliminating regional disparities and dealing with socio-economic issues?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: If the Member is asking whether all the signature projects are equal, the answer is yes. However, I think that everybody accepts that they are starting from very different bases. We are trying to target the signature projects so that they will link into one another. Therefore, when visitors come to one signature project in Northern Ireland they will be signposted to other signature projects. We will continue to review the availability of more European funds, especially with the change in sterling and the euro. However, the Member must accept that those projects are starting from very different bases.

Mr P Ramsey: The Minister is fully aware of the importance that the Walled City signature project has in the city of Derry. She has visited on a number of occasions and has seen the sound investment that has taken place to preserve the built heritage. However, the

project is not finished, and there is quite a shortfall. We must ensure the preservation of the Apprentice Boys' Memorial Hall and the Long Tower precinct, and the continuation of the Free Derry second phase, the Free Derry museum. Are there departmental guidelines on how we can proceed to the next stage and, ultimately, ensure that all buildings within the Walled City are protected and invested in?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am glad that the Member reflected that I am a frequent flyer into Londonderry city. I appreciate the work that has been done on the Walled City signature project; it is a tremendous and unique project. I want to see it completed, and the rest of the buildings brought up to the level envisaged. As I say, the potential for further EU allocations for signature projects, including the Walled City, is kept under constant review, and I have asked the Department to have a look at that again. I am happy to come back to the Member, or any other Member, on that if he needs me to.

We have confirmed with the Department of Finance and Personnel that we propose to increase funding to phase 2 of the Walled City projects through the use of EU funding, and using IDF funding to match. We can do that because of the exchange rate. We want to do as much as we possibly can. The signature project in Londonderry is a jewel in the crown of the west, and we need to keep promoting it.

Mr Cree: I can certainly understand the importance of the signature projects. What funds will be available to encourage other novel projects that may be discovered during the timescale of the plan? How will the Northern Ireland Tourist Board react to new projects that could attract European investment with grants of up to 100%?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am not sure that many European investments are made with 100% grants. If any new or innovative proposals come forward, the Tourist Board will consider them. The Member will be aware that, in the near future, we are introducing an innovation fund, which will consider up to 50% funding for innovation grants. Therefore, if he has any projects in mind, he should bring them forward to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to see whether they are suitable for that fund.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Foreign Investment

6. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment she has made of the current level of interest in foreign companies investing in Northern Ireland. (AQO 2571/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

I reiterate that the significant economic pressures that are being faced are a global problem from which Northern Ireland is not immune. However, despite the substantial job losses that have been reported in the past few months and weeks, positive progress towards achieving the public service agreement targets has been made in the past financial year. In 2008-09, inward investment activity levels remained encouragingly high. Indeed, Members may have heard the positive investment announcement last week from Intune Networks, a telecoms company whose £9 million investment will create more than 70 jobs.

However, throughout the year, Invest Northern Ireland has also noted that economic and market conditions have prompted companies to tighten their belts and focus their efforts on cost containment. That has led to a number of companies deferring their investment decisions, and, as a result, the early stage pipeline of new foreign direct investment prospects is significantly reduced in comparison with the same point last year.

The project sale cycle for inward investment can take between 18 months and 24 months to complete. Invest Northern Ireland is confident that, in the medium to long term, Northern Ireland will continue to benefit from foreign direct investment in its key sectors, and we continue to do whatever possible to ensure that Northern Ireland is well placed to capitalise rapidly once market conditions improve.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for her response. The Minister indicated a high level of interest on the part of foreign companies. What is her Department doing to assist local companies such as the Almac Group in Craigavon and others to negotiate the current economic climate and to exploit new opportunities for expansion and investment?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

As the Member knows, the Almac Group is one of our stellar companies; the Department works with the company, and Invest Northern Ireland is a frequent visitor to its premises.

I recently had the opportunity to visit the Almac Group's new drug discovery centre, which it established in 2008 as an R&D centre to enable the group to develop its own novel pharmaceuticals, particularly for cancer, to complement the group's other service-oriented businesses. The total investment costs for that innovative R&D project were £13.1 million, and the project received assistance of £6.108 million from Invest Northern Ireland.

That project has the potential to transform the Almac Group radically, to create further new jobs and to enhance significantly the development of a knowledge-based economy in Northern Ireland. It does

a tremendous job, and pharmaceutical companies throughout Northern Ireland, which do work that largely goes unseen, do a fabulous job to give Northern Ireland a reputation of which everyone in the House should be proud.

Mr O'Loan: What industry segments has the Minister identified that will be suitable for growth after the recession? What steps are being taken to build the infrastructure and competencies that are appropriate to those segments?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The MATRIX panel — the science industry panel that works with Government, academia and industry — has identified sectors for me. It has identified the areas of cleantech, nanotechnology and high-technology areas of information and communication technology. Through Invest Northern Ireland, we are working well to attract those types of companies.

As I said, last week a further two investments were made in Northern Ireland. We will continue to target those sectors, as they bring high-quality jobs to Northern Ireland and will serve us well in the long term.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That ends Question Time. Members may take their ease for a moment before the next item of business, which is the private notice question.

4.00 pm

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

PRIVATE NOTICE QUESTION

Budget 2009-2010

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has received notice under Standing Order 20 of a private notice question to the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of the UK Budget, if he will present a revised, emergency Budget to the Assembly for 2009-2010 with an emphasis on measures to respond to the economic downturn.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): The net impact of the measures that were announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his Budget statement to Parliament on Wednesday 22 April 2009 is broadly neutral as regards the funding that is available to the Executive during the next two years, with Northern Ireland's share of additional efficiency savings being largely offset by increased Budget allocations.

Departmental budgets and the Northern Ireland Budget as a whole are kept under constant review. Indeed, they will soon be reviewed formally as part of the June monitoring round. That will be followed by further opportunities to amend spending plans for the current financial year in September, December and next February.

My Department must always be flexible and responsive to changing circumstances. The normal approach to managing the Budget provides a much more flexible and dynamic process than the one-off exercise that the Member seeks. For example, the process that I have outlined, which involves reviewing the position four times each year instead of just once, has identified adjustments to the Budget worth over £1,000 million during the past two years.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister for his answer. However, I would like him to go further than he has indicated that he will. The use of monitoring rounds is certainly not a strategic approach to the current difficult situation.

As the Minister is aware, the SDLP has produced a major discussion document on new Budget proposals that would help the economy. One Member of the House commented on those proposals by saying:

“There are valuable elements in the SDLP's overall proposal”.
— [*Official Report, Bound Volume 40, p8, col 1*].

He also said:

“The whole House needs to start examining its priorities.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 40, p3, col 2*].

He added:

“there is some measure of benefit in that debate taking place, and all the political parties putting forward their proposals”.
— [*Official Report, Bound Volume 40, p8, col 2*].

