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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 19 October 2009

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## MATTERS OF THE DAY

### Car Bomb in East Belfast

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

**Lord Browne:** I am sure that the entire House will join with me and extend its sympathy to the young woman who was injured by the under-car booby trap device that was planted in east Belfast last Friday, and that it will express its relief that she is making a speedy recovery from her injuries.

It is essential that we all unite in condemning that vicious attack, which has no place in a democratic society. Furthermore, we must redouble our efforts to ensure that evil persons are not permitted to thwart the democratically expressed will of the vast majority of both communities in Northern Ireland. Moreover, we must make it clear that violent intimidation will not be permitted to destabilise our democratic institutions or to hinder progress.

There is no doubt that those responsible for planting the explosive device were intent on causing the death of a police officer, and we must utterly condemn that act. It is important that anyone who has any information regarding the matter must pass it to the PSNI, so that those who set out with the intention to murder and injure people can be apprehended and brought to justice.

This act should make us more determined to work energetically to ensure that a stable and peaceful society continues and develops in Northern Ireland.

Nothing should be allowed to deter the people of Northern Ireland from striving towards a shared future of peace and harmony, and I am sure that we are all determined that those evil people will not succeed.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It is clear that a small group of individuals in this society are trying to drag us back into conflict and back to the days when there was bloodshed on our streets, when there was no hope and when there was despair, and none of us should allow them to do that.

We have spoken about the activities of those individuals a number of times in the Chamber. Thankfully, on each occasion, the House has stood united in its opposition to what those groups are about and to where they are trying to bring us. To paraphrase what Lord Browne said: we must make politics work. No matter how difficult it is — either personally or as parties moving forward with the political process — we must ensure that politics rules supreme. Those people are trying to cause the conditions for conflict to reign. It is my strong view, and that of my party, that the conditions for conflict do not exist and no one should try to recreate those conditions on our streets.

There is nothing in this society now that cannot be dealt with through the political process, even though it may be long, slow and tortuous. I am not asking those so-called dissident republicans to agree with the Sinn Féin analysis, and I am not asking them to agree with us politically. If people have political differences with anyone in this society — with Sinn Féin or on the matter of policing — those differences can be resolved through the democratic process. That is the route that everyone should be taking. Anybody who is foolish enough to drag us back to where we have come from must be opposed.

I appeal to anyone with information on the activities of those who planted that bomb or those who are involved in any other activity associated with the so-called dissidents, to bring that information to the police and for the police to deal with it.

**Sir Reg Empey:** Lord Browne referred to an attack on a police officer. However, it was not simply an attack on a police officer; it was an attack on somebody who was connected with a police officer, whether that was a loved one or a family member. Nor was it the first such attack, as there was one in Londonderry not very long ago, as you, Mr Speaker, know only too well.

It appears that these elements are moving things up a notch: not only is a police officer fair game, but members of an officer's family or those who have an immediate connection with officers are fair game. It saddens me greatly that, even after all that we have been through, there are still people — indeed, even a new generation of people — who believe that it is

legitimate to blow a human being to smithereens, whether that is blowing arms and legs off or whatever else. We see wounded people coming back from Afghanistan, and the same sort of attacks are being planned here. The sobering fact confronting everyone in the House is that people still believe that that is the way forward.

The attack took place in a quiet cul-de-sac in a residential area. Because of its location, quite sophisticated and difficult intelligence gathering would have been needed. It was close to police headquarters, so the attack was sending out all sorts of messages.

There may also have been a message for Members of the House. Perhaps the time has come to remind Members of their own security. Why should it stop there? That is something that we should all be aware of. It is only by the grace of God that we are not attending a funeral today.

The fact is also that there are a number of young people who are being misled and abused into going back down that track. They are being brainwashed to believe that by destroying their fellow human beings they are going to achieve some political goal here. It is a very sad development, and I hope and pray that Members and our parties will offer the appropriate level of leadership to dissuade those young people from going down that track again.

**Mr A Maginness:** I thank Lord Browne for raising this important issue this morning. He encapsulated the views of the House in condemning the attack on a police officer and his partner and expressing the sympathy of the whole House to the family. It was a very chilling and frightening episode, and, quite properly, all parties in the House have condemned it. The point that Lord Browne made is very important. We must renew our vigour in building this democratic institution and showing people that there is only one way to go forward, and that is peacefully.

It is appropriate for us to renew in the House our sense of purpose in building a politics here that is genuinely shared and respectful of one another's points of view, in order to show those who are advocating violence that in fact there is a proper way of going about one's business in resolving any political conflicts, and that is through democracy and through this Chamber. It is important that that message goes out to everyone from the House. Clearly, other parties are in firm agreement with Lord Browne and the points that he has made.

I cannot understand how anybody can go about such a thing. I cannot for the life of me understand how anyone could criminally try to destroy the life of a young woman and of a serving police officer. Remember, the attack on Friday was not simply an attack on a police officer and his partner; it was an

attack on all of us in the House and in the community who are committed to a peaceful, shared future. That should be the message going out from the House.

**Mrs Long:** It is with a heavy heart that I rise to speak about the issue today, because I do not think it is the kind of incident that any of us would wish to have to discuss when we come to the Assembly on a Monday morning. I send my best wishes to the lady who was injured; I am glad that she is recovering quickly. I also think of her family and friends at this time, because, although her physical injuries may not have been as severe as those who planted the bomb hoped, I suspect that it was quite traumatic for the entire family circle to be involved in such an incident. I am thinking about them.

Others have said that Kingsdale Park is a very quiet residential neighbourhood, which it is. It is also in a very mixed area of east Belfast. The residents there are, quite rightly, shocked and outraged by what has happened, because, for them, it is a move backwards to a time that we all thought had been put behind us. That is hugely disappointing for everyone.

Those who planted the bomb clearly and deliberately set out to take life, and it is only by the grace of God that we are not dealing with a much more serious incident today. Their actions need to be strongly condemned by all in the House, and I am glad that they have been. When you plant a bomb in a residential street, you are not simply attacking an individual and their property; you are attacking an entire community. It could easily have detonated when a young child was walking past on the way to school or when somebody was going to pick up a newspaper. It is a reckless attack on a whole street full of people and a whole neighbourhood. The people who do that have clearly shown yet again that they have nothing to offer the people of Northern Ireland but misery and destruction.

The people of Northern Ireland, by contrast, have chosen to build a more hopeful, shared future. They have entrusted us, as their elected representatives, with taking that process forward. I do not believe that anyone has the right to rob them either of that hope or of that future; they are entitled to it.

We need to ensure that we are not in any way deflected from what we do on a daily basis by the violence that is being meted out on our streets by some individuals. If we allow politics to be influenced by the violent behaviour of others, they will have gained a victory. We need to ensure that we do not allow that to happen.

I close by calling on those who may know the individuals involved to co-operate fully with the police. It is only by bringing those individuals to justice that we will see an end to this campaign.

12.15 pm

**Mr Speaker:** Before we conclude this item of business, I advise the House that the leader of the Progressive Unionist Party, Dawn Purvis, also wished to speak on the matter. However, I understand that she was taken very unwell this morning, and she has asked me to convey her apologies to the House for being unable to attend to voice her concerns. It is important that that is said this morning as well.

## ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** On a point of order, a Cheann Comhairle. At last Monday's sitting, from a sedentary position, Gregory Campbell referred to my party colleague Raymond McCartney and said:

"You used to shoot people." — [*Official Report, Vol 44, No 3, p112, col 1*].

I believe those remarks to be unparliamentary, and I ask you, if you have not done so already, to check the Official Report and to advise the House accordingly. This needs to be pursued. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the Member for her point of order. I shall look at the Hansard report and come back either to the Member directly or to the House.

**Lord Morrow:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At one of our sittings recently, the deputy First Minister said to someone on these Benches:

"I am not 'the deputy' ... and don't you ever forget it." — [*Official Report, Vol 44, No 1, p27, col 2*].

I believe that that was quite unparliamentary, and I would like you to investigate that, also.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank Lord Morrow for his point of order. I shall look at the Hansard report and come back either to Lord Morrow directly or to the House on the issue.

## COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### Legislative Consent Motions

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour for the debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes to propose the motion and 15 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

#### **The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Morrow):** I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee on Procedures on the inquiry into legislative consent motions.

At the outset, I pay tribute to the staff and all the members of the Committee who assisted in bringing the report about.

When the Committee on Procedures began this report in February this year, we always knew that the subject would not generate a particularly high level of interest among others: we were not disappointed. However, the subject needs to be addressed.

For the benefit of Members who have not had the opportunity to read the Committee's report, and before I go into any detail on it, I will give some background and outline what a legislative consent motion is. Back in July 1998, during the House of Lords debate on the Scotland Bill, Lord Sewel, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, addressed the difficult question of the Westminster Parliament making laws for Scotland. Lord Sewel said:

"we envisage that there could be instances where it could be more convenient for legislation on devolved matters to be passed by the United Kingdom Parliament. However ... we would expect a convention to be established that Westminster would not normally legislate with regard to devolved matters in Scotland without the consent of the Scottish parliament."

This is the crux of the matter: Westminster will not normally legislate on devolved matters without the consent of the devolved Administration.

The convention referred to by Lord Sewel has been established, but it is not enshrined in legislation. Instead, procedures have been developed between each of the devolved Administrations and Westminster to deal with occasions when legislation that impinges on devolved matters is included in legislation going through Westminster. Those procedures need to be given a firm footing and be provided for in Standing Orders.

Some Members may wonder why the Assembly should be concerned by the fact that Westminster wishes to legislate on devolved matters. There are two reasons for the Assembly to be concerned, one of which is political and one of which is procedural. In addition, the Assembly must ensure that the legislation

that is going through Westminster reflects the needs of Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland has a devolved Administration with clear and legally defined roles. The Assembly, its Members, the Executive and Departments operate under devolved powers, and every time that we approve a legislative consent motion, we are saying to Westminster that we know that we are responsible for the matter but that that we are content for Westminster to take it forward. However, we need to ensure that the legislation is right for Northern Ireland.

Therefore, legislative consent motions are politically important for every Member. Although some may have been tempted to casually give their consent to such motions in the past, the Committee hopes that future motions will be given the consideration that they fully deserve so that this area's needs are met.

I shall turn to the procedures that are in place and the likely benefits that will flow from the report's recommendations if they are accepted. Guidance has been produced in Westminster and Northern Ireland, and it has early and full consultation at its core. At present, as soon as a Bill is proposed at Westminster, contact is made with the relevant Northern Ireland Minister and Department. The Minister should then consult with the relevant Assembly Committee, and, after further consultation with Executive colleagues, the Minister will confirm agreement to the devolved provisions being carried in the Westminster Bill.

After the Bill is introduced, the Minister will again be consulted by Westminster on how the agreed policy is to be taken forward in the Bill. The Minister will consult further with Executive colleagues and the Assembly Committee before tabling the legislative consent motion to be debated in the Chamber.

Past debates on legislative consent motions have tended to be rather sterile affairs. In fact, in most cases, very few Members outside of the relevant Committees spoke. During the first 10 debates on legislative consent motions, a total of 59 Members, excluding the Ministers, spoke to the motions. Of those 59 contributors, 43 were members of the relevant Committees. The Committee on Procedures hopes that that will change with the publication of its report and that contributions will be made by a wider range of Members.

The report contains nine recommendations. I shall not address each one, but I shall cover the key recommendations. The Committee has recommended that Standing Orders should be introduced to provide clarity and transparency on the procedures. At present, the process is Executive-driven, and, although most people are content with the current procedures, the Committee considers that it would be much better if

the Assembly were given a degree of ownership and responsibility.

The Committee has recommended that the proposed Standing Orders should provide for the relevant Committees to produce a report on the legislative consent motion. The report should be short and sharp, but it should include the Committee's deliberations and findings. The primary purpose of that is to provide Members with in-depth information that should lead to a more informed debate in the Chamber. To ensure that Members are informed, the Committee has recommended that the motion should not be tabled in the Business Office until the report has been published.

Finally, the report recognises that, in some circumstances, the Minister might have to come before the Assembly with a second legislative consent motion if the original provisions in the Bill were to be significantly amended at Westminster. In such a case, time would be likely be critical, and, although the Committee acknowledges that a shortened procedure is necessary, it also recognises that the Minister has a duty to inform the Assembly of the full reasons for the second motion.

As I said, the inquiry was not exciting, but it was necessary. The Committee on Procedures views the report as a statement by the Assembly that it wishes to have more information on and more control over legislative consent motions.

The Committee believes that that will be achieved through the implementation of the report's recommendations. I commend the report to the Assembly.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I want to join the Committee Chairperson in thanking the staff and Committee members for the production of the report. Lord Morrow has explained the issues that are involved and how the report relates to them. As has been stated, the report's recommendations will encourage Members to participate in better-informed debates on legislative consent motions. I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr K Robinson:** I also support Lord Morrow's response to an underlying problem in the Assembly. He said that it was not exciting inquiry. However, those of us who braved the journey to Edinburgh on 29 April 2009, as others disappeared by the wayside, found the Scottish experience to be positive.

Initially, there were concerns that the business of legislative consent motions would, perhaps, give back to Westminster the power that Scotland had gained from it. When we spoke to MSPs in detail, that fear did not seem to be widespread. In fact, they believe that the way in which they have approached the problem and dealt with Standing Orders has been quite fruitful.

The key is that if Departments and civil servants at Westminster have a good working relationship with their corresponding opposite numbers in the devolved Assemblies and Parliament, the system works.

The Committee wants Assembly Members to become much more involved than they have been previously. All the recommendations that we have brought forward will ensure that. I assure Members that, in future, when the Assembly is faced with legislative consent motions, they will be briefed by a report from the Committee. The report will make them aware of issues that may concern them, which they can raise on the Floor of the House before the Assembly gives its consent to Westminster to proceed.

**Mr O’Loan:** As Members said, the issue is highly important. The debate will probably not get the attention that it deserves. Similarly, when actual legislative consent motions come before the Assembly, often, they do not get the attention that they merit.

Members, rightly, devote serious attention to Assembly-based legislation. However, we have a tendency to ignore Westminster legislation that may have a major impact on devolved matters. Members’ eyes tend to glaze over at the very name of legislative consent motions. It is important that good procedures are in place to deal with Westminster legislation of that type.

It is equally important that Assembly Members take a keen interest in what happens under those procedures. The Assembly can have all the procedures in the world; however, if Members do not engage with issues, those procedures will not be effective. I support the procedures that the report recommends. It is good to see them enshrined in Standing Orders. They will improve the situation.

I note the early-warning system that is used in the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Government scan the UK legislative programme for Scottish implications as soon as it is announced. They draw those to the Parliament’s attention. It is vital that the Northern Ireland Executive effectively — and I mean effectively — replicate that system and carry that involvement through as legislation develops.

I have one concern, which relates to when a significant amendment is made at Westminster after a legislative consent motion has been agreed. The report addresses that issue. It refers to the possibility of a second legislative consent motion. However, it indicates that there will be no time for proper consideration of such a motion. Furthermore, there is no indication of a clear procedure for the determination of whether a second legislative consent motion will be required.

In practice, therefore, legislation that has significant implications for devolved matters could pass through Westminster without having been approved by the Assembly. Indeed, the Assembly could effectively be

blind as to what has occurred. I am not sure that the recommendations address that matter fully. Recommendation 7 merely states:

“Standing Orders address the curtailed process when a Minister considers that a second legislative consent motion is required.”

How Standing Orders will address that is not exactly specified. Therefore, redesigning Standing Orders around that will require further deliberation by the Committee on Procedures. However, subject to more analysis and discussion of that recommendation, I support the report and the recommendations.

12.30 pm

**Lord Browne:** I thank Lord Morrow, the Committee members and all the Committee staff for their dedication in ensuring that the report is presented to the Assembly today.

Legislative consent relates to the convention — often referred to as the Sewel convention — that the UK Government will not normally legislate on devolved matters without first gaining the agreement of the devolved legislature concerned, which in our case is the Northern Ireland Assembly.

I welcome the fact that Westminster has provided detailed guidance on legislative consent, including guidance that the Minister who is introducing a Bill must secure the Assembly’s agreement in principle to promote the legislative consent motion. After consultation and agreement, the Northern Ireland Minister will then confirm to the relevant Whitehall Minister whether the Executive agree to devolved provision being carried in a Westminster Bill. After the introduction of the Bill at Westminster, the Executive, the Northern Ireland Minister and the relevant Committee will provide details of the Bill to the Assembly by highlighting and explaining the devolved provisions and giving notice of the intention to table the necessary legislative consent motion to seek consent to the continued inclusion of the devolved provisions in the Bill. All of that is to be welcomed.

When the legislative consent motion has been agreed, the Minister will confirm the decision to the relevant Whitehall Minister, who will then keep the Northern Ireland Minister informed of any proposed substantive amendments involving the devolved provisions during the Bill’s passage through Westminster.

Members should note that, if the Assembly were to reject the motion, Westminster would be able to table amendments to remove the provisions that had not obtained the Assembly’s consent. It is, therefore, imperative that Members are kept better informed of the issues at stake in the motion.

I, therefore, welcome the Executive’s decision to introduce a similar process to that which is used by the Scottish Parliament regarding early notification of

potential legislative consent motions. I also welcome the Executive's agreement to the Committee's proposals that an explanatory memorandum and draft legislative consent motion should be provided to all Members within two weeks of a Bill being introduced at Westminster.

Without wanting to repeat what my honourable friend and colleague Lord Morrow stated, the Committee recognises that, although an individual Member may submit a legislative consent motion, agreements between Westminster and the Assembly preclude Westminster's taking account of a legislative consent motion, even if that is agreed by the House, without the approval of the Executive and the Minister who is responsible. The Committee, therefore, recommends that that issue be addressed by the proposed Standing Orders.

Although some people outside the House offer nothing but criticism and negativity, the report clearly demonstrates the advantage of having a devolved Assembly through which locally elected politicians who represent the main Northern Ireland political parties can influence not only legislation in this House but national legislation at Westminster. That obviously impacts on the daily lives of people in Northern Ireland. I, therefore, support the motion.

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr Storey):** I thank the Members who have taken part in the debate. As always, Members cannot wait to make their contribution in such debates because of the stimulating issues raised by them. However, as other Members said, it is vital that the Committee on Procedures and the House have a clear understanding of the importance of the motion. I welcome the opportunity to conclude the debate. I place on record the Committee's appreciation for the work that has been carried out by the Committee staff in producing the report.

Before I proceed, Mr Speaker, I will, with your indulgence, make reference to something else, as this may be my only opportunity to do so in the House today. I notice that my colleague from North Antrim Dr Coulter is in the House. I understand that this week, Dr Coulter will celebrate a very important milestone. If my information is correct, the spies in the Building — and they are not from that other large building nearby that was built a few months ago — inform me that Dr Coulter will be 80 years old on Friday. On behalf of my colleagues in the DUP and, I am sure, all Members, I wish him a very happy birthday and many years of blessings to enjoy. I hope that he is not going to retire from the North Antrim constituency.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures:** As the Chairperson of the Committee on

Procedures said in his opening remarks, legislative consent motions may not appear to be particularly exciting topics for a Committee inquiry. However, as the inquiry progressed, it became clear to Committee members just how necessary the inquiry was. For far too long, legislative consent motions have not been afforded the importance that they deserve, yet every time such a motion is passed in the Assembly, the result is legislation that directly affects Northern Ireland.

One obvious problem identified during the inquiry was a lack of information to enable Members, especially Members outside the relevant Committee, to contribute to an informed debate. Consequently, when legislative consent motions came before the Assembly, they were often approved by Members who had neither full knowledge nor an appreciation of the relevant issues and their consequences. The implementation of the report's recommendations will change that, and through the new Standing Orders, we will have a degree of ownership to regulate the process. The implementation of the recommendations will also mean that the Minister will make key information available for every Member and the relevant Committee will be able not only to consider the issues at stake, but to report to the Assembly on its findings. Again, that will provide Members with the relevant information. Motions will not be tabled until after that has been done.

All that would not be possible without the co-operation of others. The Committee on Procedures was pleased that, following a discussion with the Executive, Ministers welcomed our proposals and agreed to play their part in full. The Committee was pleased that the Chairpersons' Liaison Group wrote to acknowledge, and welcome, the benefits of the proposals.

I turn now to remarks made by Members who contributed to the debate. We welcome the support of Mr Brady and his party. We thank Mr Robinson for giving us an overview of the Committee's visit to Scotland and appreciate the work of those who endured that arduous task on behalf of the Committee. For those who attended, it certainly was beneficial. Sometimes, the public are very sceptical of what might be termed a "junket". I only say that a trip is a junket if I am not on it. However, although I did not go to Scotland, I can say that it was an informed Committee visit. It is useful to see how other legislators are engaging with the particular problem that we face.

