
Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 8 February 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

First Minister

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the Assembly that I have received a letter from the First Minister, dated 3 February 2010, revoking with effect from that date his earlier letter, in which he had designated the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to exercise the functions of the office of First Minister.

Suspension of Standing Orders

Lord Morrow: I beg to move

That Standing Order 20(1)(a) be suspended for 8 February 2010.

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I refer you to the first item of business that you dealt with, namely the letter from the First Minister in which he revoked his decision to step down as First Minister. Given that his decisions to step down and to step back into the office of First Minister were important political developments and matters of high public interest and that those decisions affected the authority and standing of both the Executive and the Assembly — Mr Robinson is not just First Minister but a Member of the Assembly — is it not in order that the terms of the opinion given to the First Minister by Mr Paul Maguire QC should be lodged in the Assembly Library? Is it not in order that the terms of reference given to Mr Maguire when forming his opinion should be lodged in the Assembly Library? Is it not —

Mr Speaker: Order. Those are matters for the First Minister to deal with. It is not for the House to judge what the First Minister might do now or in the future. What I have said this morning clarifies the situation as far as I am concerned. Thereafter, those are decisions for the First Minister.

Mr Attwood: I understand why you have said that, Mr Speaker. However, the First Minister is a Member of this House, serves at its discretion and was nominated to his position by it. Therefore, matters in respect of stepping down from and back into that office, on which I make no particular value judgement —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should take his place. There are avenues open to the Member, and, if he wishes to pursue the matter, he can do so through questions to the First Minister or through a motion in the House. Raising the matter through a point of order will not be effective. I remind the House that there are procedures: Members can speak to the Clerks about the procedures and conventions through which they can raise issues properly in the House. It should certainly not be done through points of order.

We shall return to the business. Before I put the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 20(1)(a) be suspended for 8 February 2010.

Mr Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the House and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

Ministerial Statement

SparkleBox Teacher Resource Website

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Education that she wishes to make a statement.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá brón orm go raibh an ráiteas deireannach. I apologise to the House for being late in getting the statement to it. I finalised it on Friday night, and my officials made final amendments this morning. This is an important issue, and I wanted to ensure that we got the statement right.

Ba mhian liom ráiteas a thabhairt faoin láithreán gréasáin acmhainní múinteora SparkleBox. SparkleBox is a website that contains resources for primary-school teachers that can be downloaded for classroom use with pupils. The site was owned and operated by Samuel Kinge, a teacher who had been jailed in Warwick in January 2005 for possession of child pornography.

Kinge started SparkleBox in February 2006, having changed his name to Daniel Kinge. In September 2009, he was arrested again for making and possessing indecent images of children. On 8 January 2010, Worcester Crown Court sentenced him to 12 months in prison and served him with a 15-year sexual offences prevention order, which bans him from using a computer unless it has a police detection programme installed. The site was used by teachers in Ireland, North and South, and England, Wales and Scotland.

Bhí scoileanna anseo ábalta teacht ar SparkleBox tríd an líonra C2k, a sholáthraíonn seirbhís bainistithe TFC do gach scoil dheontaschúnta. Bainistítear soláthar na seirbhísí thar ceann gach bord oideachais agus leabharlainne ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair.

SparkleBox was available to schools here through the Classroom 2000 (C2k) network, which provides an ICT-managed service to all grant-aided schools. The provision of the service is managed on behalf of all the education and library boards by the Western Education and Library Board.

I am advised that C2k became aware of the issues surrounding SparkleBox in December

2009. I understand that C2k liaised with the regional broadband consortia in England, a number of which had blocked access to SparkleBox until they were satisfied that suitable safeguarding arrangements were in place. It appears that C2k took the view that sufficient arrangements were in place to ensure the safety of users; so, initially, it did not remove access to the site. It is C2k's position that its system has automatic filters in place to block any possible interactive component in the site, such as blogs and toolbars.

On 28 January 2010, a parent from a Belfast primary school who had heard of Kinge's conviction informed the school, which instructed its teachers not to use SparkleBox and reported its position to C2k.

Ar 28 Eanáir 2010 chuala tuismitheoir a raibh páiste acu i mbunscoil faoi chiontú Kinge agus threoraigh bunscoil Bhéal Feirste múinteoirí gan úsáid a bhaint as Sparklebox, agus a chuir a seasamh in iúl do C2k.

On Monday 1 February, C2k changed its decision from not blocking the site to blocking it, and I am advised that it informed schools of that decision and that the site remains blocked.

Fuair mé fios ar an tsaincheist seo ar 29 Eanáir. D'eisigh mo Roinn preasráiteas le dearbhú go bhfuil scagairí i bhfeidhm ag an chóras C2k le bac a chur le hinneachar dochrach gréasáin, agus tá an Roinn ag comhoibriú le C2k ar an tsaincheist seo.

I became aware of the issue on 29 January. My Department issued a press statement to confirm that the C2k system has filters in place to block potentially harmful web content and that the Department was liaising with C2k on the matter.

Mar is eol daoibh, glacaim an-dáiríre dualgas mo Roinne le cinntiú go gcosnaítear sábháilteacht páistí i ngach gné dá n-oideachas. Is fíorthábhachtach dom a sábháilteacht, agus féachaim le mé féin a chinntiú ar bhonn leanúnach go bhfuil na polasaithe agus nósanna imeachta atá i bhfeidhm iomchuí agus éifeachtach.

As Members will appreciate, I take very seriously my duty and that of my Department to ensure that the safety of pupils is safeguarded in all aspects of their education. I regard their safety as of paramount importance, and I seek to ensure, on an ongoing basis, that the

policies and procedures in place are appropriate and effective. On a without-prejudice basis, I remain to be convinced that responses to that particular situation were proportionate and timely.

Dá bhrí sin, scríobh mo Roinn chuig príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair lena iarraidh air iniúchadh a dhéanamh ar an dóigh ar bainistíodh an tsaincheist seo agus moltaí a dhéanamh ar cad iad na ceachtanna is féidir a fhoghlaim ón cheist maidir le polasaithe agus nósanna imeachta a fheabhsú chun sábháilteacht páistí a chosaint.

Accordingly, my Department has written to the chief executive of the Western Education and Library Board to instruct him to investigate the manner in which the situation was handled and to make recommendations on what lessons can be learned from that to enhance further the policies and procedures for protecting the safety of children. I expect a full report on or before 24 March 2010.

Maidir leis an ráiteas seo, beidh mé ag scríobh chuig Batt O’Keeffe TD, an tAire Oideachais agus Eolaíochta sa Deisceart, agus chuig mo chomhghleacaithe aireachta i Sasana, in Albain agus sa Bhreatain Bheag le mo chur chuige ar an tsaincheist seo a chur in iúl dóibh.

On the basis of this statement, I am writing to Batt O’Keeffe TD, Minister of Education and Science in the South, and to my ministerial counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales to inform them of my approach to the matter.

Cuirfear cóip den ráiteas seo chuig gach scoil agus eagraíocht eile atá faoi chothabháil ag mo Roinn.

A copy of this statement will issue today to all schools and other bodies that are grant-aided by my Department. My Department will issue follow-up guidance to the circular on Internet safety that was issued in June 2007. That new guidance will specifically refer to safeguarding arrangements in light of the SparkleBox experience.

Ina theannta sin, fanaim mo chuid feidhmeannach go hiomlán i ngleic le hidirghúpa aireachta na Roinne Sláinte um chosaint páistí. Tá an grúpa seo ag obair ar phlean gníomhaíochta a chuirfidh bearta i bhfeidhm le ríomh-shábháilteacht a fheabhsú do dhaoine óga.

Furthermore, my officials remain fully engaged with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) interdepartmental group on safeguarding children. That group is progressing work on an action plan that will set in place measures to enhance even further e-safety for our children and young people.

Mar fhocal scoir, fanann an suíomh Sparklebox bactha ag C2k, iniúchfar go hiomlán bainistíocht an teagmhais seo, agus tiocfaidh mé ar ais don Tionól ar an tsaincheist seo chomh luath agus is féidir.

The SparkleBox site remains blocked by C2k. The handling of the incident will be fully investigated, and I will come back to the Assembly on the matter at the earliest opportunity. I am also writing to all the website providers to alert them to my concerns.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): Obviously, this issue is of grave concern to the House, and we welcome the fact that the Minister has come here to make her statement. I inform the House that the Committee for Education requested and received a briefing from Department of Education (DE) officials in November 2009 on the measures that the Department had taken to provide protection for children at school.

12.15 pm

The Committee was informed of new inter-agency structures, including, this year, the establishment of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland and the current risk assessment arrangements for the supervision of convicted sex offenders as provided by the Northern Ireland Sex Offender Strategic Management Committee.

The SparkleBox case appears to expose a potential loophole that allowed a convicted sex offender to run a website that was aimed at schools and schoolchildren. Will the Minister assure the House that all convicted, registered child sex offenders are banned from having direct contact with children? Will she also explain what measures have been put in place in Northern Ireland to detect sex offenders who are seeking to set up websites that are aimed at schools and schoolchildren or seeking to work in such a business?

Speaking as a Member, I ask the Minister why it took a parent to notify the school of the

situation, despite the information having been available since December 2009. Perhaps the Minister was being more than generous when she said:

"I remain to be convinced that responses to that particular situation were proportionate and timely."

The response was highly inappropriate, as it was left to a parent. We must learn the lessons from that case.

Will the Minister explain what measures will be put in place immediately — as opposed to a review that will last for weeks — to protect children?

The Minister of Education: I pay tribute to the parent and the schools involved. It is important that, as parents, we are vigilant around Internet usage and safeguarding children. As Members know, the issues are complex, and there have been many similar Internet cases. Therefore, it is essential that police services across Ireland and between Britain and Ireland liaise closely. That is why, at some of the first meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council, child protection was at the top of the agenda, where all parties wanted it to be.

I share the Member's concerns that all children in Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales need to be protected. I pledge to do everything that I can to ensure that that happens at all levels. It is a cross-cutting matter, across all Departments, and one which involves education, health and police services.

I asked to make a statement because I do not believe that any aspect of any issue that relates to safeguarding children should be hidden.

I have come here openly to give a detailed statement. I have asked for the situation to be investigated — it is an investigation and not a review — because it is an issue that I take very seriously. I am not going to pre-empt the outcome of that. However, I have questions, which the investigation will look at, and I expect very clear answers.

One reason for the investigation is so that we can constantly learn and update our information. As I said, guidelines were brought forward in 2007. However, those guidelines need to be constantly updated. I, along with my Department, am contacting service providers in the North, in England, Scotland and Wales, and throughout the island of Ireland. We must block

off all loopholes. I hope that that answers the Member's question.

I want to talk briefly about child protection in schools. Through the curriculum, pupils are encouraged to develop strategies to keep safe. The personal development strand of the revised curriculum provides a vehicle for conveying messages about normal and acceptable behaviour, problem solving and sources of help and advice. Also, all staff, paid and unpaid, who are working in schools must be vetted to ensure that only suitable people work with pupils. In due course, they will be required to join the new vetting and barring scheme. Also, the arrangements set out in this paper for ensuring the appropriate response when concerns are raised about an individual pupil will aid child protection.

As the Member knows, all schools have a named designated teacher for child protection and a named deputy designated teacher. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. What guidance or measures on Internet usage does the Department have in place to assist schools?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. Since April 2003, all grant-aided schools have been required to implement a child protection policy. When preparing its policy, a school must take into account the most recent advice from the Department of Education, the relevant education and library board and, in the case of Catholic maintained schools, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.

Advice to schools on child protection matters is issued by means of a departmental education circular. All advice issued by the Department is consistent with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's document 'Co-operating to Safeguard Children' and the policies and procedures of the regional area child protection committee.

Schools are supported in their work to safeguard children by the Child Protection Support Service for Schools (CPSSS), which is based in each education and library board. The CPSSS operates a helpline for school staff on child protection issues and is accessible every day during term time. The CPSSS provides an extensive range of training and capacity building to designated

teachers, principals, members of boards of governors and other staff who work with pupils and support schools with individual cases.

Every school inspection includes an examination of the arrangements for pastoral care and child protection by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), and there is an agreed procedure in cases where a school's arrangements are rated as unsatisfactory. In such cases, the ETI will reassess the position after six weeks, and, if the necessary improvements have not been made, the Department will intervene.

The advice and guidance given to schools are kept under continuous review. Within DE, the safeguarding advisory group comprises all key policy areas with responsibilities that contribute to child protection. It meets quarterly to review developments and exchange information. A standing group, the designated officers for child protection in education group (DOCPEG), has representatives from each of the education and library boards and is chaired by the Department. It meets monthly to consider emerging issues, such as the one that we are discussing, that arrive from casework in schools and developments in policy and best practice on safeguarding children in Ireland and elsewhere.

Representation of the schools sector's interests at an operational level — on health and social services boards — is undertaken by members of DOCPEG.

Mr B McCrea: The Minister has outlined her concern on this issue. Is it possible to find out who has visited the website and discover whether any harmful material was downloaded?

The Minister of Education: As I said, I do not want to pre-empt the outcome of the investigation. I will bring the Member's question to the Western Education and Library Board. I was advised that there was no harmful content on the website, but I await the outcome of the investigation.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. This issue is of great concern to all Members. It is important that we reassure teachers and parents today that the system fully protects children in our schools and at home.

Instead of waiting for the outcome of any inquiry, will the Minister issue guidance today to C2k and the Western Education and Library Board

informing them that immediate action will be taken and that schools will be informed directly if any similar situation occurs?

The Minister of Education: My officials have been in touch with C2k. I will send a copy of the statement to schools, but I have informed the House first because it is appropriate to do so. There should be no hiding place for people who download pornography or have been convicted of offences that relate to pornography. The key issue is to protect our children and young people, and I will take every possible measure to ensure that our children are protected. I will take the Member's comments on board. C2k and the Western Education and Library Board understand exactly the importance that I place on this issue, and they understand that harmful material needs to be blocked immediately.

Mr Lunn: I welcome the fact that the site has been blocked and that a full investigation will take place. Does the Minister have any information about the extent to which the site was used? The site provides resources for teachers. Has it been regarded as useful? I had never heard of it until recently. As Basil McCrea said, has any suspect material been found on the site? Lastly — if I am allowed to ask another question — it seems incredible that, given that the surname of the person in question has such an unusual spelling, he avoided the law at the outset of the episode by merely changing his Christian name. What checks are in place to prevent that happening in the first place?

The Minister of Education: I share the Member's concern about people being able to change their name. The latest conviction was his second. The best check is for organisations in the health sector, the education sector and police services across Ireland and Britain to work together. We need to learn from this episode, and that is one reason why I will write to my counterparts in the South of Ireland and in England, Scotland and Wales. The best way to deal with the situation is to make information public so that the occurrence of a similar incident becomes much less likely. I have been informed that there was no suspect material on the site. However, I will await the outcome of the investigation.

Miss McIlveen: I welcome the Minister's statement. Is the Minister here today voluntarily, or was she advised by others to update the Assembly? Given that it is Internet safety week,

it is timely to seek assurance that Internet safety is a key priority of the Department of Education. Will the Minister outline the input that her Department has given to the ministerial subgroup on safeguarding Internet safety? Moreover, will she provide an update on her Department's interface with the work of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety?

The Minister of Education: I asked to make a statement in the House, because I understand the importance of the issues and I want to take appropriate action. As I said, child safety is paramount.

My Department actively works with the health sector and other organisations on Internet safety. I discussed suicide prevention and Internet use with my colleague Michael McGimpsey and the various working groups. That is a key issue, as is child pornography. I sit on the working group that deals with violence against women and children, and I take that issue very seriously. Indeed, my Department is working on a programme to consider the whole issue of sexual and domestic violence against women and children. This incident is part and parcel of that.

It is timely that this is Internet safety week. We need to learn from good practice not only on these islands but across Europe and across the world. The more we share good practice, the more chance we have of ensuring that individuals such as the person involved in this case cannot continue to operate as they have in the past.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement and the importance that she has attached and attention that she has given to the issue.

It is important not to scaremonger, but parents have genuine concerns. Although the site is now blocked, what assurances can the Minister give to parents that previous use of the site has not allowed children to access questionable material?

12.30 pm

The Minister of Education: As I said, my information to date is that there is no harmful material on that website. Nevertheless, the investigation is continuing, and I will report back fully to the House on that. I want to reassure parents as best I can. I am a parent, and I understand the difficulties that surround Internet access. The Internet can be a very positive tool, but, equally, if it is not monitored

and safeguarded correctly, it can be a very dangerous tool. As parents, we have huge responsibilities. Parents can be reassured that C2k has blocked the website even though no harmful material was found on it. It is right and proper that that website should be blocked.

Mr Ross: The Minister said that C2k became aware of this issue in December 2009, but that she had not been made aware of it until 29 January 2010. Will she tell the House why that was the case, and why she was not informed immediately about something of such magnitude? Will she tell the House what protocols exist to inform her immediately when something as serious as this occurs? When C2k took its initial decision, in the belief that adequate safeguards were in place, who did it consult to come to that determination?

The Minister of Education: I should have been informed as soon as C2k was aware of the situation. Indeed, I should have been informed in September 2009, when the individual was charged. The investigation needs to look at that. We must learn from that; procedures must be put in place across Ireland and Britain to ensure that action is taken to inform the relevant authorities as soon as someone is charged with such offences. The investigation will examine all my Department's procedures and protocols as well as those of other bodies. This situation has an effect not just on education but on wider society, and it is an issue for police services across these islands.

Mr McCallister: The Minister said that her officials are engaged in the investigation process. What has her personal involvement been in overseeing C2k's protection policies?

The Minister of Education: I work very closely with all my officials on safeguarding and child protection. As soon as I heard about the matter in question, I called a meeting of senior officials. Safeguarding was one of the key areas of discussion. I told the meeting that I wanted to explain the situation to the Assembly immediately, and work began immediately to draw up my statement.

I am personally involved daily in child protection. I have worked with my officials to institute a new programme for safeguarding children in schools, and I will provide the House with details of that programme in the near future. It is starting in primary schools so that we can train teachers to look at the issues of domestic and sexual

violence in an age-appropriate way and ensure that we deal with some of those issues at the earliest possible stage.

I have always said that violence against women and children at all levels is one of the key challenges facing our society, and I take it very seriously. We are looking at those issues from the point of view of our special educational needs and inclusion strategy. That is very important, and I am glad that some good may come out of my making a statement today. The more that we speak about this issue, and the more that we work across Departments, North and South, east and west, the better chance that we have of dealing with people such as the person who was found guilty of downloading images.

Mr McDevitt: I am sure that the House will be concerned to hear that I believe there to be a factual inaccuracy in the Minister's statement. It was, in fact, on 28 December 2009 that a parent of a pupil at Stranmillis Primary School in south Belfast approached me in my capacity as a Member of the Assembly and made me aware of the situation. I, in turn, informed the school, and by way of a written question for two-day priority answer, I informed the Department of Education of the situation.

Why has my question for written answer, which was tabled on 28 January 2010 and was due for answer on 2 February 2010, not yet been answered? Furthermore, why was her Department asleep on its watch? What does that say about the record of the Assembly, the Executive and her party on child protection? It is simply not good enough. The answer to that question for written answer has not been received, and many parents will want proper answers as to why the Minister had to come to the House to make a statement for us to get the answers that we sought.

The Minister of Education: I have answered the Member's question, and I welcome the tone of the debate. Nobody should play politics with this important issue. These are complex matters, and Internet safety is complex. I pledge to do everything that I can to protect our children.

I came to the House to explain what we are doing and to make sure that there will be a thorough investigation into the matter. I have answered the Member's question, but before I could do so, I needed to investigate the matter fully and thoroughly. If there is an inaccuracy in

the statement, I will correct it. The key point, however, is that we should not be playing politics. This is an issue that all of us must deal with together. Joint all-party working groups are dealing with issues such as violence against women and children. They are also dealing with suicide prevention, and the role of the Internet in that matter concerns us, too. Michael McGimpsey did very good work on that issue, and I was a member of the working group that dealt with it. Therefore, if there is an inaccuracy in the statement, I will correct it, but, please, do not play politics with child protection.

Mr McDevitt: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I know that I am new to the House, and I may be forgiven for misreading Standing Orders, but I understand that the process for dealing with a two-day priority question for written answer is just that — a two-day process. That method was used on this occasion to expedite the information and to bring it into the public domain. I have still not received an answer to my question for written answer.

Mr Speaker: I certainly hear what the Member said. I have made it clear in the House and elsewhere on many occasions that I expect Members to get very prompt answers to priority questions for written answer that are asked of any Department. I have raised the matter in the past with the Executive, and I will do so in the future.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I raised with you previously the difficulty of receiving ministerial statements just as Members are about to speak on the matter in question. This is a serious issue; it is not an attempt to have a go at the Minister, because she apologised. I understand that, and that is fair enough. However, we need to find a way to get statements to Members in time for them to make proper responses. I need your help in that, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Once again, I hear the Member's point of order. I have continually urged Ministers that they should, as far as possible, make statements available much earlier. However, the Minister apologised to the House, and she gave a frank reason as to why the statement was late.

Executive Committee Business

Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Moved. — [The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy).]

Mr Speaker: As no amendments have been selected, there is no opportunity to discuss the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. Further Consideration Stage is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Committee Business

McElhill/McGovern Tragedy in Omagh

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

Jim Wells, Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, was to move the motion. Unfortunately, Jim has been taken ill, and our thoughts are with him. Michelle O'Neill, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, has kindly stepped into the breach.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

(Mrs O'Neill): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I also extend my best wishes to Jim, and I hope that he makes a speedy recovery.

The events of 13 November 2007 were appalling. Seven people, five of whom were children, died in a house fire in the Lammy area of Omagh. The magnitude of that outrage, which was one of the most horrific cases ever seen, warrants a public inquiry.

However, the Committee thought long and hard before agreeing to table the motion. Members did not want an inquiry to rake up the tragedy of the events in Omagh or to cause more pain to the families and individuals involved. The Committee wants to take into account the feelings of the bereaved McElhill and McGovern families, who have suffered over the past two years. Those two families are not the only ones who suffered, as the tragic event had a considerable impact on the local community. That is why individual members of the Committee were tasked with discussing the possibility of a public inquiry either with communities in the Omagh area or with their local party representatives.

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

The motion calls for a time-bound inquiry into the multi-agency aspects of the tragedy, and it does not aim to rake up the events. From consulting individual members of the families involved, we understand that, in those limited circumstances, they would cautiously welcome

an inquiry. A number of reviews have taken place since the Omagh tragedy, including the coroner's report and the wide-ranging Toner report. It covered the health, social services and education aspects of the event, and it was welcomed at the time. The Committee heard from the Western Trust that the Toner report's recommendations have been extremely useful. The recommendations were accepted fully and have helped to shape and improve children's services across the North.

The Committee is aware that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has asked Henry Toner QC to revisit the Western Trust to find out whether and how his recommendations have been implemented. The Committee welcomes the Minister's actions, but is still concerned that new information has come to light as a result of the coroner's report. That information reminds us that numerous agencies, not only the Western Health and Social Care Trust, were involved in the awful tragedy.