If I tell the Minister that the Member who made those comments was the First Minister, I am sure that he will agree with them. Obviously, the SDLP also has the support of a large number of leading economists in Northern Ireland.

Given the fact that, in these difficult circumstances, the Chancellor, Alistair Darling, chose to prioritise a number of measures, including retraining, providing help for small and medium-sized businesses, putting more money into social housing and the green economy, particularly energy efficiency —

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

Mr O'Loan: Will the Minister copy the Chancellor's example?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his question. First of all, I agree that some suggestions have been made by a number of parties that are useful to my considerations. However, as the Member is well aware, other proposals in the document to which he has referred have been rubbished, not least some of the information relating to Belfast Harbour Commissioners and Invest NI. Both organisations have now put in writing their view that the figures and analysis that have been produced by the SDLP do not stand up to scrutiny.

I am always willing to look at any suggestions that come forward that will present extra money for the Northern Ireland Budget. As part of that, I have suggested that £50 million could be saved each year by reducing the number of Departments and taking away some of the “ugly scaffolding” of the current infrastructure, to which the SDLP leader has referred. I hope that the Member will be as open to those suggestions as we are to some of his.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): The Committee for Finance and Personnel has requested an oral briefing from DFP officials to specifically examine the outcomes of the assessment of the delivery aspect of public service agreements and the monitoring of the Department's performance against those public service agreements, which have been carried out by the performance and efficiency delivery unit.

Have any areas of concern arisen from PEDU's work that put the achievement of economic targets in any doubt? Is the Minister content that existing Budget

allocations are sufficient to meet economic priorities and targets?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Chairman for his question. The public service commitments set out in the Programme for Government were agreed by Executive Ministers. The Chancellor of the Exchequer's announcements last week are not expected to have a major net impact on the Budget and the funding available to the Executive over the next two years. It is important that the Executive continue to monitor Departments' performance against their respective Programme for Government targets regularly. Officials in PEDU and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister are taking that work forward, and it is important that it continues in the future. The focus of that monitoring process has been to ensure that sufficient systems are in place to facilitate delivery and to ensure that an early warning system is in place when target milestones are not achieved.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

STEM Subjects

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the decline in the number of students enrolling in Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects; notes the commitment in the Programme for Government to increase by 25% the number of students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds at graduate and postgraduate level, studying STEM subjects by 2015; and calls on the Minister of Employment and Learning to bring forward proposals to ensure this commitment is delivered. — *[Mr Butler.]*

Mr Easton: Northern Ireland can ill afford a continuation in the decline in the number of students who study science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Therefore, it is imperative that the House overwhelmingly endorse the motion.

As Members and many hard-working families know, Northern Ireland is not immune to the effects of the global economic downturn. The solution to the economic problem lies in a knowledge-based economy, particularly in STEM subjects. Furthermore, given our present economic circumstances, I am happy to contend that our Programme for Government has distinguished itself by placing the economy at its heart.

I would love to inform the House that more students are enrolling in STEM subjects than ever before, that we have more lecturers and teachers in STEM subjects than ever and that we have higher graduation levels in the STEM subjects than at any other time in Northern Ireland's history. However, sadly, the evidence does not allow me to do so. However, before we all get depressed, people in Northern Ireland who acknowledge the necessity of quality education in STEM subjects have much to celebrate. It is not all doom and gloom. We have high enrolment figures at 49%, but, given the comparison with Scotland, we cannot be complacent. Keeping ahead of the field in comparison with England and Wales will help to deliver the competitive edge that we require.

I believe in giving credit where credit is due, and I commend the Department for making available an extra 300 PhDs by 2011. Our universities have demonstrated considerable leadership. The University of Ulster deserves praise for its Step-Up programme, and I commend Queen's University for its scholarship; bright students who achieve three A grades at A level merit that £1,000 reward for their excellence. However, we cannot ignore critical areas. A commendable number — 2,855 — of students graduated in STEM subjects, and that figure has been consistent for several years. However, it is disconcerting that more people — 3,130 — graduated in STEM subjects in 2002-03.

Moreover, I am perturbed at the number of lecturers in STEM subjects. I address myself to the South Eastern Regional College in my constituency of North Down. Many constituents testify that the college distinguishes itself through its quality teaching and learning, and I am pleased to put that on record. However, in 2008-09, there are 144 lecturers in the STEM fields, whereas, in 2007-08, there were 180 — a loss of 36. I do not consider that to be progress, because it impacts on the local and national economy.

In the past, I have said that we need more effective co-ordination between further education, those involved in apprenticeships and the demands and requirements of industrial employers. I reinforce the need for synergy. However, we need to go further and unlock the scientific curiosity and creativity in our primary-school children and fire their enthusiasm and imagination for scientific fields. Our schoolchildren must have ambition if they are to hold down skilled STEM-sector jobs. I welcome the STEM events at the King's Hall and other venues, which placed before some 3,500 primary-school children creative scientific approaches that helped to stimulate an interest in science, including, for example, a robotic sumo wrestler.

We need delivery on the commitments that have been made to the STEM programme.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr Easton: No, I will not. Effective career advice helps, as does linking skills and innovation to the wider economy. Better teacher supply and integration helps, as do more productive links between employers and schools. Facilitating the triumvirate of schools, further education and industry to more effectively communicate also significantly helps.

Getting it right with STEM subjects is critical for the following six key reasons: it reduces economic inactivity; grows our competitiveness; attracts investment; contributes to adult upskilling; improves adult education; and, most critically of all, provides employment. We have noted the decline in the uptake of STEM subjects and, for the sake of the economy, we must now note the report from the Minister for Employment and Learning on how we can achieve a 25% increase in students studying such subjects. Failure in that area is not an option. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Members who tabled the motion. Increasing the number of students who study STEM subjects at university and at postgraduate level is integral to the development of our economy, the collective wealth of our society, and our ability to make the best possible recovery from the current recession.

Although the Minister for Employment and Learning has a responsibility for the development of STEM subjects in higher education — that I know he

takes very seriously — the overall responsibility for their uptake and development lies with two other Departments. The Department of Education and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment also have crucial roles to play.

It stands to reason that, for people to study STEM subjects in higher education, they have also to take those subjects and enjoy them in secondary education. It also stands to reason that, if we are to make use of STEM subjects in the economy, there must be continued co-operation between business and Government.

The motion, rather than taking the broad and co-ordinated approach to STEM subjects that is required, has, I am afraid, fallen prey to some party politicking. The Members who tabled the motion fail to acknowledge the role of their own Minister of Education.

The world economy has changed substantially over the past 30 years. Western countries have significantly moved away from heavy industry and have been leading the way in technology, design, software development and financial services — what is now called the knowledge-based economy. However, with that change in emphasis there has been a decline in the number of young people who study science, technology, engineering and maths. That worrying trend, if unchecked, could see the competitive advantage that our education system affords us in those fields being transferred to developing countries, which are producing hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of graduates in STEM subjects every year. We are in danger of being left with economies that are heavily reliant on consumption and debt, which, as we all know, is a completely unsustainable position.