My colleague Mr O'Loan rightly brought attention to the fact that we, as a House and as members of the United Kingdom, should pay attention to the issues in Parliament at Westminster. It was good to be reminded of the importance of the process and of keeping focus on what is taking place in the House of Commons. Mr O'Loan also made reference to amendments and a possible second legislative consent motion. His concerns were noted. The Committee will be quite

happy to look at the draft Standing Orders to ensure that there is a degree of clarity around the concerns that Mr O'Loan raised.

Lord Browne said that the legislative consent motion will ensure that Members are better informed. I think that anything that makes Members better informed on issues that are relevant to the House and beyond is certainly to be welcomed. Lord Browne made reference to the benefit that that will surely bring to devolution and to local elected representatives being able to consider, and have input into, everyday issues that are of importance to our constituents.

I hope that Members found the debate to be informative and that the report will be of benefit to the House. I hope that the House will support the motion.

**Mr Speaker:** On behalf of the whole House, I congratulate Dr Coulter on reaching the right old age of 80. The whole House wishes him well for the future.

*Question put and agreed to.*

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee on Procedures on the Inquiry into Legislative Consent Motions.

## COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### Childcare for Students in Further and Higher Education

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

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey):** I beg to move

That this Assembly agrees that widening access to further and higher education is a key priority as outlined in the Programme for Government, and that a significant factor in widening access is the provision of campus-based childcare for students; calls on universities, university colleges and regional colleges to examine options for the provision of on-campus childcare, as a matter of urgency, or to seek to preserve or enhance existing childcare provision; and further calls on the Minister to promote such provision with his Executive colleagues.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I too wish Dr Coulter a happy birthday. He is a valued member of the Committee, and I hope that he has many more Committee meetings as well as birthdays. I am bit concerned that his celebrations may dig into Minister McGimpsey's budget — I hope that he will not light 80 candles on Friday in case that becomes a public safety issue. I wish him well and hope that he has a good day.

I am glad to see so many members of the Committee for Employment and Learning in the Chamber. I thank the Minister for being present to respond to the motion.

The Committee decided to bring the issue to the Chamber, because its members regard the provision of affordable and accessible on-campus childcare for students as key to the commitment to widen access to higher and further education.

I acknowledge the role of the Minister and his Department in the provision of on-campus childcare. The Department provides up to 85% of students' childcare costs, and that must be welcomed. However, as the Minister highlighted in his letters to the Committee, individual universities, university colleges and further education (FE) colleges are responsible for the provision of on-campus childcare.

I do not want to spend my allocated time lecturing Members on the rules that govern childcare for students or on the assistance that is available. The thrust of the Committee's motion concerns the provision of childcare on campus and why it is important. The Committee is proud to be able to bring to the Assembly issues that have been raised by stakeholders in Committee and at other meetings and by constituents. We have done that

on a number of occasions and will do so again tomorrow. A big part of our role is to bring to Members' attention issues that we feel they will want to know about and that directly impact on their communities.

The issue of on-campus childcare provision was brought to us by a group that sought the Committee's support to fend off the possible end of childcare provision on the Coleraine campus of the University of Ulster. The university had undertaken an equality impact assessment on the options available for childcare across its campuses, including closure of the provision. The Committee did not hesitate to engage directly with the university, and I am happy to report that the university has decided to continue with its on-campus childcare provision at the Magee and Jordanstown campuses. The university will continue to run its voucher system on the Belfast campus, and efforts are being made to secure its childcare provision at the Coleraine campus for the longer term. That means that closure is no longer on the agenda. That must be welcomed.

12.45 pm

I commend the university for making the right decision, and I support the vice chancellor's stated aim of widening access to university through financial support and other support for childcare. Moreover, I am happy to report that Queen's University has on-campus childcare provision. The Committee for Employment and Learning will seek to engage with FE colleges and other institutions to ensure that they understand the importance of making on-campus childcare available.

As I said earlier, I will focus on why the provision of affordable on-campus childcare is so important, beyond the obvious reasons of convenience and bringing such provision into the reach of students who are often on a limited income. Reliable, accessible and affordable childcare is a huge issue for students in higher and further education who have children, particularly lone parents. On-campus childcare can be the difference between students attending college or university, or remaining frustrated and denied the opportunities that further or higher education could offer them and their families. In some cases, students prefer local childcare that is not on campus for a variety of reasons, including privacy and a desire to base their children near to other family support systems, particularly if they travel longer distances to their place of learning. In those cases, we advocate that the universities and colleges engage with local childcare providers and create networks.

One stated strategic priority of the Programme for Government is the promotion of social inclusion. Equality, fairness and inclusion are regarded as key cross-cutting themes. The Programme for Government

also prioritises advancing social transformation and the inclusion of all our people. Given our ambitious economic goals, it is clear that we must ensure that more people are educated to a higher level. In order to facilitate that, we must put in place support mechanisms, particularly accessible and affordable childcare. For generations, some people in our community have been denied further and higher education opportunities because of childcare responsibilities that have largely confined them either to the home or to low-paid and part-time work. A lack of ability has not held the vast majority of people back; it has been the lack of support and infrastructure, and the lack of childcare.

I will outline a few of the Programme for Government's public service agreements (PSAs). PSA 1 deals with productivity growth, and PSA 2 deals with skills for prosperity. PSA 3 deals with increasing employment, and PSA 10 deals with helping young people to achieve through education. What do those PSAs have in common? They are all designed to make our community more prosperous and to promote greater equality and social inclusion. They all deal with introducing skills, upskilling, reskilling and educating our people, who, after all, are our most precious asset.

We cannot make those aspirations a reality if we leave significant sections of our community out of the equation. Lone parents, mothers who want to reskill and return to the workplace, young parents whose education has been prematurely curtailed and many more groups need childcare to allow them to fulfil their potential and contribute to our collective aim of creating a prosperous and inclusive society in which people who want to learn new skills and expand their education do not face obstacles such as a lack of childcare.

I hope that I have outlined to the House why the Committee for Employment and Learning is so passionate about on-campus childcare for students. Although the Minister fulfils his statutory obligations on finance, and so on, I encourage him to engage proactively with further and higher education institutions to help them create the on-campus childcare that will allow all our people to develop and provide an example for their children to follow. I have great pleasure in moving the motion on behalf of the Committee, and I look forward to the debate, especially the Minister's comments.

**Mr Hilditch:** I thank the Members who tabled today's motion. University provides a time for growth and development, and a time for acquiring new skills and knowledge. It should be a positive experience, which is why we must make life more comfortable, and university more appealing, for our students than ever before.



In recent debates, we recognised that we will struggle to fill many jobs in the future. In 2007, there was a shortfall of 535 hard-to-fill vacancies in the engineering sector. That cost our economy £21 million in gross value added. Our employers are nervous about encouraging foreign investment, and they have good reason to be concerned. If we do not encourage more students to study at home, it is likely that they will study elsewhere, graduate, find employment and settle outside Northern Ireland. That makes it imperative to encourage our universities to enrol as many students as possible so that all courses are filled.

Our graduates are the future of our economy. I read a recent article about the University of Ulster's decision to keep the crèches open at its Jordanstown and Magee campuses, and I congratulate the university on that. In addition, I understand that options are being explored at the Coleraine campus. That is good news. The right childcare is a key factor when parents make the decision to go back to study, because it can help students to engage in their education. Reliable and affordable childcare is a major issue for parents and must be provided in a variety of forms.

Without affordable childcare options, long hours and low pay force many students to make the unfortunate choice between parenthood and work. Sometimes, parents require nurseries that are based on site at colleges and universities, and it sometimes works out that nurseries that are closer to home are more valuable and convenient. Many students will require childcare facilities after classes, which gives them time to complete assignments and take study time.

It is important that colleges and universities understand the difficulties and time constraints with which parents have to cope. Teaching staff must be approachable and supportive. Building long-term relationships is an important strategy in maintaining good relations, so there is no reason why peer support should not be built into lecturing. Application forms for financial support, grants and other assistance should be uncomplicated. The whole system must be simple, and decisions on who is eligible must be immediate. To allow for that, staff will need a certain amount of training so that they have up-to-date information to assist in whatever way they can.

The recent National Union of Students (NUS) report, 'Meet the Parents', showed that 60% of students with children have thought about leaving their courses because of the difficulties that they face in juggling their studies with childcare. On the other hand, some colleges were reported as having very low usage of their nurseries. In response to a question for written answer from Sue Ramsey on 9 November 2007 about childcare provision at Belfast Metropolitan College, the Minister for Employment and Learning stated:

"for the academic year 2006/07, only one third of all available childcare places at the campus were used by College students and staff." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 25, pWA23, col 2].

If that is the case, availability should be reviewed. I understand that universities must cut their costs without having a negative effect on the teaching and learning that they provide. There is no doubt that that is a tall order. No one wants unnecessary redundancies or to cause problems for students who want to study but are unable to do so because they cannot afford the childcare costs.

I urge the Minister to reach a position on the matter, and I will welcome his comments later. It is vital that he examines ways in which to provide support for those parents who can no longer avail themselves of child-minding facilities at colleges and universities so that they can still have the opportunity to remain in further education. For many disadvantaged parents, further education is the only way to improve their lives and reduce the risk of poverty. That would have the knock-on effect of eradicating child poverty by 2020. I look forward to the Minister's response.

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter:** Mr Speaker, I beg your indulgence and that of the House for a moment to reply sincerely to the very good wishes from all sides of the House. I treasure the friendship of the Members of the House and its staff. Having reached the ripe old age of 80, I have to say that it means a lot to me to look back with many memories. I hope that, in the days to come, Members of the House will be kind towards the old man and will have good wishes for me. It has been a pleasure to serve here, and the experience of being here has enriched my life.

In further education and higher education, the provision of childcare has been an issue in recent weeks. The University of Ulster announced a review of childcare provision at all its campuses, and, around the same time, Belfast Metropolitan College announced the closure of the crèche at its Tower Street campus for financial reasons. The 'Belfast Telegraph' reported early last month that that will affect 30 children. Such a move cannot be taken lightly, and should not be forgotten.

There are only 130 childcare places at Queen's University. The University of Ulster has some childcare provision at all of its campuses, which is delivered in different ways and is under review, as I have mentioned. I urge the University of Ulster to conduct that review in an open-minded way, and I also call on the Executive to move forward with a childcare strategy. The Assembly debated a childcare strategy, and the lack of a lead from the Executive, as far back as April 2009, yet we are still seeking solutions to the same problem.

The motion focuses attention on only one aspect of the problem: provision of childcare for students who are parents. However, the broader problem remains. In its report into child poverty in June 2008, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister identified the lack of childcare as a factor in poverty, particularly child poverty. In 1999, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety issued its childcare strategy, which commented on the variable quality, high cost, low availability and lack of information on childcare in Northern Ireland, and committed to addressing each of those problems. In 2005, Capita undertook a review of the strategy, and found a great improvement in quality, some progress on information, and an improvement in accessibility, which has since begun to decline, but the number of childcare places has risen from 40,000 in 1999 to 47,000 in 2007.

The report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Capita review called for a cross-departmental strategy to be brought forward as a priority. That is yet to happen. The Department of Education must introduce its early years strategy, and the Executive must establish a lead Department for these issues. Childcare is partly, but not exclusively, a Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) issue.

**Mr McCarthy:** Does the Member agree that it is inconceivable that the Executive have allowed the Lifestart organisation to have its budget greatly reduced, which in turn means that youngsters from socially deprived areas are not able to avail themselves of the education and other factors that go with it as a result of that cutback? Does he also agree that the Executive should reinstate the funding to provide continued assistance to the Lifestart organisation?

**Mr Speaker:** The member has an extra minute in which to speak.

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter:** I thank the Member for bringing that information to the House.

Until the Executive take decisions on the broader issues that we have been discussing, we will return to the House and keep debating those issues.

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter:** Yes, I will give way.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning:** I thank the Member for giving way: I am taking liberties in his birthday week.

I appreciate that there are related issues, but as a statutory Committee whose role is to scrutinise the Department for Employment and Learning, we need to be commended for bringing the motion. If other Committees need to raise issues, those should be raised with party colleagues. The motion concerns accessing

higher and further education, and the lack of childcare provision.

**Rev Dr Robert Coulter:** I agree that the Committee should be commended for tabling the motion. As someone who has spent many years in higher and further education and has seen the benefits of having childcare facilities available to parents, especially young parents, so that they can continue their education, I think that we should bring this forward. I fully support the motion.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I, along with other colleagues, wish Robert a happy birthday, and hope that he enjoys many more.

I support the motion. I thank the Committee for Employment and Learning for bringing forward such an important issue. I welcome the Minister, and look forward to his contribution.

*1.00 pm*

I recently spoke to the manager of a women's centre about the value of childcare to education, and she gave me two relevant examples. The first was of a woman who did an access course through the women's centre. The centre's childcare facilities gave that woman the opportunity to study and attend classes, and she is now at university. The second example was of a woman who re-entered education at her local women's centre. She would have had to attend her local FE college in the second year of her course, but that college does not provide any crèche facilities. The woman was unable to afford childcare and, as a result, is no longer pursuing her career in education. She is on state benefits, unable to reach her potential or contribute fully to society.

A recent study that was undertaken in my constituency showed that the vast majority of people — around 80% — consider education to be important. In the same study, cost and lack of childcare were the most commonly cited barriers to entering or continuing education. I am aware that the Minister and his predecessors have placed a high value on breaking down barriers to education, but they have also had to balance their books. Childcare represents good value for money, but it is not free. One college director recently told me that the college used to provide crèche facilities but had to close them because of the cost involved. I have also spoken to representatives of other colleges at which there are no crèche facilities.

It is worth noting for the record that our universities provide subsidised childcare facilities or vouchers for students. Those are very important investments. The University of Ulster's recent decisions to continue to provide childcare facilities at Jordanstown, Magee and Coleraine and to continue the voucher system at the Belfast campus are most welcome.

FE colleges are funded differently to universities, and their method of funding is a matter of ongoing concern to college managers. The funding of further education colleges is dependent on student numbers, which are uncertain from one year to the next. Therefore, college managers tend to be extremely prudent in their spending and in their management of reserves. Perhaps the Minister will comment on how colleges can be put on a more stable financial footing so that college managers have greater certainty about their budgets.

The FE sector should consider the opportunities for childcare provision presented by the community sector. The community sector can provide high-quality childcare at a reasonable cost. A number of professional organisations have opted to provide childcare in partnership with the community sector.

Executive programme funds, including the children's fund, were set up when the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party were the main Executive parties. However, those have been scrapped under the Sinn Féin/DUP regime, and that has cut vital funding for such activities. The question that the Assembly and the Executive must answer is: how do we reappropriate funds for childcare in education? The SDLP supports the motion, but it would be remiss of us not to point out that the Executive does not have Budget lines that are strategically aligned to socio-economic objectives. No one should be surprised, therefore, when socio-economic objectives cannot be adequately set or met because of a lack of funds.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning:** I agree with the Member regarding the aims and ethos of the children's fund. However, does the Member not agree that, although the children's fund aimed to target the communities most at risk, Departments and civil servants were very cute in their use of the fund? The children's fund was never regarded as additional money, and that is why it was reassessed.

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

**Mr P Ramsey:** I take the Member's point but, in the past, government work could be directed at specific areas as a result of Executive programme funds; that is the difference.

The lack of alignment to socio-economic objectives is why we opposed the Budget and the Programme for Government, and we explained that at the time. It is also why we proposed in the Assembly that the Budget and the Programme for Government should be overhauled. That proposal was rejected by Sinn Féin and the DUP, and people are suffering as a consequence. If those funds had not been cut and if the Budget and the Programme for Government had been reframed, we might not be having this debate today.

The issue of childcare for students came to the Committee as a result of an equality impact assessment at the University of Ulster. Thankfully, the University of Ulster's senior management team listened to the Committee's concerns, and childcare facilities will continue at the Coleraine, Magee and Jordanstown campuses.

We are encouraging people into education as it offers a passport to employment opportunities, but parents, particularly single parents, are at a disadvantage; either they do not have access to childcare or they find that the provision that exists is too expensive. It is important to address that. The SDLP supports the motion.

**Ms Lo:** I, too, wish Rev Dr Coulter many happy returns on his eightieth birthday.

I will speak first of my experience as a young mother returning to education. Some years ago, when my two young sons were in primary school, I went back to college to study part time and, eventually, I went on to study at Queen's University and the University of Ulster at Jordanstown. It was very much a time of compromising and constantly juggling studies, childcare and running the home. One minute I thought that I had everything under control, and the next minute one of the two children would fall sick and I was in trouble. However, bettering my qualifications is the best thing that I have ever done for myself, and I have never looked back.

Widening access to higher and further education to include those in under-represented and disadvantaged communities not only promotes social inclusion but is vital for our economy. So many people from those communities are economically inactive, but, given the right help, they would all want to improve their education and get jobs. It is not only a matter of encouraging people to enrol in colleges; it is important to retain them. Young mothers who want to better themselves face so many barriers, not least those that involve their aspirations and practical issues. It is important not to set them up to fail. We must try to help and support them through the difficult times.

Research on child poverty clearly shows that children of lone parents who do not work are most at risk of being trapped in child poverty. There is a great need to encourage those parents to access higher and further education so that they can improve their employability and, thus, their economic situation.

Campus-based childcare facilities not only provide quality care but give parents peace of mind. When children are on site, parents have easier access to them and can check on them at break time and lunchtime. Such facilities are particularly useful for young mothers who are still breastfeeding their children. Queen's University has a very good range of facilities and childcare support: two full-time crèches for children

aged from two months to four years and part-time care mornings for children aged between four and 11. Those services are extremely popular.

Like other Members, I welcome the University of Ulster's decision to retain its crèches at both its Coleraine and Magee campuses and to continue its voucher system in Belfast. At a time of cutbacks, it is all too easy to target such services, as happened with the threat of closure that hung over those crèches. However, that is very much a short-term policy. During the economic downturn, we should encourage more people to upskill and return to education so that when economic recovery comes they will be ready to take up employment.

The education and library boards offer childcare grants for parents in full-time higher education of up to £7,735 for one child or up to £13,260 for two or more children. Parents should avail themselves of those grants. However, a range of childcare services should be made available for student parents, rather than having a one-size-fits-all approach —

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

**Ms Lo:** A range of services should be made available to student parents in colleges or in the community nearer their homes. It should be a matter of choice for parents.

**Mr Irwin:** I add my congratulations to Robert Coulter on his eightieth birthday.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate. The issue has come to the fore particularly because of the current economic climate, in which families have recent experience of job insecurity. I know of a few people with young families who have opted to return to part-time study to retrain in another sector of work. It is important to cater for people in that position so that, with the assistance of campus-based childcare facilities, they may be permitted to continue in education.

At present, those with young families who have lost their jobs and are considering a return to education to pursue a different career path do not have access to on-campus childcare. That hampers seriously their ability to afford and pursue further or higher education; childcare is expensive in this day and age. For potential students who have young families, are single parents or are one of two parents who are experiencing hardship, the prospect of enrolling in education is reduced seriously by the lack of childcare provision.

Also, young single parents may have to cut short their college courses or opt out of continuing to higher education so that they can care for their children. Often, in such circumstances, the parent does not immediately envisage re-entering education, at least

not until the child is of a suitable age. However, that student group could have greater access to further study through the provision of suitable campus-based childcare facilities. Such facilities would encourage mothers to return to education as soon as is practically possible and would also benefit teachers.

Childcare facilities exist in some colleges and universities and are well utilised by the student body. However, there remains much room for improvement, particularly in our FE colleges. The Assembly is keen to promote lifelong learning and must, therefore, make it as widely accessible as possible. The failure to provide childcare facilities at universities and colleges is a failure to promote lifelong learning. The current economic climate means that retraining is becoming a more important option for those who are out of work. It would be a positive step for the economy if the Assembly were to try its best to assist families by ensuring that the lack of childcare provision does not represent a stumbling block to those who want to pursue a different career.

I hope that the Minister will give the issue serious consideration and seek to focus the minds of the further and higher education sectors on moving towards the goal. I support the motion.

**Mr Butler:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I congratulate my former colleague on the Assembly Commission Robert Coulter on his 80th birthday.