The police, the Probation Board and the Prison Service also had roles to play. After the events, each of those organisations held an internal review in addition to a multi-agency case review. The Committee has seen and considered the multi-agency case review, which was highly specific. It focused on the inter-agency handling of Arthur McElhill as a registered sex offender from his time in prison until his death in November 2007. The Committee's view is that the public inquiry should consider the roles of all those organisations and, specifically, how they interacted.

The Western Trust has been open and public about its role in the events. That is to be commended, as it helped to raise public confidence that the trust is not trying to hide anything. When the Committee spoke with the trust recently, members were impressed by how seriously it took the Toner report's recommendations on child protection. We also became aware of the impact that the tragedy has had on staff in the Western Trust and the amount of stress and strain under which they have been placed. Social services staff were particularly devastated by the tragedy.

As Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, I acknowledge that people working in child protection have a difficult job. It is an incredibly complicated and stressful job, yet, every day, in a quiet and private manner, social services staff

in the Western Trust work to protect and to look after children. I hope that I have been clear that the Committee is not interested in social-worker bashing. We recognise that they do a difficult job, often in trying and heart-rending circumstances, with little public acknowledgement but a high degree of professionalism.

However, the other organisations involved, such as the PSNI and the Probation Board, lie outside the remit of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Those agencies are not devolved and remain under the remit of the Secretary of State. Therefore, the motion calls on the Minister to seek the consent of the Secretary of State to the multi-agency inquiry. The Committee wants a public examination of how those agencies worked together, communicated, relayed information and acted on their joint concerns.

An inquiry should take account of that and, indeed, of the information that emerged from the recent coroner's report. It should not focus solely on the Western Trust. The inquiry should be time-bound because we do not want an expensive inquiry that runs for months or even years. The Committee does not want any wallowing in the horrible details of the case, but it wants to ensure that such a terrible situation can never be allowed to arise again.

12.45 pm

The Committee will soon focus some of its attention on the policy area of child protection. At the end of February, we will begin a detailed and focused consideration of the main issues and factors in relation to safeguarding children and how to improve multi-agency working. We have arranged to take evidence from a range of bodies, including the PSNI, children's charities and health and social care trusts. We will use that opportunity to explore the issues concerning multi-agency working in an attempt to improve the situation. On behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I ask Members to support the motion.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and congratulate the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for bringing the debate to the House. The tragic events of Tuesday 13 November 2007, when a fire killed seven people — two adults and five children — were traumatic for everyone concerned: the McGovern family, the McElhill family, the local community

of Lammy in Omagh, the emergency services, social workers, the wider Omagh community and local elected representatives.

In coming to my decision to call for a public inquiry, I read the Toner report, the Watkins report and the inquest reports. I also had a number of meetings with various agencies and the two families concerned. Before Christmas, I met the personnel responsible for public protection arrangements, including the PSNI. Broadly speaking, their view was that the Watkins report covered all their responsibilities and that the new public protection arrangements had corrected any shortcomings that may have existed in the old multi-agency sex offender risk assessment and management (MASRAM) arrangements. The people responsible for the public protection arrangements did not see any great value in a public inquiry.

Before and after Christmas, I had meetings and conducted telephone conversations with the McGovern and McElhill families. The McGovern family and, indeed, the McElhill family were hugely concerned about the re-emergence of public focus on the case. However, the McGovern family felt that they would go along with a public inquiry if it could save any other person or family.

The McElhill family were hugely affected by the tragedy and felt that they, as an extended family, were being blamed for what happened; they were traumatised. Both families had a huge number of questions that they wanted to be answered. The McElhill family were not particularly convinced that a public inquiry would help; they were neither for nor against the idea. However, although the family was afraid of the public focus that may be placed on it, its members still had many questions that they wanted to be answered.

I met senior representatives from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety who felt that the 63 recommendations of the Toner report had met all the demands. On the same day, I met Paul Goggins from the NIO. He referred to the Watkins and Toner reports and said that although he was not minded to hold a public inquiry, he was minded to try to find a mechanism that would provide answers to the families' questions.

I was also in touch with the Policing Board, and I am glad to say that it has made moves for social workers to work in co-operation

with the PSNI. I meet the Lammy community representative regularly, and I am mindful that a spokesperson for the social workers' trade union has called for a public inquiry.

Having read the Toner report, the Watkins report and the findings of the inquest, and having held all the meetings to which I have referred, I conclude that there was a lack of cohesion among the agencies. That can, and has, led to warning signals not being noted. Such warning signals can prevent tragedies from occurring. Therefore, I support the motion and call for a public inquiry.

As we strive to secure the Secretary of State's agreement for a public inquiry, we must be mindful of the acute sensitivities of everyone involved, particularly those of the families and the local community in Lammy, Omagh. An example of that is the burnt-out remains of the McElhill home. However, communication is under way between the Housing Executive and the McElhill family to have that issue resolved. The community is well aware of that.

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

Mr Doherty: I thank the Western Education and Library Board's critical incident response team, which supported the local community throughout the trauma, and I thank the emergency services.

Mr McCallister: Like others, I wish the Chairperson of the Committee a speedy recovery.

The tragedy that occurred in Omagh in November 2007 was a truly awful event for the families of those involved, the wider community, the town and the district. An entire family perished in the fire. It was a human tragedy, and it brings very sobering thoughts to us all. The whole House offers its sympathy to the families and the community on the memory of that awful event.

It is clear that there were failings in the system with respect to the McElhill case. In at least 10 points in the Toner report, the panel found instances when what should have been done was not done. Toner concluded that although none of the agencies involved had any indication that such tragic events were about to happen, those agencies identified processes that could have been better carried out. The files of previous relevant cases should have been sought by those involved in the McElhill

case at particular points, but they were not. Information that should have been passed from one agency to another was not passed on. A risk-management discussion should have taken place, but it did not. The Toner panel identified those failings and drew them to public attention. They are now in the public domain, together with the panel's recommendations, and that is important. Failings have been identified, together with recommendations on how to ensure that they do not recur. We can all read those recommendations, and Members, particularly members of the Health Committee, can check the progress made by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in implementing them.

The Toner inquiry was independent, thorough and covered all the relevant agencies. The report makes recommendations that involve the Police Service, and the panel included a senior police officer. Recently, the Minister asked Mr Toner to return to the Western Trust to ensure that those recommendations are being implemented. The Committee will want to make similar checks.

Let me reiterate: mistakes were made, they have been identified and steps have been taken to ensure that they are not repeated. The people involved have been informed of what they did wrong in this case. No useful purpose would be served by asking those people the same questions that Mr Toner asked them, simply so that they may be held up to blame. I do not wish to see the community in Omagh or the bereaved families put through another inquiry unless there is sound reason for it. There might be reason for it if a case can be made that Toner was not independent, was not sufficiently wide-ranging, or did not cover all the issues. I remain to be convinced that that case has been made.

As the motion implies, the Secretary of State is responsible for initiating an inquiry. The Health Committee should, perhaps, ask for his opinion and seek to persuade him that an inquiry is necessary.

The Toner inquiry was independent and thorough. It also identified all the salient information about the case, so would a repeat of that process be a good use of time? I aired my concerns about holding a public inquiry when the matter was discussed by the Health Committee. Mr Doherty talked about the effect that such an inquiry could have on the families and the community,

although I accept that he thought that a public inquiry was necessary. However, after hearing evidence from the communities and Ulster Unionist Party representatives in that area, I am certainly not convinced that a public inquiry would be welcomed by everyone.

When people talk about public inquiries —

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

Mr McCallister: I have huge concerns about how a time-bound public inquiry would be held.

Mrs D Kelly: I associate myself with the Deputy Chairperson's condolences to the families and the wider community who were bereaved as a result of that dreadful tragedy.

The Committee thought very seriously about the wording of the motion because this is a very sensitive subject. The last thing that anyone wishes to do is to make life more distressful for anyone involved or to open wounds that people are trying to heal. The length of time between the tragedy and the process of the coroner's inquest has not allowed people an opportunity to grieve or to come to terms with their dreadful loss.

Mr McCallister made it clear that the Toner report and the Watkins report were very wide-ranging and that many lessons were learned. He asked whether there were any gaps, which is one of the areas that we need to look at. The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee said that if additional information came about through the inquest, there might well be a gap that needs to be addressed. That needs to be given some consideration.

Some Members paid tribute to the many good staff who work in very difficult psychological and emotional cases in which the best and worst of human relationships are exposed. We are told that 54 of the Toner report's 55 recommendations in respect of trusts have been implemented. It would be helpful if the Minister could outline whether all those have been implemented fully and whether the lessons were learned across all the trusts in the North, because the lack of investment in social services goes much wider than the McElhill/McGovern issue.

I have been disappointed that the Health Committee has not concentrated on social services as much as it ought to. It has given a

lot of consideration to health matters, sometimes to the detriment of other areas of responsibility that the Committee has to scrutinise.

I welcome the Minister's presence for the debate. I noted that he said that an additional £20 million would be invested in social services up to the end of 2011. How much of that £20 million is new money and additional resource? Does it come from existing budgets? We all know how difficult it is to recruit social workers into childcare. Retaining them is even more difficult because of the emotional toll that it takes on their lives, never mind the work that it involves overall.

1.00 pm

There are lessons to be learned by the police, the Policing Board and other agencies. There is also a real responsibility on us, as a society, to protect our children. So-called nosy neighbours who peek out from behind curtains and comment on what they see have a place in society. However, they must do something about what they see and report wrongdoing. We are all challenged not to stand idly by, merely look on or turn away from goings-on in our own communities.

Our party will carefully consider the call for a public inquiry. I look forward to hearing from the Minister. The motion has been carefully worded. As Mr McCallister said, we should find out what the Criminal Justice Minister, Mr Paul Goggins, has to say, because some of the responsibility for an inquiry lies with him. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety may have had those conversations, and I hope that he will inform the House of their outcome.

Mr Neeson: My contribution to the debate will be brief. I join other Members in wishing the Chairman of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety well. I hope that he makes a speedy recovery.

Alliance Party Members support the motion tabled by the Committee. The tragedy was yet another major blow for Omagh. I went to Omagh the day after the bomb in 1998, and the community has again been badly affected by the incident at Lammy Crescent, which should never have happened. The warning signs were already there and should have been acted upon.

The Toner inquiry was extensive, and many of its recommendations have been implemented. It is

important to learn lessons from the tragedy. If the warning signs had been heeded, the event might not have happened. However, the final point that I want to make is that what happened was a tragedy and our condolences must go to the families concerned. If a public inquiry is held, I hope that it will not be lengthy or as expensive as so many of the public inquiries in Northern Ireland over the years.

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion. I grew up near, and have close associations with, Omagh. The town is dear to my heart. I have been privileged to serve on its council since 1993 and to represent the area in the Assembly since 2007.

We all know that Omagh has experienced more than its fair share of tragedy. It is famous all over the world for the worst terrorist atrocity of the Troubles. In August 1998, 29 persons and two unborn children were brutally murdered; something that tore the town apart. It took quite some time to rebuild community relations in Omagh to the level that had existed before the bombing.

Just nine years later, tragedy struck again when, on 13 November 2007, a fire broke out in Lammy Crescent, in which a whole family — mother, father and five young children aged from 10 months to 13 years — perished. Unsurprisingly, there was immediate shock and horror at such a dreadful event.

The whole country was stunned by what, at first, seemed to be a terrible but natural tragedy. However, news began to emerge that the fire was started deliberately by a father, who had, himself, died, and feelings of shock and horror turned to ones of disbelief and anguish. We were faced with a suicide and multiple murder; an absolute nightmare. Then, as evidence began to emerge about Arthur McElhill, disbelief turned to anger. Everywhere I went, people rightly asked how on earth the authorities could have failed to heed all the warning signs. That question was very difficult to answer.

It is more than two years since those appalling events, but the pain and agony of the two families whose loved ones died in the fire is still very real. In addition, at the end of last year, they had to endure the ordeal of an inquest. Our thoughts and prayers must continue to be with the McGovern and McElhill families. We must remember that their pain will go on; it will not be forgotten, so they must not be forgotten. However, in this debate, it would not be fair to

them to go into the events of November 2007 in any detail. Indeed, it is not necessary to do so.

To make sure that the Lamy Crescent tragedy never happens again, it is important that lessons are learned. In that case, the failures by the relevant agencies were among the worst to be found anywhere. They were basic, fundamental and, worst of all, totally inexcusable. Although failures were found in particular key agencies, there is also evidence of an amazing lack of co-ordination and communication between those agencies. Why, on the basis of clear and extensive evidence going back several years, was Arthur McElhill, a convicted sex offender, regarded by officials as only being a low risk to himself and others? Why was preventative action that might have spared his life and the lives of his innocent partner and children not taken? Arthur McElhill had been known to the criminal and care authorities since 1993, but he was able to slip through the net, with most dreadful consequences.

I welcome the 63 recommendations in the Toner report, which was published last July. I welcome the progress that has been made on implementing Henry Toner's recommendations, but, to ensure that they are fully and swiftly implemented, I urge the Health Minister to keep the pressure on the authorities. Nevertheless, in light of what emerged from the Toner report and the recent inquest, there would be merit in holding a public inquiry. I know that inquiries can be costly and, sometimes, their conclusions can be ambiguous; however, in this case, the issues are so serious that a time-bound investigation would be a worthwhile exercise. Indeed, I go further and say that an investigation is vital to ensure that lessons are learned and such tragedies do not happen again.

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

Mr Buchanan: We have no desire to go back over the events of the tragedy. Nothing that we do can undo what happened of that dreadful day in November 2007.

Mr Deputy Speaker has called on me to finish. I support the motion.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also send my best wishes to the Chairperson of the Health Committee.

As a member of the Health Committee and as an MLA for West Tyrone, the constituency in which the awful tragedy occurred, I support the motion. There has been a lot of pain associated with the case, to which the local MP, Pat Doherty, referred, and he has spoken to the families. Therefore, I do not want to say anything that might add to the pain of anyone who was engaged with or in any way involved in the tragedy.

The McElhill/McGovern case is complex and multifaceted, and the two reports that are in the public domain, the Toner report and the Watkins report, illustrate those different aspects. Clearly, each report has a different focus and emphasis.

I commend the Western Trust for implementing the Toner report's recommendations. It is obvious in that report that mistakes were made and that the system did not work for the family. However, I must say that my reading of the Watkins report gave me no sense that the same gaps, issues and difficulties existed. For that reason, I believe that the motion is appropriate in this case. I want to repeat that its aim is not to raise a sensitive issue again and to cause difficulty for anyone who was involved with that particular tragedy.

I shall quote from the Toner report to illustrate its points and to tie them in with the Health Committee's motion. The report states:

"there were misconceptions on the part of many involved from the police and Social Services as to the role of the other agency and what might reasonably be expected from that other agency."

It goes on to state:

"The Interagency/ multi-disciplinary working across the range of professionals and other agencies was weak, confirmed through the records examined, interviews conducted and comments received from the various agencies".

As I have said, it is commendable that the Western Trust has implemented a number of the Toner Report's recommendations.

I turn now to the Watkins report. Comments have been made about the NIO. It issued a press release after the publication of the report, stating:

"The report found that there were no material deficiencies in inter-agency co-operation in relation to the delivery of the MASRAM arrangements in the case of Arthur McElhill."

The Watkins report's introduction refers to the case, which, it states:

"did not appear to have any sexual dimension".

Point 7 of the report states:

"Our approach has been, as required by the terms of reference, to retain the focus on McElhill as a sex offender".

Point 11 states:

"McElhill was also required to be placed on the Sex Offender Register indefinitely".

Finally, the PSNI visited the family many times. The Watkins report commends it for doing so. It states:

"The PSNI then visited McElhill again (and finally, as it turned out) on 5 November, noting no cause for concern."

The entire McElhill family perished on 13 November 2007.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr B McCrea: The events that happened in Omagh were, undoubtedly, a tragedy. We were all shocked to hear initial reports and what subsequently came to light. It is perhaps worth saying that just because a tragedy happens does not necessarily mean that everyone is at fault.

As a member of the Policing Board, I chair its human rights and professional standards committee. I want to clarify for the Deputy Chairperson of the Health Committee that the PSNI is under the oversight of politicians who represent all parties. The committee has looked at the issue.

1.15 pm

It is perhaps worth adding that I have spoken to the senior police officers involved and to others, and they have said that the decision-making process would not have changed, based on the information that was put forward to them. There was an offence in 1993 and a further offence in 1998, and, in 2004, a review was undertaken and the priority for Mr McElhill was downgraded from category two to category one. On that basis, the responsibility moved to the PSNI, and the designated risk manager visited Mr McElhill regularly, in line with requirements under the MASRAM procedures. However, there is an issue about the message that we all send out to the general public. I think that we are in danger

of castigating members of staff in the social services, the PSNI and elsewhere, who work in really difficult situations.

The point that I put to the House is that if lessons have been learned and the appropriate working relationships are now improved, one would have to consider whether a public inquiry is the right way to go, because there is a danger that an excessive amount of money could be spent on learning lessons that have already been learned. Therefore, perhaps a report should come from the House.

Our party will abstain from voting on the motion. We are open to persuasion, but there is sometimes a danger of having to be seen to be doing something because there has been a tragedy, and the public demand that something ought to be done about it. If all the right things had been done, or are being done, we would be better placed to use resources to prevent tragedies from happening in the future, rather than reporting on past tragedies.

At a senior level, we have not stepped up to the mark in respect of a number of issues. When the coroner's report was published, the multi-agency response was abysmal. Nobody came forward to explain the situation, and none of the organisations said that they were going to step forward and explain it to people for fear of being castigated as the agency that was responsible.

The procedures must be tightened up. As things stand, Assistant Chief Constable Will Kerr chairs the committee, and I have told him that he has to decide which agency is responsible. Is the committee simply a get-together, or does it have some statutory responsibility? Are there other things that we need to do? The public confidence messages that we send out are important.

Having looked closely at the public protection units, the PSNI has brought in some excellent measures, and it carries out its work in very trying circumstances. Recommendation 54 of the Toner report states that the PSNI should consider the secondment of a social services staff member. However, the difficulty was that we could not get anybody to come and do that work because of recruitment issues. People are trying to work together on these trying, difficult areas, and they need support. I urge the House to send a clear message to the public that we are on top of the matter, we are working together on it, and we are going to make the

appropriate decisions to safeguard the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Gallagher: I, too, want to say at the outset that the families who have been caught up in the centre of this tragedy have suffered great hurt and pain. There is also sadness and sorrow in the wider Omagh community. The McElhill family home is in County Fermanagh, and some of the family still live there with their parents, while others live in Tyrone and elsewhere. The McGovern family home is across the border in County Cavan. For those families, pain is an everyday experience, and it is something that simply will not go away.

I have spoken to some of the family members, and they say that the wounds of the event can be reopened by an occurrence as simple as passing a shop, when they are out and about, and seeing newspapers or magazines that are reporting something to do with the tragedy. That is how they live.

I am not entirely convinced about the need for a public inquiry. We have to rely on the professionals and respect their advice on such sensitive issues as this. We also have to listen to the public. I am getting a strong message from the public, aside from the families who have been caught up in the tragedy. The public are asking why we would throw money on more inquiries. They are saying that there are serious problems in homes where children live and where they are at risk and that money should be spent in that area. We have to keep all those things in balance.

Reference has been made to the Toner report and to the other reports that look at the serious cases that are being covered by the PSNI and the Prison Service. We must ensure that every letter of every recommendation in those reports is implemented. Members will hear from the Minister shortly, but I believe that there is a case in favour of the Department appointing to the Western Trust an independent individual to ensure that every weakness that is highlighted is dealt with and that the same mistakes will not happen again.

In 2009, we had the death of a young baby girl in her home in Enniskillen. The report of the western area's childcare committee was published recently, and we have to be concerned about its conclusions. In the past year, the PSNI in Fermanagh forwarded 52 prosecution files to the Public Prosecution Service (PPS). Those

files related to child abuse, which, as Members know, could be physical or sexual abuse. That pattern is replicated across the western area in the Omagh and Derry districts. In addition, the number of children on the child protection register has grown noticeably over the past three years. That confirms that something has to be done now to ensure the safety of young children, even in their own homes.

Setting up public inquiries merely because of startling headlines might be a distraction from a growing problem, and I have mentioned some of the facts around that. There are, therefore, increased demands for assistance from social services and family support services and for the services that they provide, which, at present, are badly under-resourced and undermanned. Those services in the west are under a lot of pressure; the figures speak for themselves. We cannot continue like that. The Deputy Chairperson of the Health Committee said that there would be a Committee inquiry, and there is a possibility of a public inquiry.

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

Mr Gallagher: Those sorts of inquiries must not distract staff resources, which are already scarce, from a very serious problem. To do so would demoralise the staff in the area who are working valiantly and leave them fed up, alone and isolated.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The events of 13 November 2007 are forever etched in our memories. Even now, more than two years later, it is difficult to comprehend how such a terrible tragedy could occur. The tragic events have had a tremendous impact on the community in Omagh and, in particular, on the families and friends of the victims, who will have to live with the grief for the rest of their lives. I am sure that I speak for all Members when I say that they are in our thoughts and prayers.

As Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I have a shared responsibility for the issue with other Ministers, given that the Western Trust was one of a number of key agencies involved with the McElhill/McGovern family. Early on, I recognised the need for an inquiry, which is why, in January 2008, I appointed Henry Toner to investigate the role of the health and social care agencies that were involved with the family. Anyone who has

read the Toner report will recognise that the investigation into the role that the health and social care agencies played with the McElhill/McGovern family was extensive and thorough. It identified a number of deficiencies and made 63 recommendations, 55 of which were directed at the Western Trust.

For many people, including Members of the Assembly, today's debate shows that there remains the belief that there are unanswered questions regarding those events. Seven people died at Lammy Crescent. In the minds of many people, for something so terrible to have happened, someone must be to blame and someone should be punished.

The coroner concluded that, on the balance of probabilities, Arthur McElhill and Lorraine McGovern had been up all night. She also concluded that Lorraine McGovern was about to leave and take some of her children with her when the fire was started by Arthur McElhill. All seven members of the family died as a result of the inhalation of fire fumes.

I recognise that there is a significant issue in relation to public confidence, which is why I asked Mr Toner to return to the Western Trust. His role will be to confirm that all of the recommendations in his original report have been implemented, and I expect his findings to be with me by the end of March 2010. Toner's original report identified a number of deficiencies in the performance of social services in particular in the Western Trust area. However, Henry Toner also concluded that there was no evidence that any of those health agencies could have anticipated that the tragic events of 13 November 2007 were about to occur. He said that no reasonable person could have predicted those tragic events.

The protection of children is a key priority for me and for all of us here. The events at Lammy Crescent reinforce what we already know, which is that, overwhelmingly, children come to harm at the hands of people in their own family and friends of the family. We also know that a number of factors are often present in child protection cases, including domestic violence, substance misuse and mental health problems. To some extent, all of those issues appear to have been present in this case. The other major factor is deprivation.