I welcome the independent review into developing STEM subjects that was jointly commissioned by the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education. I understand that the report is currently with the Minister, and I look forward to analysing the policies that develop from it. I sincerely hope that the report adequately addresses the issue of encouraging young people to engage with STEM subjects at an early age.

I fear that the modern education system has deprived many young people of the excitement and potential possibilities of science and engineering subjects. It appears that young people are less inspired by STEM subjects than ever before and are now often persuaded to study subjects that can appear easier and guarantee better marks at GCSE and A level. That problem must be addressed. Similarly, there is a need to adequately examine how we can encourage more children from socially deprived backgrounds to gain access to higher education, particularly in STEM subjects. As was

discussed last week, plans to tackle educational underachievement are as crucial as that examination.

4.15 pm

There is also the issue of retaining as many young undergraduates as possible in Northern Ireland. Although the trend is not as prominent as it was in previous decades, thousands of our young people are still travelling to GB and to the Republic of Ireland to study and work. Although most contribute to the greater economy, their talents are often lost to Northern Ireland.

If we are to learn anything from the recent mistakes that precipitated the current economic crisis, it is that government and the private sector must be in continual and productive conversation with each other. If Northern Ireland is to grow its private sector adequately, strategies must improve and increase. The adequate development of STEM subjects throughout the education system and the ability to feed them into and develop new areas in our economy will be crucial to our future economic and social success.

I believe that the Minister for Employment and Learning is engaged fully in that process. I also believe that he, in conjunction with his colleagues, will deliver the necessary framework for that development to take place. I hope that all Departments that are involved have the capability to deliver the co-ordinated drive to carry out that plan. I support the motion.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá an-áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht thábhachtach seo.

I am happy to participate in this debate, and I thank the Members who secured it.

It is a fact of life that our economic development depends very much on the STEM subjects. If we want to attract foreign direct investment, we must have a workforce that can offer a good supply of STEM graduates. If we want to develop a stronger base of SMEs here, we need people who are qualified in and able to apply STEM subjects in practical business settings.

Recently, we heard news of a company that will bring 150 new jobs to the Sandy Row area of Belfast. The company spokesperson, when explaining the reason that it moved to Northern Ireland, said that the availability of a good supply of experienced software engineers was a major determining factor. That illustrates, in a practical setting, the importance of the STEM subjects.

I could rehearse the many disadvantages in Northern Ireland that we have in economic development. However, it is much more productive to concentrate on the positive. As Mr McClarty said, the successful economies of the future will not depend solely on location, national

resources or infrastructure — those factors will always have a bearing — but will be knowledge based. That means that economic development will be driven largely by brain power that is focused in the most productive economic directions. In the context of this debate, that means that there should be a focus on science, technology, including information and communications technology, engineering and mathematics.

At present, the number of pupils in Northern Ireland taking STEM subjects at A level has fallen drastically by 35%. We must address that situation urgently if we are to gain the competitive edge that we need for economic survival.

What do we do? Obviously, we must encourage and direct more people to the STEM subjects. At the moment, our schools seem to be obsessed with producing more and more professionals for service industries. We must highlight to young people the practical business and economic applications of the STEM subjects, not only by providing the relevant information in an attractive, modern format but by placing greater emphasis on a more applied approach to teaching and learning and on the application of knowledge through the challenge of problem solving in simulated real-life situations, which will help to stimulate the interest of young people in those subjects. We must get the message across that the STEM subjects mean economic development, that economic development means work, and that work means prosperity.

Often, school principals and senior management teams are the gatekeepers who can admit or exclude information and messages to schools. We need to ensure that we get the message across to those people, and that they, in turn, cascade that message down through staff to pupils.

As a major stimulus, some organisations have advocated a champion for STEM subjects. I agree that that would be helpful, but we need a series of actions, working in tandem, to ensure that we have a coherent strategy.

Greater engagement between local companies and schools is another important stimulus that should be developed further. The professional development of STEM teachers in business skills is also useful. We need effective programmes and the reskilling and upskilling of our workforce, including conversion incentives. Other useful ideas include payroll shelter, greater investment in the Success through Skills strategy and a national internship scheme.

Emphasis on STEM subjects cannot stop at ages 16 or 18. We must continue to raise the profile of those subjects in further and higher education. The current research assessment process, under which the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC) rewards pure

research over academic enterprise, does not encourage product process innovation, which can lead to business and economic development.

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

Mr D Bradley: We need the right balance in favour of academic enterprise, so that our best researchers and innovators in the STEM areas are retained and are active in contributing to our economy.

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

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Ms Long: I thank the Members for bringing the motion to the House. In his introduction, Paul Butler said that there was a perception that people who study STEM subjects are nerds or geeks. I am interested in the debate because I studied STEM subjects and enjoyed them very much. For many years, I was an engineer by day and a politician by night, which could be the strapline for a very boring comic-book superhero. Nevertheless, how people perceive the studying of science and technology subjects is a serious issue.

I am very passionate about the studying of STEM subjects because I believe that it opens doors for young people to really challenging, stimulating and interesting careers. It also equips them with skills that can be transferred into many other areas of learning. That is incredibly important.

Although I agree with the first part of the motion, which expresses concern about the decline in enrolment and highlights the targets in the Programme for Government, the call at the end of the motion puts all the emphasis on the Minister for Employment and Learning alone to bring forward proposals and ignores the responsibility of the Minister of Education in that regard entirely. People's perceptions and their ability to study at the second level will be dictated largely by expectations born out of their primary and secondary education. People are very unlikely to be studying STEM subjects at graduate and post-graduate level if they are not interested and engaged by them when they are at school; and we have to be conscious of that. If people have not studied STEM subjects at GCSE and A level, it is unlikely that they will be equipped to look at them as a potential degree course.

By the age of 13, most people have already decided what degree of emphasis they are going to give science, technology, engineering and maths when it comes to further study. Many people take STEM subjects at that level purely to fulfil the criteria for the curriculum: they must study certain subjects, but not because of any particular passion for them. We have to recognise that, and we have to look at how those subjects are taught.

I am not absolving the Minister for Employment and Learning of any responsibility, but I think that the Minister of Education and her Department have to accept that they are responsible for the first 14 years of primary education and for early-years education. That cannot be ignored.

Study after study has found that perceptions and stereotypes are formed very early in life: those may be gender stereotypes, or there may be ideas about career restrictions or options available. There may be a perception about the difficulty of the subjects, that it is hard to achieve top grades in A-levels if one picks science subjects, or, at least, that it is harder to do so than if one were to pick other subjects. There is also the notion that you are a geek or a nerd if you want to study those subjects. I did not get drawn into the debate about the differences between geeks and nerds: that would only confirm people's suspicions of me.