As the Chairperson of the Committee, Sue Ramsey, said, the motion came about because of a situation, since rectified, at the university campus in Coleraine. Although some Members talked about the wider problems of childcare provision in society, it is an ongoing issue in universities and further education colleges. A similar problem to that in Coleraine arose at Belfast Metropolitan College, where childcare facilities have been withdrawn. Although childcare provision in society is a wider issue, the motion focuses on its provision for those enrolling in further education.

The Minister must try to address the issue. I noted his reply to a question about the situation at Belfast Metropolitan College, in which he stated that the colleges and universities are autonomous organisations that set budgets and decide what facilities to provide. Indeed, we have come up against that problem several times. However, there is a conflict between that and the Programme for Government objective and Department for Employment and Learning objective to try to ensure that people can take up further education.

1.15 pm

Many people dream of taking up further education. However, if they are jobless or are in poverty, having a child can unfortunately reinforce that poverty and put up barriers for those people trying to get into further

education. As has been said, this debate has come about because of the situation in Coleraine and in Belfast Metropolitan College. However, I have no doubt that the issue will come up again unless a policy is formulated to deal with the matter. When it comes to cutbacks in college budgets, childcare provision is something that will unfortunately take a hit.

The Belfast Metropolitan College situation involves a PFI contract, which complicates the problem because Northwin Construction owns the building. I know that it is trying to review the situation. I hope that the Minister will try to mainstream funding for childcare provision or implement other measures so that the Executive can deal with the matter. There needs to be a longer-term strategy and, as Robert Coulter said, a cross-departmental debate about how we deal with this problem in society in general. We need to come up with ways that allow lone parents and those who suffer because of poverty and deprivation to get back into further education. Other problems such as financial burdens face people if they want to return to education, so childcare provision should be in place, whether that is on-campus or whether there are other arrangements, as has been suggested.

As a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I support the motion. I hope that we will hear a positive response from the Minister.

**Mr T Clarke:** Like others, I congratulate Dr Coulter on reaching such a tremendous milestone. I congratulate him on his endeavours and how he continues to work on. I must admit that I was amazed to hear that he is 80 today; I thought that he was much younger. I wish to see him continue the job that he is doing.

I support the motion. I am sure that everyone in the Assembly agrees that education is extremely important. If we are to have a strong economy, we need to have a well-educated population. More and more people are going into further and higher education, which has to be welcomed. However, there are still many people who feel that they cannot enter full-time education due to financial or family circumstances. That should not be the case. For many people who have children — especially those with young children — entering into further or higher education does not seem like a realistic option. Childcare costs, along with the reduced income that is associated with going to college or university, put many people off going down that route.

I welcome the spirit of the motion. I welcome its recognition that the problem exists and the possible solutions that it offers. The priority should be ensuring that existing on-campus childcare services are retained. It is obviously easier for university campuses to provide those services due to the high number of people who can use them, as that reduces the cost of

provision. However, those services are by no means secure, and the argument needs to be made for their retention, as they are essential for enabling more parents to enter full-time education. As we are aware, it is harder for smaller colleges to provide childcare services. However, I encourage them to look at the options that are available to them. For many people, regional colleges are the first step towards university. It is important that the support that they need at that first stage is in place so that they are able to go further.

I believe that a childcare grant is available for those who are studying full time of up to £7,700 for someone with one child and £13,200 for someone with two or more children. However, on-campus childcare is much more beneficial to parents as it gives them more flexibility and allows them to be closer to their children.

There is no silver bullet that will help parents get into further and higher education. However, greater availability of on-campus childcare is one practical step that can be taken to help that happen.

**Mrs McGill:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I apologise for my late arrival in the Chamber. I congratulate Rev Coulter and wish him well.

As a member of the Employment and Learning Committee, I support the motion, which advocates:

“widening access to Further and Higher Education”,

and that is what the debate is about. In particular, access must be widened to include people on low incomes. While discussing childcare, Anna Lo commented that we are, by and large, talking about young women. Universities and colleges, by their very nature, should be attractive, welcoming and encouraging to everyone. It should not be beyond the budgets and promotional capabilities of universities, of all places, to encourage young mothers, parents and all those who want to attend. Universities should promote themselves in ways that get those people to join and remain in order to further their education.

That is important for a number of reasons. I am aware, welcome and accept that the Department funds childcare, as Minister Empey said in reply to a question from Committee Chairperson, Sue Ramsey. As Paul Butler and other Members may have mentioned, the motion is about policy, not the management of budgets. We accept that and know that times are tight and that there is an economic downturn. However, I am sure that the Minister and the Department can come up with a policy that makes further and higher education attractive to everyone and ensures that “widening access” is not just a couple of words in the Programme for Government but is implemented in places that matter.

**Mr G Robinson:** I also congratulate Robert Coulter. With the grace of God, I hope that he is granted many more happy birthdays. Well done Robert.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr G Robinson:** Northern Ireland's successful recovery from the current economic downturn lies in its being able to provide the educated workforce required by firms that are expanding or setting up here for the first time. To ensure that such a workforce is in place when needed, we must ensure that the talent in our population is given every opportunity to shine, regardless of previous educational attainment or gender.

The latter point is important to the debate, because lack of childcare is most likely to impact on women. We must make sure that everyone with a talent to offer is given the chance to develop and utilise it for their personal, and Northern Ireland's economic prosperity in years to come. The provision of childcare for those who need it to further their education is key, particularly for women, who traditionally carry out such duties.

I have been contacted by individuals and families who were deeply concerned about the proposed withdrawal of crèche facilities at the University of Ulster's Coleraine campus. Thankfully, the university has said that it will retain the facilities. I do not doubt that withdrawal of such facilities would adversely impact on the educational and life opportunities of some people.

I ask the Assembly: do we or do we not want to utilise the skills of every person in Northern Ireland? The only answer is to remember that there is lifelong access to further and higher education. We must address all the issues that arise for those who wish to take advantage of that lifelong access to learning.

I remind Members that access to such learning brings a double economic benefit, both for individuals and for Northern Ireland. It will help to give us the educated workforce that potential employers seek when relocating or expanding, and it will further assist the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to attract new investment and employment to Northern Ireland.

To ensure that that investment becomes a reality, it is the Assembly's duty to guarantee that childcare is available to those who return to education to update their skills or to enhance their employment chances. Empowering individuals through education will enable the great talent that is undoubtedly in Northern Ireland to be utilised to its fullest potential.

Finally, I point out the obvious: providing childcare, in itself, creates employment, and that can only benefit Northern Ireland's economic well-being. Although there may be short-term financial pain, if childcare

were available to those in higher and further education, there would be long-term financial gain for individuals and for Northern Ireland as a whole. I support the motion.

**The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey):** I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. The debate has been interesting and, sometimes, almost emotive, so I thank all Members who contributed. Before moving on, I should say to my worthy colleague Rev Coulter that he need not think that he will dine out on this birthday for ever. I assure him that the time will soon return when he will give and receive no quarter.

My Department does not have direct responsibility for childcare policy in the Executive, and that point has been raised already. Indeed, no single Northern Ireland Department has full responsibility for it, so Members will need to return to that issue. Nevertheless, it is a cross-cutting issue, and I am hopeful that the work of the interdepartmental child poverty subgroup, which is led by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and which is developing a childcare strategy, will provide an Executive-wide response to the issue.

I assure Members that my Department is committed to widening access to further and higher education for all groups and sectors in the community, including those with dependent children. I point out that Northern Ireland's record in achieving higher participation rates in higher education for those who are from more disadvantaged backgrounds is well above the levels that are being achieved in other parts of the United Kingdom.

My Department has been striving to widen access to higher education through a variety of financial incentives. In the 2008-09 academic year, we allocated almost £2.5 million to encourage enrolments in higher education from all communities, and £1.4 million went to universities to assist with the cost of providing additional support for students from under-represented groups. A further £342,000 went to higher education institutions to provide disability premiums, and £708,000 was earmarked to support special projects that are aimed at making universities more accessible to young people who have felt excluded from higher education.

The University of Ulster's Step-Up programme is one such project, and it is designed to help people with low attainment levels from disadvantaged areas in Belfast and Londonderry to improve their academic performance and gain entry to university. I am pleased to say that the programme is both well regarded and very successful. More than 700 students from those disadvantaged areas have attended university courses, and 95% of participants have completed their course.

The Discovering Queen's initiative at QUB is another of those projects. That Province-wide programme targets

pupils from non-selective post-primary schools, who tend to have experienced disadvantage. Many participants have had no family experience of higher education and a very limited family income. To date, more than 15,000 pupils have engaged with the programme.

Feedback shows that 87% are more likely to want to attend university as a result of participating in the programme. Under the variable deferred tuition fee arrangements, each of the universities is required to make access arrangements to ensure the provision of student bursaries and outreach activities.

1.30 pm

My Department has asked the universities to submit an assessment of their widening participation initiatives to help to inform the way forward for the recruitment, retention and progression of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. As a result of those positive actions, participation of those from socio-economic groups 5 to 7 increased from 24% to 25.8% during the period 2002-07. As under-representation will continue to be a challenge for my Department and for the universities and colleges, we are leading the development of an integrated strategy for widening participation, which has the full support of various Departments.

It is not just in higher education that great strides have been made to encourage students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Over the past 10 years, further education colleges have successfully increased participation in almost every group in our community. Since 1998-99, the number of FE enrolments from the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland has increased by almost 31%. Enrolments from deprived areas now make up one fifth of the FE student population.

FE has also an outstanding track record in engaging students with dependent children. In the 2007-08 academic year, more than 15,000 students with dependent children were enrolled on FE courses. Some of those students have been able to avail themselves of on-site college crèche facilities. Many others have not had access to such provision or have chosen not to use it. It is simplistic, therefore, to suggest that, by increasing the number of crèches at universities and colleges alone, more students with dependents would be able to avail themselves of further and higher education.

Four of the six FE colleges offer on-campus childcare facilities. The level of usage by students varies by college. Almost all those crèches are open to the general public. In order to remain viable, many cater for children whose parents are not college students. Any decision to provide crèche facilities is a matter for individual colleges and universities, which determine what services and amenities to offer students. However, my Department is committed to

supporting students with dependent children and recognises the additional support that they require.

The Department provides a significant level of financial support to students with young children. In 2008-09, my Department provided over £675,000 to help students with the cost of childcare. That support is available through three separate funds to help students to meet the cost of childcare in any setting, not just childcare provided by a particular university or college.

There are two significant advantages to those schemes. First, they are flexible. The student can use the childminder or crèche of his or her choice, which in turn increases the number of childcare places far beyond what could be provided by university or college crèches. Secondly, it is more cost-effective than funding colleges and universities directly for nurseries or crèches. The funding goes straight to the parent or childcare provider, not to the institution. It also means that students with dependent children are free to attend their preferred university or college course of study, and the availability of childcare facilities is not a major deciding factor.

As I mentioned earlier, there are three funding streams for childcare. The Care to Learn Northern Ireland scheme provides young parents, aged 16 to 20, with financial support to meet childcare costs. Care to Learn is open to all full-time and part-time students enrolled in a professional or technical FE course. That scheme provides students with funding to meet childcare costs. It can also assist with the cost of travelling between the childcare provider and the college. In 2008-09, some £326,000 was provided under the scheme. I am pleased to confirm that a further £350,000 will be made available for the scheme in the current financial year.

The FE awards scheme allows full-time students aged 19 or over who have dependent children to claim up to 85% of their crèche costs each week. During 2008-09, £212,649 was claimed by students for childcare under the FE awards, and that was an increase of 116% over the 2007-08 figures. To put that in monetary terms, my Department made an additional £100,000 available for childcare in the academic year 2008-09 through that funding stream alone.

A third funding stream, the support funds, also offers FE students financial support to meet childcare costs. Under the support funds, colleges pay a contribution towards childcare costs directly to the childcare provider. FE colleges awarded £136,735 towards childcare costs through the support funds during the academic year 2008-09.

The two main universities also provide on-campus childcare. Queen's University provides preschool and out-of-school places for young children. The cost of providing that facility is met by user charges and a

subsidy from the university. Student charges are subsidised. The University of Ulster provides childcare services for the children of staff and students across its four campuses in a variety of ways. Those include crèche facilities in purpose-built buildings, owned by the university and staffed by university employees; the leasing of space to independent voluntary organisations to provide childcare; and financial support to meet the cost of childcare provided by independent organisations. The University of Ulster has advised me that it is considering options for future childcare provisions at its Coleraine, Jordanstown and Magee campuses following a public consultation process. The university has given an assurance that the current childcare arrangements at all its campuses will be maintained until at least August 2010.

My Department provides a childcare grant for full-time HE students who have dependent children. That operates in a similar way to the FE schemes that I mentioned. The childcare grant is means-tested and based on actual costs paid for approved childcare.

My Department is committed to ensuring that anyone who wishes to attend university or college can do so, regardless of their financial circumstances. I recognise that students with childcare responsibilities require additional support to undertake their studies. That is why I am pleased to emphasise the wide range of support that my Department offers to help with childcare costs.

Crèche facilities at universities and colleges are a valuable asset, but they cannot ever hope to offer the capacity required to meet the childcare needs of all student parents across Northern Ireland. Through the flexible funding arrangements provided by my Department, FE and HE students with childcare responsibilities are able to choose a childminder and childcare setting that meets their particular needs. As Mr Hilditch said, demand is hard to predict and is erratic, and, in some cases, the only way in which facilities can be supported is by opening them to the public. There is a mixed picture in different places and, of course, it varies from time to time, and that is why we need the flexible financial arrangements that we have.

In conclusion, I am pleased to put on record here today that my Department will continue to encourage and support enrolment in third-level education by young people, whatever their background and circumstances. That includes helping to ensure that prospective HE and FE students have access to childcare provision. I believe that the considerable financial support arrangements that I outlined fully demonstrate that commitment.

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mr Buchanan):** I thank all Members who have taken an interest in today's

debate by participating in and giving their time to it. I also thank the Minister for his response.

As we seek to support lifelong learning, it is important that on-campus childcare is available at an affordable rate for everyone. Recent proposals to run down and close some of those sites at our universities caused much concern and anxiety among people who seek to further their education and reskill so that they can return to employment. I thank the Committee for its work on the issue and for bringing it to the attention of the House today. I was appointed Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning only recently, so much of the work was done before I assumed that position.

David Hilditch said that we need to make life more comfortable and appealing for students in the future. All Members acknowledge and welcome that, and appreciate that we must do something. I welcome the fact that the universities are to rethink their decision to close their campus-based childcare facilities. There are concerns about the suggested closures, and we are delighted that, in the interim, universities have decided to reconsider the issue. Mr Hilditch also said that it is important to understand the concerns of parents who want to retrain when no campus-based childcare facility is available. He said that 60% of students with children are considering leaving courses because they find it difficult to get childcare support on site. We want to move away from that situation and ensure that childcare facilities are available for those who require them, when they require them.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter said that the moves to close campus-based childcare facilities cannot be taken lightly, and we must be mindful of that. I urge the University of Ulster to approach the review with an open mind. He also mentioned the lack of departmental joined-up thinking and the Executive's failure to produce a childcare strategy.

Pat Ramsey gave examples of individuals who were unable to further their education because of a lack of childcare provision. As a result of that, those people are on full-time benefits. We must move away from that situation and ensure that some sort of childcare facilities are provided for those people. It is imperative that facilities are provided during the economic downturn so that the people who are affected can be retrained and reskilled and get back into employment. Mr Ramsey also spoke about further education colleges. He said that some of them have facilities, some have neither the buildings nor the space in which to provide facilities, and some found that it was too costly to keep the facilities running. He also mentioned funding for further education colleges and the concerns of college principals. The colleges need to be on a more stable financial footing and to know about their future budgets.

Anna Lo spoke of her circumstances and the difficulties that she faced in seeking to reskill and retrain and to be



in a college setting when she was bringing up her children. She spoke of the importance of not only recruiting people into college but retaining them. Furthermore, she spoke of parents' peace of mind when on-site childcare provision is available. She went on to highlight the benefits of the campus-based childcare facility at Queen's University. Perhaps we could consider that model as a provision that could be extended to other campuses. She also said that one size does not fit all, and all Members will agree with that.

William Irwin spoke about the economic climate in which we find ourselves and the need to retain on-site childcare facilities. He said that access for parents of young families, who have lost their jobs or who want to return to employment, should be widened by a campus-based childcare provision. We need to make lifelong learning more accessible and to widen it as much as possible, which would be a positive step towards helping the economy. We must focus the minds of personnel at higher and further education campuses to embrace campus-based childcare facilities.

1.45 pm

Mr Butler spoke about the need for childcare provision for those undertaking higher and further education. He also spoke about the black hole that exists where that provision is not in place. He went on to say that, unless a policy is adopted on campus-based childcare provision, future funding may be jeopardised, and that is a matter of concern. Without such a policy, the first area to be cut by the universities and colleges will be childcare provision, and we must stem that.

Trevor Clarke said that if we are to have a strong economy, we need a well-educated population. Due to the recession, people are losing their jobs, and, if they are to re-enter the workforce, they must be retrained and reskilled. Currently, it is not feasible for many people to enter further and higher education due to the lack of campus-based childcare provision. We must ensure that existing provision is retained. It may be more difficult for smaller colleges to provide childcare, as they do not have the space or the financial support to do so, but that provision is the first step in the retraining and the reskilling of our people.

Claire McGill spoke about making further and higher education more attractive to students, and it is very important to make our colleges and universities more attractive for those who wish to retrain and reskill.

George Robinson spoke about the way in which the lack of childcare provision in the further and higher education sector is adversely impacting on people, especially women, who wish to further their educational skills. He went on to say that it is our duty to ensure that childcare services are available to allow people to achieve their full potential and that, although that might involve a financial burden, that short-term pain

will turn out to be a long-term gain. We must examine a strategy for the future and take that long-term view.

In his response, the Minister made several comments, which I thank him for. He informed the House of the support that the Department provides to the universities and colleges to encourage an uptake in further and higher education. However, despite that support, there is still under-representation of those from deprived areas, and that will remain a challenge for the Department. Indeed, no matter how many resources we put into further and higher education, that under-representation will always be a challenge for both the Department and the Committee.

The Minister told the House that enrolments of students from deprived communities have risen greatly since 1998-99 and that further and higher education has an outstanding track record in attracting students with dependent children.

The decision whether to provide on-campus childcare facilities is for the universities and the colleges to make. However, the Minister stated that the Department had taken a keen interest in the area and that it had provided funding to the universities and colleges to establish childcare facilities. He also told the House that the Department made an additional £100,000 available for childcare in 2008-09.

Many of the issues that the Minister raised dealt with the funding of childcare facilities and the support that is available to the colleges. The Minister suggested that that support will continue, and the Committee welcomes that. The Minister also said that the Department was committed to enabling everyone to attend universities or colleges irrespective of social background. We must widen the support that has been offered by the Department.

I thank the Minister for his response to the debate. I also thank the Committee for tabling the motion —

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

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning:** I also thank the Members who participated in the debate, and I hope that there will be full support for the motion.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly agrees that widening access to further and higher education is a key priority as outlined in the Programme for Government, and that a significant factor in widening access is the provision of campus-based childcare for students; calls on universities, university colleges and regional colleges to examine options for the provision of on-campus childcare, as a matter of urgency, or to seek to preserve or enhance existing childcare provision; and further calls on the Minister to promote such provision with his Executive colleagues.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Personal Protection Weapons

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

**Mr B McCrea:** I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the dissident threat to serving and retired military personnel and police officers; and calls on the Chief Constable to review urgently the policy on personal protection weapons.

I propose the motion against a backdrop that is both serious and severe and one that requires our immediate attention. The recent events in east Belfast, coupled with other activity in Londonderry, Newtownbutler and other border areas indicate that the circumstances we now live in are not the same as those originally envisaged when the policy was reviewed by the Chief Constable.

The PSNI policy directive states:

“The Chief Constable acknowledges the positive obligation to take all reasonable measures to obviate the risk to an individual’s life where the police know, or ought to know, that there is a real and immediate risk.”

It goes on to state:

“In light of the more stable political and security environment the Chief Constable is committed to reviewing the grant of firearms certificates ... and moving towards the situation where these will only be authorised where there is a ‘verifiable specific risk’ to the life of an individual”.

When that document was written, we were living in different times.

The policy was enacted, and in 2005, only 25 personal protection weapons (PPWs) were revoked. By 2008, 100 had been revoked, and by 2009, 151 had been revoked. Clearly, the policy has been brought to bear. Of course, people have complained about it, but there has been no response worth talking about from the PSNI. The changed circumstances were raised in the twenty-first report of the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC), which states:

“the overview of dissident republican activity over the six months” is more serious than:

“any time since ... April 2004”.