In Northern Ireland today, 100,000 children live in poverty, 40,000 live in households where

there is substance misuse, 11,000 live in families where they witness domestic violence on a daily basis, and many thousands of adults and children across society suffer from depression and other forms of mental health problems. Day and daily, social workers and other healthcare professionals are out there on the ground helping families and children to deal with those issues. Overall, they do an excellent job in extremely difficult circumstances. I am tired of hearing unfair criticism of the dedicated professionals who deal with extremely difficult and sensitive cases. We must never forget the thousands of cases where the intervention of social workers prevented children from coming to harm. Recent research has shown a 38% drop in the number of violent and unexplained deaths of children in England and Wales, and we operate the same system here. Social workers in Northern Ireland continue to make a real difference in the lives of children and families every single day.

Even if we had the best-resourced and most effective service in the world, it would be impossible to ensure that no child or adult would ever come to harm. As Minister, I have sought to target additional resources at child protection, mental health services, domestic violence, substance misuse, and sexual violence. Despite that, those services remain comparatively under-resourced, compared to the rest of the United Kingdom.

The inquiry into the role of health and social services in the tragic events at Lammy Crescent identified the lessons that had to be learned.

1.30 pm

It is not for me alone to decide whether a public inquiry should be held. Social services were only one of the agencies involved with the McGovern/McElhill family. The Northern Ireland Office and the police were also monitoring Arthur McElhill as a sex offender. I would not support a public inquiry into the tragedy unless I genuinely believed that it would reveal previously unknown information.

Henry Toner and his team produced an extremely detailed report, which clearly identified failings on the part of social services and other agencies in the Western Trust area. They also made several recommendations in relation to those failings. As a result, and on the basis of actions arising from those areas for which I have responsibility, no substantive

grounds exist for holding a public inquiry into the tragedy. Furthermore, all Members should be mindful of the distressing effect that a public inquiry would have on both families, because of the ongoing and significant media interest in the case. The costs of a public inquiry would have to be met from budgets that are already under pressure. However, if I believed that a public inquiry would address any unanswered questions, and if the Northern Ireland Office and the police felt that an inquiry was required, I would support it.

All our efforts must be aimed at minimising the risk of such terrible events occurring in the future. However, to enable us to protect children and vulnerable adults to the best of our ability, those services must be properly resourced. If any Member seriously believes that the latest proposed £113 million cut in the health and social services budgets will not have a negative impact on those services, he or she is badly mistaken. Historically, family and children's services in Northern Ireland have been under-resourced by some 30% compared with the rest of the UK. Those are not my figures; they were provided by the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). I inherited that situation, but the demand for social services has not ceased. Indeed, it continues to grow, and during the past five years, the number of children referred to social services has increased by almost one third.

For the past two and a half years, I have been warning the Assembly about the dangers of underfunding health and social care. As the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I have increased spending on services for children by 14%. That has not eradicated the underfunding of those services, but at least I have attempted to close the gap. That historical underfunding is also the reason why the Department has driven forward improvements. Recently, for example, I secured £3.5 million of additional recurrent funding to help in the recruitment of around 70 more front line social services staff. That extra staffing compliment includes about 30 posts at principal practitioner, social worker, senior practitioner and team leader levels in front line child protection and family intervention teams, and it will, effectively, result in an extra team for each trust. However, those investments are now under threat.

In line with a key Toner recommendation, further posts will be created to assist with public protection arrangements and to enable trusts to discharge their role in monitoring sex offenders. The Department is, for example, funding pilot initiatives that will place social workers in police units in each trust area: the police are not funding that, health and social services are. Those social workers will work closely with the police on improving communication and intervention to help child and adult victims.

Family intervention teams play a crucial role in helping families in need to address problems before they lead to child protection concerns. Those teams undertake more detailed assessments and work with children and families in need, and the majority of the new posts are likely to be in those teams, which also have the most unallocated cases.

Child protection services are in the midst of a substantial and ongoing reform programme to introduce improved assessments of children in need and to ensure that better services are delivered. That programme will address several key weaknesses that were identified by child protection inspections and inquiries into cases, such as the McGovern/McElhill tragedy, in which children died or came to serious harm.

The reform programme includes the introduction of a single assessment tool for children; common standards of supervision for front line staff and recording of files and key documents; improved information sharing; common thresholds of need and intervention; common organisational structures across trusts; a pilot scheme to monitor social workers' caseloads; and new arrangements to embed those standards and guidance into undergraduate training at Northern Ireland's two universities. We also continue to monitor closely the number of unallocated cases in health and social care trusts. Trusts have received investment to help to reduce those cases, and we will continue to monitor that to see what additional actions may be necessary.

I know that, despite that, much more needs to be done. I worry about the level of resourcing that I have been able to deploy into all those services. I can only imagine how much more difficult it is for professionals working on the ground with families and children who desperately need help and support. On previous occasions I have said that, as an Assembly and

an Executive, we must be mature about the difficult choices that we face. How we invest in and protect our children speaks volumes to the outside world about the type of Government that we are and about the sort of country that this is and what we hope it to be in the future. We need to look for opportunities when they arise to try to make things better.

I am awaiting Henry Toner's follow-up report, and I fully expect that to provide assurance that actions have been taken to fully implement all his recommendations in the Western Trust. Members have asked about the outstanding issues that are being worked on in the Department. We still have to complete the child protection guidance, but that is awaiting the new child protection arrangements that will be introduced later this year, which will help to inform the final part of that work. The other outstanding recommendation for the trust is the timely distribution of minutes, which relates to ensuring that minutes of meetings are properly shared among the other agencies. Members have made important points about sharing across agencies in the field of health and social care for which I have a responsibility. That has been one of my key priorities, and the Toner report provides the blueprint and format for that.

That is where we are as far as the Health Service is concerned. I believe that I have taken all reasonable steps in the area of health and social care. However, if the Assembly votes in favour of the motion, I will write to the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ask them to raise the issue with the Secretary of State.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Members for taking part in the debate and also for being mindful of the sensitivities around it. I hope that it has been made clear, through the contributions of members of the Health Committee and local representatives, that no one wants an inquiry simply to rake over old ground or to reopen wounds that were beginning to heal. As a Committee, we are very aware that it is not only the families that have been affected but the wider community. We have heard from senior social workers who have been incredibly stressed by events, as well as from local GPs who have evidence of the stress that people in the local community have been under.

The Committee is aware of the number of reviews and reports carried out on the events in question, all of which have been useful and have led to lessons being learned. However, it believes that more could be done and that all the reviews and reports have missed one very important area: how did all the agencies that were involved work together and communicate? The Committee believes that lessons can be learned about that. Inter-agency working is difficult, wherever the setting, but the issue concerns children's lives, and the better that that inter-agency working is done, the better the protection that we can offer children.

The motion calls for an inquiry into the multi-agency aspects of the tragedy: that must be underlined. The Committee believes that that can be done without unnecessarily raking up events of the past. Members have spoken about cost. The Committee does not want to see an expensive inquiry that runs and runs. It has to be time-bound and focused, and it has to consider the multi-agency aspects and how they work together. The Committee is aware that other agencies involved in such an inquiry are likely to be the PSNI, the Probation Board and the Prison Service.

We are aware that a case review took place on the inter-agency handling of Arthur McElhill as a registered sex offender. That review was commissioned by the sex offender strategic management committee and involved those agencies.

The Committee is also aware that it is not within the remit of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to establish such an inquiry, but the Minister can ask the Secretary of State to initiate a review, and we call on him to do so. I welcome the positive comments that the Minister made at the end of his contribution when he said that if the House were to vote in favour of the motion, he would talk to OFMDFM about making that contact and taking the matter forward.

I will now turn to Members' contributions during the debate. Pat Doherty spoke about the sensitivities of the families and of the local area, and he said that he had spoken to both families. Pat has spoken to many of the relevant agencies, and he believes that there is a lack of cohesion among those who work in child protection. He feels that more needs to be done and that a public inquiry is warranted.

John McCallister does not believe that a public inquiry is necessary. He said that the Toner report was wide-ranging and independent and that it covered all the agencies that were involved. The Committee does not dispute the findings of the Toner report, but we believe that lessons need to be learned in collective working, and we want the inquiry to focus on that. Mr McCallister recognised that during the handling of the case and leading up to the tragedy, mistakes were made, such as the fact that it was not ensured that case conferences happened. He said that the Toner report dealt with those mistakes and that an inquiry would serve no purpose. The Committee disputes that.

Dolores Kelly offered condolences to the family, welcomed the lessons that were learned from the Toner inquiry and the Watkins inquiry and paid tribute to the social services staff, who work in difficult conditions. The Minister referred to the unfair criticism of healthcare professionals in social services. The Committee is not for one minute suggesting that those staff should be criticised. We recognise that they do difficult work in difficult conditions. The Committee is not about bashing those staff. Dolores said that the lack of investment in social services was disappointing, and she questioned whether the additional £20 million promised for social care was recycled money or new money.

Sean Neeson said that the community in Omagh had been affected by the 1998 bomb, and he talked about the effect that this tragedy had on the Lammy area. He said that the terrible incident might never have happened if the warning signs had been heeded. Obviously, we cannot suggest that the tragedy would not have happened, but if proper and improved inter-agency work had been taken forward, at least we could have been more sure that the proper procedures had been applied. Mr Neeson supported the motion, but he said that any inquiry should be neither lengthy nor costly.

Thomas Buchanan supported the motion and said that lessons needed to be learned to prevent future tragedies. He welcomed the Toner report's recommendations and asked the Minister to maintain pressure on agencies to make improvements. I welcome the fact that the Western Trust has implemented 53 of the 55 recommendations in the Toner report, but we want improvement in multi-agency working.

Claire McGill, who represents the area, said that the case is complex and has many aspects. She said that the Toner report and the Watkins report looked at those aspects, and she commended the Western Trust for implementing Toner's recommendations, for recognising that mistakes were made and for its willingness to learn from them. Mistakes include misconceptions of the role of other agencies and lack of inter-agency working, and we need to get to the bottom of that.

Tommy Gallagher referred to the great hurt and pain of the families and the communities, but he is not entirely convinced of the need for a public inquiry. He has listened to the public, who were concerned that money spent on an inquiry could be better spent on child protection. Perhaps Tommy misunderstood me when he thought that the Committee was going to conduct an inquiry into child protection. Just to clear the matter up, we are considering a new piece of legislation on safeguarding.

Basil McCrea said that local politicians have a level of oversight for the PSNI. The PSNI has told me that its decision-making protocols would not have changed. Members of the public have suggested that the improvements that have been put in place are not working, but the message must be sent clearly to the public that we are taking the issue of child protection seriously and that we want to improve inter-agency working. Although individual agencies might have done their jobs, they did not do that collectively.

1.45 pm

I now turn to the Minister's comments. He said that responsibility for this is not down to him alone, and the Committee accepts that other agencies need to step up and take responsibility. The Minister said that he has done all that he can in asking the Toner inquiry to go back to the Western Trust and to provide him with an update on how the recommendations have been taken forward. We obviously welcome that, but we believe that all the other agencies need to take responsibility. We need to minimise risk, and that is what the Committee aims to do. Nobody can say for sure that an event like this will never be repeated. However, we must be confident that we have taken forward all the measures that we can to ensure that best practice is in place and that people work more efficiently together. We

welcome all the improvements that have taken place in the Western Trust and across the board in the Department.

We fully recognise the difficulties that professionals face in doing their job. The Minister talked about public confidence — that is what today's Committee motion is about. We want to ensure that there is public confidence in all the agencies that are involved in child protection. Child protection is a key priority for every Member in the House, including the Minister.

As I said earlier, the Minister talked about unfair criticism. I want to again put on record — I said this when I proposed the motion — that I commend the good work of the social services, because, quite often, that work goes unrecognised. The Minister said that the tragedy might not have been prevented, even if the best resources or systems had been in place at the time, and, of course, we agree with that. However, we need to be confident that we have taken all the steps and precautions that we possibly can, because this tragic event cannot be allowed to be repeated. We must be sure that we take all possible steps to improve systems and practice, and multi-agency working needs to be improved to maximise any chance of that.

I welcome the Minister's closing remarks that he will write to OFMDFM to ask that it raise the issue of the way forward with the Secretary of State. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to seek to secure the agreement of the Secretary of State to initiate a time-bound public inquiry into the multi-agency aspects of the McElhill/McGovern tragedy in Omagh.

Private Members' Business

Schools Estate

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

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the need for newbuild and ongoing maintenance to ensure provision of a schools estate fit for the twenty-first century; recognises the additional economic benefit of construction industry job creation; and calls on the Minister of Education and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that a procurement mechanism is in place, which expedites the provision of capital projects, and that adequate funds are provided to maintain our schools to the highest possible standards.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm an rún seo a mholadh.

I am pleased to propose the motion to the House. It was tabled at a time when we were not aware of the swingeing cuts that all Departments now face. At that time, we knew about the huge backlog in schools maintenance that amounts to about £240 million. That amount is equivalent to a host of new primary and secondary schools, and it clearly points to the poor state of the schools estate.

The Minister says that she is aiming to create a world-class education system. How can we have a world-class education system when the schools estate is evidently in need of so much repair? Some will argue that it is not the school buildings that count but the quality of the teaching and learning that take place within them. However, if Members speak to teachers in recently refurbished or newbuild schools, they will hear about the clear, positive effects of modern, up-to-date facilities for the pupils and staff, and, indeed, for the way in which those schools are viewed in the local community.

Some teachers have to work in outdated and outmoded buildings with facilities that have long been in need of replacement. Past pupils, who have long left school, say that newbuild and refurbishment were promised during their school days, only to come to nothing.

The procurement process for newbuilds is extremely frustrating for education providers, staff, parents and pupils. Usually, dates are given and projections are made, only for those to be dishonoured and delayed by further bureaucratic stalling. Not only are newbuilds slow at coming on stream but basic, badly needed repairs are not being done and are piling up, year on year. The longer that repairs are left undone, the more the schools estate deteriorates and the worse the conditions in which children and teachers have to work. The longer that maintenance is delayed, the greater the bill will be. Lack of investment now is a false economy, and, in the long term, the cost will be even greater.

We are told that further pressures on this year's education budget mean that no newbuilds will go on site in 2010-11. At least, that is what senior officials from the Department of Education (DE) told the Committee on several occasions. However, what they tell us varies, to some extent, from what the Minister tells us. On Wednesday 3 February, the Minister appeared before the Committee for Education, and she said that that is not the case and that, depending on the outcome of the ongoing strategic review, there may be some newbuilds during the coming year. Such mixed messages emanating from the Department are frustrating and disappointing for the teachers, pupils and parents associated with schools, such as those in my constituency — in Forkill, Drumantine, Maddan, Carrick, and so on — which were promised that their newbuild would be on site in spring 2010. They want to know whether that is true, but the messages from the Department are mixed: “no” from the officials but “maybe” from the Minister.

Many Members are aware of similar situations in their constituencies, and they will also be disappointed that no building work will be done in the coming year. That is largely due to a £22 million cutback in the Department's capital budget, alongside a £52 million reduction in the Department's resource budget.

On 14 January 2010, the Minister kindly wrote to the Committee:

“to obtain the views of the Education Committee on how we can deliver these savings and address pressures within the overall context of my priorities for education.”

A cynic might say that the Minister is quite willing to invite the Committee to help her to

make cuts but that, when money was available for investment, she was happy to do that without the Committee's help.

The Minister and her officials outlined five areas in which savings can be made to make up for the shortfall in resources. Those include reductions in bureaucracy in Classroom 2000 (C2k), the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), the entitlement framework and the school improvement programme.

All those issues are associated with the resource budget, but we have no detailed information on the Minister's plans for the capital resource. We know that her Department would need in the region of £70 million to progress the 100 or so schemes that are still in the pipeline. Under present economic conditions, that resource will not be available.

We need to know the results of the strategic review of the capital programme that the Minister has undertaken. Schools that are awaiting projects will expect to know where they stand, and it is important that there be a clear and transparent process. Having already received mixed messages from the Department, I would like the Minister to tell us what lies in store for the new school building programme. Is the review finished? If not, when will it be finished? What criteria will she use to determine the projects that will go ahead and those that will not? The Minister may wish to tell us how much resource she intends to set aside for minor works and for much-needed maintenance respectively. Those are very important areas, especially at a time of slowdown in capital spend.

After the High Court ruling on the schools modernisation framework agreement for tendering procedures, which was originally aimed at expediting new school builds, will the Minister tell us what her Department is doing to accelerate the procurement process? It is important that we get an answer to that question.

As we all know, the education and skills authority (ESA) was originally designed to save £20 million a year, which would go to front line services. Some of the money that was originally intended for the ESA has had to be submitted to the Department of Finance and Personnel because of delays. I am sure that that has had a knock-on effect in other budget areas.

Once again, I remind the House of how important it is that our teachers and pupils work and learn in the best possible facilities. That is not the case at present, and, with an outstanding bill for maintenance of £240 million, it is imperative that we continue to invest in the schools estate in order to aim to have the best possible facilities available to our children and to our teachers. Gabhaim buíochas leat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, as an deis seo a thabhairt domh labhairt ar an ábhar seo.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey):

The Committee receives regular briefings on the education budget from senior officials in the Department of Education. On 18 November 2009, the Committee questioned departmental officials on how the £70 million capital requirement for 2010-11 would be addressed. The Committee also asked how further additional efficiencies in the Executive's spending plans for 2010-11, which amount to some £22 million of capital pressure or 11.5% of the 2010-11 educational capital budget, would be found. As Mr Bradley mentioned, the question of the £240 million deficit in the maintenance budget also arose.

In their response, departmental officials said that the Minister was reviewing capital expenditure plans and that information would be available to the Committee early in 2010. The Committee then heard from the officials that, in the absence of any additional capital funding, the Department of Education would not release any further new capital projects into 2010-11 and would cease work on bringing new projects into the process. However, the Minister seemed to be at variance with her officials on that issue when she met the Committee last week, and we would appreciate it if she could provide clarity to the House today on that issue.

2.00 pm

The Committee was also concerned about a specific DE briefing on the Department's capital spending programme at its meeting on 9 December. It confirmed the serious position of the capital programme, which will be restricted in 2010-11 to minor works spend that is needed to meet statutory requirements. The Committee reaffirmed its request for information on the Minister's review of the capital programme. Moreover, the Committee had serious concerns when it was informed of the £240 million backlog of requests for maintenance from schools.

The Committee received a letter dated 14 January 2010 from the Minister setting out the Executive draft proposals and plans for 2010-11, which identified £22 million in capital expenditure reductions. However, the letter proposed no measures to address the problem or to highlight the serious position of the education capital programme in 2010-11. That was a serious deficiency in the correspondence. Furthermore, the Committee has received no information on the Minister's review of the education capital programme, even though it asked officials in December to provide the criteria for selection of capital projects and any proposed outcomes. The Committee understands and is concerned that the Minister is reviewing the capital programme on the basis of how projects fit with her policies on area-based planning and the entitlement framework.

I will now move to issues that I have as a Member of the House. I declare my membership of the board of governors of Ballymoney High School. I urgently need an assurance from the Minister that there will be movement on capital projects in 2010-11. In my constituency, Ballymoney High School has been waiting for six years, and as the proposer of the motion said, I hope that the Minister will not target schools on the basis of non-compliance with her priorities.

We are not here about the priorities of an individual Minister; we should be here about the priorities for education in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is totally unacceptable that this Minister is overseeing a review of capital build programmes, yet has not informed the Education Committee, to date, about the criteria that she is using. The Minister told the Committee that the information will be disclosed at the appropriate time, which will be after she has made the decisions and has choreographed the estate in the education system to create losers instead of winners. I want the Minister to tell the House what the situation at Ballymoney High School is today, and what is happening with the capital programme for Ballycastle High School, which is held up as an example of cross-community collaboration?

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Finally, will the Minister bring to the House a decision about —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:
— Garryduff Primary School outside the village of Dunloy —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:
— in my constituency, which has been waiting for seven years —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr John O'Dowd.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacú leis an rún.

I support the motion. It would be difficult for anyone to speak against the intent of the motion, which calls for more finance for a school build programme and for a procurement policy for a build programme. We are all aware that the previous procurement procedures were challenged successfully in the courts and had to be revised. That caused a considerable delay to building projects across the North.

It is not surprising that MLAs will rise to speak about schools in their constituencies, because many schools across all constituencies require newbuilds or major renovation works to ensure that our children are taught in a welcoming, safe and open environment.

I have looked jealously at some of the schools that I have visited across the North, especially Holy Cross College in Strabane, which opened recently. Anyone who visits that school can only be impressed by the facilities that are available to its pupils, and I wish them all the best for the future.

I welcome the education debate. Observers of the debate might come to the view that nothing else matters in education other than the transfer procedure, having listened to the media and certain politicians who, when they make their single transferable speech on education, are referring to the 11-plus and can offer no broader policy proposals beyond that issue. Today's debate is refreshing from that point of view.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Would it not be advisable that the Member inform the Minister that, when it comes to devising policies on capital, she should take the transfer procedure out of the equation? It is obvious that she is judging schools on the merits of a policy that is based on transfer 2010. That does have something to do with the transfer procedure. While I am on my feet, I

congratulate the children who, at the weekend, received the results that prove that academic selection is here to stay.

Mr O'Dowd: I often speak to the Minister about many issues and will continue to do so. Surely all Departments are run on the basis of policy. I would be shocked if, for instance, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) was being run on policies to which its Minister did not adhere. It is foolish to suggest that Departments are not being run according to their existing policies.

I add my congratulations to the children who sat the tests and got their results at the weekend, regardless of what those results were. I wish all the children who are transferring to post-primary schools in the autumn the best of luck in their educational future, regardless of whether they sat a test.

We are now entering the realm of what the public call bread-and-butter politics. As local politicians, we will have to make some difficult decisions in the months and years ahead. The recent Budget cuts that were agreed by the Executive are only the beginning of a hard fiscal period for the Assembly and for society as a whole. If we are to continue to table motions on spending, we must craft them in a way that suits our political train of thought and offers viable and credible fiscal alternatives. That is where the debate is going and where the general public expect us as politicians —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Just give me one second, Dolores.

The general public expect that we, as politicians, will ensure that in tabling motions we offer an alternative. All Ministers could stand up and do what Margaret Ritchie does — I congratulate Margaret on her election as leader of the SDLP — all Ministers could stand up and say that they cannot do their job because they need more money. That rhetoric is no longer satisfactory. We have to plan a way forward with the limited fiscal capacity that we have.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member outline why Sinn Féin is not challenging its partners in the DUP to open the books on the Budget and the Programme for Government? In light of the difficult economic climate, will they have a real look at this year's Budget and Programme for Government?

Mr O'Dowd: If the Member for Upper Bann checks, she will discover that Margaret Ritchie is not only the leader of the SDLP but a member of the Executive. The Executive discussed in detail the required £300 million of savings and the Programme for Government and agreed the Budget in detail. All Statutory Committees, including the Committee that is chaired by the Member, are scrutinising Budget bids by their respective Departments. It is not Sinn Féin's fault if the Member has not seen the Budget; it is her own fault. Even as a Committee Chairperson, she should be analysing in detail the Department of the Environment's budget. If she is not, she should be asking serious questions of her fellow Committee members.

Back to the point in hand —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I have only a few moments left.

I welcome the motion but, if we are to move forward in serious political debate and offer alternatives, not only should we table motions —

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

Mr O'Dowd: Members must table motions that outline how those alternatives can happen.