We need to look at how we engage young people with those subjects when they first come across them in the classroom. That needs to be addressed through positive role models and good careers advice. Experiences in the classroom are also incredibly important, particularly experiences beyond the classroom in fieldwork and practical assessment. That will often engage young people who would otherwise find those subjects very dry if engaged solely in classroom learning. There are huge opportunities, because of that practical element, to engage young people who do not respond to those subjects in a classroom setting.

In the current economic climate, we have to recognise that a lot of our focus will be on looking for jobs in research and development. There must be a degree of technical competence if we are to have the right skills balance to attract such jobs. We have gone through the pattern of attracting jobs that can then be transferred to lower-wage economies, and we have lost out as a result. If we target high-end R&D-based jobs, they are much more likely to remain here in the long term.

STEM subjects are not only for those who want to become scientists or engineers when they graduate; they also provide academic rigour and transferable skills such as logic, numeracy, management skills and experience in problem solving and team working, all of which are crucial in a range of environments. People are not closing down their options if they choose to study for a scientific career; they are opening up a huge number of careers for themselves down the line that might be in fields that they did not expect, such as politics.

Mr Hilditch: I, too, welcome the opportunity to highlight this matter in the House and to support the motion. I thank the Minister for Employment and Learning for his participation. As Mr McClarty and Mrs Long said, there are others in that supply chain.

If we are to build our economy, we must build it on information technology and engineering. That is why we must address the decline in the number of students who study STEM subjects and the gap that exists between available skills and the total volume of required skills. At Queen's University in 2000, there was an all-time peak of 120 students studying electrical, electronic and software engineering. In 2008, there were only 36 students on those courses. Other research and statistics project a deep and worrying developing situation.

Employers have good reason to be concerned that there will not be sufficient skills to provide the next generation of scientists and engineers. Our reputation in Northern Ireland for a world-class workforce at the top of the league is in danger of being characterised by becoming mid-table dwellers.

There is an annual requirement in the STEM sector for about 1,350 recruits across all occupational areas just to replace the people who will retire in the next six years. In 2007, 2,500 people were recruited into the entire engineering industry alone, within which there were 535 hard-to-fill vacancies. That is estimated to have cost our economy £21 million in gross value added.

We are trying to encourage investment, and we need to start concentrating on the availability of the workforce that will be required if foreign companies set up here and the need for a training system that will continue to deliver the number of skilled people that are needed for that sector. I therefore urge the Minister and his Department to work with the Committee for Employment and Learning, the Executive and other Ministers who are not here today to build relationships with the universities and colleges, to introduce incentives for students to study the STEM subjects, and to increase the number of apprenticeship opportunities in that sector.

It is imperative that the Minister bring forward robust proposals to ensure delivery in line with commitments in the Programme for Government and to safeguard a future workforce that is fit for purpose. I support the motion.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am glad that we have the support of the Assembly for the motion, including, in the words of Naomi Long, the geeks and the nerds. It is useful that, in debates such as this, we have the participation of Members who are interested in science subjects. Therefore, I would not allow anyone to be put down by saying that they are geeks or nerds. Geeks and nerds are needed in this day and age.

4.30 pm

One of the main reasons for our proposing this motion was a presentation that the Committee for Employment and Learning received from the

Institution of Engineering and Technology. I accept the point that Naomi Long and others made about other Ministers having a role in the issue, and I will come to that later. However, we spearheaded it solely towards the Minister for Employment and Learning because DEL and its Minister made a commitment in the Programme for Government that he can deliver on, and we need to outline that today.

I am not for one minute saying that the Departments of Education or Enterprise, Trade and Investment, or, indeed, other Departments do not have a role. They have a valid role to play, but, when the Committee heard that presentation, we realised that we needed to take forward a review with STEM stakeholders. Therefore, we organised an event in the Long Gallery and got the buy-in and support of the Education Committee and the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee. It is the first time that three Committees have come together to consider one issue, and the Committees were all quite active in promoting the STEM issue at that event.

There is consensus among the members of the three Committees on how we take the issue forward and how we collectively go to the Department of Education and its Minister, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and its Minister, and the Department for Employment and Learning and its Minister. Therefore, there is no reason for anyone to suggest that we are focusing on DEL or its Minister. We are quite mature about the fact that other Departments have a role to play in the matter.

As I said earlier, there have been discussions in previous debates and even in private Members' questions when Members have said that there is an issue about the Executive looking again at the Programme for Government. We need Ministers to come to the Assembly and outline to us how they propose to deliver their commitments in the economic downturn, because that commitment was given a year ago. Therefore, the delivery mechanisms or the objectives of how to deliver are there. Ministers need to come and outline to us how they will do that, and then we can work together.

One of the public service agreements in the Programme for Government relates to skills for prosperity, and its aim is to:

“Ensure our people have the right skills to deliver economic prosperity now and in the future and increase skills and career choices in STEM subjects”.

Again, that goes back to the point that we need to get people involved in science, technology, engineering and mathematics at a younger age, before they are labelled as geeks. We need to make those subjects sexy in primary schools, using language that primary-school kids can understand.

I and other members of the Employment and Learning Committee have just returned from a study visit to America, and the collective, joined-up approach from many of the Departments in the United States struck me. We went to Boston, North Carolina and Washington, and, from the outset, there was a collective approach to STEM subjects. When I saw that joined-up approach, it made me realise that we can talk about what the Minister for Employment and Learning can do when kids get to the age of 16, but we need to talk about what to do before they get to that age. We also need to involve DETI, because there is no point in retraining people if there are no future prospects for them. Those are the reasons why we proposed the motion.

We have excellent schools and colleges, we have investment, and we have world-class universities. We need to bring them together to achieve the objective that was set out in the Programme for Government. I support the motion.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. As a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I am concerned that the numbers enrolling in STEM subjects are declining. It has often been said that a good economy is based on a strong skills base in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Over many years, Northern Ireland has produced many top graduates from STEM subject areas.

In a smaller country such as Northern Ireland, generating a good number of quality engineers is vital to the future of manufacturing and exporting. Therefore, it is worrying that the evidence points to a lack of uptake of those subjects. The problem is compounded by the fact that we are now in the grip of a worldwide recession. In the past few weeks, there has been news of unfortunate job losses on mainland Britain and in Northern Ireland. It is clear that the numbers of people enrolling in STEM subjects will continue to decline in a downward spiral as jobs in those sectors become more difficult to find. The debate today is complex. Although the main thrust of the motion is to urge the Minister to bring forward proposals for a 25% increase in the number of students enrolling in STEM subjects, we cannot ignore the current economic climate.