It goes on to state:

“Dissidents have turned their efforts more directly to trying to kill PSNI officers, using a variety of tactics and methods.”

Paragraph 2.6 of the report states:

“Our comments below ... indicate that there has been a continuing high level of serious violent activity, often with the express intention of killing, or making possible the killing, of members of the PSNI and other security personnel, and often doing so by imperilling the lives of members of the general public.”

The Independent Monitoring Commission is telling us that there is a very real and a very severe threat, and that these are not the halcyon days that we had envisaged way back when. We now face a very real threat, and no amount of wishful thinking or NIO spin that tells us that there is no real threat and that everything is OK will change the reality that our officers are at risk day and daily, our previous officers are at risk, and, most shamefully of all, friends, family and relatives of officers are at risk.

Against that background, it seems bizarre that a Chief Constable would continue to advocate the removal of PPWs from those who have served this community and our country so well for so long. I could understand if there was a particular problem with PPWs and if they resulted in killings at home or were shown to be part of a problem. However, in all the cases that I reviewed, there has never been a security issue. They have been used responsibly and they give people the reassurance that they need. I cannot see why we should follow a route of sheer political correctness and take away a source of comfort to those who have served us so well.

I know that this issue has been raised by a number of party leaders in discussions with the Prime Minister, and Shaun Woodward has certainly been made aware of it. However, they do not seem to understand that it is not just a matter for the negotiations about the devolution of policing and justice. This issue is not just some trinket to be moved around, and given in exchange for agreement on something else. There is a very real and serious threat to people, and we must overturn the current policy.

I looked at the amendment that has been tabled by Members on the opposite Benches. I wonder why they bothered to table it, because it merely states the status quo. What they are calling for is what the policy already is, so the amendment is entirely redundant. I look forward to hearing the arguments of Members who support the amendment. They will try to say that personal protection weapons should be made available only when there is a clear and identifiable threat. However, all our history tells us that atrocities happen only when intelligence fails — that is when there is a problem. Despite all the good efforts of our men and women, occasionally things happen. At such times, all our people must have the opportunity to defend themselves.

The policy on personal protection weapons has a knock-on effect on morale. What signal does it send to

serving police officers and those who have served in the past if we take away the very weapons that they possess to defend themselves?

I had occasion recently to speak to the most recent group of graduates from the PSNI college at Garnerville. They were fine men and women. I had to speak to them on a serious note, although it was a day for celebration. All of them were proud to wear the uniform of the PSNI. Their mothers and fathers were there, beaming with pride at what their children had achieved and what they were going to achieve. I shared in that pride, but I also had to give them the message that, when they left that place, they were going to go into harm's way. I had to tell them that they were going to go to areas and be asked to carry out neighbourhood and community policing, because only through a hearts-and-minds strategy will we win the long-term battle, but in doing so, they would be placed in areas of extreme risk.

The challenge for all of us is to ensure that we continue to win the support and confidence of all sections of the community, while also being able to keep police officers, those brave men and women, alive. I know that that is a stark thing to say. Some might accuse people of trying to heighten tensions, but nothing could be further from the truth. That is the situation that we face. There have been issues in Londonderry, Newtownbutler, Meigh and east Belfast. The challenge for the Chief Constable is to find a way of resolving two issues: first, winning hearts and minds through community policing; and secondly, making sure that our officers are necessarily protected.

Few things that I can think of would reassure all our men and women as much as a decision by the new Chief Constable, who is not bound by the decisions of the past, to review the policy, to look at it in a new light and to state that, although we cannot be sure about intelligence on threats against any specific individual, we are quite sure that there is a very severe threat.

Every time that I attend a meeting of the Policing Board at which we receive a report from the Chief Constable, we ask about the current level of threat. We are told that it is severe, absolutely severe. No one can minimise this, and those who do — I point the finger at the NIO and its lackeys — are doing us a disservice.

*2.00 pm*

If we are serious about moving forward on policing and justice on whatever timescale can gain everyone's commitment, we need to start showing that we will address these very real issues properly. Therefore, I urge the House to reject the amendment, which adds nothing to the status quo, to back the main motion and to send a message of positive goodwill to all our men and women in the PSNI.

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

**Mr B McCrea:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. That concludes the proposal.

**Ms Anderson:** I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "this Assembly" and insert

"calls on the Chief Constable to ensure that any application for a personal protection weapon is considered only on the basis of the level of threat against the applicant."

Tá mé ag labhairt ar son an leasaithe. I begin by pointing out that, like Basil McCrea, I am a member of the Policing Board. I think that, like me, Basil McCrea will have heard the then Chief Constable, Hugh Orde, outline the rationale behind the new regulations governing the issue of personal firearms. Hugh Orde made it quite clear that it was now PSNI policy that anyone who holds a personal protection weapon (PPW) can be considered for a further licence only if it can be shown that there is a threat to the life of the applicant. That is why we are seeing some of the licences being removed; no threat has been identified. That is a good thing.

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

It is a good thing that some of these weapons are being taken out of circulation. It is good that, in the vast majority of cases, there is no specific threat to individuals. I recognise that there are many responsible gun users, but the issue of weapons is not something to be taken lightly. Basil McCrea should know that; after all, the human rights and professional standards committee of the Policing Board — we are both members, and Basil actually chairs it — led the board's inquiry into domestic abuse. It recommended that an application for a firearms certificate should be judged against the applicant's past behaviour, including criminal convictions and breaches of non-molestation orders. The report stated that access to a firearm was a significant factor in any risk assessment, but, rather than heed such warnings, the proposers of the motion seem to want to hand out weapons to all former RUC officers and UDR/RIR soldiers, regardless of background. If they do not, maybe they could say so and clarify the situation when they address the Chamber later.

Basil McCrea was at the meeting when Hugh Orde set out the stall. He heard the evidence, and he heard how, from now on, the PSNI would issue weapons only when there was a verifiable and justifiable threat. Maybe he did not hear that; maybe, like so many of the former RUC personnel whom he wants to arm, he is suffering from a touch of hearing loss. Whatever the reason, it is disappointing, extremely disappointing—

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

**Ms Anderson:** I will indeed.

**Mr B McCrea:** I was just checking that the Member herself had not had a touch of hearing loss and would take the intervention.

I have listened to the points that the Member has made, and I agree with many of them, including those about domestic violence and suchlike. However, the point of this motion is that there are many officers who have held PPWs for a long time with no ill effects and no unstable backgrounds, nothing like that. All that we are saying is that this is not the right time to revoke this policy.

**Ms Anderson:** I suppose that the Member will recognise that, out of all the PPWs that were withdrawn in 2009, only two cases were appealed. It does not seem to be an issue for the people who were actually refused. They could have gone through an application process and appealed the decision, but they did not. Only two people appealed their decisions. Those people were probably quite satisfied with the judgement.

Whatever the reason, it is disappointing that the proposers of the motion would rather ignore the reality of the situation and instead seek to prey on people's fears. Basil touched on that in his opening address. It is preying on people's fears to paint a worst case scenario and reduce the issue to its lowest common denominator. How will we ever move to a shared and better future when political representatives are stoking up fears and tensions, insisting that a weapon under the pillow or by one's side is someone's right?

I do not deny that some of those micro-groups — those pseudo-republicans — pose a threat. Indeed, in all likelihood, as many Members know, they pose more of a threat to members of my community than they will ever pose to any former member of the security forces. The way to defeat those people is not to create another armed militia but to show that the political process is working and will continue to work. It is to demonstrate that we can work together despite our different aspirations and all the political differences between us and that we can work together to pursue our political objectives peacefully in a system that is founded on partnership and equality.

Society has moved on, and people want us to work together. Nevertheless, I recognise that there may be cases in which the issuing of a personal protection weapon is justified because of a verifiable and specific threat. However, as the amendment states, all applications should be considered individually, and a decision should be taken once the level of threat against an applicant has been assessed. Operational decisions should be made on the facts; political decisions on the matter should not be taken in this Chamber, and *carte blanche* should not be given for weapons to be handed out without a justifiable reason.

I ask Members to reflect on the Sinn Féin amendment and to support it based on the arguments that I and many others have made. It is simply not good enough for certificates to be issued to everyone who applies. Consider the evidence on the number of applications for PPWs that have been refused against the number of people who have appealed against the loss of those weapons; many people are satisfied with the decision that was taken.

Some 3,224 certificates are out to issue, 953 of which have been issued to former RUC and PSNI personnel and 1,184 of which have been issued to former UDR and RIR personnel. It is not clear who the remaining certificates have been issued to, but many weapons are in circulation. It must be ensured that the policy is robust and that each case is considered on its merits. Certificates must not be given and reissued to everyone who has secured a PPW. I ask Members to support the amendment. Go raibh míle maith agat.

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** Like the previous two Members to speak, I declare my membership of the Policing Board.

I welcome this timely debate, for, as the proposer of the motion, Basil McCrea, acknowledged, we have been overtaken by events. I refer first to the disgusting events that took place last week in our city; and, secondly, to the attacks and threats which other people, including Members of this House, have faced or been warned of. I speak as one of those people. We know that, slowly but surely, events are taking over as the security situation deteriorates. Rather than putting our heads in the sand about the security situation, we must face it appropriately.

The other event to overtake the motion is the fact that the new Chief Constable has made the DUP and other parties aware that a new review is under way. That is welcome, and, along with many realists in the House, the DUP will await with interest the outcome of that review. Let us hope that the flawed nature and ideas of the previous review will be set aside and that a new review will result in a much better policy to address the issues that, quite rightly, have been brought to the attention of the House.

At the outset of the debate, it is important to put matters into perspective. I have heard words spoken today that suggest that certain Members want to create an armed militia, give out gun licences like confetti and ensure that whoever applies for a gun licence gets one. However, I have not heard that kind of *carte blanche* attitude being taken in any debate on, or public reaction to, the issue of personal protection weapons. Indeed, a much more serious attitude prevails among those who already have, or require, personal protection weapons.

Again, it is important to put into perspective that in 1991, there were 10,500 licences for personal protection weapons in Northern Ireland. In 2009, 3,100 such

licences are available. Therefore, the very suggestion that the country is awash with those weapons is, quite frankly, nonsense. If the Assembly were to take the view that weapons should be handed out to every current and former member of the police and military — which has never been suggested by the proposer of the motion, nor, indeed, by any Member on this side of the House — over 33,000 licences for personal protection weapons would be issued in Northern Ireland.

The Assembly must put matters into perspective and recognise that the number of licences that are currently available is small. More importantly, by and large, licences are issued to people who have a military or police background and who are, quite clearly, likely to be under attack. They have also been issued to individual businesspeople who have been threatened or, indeed, have been victims of attempted kidnap. Licences have also been issued to other people who are under attack.

Fewer than one dozen of those personal protection weapons have been stolen during the past five years. During that time, no such weapon has been used in serious or organised crime in the community. I understand that two weapons were used in two separate suicides. Again, those facts should put the matter into perspective. The fear that has been generated that personal protection weapons will cause a serious problem in society is, quite frankly, wrong.

I believe that there is a resource issue. The firearms branch must be properly resourced in order to process applications quickly and expeditiously. The Assembly must reject the amendment because it is, frankly, out of date. It has already been demonstrated that the old review does not work and that a new review must be put in place. Thank goodness that that new review is now in place.

**Dr W McCrea:** I thank my honourable friend for giving way. The Assembly has been assured that if a specific threat exists, a licence will be granted. Perhaps, the honourable Member could tell the House what specific threat was known against the soldiers in Massereene Barracks, where two of my constituents were brutally murdered?

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** Fortunately, the solemnity of the point that the Member has made will not be lost in the House. Indeed, what specific and active threat was known against the dog handler who was targeted last week? He was probably one of the most relaxed police officers in Northern Ireland. He was not considered to be under any threat at all. Yet, there was an attempt not only to murder him, but to murder his partner.

Some Members who sit in the House have used personal protection weapons, such as my colleague who used one in the 1980s. There was no specific threat against him. There was a general threat in the area where he lived. People came to murder him. Only

the mercy of God and the straight shot of a bullet from his personal protection weapon saved his life and his family's lives.

People must recognise the seriousness of the situation that is faced. They must also recognise that the motion is not a demand for a new militia and for weapons to be handed out *carte blanche*. It is a demand to protect the lives of people who are clearly and actively under threat. I support the motion and recognise that the Assembly must address the issue expeditiously.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I am mindful that the debate is taking place after the attempted murder of a serving police officer. I offer my best wishes to the officer's family. I hope that all other officers gain heart from the resounding condemnation of that attack from across the community.

2.15 pm

However, today's debate is about personal protection weapons. Some Members outlined that more than 2,000 of those weapons have been issued to former members of the security services, who are either ex-Army personnel or ex-police officers.

The review of policy on personal protection weapons and any subsequent decisions about the issue are operational matters for the Chief Constable. I am, therefore, thankful that politics and political interference have been taken out of those decisions. The test for the new Chief Constable will be whether he bends his knee to Unionist demands or whether he makes his decisions purely on the information and the intelligence that he has at his disposal.

It has become clear that it would not have made any difference had the police officer who was targeted on Friday had a personal protection weapon. As Mr Paisley Jnr outlined, personal protection weapons have been more likely to attract domestic burglaries in more recent years, given that a number of them have been stolen. They have also been used in domestic violence incidents and in suicide attempts.

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** I read out the stats on personal protection weapons to the House. The Member cannot show any evidence that personal protection weapons have been stolen and used in serious and organised crime. We should get away from that and have a serious debate. If the Member disagrees with us and the Member who moved the motion, so be it. However, the statistics are clear, and as the Member said, there is no history of personal protection weapons being used in serious crime or armed robberies in the past five years. The only instance that has been recorded was suicide, which was a tragic situation but nothing whatsoever to do with crime.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Mr Paisley Jnr clearly defined that the weapons that had been stolen were not used in serious and organised crime. Nonetheless, a number of

them have been stolen from homes. That is also a fact. As a former member of the Policing Board, I recall a private meeting during which the former Chief Constable informed members that the number of retiring PSNI officers taking personal protection weapons was declining. Therefore, there has been a change of culture and ethos.

Whether or not Members like to admit it, in the past, members of the police were perceived to be primarily from the Protestant community, and we all know the historic context and reasons for that. Today and in the past, we have seen Catholic officers in particular being targeted by dissidents for reasons that are clear to them. It is unfortunate that dissidents will fill a political vacuum where one exists.

Martina Anderson said earlier that partnership and equality make politics work, and that is right. However, it is quite clear that the majority of people in the community understand the reality of the mutual veto and see the paralysis that exists at the heart of Government. If we were really to get on with the jobs that we have been elected to do in serving the community instead of playing games, people across the community would have much more confidence in all areas of Government.

People do not want guns in circulation. The recent decisions by the INLA and others to decommission are to be welcomed. However, the principle of taking guns out of society applies across the community. Maybe a Member can correct me, but I am not aware of any former or serving police officers or RIR officers who have had to discharge their personal protection weapon to protect themselves, their family or their property. Therefore, one wonders whether some people use them as a comfort blanket.

**Mr B McCrea:** The Member used the term "comfort blanket". Does she agree that if someone tells a retired officer to give back the PPW that he or she has held for some time even though he or she has done nothing wrong and is of sound mind and stable, it is likely to have a negative effect on that person? Does the Member think that that is helpful, given the current debate in which she said that we want to hear all sides of the discussion?

**Mrs D Kelly:** We want a more normal society in which guns are taken out of the community.

Nobody is entitled to hold a firearm: it is a decision for the Chief Constable, and he is very clear about what must be taken into account. The current policy states that the Chief Constable:

"must take account of the unique and individual circumstances surrounding each application and that protecting the life of the applicant is a concern that must be balanced against that of the safety of the public and the peace and the general undesirability to have handguns for personal protection."

If the Chief Constable continues to apply that principle when individual cases are reviewed, we can all live with it.

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

**Mrs D Kelly:** We will be supporting the amendment proposed by Ms Anderson.

**Mr McCarthy:** I have to inform the House that the issue of personal protection weapons is not one that I have much knowledge on; however, I am the only one here to put forward the Alliance Party's views.

**Mr Kennedy:** You have just ruled yourself out as justice Minister.

**Mr McCarthy:** That is possible.

As far as I am aware, the Chief Constable will be reviewing the arrangements for PPWs shortly. It is unfortunate that we are in such a position; we should have moved away from it long ago. I imagine that the people to whom the motion refers would prefer not to have to ask for PPWs. If there were no threat to any of our security personnel, there would be no need for PPWs.

I add my name to those who expressed sympathy for the lady in East Belfast, my neighbouring constituency, and her police partner. It was a horrible experience and something that should never have happened. There was absolutely no reason for it. I do not know whether, as Mrs Kelly said, a PPW would have made a button of difference to the situation on Friday morning. Nevertheless, my party and I look forward to the day when PPWs are not required at all. I support the motion.

**Mr G Robinson:** As the motion states, there has been a considerable threat from dissident republican terrorists in Northern Ireland, which has been all too evident in the last few days and weeks. In conjunction with that, there is the policy of refusing PPWs to the people who are, due to present or past service, deemed to be at risk from terrorists. That is a dangerous road to go down when people's lives are at risk.

Many individuals involved are serving, or have served, the people of Northern Ireland as full-time or part-time members of the security forces. It could be interpreted that their reward is to be left exposed and defenceless at a time of heightened threat from a lunatic and dangerous fringe group in our society. Perhaps the powers that be think that those under threat should defend themselves with a brush shaft or cower behind the sofa. Unfortunately, that is just not the case when the threat is so high.

Recently, a constituent of mine applied for a PPW and was refused, despite having received official notification from the police that he was under threat.

That is a ridiculous and unjustifiable situation, especially as there is a verified threat against him. In such a case, there should be no question about issuing a PPW to serving or retired members of the security forces so that they can protect themselves and their families. It is a matter of life and death. None of us wants to see our graveyards once again being filled with the victims of republican terrorists, especially when those under threat have been refused a weapon for their personal protection and that may save their lives or the lives of their families.

I fully appreciate that the Chief Constable has not had long to warm to his new chair. However, he must address the issue of PPWs for serving and retired members of the security forces as a matter of urgency. I have no doubt that those individuals deserve support and protection at this time of heightened risk.

I call on the Chief Constable to use his personal authority and common sense to realise that he can successfully address this life-or-death issue.

**Lord Morrow:** I do not know whether it has been made clear, but my colleagues and I will be supporting the motion and not the amendment. It is unfortunate that the amendment has been tabled, because it attempts to cloud the real issue and not look at it from the proper perspective.

It is worth repeating that events have caught up with the motion. The Chief Constable has commissioned another review. The former Chief Constable conducted a review, but the new Chief Constable, who obviously wants to have a hands-on approach, has ordered another one to take place. We welcome that and await its outcome with bated breath.

The issue of PPWs is very serious and should be debated in the House. It is something that many MLAs have had to grapple with in their own constituencies. For example, just last Friday, I was visited by a constituent who is in trouble because there is a threat to take away his PPW. It is people such as him, who live in isolated rural areas, who need our support and, unfortunately, PPWs. Kieran McCarthy said that it is unfortunate that PPWs are needed in our society. We have to ask ourselves why that is the case.

People need to face reality, and I challenge Martina Anderson and her colleagues to do so. People are being murdered, and we only have to look to last Friday to see another attempt to murder. As was said, two soldiers at Massereene Barracks and one constable in Craigavon were murdered. There was no specific threat to any of those individuals, yet, sadly, they are in their graves. The community is looking to the Assembly and its Members for moral support.

We have come through 35 years of unmitigated terror, and anyone who looks through rose-tinted glasses and thinks that all is well is not facing the

facts. We have a long way to go. We have taken one step: we have another million still to take, and anyone who thinks that there is a quick and easy solution to the problem is not living in the real world.

Dolores Kelly tries to sectarianise everything by conducting a Protestant and Catholic headcount — I do not know why she always insists on going down that road. She said that most PPWs are held by members of the Protestant community. If she insists on making such statements, will she ask herself about the reason for that?

**Mrs D Kelly:** If the Member had listened to what I said, he would have heard me say that the reasons for that are well known. It is a historical fact that the IRA targeted officers from the Catholic community first to try to put other Catholics off joining the police, in the same way that the dissidents are now targeting Catholic officers.

**Lord Morrow:** It is a long-established fact that only a very small number of Roman Catholics were in the RUC. If the Member is saying that that was because Catholics were threatened, she is absolutely right — they were threatened by the Provisional IRA and others to ensure that they would not join the RUC. That resulted in an imbalance in the RUC, but that is not the issue that we are discussing. We are discussing the problem for present or former members of the security forces who feel that they need a PPW to protect themselves.