Mr B McCrea: It has really surprised me that no one has been talking about education over the past week. We have been at Hillsborough talking about parades, policing and justice, a new future and how we are all going to get on together so much better. Yet no one has mentioned education.

As Mr O'Dowd said, this is real politics. We are in one unholy mess. Last year —

Mr McElduff: Will the Member accept that Reg Empey, who is a party colleague of his, is the Minister responsible for further and higher education? If education is in a mess, that is an indictment of his own colleague.

Mr B McCrea: It is always good to hear from the honourable Member on the opposite Benches, and it is good to hear that he is as entertaining as usual. I am not sure what point he is making, but thanks anyway, Barry.

The issue comes along —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Once again, I ask Members to make their remarks through the

Chair. If it continues, I will name the Member and ask him to go.

Mr B McCrea: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The question comes back to education. I am keen to debate education. I am keen to work out why we were able to spend £250 million on capital projects last year and why we will spend nothing in this incoming year. Decisions have to be made. I also want to know why we do not have £100 million for revenue budgets. I want to discuss those issues.

The Committee for Education receives presentations from departmental officials giving it those facts. However, the facts are then apparently countermanded by the Minister, meaning that all we get is confusion. It is not possible to talk about these matters sensibly if we do not have the proper information.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I have only five minutes in which to speak.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Mr O'Dowd's logic says that we should help to identify problems. His own Minister sent the Committee for Education a letter asking it to help the Department to identify problems. It is, therefore, obvious that even the Minister does not know what she wants to do about the education cuts that have to be made.

Mr B McCrea: Mr Bradley will make the winding-up speech, so I am sorry that I cannot take his intervention.

I agree with Mr Storey. This is what the people of Northern Ireland are talking about. They want to know what is happening to our schools. Many of the schools in which our children are taught are substandard. We have to make some arrangement whereby we continue to replace schools that are below the necessary standard, and, if we have to, we must make the appropriate hard decisions. That means some form of closure of schools that are, perhaps, not in the right place. Certainly, we have to recognise that we want to ensure that everyone has equality of opportunity. If we are to make those hard decisions, we have to get together. It is not possible for one of us to come forward, whether that is the Minister or someone else,

and say that they will deal with the matter in their way and that no one else is to be involved.

I am struck by Mr O'Dowd's admonishment that we will have to look for a way to find the money. The next motion on the Order Paper, which is about a health issue and which Mr O'Dowd's party tabled, calls for precisely what he is telling us not to do. He is telling us not to come forward with proper plans. That is exactly the point. Perhaps the Member should reflect on that.

The issue comes down to how we deal with the finance. We need to take a long, hard look at where waste and inefficiencies exist in the system. We understand that the money is not there. I was not sure whether I could support the motion, given that it calls for money that we know is not there. However, we must find a way forward and do something for the sake of our children and investment in the future.

To that end, can we not, please, remove all the confusion, unacceptable delay, prevarication and inquiries? Nobody really knows whether certain schools will be built. A long list was issued years ago, and we do not know whether those schools will be built. That is unacceptable, it is cruel, and it is not fair. Those are all the things that politicians should not be doing. We must bring some form of clarity. I make this pledge: the Ulster Unionist Party will respond sensitively and appropriately in trying to work out a solution for all people in Northern Ireland.

2.15 pm

I am sure that the Minister will speak about ESA, but my party supports it, provided that its purpose is to streamline and improve efficiencies. We had a problem with ESA when it became a super-quango that was going to tell everyone what to do. If those issues are addressed, we will support it. Finally, when we consider cross-party working groups, such as those dealing with the transfer issue, why will Sinn Féin not join us? We have had working groups left, right and centre on the efficiency of the Executive, on trying to —

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

Mr B McCrea: Why not have a working party on education?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr B McCrea: Why will Sinn Féin not work with the rest of us for the benefit of all the people of Northern Ireland?

Mr Lunn: A quieter contribution is coming up. I support the motion. Even John O'Dowd agrees that we should support it. The need for newbuilds and ongoing maintenance of schools is self-evident. If one were to ask the head teacher of Lagan College if she needs a newbuild, she would say that the school would probably have to fall down before it is rebuilt. If one were to ask in Magherafelt, one would be told that a new school has been promised and will not go ahead. If one is looking for a maintenance example, one could talk to a head teacher on the Springfield Road who regards himself now as more a plumber and electrician than a head teacher.

I notice that the motion refers to a procurement mechanism to expedite the provision of capital projects. That is fair enough: we should have a good, efficient procurement mechanism. However, if it were speeded up at the moment, it would probably make things worse, because it would mean that more projects were coming forward with even less money to provide for them. If the strategic review turns a "maybe" into a possibility of one newbuild, that will probably be the height of it. The backlog of maintenance work required is critical and is getting worse. It is bound to get worse.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:

An example was highlighted to me the other day in which a school needs repairs done to windows, but, in order to spend the money before 31 March, they are tarmacking the yard at the back to provide additional car parking spaces. That shows that the Minister is not even in control of the processes that she governs.

Mr Lunn: The maintenance budget deficit of £240 million can only get worse. If I remember correctly, the £30 million expenditure figure this year has been reduced from £90 million, which might have made a dent in the problem. Trying to pay off £240 million at £30 million a year will not get easier. That figure of £240 million will probably rise. However, it is not a new problem. At the risk of appearing to defend the current Minister, I will say that this has been going on under direct rule and under the previous Minister. It is a cumulative situation, which has now come to a head.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: No, I have already given way once. All right; I will. Go ahead.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member very much. The whole point of devolved administration was that we would have control of our own affairs and make a difference to people on the ground. It is a failure of devolved administration if we cannot get that right.

Mr Lunn: Getting a handle on our own affairs would be all very well if we also had control of our own money. However, the money coming through is being reduced, not increased.

Mr McCarthy: Wait until the Tories get their hands on it.

Mr Kennedy: You would put up our own taxes, Kieran.

Mr Lunn: Every Department wants to get something out of the money that is coming through, and every Department has to take a cut this year. It is not a new problem, and it is hardly a surprise that we are faced with this situation. The only way to solve it, and I find myself agreeing with Basil McCrea occasionally —

Mr Kennedy: Steady now.

Mr Lunn: I know.

Mr McCallister: Resign. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lunn: It needs to be —

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I hope that it is a point of order.

Mr McElduff: I hope it is too. A conversation seems to be taking place involving several Members in sedentary positions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is not a point of order. However, I am pleased that the Member made that point, because I have been trying to do so. Some Members are overcome by their own verbosity.

Mr Lunn: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am heartily glad that Mr McElduff made that point. If you stood here and tried to speak on a regular basis, you would realise just how difficult it can be.

Anyway, I will try to return to the issue. We need to tackle the problem at its source. We need to have a proper go at dealing with the entire

issue of area-based planning rather than just tinkering with it. We need to look at the issue of sustainable schools: there are too many sectors, too many empty desks and too many systems. I am pointing towards the ESA. I hope that the outbreak of goodwill which seemed to occur on Friday like some sort of miracle will be extended.

I hope that the working group that will look at the business that has been stuck in the Executive logjam will speedily clear the way for a proper discussion about the ESA, because that is the vehicle that could produce efficiency. In addition to the £20 million saving through its own operation, it could help to bring about a root-and-branch review of the entire system to try to make some sense of the situation. I am also glad to hear that the Ulster Unionists appear to support the ESA again. Their support has been on and off, but I am glad that it is on again, even if it is subject to caveats and restrictions.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr Lunn: I am finished, Basil, so you will not be able to make an intervention.

Miss McIlveen: I support the motion. It asks us to recognise the additional economic benefit of construction industry job creation. The economic downturn has had a devastating impact on jobs, particularly in the construction industry. The construction industry accounted for 44% — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. A complaint was made recently about conversations. *[Interruption.]* I am sure that the Member will bear that in mind. I apologise, Miss McIlveen. Continue.

Miss McIlveen: The construction industry accounted for 44% of the rise in unemployment in December 2009. According to DETI claimant count figures, 13,245 claimants came from the construction sector. As a response to that problem, I understand that the Executive's gross capital investment during 2009-2010 will be in excess of £1.7 billion, which is an unprecedented level of government investment. I am referring to the parts of the motion that have not yet been addressed.

I understand that the Minister of Finance and Personnel and his predecessor have

been working alongside construction industry stakeholders to address concerns relating to improving opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises to access public procurement and information regarding future government construction works and services. Such measures would go some way to addressing the concerns expressed in the motion about a procurement mechanism and the expedition of capital projects from the point of view of the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). However, the relevant Departments must provide information regarding capital projects and the timing of those works.

I am slightly disappointed in the motion. There is no doubt that the Assembly will pass the motion, and, indeed, it will no doubt receive unanimous support. From listening to the contributions to the debate, it is obvious that Members recognise the need for newbuild schools and ongoing maintenance at schools. I am sure that we are all united in our wish not only to protect but to create jobs in our construction industry and that we all wish that adequate funds were available for a host of things. In coming weeks, we will no doubt see recurrent motions calling for various Departments to be given adequate funds for a host of projects.

What disappoints me about the motion is that it does not address the fundamental issue: the Minister's handling of her Budget. As we have heard, schools around Northern Ireland have been earmarked for newbuilds and extensions. Those are all at different stages and, previously, would have been given an indication of when work would commence. However, given the current financial situation, Members, the schools and the construction industry do not know whether finance is available or when it might be made so. All those groups need certainty about what is happening.

As has been mentioned, we have known for some time that financial cuts are coming, and, since December, we have been made aware of how severe they would be. In that same month, the Committee was told that there would be a review of the capital programme, and we expected its results early in the new year. We have yet to receive them.

The Minister has now decided that she will come to the Committee and ask us where we think the axe should fall. Without doubt, she

has treated the Committee with contempt over the last two and a half years, and now she asks us to provide cover for her. Perhaps we should not be so cynical; perhaps we should see it as a new start for the Minister. She may be embarking on a new path on which, in the future, she will be much more co-operative with the Committee.

In a spirit of co-operation, I ask that the Minister provide the clarity required by the Assembly, the schools and the builders. Will she advise the Assembly of the criteria for her review of the capital programme and of the results of that review? Will she tell the Assembly at which of the schools earmarked for maintenance, newbuilds and extensions work will proceed and at which work is placed on hold? Can she tell us how long the projects put on hold will remain that way? Can she confirm that no new projects will be commenced in 2010-11? Can she confirm that those projects already on site will proceed? Can she reassure us that full equality impact assessments have been or will be carried out in respect of decisions on whether projects should proceed or be placed on hold?

I look forward to the Minister's response to those questions.

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

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

OFMDFM: Budget 2010-11

1. **Mr G Robinson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their 2010-11 budget. (AQO 663/10)

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): In the 2008-2011 Budget, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) was allocated £86.4 million of current expenditure and £17.3 million of capital for the 2010-11 financial year. On 12 January 2010 in the Assembly, the Finance Minister announced the outcome of the Executive's review of their 2010-11 spending plans. The Executive's proposals, which were issued for consultation by the Finance Minister, proposed a £4.1 million reduction in OFMDFM's resource allocation and a £5.2 million reduction in its capital allocation for 2010-11.

Subject to the outcome of the consultation exercise, OFMDFM's revised budget allocations for 2010-11 will be £82.3 million of current expenditure and £12.1 million of capital. We are considering a number of options for delivering the budget reductions proposed in the Executive's review of their 2010-11 spending plans. The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will be briefed on our proposals for the delivery of the 2010-11 budget reductions as soon as our considerations are complete.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister indicate the implications for the number of staff in the Department?

The deputy First Minister: It has implications, undoubtedly, but we are considering options for delivering the additional savings agreed by the Executive for OFMDFM in the review of their 2010-11 spending plans. Following a bilateral meeting with the Minister of Finance and Personnel on 19 November 2009 to discuss OFMDFM's

2010-11 administration cost pressures, the First Minister and I agreed to develop a robust plan to address those pressures through a reduction in the Department's headcount.

The departmental restructuring plan will deliver efficiencies of 51 OFMDFM full-time employees (FTEs), which will bring OFMDFM's staffing level at 1 April 2010, or as soon as possible thereafter, to 314 FTEs. The proposals will deliver estimated annual administration cost savings of £2.3 million. All OFMDFM staff have been advised of the staffing reductions in a minute from the head of the Civil Service.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to question the deputy First Minister. Will he explain the absence of his Department's revised expenditure plans to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in advance of tomorrow's plenary meeting?

The deputy First Minister: As I said earlier, we are considering a number of options for delivering the budget reductions proposed in the Executive's review of their 2010-11 spending plans. It includes an assessment of any impacts on our obligations to promote equality, good relations and social inclusion. Obviously, that takes time. I do not want to speculate on the potential impact of the plans on any part of the Department until we have completed our consideration of the issues and briefed the OFMDFM Committee.

Mr Attwood: Given that it appears that we are now moving with more certainty towards the devolution of justice and policing, will the Minister confirm the budget line for the proposed office of Attorney General in the 2010-11 budget plan? Will he share with the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister the report that he and Peter Robinson received last September, nearly five months ago, about the future shape and role of the Attorney General's office —

Mr Speaker: The Member should come to his question.

Mr Attwood: — so that all of us may be in a place to better understand what the devolution of justice will look like when it comes?

The deputy First Minister: I am very pleased that the Member has adopted such a

progressive and constructive approach to the transfer of policing and justice powers. I do not have the figures for the cost implications for the office of the Attorney General off the top of my head, but I will write to the Member with them.

Ms Lo: Last month, the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) confirmed to me that it has received almost £1 million from the UK migration impacts fund for this year, and I understand that the fund will run for a second year in 2010-11. Will the Minister state whether any of that money was given to OFMDFM to help those migrant workers who have no recourse to public funds? Will OFMDFM receive any more money for next year?

The deputy First Minister: That will be part of an ongoing discussion between OFMDFM and DFP. When we know the outcome of that discussion, we will write to the Member.

Central Advertising Unit

2. **Ms Purvis** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much was spent by the central advertising unit on newspaper advertising in the last three years; and whether competitive tendering practices are always followed to ensure that the best possible price is obtained for such advertising. (AQO 664/10)

The deputy First Minister: The central advertising unit holds figures for the amounts spent on newspaper advertising by Departments, their agencies and non-departmental public bodies. The total amounts for the past three years are £8.7 million for 2006-07, £9.6 million for 2007-08 and £8.4 million for 2008-09. That amounts to more than £26 million over the past three years on classified advertising — public notices and recruitment — and campaign advertising.

The differing natures of the two types of advertising mean that different approaches are required. A competitive tendering process that was applied to classified advertising in 2006 resulted in a lengthy court challenge by some newspapers. Given the level of expenditure and the ongoing pressures on departmental budgets, we recently agreed to carry out an interim review of the policy on classified advertising. That review, to be undertaken by OFMDFM officials, will include some of the highest-spending Departments, with support from the Central Procurement Directorate.

The approach to campaign advertising is different. Competitive rates for government have been negotiated with each of the main media organisations. That approach now delivers improved value for money, with incremental savings last year estimated at more than £660,000.

All aspects of the tendering process must comply with procurement guidelines.

Ms Purvis: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. When will that interim review on classified advertising be completed and published? Is a value-for-money review of all government advertising planned?

The deputy First Minister: The review is ongoing. I do not have a date for its completion, but we wish to expedite it. We are all conscious of the need to ensure that public money is used properly. A tendering process was run for classified advertising in daily newspapers. After the results became known, three local newspapers combined in a legal challenge to stop its implementation.

The case never came to judgement. As the length of time that subsequently passed rendered rates and other marketplace data out of date, the newspapers agreed to drop the case on the basis that the approach would be re-examined. That re-examination is now under way.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline the role of the central advertising unit?

The deputy First Minister: The unit applies specialist expertise to improve the value for money and effectiveness of advertising for all Departments. In 2008-09, the unit cost £398,000 to run and delivered savings of more than £1 million. The unit has 12 posts: nine in Belfast and three in Derry. Last year, the Derry team handled almost 7,500 classified ads worth £2.6 million. It recently achieved a 100% customer satisfaction rating across seven performance areas. The Belfast team delivered 18 advertising campaigns, each of which had clear objectives and measures of effectiveness.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the deputy First Minister outline how much was spent on the development of the Executive's website? In light of its being virtually a replica of the Directgov website in the United Kingdom, was there a tendering process?

The deputy First Minister: I do not have that information to hand, but we will write to the Member with it.

Child Poverty

3. **Mr Butler** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they plan to use the Financial Assistance Act 2009 or to set up an Executive programme fund to ensure that the Executive meet their targets in relation to child poverty. (AQO 665/10)

The deputy First Minister: With your permission, Mr Speaker, junior Minister Kelly will answer that question.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The tackling of poverty and disadvantage is a priority in the Programme for Government, and it is a theme that cuts across departmental boundaries. Child poverty is an integral part of the overall work to tackle poverty and disadvantage, and specific child poverty targets have been set in the Programme for Government. To ensure that resources and efforts are directed to those in greatest need when allocating resources to programmes, Departments are required, in line with normal public expenditure guidelines, to consider available data and research on poverty, including child poverty.

It is the responsibility of the Executive subcommittee on poverty and social inclusion to agree the priorities and the key Executive actions that are necessary to meet child poverty targets. To that end, Ministers have asked officials to work with colleagues from other Departments to identify the priority actions that are required to benefit those groups, including children who are in greatest objective need. The Executive subcommittee on poverty and social inclusion is due to meet shortly to consider the outcomes of those cross-departmental discussions and associated proposals for priority action.

Once priorities are agreed by the Executive subcommittee, it will be for the Executive to consider and decide how those priorities should be implemented and resourced. In the Executive's considerations, they will consider non-legislative options before legislative methods such as the Financial Assistance Act 2009.

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

Will the junior Minister consider, through his good offices on the subcommittee on children and young people and the subcommittee on poverty and social inclusion, whether money in dormant bank accounts could be used to create a dedicated fund to address child poverty?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): We recognise that legislative proposals for dormant bank accounts represent an opportunity for the Executive to target additional resources at tackling social need through the Big Lottery Fund. We look forward to the outcome of the Department of Finance and Personnel's consultation process, which ended in October 2009.

Mrs Long: Has there been any progress in resolving the dispute between the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety about school-age childcare, which the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister identified as one of the main barriers to people's being economically active and, therefore, to their being able to lift their families out of poverty?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): We were due to meet the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister last week, and we will meet it next week. I do not have precise information now, but we will have it when we meet the Committee.

Mr Cree: To ensure that any distribution of financial assistance funds is seen to be fair and equitable, what steps and protocols has the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister put in place to determine the relative priority of each government programme that has suffered from cutbacks that inhibit the achievement of preset targets?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): To date, the Executive subcommittee has met on two occasions, during which it reached conclusions about the agreed terms of reference. In addition, it has been informed about the extent of poverty here, and it has agreed the work that should be undertaken to identify the key co-ordinated priority actions that are needed to benefit areas, groups and individuals, particularly families and children in greatest objective need. We considered and agreed initial proposals for a monitoring and reporting

framework for the Lifetime Opportunities strategy, which we adopted more than two years ago as the overall architecture of our approach to poverty and social inclusion. Furthermore, we agreed to the early re-establishment of the Minister-led poverty and social inclusion stakeholder forum, which is another accountability mechanism.

2.45 pm

The third meeting of the Executive's subcommittee is due to be held shortly. The meeting that was scheduled for 17 December 2009 was cancelled due to an extended Executive meeting. A new date is to be agreed. At that meeting, Ministers will consider further proposals on priority action areas, as well as the monitoring and reporting of a framework for lifetime opportunities.

Promoting Social Inclusion: Disability

4. **Mr Hilditch** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the report of the promoting social inclusion working group on disability will be taken forward. (AQO 666/10)

The deputy First Minister: On 3 December 2009, the promoting social inclusion working group on disability presented a report to the First Minister and me at an event in Belfast City Hall. When we accepted that working group's report, we committed to taking it to Executive colleagues to seek their response. The report has already been agreed by Departments at official level. The next step will be to discuss and agree a formal Executive response to the report's recommendations. Following that, we will carry out a consultation exercise on the response. The response to the report will form an important part of the Government's implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and it will promote equality of opportunity for people with disabilities in line with our statutory and equality duties.

We have already provided a copy of the report to the OFMDFM Committee and have agreed that the Committee should be provided the opportunity to comment on the Executive's response in due course.

Mr Hilditch: I welcome the deputy First Minister's response. Can he assure the House that every effort is being made to end discrimination and the abuse that people with disabilities sometimes face in day-to-day society? Departments have been almost silent

on disability discrimination compared with other forms of discrimination on, for example, grounds of race or religion.

The deputy First Minister: The report's key vision is of a future in which people with disabilities contribute to and benefit from cultural, social, political and economic life on an equal basis with others. We in OFMDFM absolutely agree with that. It is essential that any Government, particularly any that we are part of, recognise the need to ensure that everybody in society has the ability to achieve their full potential. We are absolutely committed to taking that work forward through to the Executive and on to consultation in the total belief that, on the other side of the process, we will have devised an approach and a strategy that recognise that people with disabilities must be treated with respect and have the unequivocal support of all Departments under our tutelage.

Mr McDevitt: Does the deputy First Minister agree that the best protection that this region could offer people with disabilities would be a strong and inclusive bill of rights? Do he and his Office agree with the SDLP that the British Government's proposal for a bill of rights, which is currently out to consultation, is defective and falls far short of the ambitions of this region and of the Good Friday Agreement?

The deputy First Minister: I will speak now on my own behalf and as a member of Sinn Féin, rather than on behalf of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. My party has registered its strong opposition to the approach that the British Government have taken. I would be surprised if many other Assembly parties did not share some of the concerns of Sinn Féin and the SDLP, and, indeed, those of many other people who are involved in community and voluntary work.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the deputy First Minister's answers. If he wants to take those efforts a step further, there is nowhere better to promote inclusion of people with disabilities than the Building itself. Last week, I attended a conference to which people with disabilities were denied entrance through the front door of the Building. Why should people with disabilities not be permitted to enter through the front door of Northern Ireland's Parliament Buildings? They were sidelined to a side door. I ask the Minister to take that on board.

Mr Speaker: Order. I must point out to the Member that his question is for the Assembly Commission, not for the deputy First Minister. We shall move on to question 5.

Mr McCarthy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker —

Mr Speaker: Mr McCarthy, it is clear that your supplementary question related to the Assembly Commission's responsibilities in and around the Building.

We will move on. Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Equality Commission

6. **Mr Campbell** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, following the publication of the latest fair employment monitoring report by the Equality Commission, if they intend to hold discussions with the Equality Commission regarding the under-representation of Protestants in organisations which come under their remit, including the Equality Commission itself. (AQO 668/10)

The deputy First Minister: All specified public bodies, including the Department and its agencies, are legally required by the Fair Employment and Treatment Order 1998 to monitor the community background of their workforces. The Order also places a duty on them to conduct a review, at least once every three years, of their employment composition and employment practices. The purpose of the review is to determine whether both communities enjoy fair participation in employment. Where that does not appear to be the case, employers may take affirmative action measures to attract members of the under-represented community into their employment.