The review is yet to be published, and I will be interested to read its recommendations on increasing enrolments in STEM subjects. However, given the economic situation, any proposals must be tailored to encourage innovation and ensure that Northern Ireland has the skills and ideas to punch above its weight in a global market.

To date, Northern Ireland has been lauded for its skills base in ICT and engineering. It is that strong STEM skills base that has allowed multinational companies to locate and thrive here. However, we cannot

afford for the recent drop in enrolments to continue, or those same companies will find it increasingly difficult to source new staff and will, ultimately, move elsewhere.

I note that the Minister has raised the possibility of bursaries for students enrolling in STEM subjects. Indeed, the motion calls for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to have increased access to STEM subjects, and there is no doubt that fees are a significant stumbling block in sustaining a three- or four-year university degree.

Although the motion relates solely to the Department for Employment and Learning, there is also room for improvement at the Department of Education. Schools play a vital part in shaping the future for STEM students and in helping them to achieve their qualifying grades for university. The aim of the recent STEM Experience event was to introduce younger pupils to science and technology, and that is a welcome initiative, but more must be done to encourage younger pupils to consider STEM-based further and higher education.

Many factors have a bearing on the enrolment figures for STEM subjects. Much work is required to encourage our children to focus on those subjects and our students to pursue the subjects at university. We must also encourage our economy so that it can sustain our graduates with employment opportunities in industries in which their skills and ideas can be harnessed.

I very much doubt that a review will, in itself, provide the solution to the dilemma. However, it is imperative that it is forthcoming and that the Minister is prepared to accept its conclusions and act in the best interests of students.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I join other Members in thanking Mr Butler and his colleagues for tabling this important motion.

Across the western world — including the United States, Scandinavia and the United Kingdom — and in Japan, there is a developing and worrying trend of declining enrolment in STEM subjects. Indeed, in the past decade alone, the number of PhD candidates researching science subjects has fallen from 65% to 57%. Although the number of PhD candidates has risen overall, the number taking science subjects has failed to grow at anywhere near the same rate. That is surely a worrying trend.

I am aware that the Minister is currently considering the STEM review, which the Department for Employment and Learning commissioned in conjunction with the Department of Education. I look forward to seeing that report in the near future, after it has been considered, and I hope that it will provide some of the answers to our questions.

As I said, the report was commissioned jointly by the two Departments. That interdepartmental co-operation seems to be a lost theme of the overall STEM debate. The decline in graduates is a symptom of another problem, which has its roots in the school setting. As one who has spent many years working in further and higher education, trying to rectify some of the laxness in the minds of students entering that level of education and interest them in engineering and science, I am fully convinced that the real problem to be tackled is not at the top but at the bottom end, where the students start — in primary school and upwards.

It must be fully accepted that a decline in graduates leads eventually to a shortage of schoolteachers in STEM subjects. However, at this stage, the focus should surely be on the decline in interest at school level. If children and young people are not taking STEM subjects from Key Stage 3 to GCSE and A level, we can hardly expect them to take them to degree and post-graduate level.

We must focus efforts on identifying the reasons for the decline of STEM subjects in schools and take steps to rectify that problem. I feel that, if we succeed in that, the problem in our universities will fix itself. We cannot expect our universities and the Minister responsible for them to tackle a problem that has germinated long before children and young adults get to that stage of the system. The root of the problem needs attention before we can tackle any residual problems in the take-up of university places. That root exists at and even before GCSE and A-level choices.

Therefore, I look forward to hearing what the Education Minister plans to action from the joint report. In respect of what is being done now, Queen's University, as has been stated, deserves tremendous credit for its scholarship, which provides a £1,000 bursary for the top students entering STEM courses. Very often, higher education in professions that are associated with STEM subjects requires much more than a three-year undergraduate course, and any bursary that attracts the best students to those vital courses and jobs is to be welcomed.

That Queen's filled only one-third of its electrical engineering places in 2007 is evidence of the problem that we face. The grant is evidence of Queen's taking a positive initiative to do something about it. Queen's University's pioneering of this type of incentive in the UK is further proof of the top-quality institutions that we have in Belfast. I hope that Queen's is considering other steps that it can take to improve the situation and that it will roll out its bursary a little more widely, budgetary considerations notwithstanding. I welcome the steps taken so far by the Minister and by Northern Ireland universities; however, I reiterate my call for the Department of Education to take its place at the head of the push for STEM subjects.

Dr McDonnell: I also thank the Members who tabled the motion. We are all indebted to them and I am delighted to see that there appears to be total consensus around the Chamber.

We all know that we are in very challenging economic times in which there is a great need to take advantage of every opportunity that arises to rebuild our economy. Foundations for a future high-wage, high-value-added economy must be laid today. If we are to meet the demands and requirements of new technologies and new high-value-added industries, we must plan well in advance.

The birth of the Celtic tiger had a lot, if not everything, to do with STEM subjects, because the Irish Republic invested substantial amounts of money in those subjects and in technology colleges. The Celtic tiger's birth was well-planned and did not come about by accident. I would like to see Celtic tiger II being born in the North and producing that sort of economy there. The fact that the Celtic tiger is hibernating does not preclude us from hoping for another round. If we make the appropriate plans, that hope will be well founded.

4.45 pm

If we are to be successful in attracting foreign direct investment and if we are to grow and sustain indigenous firms, we must be able to compete on a global stage and invest in the STEM subjects; their importance to the economy cannot be overstated. Unfortunately, however, there is a steady year-on-year decline in the number of students who study STEM subjects and successfully acquire qualifications in science, technology, engineering or maths at further- and higher-education levels. Others have brought those numbers to the attention of the House, so I will not repeat them.

I know that a review is taking place. I urge the Minister to bring forward recommendations for urgent implementation. It worries me that the Executive made a commitment in the Programme for Government to increase the number of students — especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds — at graduate and post-graduate level in STEM subjects by 25% by 2015. By my calculations, that requires an additional 1,623 students to enrol in STEM subjects each year for the next seven years. That is a tall order.

There are initiatives that may help to achieve that target. It is the view of the SDLP that those initiatives should start now in primary schools right across Northern Ireland. There is no point in waiting. Schools should take every step to promote the STEM subjects and interest in them, and they should create an interest in STEM subjects in a fun and innovative way for primary-school kids in their curriculum and their extra-curricular activities. They should open the eyes of children and young people to the cutting-edge,

high-value-added, highly paid opportunities in our economy if they take that educational path. That effort could be supported by local companies via school site visits, job fairs that showcase careers and mentoring programmes involving companies and interested pupils.

Last week, I attended an award ceremony for the engineering education scheme in Northern Ireland at the Whitla Hall at Queen's. I was very impressed by the projects that were presented by sixth-form students from across Northern Ireland. They developed innovative solutions to industrial problems in collaboration with neighbouring engineering companies from their towns or villages. It was a very worthwhile initiative. I saw, as could anyone, how much the students enjoyed working together in a school atmosphere with local companies in real-life situations.