We all want to hasten the day — most of us do anyway — when former members of the security forces and, indeed, individuals in public life no longer feel threatened and do not need weapons to protect themselves. Therefore, I hope that Mrs Kelly will join the rest of the House today and steer society down a road on which we do not need PPWs.

2.30 pm

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

**Lord Morrow:** At the moment, we do need them. I think that my time to speak is up.

*The debate stood suspended.*

## Oral Answers to Questions

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

#### Chief Constable

1. **Mr B McCrea** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail any meetings they have held with the new Chief Constable. (AQO 231/10)

**The First Minister (Mr P Robinson):** Matt Baggott took up his appointment as Chief Constable of the PSNI on 22 September 2009. The deputy First Minister and I had a private informal meeting with him on Wednesday 7 October 2009 in Stormont Castle. I had met the new Chief Constable previously on 30 September 2009, when I led a party delegation to meet him and his senior officers. At the meeting on 7 October 2009, the deputy First Minister and I were encouraged by the Chief Constable's vision for the future of the PSNI and by his focus on establishing a personal policing service that is fit for the twenty-first century.

**Mr B McCrea:** When the First Minister and deputy First Minister met the Chief Constable, did they discuss the financial package that is on offer? Do they agree with the Chief Constable that that is as good as it gets? Will the First Minister outline the nature of any outstanding issues and when they might be resolved so that he can decide whether the terms are acceptable?

**The First Minister:** Mr Deputy Speaker, as I am sure you can imagine, the deputy First Minister and I took the opportunity to discuss elements of the financial package with the Chief Constable. Indeed, the package improved subsequent to that meeting. I am sure that that will be reflected when the Chief Constable and everybody else sees the document. The deputy First Minister and I are keen for the document to be published. However, it is the property of the Prime Minister; it contains his proposal, and Downing Street must decide when it can be seen.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Has the £17 million saving that the PSNI is required to make been cancelled? When will the Policing Board, which is the oversight body of the PSNI, have a say and a role to play in the budget?

**The First Minister:** As I said, it is for the Prime Minister to release the details of the proposal; I do not intend to release it in public for him. The deputy First Minister and I held a series of meetings last week at which we discussed the detail of the proposals with the leaders of the Assembly parties to, as far as possible, update them on the position. My party still awaits clarification on some of the financial issues that are

involved, and other matters must be resolved, such as the identification of a future justice Minister, procedural matters for the decision-making process between the Assembly and the new Department and the substantial issue of gaining community confidence. I look forward to resolving those issues.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What did the Chief Constable outline as being the main financial issues that face the PSNI?

**The First Minister:** The Chief Constable was particularly concerned that flexibility be secured in the early period of his term to allow him to rely on funds. That is connected to Mrs Kelly's question about the £17 million. The Chief Constable is convinced that efficiencies can be gained in the policing budget, but he believes that a period of time will be required to identify and make those savings. From his point of view, he sought flexibility in the early part of his term to enable him to identify and gain the efficiencies, rather than those efficiencies being enforced immediately.

**Mr Paisley Jnr:** Will the First Minister inform the House whether the financial deal that is on offer from the Prime Minister has improved in recent weeks? If so, will he indicate by how much it has improved? Furthermore, can he tell us how beneficial that improvement could be, given that some were urging him to close on a deal several weeks ago?

**The First Minister:** We will all have difficulty in identifying, even at this stage, the question of "how much?". That is simply because there have been so many iterations of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee paper; I believe that we have had three different sets of figures from that Committee. We have had a set of figures from the Treasury, which, I can assure the Member, are slightly lower than the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's figures. We have been working on figures that we were able to interrogate ourselves.

A big issue that was resolved recently was that relating to claims for hearing loss. That was a big ticket matter, as was the issue of legal aid, which was also dealt with latterly. All those issues have to be resolved, and we have seen, sadly, in the wake of the attack in my constituency on Friday 16 October, the need to ensure that the police are properly resourced. There is no à la carte menu from which we can get something and hope that it will satisfy all needs. If there are inescapable pressures in the policing and justice budget, we have to meet them, wherever they are. That requires us to stick at it until that matter is resolved.

I welcome the remarks that were made in the Chamber earlier about Friday's attack. The deputy First Minister and I are both on public record condemning that attack, which showed that intelligence is being gathered by the dissident



terrorists. It is essential that serving and former police officers be alert at this time. We must ensure that community support exists for the Police Service right across the Province and that it has the resources to do the job that we expect of it.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member is not in his place to ask question 2.

### Ilex Board

3. **Mr Campbell** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many people have been appointed and reappointed to the board of Ilex urban regeneration company in Londonderry over the last three years, broken down by community background. (AQO 233/10)

**The First Minister:** With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will ask the junior Minister Mr Newton to respond.

**The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Newton):** I was not expecting that, Mr Deputy Speaker; I will just find my place.

I wish to report that eight people have been appointed to the board of Ilex since 2006, two of whom have recently been reappointed in accordance with public appointment guidelines. The community background breakdown is: two Protestant, four Roman Catholic and two unknown. A public appointments competition is under way to recruit additional board members.

**Mr Campbell:** I thank the junior Minister for his response. Ilex has the potential to do significant work in an area that is economically disadvantaged, such as the area that is served by the Ebrington site. However, just as there is a need to be conscious of the political and religious breakdown of those who apply and are appointed to the Ilex board, will the junior Minister give an assurance that the same consciousness will pertain to the work that Ilex will do, particularly when trying to ensure that the minority unionist community in Londonderry, which has a significant attachment to the rich military history of that site, is represented in the future work programme?

**The junior Minister (Mr Newton):** That is absolutely right, and the Ilex board will want to acknowledge Mr Campbell's points. It is obvious that fairness and transparency in all things are imperative as this very important project is rolled out for that part of Northern Ireland.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. Will the junior Minister reassure the House that, irrespective of religious or any other

background, any job offer made by Ilex will be based on ability only?

**The junior Minister (Mr Newton):** Above all other considerations, the Member will understand that community confidence is an important feature and that people should be offered public appointments in a manner that is transparent and ensures that the merit of any such individuals can be stood over.

As I said to Mr Campbell, fairness and transparency are important. This project is important to the whole of the north-west and must therefore have community confidence.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members to rise in their place to indicate that they wish to ask a question; otherwise I will assume that their question has been answered. Each time a Member wishes to ask a question, they must rise in their place.

### Presbyterian Mutual Society

4. **Mr Kennedy** asked the First Minister and the deputy First Minister what progress has been made in negotiations with Her Majesty's Government regarding compensation for savers with the Presbyterian Mutual Society. (AQO 234/10)

**The First Minister:** We are very aware of the anxiety and distress caused to members of the Presbyterian Mutual Society (PMS) by the prevailing uncertainties around their savings. We are encouraged by the Prime Minister's speech in Brighton, where he said:

"not one British saver has lost a single penny."

We are doing all that we can to work towards a solution for PMS members. The PMS administrator wrote to members of the society on 22 September to provide an update on his work. His recommendation was to await the outcome of the Government assessment on what assistance they could give before taking further decisions. I assure Members of the Assembly and members of the PMS that the matter is receiving our close attention.

We met the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 14 October to review progress on finding a solution to help PMS members and received an update from officials on progress. We emphasised the need to find an acceptable resolution as quickly as possible. Initial discussions at official level with some local banks have already begun. We highlighted that it would be necessary to progress those talks further.

We should know the outcome of the discussions shortly and are expecting a full paper on the options open to resolve the PMS problem to be presented to the ministerial working group within the next three

weeks. When we receive that paper, we will decide on the best way forward.

**Mr Kennedy:** I register my interest as one with a modest investment in the PMS. I thank the First Minister for his reply. He will be aware, as is the entire House, of the overwhelming support from all political parties for the plight of PMS savers and investors. Will the First Minister reflect that support in any future discussions with the Prime Minister, the Treasury and the ministerial working group? Will he assure the House that he will not allow the Government to use the PMS as a political pawn in their discussions with any party on the possible devolution of policing and justice?

**The First Minister:** The Member's investment is the only modest thing about him. He should be aware that it is only he and his party leader who are linking the PMS to policing and justice; neither my party nor I have made a proposal to the Prime Minister to link the two. The issue stands firmly on its own two feet.

It is clear to us, on the basis of what the Prime Minister has said, that savers in the UK will not lose money, and we want him to stand by that. People who have put funds into the PMS regard themselves as savers, and the rule books identify them as such. We hope that the Prime Minister will take that into consideration when he receives the report from the ministerial group.

The deputy First Minister and I, along with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who were present at the last meeting, felt that officials had seriously engaged on those issues and that they were considering proposals. As I said in my initial reply, we regard the involvement of a local bank as the best way forward, if that is achievable. However, that would require us to examine legal and European regulatory issues. Of course, we need to have regard to the interests of the bank, which will want to know details of the Government's involvement.

We hope to take the matter forward. We have agreed to meet in three weeks' time, and I hope that we will agree one proposition that should be put to the Prime Minister at that stage.

2.45 pm

**Mr Moutray:** The First Minister said that he is all too aware of the hardship that the issue has caused individuals and churches. I thank him and others for the efforts that have been made on behalf of the people involved. Does he believe that the Government at Westminster are committed to finding a solution to the matter?

**The First Minister:** The deputy First Minister and I have had a number of conversations with our officials who have engaged with HM Treasury in Whitehall. I

get a clear impression that that engagement has been serious. It is not simply a case of propositions being identified — follow-up work is being done. After looking at the options that are under consideration, I hope that we can opt for some of the earlier propositions rather than having to fall back on hardship funds and so on.

We are keen to engage the banks on the matter, and some banks have expressed an interest. Discussions have already taken place, but a phase of due diligence is necessary from the banks' point of view. We will have to look at some regulatory issues thereafter, but we are moving forward. I am aware that the administrator had to postpone a planned meeting with members of the Presbyterian Mutual Society, and I recognise that some people who have savings with the society are experiencing considerable hardship. Some of those people need to access their funds, but they cannot do that. The sooner we resolve the matter the better. We are putting pressure on HM Treasury to complete its discussions so that the Prime Minister can make a final decision.

**Mr Brady:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is there any evidence that the board of the Presbyterian Mutual Society operated outside its legal authority?

**The First Minister:** A report has been produced that includes criticism of the board of the Presbyterian Mutual Society and others who had a role in auditing and overseeing that organisation's operations. Given the potential legal consequences, we would be better to wait for the publication of the report — if that ever happens — before pointing fingers in any particular direction.

## Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy

5. **Mr Ford** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when their Department will publish the consultation document on the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. (AQO 235/10)

8. **Ms Lo** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when their Department expects the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy to be published. (AQO 238/10)

**The First Minister:** With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Newton to respond.

**The junior Minister (Mr Newton):** With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 8 together.

It was originally intended that the draft programme for cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) would be brought forward before the end of 2008. That and subsequent timing commitments were made in good faith, and we expected those to be met. It was not possible to meet

that date, but reaching agreement on the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy remains one of OFMDFM's policy priorities. The First Minister and deputy First Minister have agreed a process, and OFMDFM officials are working on a revised draft of the programme. That process will identify areas of agreement and outstanding areas of contention.

We continue to work intensively towards an agreed strategy that will benefit all our people now and in the longer term. However, work to promote community relations and good race relations has continued for the past two years, led and supported by junior Minister Kelly, myself and the entire ministerial team. There are many examples of that commitment. In the current Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) period, we have invested a not insubstantial amount — £29 million — in good relations work to build a shared and better future. Junior Minister Kelly and I continue to chair the north Belfast working group, which focuses on interface issues in Belfast and across Northern Ireland. This summer, we spent £500,000 to resource work on summer intervention programmes. Since devolution in 2007, we have spent a total of £1.5 million on such intervention work.

Since May, we have spent £4.372 million on district councils' community relations programmes, and we have committed a further £2.79 million in this financial year. We have worked proactively with our key partners in Coleraine, both statutory and non-statutory, following the killing of Mr Kevin McDaid in May. We provided £23,000 to Coleraine Borough Council for divisionary work in addition to the £86,000 that was awarded to the council for good relations activities.

Finally, in the past two weeks, we have provided further funding for specific intervention work in east and north Belfast.

**Mr Ford:** I am totally baffled by that response. It was great to hear that long list of financial statements, but it has absolutely nothing to do with the question that I asked. Some of us have complained for a long time about the lack of a CSI strategy from OFMDFM. My question was about a consultation document on a CSI strategy, and we got no information whatsoever on that. The DUP and Sinn Féin have both prepared documents. If they cannot agree on a consultation document, will they at least agree to circulate their two different documents so that we can have a consultation on them?

**The junior Minister (Mr Newton):** I am sorry, but I am not quite sure what the question was.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to ask a brief question.

**Mr Ford:** I am sorry. Perhaps if the junior Minister had answered my question in the first place, he could have concentrated on my supplementary. I asked a simple

question: if it is impossible for OFMDFM to publish a single consultation document on a CSI strategy because of differences between the two parties, will it at least publish the two separate documents for consultation? We can then engage in a formal consultation process, which might move the issue forward.

**The junior Minister (Mr Newton):** It is my understanding that the two documents have not only been published but have been made public and roundly examined in the press. I am certain that if Mr Ford consults the press or the DUP — I cannot speak for Sinn Féin — those documents will be made readily available to him.

**Ms Lo:** It was bad enough to have a long delay in publishing the CSI strategy, but the situation is now worse: we have two draft documents, which shows that the two major parties cannot agree on an approach to community relations.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to come to the question.

**Ms Lo:** Can OFMDFM give an indication of how long it will take to resolve the impasse and provide a clear timetable for when the strategy will be published for consultation?

**The junior Minister (Mr Newton):** I thank the Member for her question. We want to publish a document together. I do not think that it is correct to say that the fault lies wholly with either the DUP or Sinn Féin; the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP also worked on the document for a long time. However, there is a need for agreement, and that agreement was not found in the two parties that had initial responsibility. The Executive have come a long way over the past two years; we can, at least, air those issues and recognise that it will take time, consideration and huge effort on the part of everyone in the Executive to address the legacy of our past and the challenges that lie ahead.

We want a strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration and a blueprint for a shared and better future, but, while we continue to do our very best to reach that stage, we continue to work in communities where much important work is being done locally. We are also working at the heart of government to deliver meaningful programmes that are aimed at ending the scourge of sectarianism. Nothing highlights that scourge more than the reports of the bigotry, sectarianism and, perhaps, ethnic cleansing that is being experienced in Rasharkin at the moment, where Protestant families are under threat and are being driven out of the village. We all want to address those important issues. We want to share a strategy that is effective and can produce results. We need to bring that together.

**Ms Anderson:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the junior Minister for his answers. Given that we all want a shared and better future based on equality and human

rights, can the junior Minister outline the relationship between equality and good relations as set out in section 75 of the 1998 Act and as relates to PSA 7 and objective five, as agreed in the Programme for Government?

**The junior Minister (Mr Newton):** The Member raised several issues. The existence of equality does not necessarily mean that there will be good relations. I have made clear the importance that we attach to the matter. It must be addressed, and I hope that it will be addressed sooner rather than later. I hope that the Member's side of the House places as much emphasis on that as does this side of the House.

**Mr O'Loan:** In light of the junior Minister's evident concern about Rasharkin, one expected to hear more from him about outcomes rather than process. Do the First Minister and deputy First Minister have realistic expectations of producing a report on a CSI strategy before the summer recess? I am thinking of the summer recess of 2010.

**The junior Minister (Mr Newton):** My answer to the original and supplementary questions made it clear that the strategy is important and that it will be produced as soon as possible. It will not be a superficial document that does not deliver exactly what we want; it will be based on strategy, it will contain finite detail, and it will produce outcomes.

**Lord Browne:** The junior Minister will be aware that an explosive device was fixed to the car of a policeman's partner in east Belfast last Friday. I will be pleased to receive assurance from the junior Minister that that policeman and his partner, having been subjected to the despicable terrorist attack that was condemned in the House earlier today, will be able to avail of the special purchase of evacuated dwellings (SPED) scheme to ensure that they receive alternative housing.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Members must take care to ensure that supplementary questions relate to the original question. As the Member's question strays slightly from the original, we will move on.

### OFMDFM: Joint Working

6. **Mr W Clarke** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the joint nature of their office, to explain how the joint procedures within their office work in practice. (AQO 236/10)

**The First Minister:** The Departments (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 established the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which is jointly in the charge of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. Statutory and other prerogative and executive powers of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister are exercised by the First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly. In practice, that

means that agreement must be reached on matters that require formal ministerial approval.

**Mr W Clarke:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the First Minister recognise that public confidence in the institutions builds when all aspects of the Pledge of Office are observed?

**The First Minister:** That is one factor that helps to bring about public confidence, but it is not the only one. People want the Assembly to deliver, and that requires the Assembly and the Executive to make expeditious and sensible decisions. That is what builds public confidence. Those decisions must be made in the context of the ministerial code and the Pledge of Office.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the First Minister agree that greater integration and cohesion in OFMDFM would send out a much more positive message to the general public and help to realise the full potential of devolution?

**The First Minister:** In listening to the Member, the Assembly will recognise that he draws from his experience of the most divided OFMDFM, in which his party and the Ulster Unionist Party held the main positions. At times the atmosphere was so bad that they could not even talk to each other. They produced approximately half the number of decisions that the current OFMDFM has made in a shorter period. I recognise that the Member draws his experience from an Executive that collapsed on four occasions.

**Mr K Robinson:** If the powers of the First Minister and deputy First Minister really are equal, why do they have different designations? Surely that alone suggests that some are more equal than others.

**The First Minister:** Let us be clear that certain statutory powers must be exercised jointly, as recognised in the legislation. Effectively, that means that meetings of the Executive have to be jointly chaired, the agendas of those meetings have to be jointly agreed and decisions have to be jointly taken. Outside of that, there is not a statutory requirement. However, in the interests of good practice, there is agreement about how we proceed on most occasions.

3.00 pm

We must recognise that the Executive brings together four parties into a mandatory coalition, but it is not a coalition of those who chose to be together. Therefore, there will be ideological and other differences in our approaches. However, given the differences in the history and backgrounds from which we have come, there have been remarkable levels of agreement. The fact that we were able to agree a Programme for Government, a Budget and an investment strategy in a very short time is to the credit of all those who took part in those negotiations.

Rather than drawing attention to the few areas of disagreement, we should draw attention to the hundreds of areas on which we have been able to agree and move forward, but, of course, that is not a trendy thing for newspapers to emphasise.

## REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### Urban Waste Water Directive

1. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the implementation of the urban waste water treatment directive.

(AQO 245/10)

**The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. One of the key aims of Northern Ireland Water's investment programme is to ensure that appropriate treatment is in place in new and existing works to meet the requirements and standards of the directive. The responsibility for implementing the urban waste water treatment directive rests with the Department of the Environment (DOE), which regulates discharges under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999. Therefore, NI Water needs DOE's permission before it can discharge into waterways or underground strata.

We are currently investing £1 million every working day to improve our water and sewerage infrastructure and services. I will ensure that NI Water continues to provide the investment that is needed to improve our environment and meet the aims of the directive.

**Mr Beggs:** I thank the Minister for his answer. To meet the urban waste water treatment directive, Northern Ireland Water does not propose to treat secondary sewage but to discharge untreated sewage from Ballycarry, Whitehead and Ballystrudder into the mouth of Belfast Lough. Is the Minister aware that the threshold in England for such amounts of water is a population of 2,000, whereas it is 7,500 in Northern Ireland? Will he review that figure and ensure that large amounts of untreated sewage will not be discharged into such an environmentally sensitive area adjacent to areas of special scientific interest and in which the Gobbins cliff path proposal is imminent in the next number of years?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I appreciate the Member's concern. He has to bear in mind the difference when it comes to the standards that are applied. He particularly referred to the standards that were adopted in Britain, which are known as the Meacher principles. Those followed a period of very substantial investment in water and sewerage infrastructure in Britain, which was something from which we did not benefit.

It is not correct to describe what is being discharged in places like Cloughfin, Whitehead, Ballycarry and Ballystrudder as raw sewage. I understand that the proposed discharge at Cloughfin, in particular, will consist of secondary treated effluent from a works at Ballycarry, along with screened waste water from Ballystrudder and Whitehead. The combined population equivalent is less than 10,000, and, as the effluent is discharged into coastal water, secondary treatment is not required.