The Equality Commission has in place an affirmative action programme designed to redress the imbalance of representation in its staff. That includes the use of a statement in all job advertisements welcoming members of the Protestant community; contacts with schools and third-level educational establishments; contact with, and forwarding job vacancy information to, community organisations servicing the Protestant community; and engagement with representatives and people with influence in the Protestant community. Officials maintain regular contact with the commission to keep the situation under review.

Mr Campbell: I note that there was an admission that some work goes on in bodies in which there is an under-representation of one community or another, but there was no admission that the Equality Commission is one of those bodies. Yet, the facts are there; they are undeniable. The figures involved are quite small, but other figures regarding recruitment of Protestants to many major public sector bodies are equally undeniable; many thousands of them are denied equality of opportunity. When is the deputy First Minister going to waken up to that reality and address his mind to trying to resolve it?

The deputy First Minister: I remind the Member that when he asks a question of me, he is asking a question of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I also remind him that, in my earlier answer, I said that the Equality Commission has in place an affirmative action programme that is designed to redress the imbalance of representation in its staff. I must point out that when I was 15 years of age, I was a victim of religious discrimination, so I know all about it, and under no circumstances would I tolerate any section of our community being discriminated against because of religion.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. Does the Minister accept that it is important that the employment profile in the North reflects equality of opportunity, and that equality means equality for everyone in this society, not for one community over another?

The deputy First Minister: I absolutely agree that it is vital for the employment profile in the North to fully reflect equality of opportunity, particularly in the public sector. Some good progress has been made to ensure a more fully representative employment profile across the public and private sectors. That has been due not least to the pressure for more effective fair employment legislation and implementation. However, there is still some way to go, and there remain worrying levels of structural inequality across wider society.

Mr K Robinson: I listened very carefully to what the deputy First Minister was saying about recruitment. Does he believe that the time has now come to take indicative action, along the lines of the 50:50 recruitment policy for the PSNI, to redress some of the long-standing under-representations of the Protestant community in sections of the public sector?

The deputy First Minister: The difficulty is that, if we went right across the North, we would be able to pick out all sorts of examples of people being under-represented, whether in the Protestant community in regard to some situations, or in the Catholic community in regard to others. I want to get away from talking about the issue in the context of Protestant or Catholic. We must recognise that all citizens have rights, and we have to ensure that, as we move forward, there is equality of opportunity for everybody.

We are dealing with a one-off situation in respect of the PSNI. Throughout the decades, since the partition of Ireland, there has been under-representation in the police for many reasons. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The deputy First Minister: I will not turn this into a political debate, because I could stand and talk about the subject for the next two hours without any difficulty.

North/South Parliamentary Forum

7. **Mr Gallagher** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the proposed creation of a North/South parliamentary forum to advance political understanding and wider opportunities on the island of Ireland. (AQO 669/10)

The deputy First Minister: Agreement to establish a North/South parliamentary forum is a matter for the Assembly and the Oireachtas. The issue has been discussed at North/South Ministerial Council plenary meetings. It was most recently discussed at the meeting held in Limavady on 14 December 2009. At that meeting, the Council noted that the establishment of a forum is a matter for the Oireachtas and the Assembly under paragraph 21 of annex A to the St Andrews Agreement. It also noted the Speaker of the Assembly's proposal to hold a North/South parliamentary conference.

Two working groups, one in the Oireachtas and one in the Assembly, have been established to develop proposals for a North/South parliamentary forum. The Houses of the Oireachtas Commission and the Assembly Commission held a joint meeting on 18 November to discuss issues of mutual interest. During discussions, our Speaker, Mr William Hay, proposed that a North/South parliamentary

conference be arranged. That proposal was welcomed by the Ceann Comhairle, and it was agreed to progress the matter through two working groups established by both institutions. I understand that a meeting to discuss arrangements for a North/South parliamentary conference, involving officials from the Houses of the Oireachtas and the Assembly, was scheduled for last week.

Mr Gallagher: Will the Minister provide more precise information on when the North/South parliamentary forum will be established? I welcome the progress that he has outlined. However, since the inter-parliamentary forum will be such an important body for building trust among our politicians across Ireland and improving understanding on the island, will OFMDFM soon be able to tell us that it is going ahead with it?

The deputy First Minister: As I outlined in my answer, whether it goes ahead is a matter for the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission and the Assembly Commission. As many people know, we went through arduous negotiations in the Hillsborough discussions, which lasted variously from 10 days to two weeks. The matter was discussed, and the outcome is apparent in the document that was issued. It is clear that the working group that we have established will have a responsibility to take forward matters in the St Andrews Agreement that have yet to be implemented. The responsibility rests with that group, and I hope that its work will be expedited in the interests of ensuring that we see the full implementation of what was agreed at St Andrews some three years ago.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Chean Comhairle. Tá ceist agam don Aire. Will the deputy First Minister confirm that the parliamentary forum and all other outstanding aspects of the St Andrews Agreement, including a strategy to promote and enhance the Irish language, will be addressed and implemented through the structures that were agreed at Hillsborough last Friday?

The deputy First Minister: As was made clear in the agreement that was published on Friday, the First Minister and I will oversee an exercise that examines the St Andrews Agreement and identifies all matters contained in it that have not been faithfully implemented or actioned. We will provide a report to the Executive by the end of February in which we will detail the

level of progress that has been made on each outstanding matter. We will seek approval from the Executive to set up a working group to make recommendations on how progress can be made on matters that have not been actioned. Junior Ministers will be asked to chair that working group and to make an initial report by the end of March. Within four weeks of the working group's initial report, we will agree a programme to effect completion of the working group's agreed conclusions.

OFMDFM: Legislative Programme

8. **Mr Kinahan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail their Department's legislative programme for the current session of the Assembly. (AQO 670/10)

The deputy First Minister: The Member will be aware that, in this session of the Assembly, we introduced a Department of Justice Bill, which passed its Final Stage on 1 December last year. We are developing proposals for a commissioner for older people and a victims and survivors' service, and consultation exercises on the respective proposals took place recently. Legislation will be required to establish both of those, and once we have considered the consultation responses and consulted with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, we intend to seek the agreement of the Executive to finalise policy proposals ahead of introducing the relevant Bills in the Assembly later this year. Furthermore, the Member will be aware from the agreement that was published last Friday that we intend to introduce a Bill on parades later this year. Other legislative requirements may arise in the future, and the Executive's agreement to the policy and to the legislation will be sought in accordance with the established procedures.

3.00 pm

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Heart Disease

1. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to reduce the level of heart disease. (AQO 711/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): In June 2009, I launched a service framework for cardiovascular health and well-being that set standards for the prevention, diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation and palliative care of individuals in communities at a greater risk of developing cardiovascular disease. In that context, action is being taken across a wide range of areas to reduce heart disease, including initiatives to promote healthier lifestyles and to reduce smoking, obesity and alcohol consumption.

In recognition of the pivotal role of GP practices, substantial funding is provided to practices for the provision of lifestyle advice on smoking cessation, safe alcohol consumption, healthy diet and physical activity. In addition, GP practices maintain registers of at-risk patients and carry out annual blood pressure assessments and medication reviews for that group. My Department is also developing plans to make Northern Ireland self-sufficient in cardiac surgery and is investing in cardiac rehabilitation.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his answer.

The Minister may be aware that Cookstown in my constituency has the highest rate of heart disease in Northern Ireland for people under 65 years of age and the third highest for those under 75 years of age. Does the Minister agree that those figures are startling and that the fact that it is a rural constituency is cause for concern? Will he give details of what steps can be taken in rural areas, especially areas that no longer have acute hospital provision?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The first step taken is that I established the Public Health Agency, and its key role is to take forward those vital messages to the general public. The reality is that our hospitals are filled with large numbers of people who, had they made different lifestyle choices in years gone by, would not now be in hospital. Those lifestyle choices relate to smoking, obesity, alcohol, and healthier lifestyles. Secondly, we are dealing with the current situation. For example, we have a requirement for 1,000 cardiac procedures per annum, which is the capacity in the Royal Victoria Hospital. However, demand is higher than that, and we want to satisfy that demand and ensure that patients do not come to harm by waiting overlong for their treatment.

I am not aware of the specific numbers as regards Cookstown. People in Cookstown are

the same as everyone else in Northern Ireland: they are entitled to the support of the Health Service for cardiac and any other procedures, which are provided on the basis of equality and fair treatment for all patients.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's comprehensive response, and I also welcome the additional investment in cardiac rehabilitation. Does the Minister believe that the service framework dealing with cardiac rehabilitation is working, and will he give the percentage of heart attack patients who are able to access cardiac rehabilitation programmes?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: With regard to whether the programme is working, the Health Service is, in general, clearly working and that is evidenced by the higher life expectancy of the general population. For example, 25 years ago, cardiac open heart surgery was, typically, provided for patients in their fifties. Today, it is much more likely to be provided for patients in their eighties, due to new medical interventions, the skills of our cardiac teams and the work being undertaken by primary care through GP practices. All that has combined to ensure that we are able to defer major cardiac surgery until much later in life, which demonstrates that the system is working.

The service framework for cardiovascular health and well-being are new standards that the Department has put in place, which allow patients to be shown exactly what type of service they should expect to receive. The Department is rolling out similar frameworks across several other areas of healthcare, and it has already done that for cancer and stroke services. Those frameworks are all about improving the service and expanding quality of life.

Mr Gardiner: Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to the staff who work in cardiology services across Northern Ireland? Does he agree with me that, contrary to what has been proposed by the DUP, health funding should not be reduced? That will ensure that Northern Ireland maintains the highest standards of cardiac care.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Of course I agree with the Member's second point about funding. Members have heard me make that point over and over again, and I assure them that I will not get tired of making it. There is substantial underfunding

in health and social services in Northern Ireland, as we heard during the previous debate on the McElhill/McGovern tragedy.

We have very highly talented and trained professional cardiac teams in Northern Ireland, which are headed by our cardiac surgeons. Each of those surgeons requires a specialist team, including cardiology anaesthetists and specialist nursing and theatre staff, who must be trained and be able to maintain their skills. It is very much a team game, and it is appropriate that we occasionally pay tribute to them, because they save lives daily.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his very detailed response to the original question. Will the Minister provide the cost of sending patients to places such as England and the Republic for heart treatment?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Northern Ireland has the capacity to conduct approximately 1,000 cardiac operations each year, and approximately 1,250 operations are required. Two years ago, I was presented with the choice of allowing patients to remain on waiting lists until those operations became available or sending them elsewhere. Our cardiac surgeons are very successful in determining risk and ensuring that those who are most at risk come first, but some patients were coming to harm while waiting for operations. Therefore, I invested extra money in procedures to ensure that those patients received timely interventions.

As I have said, those interventions are not all available in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the Department offered patients a choice among London, Dublin and Glasgow. The procedure in London is comparable to the cost of a procedure in the Royal, but it is more expensive in Dublin. There are differences in travel and accommodation costs. I am considering that matter, because the cost of travel and accommodation brings the cost of having those interventions carried out in Guy's Hospital to almost the same total as the Dublin clinics.

However, one must give patients a choice, and patients very often prefer Dublin because it is a land rather than a sea trip. The other reality is that many of those who require open heart surgery today are much older and perhaps frailer than they would have been 25 years ago. Indeed, many of those patients are very often well into their 70s or 80s. All those factors

must be taken into account to ensure that our patients do not come to harm.

DHSSPS: Budget 2010-11/ Efficiency Savings

2. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on his Department's proposed revised budget for 2010-11. (AQO 712/10)

5. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he can provide an assurance that the additional savings to be found, as announced by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, will not impact on front line services. (AQO 715/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 2 and 5 together.

The position that I face in the next financial year is dire. Not only am I faced with delivering £700 million of existing efficiencies and a 9% increase in demand, but I am facing a proposed budget reduction.

If implemented, the reduction would take my settlement to a meagre 0.3% above general inflation: in effect, it would be a stand-still budget. My position is even worse than that. Given the increase in GP referrals, the rapid ageing of the population and the increase in the birth rate, I will have to find another £100 million, or perhaps more, in order to simply stand still. The Executive are well aware of those pressures but chose to ignore them when making the proposal for a reduction. I cannot guarantee that the additional cuts will not hit the front line.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for that response. The facts and figures that he has provided are not good news at all. The Minister will be aware that the revised Budget Bill will be introduced to the House next week. Does he agree that any party that votes to further cut the health budget by £133 million will be treated with contempt by the public? Does he also agree that if one does not want cuts to the Health Service, one should not vote DUP? *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is possible that there will be a lot of contempt floating around before all of us are much older. I have outlined the situation in

relation to the Health Service, and I make no apology for doing so again. We need to find £700 million to take out of the health budget over three years. That is an enormous task, and it is causing huge pressures in all the trusts. All Members need to bear that in mind when considering the difficulties in the trusts in their areas.

It is also estimated that, by the end of the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, we will be £600 million short of the cost of providing a service comparable to that provided in the UK. As a unionist, I make no apology for saying that I believe that all parts of the UK should get equal treatment. However, that is not possible given the current funding available to the Health Service.

Under the Budget settlement, I got full flexibility over my resource and I was entitled to bid for funding to deal with pandemic flu. However, when I bid for that, I had to accept a very poor settlement indeed, which represents a very serious cut to the Health Service of well over £30 million. As part of the Budget, I also made an agreement to receive the first £20 million of available in-year moneys; I am still waiting for that. All those things add up, but the key thing that people must remember is that demand is up by 9% this year, and was up by 12% last year. Those are huge increases, and they cannot be addressed by a budget increase, in real terms, of less than 1%.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It is clear that the Minister faces difficult decisions, as do many of his ministerial colleagues. He made an interesting comment when he said that, as a unionist, he expects everybody in the UK to receive the same treatment. Is that not part of the difficulty? The Minister is looking at Health Service planning on the island of Ireland from a unionist perspective, rather than a health perspective. Does he agree that, as long as he is involved in turning his back on the Health Service in the Twenty-six Counties and does not plan island-wide, we will continue to run into the serious financial difficulties that we are currently faced with?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Over and over again, I have said that where we can derive benefits for patients in Northern Ireland, I am not averse to a co-operative venture with the Irish Republic. Mary Harney takes a similar approach.

I remind Mr O'Dowd that cradle-to-grave healthcare is provided universally and free at the point of delivery in the UK. That is not the case in the Irish Republic, where people have to pay. The UK has the only proper health service that actually delivers and is free at the point of delivery. The UK's Health Service is also the cheapest. In France and Germany, there is a hybrid of the system in the Republic of Ireland. In America, where there is a big debate on health, there is a purely private health service, and people pay for that at the point of delivery. There, the health service costs 18% of GDP. In France and Germany, the health service costs 10.5% to 12% of GDP, and in the UK, where the service is universally delivered, it is free and is the best health service in the world, costing just over 8% of GDP. Not only is it better and more efficient but it is cheaper.

3.15 pm

Mr Campbell: I understand the Minister's difficulty, and that of each Minister, in operating under tight financial constraints. Will he join me in commending the many groups that are involved in a voluntary capacity and which do excellent work, particularly those that are involved in the area of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)? Within those tight constraints, will he consider what assistance might be offered to try to help them to alleviate the difficulties that people face?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I subscribe to Mr Campbell's sentiments, and I will look to support anyone who provides health and care in the Province, particularly those who alleviate and address the pain and distress that so many patients feel. However, activity is directly proportionate to the resources that are available to fund it, and as the funding reduces in real terms, which is happening, activity is bound to reduce. Therefore, tough choices are to be made, but I assure the House that I will not make those choices on my own. I will allow every Member to join me in making those tough choices about what happens in hospitals and with staff. As I have done before, I assure every Member that the order of the reductions is severe.

Mr O'Loan: Does the Minister consider that the system of merit payments for consultants and doctors represents an effective use of public funds? Does he intend to return to that issue when he next undertakes pay negotiations?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I operate the system to the optimum efficiency that I can derive. I take the opportunities to make savings, and I will go forward on that basis. Merit payments, or payments by results, are cost-effective in many areas. I can write to the Member to discuss the basis of British Medical Association (BMA) contracts, and I remind him that, in Northern Ireland, consultants in hospitals get paid less than they would get paid if they lived in the Irish Republic or on the mainland and they get paid about a quarter of what they would get paid if they lived in the United States.

Our entire Health Service provides value for money. I do not pretend that it is perfect in every way and that there is no waste, but where I see waste, I will seek to drive it out. As I said to Mr O'Dowd, as a general rule, the Health Service is efficient and we should be proud of it, not simply because of the standard of care but because of the way that staff provide that care with the limited budget that is offered to them.

Dr Farry: I have sympathy for the position in which the Minister finds himself, but does he regret describing his budget settlement as a "good deal" in February 2008? I identify with the Minister's desire for common standards across the UK. Does he agree that it is time for his party and his Executive colleagues to bite the bullet over water charges? It is difficult to argue that the Health Service is underfunded while taking a different approach to funding water to the rest of the UK.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am grateful that Mr Farry's question went into the realms of water. I remind him that I am the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, not the Minister for water. I never described the health budget as a good deal. I said that it was not enough but was as good as it gets. The key UK standard is democracy, and that standard governs us all. How would the appointment of the Member's party leader as Minister for policing and justice reinforce that principle in any way?

Mr Speaker: Questions 3 and 4 have been withdrawn and question 5 was grouped with question 2.

Hip Arthroscopy Surgery

6. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the provision of hip arthroscopy surgery. (AQO 716/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Health and Social Care Board is working with trusts to develop an evidence-based business case for the development of a hip arthroscopy service in Northern Ireland. In the interim, where the procedure is recommended on clinical grounds, the Health and Social Care Board will consider funding the treatment of individual patients through the standard procedures for extra-contractual referral. The alternative treatment is physiotherapy and medical therapy, and that may be offered to patients if it is considered to be clinically appropriate.

Mr McCarthy: I am deeply disappointed at that response, because it is exactly the same as a written response that I got from the Minister almost one year ago. What has the Minister got to say to a 34-year-old constituent of mine and, indeed, others who are desperately seeking that surgery but cannot get it? They cannot even get that service across the water, because they are being denied extra-contractual referrals by the trust. Those people's options are confined to gobbling up medicine and pills.

Mr Speaker: I advise the Member to come to his question.

Mr McCarthy: What does the Minister say to those people?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am just wondering what I will say to Mr McCarthy. Hip arthroscopy is a low-demand service with around 30 procedures per annum: that is the figure for 2009-2010. We cannot provide that type of service when it is in such low demand, because it would not be cost-effective given all the other demands on the Health Service. Hip arthroscopy is usually performed through keyhole surgery, and patients can be referred to hospitals on the mainland for the procedure. Physiotherapy and medical therapy, as well as the standard surgical procedures, are also available. Arthroscopy surgery is mainly used in operations on knee and shoulder joints. I regret that folks have to wait longer for that surgery than they perhaps anticipate that they should have to wait, and I

am happy to look at the issue of waiting times and referrals. However, I really believe that the demand for hip arthroscopy in Northern Ireland would need to be higher than it currently is in order for us to put that service in place.

Mr P Ramsey: Good, effective work in hip and knee replacement surgery has been ongoing. Will the Minister outline whether the number of fractures that people sustained in unfortunate incidents and falls during the severe weather this winter has had a detrimental effect on those already on the waiting list for surgery?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am sure that the Member is aware that the Health Service experiences those pressures every winter. They were particularly severe this winter, and we are still not out of that situation. If the clinics at the Ulster Hospital, Craigavon Area Hospital, Royal Victoria Hospital and Altnagelvin Area Hospital cannot cope, we will — this has happened on occasions — suspend elective surgery, which is planned visits to hospital for planned surgery. Elective surgery was temporarily interrupted, but I understand that extra sessions were put on at Altnagelvin and other hospitals to deal with the increasing number of patients on the waiting lists. I will keep that under review. It happens every year; it has been slightly more severe this year. However, I think that the Health Service has coped very well given the pressures under which it operates.

Tyrone County Hospital

7. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he can confirm that the rehabilitation and palliative care beds at the Tyrone County Hospital, as set out in the new model of care services, will be sufficiently funded in order to ensure high-quality and safe services. (AQO 717/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Funding for individual services in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area is a matter for the Western Trust and the Health and Social Care Board to resolve. I understand that the board has asked the trust to submit a business case for the recurrent funding of palliative care beds at Tyrone County Hospital and that work on the business case is under way. Ensuring the safety of patients receiving treatment in any part of the Health Service and the quality of the services that they receive are my top priorities. I

believe that the new model of care services envisaged for the people of the Western Trust area is consistent with those principles.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response. The Minister will be aware that those beds are part of the model of care services that was set up at the time when he removed acute services from Tyrone County Hospital. I am sure that the Minister will also be aware that the commissioner of services has informed the Western Trust that the board is not in a position to fund those beds. How, therefore, can the Minister be committed to something that the commissioner for services has indicated to the trust that the board is not prepared to fund?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I do not know where Mr Buchanan got that information from. It is about as consistent as the other information that he frequently offers to me on the Floor of the House, not least his intervention during this morning's debate on the Omagh fire when he pointed the finger firmly and straight at social services workers. Shame on him for that.

The trust has been asked to submit a business case for rehabilitation and palliative care beds. Business cases are submitted to show that a need exists and to demonstrate value for money. That is happening now, and it will subsequently be determined what degree of service will be provided.

Mr Buchanan, for one, majored on efficiencies. My Department is investigating how to provide palliative and rehabilitation care beds in the Tyrone County Hospital and achieve the optimum value for money.

Mr Buchanan: *[Interruption.]*

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Even when shouting from a sedentary position, Mr Buchanan should make his remarks a little more consistent with what he said in the past.

Mr Gallagher: Does the Minister agree with everyone in the Omagh and Enniskillen areas that the best way to secure safe services in the long term is through the provision of new hospitals? The hospital on the Enniskillen site is going ahead. Will the Minister assure Members that the plans and funding for the new hospital in Omagh, which were to follow on smoothly from those for the Enniskillen hospital, are in place?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: When the Member began his question, I wondered what on earth he was going to say next. The hospital in Enniskillen is on time and on the money, and it will be delivered by the expected date.

In the teeth of opposition from Mr Buchanan and others, I announced plans for a new enhanced local hospital at Omagh. That is still in the planning process, and funding is at least a year away. We all know what is happening to funding at the moment. Perhaps Mr Buchanan will talk to his colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel and come back to the House in due course to tell us how much funding will be made available for the hospital in Omagh — but no one will hold their breath for that to happen.

Mr Elliott: Does the Minister share my concern at Mr Buchanan's continually negative remarks on the entire health provision in the south-west of the Province? Will the Minister confirm that the commitment of providers in the south-west to the Health Service is absolute and that the acute services hospital in Enniskillen will be delivered on time?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I confirm that the hospital will be delivered on time and will provide the full range of services that one would expect of an acute hospital. It will be a major addition to the provision of hospital services in the south-west. Those services will include 24/7 A&E, inpatient medicine and surgery, paediatrics, obstetrics and gynaecology, a critical care unit and day procedures. Its comprehensive range of outpatient services will include medicine, surgery, paediatrics, and obstetrics and gynaecology. It truly is the twenty-first century hospital that the south-west so badly needs.