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

Dr McDonnell: Greater steps must be taken to increase the number of STEM graduates. I support the motion, and I urge the Minister to do everything in his power to ensure that that comes about.

Mr Poots: This is one of the more important subjects to come before the Assembly. It will probably not receive much coverage because it is not particularly controversial, but that does not diminish its importance.

Over the past weeks and months, there have been considerable job losses in Northern Ireland, particularly in the manufacturing industry. My outlook is not total doom and gloom, and I anticipate that some of those jobs will come back to those industries. Bombardier, for example, has a history of having to move with the times; it has made large-scale layoffs before and has subsequently re-employed. I hope that other organisations, such as FG Wilson, will re-employ as markets recover. However, it is more than likely that some jobs that were lost will not be replaced. I do not believe that the Visteon jobs, for example, will be replaced in the motor industry, and the textile jobs that have been lost over the years will not be replaced. We cannot compete with many of the Far East or north African countries as they progress in that type of economy. If we are to compete and create quality jobs for our people, it will be through STEM subjects.

Giving people the opportunity to engage in tradable services that are, largely, knowledge-based is critical to Northern Ireland's future. It is critical not just for high earners, who leave university and take up good jobs but for lower earners who work in the service industries, in cafes, restaurants, stables, sports clubs and shops. Those people also need a strong, vibrant well-paying economy so that the service sector can exist and prosper. Therefore, it is critical that STEM subjects are developed in our universities and that young people are encouraged to be interested in those subjects.

We must reach out and bring people to Northern Ireland for third-level education rather than export so many of our young people. That is also critical because the more graduates we have in Northern Ireland, the greater prospect there will be of attracting firms here to make use of those graduates. Those firms will be enhanced by being in Northern Ireland, because there will be a stream of quality graduates to fill their vacancies.

We must also become more involved in developing research programmes in association with the universities. Although success stories have come out of the universities, that area must be developed further. We must look at how to bring Northern Ireland universities to the cutting edge of research and development for large companies. That, as a consequence, will enable us to keep more graduates in Northern Ireland.

Sue Ramsey, Rev Coulter, and my colleague William Irwin, touched on the core importance of education. Although the Minister for Employment and Learning will be responding to the debate in this instance, if the young people who actually sit the science and maths GCSEs and A levels do not have the required qualities, it will be pointless for universities to create spaces for them. Therefore, it is important that more young people are encouraged to take STEM subjects, which will lead them on to doing courses involving STEM subjects at university. Much of the debate in Northern Ireland is detrimental to that aim, and the Minister of Education's wish to have a lot of comprehensive schools and to do away with schools that achieve academic excellence will do nothing to contribute to producing more young people with the necessary qualities. Moreover, the Education Minister's actions will not help children from a working-class background to achieve those goals, because a consequence of her actions will be that more parents will be paying for young people to take up places in the best schools. Once again, working-class kids will not have those opportunities.

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

Mr Poots: There is a great burden of responsibility on the Education Minister to assist the Minister for Employment and Learning in this matter.

Mr Attwood: I could not dissent from a word that has been said this afternoon. However, I am wondering how we can take a motion from the Assembly and, for the want of a better word, "operationalise" it in the life and economy of the North. It is on that theme that I shall talk.

I do not know what shape the Northern Ireland economy should take in the next 20 or 30 years. However, people who have been speaking to the SDLP in recent days have been saying that the investment

and education priorities for positioning ourselves in the global market must involve bioscience, information technology and engineering. Although that may be self-evident, we must determine, at Government and university level, the hard shape that those broad, warm aspirations will take, and we have not yet done that.

If those are the three priorities — I do not know whether they are — how will they shape up under the Government and universities' partnership over the next 20 or 30 years? The Minister hinted at some of this during Question Time, but, if economic interventions are to be made in the current downturn, they will have to be measured against instances of companies that have a STEM requirement and background and for which training or weighed subsidies may be required, if that is what transpires over the next number of weeks. If we are to ensure that people who are in work can stay in work, we must protect the skills base that is a product of a STEM culture. I want the Minister to give us not only a time frame in which any intervention may come from him and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment but an indication of the scale of that intervention. Moreover, I want the Minister to indicate what aspects of our economic base, including those that rely on STEM skills and STEM background, might be the priority areas for protection in the event of the Assembly and Executive endorsing a programme of measures.

Alex Easton correctly recognised that one of the better developments over the past couple of years to try to ground our education and economic base in STEM subjects was the roll-out of the 300 PhDs that the Budget funded. However, as Alex Easton and every other Member knows, that funding package is for the North and the South to share. Alasdair McDonnell touched on the broader lesson to be learned, which is that unmet collaborative opportunities exist in higher and further education sectors on this island.

I have previously asked the Minister whether any conversations are taking place with Dublin yet about how we might maximise North/South opportunities in further and higher education and in community colleges. That remains a valid question, but it will also remain a valid strategy over the next 10, 20 and 30 years. Whatever one may say about the Celtic tiger in its current phase, well-regarded international economists believe that the South's essentials are right, because, for over 30 years, it invested in R&D in areas where the skills base would add value to its economy. When we are on the far side of the recession — with respect to the South, it may be on the very far side of it — those essentials will still be right. We can still learn from the South, and enormous opportunities exist to work with it in future.

We need to have a conversation about whether research moneys that come from the Government

should go into the higher-education sector and not into the areas that we think will produce added value and be the economic drivers. It is best that we start that conversation now. Would it be better to invest Government money in pure research or in liberal arts research rather than target it at STEM areas or at PhDs, which would give the people of the North an economic and educational uplift?

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. I thank the Members who contributed to the debate, and I will address as many points as I can. I am aware that the subject has attracted great interest in the Chamber. February's joint discussion forum, comprising the Committee for Education, the Committee for Employment and Learning, and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, demonstrated that interest practically. It is good to have the commitment to the issue that Members have shown to date, and I trust that my Department's policy — together with that of the Department of Education and of others that have an interest in the issue — will benefit from their contributions.

The past decade has seen tremendous scientific and engineering progress. From the advances in hybrid-fuel technology to the iPhone and all the features that we now expect from mobile communications, the application of knowledge in the STEM field benefits us all.

Northern Ireland has a proud heritage of world-leading engineering firms and scientific pioneers. From Henry Ferguson and his tractor to Frank Pantridge, the inventor of the portable defibrillator, we can point to those who showed what can be achieved on our own doorstep and exported around the world.

5.00 pm

Only last week, Intune Networks, which is a Dublin-based software company, announced its decision to expand its operations in Belfast to almost double its current size. When asked the reason that it chose Belfast, its chief executive made it clear that the key reason was the level of the talent pool of communication specialists that we can offer. However, even with such success stories, it is clear that there is further potential to boost our productivity.