We will continue to invest as best we can. As I said in my original answer, we invest about £1 million every working day to try to secure the best possible system. We work closely in compliance with DOE and the environmental services, and we work to comply with the guidelines that we have been set. We will continue to make that investment to improve all our coastal waters.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline what the DOE's legal obligations are under the current urban waste water treatment directive?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Department of the Environment is responsible for implementing the urban waste water treatment directive, which, as I said, regulates discharges under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999. Therefore, Northern Ireland Water needs DOE's permission before it can discharge into waterways or underground strata. The Environment Agency has to be satisfied with the propositions that are brought forward by NIW before it will give its consent.

**Mr Dallat:** The Minister said that £1 million a day is being spent on water treatment. Will he clarify whether there are any additional costs that relate directly to implementing this directive?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** There would certainly be additional costs if we were not to implement the directive. At one stage, fines for not implementing the waste water treatment directive were threatened by the EU, but we have kept ahead of requirements. Hence the necessity for a sustained high level of investment in water and sewerage infrastructure, which was largely neglected for the previous 20 years in respect of substantial investments. Therefore, there are implications if we do not invest and fully implement the waste water treatment directive. The drive behind securing the necessary finances is to keep us ahead of infraction costs from the EU.

### Regional Development Strategy

2. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Regional Development what action his Department is taking to

maximise participation in the public workshops on the regional development strategy. (AQO 246/10)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I intend to hold consultation events in each of the 11 new council areas. Such events proved productive during the early stages of the review last year. I propose to use a number of ways to maximise participation. The events will be advertised in daily and weekly newspapers and on my Department's website. All those who attended the pre-consultation workshops and for whom we have addresses will be personally invited.

I intend to ask members of the external working group, which was formed to help to ensure that the work on the review and the strategy was carried out in a robust and open manner, to target those they represent. That should capture representatives from NGOs, businesses, local government, house builders, academia, the planning profession and cross-border groups.

Personal invitations will also be sent to individuals and organisations on my Department's consultation list, which includes the Equality Commission; the Community Relations Council; voluntary, community and trade union groups; and organisations representing the various categories included in section 75. All MLAs and local councillors will also be included.

I have asked my officials to ensure that venues are accessible and that timings do not exclude anyone from participating.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I take the opportunity to congratulate the Minister's local team on winning the Armagh junior championship yesterday.

How will the regional development strategy take account of planning reform?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** We will obviously work in conjunction with all the Departments. The review of the regional development strategy is an Executive document that is being carried forward by the Department for Regional Development (DRD). The redrafting of that document requires us to work with each and every Department. There is a particularly close working relationship between DRD and DOE in developing proposals for new key roles and responsibilities for central government with regard to regional planning. Hence, we have worked with all Government Departments but particularly closely with the DOE, given the overlap between it and my Department.

**Mrs Long:** What discussions have there been between DRD and DOE about the planning reform process, particularly in ensuring coherence between the local development plans and the overriding, Northern Ireland-wide regional development strategy?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** As I said, a key part of the review of the strategy is to make

sure that it works properly. There are a number of issues in the melting pot in relation to that. There is the review of planning itself, but there is also the change in how planning will be processed through the new local government structures. Therefore, we have had to work particularly closely with DOE to ensure that the regional development strategy that we are revising fits in with all of that. I had meetings with Sammy Wilson when he was Minister of the Environment; I believe that I recall meeting Arlene Foster when she was the Minister; and I look forward to continuing that discussion with the new Environment Minister.

**Dr McDonnell:** I thank the Minister for his answers. Does he agree with me that regional development for border areas is a cross-border issue? Will he outline what in-depth discussions have taken place with the Irish Government about regional development in areas that overlap the border?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Of course that is key to our development. For a number of reasons, I felt that the 'Shaping Our Future' document produced in 2000-02 was out of date. Some of them were environmental issues that had increasingly come to the fore and needed to be addressed, but a key issue was that the all-Ireland dimension of the working institutions needed to be reflected more. Therefore, a number of people whose organisations have a cross-border element are included in the working group to deal with the matter.

The Member will know that we have been working on spatial planning, not just with the Department with which I regularly liaise in the North/South Ministerial Council meetings but with the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in the South, which is headed by John Gormley. We have launched not only an all-Ireland spatial planning process but specific processes with respect to Newry/Dundalk and the north-west. Although those are key elements, there has been insufficient recognition of the cross-border potential of the regional development strategy, so we will work with the new local councils — a substantial number of which will be in border areas — to ensure that they are also able to develop those relationships.

### Public Transport: Bilingual Signage

3. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps his Department is taking to encourage bilingual signage in public transport depots. (AQO 247/10)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** My Department is considering a Translink paper on the use of bilingual passenger information, which suggests that it would be possible to provide bilingual destination

screens on the real-time information points at bus stops. However, the practicalities need to be worked through, and the bus routes for which that would be appropriate must be identified. We will respond to those proposals in due course.

Translink has informed me that it will respond positively to any requests to improve any forms of information that it provides to the public, as it has done in locations such as Dungannon and west Belfast. That approach applies to bus and rail services. For example, Translink has provided ad hoc information in Irish, including school safety material and timetables, at bus shelters at specific locations. A small number of Goldline cross-border services have bilingual destination screens, and an Irish translation service is available on the Translink website. Translink has also informed me that it will be including multilingual signage at Newry railway station, the practicalities of which are being finalised.

**Mr Brady:** I thank the Minister for his answer. What is his Department doing to promote the use of the Irish language through services that are provided by its agencies, such as Translink?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Recently, the Department worked with Raidió Fáilte to develop Irish language advertisements to promote our door-to-door transport and concessionary travel services in Belfast. Literature to promote door-to-door services is also being made available in Irish. I have also been told by Translink that it provides school safety information and guides in Irish on how to use its services. At a local level, Translink has made information available in Irish on bus services at two bus stops with known Irish language links. Ulsterbus cross-border services 274 and 296, operating from Derry, have bilingual destination signs, and an Irish translation service is available on the Translink website.

**Mr I McCrea:** Does the Minister agree that, in Northern Ireland, there is not a large number of people who require information in or are even able to speak the Irish language? Given his and other Departments' efficiency savings requirements, does the Minister agree that providing bilingual information is not a prudent use of public finances?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I am disappointed, because I thought that the Member would have been heartened by our efforts to promote the Irish language, which shows that you cannot please all the people all the time.

It is not a matter of the Department throwing money away on a whim. First, in the context of the Department's overall budget, the costs are not substantial. Secondly, under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, we are obliged to

ensure that we promote languages, and my Department and its agencies take that obligation very seriously.

**Mr Kennedy:** When will appropriate signage be provided at the land frontier between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland where the A1 meets the N1, given that that road has been in operation for some years?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I will have to take advice from the Member on what he considers to be appropriate signage because, like him, I am a south Armagh man, and I have yet to get lost on that road. Nor have I had any requests from members of the public who have got lost travelling across the border. If we are really on an efficiency drive, perhaps removing the border would solve all those problems.

3.15 pm

## Water Supply

4. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister for Regional Development when he expects to make a decision on the future funding for water provision. (AQO 248/10)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I have frequently to explain that it is not for me alone to decide the future of funding arrangements for water and sewerage services. It is a matter for the Executive collectively. Over the coming months, the Executive will make decisions on the funding of public services generally for 2010-11, and this will include the funding of water and sewerage services. We remain committed to consulting publicly on any decisions we take arising from the Independent Water Review Panel's strand-two report.

**Mr Cree:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he give the House a full breakdown of the cost of a further deferment of water charges, were such a decision to be taken?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The financial implications of a further deferral of water charges beyond 2009-2010 are as follows. The Department is providing about £270 million for 2009-2010. Initial estimates suggest that deferring charges over the period 2010-13 would extend the departmental expenditure limit by something like £1 billion. However, those costs could vary, depending on the nature of any Executive decision.

Whether or not households pay an additional contribution, if we want a world-class water and sewerage service, it must be paid for. As I said in answer to a previous question, it costs around £1 million each working day to deliver water and sewerage services. Were there no additional contributions, money would have to come out of the Executive's overall Budget, because there is a legal obligation under article 213 of the Water and Sewerage Services Order 2006 to meet

those costs in 2009-2010. It would increase the pressure on the Budget and limit the money available for other public services. As I have said, it is a matter for the Executive to decide how that should be done. If we agree to deferral, the Executive will have to balance competing demands, as with any expenditure.

**Mr Gallagher:** Does the Minister accept that, although we are led to believe that domestic charges have been deferred, some people are being billed for the use of water in their homes? Given that those concerned are mainly vulnerable people in supported housing developments, will the Minister undertake to ensure that they do not receive any further bills for their water? Will he work with his colleagues in the Executive to sort out the problem that has given rise to those domestic charges?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Following a decision taken by the Executive some time ago and supported by all the parties represented in the Executive, bills have been introduced for all non-domestic properties. That has led, in some instances, to mistakes in the system for identifying which properties should be billed. The Member has raised the issue of bills issued to vulnerable adults; I regret that that has happened, and I regret any distress that that might have caused.

I constantly emphasise to NIW that its information systems must be as accurate as possible to ensure that both the properties to which it sends bills and the amounts charged are correctly identified. It is inevitable that mistakes will occur in a new system. This is the result of an outworking of a decision taken by the Executive some time ago. It is incumbent on NIW to correct the mistakes as quickly as possible and so ensure that people feel more confident in the system.

## A5 Dual Carriageway

5. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the level of concern in the farming community about the proposed A5 route. (AQO 249/10)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I am fully aware of the concern in the farming community that has arisen as a result of the announcement of the preferred route for the proposed A5 dual carriageway. That concern is understandable, given the scale of the project and the number of farmers and other landowners involved.

Roads Service and its project engineers, Mouchel, are nearing completion of their first round of landowner visits. Those meetings have clarified a number of issues for affected landowners, and I understand that they have gone some way to reducing concern in the farming community.

**Mr Buchanan:** I thank the Minister for his response. However, I ask the Minister whether those concerns are being fully addressed and whether the voice of the farming community is being heard. Is there the potential to move the roadway beyond the 20-metre buffer zone in order to prevent the separation of dwelling houses from farmyards?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** As the Member rightly said, there is a 20-metre buffer zone along the line of the preferred route. There has been particular concern about this project. That is inevitable and unsurprising, and I understand it fully because this is the biggest road project that we have ever undertaken. However, it follows a pattern similar to that of other major road projects in the past 10 to 15 years, all of which have involved land acquisition and, in some cases, property acquisition and discussions and negotiations about compensation and access for farms along the way.

Routing a major road such as this through somebody's land is bound to cause upset; that is accepted. There is scope to alter the route after discussion with landowners. However, the Member must realise — I am sure that he does — that, if the route was to be altered significantly, its line would be thrown off, and that would affect another landowner down the road. Therefore, there is a limit to the amount of alteration. Part of the aim of the negotiations that are going on individually with all the landowners along the way is to secure the best possible solution for those landowners and the road project.

**Lord Morrow:** I have listened carefully to what the Minister has said about the proposed A5. Will he give an assurance that all issues will be looked at carefully, in particular the alternatives to the preferred route that have been suggested? I am thinking in particular of the section from Aghnacloy to the Ballygawley roundabout.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I assure the Member that careful consideration will be given to all aspects of the project. The preferred route has been set. There is some flexibility in it. The Member has raised the issue of the funding of our roads before; I presume that that is what he is referring to in relation to Ballygawley to Aghnacloy. The current upgrading of that route was part of a Design, Build, Finance and Operate (DBFO) package that also included the dual carriageway in and around Newry, a number of junctions on the A1 between Newry and Sprucefield, the dualling of the A4 between Dungannon and Ballygawley, and the improvements to the A4 and Annaghilla Road towards Enniskillen, just west of the Ballygawley roundabout.

The cost of that entire package is £320 million; the Tullyvar element is only approximately 2% of that. The decision taken by Roads Service not to renegotiate to remove that element from the package was the



correct one, given the time that it took to put that complete package together.

Other factors that influenced the decision to keep the Tullyvar section as it is being built are that the land had been vested, compensation had been agreed with a number of landowners, and the A5 Tullyvar section will be in service for six years from 2009 to 2015 before the A5 is completed.

**Dr Deeny:** I welcome the Minister's comments. I also welcome the plans for the A5 from the points of view of infrastructure and safety. First, is there a time frame for construction to start on the A5? Secondly, with regard to safety, will the proposed dual carriageway of the A5 be based on that of the A4, with no right turns off or onto the carriageway?

**The Minister for Regional Development:** There is a lot of design to be done, negotiation and discussion to go on and compensation issues to be sorted out with landowners. Inevitably, there will be a public inquiry in which people in the area will have a chance to put forward their point of view again and to have it heard by an inspector. However, the intended construction date is 2012 to 2015.

I confirm that it is a high-grade dual carriageway, which does not involve crossing over its central median. The junctions will be grade separated to almost motorway standard. Motorway standard involves a more substantial take of land than a dual carriageway does, and that would have created even more problems for the local farming community than this project has.

### **Greyabbey: Main Street**

6. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Regional Development, given the deteriorating condition of Main Street, Greyabbey and the fact that work on the sewers will not begin until Autumn 2010, what action he intends to take in the interim to repair the road, which is causing damage to vehicles. (AQO 250/10)

7. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Regional Development if his Department will make temporary arrangements to improve the condition of the road in lower Main Street, Greyabbey. (AQO 251/10)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 6 and 7 together.

Roads Service has a commitment to carry out a major improvement scheme at Main Street, Greyabbey. However, the extent of that scheme is such that the funding required has not been available. I am not in a position to provide Members with a definite timescale for the implementation of the scheme. NI Water has given notice of its intention to lay a new section of

sewer in Main Street, Greyabbey, in the autumn of 2010. I am sure that Members will appreciate the Roads Service's reluctance to proceed, even were funding available, with the reconstruction/resurfacing scheme where it will be subject to excavation and reinstatement within a relatively short period.

In the interim, Roads Service intends to carry out some areas of extensive patching on the worst sections of the carriageway. The road will continue to be inspected under the Roads Service's cyclical regime, and any actionable defects will be noted for repair, in line with maintenance guidelines.

**Mr Shannon:** This is the first question that I have had selected for oral answer since the Assembly's return from summer recess. I will pick the lottery numbers today as well; I might have a chance of winning that.

Not only is Greyabbey's Main Street the worst road in the Ards borough and the Strangford constituency, it is the worst road in Northern Ireland. It is even worse than the roads in the west of the Province; I say that for the benefit of the Members from the west of the Province who are in the Chamber.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member will have to come to a question very soon.

**Mr Shannon:** Are the Minister and his Department aware, as I am, that the shock absorbers of cars are being broken on that road and that damage is being caused to tractors and trailers? I know that the Minister comes from a farming community. Is he aware of the stress that there is on the vehicles that travel up and down that road? The road resembles a potato field or a war zone; it is the worst road in the world. The Minister should be doing more about it. He should not be putting it off by saying that his Department will do some remedial repairs. It is not remedial repairs that we want; we want long-term repairs carried out now.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** The Deputy Speaker is sensitive because he knows of worse roads in his constituency.

I understand what Mr Shannon is saying. I have been in Greyabbey at the invitation of Mr Shannon and Kieran McCarthy. I understand that the road is in a poor state, and Roads Service is committed to trying to address that. However, a major sewerage scheme will be dug through the road, so it does not make sense to do anything with the road now. One of the complaints that we receive most frequently relates to the digging up of roads by the likes of NIW, Phoenix Gas or a telecoms company six or nine months or a year after Roads Service has laid a good surface. People always say that the level of reinstatement rarely matches the original scheme. Therefore, given that there is a major scheme to go down in the near future, it makes sense to wait until after that. I am sure that Roads Service

will be contacted on many occasions between now and then by Mr Shannon and Mr McCarthy, but it will continue to try to keep the road in as good a standard as it can in the interim.

**Mr McCarthy:** I am disappointed with the Minister's response, but it was not unexpected. As the Minister said, he was in Greyabbey, and, at that time, the road was in a deplorable condition. The Minister should know that it is in a hellish condition now; it is in an even worse condition than it was 18 months ago. There should be no excuse for the delay in funding. We have heard about funding over and over again. Come autumn 2010, I have no doubt that the issue will be put on the long finger. Main Street in Greyabbey is the worst road not only in Northern Ireland, but in the Thirty-two Counties.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member must come to a question.

**Mr McCarthy:** It is the worst road in Europe. Rather than spending millions of pounds on consultancy fees, about which we have heard much criticism in recent times, does the Minister agree that Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water should plough money into front line services and give the people of Greyabbey some sort of modern main street that will encourage visitors?

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member must come to a question and a subject.

**Mr McCarthy:** It is the main road to the old abbey, and we should —

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to resume his seat. I call the Minister to respond.

**The Minister for Regional Development:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. There is a major scheme to be carried out in that area, and I am sure that, if we relaid the road before that, Mr McCarthy and Mr Shannon would be the first Members to their feet to ask why my Department laid a new surface only to let NIW dig it up six months or a year later.

The spending on consultancy fees assists such major schemes. There is a simplistic view that spending on consultants is, sometimes, a waste of money. However, if we do not seek expertise on waste-water treatment and water systems — NIW does not have it in-house — we will not get the types of system required to bring us up to an appropriate standard. That type of spending is necessary, and it helps deliver the sort of scheme that the Member will be looking for.

I understand the Member's frustration, but his constituency is not the only one with poor roads. Recently, I commissioned the Snaith report, and I invite Members to read it. I do not want to adopt the mantra "Give me the money, and I will build the roads", which is similar to that used by some other

Ministers. However, the report recognises that our roads system, which is largely rural and not built for the volume or weight of traffic that it is experiencing, is under severe pressure and not being repaired properly, and that will store up problems for us in the future.

I have been arguing for that, and I recognise that to be the case. Those roads require more investment, but unfortunately, in the current financial climate, more investments in those roads will leave less money for investment in other services.

3.30 pm

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member is not in his place for question 8.

**Mr Storey:** I can assure you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I am in my place and don't you forget it. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** My apologies. I made a mistake and I apologise for it. I do not wish to be threatened by the Member. *[Laughter.]*

## Speed Limits

8. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister for Regional Development when he intends to bring forward the 'Setting Local Speed Limits' policy. (AQO 252/10)

**The Minister for Regional Development:** I am tempted to say that the Member should stay in his place.

Members will be aware that Roads Service published the review of its policy on the setting of speed limits earlier this year. Public consultation was completed in April 2009, and in addition to feedback from other Government Departments and key stakeholders, a total of 54 public responses were received. The feedback was generally supportive of the policy proposals; however, several issues remain to be resolved. Nevertheless, I hope to be in a position to publish the final policy document by the end of 2009.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Personal Protection Weapons

#### *Debate resumed on amendment to motion:*

That this Assembly notes the dissident threat to serving and retired military personnel and police officers; and calls on the Chief Constable to review urgently the policy on personal protection weapons. — [Mr B McCrea.]

#### *Which amendment was:*

Leave out all after “this Assembly” and insert

“calls on the Chief Constable to ensure that any application for a personal protection weapon is considered only on the basis of the level of threat against the applicant”. — [Ms Anderson.]

**Mr Kennedy:** The PSNI policy directive on personal protection weapons, now happily to be reviewed, states:

“It is the intention of Her Majesty’s Government in Northern Ireland to see as early a return as possible to normal security arrangements and a situation where the need for firearms for personal protection firearms is substantially reduced, or no longer necessary.”

That is a desire that the Ulster Unionist Party shares, and it will continue to work for those circumstances to be brought about. However, I am afraid that the current Government and, regrettably, some elements in the PSNI, are engaged in wishful thinking over their assessment of the current security position and the level of threat to former police officers and military personnel. There is a very great danger that in order to uphold Government policy, the senior command of the PSNI will ignore the reality on the ground and put the lives of numerous people in Northern Ireland in danger.

There has been a litany of incidents, most recently the deplorable bomb attack in east Belfast on 16 October 2009. That attack, together with the murders in Antrim early this year and the murder of Constable Stephen Carroll in Craigavon, illustrates that while we have moved forward in recent years, the threat from dissident Republicans is a real and growing one.

The Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) began reporting seven years ago and since then, and particularly with the introduction of the PSNI policy on personal protection weapons, there has been a marked reduction in the granting and renewal of those weapons for ex-service personnel and ex-police officers.

The Ulster Unionist Party is not into scaremongering, and it recognises that an overreaction from the authorities can play into the hands of dissidents and others. However, what we are dealing with is the personal security of thousands of men and women and their families, and the granting of protection to those who have served Northern Ireland through its darkest days, and who often held the line and provided people

in the community with the confidence to go about their daily lives.