All that is needed now is a decent road from Enniskillen to Omagh. If I could provide that at no expense to the Health Service, I would do so, but I notice that the Minister who is responsible for roads is about to step up to take questions.

Disability Strategy

8. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the disability strategy will be published. (AQO 718/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My officials are working to

develop and publish a draft disability strategy for full public consultation by the end of March 2010. Recently, significant progress has been made towards achieving that goal; for example, a multi-agency project team has been established to oversee and contribute to the development of the strategy, and pre-consultation events have been held to engage with health and social care professionals, service users, carers and the voluntary and community sector. It is anticipated that the finalised strategy will be published by early autumn.

Ms Anderson: The disability strategy is cross-cutting and cross-departmental in nature. Therefore, is the Health Department working with OFMDFM on the consultation on promoting social inclusion, which the deputy First Minister mentioned today, and on the working group report that was handed over to OFMDFM in December 2009?

3.30 pm

The Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Member makes an important point about social inclusion. The Health Service provides most of its care for those in the first and last 10 years of their life, by definition the most vulnerable individuals in our society. Any cuts to the health budget will specifically hit those people, so there is no way around an equality impact assessment, except by sleight of hand.

We are looking to develop our strategy with any Department that has a cross-cutting interest. We have developed a number of strategies. The issue is getting the strategy right and getting the plans and the resource in place to back it up. That is what I am looking to do in a disability strategy.

It is a fact that disability increases with age, and it is also a fact that women are more likely to have a disability than men, unless they are in their younger adult years. Disability gets worse with age, so a strategy is a key measure in extending life and ensuring quality of life.

Regional Development

Belfast Rapid Transit System

1. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the progress of the rapid transit system. (AQO 725/10)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. My Department is undertaking a public consultation exercise on the policy proposals to inform a new rapid transit Bill. The consultation period will run until 19 February 2010. After that, the Department will consider the views expressed by the consultees and produce a consultation report that will contain the finalised policy.

The rapid transit division is preparing an outline business case for the project. The outline business case process will identify the preferred options for rapid transit with regard to the network routes, a procurement strategy, a commercial business model and a fare system. Identifying the preferred options will allow the Department to undertake the necessary public consultation, impact assessments and appraisals on the various options before recommending a final route alignment for each of the three routes.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his response. Will the Minister give the House assurances that the scheme will be developed in a way that will allow for an upgrade to light rail and an extension to the Belfast commuter belt in the future? Does he accept that Belfast's transport requirements will only grow and grow in the future and that he needs to make future development as easy as possible?

The Minister for Regional Development: I accept that the transport requirements in Belfast will continue to grow, which is why we have sought to bring forward proposals to address that, such as rapid transit. High dependence on the car, even in the Belfast area, is causing a serious problem for our road network. Therefore, proposals such as rapid transit and more quality bus corridors in and around the Belfast area will be vital in the years ahead.

Future-proofing of anything that is done now is essential. That is why I wanted to ensure that the Environment Minister, the Social Development Minister and I were together on the Belfast city centre proposals so that no Department was doing anything that would inhibit the development of a better transport system in and around the city centre and Belfast generally.

The rapid transit system is designed so that it could be upgraded to light rail, if numbers justified such a move. Although the initial proposal is for three pilot routes, the hope and intention is that the system will include further routes. In due course, that may well take

into consideration some of the areas that the Member talked about.

Mr Gallagher: I bear in mind the points that the Minister made about statutory consultation on aspects of the rapid transit system. Is his Department having discussions with the Planning Service on some aspects of the rapid transit system, and will he update us on any meetings that have taken place?

The Minister for Regional Development: The current consultation, which closes on 19 February, is on the legislative proposals, which are, in essence, enabling legislation. The consultation is not about the detail of the projects or the routes; that discussion is being taken forward by the rapid transit group in the Department. That group is in discussions with all stakeholders, and I am sure that that includes planners.

The group is examining each of the three routes that were proposed as pilot schemes and talking to various people on the ground such as business organisations, public transport providers, planners and Belfast City Council. There will be a consultation period when it releases its proposals for those three routes.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Car Parking

3. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister for Regional Development how Roads Service intends to manage the issue of commuter parking in residential areas, especially in Belfast. (AQO 727/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: By way of background, I should explain that the Belfast metropolitan area plan 2015 sets out the transport proposals that my Department aims to have implemented by 2015. The plan has identified some areas of parking restraint where it is my Department and Roads Service's intention to work towards the improved management of parking, including, where appropriate, the introduction of residents' parking schemes.

Members will be aware that Roads Service's initial attempts to introduce the first residents' parking schemes in the inner-city areas of Belfast were met with considerable local opposition, particularly on the cost of a permit. That led to a considerable delay while my officials dealt with those concerns. Despite the fact that we amended the policy on the

introduction of residents' parking schemes to address local residents' concerns, I regret that the most recent consultation in Belfast still failed to gain sufficient support to allow a scheme to be implemented. However, I am aware of the difficulties that residents experience in many areas of Belfast, and I have not closed down any options that are open to me to resolve the issue. I will meet my officials to consider the best approach for moving forward in light of the experience that has been gained to date and in a way that will harness residents' support.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat. Is the Minister open to exploring the introduction of separate schemes in the five identified areas of Belfast, as opposed to operating them together as is currently proposed?

The Minister for Regional Development: As I said in my initial answer, I am not closing down any option. I was disappointed because the central objection and, in some cases, the only objection was the cost of the permits. I moved to address that problem and removed the cost of permits. However, when we surveyed in all five areas, we found a very low level of response, which indicated some degree of apathy in those areas towards the parking schemes and nowhere near the required level of support. However, I will meet officials tomorrow to discuss how to make progress, and I am happy to discuss any option to get the schemes off the ground.

Mr Cree: Does the Minister accept that the problem exists because our public transport system is simply inadequate? Does he accept that improving the reliability, price and quality of public transport into the city centre would have a direct effect on the problem of on-street parking?

The Minister for Regional Development: I accept that. We have been striving to achieve that, and passenger numbers on the rail and bus networks have grown considerably over the past number of years. The impetus is to continue to invest to ensure that public transport is reliable, comfortable and accessible. All of our substantial investment in public transport has been intended to achieve that outcome.

Of course, that is one aspect of what needs to happen to stop the problem of people taking cars into city-centre areas and parking them there all day. We must reduce the availability

of parking spaces in the city centre. Ultimately, we must adopt a carrot-and-stick approach to get more and more people out of private cars and on to public transport. However, public transport needs to be brought up to scratch; the investment is trying to achieve that.

Mr McDevitt: I welcome the Minister's acknowledgement that the early trials of residents' parking schemes were a failure, particularly in south Belfast. Will the Minister give a commitment to the House to work with me and colleagues in other constituencies that are badly affected by commuter parking to develop schemes that satisfy the community? Does he accept that many communities would welcome properly managed and properly designed residential parking schemes?

The Minister for Regional Development: I do not accept that the proposed parking schemes have been a failure. The exercise was not met with the support that we wanted. Nonetheless, while teasing out the issues and working with communities in inner-city areas, we addressed a range of issues and examined each area to determine its specific requirements. The residents' parking scheme has been tailored for each area. As the Member will know, each area is different and has different requirements.

I have met many elected representatives from all areas of Belfast to discuss those schemes, and I am happy to continue to do so. I know that there is a demand in other areas, and we are keen to get some schemes under way, if only to display the benefits that can flow from a residents' parking scheme. Where none exists, it is hard to point out the benefits that will accrue to neighbourhoods. The areas that suffered the most acute stress were the five inner-city areas that have been identified; quite rightly, the schemes in those areas are a priority. We have not given up on getting those schemes off the ground, and we will continue to examine all options. I am happy to discuss those issues with any elected representatives in any of those areas.

Ms Lo: When I last spoke to the Minister, I mentioned Stranmillis. Will he confirm that, when he attends his meeting tomorrow, he will consider areas just outside the five identified areas in the first pilot scheme such as the lower Malone Road and Stranmillis?

The Minister for Regional Development: My colleague mentioned the Bogside, which is also being considered as part of the scheme.

The problem of all-day residents' parking was most acute in the inner-city areas closest to the city centre, and that is where the priority was. Nonetheless, the Member is right: a range of other areas has been identified, and some preliminary assessments have been done in those areas, including the lower Malone Road and Stranmillis and, indeed, the Bogside in Derry. All those issues will be up for discussion as we try to move those schemes forward.

Railways

4. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his priorities in relation to the extension of the rail network. (AQO 728/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: My priority is to maintain, improve and upgrade existing railway lines in the region. There are no plans to extend the rail network at this time. The development of an overall railway infrastructure was considered during the production of the business case that was completed in August 2007 for the New Trains Two programme. That followed the work of an interdepartmental group that was established in 2006 to consider options for future investment in the railway network here.

As a result, it was agreed that we should continue the emphasis on maintaining and improving the existing infrastructure and improving passenger services. The planned investment in public transport by my Department in the North of Ireland over the next 10 years is set out in the investment delivery plan, which is published on the Strategic Investment Board's website. Therefore, my current priority is to extend the track life of the line between Ballymena and Coleraine; introduce 20 new trains with supporting platform infrastructure and stabling facilities over the next few years; and undertake a full relaying of the line between Coleraine and Derry.

Along with essential maintenance, total rail investment over the next three years could be close to £250 million. That demonstrates clearly my commitment to rail investment. Future investments in the railway will be considered in the context of the current regional development strategy and regional transportation strategy

review, the next comprehensive spending review period and ISNI.

Mr Burns: As the Minister knows, my aim is to get the railway line between Lisburn and Antrim reopened to service Belfast International Airport. Has the Minister had any further discussions with the Kilbride Group regarding the development of a station at the International Airport, the feasibility study for which he agreed to contribute to at a meeting last year?

The Minister for Regional Development: I share the Member's view: I would like to see that line reopened, and I would like to see the railway network extended. However, I am dealing with the here and now, and I am securing a substantial investment to ensure that what we have continues to operate properly and is improved, including the number of trains on the network.

As the Member said, I met representatives of the Kilbride Group's community rail group in March 2009. We discussed proposals to have the Antrim to Knockmore railway line reopened in order to provide new commuter services. Given the proximity of Belfast International Airport to the line, the Kilbride Group's representatives argued for a feasibility study to develop a halt or station at the airport. I made it clear that, if they secured local council support for a study, my Department would contribute to the cost. There has been no follow-up from the Kilbride Group since.

Mr Speaker: I encourage Members to stand in their place if they want to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Neeson: While we are on the subject of the development of the rail network, will the Minister update the Assembly on the provision of new trains, particularly those for use on the Larne line?

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member will know that we signed off on the procurement of 20 new trains last year. I do not have the exact details to hand, but I recollect that they are to come into service in 2012 or 2013. The Member and other East Antrim Members have raised the issue of trains on the Larne line on many occasions. There is a commitment, when the new trains come into service, to replace the trains on the Larne line. That will be done very shortly after they come into service.

3.45 pm

Mr Savage: The Minister is aware of the high cost of the railway line from Antrim to Lisburn. However, has he other possible routes in mind so that we can have a railway system that measures up to his expectations?

The Minister for Regional Development: It is not necessarily a question of what I have in mind. There has been a strong lobby to extend the rail network, particularly in the north-west. That applies not just to this Administration; there has been a strong cross-border lobby to extend the railway service into Tyrone, Derry, Fermanagh and Donegal. There is an obvious gap in the rail network in Ireland in the north-west.

The Member is right that extending the rail network would be expensive. Some say that it could be done at the drop of a hat or that Europe is willing to invest a huge amount of money, but that does not always prove to be the case. Europe has been very supportive but not to the extent of opening entire new railway networks.

The Department will continue to press the case. I have supported those who have come to me wanting to extend the railway network and have encouraged them to continue to build their case and to lobby for it. Even though the population in the west is more scattered, the importance of sustainable transport will move higher up the agenda as congestion increasingly becomes a problem.

Mr Hamilton: We should never have closed the line to Comber.

Portaferry-Strangford Ferry

5. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister for Regional Development if any assessment has been made of the need to provide an improved backup service for the Portaferry to Strangford ferry. (AQO 729/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Department's Roads Service reviewed the need for a backup service for the Portaferry to Strangford ferry several years ago. In 2009, Roads Service produced the MV Rachlyn foot-passenger-only vessel. The vessel is now available in its backup role, should the MV Portaferry II and the MV Strangford car and foot passenger service not be operational.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that two breakdowns of the 40-year-old backup vessel, the MV Strangford, over a 24-hour period during the critical Christmas period is unacceptable? Does he also accept that equally problematic during those breakdowns was the perceived lack of information given to passengers? That included the continually malfunctioning electronic signage, which his Department purchased some years ago at more than £200,000, on some of the roads around the Ards Peninsula.

The Minister for Regional Development: I am disappointed and share the Member's frustration that the service was not available over Christmas. MV Portaferry II, the main operating vessel, was in dock for its annual refit from 5 November 2009. Unfortunately, the main backup vessel, the MV Strangford, developed an engine failure that proved difficult to diagnose. Consequently, that disrupted services from 26 to 29 December. The MV Strangford had been operating reliably before that.

I appreciate the difficulties, as people from the peninsula rely heavily on the service. I will raise the operation of the service with Roads Service. Lessons will have to be learned from that breakdown, because no one likes a breakdown in the service. Information is essential to those who use the service. I will, therefore, raise the issue of signage with Roads Service to ensure that we learn lessons.

Mr P J Bradley: Will the Minister confirm that there is a foot-passenger-only vessel anchored somewhere in Strangford Lough that cannot be put into service because the crew has not been trained? Is there a reason for that delay?

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service plans to recruit additional crew. Two mechanical maintenance staff have been appointed, although they have yet to take up the posts pending security clearance. Agency staff are being brought in to assist on deck until permanent crew have been appointed.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his answers. Has he discussed the Portaferry to Strangford ferry with his counterpart in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment with a view to encouraging tourism? Despite a number of breakdowns, the service operates regularly, and it could be a tourist attraction.

The Minister for Regional Development: No; however, I concur with the Member's view. Having crossed on the ferry on a lovely sunny afternoon, I know that it is a beautiful part of the world. The ferry service greatly enhances that, and it could become a tourism feature. I will mention it to the Minister at the next opportunity.

Mr Speaker: Mr Campbell is not in his place to ask question 6, and question 7 has been withdrawn.

A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue

8. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue road scheme. (AQO 732/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: The A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue dual carriageway is being constructed as part of package 2 of the Roads Service design, build, finance and operate (DBFO) programme. Amey Lagan Roads Limited is the project company, and Lagan Ferrovia is the construction contractor. I can confirm that work is progressing satisfactorily: for example, the bridge providing access from Derrybeg Lane to Newry's new railway station has been open to traffic for several months.

Lagan Ferrovia also made a particular effort to make the Cloghogue junction at the southern end of the scheme available to traffic at the beginning of December to assist with Christmas travel. At the northern end of the scheme, traffic has been moved onto the new northbound dual carriageway between Beech Hill and the new Sheepbridge junction to facilitate the completion of the southbound carriageway at that location.

Lagan Ferrovia recently indicated that construction works on this strategic road improvement scheme were ahead of schedule. Therefore, subject to that momentum being maintained, there is an expectation that the new road may be open to traffic ahead of the programme completion date of December 2010.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. I hope that he keeps Armagh in mind if he intends to introduce a new railway network. If there is an opportunity for sections of the new road to be completed on time, will they be opened ahead of the completed road scheme?

The Minister for Regional Development: Lagan Ferrovia indicates that it does not plan to open

the A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue dual carriageway in sections. It points out that substantial completion of the construction works under the DBFO contract requires road safety audits, snagging works and other commissioning activities to be carried out that will require access to the new dual carriageway. It also advised that, as construction works progress, it will be necessary to transfer traffic onto sections of the new dual carriageway from time to time. Those arrangements will involve temporary traffic measures.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the completion of the new A1, welcome as it will be, will have only minimal impact on the traffic chaos in Newry, especially the tailbacks on the Camlough, Belfast and Warrenpoint Roads? Will he outline how he intends to address that problem in the interim as we await the progress of the southern relief road for Newry?

The Minister for Regional Development: I do not agree with the Member. He knows the area as well as I do, and, when the strategic traffic — the Belfast to Dublin traffic — is separated from traffic going into Newry on the Belfast Road, that will have a substantial impact on the Camlough Road when the new junction is available. It will also have an impact on the backup of traffic there.

The Member mentioned the Warrenpoint Road, and the southern relief road is a project that we are pressing forward with. Interim measures have been taken, such as signalling and park-and-ride facilities, to encourage more people to use public transport. However, Newry's problems are experienced in every urban area across the island and beyond. A substantial increase in the use of private cars has created difficulties for road systems that were not built to cope with such a volume.

I assure the Member that, when finished, the road will have a significant impact. He said "welcome as it will be", and I am sure that he will be out welcoming it when it does open. I am sure that he will also welcome the substantial investment that we have made in Newry railway station, which will encourage more of the travelling public to use public transport.

Mr Speaker: Mr Lunn is not in his place to ask question 9.

Coleraine Harbour

10. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans for Coleraine harbour. (AQO 734/10)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Coleraine harbour is a trust port, and my direct responsibility is limited to matters relating to its governance structure. As part of the forthcoming public consultation exercise on new harbours legislation, I intend to consult on my view that, in principle, Coleraine harbour should become a municipal port. Under that proposal, ownership would transfer from Coleraine Harbour Commissioners to Coleraine Borough Council. Such a change in status would be effected by means of a transfer order that would be brought to the Assembly for approval.

Mr Dallat: The Minister will be aware that there has been a wind of change in the Coleraine Harbour Commissioners, largely because new people with vision have been introduced there. Those people have produced a master plan in a short time. Does the Minister agree that it is right to revisit the proposals, given that Coleraine will need to be developed to handle the traffic that will flow from the Shannon and the Erne when the Ulster canal is reopened?

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member referred to "new people with vision"; I will have to take his word that the old people did not have vision. From my early discussions with people in that area, including the Coleraine Harbour Commissioners, I concluded that it would be best to transfer the harbour to Coleraine Borough Council and to make it a municipal port. However, that proposal is out for consultation, and I am open to what that will bring. If things have changed, I am sure that we will be able to adapt accordingly.

A6 Road Scheme

11. **Mr Leonard** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the A6 road scheme. (AQO 735/10)

The Minister for Regional Development:

I assume that the Member is referring to the proposed A6 Derry to Dungiven dual carriageway scheme, which will incorporate a dual carriageway bypass of Dungiven. Roads Service has advised that work to finalise a reference design for the scheme is continuing. That will enable the completion of the environmental

statement in preparation for the publication of the draft direction and investment Orders. It is anticipated that those Orders will be published before the end of 2010.

Consultations with statutory bodies on environmental issues are under way. Two site investigation contracts, with a combined value of £1 million, have just been awarded. I can further advise that a public exhibition that was held in Strathfoyle on 19 and 20 January sought the views of local residents and businesses on proposals for the A2 between the Maydown and Caw roundabouts. Those proposals resulted from those that were made for the new A2/A6 junction at Stradreagh.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he confirm how much the A6 Derry to Dungiven dualling scheme will cost?

The Minister for Regional Development: It is estimated that the scheme will cost between £320 million and £390 million.

Town Centres

12. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development what co-operation exists between his Department and local councils to ensure that the commercial centres of towns are accessible during periods of freezing weather. (AQO 736/1)

The Minister for Regional Development: This could be a record, a Cheann Comhairle.

I advise the Member that there is no statutory duty on Roads Service or, indeed, on district councils, which are responsible for street cleaning, to salt or to clear snow and ice from footways. A key outcome of the most recent review of the winter services, policies and procedures that Roads Service operates and that the Assembly debated fully and accepted, was that the practice of targeting the limited resources available at the busier main routes should continue.

The review also included the treatment of footways. At that time, it was recognised that the cost of salting footways was prohibitive and that the basic logistics of introducing what were largely manual tasks would be impractical. It was proposed that, in periods of prolonged lying snow, the Department should seek to enlist the help of other agencies, such as district councils,

to assist in clearing busy town centre footways. The then Minister wrote to each council to outline the proposals for partnering arrangements for the removal of snow and ice from town centre footways and pedestrian areas.

Roads Service followed that up by writing to each council to explain the proposals in detail, and it enclosed a proposed model arrangement. In consultation with NILGA (Northern Ireland Local Government Association), Roads Service drew up a draft legal agreement. However, only a small number of councils signed up to that agreement. Therefore, the resources that are available to treat snow and ice on footways are somewhat limited. No further action was taken at that time. However, following the recent prolonged spell of wintry weather, I have asked the chief executive of Roads Service to revisit the proposed partnering arrangements with councils.

Mr G Robinson: Will more salt boxes be provided, particularly in very remote rural areas? During the recent period of extreme weather, a lot of people called at my office to request an extension of that facility.

The Minister for Regional Development:

During the prolonged spell of wintry weather, I had a discussion with Roads Service, and its experience is that periods of extreme weather provide an opportunity to test systems to see how they are working. Salt piles and grit are provided on request. Generally, those requests are made by people who live on difficult stretches of road. Indeed, elected representatives make such requests.

There are some 3,500 salt boxes across the North, and there are criteria for where they are located to ensure that they are adequately spread out and that they are not too close together. It is a matter of having a discussion with the depot manager or the Roads Service manager in one's area to identify the areas where salt boxes are required. It is during the summer that such measures will be taken. It is difficult for Roads Service vehicles to get out in icy weather in order to provide new salt piles. If people could identify the trouble spots from their winter experience and discuss them with local managers, we could see whether those needs could be met during the summer so that salt and grit could be in place for the following winter.

4.00 pm

Mr K Robinson: Our weather patterns have changed dramatically and will, by all accounts, continue to change. Does the Minister agree that instead of fiddling around and trying to get councils to do one thing, someone else to do another and someone else again to do a third, an official should go to a country such as Germany to see how it deals with consistent snowfall, year on year? In that way, a comprehensive policy to deal with the situation could be devised.

The Minister for Regional Development:

The problem is that weather patterns are not consistent. On the one hand, we are told that there is global warming; on the other, we have the coldest winter in 30 years. The fact that we have not experienced such weather for 30 years illustrates that we do not get the weather patterns that are usually experienced in the centre of a large continent. There are always lessons to be learnt, but Ireland is an island and it is affected by different climatic conditions. Ours is a difficult country to plan for because it does not have a consistent weather pattern. All we can do is try to improve the systems we have. We have developed systems that cover the vast majority of the needs of the travelling public. However, that still presents problems for people living in rural areas.

As for district councils, the gritting and salting of footpaths is a largely manual operation: it is not suited to Roads Service, which works mostly from vehicles. There is an opportunity to use the connection between regional government and local government. I discussed that with local government in my own area, and I found that manual staff who could have been available for work such as clearing footpaths had been laid off because they could not work. I am disappointed that the discussion a number of years ago did not bear fruit, but, in the light of this winter's experience, there is an opportunity to revisit it.

Mr Speaker: Order. That ends Question Time. I know that a number of questions were withdrawn, but we were able to answer eight questions. I receive complaints all the time from Back-Benchers that Ministers take time deliberating in their answers. However, we cannot say that today, and so I congratulate the Minister. *[Interruption.]*

Mr K Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I concur with all the remarks you make, as do many Members from around the Chamber. I hope that the Minister's colleagues will take a lesson from Minister Murphy's achievement in this respect.