With that in mind, the recently published MATRIX report focused on the economic growth and wealth creation that will be brought about by the increased commercial exploitation of Northern Ireland's science and technology capabilities.

In addition to the work that was taken forward to gain a better understanding of Northern Ireland's strengths and weaknesses in science and technology, MATRIX also conducted a market-foresight initiative known as the Horizon programme. That programme

identified opportunities in five key technology business areas, and it suggested how Northern Ireland could gain a strategic market advantage to compete internationally in those areas. Yet, as the world continues to look towards technology to gain a competitive advantage, it seems that, like people in many other developed countries, more and more of our young people are choosing actively to not study STEM subjects at school, college or university.

The recent report entitled 'Forecasting Future Skill Needs in NI' by Oxford Economics in association with FGS Consulting, supports that view. It also notes that although Northern Ireland is trailing behind the UK average in the percentage of people who have degrees in STEM subjects and who are employed, there is an increasing demand for those graduates.

Dropout levels in STEM subjects are also particularly high. That is the case primarily during the first year of study; for example, one of the highest dropout levels, at 18%, is in computer science. The Department has been working with Queen's University and the University of Ulster to address that problem. A range of measures, both academic and pastoral, has been introduced. Examples of those measures include: increased numbers of tutorials; greater emphasis on personal tutorials for students in their first year; and closer monitoring of attendance. Pre-entry initiatives, such as masterclasses and targeted support, have also been set up.

The point when a young person loses interest in science often occurs much earlier, as a number of Members from all sides of the House mentioned. In many cases, young people have made choices at school that have limited their options in those fields. Therefore, in order to maintain our reputation for excellence and economic competitiveness, it is important that we nurture a passion for those subjects in our young people when they are still at school. A number of Members raised the obvious point that choices are made at 13 years of age, thereby limiting to a large extent what is possible later.

Unlike some other subjects, the application of knowledge in STEM areas requires a solid foundation of underpinning knowledge. The linear nature of mathematics and other sciences requires the patient layering of concepts and theories in the mind. The critical juncture for our STEM-based economy is not, therefore, at the university application stage; it is at the GSCE subject-selection stage, as some Members mentioned.

The teaching of science and mathematics can be ripe, with practical, real-life examples of what can capture and hold the interest of our young people. However, the STEM review identified how the repetition of concepts that were studied previously at Key Stage 2

and Key Stage 3 leads to a reduction in student enjoyment of the subjects. There may be scope to improve the already strong curriculum in that regard.

One slight spark of hope can be seen in a diagram in the STEM report, which I received only recently. That diagram covers the period 2001-08 and shows that in 2007-08, there appears to have been a slight increase in the number of people in Northern Ireland who applied to study STEM subjects at GCSE. Therefore, that may be a slight indication that something is stirring, although it is too early to be definitive.

It is for that reason that I asked Richard Noble OBE to be the guest speaker at this year's skills conference in May. That conference will focus on STEM subjects and will bring together leading policy-makers, educationalists, training providers and industry representatives. Richard is the entrepreneur who oversaw the Thrust SSC project that holds the world land-speed record. Not content with that, he has set up a new project called Bloodhound, which will aim to break the existing record, and, together with a strong education programme, will inspire the next generation of young scientists and engineers and help to address the potential shortfall of skilled young people in that area in the UK.

Our expectations for a successful economy are predicated on the exploitation of STEM knowledge at all levels, from apprenticeships to PhDs. Addressing that shortfall was the reason that my Department, in conjunction with the Department of Education, commissioned the independent review of STEM policy in 2007. The steering group, comprising representatives from business, Government and academia, led by Dr Hugh Cormican, was asked to examine the issues relating to the uptake of STEM subjects and to make recommendations to ensure the future success of STEM education in Northern Ireland. Although I had initially hoped to receive the report earlier, I am pleased to say that Minister Ruane and I received the final report and recommendations on Good Friday, and they are being studied as I speak.

I assure the Committee and Members that my Department will respond promptly to the issues that arise from the STEM review and to the recommendations that relate to my Department as part of the revised 'Success through Skills: The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland'. I intend to provide a progress update on that at the aforementioned skills conference in May at W5.

It is worth noting in the interim that the report makes several recommendations for which responsibility lies across a number of Departments and bodies. We are all aware that young people's decisions on their future careers are greatly influenced by their choice of subjects at GCSE. Similarly, the general attractiveness

of an industry and the terms and conditions on offer shape those choices. Clearly, business should take a lead. We must remember that what businesses pay people to do jobs in that area has a direct link with the number of people who go down that route.

Businesses will have to play a key role in ensuring that young people make the choice to study STEM subjects. We have seen how that can be done through the implementation of the information and communication technology (ICT) action plan. Better engagement between companies and schools can help to make that happen.

The future skills action group for ICT worked with a wide range of stakeholders to develop a proactive and comprehensive action plan to address the immediate skills needs of the sector. Implementation of that plan has seen a high profile advertising campaign named "Bring IT On"; interactive workshops that link industry with schools, delivered by Momentum, the ICT trade federation; and support for a range of projects initiated by the sector skills council for IT and telecoms — e-skills UK. Work also includes better short- and long-term research about the state of play of the industry and the skills that employees will need to help the sector to reach an even higher level of productivity.

Although I have just received the report, work has been continuing. Through the critical sectors initiative, my Department has recently commissioned a feasibility study into the possibility of providing STEM bursaries or scholarships to encourage students to study STEM courses in Northern Ireland's higher and further education institutions. That research will make recommendations on the types of financial assistance that should be offered, the length of time for which it should be supplied, and which subjects will be eligible for funding. It will also investigate the impact that those bursaries may have on other subject areas. The findings of that study will be available this summer.

It is important to note that Queen's University already offers a £1,000 bursary, to which reference has already been made. A scholarship of £500, in addition to the £1,000 bursary, is paid to all students who achieve three A grades at A level, and a scholarship of £1,000 is paid to all students who achieve four A grades at A level in physics and mathematics. Other organisations also offer their own bursaries. For example, the Institute of Physics in Ireland offers five grants of £1,000 a year to the top-achieving students in that subject.

My Department is also funding an additional 300 PhD places at our universities, to which reference has been made. Those places are confined to areas of economic relevance, including STEM-related subjects, and that will significantly increase high-level skills in those important areas.

I shall refer to one or two points that were raised by colleagues during the debate. A number of Members, including Mr Butler, raised the issue of the decline in STEM subject uptake. I am pleased to say that although the STEM review indicates that there may be a slight turning of the tide, it is, quite frankly, too early to say.

Mr Hilditch referred to enrolment numbers for electrical engineering courses at Queen's University. Another, perhaps slightly more positive, indicator is that, for 2009-2010, enrolments have increased by 12% in software engineering, which is a subject area that is critical to all the issues that we have discussed.