Along with other Members of the House, I have received substantial correspondence and representation from former members of the security forces who are concerned for their personal safety. Although I recognise the work that has been carried out by the PSNI and the Garda Síochána to prevent dissident attacks, it is clear from recent events that intelligence does not always adequately reflect those threats. Therefore, I do not fully understand why the PSNI has taken such an inflexible attitude on the issue.

In the current climate of dissident threat, the granting of a PPW only when a specific threat is provable in the past six months is an inadequate and clumsy policy. I hope that the new Chief Constable not only reviews the policy but changes it in line and commensurate with the threat that exists.

The people who hold, or wish to hold, personal protection weapons pose no threat to this society. They are law-abiding citizens who have upheld law and order in Northern Ireland through its most difficult history, and those men and women should not be punished for that service. Nobody wants to go back to the past, and we should all do everything in our power to ensure that dissident murderers are not allowed to drag us back there. However, that desire should not cloud our judgement when it comes to the threats and dangers that exist today. I support the motion.

**Mr A Maginness:** We all recognise the need for personal protection weapons in certain restricted circumstances. They are, alas, needed in our society. However, applications for personal protection weapons must be based on a considered analysis of people’s personal circumstances and the threat to their personal safety or the safety of their families; it is important to keep that in mind.

The SDLP’s objection to the substantive motion is based on the fact that there cannot be a generalised view of personal protection weapons. There cannot be a policy that says that a class, or classes, of people should be granted those weapons automatically. That is the substance of the motion, and I do not think that I do injury to the motion by saying so. If there were a live threat to an individual, of course a personal protection weapon should be granted.

There is a threat, in particular from so-called dissident republicans. However, that threat should not activate a generalised policy of granting personal protection weapons to a class, or classes, of individuals. The granting of a personal protection weapon (PPW) should be based on an individual assessment, and the Chief Constable and his colleagues had embarked on that policy in an attempt to slow down, or at least limit, the granting of personal protection weapons. If the

security situation were to deteriorate to a point where there is a much greater threat to serving or retired police officers, that policy ought to be reviewed. However, we have not reached that point.

**Mr B McCrea:** I am interested in the conciliatory tones of the Member. What bases would he use to decide that the threat had changed? Would it be information from the Independent Monitoring Commission, the Chief Constable or the Assembly? How will he know when it is time to issue PPWs to everyone? Will we have to wait until it is too late?

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

**Mr A Maginness:** With respect to the Member, the issuing of personal protection weapons to everyone is not a desirable policy, and the Member should think carefully about that statement.

When the security situation reaches such a level that the Chief Constable, his colleagues and other sources come to the conclusion that there is a real threat to a class of people, the Chief Constable will be duty-bound to change his policy on the granting of personal protection weapons. Until that point, it is right and proper for the Chief Constable to say that personal protection weapons will be granted when a real and live threat to an individual has been shown to be extant. In those circumstances a personal protection weapon should be granted.

It is not desirable for legally held weapons to be widespread in society, because that gives rise to problems. We know that, sadly, there have been circumstances in which personal protection weapons have been misused, not to threaten the peace of society, but in other circumstances. That is to be regretted. The more legally held weapons that there are, the greater the risk that those unfortunate situations may develop. Our view is that the granting of personal protection weapons should be based on a personal assessment of an acute threat to the individual. That is the way it should be done, and that is the way that the Chief Constable is carrying out his duty to his officers, and, indeed, to individual citizens in the community. That is the position that my party supports.

**Mr Buchanan:** First, I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board. I support the motion. Although a review is under way, it is important to bring the matter to the attention and focus of the Chief Constable, Mr Matt Baggott, given the widespread concern across Northern Ireland. This is especially the case in isolated rural areas, where serving and ex-members of the security forces are finding it extremely difficult to have their licences for personal protection weapons renewed.

At the outset, I will state that I do not support the amendment, for the simple reason that it calls for what

is already in place. Time and again, we have seen how that policy is failing the needs of individual members of the security forces because there is no apparent specific threat on their lives. My office is visited continually by people who have been refused the re-granting of their PPW licence simply because there is deemed to be no specific threat to their lives, yet there are clear examples of people who have been murdered when there has been no specific threat on their lives. Members have mentioned the two soldiers in Massereene Army Barracks in Antrim and the police officer in Craigavon. There was no specific threat to their lives, yet they were brutally murdered.

The policy recently adopted by the PSNI, that unless there is a specific —

**Mr A Maginness:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Buchanan:** With all due respect, the Member has had his say. The policy that the renewal of licences for PPWs will not be granted unless there is a specific threat on one's life — irrespective of the increased dissident republican threat — flies in the face of all logic. At almost every meeting of the Policing Board, we are briefed on the increased dissident republican threat and are told that it is higher than it has been for a number of years. We are seeing the results of that threat across Northern Ireland. No later than last Friday, there was an officer in my office who had received a text message from the PSNI reminding him of the increased security threat and advising him to review his personal security; yet, despite that, he is not deemed to have a specific threat to his life.

In rural areas, people who are having PPWs removed are being placed in vulnerable positions by the current policy. The Assembly must give them its full support. The message must go out from the Chamber that Members are giving them our full support.

I will give the House a prime example. One of my constituents served in the UDR and then the RIR for 23 years. During the last 10 years of his service he served along the border in Fermanagh and Tyrone. He knew the terrorists, and was obviously known to them. Following the abandonment of the RIR, he pursued a career as a specialist joiner, and his work with his employer now takes him back into those same areas, along the border in Fermanagh and Tyrone; areas where the dissident threat is taking place and where lives have almost been taken.

However, his application to have his PPW reissued was refused, because it was deemed that there was no specific threat to his life. The irony is that the PSNI in F district, which covers Omagh and Fermanagh, advised that constituent that he was placing his life in extreme danger by working in those areas.

3.45 pm

That is the flaw in the policy, which I ask Matt Baggott to examine and reverse. It is a clear example of a policy that fails individual police members. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the House to give its full support to the people who live and work in isolated rural areas, who feel vulnerable and who are having their PPWs removed and feel that their lives are still at risk. It is disgraceful for the police to simply disregard concern for personal safety, the same concern that led those people to protect the country in the past. That must be addressed urgently, and a clear message must be sent to the Chief Constable that the current policy is wrong. It must be reversed to protect the lives of current and former members of the police and anyone else who holds a PPW.

**Mr Spratt:** I support the motion, and I declare my membership of the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

All Members should be aware and take account of the serious threat that exists in the Province. In the past number of weeks and months, serious incidents have taken place at Meigh and Forkhill, and two soldiers and a police officer, Stevie Carroll, were murdered. In those incidents, no specific information was given that something was going to happen. Moreover, the incident that took place at the weekend was particularly sinister, and we should all bear that in mind. The device that was used in that incident was of a type that has not been used in a long time, and, without mentioning the specific detail that I have heard, we should all be concerned. I know that serving members of the Police Service and of the security forces are very concerned about that incident.

Over the past number of months, there has been no indication whatever of any specific threat to individuals. The policy that the previous Chief Constable and Assistant Chief Constable, both of whom have now left the Province, adopted was flawed in that it sent out seriously mixed messages to the community. They said, on the one hand, that there was a severe threat across the board, but on the other hand, they took away personal protection weapons.

On Saturday, yesterday and today, I received calls from former Police Service colleagues who have not carried personal protection weapons for a number of years but who have now returned to doing so. Sadly, they have also returned to checking underneath their vehicles. In an earlier debate today, Sir Reg Empey said that Members should also look at their personal security, and we should all be doing that.

I am sad that SDLP and Sinn Féin Members are trying to pull a smokescreen over the issue. Earlier, Dolores Kelly said that she is not aware of a time when a personal protection weapon has ever been used. The counter-argument is whether we know how many lives

have been saved simply because someone was carrying a personal protection weapon. The answer is that we do not. Carrying such a weapon gives folks the reassurance that they need.

**Mr Kennedy:** Does the Member agree that often the most serious threat is a silent one; a threat of which the intelligence services are unaware and of which they are, therefore, unable to inform an individual? Protection by way of a personal protection weapon is, sadly, necessary for an increasing number of former police and military personnel who still live in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member will have another minute in which to speak.

**Mr Spratt:** I agree absolutely with the Member. The silent threat was always the problem because, often, it led to people being shot in the back and murdered like dogs in the streets of Northern Ireland. That happened time and time again. I hope that that situation never returns.

With regard to the Member's point about intelligence, I believe that at present, the intelligence system does not feed back the information that it should. There is a serious deficit in the information that is being obtained by the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the security services. We do not know of there having been any feedback about, or warning of, a specific threat against an individual before any of the incidents that have taken place during the past number of months.

The incident that took place on Friday 16 October 2009 was particularly sinister because it was quite obvious that the attackers knew that the police officer normally travelled in the passenger seat of the vehicle. The device was planted under the passenger seat in expectation that the officer would travel in the vehicle. Members will have heard Chief Superintendent Maguire say that in all probability, had the officer been in the passenger seat of the car, he would have lost his life that morning.

My time is almost up. All Members must be aware of those issues. The motion is, certainly, timely. Thankfully, a security review is under way. I would be surprised if the Chief Constable does not have to find a different policy as a result of the ongoing review. I support the motion and reject the amendment.

**Mr Weir:** Like others, I declare an interest as a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I support the motion and reject the amendment. At the outset, I must say that where the amendment has come from is no great surprise, and the remarks from the party opposite have been, sadly, predictable. Even more disappointing is the attitude that has been taken by the SDLP in the debate. It has been remarked that

personal protection weapons are a comfort blanket. Such blasé remarks are fairly disgraceful.

It has been said that the withdrawal of personal protection weapons is part of the removal of guns from society. As if there were some equivalence, the removal of personal protection weapons has been equated — perhaps, unintentionally, but equated nonetheless — with the disarmament of paramilitary groups. It has also been suggested that dissidents would move in and try to exploit any degree of political impasse. In certain regards, that almost gives cover to their nefarious activities.

One Member said that the situation should be reviewed only when a more widespread threat has been identified against a group of people. At what point would there be acceptance that the threat has moved from a specific threat against individuals to a general threat towards a wider group? Must we wait until one, two, three, four, or any number of former security forces personnel are murdered before the situation is reviewed?

Although, on occasion, it can be due to a pleasant event, more often the House employs its procedure to bring matters of the day to the Floor of the Chamber because a tragedy has taken place, either in a wider Northern Ireland context or on a more specific basis in a constituency. Must we wait until there are matters of the day in which we must, sadly, comment on the death of a former member of the security forces before that situation changes? Must we wait and try to close the door after the horse has bolted? The time is right to take action now. I, therefore, welcome the Chief Constable's commitment to conduct a review.

Some Members quoted statistics on personal protection weapons, and the SDLP argued for the removal of guns from society. Just over 3,000 of the 62,000 firearm certificates issued in Northern Ireland are for PPWs. The actions that have been taken will not make a significant numerical difference to the overall number of firearms; however, it does make a significant difference to the security of individual officers.

Some Members spoke about the problem of hanging this debate on a specific threat. However, the incidents in the constituencies of South Antrim, Upper Bann and East Belfast send out a message from the dissidents that no area in Northern Ireland is safe. My constituency of North Down is home to a large number of former security force members, and I do not want one of them to tragically lose his or her life before it is accepted that the general threat from dissidents potentially applies to former police officers.

Senior members of the police and the IMC have said that dissidents pose a greater threat to security now than at any stage over the past 10 years. Yet, the way in which the police have applied the policy on

PPWs in recent years shows that they are moving in the opposite direction. In 2005, 25 requests for PPWs were refused.

**Mr A Maginness:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Weir:** I will give way in a second. In 2006, nine requests were refused, and in the past year, more than 300 requests have been refused. Similarly, in 2007, one weapon was returned; in 2008, one weapon was returned; and in 2009, 28 weapons were returned.

**Mr A Maginness:** I thank the Member for giving way. I wish to make two points. First, the SDLP is not suggesting that there is equivalence between the disarmament of people involved in paramilitary activity and the removal of personal protection weapons from members of the security forces. Secondly, if the Chief Constable was not satisfied that there was not a threat to those individuals, he certainly would neither remove certificates nor fail to grant them.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

**Mr Weir:** I accept that that suggestion was probably inadvertent. However, members of the SDLP need to make their remarks a lot clearer. What Dolores Kelly said earlier about this issue being part of the removal of guns from society put it on an equivalence with paramilitaries. As regards the former Chief Constable's opinion, the situation is moving rapidly, and things have changed over the past year. I look forward to seeing whether, if the new Chief Constable reverses the position on PPWs, the SDLP will embrace that.

**Mr A Maginness:** *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Weir:** The Member is making some remarks from a sedentary position that I cannot quite make out.

The reality is —

**Mr A Maginness:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Weir:** I have only six seconds left, so I do not have any time to give way. It is important that we put down a marker now to take action that saves lives, rather than wait until it is too late.

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

**Mr Weir:** I, therefore, support the motion.

**Mr Shannon:** I support the motion and oppose the amendment. Like other Members, I condemn the car bombing incident in Belfast on Friday. The motion was proposed before that bombing took place, and my colleagues did not imagine that such an incident could happen when they tabled it. However, the incident illustrates the fact that military personnel and police officers are under the same threat and in as much danger as they were 10 years ago.

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

In 2002, weapons had already been issued to some PSNI recruits due to the increase in dissident threat at that time. Some student officers were issued with personal protection weapons because of an increased terrorist threat and the level of threat against them. Trainees have been targeted in the past. Indeed, a Catholic recruit in Antrim escaped injury in July 2002 after a bomb was discovered beneath his car. It was subsequently determined that personal protection weapons should be issued to those who felt that they needed to be protected from a threat. At that time, a very specific policy was sent out.

4.00 pm

In recent months, the threat against on-duty and off-duty officers has increased greatly. I know that my colleagues on the Policing Board are working extremely hard and have been vocal in their warning that the phasing out of the full-time police Reserve will place even more pressure on front line officers, which could lead to a breach in safety.

In recent weeks, dissident republicans have intensified their activities. Over the past year, 30 police officers have been so concerned about their safety that they have been forced to move house, which is a clear illustration of the threat that those officers are under. Statistics show that the targeting of security personnel, and threats against security personnel, are, unfortunately, not a thing of the past. Some of the figures are worrying: in the past two years, 420 viable devices have been found in 750 security alerts across Northern Ireland. There is a problem.

Concern is growing for former members of the security services as it emerges that, in the past 10 months, the police have removed 172 personal protection weapons from them. I have spoken to former constables and sergeants who have had their weapons taken off them and who feel extremely insecure at this time, as well as to ex-members of the UDR and the RIR who feel that they may not be safe in their homes. Those people feel safer when they are carrying a personal protection weapon.

Growing concern over the safety of officers comes amid revelations that, so far this year, the Police Service has removed personal weapons from 170 former members of the security forces. The 'Belfast Telegraph' obtained figures citing that 2,030 former security force members, police and army, have firearm certificates allowing them to carry a personal protection weapon.

Many people who come to my office, and to the offices of other Members, are concerned about losing their PPWs. Those who live and work in republican areas, where the dissident threat is high, need their personal weapons to be returned. Figures obtained under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 show that 172 handguns have been removed from security personnel

this year. Let me make it clear: the 172 handguns that have been removed from security personnel must be returned to give those people some security.

The Police Federation chairman, Terry Spence, said that he was deeply concerned about the security situation, and although the return of military support is not a move that the federation would like to see, he warned that police resources are being stripped to such a level that officers are struggling to deliver an effective Police Service. He said:

"The threat has greatly increased against our officers both on and off-duty. The situation is very serious and we have made it clear that we need the resources. The full-time reserve must be retained. They are very experienced in dealing with this type of activity. If they are going to be phased out this is going to put more pressure on officers on the frontline. It will breach the health, safety and welfare of those officers on the ground and we would have very serious concerns".

Resources are an issue.

Taking weapons from former servicemen and women is nothing short of insanity. People must be able to feel safe in their homes. Hailing from the Strangford area, a constituency that houses a large number of ex-service people, I know that the concern shown in my office is phenomenal. It is my belief that that is a warranted concern. I am concerned for the personal safety of a great many people from my area who have had personal weapons removed.

Our police force is on high alert. Although we are constantly assured that it is only a few dissidents carrying out such activities, they have the capacity to do damage. I do not want to see another family lose a loved one, especially one who had the training and the means with which to defend themselves, yet who had that taken away from them. If anything, more of our ex-security forces should have a PPW designated to them as a means of deterrent.

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

**Mr Shannon:** People are less likely to prowl around the home of a member of the security forces if they suspect that that person has a weapon that they are trained to use. I support the motion, but certainly not the amendment.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board.

A number of Members who spoke touched on the attack in east Belfast on Friday, and I join them in condemning that incident. There is no doubt that those responsible for that and similar actions over recent months want to plunge this society back into conflict. We should be mindful that those who carried out that attack want to see a knee-jerk overreaction. We need to be very measured in our response and mindful of that.

As a Member said, there are 61,977 firearm certificates in the North, including 3,334 personal protection weapons. It is clear that this society is awash with legally and illegally held firearms. We do not want our society to have an abundance of legal or illegal firearms. We want that situation to change, and it is changing.

The PSNI's personal protection weapon policy refers to a number of drivers for change, including the report into the Dunblane tragedy in Scotland. That report placed greater emphasis on firearm controls and on the need to re-examine regularly the suitability of a person and their reason for possessing a firearm, without simply renewing the existing certificate. That is a more sensible approach than handing out certificates *carte blanche*.

There were a number of tragedies in the recent conflict. In one incident, an RUC member used a personal firearm to kill three people in the Sinn Féin office on the Falls Road before turning his gun on himself. Therefore, there are examples in which the issuing of certificates for personal firearms can end in tragedy.

**Mr Spratt:** My understanding of the incident that the Member mentioned was that the officer had a service weapon, not a personal protection weapon. No firearms certificate was issued for that firearm; such weapons are still issued automatically to serving members of the PSNI from all sections of the community.

**Mr McKay:** That highlights the point that the more weapons there are in society, even those that are held by serving PSNI members, the more likely it is that something will go wrong. That is the case in every society and every police service. The less need there is for guns in society, the better. That is the situation that we need to work towards. The more guns there are in society, the more access there is to guns, and the more tragedies there will be.

Over the weekend, I attended an event on suicide prevention. Some of the workers in that field pointed out the number of tragedies that occur in American society due to the fact that access to guns is too great. Therefore, we need to be mindful of all the facts and statistics.

Martina Anderson said rightly that a verifiable threat to the applicant has to be identified before he or she is considered for a personal protection weapon. That has been discussed widely at the Policing Board's human rights committee.

Dolores Kelly mentioned weapons being stolen. Regardless of the statistics, the more weapons there are, the more risk there is that they will be stolen. As Mrs Kelly said, some retired officers are declining weapons, and I have come across a number of serving officers who feel uncomfortable carrying firearms while they conduct community policing.

**Mr B McCrea:** Does the Member agree that we are not trying to force weapons on officers who do not feel that they need them? We are trying to ensure that those officers who do think that they need them, or those who have had them in the past and still want them, can still have them.

**Mr McKay:** We are talking about former and serving PSNI officers, and we have to leave it to the Chief Constable to decide whether they are entitled to a weapon. We cannot just say that any serving officer is entitled to a weapon, because there is a risk involved in that. We must be cognisant of that risk before we agree motions such as this.

I want to have a situation in which the need for firearms for personal protection is reduced substantially or they are no longer necessary. There is an onus on us, as politicians, to ensure that the current process continues to work and that we do not give opportunities to those who would like to plunge our society back into conflict. That is why I support the amendment.

**Mr Elliott:** I thank those Members who took part in the debate. A number of Members expressed their condemnation and sympathy for the person who was injured in east Belfast last week. I want to put on record my condemnation of all terrorist attacks, including that in east Belfast last Friday.

The citizens of this Province have undergone almost 40 years of terrorist attacks, all of which must be condemned equally. They have all brought heartache and pain to society in Northern Ireland and further afield.

I will discuss some comments that Members made during the debate. My party colleague Basil McCrea set the scene for the debate and outlined why the Ulster Unionist Party tabled the motion. He outlined some useful assessments that were made by the Independent Monitoring Commission. The most recent Independent Monitoring Commission report, which Mr McCrea did not mention, said that the Continuity IRA and the Real IRA had been especially active, resulting in a more concentrated period of attacks than at any time since its first report in April 2004. That creates a detrimental situation here and highlights the serious effect on the community.