Private Members' Business

Schools Estate

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the need for newbuild and ongoing maintenance to ensure provision of a schools estate fit for the twenty-first century; recognises the additional economic benefit of construction industry job creation; and calls on the Minister of Education and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that a procurement mechanism is in place, which expedites the provision of capital projects, and that adequate funds are provided to maintain our schools to the highest possible standards. — [Mr D Bradley]

Mr McLaughlin: The Minister for Regional Development is leaving the Chamber, and I am trying to work out how we will be able to cope with his ego from now on.

I have considered the motion carefully. On balance, it is very worthy and it deserves to be supported. I hope that it is passed. All parties should enthusiastically support the call to provide a schools estate fit for the twenty-first century and should support the Minister as she bids for additional resources and capital in the monitoring process. Parties should recognise immediately the economic benefit that accrues to the construction industry from newbuild and ongoing maintenance spend.

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

This matter relates to the Education Department, but when our spending Departments put their minds towards ensuring that there is maximum uptake from local industry and enterprises, that benefits indigenous companies. I look forward to the publication of the Finance Committee's report on the procurement process. Despite various entreaties from all parties in the House, there is work still to be done to open up participation and opportunity for indigenous companies to avail themselves of government contracts.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): Does the Member accept that there is a huge difficulty with procurement, which is why the frameworks collapsed? Indigenous companies are excluded from the procurement process because of the introduction of a process that has created a wider net. The result is that local companies involved in maintenance, minor works and

capital works are being severely penalised and are unable to get the work that will supply local industries and local people doing those jobs.

Mr McLaughlin: I accept the Member's point. The Finance Committee examined that matter. Quite clearly, legal challenges have contested the orthodoxy that bigger is necessarily better. We have seen the anomaly where local indigenous companies carried out 100% of the works but did so under the project management of big multinationals, which had all the in-house facilities to ensure that they won the tendering process. There is scope, which is the point that I made. I value the comments that the Member made in that respect.

The final section of the motion states that adequate funds should be provided:

"to maintain our schools to the highest possible standards."

That is a very worthy statement. The proposer would have done justice to his commendable motion had he indicated how much he was talking about. That is a very high standard, and people would want to see —

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. I would certainly have indicated how much money is needed had the Minister provided me, as a member of the Education Committee, with that figure. Had the Member been here for the debate this morning, he would have heard that the Minister has not provided the Committee with that information. Perhaps, when she brings forth the information, I will be in a better position to provide a figure.

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

Mr McLaughlin: I welcome the point that was made. I was present for the debate this morning: competing diary commitments created the initial difficulty. I paid particular attention to the proposer's arguments, and I make it clear that I support him. My point is that, over and over again, we have heard arguments from the same party that do not specify where exactly the money would come from, what other budgets would be affected, or how the Executive could address the grandiose claims that are made.

The general thrust is that everyone would address the stricture in the motion, which states that schools should be maintained to the highest possible standards. We are discussing

only one of the spending Departments. There are a number of them, and they have all been affected. We have heard the arguments being made for an increase in the budgets for social housing and health. However, we have a finite amount of money that has been reduced somewhat as a result of external economic conditions changing, the responses of the British Government to those and the falling property prices, which have rendered the entire programme of the disposal of surplus assets of no benefit at all to those spending Departments in the present circumstances.

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

Mr McLaughlin: Bring forward the motions and arguments to achieve the highest possible standards, but let us be sensible. It is time to get away from that pie-in-the-sky argument.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion, because the issue must be considered. The Minister will be under no illusion about the issues that I will highlight and draw to her attention yet again. It is important that we do so within the remit of the proposal. In particular, I will make very clear the issues that are vitally important to the people whom I represent and to the constituency of Strangford.

The motion clearly outlines the fact that we must ensure that the physical aspects of our schools maintain the highest standards of the education system that we provide, and it asks for a mechanism to be put in place.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel has made clear his Department's dedication to the construction industry and to playing its part in ensuring that work that is carried out goes to home-grown talent and firms. Indeed, government projects account for over 40% of construction work. That can be maintained and built on, not just for the sake of ensuring that jobs are in place but because that work must be done.

The October 2009 report, 'Construction in the UK Economy: The Benefits of Investment', highlights the multiplier effect of construction on the economy.

The report suggests that for every £1 put in to construct, that there is a benefit of £2.85 on roads and infrastructure, and a benefit of £4.83. This is something which has been seen

for years and it is therefore to be seen that the benefits are twofold: jobs in the short term and long term benefits to the economy.

The report advises that for every £1 spent on construction, the nation derives a wider economic benefit of £2.85. For every £1 spent on roads, infrastructure benefits by £4.83. I have been saying that for years. The benefits are twofold: jobs in the short term and economic dividends in the long term. The Minister of Finance and Personnel also recognises that, and he has consequently ensured continued investment in that realm. He has set up a task force to help to bring about the right results: getting people off unemployment benefits and into jobs that enhance their skills.

Furthermore, the Minister provided budgets for each Department that, if properly managed, will ensure that capital is spent on construction and maintenance. The Minister of Education must fulfil her role in that area. She must take a real look at her Department, how it is organised and how it uses its capital spend.

I cannot talk about newbuilds without mentioning one that is close to my heart, and I declare an interest, Mr Deputy Speaker, as a member of the board of governors of Glastray College. The college is in my constituency and has an £11 million project for a school newbuild. The college is oversubscribed by 57 pupils this year, and children are turned away every year. The feeder schools are full, and enrolment is steady and secure, yet we are still waiting for the project's start date.

Until now, we have spent £3 million on purchasing land for the newbuild, on consultation costs and on architect's fees, but the school still awaits the green light from the Minister. Recently, two meetings about the newbuild have been cancelled. The school has been left in limbo. It does not want to patch up the roofs and boilers in the short term at a cost of thousands of pounds, because it believes that the newbuild will start soon enough; however, no date has been fixed.

I assume that the money is there. The Minister of Education was confident of having it when she gave the go-ahead to meet the initial costs. Why has the contract not been allocated? Why have the jobs not been created? Why are workers not on site?

The Minister must also consider how she allocates her budget and understand the need to prioritise rather than, with respect, allocate money to apparently unnecessary and often gratuitous schemes that reflect her beliefs and affiliations. Those include £20,000 for each of the four boards for youth clubs and community organisations to promote the Irish language. When funding is needed for much more important projects, why has that money been sneaked in the back door?

I ask the Minister to examine that seriously. We need a fit-for-purpose school that provides quality education to many children. With great respect, there can be no pet projects. Members are well aware that it is not my style to attack Ministers. However, I cannot sit here quietly and allow a debate to take place that highlights the plight of our construction industry and how to further the education of our children.

I ask the Minister to allocate her funding to provide institutions that ensure that our children are the best educated in the world and that they have the facilities required to enhance their education at the most basic level. The time for point-scoring allocations has passed. The community that I represent comprises people of all backgrounds who are urging the Minister to do right by their children and to stop her game-playing. Leave that for children in their playgrounds. I look forward to the Minister's response.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Members who tabled the motion. The built environment within which our children study is crucial to their educational experience and their ability to learn. Schools should be inspiring places in which children and teachers feel that they can flourish. Unfortunately, for two reasons, that is not the case in many schools across Northern Ireland. First, we have a largely dysfunctional procurement and planning policy; and secondly, we face a growing financial crisis.

4.15 pm

In November 2006, in the Department of Education's review of public administration policy paper, which was compiled under direct rule, Ministers outlined problems with the Department's procurement policies, namely the lack of integration, co-ordination and consistency between the planning activities of the education authorities; the lack of robust and consistent information on the condition and

suitability of the schools estate; the time taken to complete economic appraisals in the approval process; the duplication of activities; and the differences between sectors in how planning and development matters are resourced and delivered.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:

The Member hit on a very important point. The Minister has put a lot of store in area planning and collaboration, but in the recent report that the Member will be aware came to the Committee for Education, it is abundantly clear that area planning is no longer broadly accepted in the school environment. Furthermore, the entitlement framework contains other criteria that the Minister uses to determine whether or not a school will be built. However, she is proposing to take money out of the entitlement framework, even though it is a statutory obligation that she is supposed to meet by 2013. Yet she tells us that establishing the education and skills authority (ESA) is an Executive programme that must be implemented. Obviously, the Minister does not know what policy suits on any given day of the week.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Member for his intervention. Indeed, the Minister talks about her interlinking policies, but when one takes several links out of a chain, it is not much good to anybody. As the Member pointed out, the picture is relatively disorganised, particularly with respect to the procurement policy, which cannot possibly deliver the best value for money or the best results for our children, teachers, society or, indeed, the economy.

Can anyone honestly say that, in nearly three years of devolved government, the situation has improved? The ESA and, as the Member said, area-based planning are in turmoil. Capital projects are under review. The Minister is making decisions, such as those pertaining to the Middletown Centre for Autism, there is a completely unacceptable backlog in school maintenance and, to cap it all, we have run out of money.

Mr B McCrea: Although Mr Lunn is not in his place, will the Member take this opportunity to clarify the Ulster Unionist Party's position on the ESA?

Mr McCallister: As we made clear in the debate last week, of course we are not opposed to the principle of streamlining education structures. Indeed, Mr McCrea clarified that point earlier. However, we have consistently opposed the creation of a super-quango, which the Minister seems intent on doing. We have been rock solid in opposing that measure, and, until the Minister comes up with something more in keeping with our views and our policy statements on the issue, we will continue to oppose it. It is disappointing that Mr Lunn is not in his place.

During the 2008 strategic stocktake, the Minister of Education claimed that, in 2010-11, she would need £90 million for capital projects. The Minister of Finance and Personnel has proposed a further £22 million of cuts to the Department of Education's capital budget next year. There is a gaping hole in the Minister's capital budget, which means that, in the foreseeable future, it is very unlikely that any newbuilds will commence. We must ask ourselves whether that is an acceptable situation.

The 'Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2008-2018' states:

"The Executive is determined that our schools estate will be redeveloped in time to engage children from all backgrounds — so that all are helped to reach their full potential. Our future economic and societal well-being depends on it."

It is clear that financial mismanagement, circumstances and proposals from the Minister of Finance and Personnel have led to a situation in which developing the schools estate is no longer crucial to our future economic and societal well-being.

I appreciate that we are in a period of fiscal crisis. However, the Executive are still in a period of crisis in government. Their lack of collaborative decision-making until now has led us to that point. We cannot allow the idea that the current financial crisis was inevitable and that current options are the only ones that are available to prevail.

Mrs M Bradley: Formerly, the issue of the schools estate was one of progression. However, since the onset of the current economic climate, the progress on newbuilds has been virtually non-existent. Information on the maintenance of older schools is frighteningly scant, to say the least. Education is in a state of general confusion.

Some schools' physical structure is extremely poor. Overall budgets have been slashed to nothing. Some schools are in desperate need of repair. It is worrying when issues such as health and safety are sidelined due to financial constraints.

In the latest round of cuts, education has taken a £73 million hit, which is to be achieved through the reduction of current expenditure and the halting of non-essential capital expenditure. In plain terms, that means that there will be no newbuilds and a vast reduction in current school budgets that are already near breaking point.

The Department for Social Development (DSD), under the stewardship of my colleague and, of course, my new party leader, Margaret Ritchie, has already evaluated the benefit of investing in newbuilds at present. Quite frankly, if material and labour costs have fallen for house building, the same will apply to education newbuilds. That said, the Minister of Finance and Personnel would no doubt have a line to dampen that theory and would endeavour to challenge any Member of the House who dared to ask for more money. He would want us to tell him where he must find the sum involved and which Department's budget should suffer in order to increase the coffers of another. Perhaps he did not receive my party's document, 'New Priorities', which, in fact, tells him where he can find £400 million without inflicting any more stress on Departments.

I do not want to detract from the motion's seriousness. I am sure that there are schools in every Member's constituency that are in need of essential repair or a complete newbuild.

The Minister of Education will be well aware of the problems around services for pupils and the extreme pressure that special-needs delivery is under. I assure the House that the Committee ensures that she is well informed of our concerns in all aspects of education, not least the education budget forecasts for the new financial year. It is with that in mind that I hope that she will respond positively to the motion and petition the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that a formal and effective procurement plan and mechanism are implemented in order to, at least, ease the burden on some schools that are in need of essential repair or, as I said, newbuilds, at the earliest possible date.

All Members have such schools in their constituencies. I certainly do in my area, where lots of schools need lots of repairs. A controlled primary school in my area has been waiting for years to be rebuilt. It owns the land beside the school. Plans to rebuild have been with the Department for many years. I want to see them come to fruition.

It is essential that the Minister of Education oversees schools that are fit for purpose in the twenty-first century. Young people deserve every chance and facility that it is possible to give, so that they all reach their optimum potential. Education is the only avenue that is open to many children and young people who are caught in the poverty trap. It is essential that we do everything that is physically possible to make that learning process safe and enjoyable. I support the motion.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo thacaíocht in iúl don rún.

I support the motion. Of course, the Assembly — an Tionól seo — must work extremely hard to ensure that the Minister of Education has adequate funds with which to upgrade the schools estate and make it fit for the twenty-first century. I agree with that absolutely. Of course, the Assembly must take into account the financial difficulties in her Department and the wider Executive. Like Mitchel McLaughlin, I hope that parties who have spoken strongly this afternoon will support Cairtriona Ruane when she makes bids in monitoring rounds, etc, for additional funding that might become available.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: The Member is asking us to support the Minister in her monitoring round bids, but the same Minister surrendered £9 million because her Department could not spend it owing to technical issues. Therefore, how can he expect Members on this side of the House to support a Minister who is not even capable of managing the financial resources that she has?

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

Mr McElduff: Thank you very much, Francie — I mean, Deputy Speaker. As I understand it, the Minister of Education has been following the normal financial rules. As Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I know that there is a much greater culture

of underspend under a DUP Minister in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Therefore, it is a cross-departmental problem.

Mr B McCrea: The Member has asked us all to support the Minister of Education in getting more money to tackle this important issue. Can I rely on his support, and will he speak to his deputy First Minister and other three Ministers, to ensure that they are all batting for education and that those Ministries will also surrender funds to protect our children?

Mr McElduff: Certainly. It would help if Mr McCrea put that proposition in writing to me, and I will give it due consideration.

Mervyn Storey asked a number of specific questions about North Antrim, and fair play to him. In my constituency, I am anxious that Dean Maguire College in Carrickmore overcomes uncertainty over legal issues and precise site selection to gain absolute assurance about its future. I take this opportunity to commend the Minister and her Department for the tremendous work that was achieved in replacing the previous site of Drumragh Integrated College in Omagh, which was the old building at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital. The college has moved into a beautiful newbuild school in Omagh, and I know that the principal, Nigel Frith, and the students are delighted with it. One of the students is on work experience with me this week — young Conall Campbell — and he is very pleased with his new school environment, because he has witnessed both settings: the old building at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital and the new Drumragh Integrated College. That is very good.

Mr McCallister: In the interests of equality across West Tyrone and South Down, would the Member like to add to his list Down High School and Blackwater Integrated College?

Mr McElduff: That is self-evident. The Member has spoken, and he has spoken well. I commend him for taking the opportunity to highlight constituency concerns. I would be very disappointed in him if he did not do that in this setting, so congratulations; well done.

Lisanelly education campus in Omagh represents another major project. I commend the Minister for her personal interest in that visionary project, and I wish her all the best with taking that forward.

We want to hear about how the Minister's Department has responded, and is responding, to the construction industry crisis. I want to know the Department of Education's response to that, because every Department is charged with responding appropriately. Does the procurement policy provide opportunities for local companies that are hard-pressed at this time? Does it provide opportunities for the long-term unemployed and for apprentices from socially deprived areas?

One sector that has not been mentioned during this debate is Irish-medium schools. I feel that there are a disproportionate number of mobile huts on those sites, and I would like to see a systematic programme for taking the Irish-medium sector forward into proper, newly built schools. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis an cheist seo a phlé inniu, mar creidim go daingean go gcaithfidh infheistiú a dhéanamh san eastát oideachais leis an timpealleacht cheart a sholáthar le gur féidir eispéireas oideachasúil ardchaighdeáin a thabhairt do dhaoine óga.

4.30 pm

Today's debate focuses on the continued need for newbuilds and ongoing maintenance in the schools estate, primarily to ensure the provision of a schools estate that is fit for the twenty-first century, and calls on Members to recognise the resulting additional economic benefit through the creation of jobs in the construction industry. I welcome the opportunity to debate the issue with Members, because I firmly believe that, as a priority, we must invest in our education estate to provide the right environment for the delivery of a high-quality educational experience for all our young people, with equality at its core.

The context in which the schools estate is managed and delivered is complex. We have a large schools estate, which is managed by a wide range of sectoral interests, and a history of significant underinvestment. I join Trevor Lunn in saying that the ESA should be a priority for the Assembly, and I hope that it will be. I note the zigzagging and shifting of various political parties, and that is to be welcomed. It is good when people change their minds about things that should have happened.

As a result of that history of underachievement, a significant proportion of the schools estate does not meet the current schools building handbook standards. Investment in our schools estate is recognised in the Executive's 10-year investment strategy, which states that £3.5 billion of capital will be made available for investment in our education infrastructure in the period 2008-2018. In recognition of that, the Executive allocated £700 million over the current Budget period to enable over 100 major school projects to be taken forward. Add to that the outcome of the Irish-medium review, which was held since that allocation was made. Barry McElduff's point was well made. Schools in the Irish-medium sector and the integrated sector are among the sectors that have prefabs for classrooms. In some cases, the entire school is in prefabs. We need to take that on board.

If someone arrived from Mars and listened to the debate, he or she could be forgiven for thinking that nothing has happened in the schools estate in the past two years.

Mr McCallister: Yes.

The Minister of Education: Some Members do not know what has happened. I will give some examples, because it is easy to be critical. Abbey Christian Brothers' School in Newry has a new school, as has Ashfield Girls' High School, which I visited recently. It has a beautiful new school, and £23.4 million was spent on it. A replacement school was built for Ballymacrocket Primary School in Glenavy; £23.8 million was spent on a replacement school for Bangor Academy; £5.4 million was spent on Brookfield Special Primary School; and £15.2 million was spent on a replacement school for De La Salle College in the west of the city. Drumragh Integrated College has been mentioned, so I will not mention it again. A new replacement school was built for Glendhu Nursery School, and a beautiful school was built for the Holy Cross College in Tyrone. It is ready for the next generation, and it is operating on an all-ability, co-educational basis. Some £7 million was invested in Orangefield Primary School; £5.3 million in Pond Park Primary School; £0.7 million in an extension of the Irish-medium unit at St Catherine's College; £3.5 million in St Colman's College; £1.8 million in St Patrick's Primary School in Saul; £3.6 million in St Peter's Primary School, Cloughreagh; and £4.4 million in Templepatrick. Work was done at Towerview Primary School as well. The list goes on.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: I will not give way; no Member acknowledged the work that is going on. Let us look at some of the projects that are on site. Work is ongoing at Assumption Grammar School, various post-primary facilities, Ballysillan youth club and Banbridge Academy. Some £32.8 million is being spent on Belfast Boys' Model School. Investment has also been made in Belfast Model School for Girls; Lisbellaw Primary School; Lisnagelvin; Our Lady and St Patrick's; St Cecilia's College; St Mary's College; St Joseph's Primary School; St Mary's Primary School — the list goes on and on.

Basil McCrea will be aware that the most recent investment was made in Magherafelt High School. In fact, representatives from that school are here today. Some £11.5 million is being invested in a replacement building for the school. St Patrick's Grammar School in Downpatrick, which is locally known as "the Red High", has received investment of £16.8 million.

Let us look at things in the round, rather than being selective. A total of £427 million is being invested in the schools estate. Since taking up my role as Minister of Education, I have been at pains to ensure that we fully utilise the capital funds that are available to improve the condition of the schools estate. In 2008-09, my Department's capital spend was in excess of £199 million, which represented 99% of the final budget position. In the current year, 2009-2010, the Department is on track to spend its capital budget.

It is important to remind Members that the Department's capital budget does not merely cover the construction of new schools; it also covers investment in transport, youth and early years, minor works in schools and several other capital requirements. Members should note that, if we are serious about dealing with climate change and reducing wastage in the transport system, transfer 2010 is the best option. Rather than the parties on the opposite Benches trying to block progress and pointing the finger, we must have real debates on such issues.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: No, I will not. There is no doubt that, in a climate of ever-tightening budgets and with all Departments having to find savings, the situation is difficult. I look forward

to the support of the parties opposite and on this side of the House when I seek more money for capital build projects. Some parties act as the opposition in the Executive and claim that they do not have enough money, and their colleagues try to cause difficulties for other Departments.

I am reviewing capital projects because I want to ensure that the investment in the education estate is consistent with and supportive of the entire policy framework, including the statutory duties on equality and targeting on the basis of objective need. In the current economic climate, the review will ensure that the available resources are used to secure the best outcomes for children and maximum value for every taxpayer. In light of that, it is important that we validate that the projects in which we invest are viable in the long term. We must ensure that they are targeted on the basis of need and that equality is at their core.

I commissioned a review of current capital works to ensure that they are all consistent with the overall policy framework. That will not be a protracted exercise, but Members will appreciate that major capital investment must be based on robust, defensible and consistent decisions. Such investment must be able to support important areas, such as raising standards for all, closing the gap in achievement by improving access to equality and improving the learning environment.

We must take into account the reviews of special educational needs and Irish medium. The capital review will inform a more strategic approach to capital investment decisions and the management of the schools estates. In common with other Members, I would like to have additional funds to invest in the infrastructure of schools. I look forward to the support of the Committee for Education and my Executive colleagues from all parties in securing those funds. Every Member is concerned about certain schools in his or her constituency. It is important that those schools receive the support that they deserve.

The current estimate for completing the remaining list of projects is more than £600 million, and that does not take into account the additional major projects that are in the pipeline. Lisanelly is a key priority for me and my Department, and people will have noted its inclusion in Gordon Brown's letter. Lisanelly

represents the way forward for Omagh, and I chair a working group that is examining that issue.

The schools estate has a significant maintenance backlog, which is currently estimated to be in the region of £278 million, and getting money for the maintenance of schools is a good way to kick-start the construction industry and support local companies. In the current financial year, I have allocated and spent in the region of £82 million on minor works across the estate. In the same period, the education and library boards allocated £26.5 million to maintenance, including an additional £5 million that I allocated in-year in recognition of the need to address underinvestment in schools.

I am acutely aware of the additional economic benefit of creating jobs in the construction industry and the need to expedite taking capital projects to the market. To support the local construction industry, my Department and I fully committed the capital budget available to me and maximised the investment in the schools estate. If I am given more, I will be happy to spend it and continue that investment.

One of my objectives is to achieve a system of strong, sustainable schools planned on an area basis and to move away from the way in which things were done previously. In the past, there was no proper area-based planning or decision-making process. As a result, some schools are empty only a couple of years after they were built. We are doing things differently now. Sustainable schools are a key element of the policy framework that I am putting in place, at the heart of which is 'Every School a Good School'; the Irish-medium review; the revised curriculum; the entitlement framework; and equality duties and targeting on the basis of need.