As a number of Members said, the target is challenging. I will not throw in the towel before we have had a good go at it or before we have discussed and implemented the recommendations of the STEM report. A range of measures must be taken over the next few years to resolve the problems.

Naomi Long made a point about the perception of STEM subjects, and that goes to the core of the matter. Companies must get out and engage early with schools, because people need to know what is going on. The image of the nutty professor in a white coat is not the current image; it is the sort of image that is portrayed on television. All the soap operas portray slick lawyers, and that is an attractive image; few of them concentrate on people who work in engineering or science, unless they are trying to blow something up. Society as a whole needs to examine the matter carefully, and promotion of STEM subjects must be done much earlier.

Alex Attwood mentioned a number of collaborative measures with the Republic. There was, and is, collaboration. The Member will be aware of the announcements about research projects that were made before and after Christmas. Funding permitting, I want to extend those projects. I assure him that no opportunity has been missed in that collaborative area, and the universities, through Science Foundation Ireland, are working well together at present. All the projects that we announced involve three, four and, in some cases, five universities. Much is happening in that area, and there is scope for further development if that is possible in the current climate.

I know the point that Alasdair McDonnell made about the Celtic tiger economy being born in the institutes of technology, and so on. There is no doubt that, at the very time when those institutes were opening in the South, we were closing down our colleges. We were going completely in the opposite direction, but a lesson has been learned.

Rev Robert Coulter mentioned the decline in STEM subjects across the developed world and the fact that it is not confined to this region. Millions of engineering graduates are coming out of universities in China and

India every year. The future capacity for engineering in the world will shift to those countries, and we will be left behind if we are not careful.

Many Members contributed to the debate, and I am sorry that I cannot list everybody's contribution. It is clearly a cross-departmental issue. It is primarily my Department and the Department of Education that are involved in, and focused on, the issue, because action must start in schools, even in primary schools. We must get right down to that level. The opportunities and the will exist. We received the STEM report only in the past couple of weeks; we will try to turn it around and respond positively as quickly as possible, and we will publish the STEM report when it is possible to do so. I thank Members for their contributions to the debate. We are focused on delivery and on the achievement of the targets.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank all Members who contributed to the debate, and I thank the Minister for being present for its entirety.

Having listened to Members' contributions, I wish to make some comments of my own. The Minister commented on individual contributions, and I wish to do the same and to examine how those contributions fit the motion. Perhaps I am beginning my speech with a negative point, but few Members focused on students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Members rightly talked at length about the need to increase the number of students taking up STEM subjects, whether at further education, higher education or PhD level. However, we may have missed an opportunity to focus on people from disadvantaged backgrounds; I will look at the Hansard report, but I think that only one or two Members mentioned them. I do not know what is in the review, but a key point of the motion was to focus on people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

5.15 pm

A couple of Members made the point that Caitríona Ruane, the Minister of Education, had been left out of the motion; however, the three people who tabled the motion, my party colleagues Sue Ramsey and Paul Butler and I, are all members of the Committee for Employment and Learning. Sue Ramsey explained why the Minister of Education is not mentioned in the motion, but it has nothing to do with leaving her, or the Department of Education, out. The Minister for Employment and Learning did not mention the careers strategy, but it refers to a joined-up approach to STEM subjects. It may have been an oversight not to mention the Minister of Education in the motion, but it was certainly not a case of leaving her out.

Paul Butler spoke in detail about STEM subjects when moving the motion; like other Members, he

talked about the decline in the number of students enrolling in STEM subjects and said that there is a need to develop links. I totally agree; moreover, the process needs to begin in primary school. I am a member of the Western Education and Library Board, and, last year, 18 schools took part in an event that was facilitated by Sentinus. I declare an interest in that the competition was won by Donemana Primary School, which is in my council area. I commend Donemana Primary School on that achievement.

Work is being done on the issue. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment carried out an inspection of a small cohort of three schools that are involved with Sentinus. The inspection report highlighted the value of working with children to focus them on the available opportunities. The competition that was won by Donemana Primary School concerned a slow marble run. The schools were given a certain amount of materials and an hour to work on the project, and Donemana Primary School came out on top. There is cross-departmental work being done.

Paul Butler also referred to careers advice. Careers advice is critical, and I hope that the careers strategy that was launched this year will address it effectively in practice. Other Members said that those providing careers advice may not be very well informed about the sciences, which is something that needs to be looked at. Naomi Long, and others, talked about the negative perception that some people have of those who study the sciences. However, despite what the Minister said, such a perception is not common currency. Indeed, Naomi Long also said that people learn logic and so on from studying the sciences, and that could help politicians. In fairness to Mr McClarty, he mentioned the need to look at those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Alex Easton talked about the extra PhDs; so did Alex Attwood, who also mentioned the further education colleges. That is a point that I want to make: not enough is done to forge links with the further education colleges. More could be done. When one talks about the STEM subjects, people think immediately of Queen's and higher education. People think that universities deliver the science graduates, and that is the case. However, while good work is done in higher education, work can be done with further education. Dr McDonnell and the Minister both mentioned the work that could be done in further education. The Letterkenny Institute of Technology does cross-border work with the North West Regional College in Derry and Strabane, though it may not be just in the sciences.

Dominic Bradley said that business needs graduates in STEM and a good supply of software engineers. He urged that we direct more students to the STEM subjects. Some work is being done on that, though businesses should have another look at what they are

doing. In the education system there is progress being made, and the Minister referred to it.

David Hilditch spoke of the drop in enrolment in STEM subjects. The Minister said that there may be some improvement in the trend, though it is nothing to get excited about. He felt that, in some cases, we can detect a gradual increase.

Sue Ramsey said that other Ministers and Departments had a role. She referred to her recent visit to America. The Minister visited the Museum of Science in Boston at an earlier date, and he referred to the work that is done there. William Irwin also spoke of the decline in numbers. All the Members have spotted that except the Minister, with his possibility of a slight increase.

Reverend Coulter spoke of the STEM review commissioned jointly by the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education. He was concerned that the education aspect had been ignored by the three Members who tabled the motion, but I hope that I have made it clear that that was certainly not our intention.

Dr McDonnell made a good point, which was referred to by other Members. We need 1,623 additional STEM students per annum if we are to get up to the level that we should have. As the Minister said, it is a very big challenge. I do not know how it will be met, and I am not sure that those students will come from disadvantaged backgrounds. I stress that point.

Those are all the points that I have to make. I support the motion. The Minister said that there is an awful lot going on. Someone mentioned the word "operationalise", and it might be important to see how all of this turns out. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the decline in the number of students enrolling in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects; notes the commitment in the Programme for Government to increase by 25% the number of students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds at graduate and postgraduate level, studying STEM subjects by 2015; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to bring forward proposals to ensure this commitment is delivered.

Adjourned at 5.23 pm.