Martina Anderson proposed the amendment and said that, in cases where no threat is identified, a person should not be issued with a personal protection weapon. Numerous Members outlined the many occasions on which there was no specific threat to people, and explained how that did not prevent them from being murdered. That did not stop the brutal terrorist thugs in society targeting them. Ms Anderson said that people — and pointed the finger at us — were playing on people's worst fears. She should tell that to the families of people who have been murdered in our society and await their reaction.



Ian Paisley Jnr provided a helpful statistical overview of the situation. I thank him and his party colleagues for their support for the motion. He indicated that a review is under way. I sincerely hope that that review is genuine and not just a review for the sake of it, because we have heard during the debate whose policy we are implementing. That is outlined in Sinn Féin's amendment. That party's policy is in place, and we are implementing it. I will return to that matter later.

Dolores Kelly of the SDLP spoke next during the debate. Like many others, I was disappointed at the SDLP's stance and its views on the motion. She said that she was pleased that political interference had been removed from the decision-making process. I contend that the complete opposite is true. We have seen political interference in the existing policy, which the amendment outlines. It is unfortunate that Dolores Kelly attempted, in some way, to link the motion to religious and sectarian affiliation. That is saddening, and I am sorry that she went down that road. However, she made those remarks, and other Members challenged her. I hope that she reflects on her comments and realises that she was wrong.

Kieran McCarthy of the Alliance Party made a helpful contribution.

**Mr McCarthy:** It was short.

**Mr Elliott:** It was short but telling. He said that the vast majority of people, if not all of them, who are seeking PPWs at the minute do not want to be in that position. I totally agree. Most of the people who have approached me and others for help say that they do not want a PPW but, given the seriousness of the current situation, feel that they cannot do without them. I await the day when we do not want or need PPWs. At least one of my constituents gave up his PPW in the past, but has now reapplied and received it again.

**Mr I McCrea:** Does the Member agree that in parts of my constituency, certainly rural parts such as Pomeroy, people in minority communities feel under serious threat because of the increase in dissident activity?

4.15 pm

**Mr Elliott:** That goes to the heart of the motion and the debate. There are people who feel vulnerable, isolated and threatened, and who no longer want to be in that position, but they are at present.

Mr George Robinson mentioned vulnerable people in society who need protection. Lord Morrow spoke about the state of our society and how there was a need to retain personal protection weapons. My party colleague Danny Kennedy said that those who are affected by the current situation and who have asked for PPWs do not pose any threat, and it is they who feel threatened.

Mr Alban Maginness stated clearly that he supported current policy. However, we could not determine what exactly would change his mind about altering the policy.

Mr Thomas Buchanan spoke about vulnerable people in his constituency and highlighted a couple of specific issues in West Tyrone.

Jimmy Spratt talked about the device that was used in east Belfast, and he said that similar devices had been used in the past but had not been used in more recent times. That is a very worrying development. We have heard about the use of that type of device in one or two other recent incidents and the type of materials that have been used. That poses the question of where that material and expertise is coming from.

I say to the people over here who oppose the motion that, if they know of the people who are behind those incidents, they should give them up. It is time that they told the authorities and helped society in Northern Ireland to move forward.

Mr Peter Weir expressed his concern that it will take a tragedy and a murder before someone will agree to change the policy on PPWs. Jim Shannon quite rightly highlighted the cases of a number of former security force members who have had to move home, which has been on the increase in recent months.

Mr McKay of Sinn Féin made the winding-up speech on the amendment, and he said that he was keen not to provoke an overreaction that would play into the hands of the dissidents. I say to Mr McKay and his party: do not play into the hands of the dissidents, but come out and support the law-abiding citizens of this society. Mr McKay's party is giving oxygen to the dissidents by opposing the motion. Let us all work together. If Mr McKay wants to cut that type of activity out of society, he should come in behind us and rally behind the motion and other policies that relate to the situation in Northern Ireland.

It is quite clear that people who are now asking for personal protection weapons did not have access to the illegal weaponry that many others took the opportunity to use over the past 40 years. Those people lived by the law of the Province and others did not. Others, unfortunately, went out at night and hid behind trees and in ditches, and murdered the citizens of the Province. They had access to illegal weaponry, and many of them, unfortunately, still do.

In 2003, the decision of the then Minister of State to reject an appeal against the refusal of the then Chief Constable to grant a Mr Hugh Herdman a firearms certificate for a personal protection weapon was the subject of a judicial review. The judge held that the idea of a specific threat was overly inflexible, and he suggested that there should be a much more flexible approach in the policy on personal protection weapons.

That is what we are asking for. We want a genuine policy that will not only have an effect on the statistics that we heard about but have an effect on people's lives. We want to support the vulnerable, isolated and threatened people in our society.

*Question put*, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 32; Noes 47.

#### AYES

*Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Gallagher, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Brady and Mr F McCann.*

#### NOES

*Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McFarland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr B Wilson, Mr S Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Elliott and Mr Kennedy.*

*Question accordingly negatived.*

4.30 pm

*Main Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That this Assembly notes the dissident threat to serving and retired military personnel and police officers; and calls on the Chief Constable to review urgently the policy on personal protection weapons.

*Motion made:*

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

## ADJOURNMENT

### Tor Bank School and Lagan College, South Belfast

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak and that all other Members will have eight minutes.

**Ms Lo:** Although I will focus today on the impact that the delay in completing the Lagan College building project has had on my constituents in South Belfast, it clearly also affects people who live in areas beyond South Belfast. My colleagues Stephen Farry, Naomi Long and others have been contacted repeatedly by people who are concerned about the lack of progress in the process.

Lagan College, which was founded in 1981 with just 28 students, is Northern Ireland's first planned integrated school. The central aim of governors and staff is to educate together and to the highest standards Catholics, Protestants and others of goodwill of all abilities. Today, there are 1,230 students, including 200 in the sixth form, the majority of whom will proceed to higher education. The college, which is consistently oversubscribed, is a bilateral school that admits 35% of its annual intake on the basis of the transfer grade. In 2009, 91% of students achieved three or more A levels, and 70% of students achieved five to 10 GCSE passes at an A\* to C grade.

The first phases of the permanent buildings were opened in 1991, and the technology and design block was added in 1997. In 2001, it was announced that the college was to receive £11.1 million — now around £20 million — for completion of the permanent buildings, the first suggested date for completion being September 2006. That project comprised three schools: Lagan College, Down High School and Tor Bank School.

Down High School withdrew from the project after one year. However, eight years after the project was announced, the buildings for the remaining two schools appear to be no closer to completion. It is appalling that 70% of teaching takes place in temporary accommodation.

It was decided that Lagan College would take the public-private partnership (PPP) route. The college would not have selected an option that bundles together into a single project three markedly different schools: a special school, an education and library board school and a grant maintained integrated school. The project was also complicated by the fact that

Lagan College is located on a National Trust site that has a 99-year lease, and any extension or change must be approved by the trust's board.

The project is an extension and refurbishment of the main building. The college's staff have worked hard and done everything in their power to keep the process going, but the project has encountered hurdle after hurdle over the past few years.

When the evaluation of the bids was completed at Easter 2008, the schools were confident that they would have had a preferred bidder and be on the way to signing a contract by the spring of 2009. Unfortunately, the issues that have delayed the process must be resolved before a preferred bidder can be announced. Construction has been pushed back to at least the autumn, or even the winter, of 2010. That will be almost nine years after the project was announced. It took until early March 2009 to resolve the majority of the issues. The final issue that threatens to delay the project further is the ability to finance it in the current market conditions. The Department of Education, the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Strategic Investment Board must develop a resolution with the utmost urgency.

The delays are having a detrimental effect on the college's operation and planning. The site and building were designed to accommodate 600 students; the current enrolment is 1,230. Although an agreed allowance has financed an extra general classroom for the past five years, the amount of specialist accommodation has not increased. There is a serious shortage of specialist facilities for physical education, ICT, home economics, art, science and music. The college has one multi-purpose hall of 260 sq m that is constantly overbooked and overused. That is the only facility in which the college can deliver the PE element of the curriculum throughout the Key Stages. The hall is in increasing demand as a venue for extra exams throughout the year. To help to overcome the difficulties in the PE department due to the lack of facilities, a temporary PE unit is being built.

The college lacks the space for a study for sixth-formers, and those students have no common room or recreational facilities. The existing canteen was designed to accommodate 260 students at a sitting; it now caters for 500. It is impossible for the college to draw up a maintenance schedule for permanent, semi-permanent and mobile classrooms, because it has no idea how long it will be before they are moved or demolished as part of the decant phase of the construction. The maintenance of the temporary buildings is costly. Many mechanical and electrical installations are due to be replaced or upgraded, but it is also impossible to budget for any changes until a schedule for the project's completion is agreed.

Due to the large number of mobile classrooms, the college spends a disproportionate amount of its budget on heating and electricity. That is detrimental to the health of students and staff, and it also has a high negative environmental impact. In addition, the college is not able to avail itself of any grants to improve energy efficiency until the new building is due.

The college is constantly writing to the Department about health and safety issues because of the increasing enrolment and the nature of the site. Those issues include car parking, drop-off facilities for parents, bus bays, which cater for a maximum of 14 buses safely, but are now being used by 17 buses, and the need for a perimeter fence around the college. However, the Department has informed the school that it is reluctant to invest money because of the building project. The Department of Education has recently added 20 extra spaces for car parking, replaced five double mobiles and two art mobiles, and extensively repaired one double mobile. However, those are all piecemeal actions: they are not really what the college wants.

The whole situation is totally unacceptable. Lagan College needs those buildings now. Parents send their children to the college in good faith and in the expectation that the building will be completed. Many staff have spent untold hours at meetings and feel utter frustration because of the continual delays. The Department selected Lagan College for this unbelievably complex process, and it is essential that the Department now works closely with the college to draw up an agreed timetable for completion so that staff can plan with those dates in mind. The pupils deserve a proper school building that is fit for purpose.

**Mr Spratt:** I support what Anna Lo has just said. I apologise to the Minister because I have to leave after I speak, so I will not be here to hear her reply.

Given that the school is in my council area and in the south Belfast area, I have been involved in a fair amount of work with it over the years, particularly at council level. I am aware of its very serious plight. It is unsatisfactory for pupils in any school in any part of Northern Ireland to be taught in mobile classrooms. Unfortunately, however, that is part of the reality of the situation. It is not possible to provide for every school, but Lagan College has substantially increased its pupil numbers over the years. It suffered fairly severe damage to classrooms and computers a while back, and, on that occasion, the board and the Department were very good and sorted out the situation as soon as they could.

I know that Down High School is now out of the scenario, but Lagan College is tied to Tor Bank School. My colleague Iris Robinson, along with political colleagues from many different parties, has been heavily involved in trying to get Tor Bank sorted out for a number of years. It provides accommodation for

pupils from all parts of Belfast and from outside the greater Belfast area. It is disgraceful that it has been in the position of working with mobiles for many years.

When I and other members of the South Eastern Education and Library Board were sacked, which the Minister agitated for, Tor Bank School was a regular topic of discussion. We all tried to do what we could to get the issue resolved, but even now that has not happened. I worry that Tor Bank and Lagan College are linked in a PPP project. The best way to put it is that one school holds back the other.

4.45 pm

I hope that the Department will quickly look at Tor Bank School and Lagan College. I will not go through all the statistics presented to the Assembly by Anna Lo. Needless to say, there are accommodation problems and there is very serious need. Many pupils have left the school having spent their full education there in mobile classrooms. That is totally unsatisfactory and should not happen. Lagan College is a good school that is well used by all sections of the community in south Belfast and Castlereagh.

On the matter of the roads and the increase in traffic for buses, I must be fair and say that Roads Service has done a considerable amount of work over the years to improve the roads outside the entrance to the school. A footpath was also put in. Former board members worked together to move forward that work. However, there is a traffic problem. It is a busy road, and I appreciate that the turning circle in the school grounds is not satisfactory at present. So many buses are going in and out that health and safety issues arise, which puts added strain on teachers, pupils, parents and everyone else who has to deal with the situation.

I ask the Department to take a serious look at the issues affecting Lagan College. I also ask the Minister to look at Tor Bank, which deals with some of society's most vulnerable children. Time is of the essence, and both schools' situations must be sorted out. I urge the Minister, her Department and its officials to do all that they can to resolve the situation after so many years of waiting.

**Dr McDonnell:** I thank my South Belfast colleague Anna Lo for bringing this important issue to the House. The delay in the extension and refurbishment of Lagan College and the development of permanent buildings there, as well as the slowness in providing the promised new school building at Tor Bank, is nothing short of a disgrace.

I was involved in lobbying the previous Minister of Education, the present deputy First Minister, for improvements at Tor Bank School and Lagan College way back in 2001.

Building projects for each of those sites were announced in early 2002. At that stage, the expected

completion date for Tor Bank was September 2005, and for Lagan College, it was September 2006. More than seven years on from that initial announcement, as we approach the end of 2009, construction work has not yet even begun on either site. Indeed, contracts have yet to be awarded. That is despite the expected timeline of about 18 months from the critical initial planning stage to the final negotiations of the PPP projects, as published on the Department's website. Eighteen months is a lot shorter than seven years, and it is still going on.

The next set of estimated completion dates for the projects, as outlined by the Department, is somewhere in late 2010 or early 2011. If we stick to that timetable, more than eight years will have elapsed since the initial announcement was made.

Even after a seven-year wait, when one obstacle followed another, although it is understandable that there is a lot of hope, there is little confidence among pupils, teachers, parents and principals that that suggested timeline will be fulfilled. Given that Members provided background information on the disastrous delays and ongoing obstacles and made valid points about the detrimental impact that those problems continue to have on pupils and staff at both schools, there is no need for me to repeat what they said.

In the past seven years, needless time, effort and money have gone into both projects. Between the two sites, more than 30 project board meetings have been held, not including meetings with prospective bidders. Furthermore, I am told by the Tor Bank School principal that, in the past seven years, well over 150 meetings were held in an attempt to move the project forward, not to mention the significant amount of time that departmental officials spent on the matter and the consultancy fees that the Department spent.

As Members may have gathered, Tor Bank School is not an ordinary place. Profoundly handicapped children are expected to operate on a steeply inclined site, and many of them cannot get from one part to the other. It is a most unsuitable place even for physically able pupils, and it is an absolute disaster for children who are confined, as many of them are, to wheelchairs. Unfortunately, we are where we are, and the burning task before us is not to look back, but to focus on moving forward.

A month ago, in response to a question for written answer, the Minister of Education said:

"my Department has to be assured that this project is the best way forward."

That frightens me. She went on:

"The Department is therefore working closely with those involved in the project to address this issue as a matter of urgency."

More shakiness, flakiness, uncertainty and indecision seem to be emerging, and that response leaves me

concerned and confused. Therefore, I would welcome further clarification on the Minister's statement. I want her to clarify whether she has reservations about value for money and the use of PPP as a procurement process, or whether her reservations are simply about the Tor Bank School and Lagan College redevelopment projects.

It would also be extremely helpful to all concerned if the Minister would confirm whether the obstacles that are halting the PPP process will be overcome so that the latest completion date of late 2010 or early 2011 can be met. If meeting that deadline is not possible, will the Minister fulfil her commitment to carry out the refurbishment and the newbuild by prioritising the projects under the traditional procurement process so that work can begin immediately?

The SDLP is on record as expressing grave concerns about the ability of PPP to meet essential value-for-money, transparency and accountability criteria. In particular, it felt at the time, and it continues to feel, that Tor Bank School, where the environment must change continually to meet the changing special needs of its pupils, and Lagan College, which is on a National Trust site, are both completely unsuitable for inclusion in a PPP project. The complications and agonising paralysis that have arisen from these projects are, regrettably, testimony to the fact that the SDLP may have been right.

Nevertheless, it is essential that we get a clear decision today, or in the very near future, on how to kick-start the urgent development work that is needed on both schools. Make no mistake, in the past seven years, the pupils in both schools have suffered, and they continue to suffer. Sadly, many children with severe learning difficulties and other shortcomings have died while waiting for the desperately needed improvements to be made to Tor Bank School.

We cannot lose sight of that, as school is for many children, and especially for those children, the only chance of getting a life.

That is why we need a clear decision today from the Minister. Decisions on Tor Bank School and Lagan College have been left hanging for too long; the confusion needs to end and we need decisive action now. The children, their teachers, their parents and all of us deserve it. If the PPP process will not work, we need to switch to a more traditional process that will.

**The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I see that all the parties are represented in the Chamber. I welcome back Jimmy Spratt, and I am glad that he is here to hear my comments.

This is a serious issue. People are aware that I actively encourage and facilitate integrated education along with Irish-medium education; it is a part of my statutory duty that I take very seriously.

A couple of days ago, I attended a meeting with all the integrated schools in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area, and I am conducting a series of meetings with integrated schools across the North.

I agree with Jimmy Spratt on the issue of mobile classrooms. The Irish-medium and integrated sectors are the only sectors in which entire schools are housed in mobile classrooms, and that is simply not good enough. Our children should be educated in top-class buildings, and that is what we are moving towards.

Members know that I have a significant amount of money to invest, but there are rules and regulations about how I invest it. I cannot say that this project will go ahead right now, as Dr McDonnell and every other Member knows. We have to go through processes.

I thank Anna Lo for securing the debate. Since coming into office, I have opposed the use of public-private partnerships in schools. I have not approved any new PPP projects since taking office, and the Lagan College and Tor Bank School cluster is one of a number of legacy PPP projects that were already in procurement when I was appointed.

Bhí roinnt tosca ann a raibh tionchar acu ar sholáthar an PPP do Choláiste an Lagáin agus do Scoil Speisialta Tor Bank. Ar na tosca seo bhí athruithe sa scóip agus athruithe maidir leis na tairgeoirí chomh maith le hathruithe sa pholasaí d'úsáid PPP i scoileanna.

As people know, a number of factors affect the PPP procurement for Lagan College and Tor Bank School, including changes to the scope, the composition of the bidders and policy in relation to the use of PPP in schools. Two key changes referred to by Anna Lo, or perhaps another Member, delayed the procurement of all school-sector PPP projects: the change in policy in 2005, which removed catering; and that in 2006, which removed cleaning from the scope of services that transferred to the PPP operator.

Another significant issue for this PPP proposal was the need for Lagan College to negotiate a revised lease with the National Trust, as the school is situated on a National Trust site. That was mentioned earlier in the debate, and it resulted in some delays to the project.

More recently, a major issue arose as a result of last year's change in financial markets, which was brought about by the banking crisis. The public-sector comparator was recently revised to take account of changing market conditions, and revised costings still indicate a value-for-money deficit, with additional risk attached as the project parameters remain volatile in the period up to financial close.

To appoint a preferred bidder at this stage would contravene the procurement guidance within which the Department must operate. There are also substantial additional consultancy costs on the project, associated with reaching financial close, that have not been agreed

with the Department. The Department has been provided with a business case setting out the details, and I have sought further clarification on the full quantum of consultancy support before making a decision.

A number of those issues have arisen due to circumstances and events that could not have been foreseen or mitigated by the Department or the project board.

*5.00 pm*

The Lagan College/Tor Bank School PPP project is being procured by the project board, which is made up jointly of members of Lagan College, Tor Bank School, and the South Eastern Education and Library Board. Project management is provided by the PPP education service. The project is not procured by the Department, nor has the Department at any time put an obstacle in the way of moving the project forward.

I appreciate totally the frustration felt by staff and pupils at Lagan College and Tor Bank School, and I share that frustration. However, my Department must ensure that any eventual contract to provide the schools with new facilities is in line with government procurement policy and is affordable to the public purse. The Department is working very closely with those involved in the project to be assured that it is the best way forward.

To answer the question about timelines: the project board is seeking the best and final offer. All being well, the next stages are: the appointment of a preferred bidder, which will take one week or less for the project board to issue a letter; the preparation of the full business case and its approval by the Department, which will take nine to 12 months to financial close, depending on whether there are any planning issues; and the opening of the schools in 2011-12, subject to a 24-month build for Tor Bank School and a 42-month build for Lagan College. Therefore, if a contract were signed in nine months and the contractors went on site in June 2010, Tor Bank School would be completed in June 2012 and Lagan College in December 2013. That is probably not what Members wanted to hear, but I have to abide by procurement guidelines.

As I said at the outset, if I had had a choice, PPP would not have been my preferred way forward. It gives me no joy to be proved right about PPP projects. I assure Members that we will move this project forward as quickly as possible. I absolutely take on board the points that were made about Tor Bank, which I have visited. It is disgraceful that some of our most vulnerable children are being cared for in those conditions. Having said that, I know that Members will join me in paying tribute to the teams at both schools that have managed the difficult situation very well.

*Adjourned at 5.02 pm.*