I do not want to name people, but it is disappointing to hear some Members criticising the funding of the Irish-medium sector. I thought that we had moved beyond that, but, obviously, we have not. The Irish-medium sector deserves to be treated on the basis of equality, which it will be by my Department and me.

I fully support and am the lead advocate for the need to provide a schools estate that is fit for the twenty-first century, and my Department and I have fully utilised the funding that is available to do that. I also support the need to ensure that a procurement mechanism is put in place to expedite the provision of capital works, and

my Department and I are also doing everything in our power to deliver on that.

Aontaím go huile is go hiomlán gur chóir cistiú leordhóthanach a bheith ar fáil le scoileanna a chotabháil ag na caighdeáin is airde. Thug mé cuairt ar roinnt mhaith scoileanna ar fud an Tuaiscirt agus tuigim rímhaith an gá atá ann le níos mó infheistiú caipitil in eastát na scoileanna. Leanfaidh mé liom ag cur ina luí ar mo chomhghleacaithe sa Choiste Feidhmiúcháin an gá atá ann le níos mó infheistiú caipitil in eastát na scoileanna.

I totally agree that adequate funding must be provided to maintain our schools to the highest possible standards. I have visited many schools throughout the North and am acutely aware of the need for enhanced capital investment in the schools estate. I will continue to advocate that with my Executive colleagues.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank all Members and parties for supporting the motion and for their contributions to the debate.

Many Members agreed on several points. We agreed that we want investment in our schools estate; we want the best learning environment for our students and young people; and we will all work to ensure that as many capital projects as possible are realised to help the construction industry. However, many Members were concerned about the review of capital spend that the Minister informed the House about last year. I am sure that, like me, Members were disappointed that the Minister did not tell the House about the criteria for that, other than there being a need for equality and objective need. That is a bit strange coming from a Minister whose party has just sold out on equality at Hillsborough, where it colluded with other parties to deny a nationalist the justice Ministry and a seat at the Executive table. Equality from Sinn Féin? What that party used to call discrimination and gerrymandering, it now calls a historic breakthrough.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Does the Member agree that it is not the first time that Sinn Féin has adopted double standards on the issue of equality? The Minister of Education repeatedly tells the House that equality is at the core of everything that she does. However, let me inform the House that the reason why ESA is not coming back is that the Minister cannot deliver equality. She has insulted the controlled sector and the

transferors, which is yet another example of a Minister who wants equality only on her terms rather than on the basis of treating everybody equally and fairly.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it not important that Members who contribute to the debate do so accurately? There is no public record of the transferors or any other sector having registered a complaint about the Minister insulting them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order. However, I am sure that the point has been made.

Mrs D Kelly: I take the point that was made by the Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

With the exception of Sinn Féin, all the parties are doing sterling work in trying to reach a compromise agreement on the way forward for transferors.

I assure the Chairperson and others that the SDLP will take no lectures on equality from Members to my right.

4.45 pm

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: Of course.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for giving way. She may be mistaken, because the agreement on how the new justice Minister will be elected was not made at Hillsborough; it was voted for in the Chamber. I remind Mrs Kelly that the SDLP voted for those new arrangements.

Mrs D Kelly: I am glad that Mr O'Dowd made that point, because I heard him on 'The Stephen Nolan Show' giving the same spin. The SDLP proposed amendments to the Department of Justice Bill, but those amendments were voted down by Sinn Féin, which is engaged in gerrymandering.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members are straying from the subject and should return to the debate.

Mrs D Kelly: I will get back to Members' contributions. Mr Bradley said that there was a £240 million maintenance backlog in the schools estate. When considering the condition of equipment or the structure of our homes, there comes a time when one realises that one is throwing good money after bad and one has to make a sensible decision on the best way to invest.

Mr McCallister made the point — I cannot recall the title of the report that he mentioned — that some units in the Department of Education were working in silos and that there was no co-ordinated and collaborative approach to getting the best with the budget that we have. That is disappointing, and I hope that the Minister will address those concerns.

Another common thread was procurement. I understand that many procurement matters are not the fault of the Minister; legal challenges held up some decisions. We have to be honest and accept that. However, it now falls to the Minister, in consultation with the Minister of Finance and Personnel, to find a way out of that maze and see whether we can ensure that contracts that are still outstanding are soon advertised and tendered for in a fair and equitable way. Many young people and families who depend on the construction industry, either for direct labour or through services provided, are suffering. We need to get to grips with that issue.

It was interesting to hear Mr Barry McElduff tell us how pleased the student who is on placement with him this week is with his school. However, I was told that soil would be turned over in December 2008 for building projects in some of the schools in my area of Lurgan; for example, in Tannaghmore Primary School. It never happened. Every time one asks a question of the Minister, the goalposts change. Either the economic appraisal was not right, the money is not there, the business case has to be deferred or, more recently, it is tied into the entitlement framework arrangements. There is a total lack of clarity in the House — we cannot get direct answers from the Minister — and, more importantly, there is a lack of information and clarity being provided to the boards and management committees of all schools.

It is very telling indeed that, two and a half years on, people still do not know what will happen to their local primary school. Schools are not just centres of education; in many rural areas, they are used as community centres. When deciding on a school for their child, people need surety on whether it has a future, as the Minister has still not made a decision on the Bain recommendations.

Members asked where the funding will come from, and challenged the House to support the Minister in making a bid to the Minister of

Finance and Personnel for additional funding. However, the Chairperson of the Committee for Education pointed out that £9 million was surrendered, and some Members did not have the confidence that, if the Minister were to receive additional funding, that money would be able to be spent. The Committee and the Minister must get to grips with what is going on to allow £9 million to be surrendered in such tight fiscal times.

A few eyebrows were raised around the Chamber when some Members, particularly those from the Sinn Féin Benches, criticised parties that had asked for more services but did not say that their party colleagues in the Executive should surrender their moneys. Mr Basil McCrea pointed out that, in the next debate, Sinn Féin will call for additional services, and that hypocrisy speaks for itself.

The debate has highlighted some key issues of critical concern, not least to parents and children, about the school environment and newbuilds. Questions remain unanswered, and I have no doubt that the Committee will take those forward, as it has done in the past, for the Minister to answer. Certainly, no answers were given here this afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the need for newbuild and ongoing maintenance to ensure provision of a schools estate fit for the twenty-first century; recognises the additional economic benefit of construction industry job creation; and calls on the Minister of Education and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that a procurement mechanism is in place, which expedites the provision of capital projects, and that adequate funds are provided to maintain our schools to the highest possible standards.

Private Members' Business

Perinatal Psychiatric Services

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

Mrs O'Neill: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that the provision of perinatal psychiatric services is lacking; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that mentally ill mothers and their babies are protected through the establishment of recognised structures for the provision of mental health care in pregnancy.

The perinatal mental health period spans from conception to two years after the birth of the child, and it is during that period that women are most likely to be admitted to psychiatric hospital and are at increased risk of experiencing the effects of mental illness. Women with a pre-existing mental illness are more prone to relapse or reoccurrence of the conditions.

There are four main areas where services fall short of expected standards or where provision is lacking: lack of specialist services, including mother-and-baby units; failure to identify risk factors; inadequate treatment of severe disorders; and lack of co-ordination between services. Importantly, nurses and other health professionals remain unclear about their roles and responsibilities in managing perinatal mental health problems. The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety took evidence from individuals who have an interest in and who share concerns about the provision or non-provision of those services.

Suicide is now the most common cause of maternal death. The management of post-natal depression requires a multi-disciplinary approach, and that is supported by the recently published National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidelines on antenatal and post-natal care for women, which set out a number of key priority areas for improved service frameworks and pathways. Key roles are included for midwives, psychiatrists, health visitors, obstetricians, gynaecologists and GPs. Clear pathways that all professionals

recognise are needed so that any woman who presents in danger is looked after to the highest standards and given appropriate interventions where necessary.

Although suicide is the most common cause of maternal death, it is a hidden problem in society. It is the biggest indirect killer of pregnant women and of women who have given birth recently. For various reasons, such as protecting the surviving child, the issue is a somewhat taboo subject. By tabling the motion, we aim to draw the House's attention to the issue and to call on the Minister to ensure that appropriate support is available for the people who need the service.

The birth of a child is a critical period for any family. It is a period of great joy, but it can also be one of great distress. There is no doubt that after delivery, mothers are at increased risk of psychiatric conditions that affect not only them but the whole family. The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety was told by the only psychiatrist who specialises in perinatal mental health, Dr Janine Lynch, that long-term mental health and psychological adjustment are influenced by an individual's early environment as well as his or her genes. Therefore, proper intervention would reduce instances of maternal illness, and that would have a beneficial effect on mothers and their children's future psychological health.

The Bamford review identified eight groups of people who have highly specialised mental health needs, and it recommended service developments for each of those groups. One of those groups consists of the people who use perinatal services.

In the Executive response to the Bamford review, one of the suggestions was that those specialist services should be addressed as time and resources permit. Perhaps the Minister will tell us today whether his Department has taken forward any of that work and what, if any, progress has been made in protecting vulnerable women and their families.

I wish to make it clear that not all women who need perinatal support are at the severe end of what is a spectrum. The spectrum ranges from mild, benign and self-limiting baby blues through anxiety and depression to a severe illness called puerperal psychosis. At one end of the spectrum, all that is required is simple reassurance; at the other, hospital admission

and specialist treatment are required. In between, there is a mixed bag of diagnoses. Most of the support can be provided in the primary-care setting so long as staff receive adequate training and support from secondary providers.

Some time ago, the Committee heard at first hand how frustrated staff were, to say the least, at the lack of services for women with perinatal mental illness. Surely, if staff on the front line are making those statements, we need to listen and act sooner rather than later. There are well-developed services in Scotland, England and Wales, but, unfortunately, services on the whole of this island are underdeveloped. The services that have been developed in those countries include a number of mother-and-baby units, and I had the good fortune of visiting such a unit in Glasgow. In Scotland, it is enshrined in law that mentally ill women have the right to be admitted with their babies for specialist treatment for a time. When I spoke directly to women in those mother-and-baby units, they said that not having their child with them would have had a further detrimental effect on their mental health and recovery period.

As I said, nowhere on this island can a woman be admitted with her baby for psychiatric treatment. Given the tight budget restraints, I suggest to the Minister that he explore the mechanisms of the North/South Ministerial Council as a way of developing services in the most efficient manner.

Services here in the North lag well behind in the provision of perinatal psychiatry. We have no recognised structure for the provision of mental health care during pregnancy, and although there is good practice among individuals, services are patchy and inconsistent. There is no regional development strategy. I am aware that the Minister is due to produce a maternity services strategy shortly, and, hopefully, it will have some reference to perinatal services. Perhaps the Minister will advise us on whether that is the case in his contribution to the debate.

I noted in the research pack that there is an identified care pathway in the Western Trust, and I commend that. However, I can only assume that there are no identified care pathways in any of the other trusts, given that there was no mention of them.

In conclusion, we need a strategy for that specialist service to protect those women

and their families when they need it most. We should not allow perinatal depression to be a hidden problem any longer. We need to identify the gaps and implement strategies and supports for those who are providing services on the front line. I urge Members to support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Easton: I support the motion as it highlights the need for action on an important subject. The Bamford review, which was published in 2005, highlighted some serious irregularities in mental health services as a whole. Unfortunately, the Bamford review has yet to be fully implemented. The report highlighted the importance of care for mothers and described childbirth as a time when mothers are vulnerable to becoming severely mentally ill. Time is of the essence in implementing those changes, and the Committee is always there to help the Minister to achieve what is best for the people of the Province. Having a baby is usually associated with much joy and happiness, but, unfortunately, that is not the case for many new mothers.

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

Psychiatric disorders contribute to 12% of maternal deaths, with suicide being the leading cause; about 10% of all recently delivered mothers have a major depressive illness. Those are depressing statistics, but they highlight the importance of the issue. We need to do everything in our power to ensure that mothers and mothers-to-be receive the necessary help, care and support from the Health Service.

We hear much about post-natal depression, but many members of the public are unfamiliar with the term “perinatal depression”. It refers to the period in and around childbirth — a crucial moment between mother and baby. It is important that mothers-to-be are looked after in the period leading up to, and after, childbirth. As with many areas of the Health Service, research has shown that there is a need for a multidisciplinary team approach to the care of a mother should she show signs of depression or any other sort of psychiatric behaviour. According to the charity Mind, health professionals are unprepared for providing the necessary psychological help and support to mothers, and that is very worrying.

5.00 pm

I am concerned that there is no mother-and-baby unit in Northern Ireland, and I wonder why

that is. Furthermore, it is a concern that, with so much pressure on hospitals, mothers who are about to give birth are generally rushed in and out of hospital, usually on the same day. A baby may be delivered safely, and mother and baby may be physically well, but the mother's state of mind, and how she is coping after the birth, must be looked at. Having a baby is a life-changing experience, with major physical and psychological consequences for which a mother-to-be may not be prepared. With the focus usually on the baby, a mother can sometimes feel ignored or can put on a brave face. We must ensure that mothers are OK, and that they get the support and care that they need.

Mothers with psychiatric problems should not be subject to long waiting lists for treatment, because the early days of a child's life are very important for the mother and the baby. I join my colleagues from the Health Committee who proposed the motion in their call on the Minister of Health to ensure that mentally ill mothers and their babies are protected through established structures that ensure their care and safety. Mothers, and the care of children, are vital to the future of our society. I support the motion.

Mr McDevitt: The SDLP supports the motion. Across the continent, suicide remains the biggest indirect killer of pregnant women and those who have just given birth. That there is no provision for perinatal mental illness on the island worth talking about is a matter that deserves the attention of the Assembly and, therefore, I commend Mrs O'Neill and her colleagues for tabling the motion. I want to take the opportunity to apologise to Mrs O'Neill for being late and missing the beginning of her speech.

There is a black hole in policy. There is no joined-up thinking with regard to women or the process of bringing a child into the world. Pregnancy is a time in a woman's life that should be filled with profound joy and a great sense of purpose; it is the fulfilment of their very being. However, it can become a living nightmare that often goes undiagnosed, and, when diagnosed, is unable to be treated properly because it is not an option to provide a pregnant woman with medical treatment that might involve antidepressants. That is a further concern. That is particularly worrying given that we know that the problem exists. The Bamford review identified the problem and set out specific recommendations on what to do about

it. However, progress on the implementation of the recommendations remains painfully slow.

The Assembly will note with grave concern that there is not a single perinatal mental health bed in the region or anywhere else on the island. It is surely a failure of society, and of the regional Government, that women continue to find that they are unable to seek answers to what is going on in their bodies and in their minds, not just during pregnancy, but afterwards, and in the early years of their child's life.

I am happy to support the motion. It is important that the House send a signal that the care of pregnant women is something that is as precious to us as the life that lies within them.

Mr Gardiner: The motion is yet another example of a wish-list motion from Sinn Féin: the party that calls for big new spending on health, yet votes for a Budget that cuts back on the Health Department's spending. If Sinn Féin was serious about providing all the services that it has called for, it would not have voted for a Budget that puts the Health Service £600 million behind the rest of the United Kingdom. We will all watch with interest when the time comes for Sinn Féin to vote for the additional £113 million of cuts to the health budget, as planned by the Finance Minister.

The motion raises an issue that I have raised before. It is wrong for a party to propose motions that involve additional public spending without identifying, even in broad terms, where it would find the money to finance such proposals.

No one objects to an extension of perinatal services. An extension is needed; the Bamford review recommended one, and we would all like to see one. I am sure that the Minister would like to provide an extension, but where is he to find the money to fund one? Where is he to find the money in a climate where the DUP Finance Minister, Sammy Wilson, is proposing to cut another £113 million from the health budget? That is the heart of the matter.

The time has come for a more reasonable attitude to the motions that are brought before the Assembly. The motion is just another cheap headline for Sinn Féin, which is the party that voted for health cuts. That is the terrible reality. To call for more services and budget cuts at the same time is complete humbug.

Mr McCarthy: I am a wee bit taken aback by Mr Gardiner's comments. However, people are entitled to their opinions.

I welcome the motion and support it on behalf of the United Community. In doing so, I fully acknowledge the excellent work that is carried out throughout Northern Ireland by our Health Service; long may it continue.

I totally agree with the sentiment of the motion. Regardless of what Mr Gardiner said, there is obviously a need for some provision along the lines stated in the motion. I hope that the Minister, who is in the Chamber, can offer such services to all who are in need of them as soon as possible.

Mr Buchanan: I add my support to this timely motion. Like Mr McCarthy, I am taken aback by the lack of compassion from Sam Gardiner on such an important issue. It is important that the Assembly recognises that there is a gap in perinatal psychiatric services provided by the Health Service in Northern Ireland, because only then will steps be taken to improve those services.

Although the arrival of a newborn child is always a joy and delight for any parent, it must be recognised that there are those who suffer from mental health problems during pregnancy and up to two years after the birth of the child. Depression and anxiety are common symptoms during pregnancy and after childbirth, and it is estimated that one in 10 pregnant women in developed countries suffer significant mental health problems.

Both the NICE guidelines on antenatal and post-natal care and the Centre for Maternal and Child Enquiries (CMACE) report, 'Saving Mothers' Lives', show the importance of early identification of women at risk. The guidelines and the report have also outlined the clear role for public health nurses in identifying risk factors and providing early interventions through the promotion of partnerships with midwives, GPs, Sure Start and mental health colleagues.

At one end of the spectrum, simple reassurance is all that is required, while at the other, hospital admission and specialised treatment are necessary. Therefore, most interventions can be provided within the primary care setting, as long as adequate training is in place and the required support for the secondary services is provided. That will mean that specialist services are

only needed to treat those with more serious depressive disorders.

There are well-developed services in England, Scotland and Wales, including a number of mother-and-baby units. It is disappointing and unacceptable that Northern Ireland lags behind in such provision, with no recognised structure for the provision of mental health care during pregnancy and no specialised facility for the admission of mentally ill women and their babies, despite the Bamford review clearly recommending that perinatal services be provided as a specialism.

The Royal College of Nursing recommends that all women with perinatal psychiatric disorder who require specialist psychiatric care should have access to a consultant and other mental health professionals irrespective of their place of residence. Moreover, it believes that proper protocols should be in place in every maternity service for the management of women who are at risk of a relapse into a serious mental illness after delivery. I remind the Minister that that includes County Tyrone, an area in which no maternity service is available. That is blatant inequality and discrimination. Children from the county have had their identities stripped from them. The House should take cognisance of the fact that there is no provision enabling a child to be born in County Tyrone.

I have outlined views that have been expressed by Health Service professionals. Those people are at the cutting edge. Therefore, I ask the Minister to take cognisance of that fact and, as the motion outlines, take steps to establish recognised structures for the provision of mental health care during and after pregnancy. I support the motion.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I attended an event in my constituency on Thursday that was organised by the Patient and Client Council. It was a very welcome event. During the question and answer session, a young mother spoke about her first pregnancy, during which she was feeling down, and a health professional prescribed sleeping tablets for her. As I listened to her, I could see that that young woman is still anxious, though it has been some time since she had her first child. She told the people at the event that she had not been tired and it was not that she did not want to go to sleep. She had been trying to say that she

needed reassurance and professional medical help, which she did not receive.

I saw the Minister's press release when he launched the mental health and learning disability action plan, and it referred to the Patient and Client Council, and I did think that the event was an example of where the plan was working. However, in advance of today's debate, it struck me that although there was perhaps no simple way to deal with the young woman's problem, the solution was not to prescribe sleeping tablets to her. There is a need for services and structures.

I listened to Mr Gardiner, and I am one of the people in Sinn Féin who brought the motion to the House. However, I did not recognise myself in Mr Gardiner's comments.

Mr Gardiner: I have no problem with the motion. If the finance is available, I am quietly confident that the Minister will want to introduce the service. However, the finances must be made available, and the health budget should not be reduced every time cuts are made. I have no problem with the idea. I will support it, encourage it and encourage the Minister to implement it if the funding is available. The funding is my problem.

5.15 pm

Mrs McGill: I thank the Member for his intervention. I will quote from the Minister's press release, which is insightful. It is particularly apt, given Mr Gardiner's intervention.

Minister McGimpsey said that:

"I was able to secure additional resources for mental health and learning disability and all of the actions in the Plan can be delivered within our existing resources."

I know that there is a difficulty with budgets, and I understand what Mr Gardiner is saying. The Minister talked about using the resources in the existing budget. However, we still have to find a way to deliver for the woman whom I mentioned at the beginning of my speech. I do not think that it would take all that much more money.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Michelle O'Neill, referred to the Western Health and Social Care Trust's action plan, which is to do with professional training. That is a good idea; if that had been in place when the mother

whom I spoke about was offered sleeping tablets, the staff would have been better placed and better skilled to deal with the situation.

I read the minutes of the Health Committee's meeting of 17 April 2008 at which Breedagh Hughes of the Royal College of Midwives, a Dr Janine Lynch and others made a presentation. Neither I nor Mr Gardiner were members of the Committee at that time. Anyone who has doubts about the motion should read those minutes. In my view, the evidence that was presented at that meeting was very convincing about what we need to do. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Kinahan: I am pleased to be able to speak on this motion. On 17 April 2008, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety took evidence from representatives of the Royal College of Midwives on the matter of perinatal psychiatry care. At that meeting, the Committee was told that suicide is the biggest indirect cause of death among pregnant women. We have heard many Members say the same thing today. Suicide is especially prevalent among women who have just given birth. The Committee was also told that suicide is a hidden killer in pregnancy. Many people have no idea that that is such an issue.

The point of the Health Service, and, indeed, the welfare state, is to provide a support mechanism to the population to ensure that society does all that it can to help those who need help. It is clear that perinatal mental health services is an area in which women need the help that the Health Service can provide. The Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (Northern Ireland) considered that issue and reported with several recommendations.

The motion calls on the Minister to implement changes in the structures of the provision of mental health care for pregnant women. We will hear from the Minister a bit later about what he is doing, and has done, on the reform of mental health care. However, I say to the proposers of the motion that they also have a role in helping to make that happen. We must, in this House, work to protect the health budget. I say that because there is a silent killer out there, and we are debating it today. If we are to protect the vulnerable and provide support to those who need it, we know that our Health Service needs the resources to deal with those issues.

I agree with the proposers of the motion that resources must go into the development of services for pregnant women. The case for that has been made well and cannot be ignored. However, I also believe that the health budget is overstretched. Healthcare in Northern Ireland is appallingly underfunded. The pressures on the health budget make developing services in the Health Service extremely difficult; indeed, almost impossible.

I do not intend to oppose what is a very pertinent motion. However, I suggest to its proposers that they need to look at the bigger problem that the Minister is facing. Perhaps they should, in fact, table motions that are relevant to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, calling for him to properly resource the health budget.

The Bamford review recommended the implementation of a clear regional strategy and a specialist perinatal mental health service.

I would very much like to see that come to pass. I would like to see all the recommendations of the Bamford review implemented. However, we must recognise that we are still waiting for those elements of the review that have not been implemented to be put into operation. They have not been implemented not because there is a lack of political will; it is because there is a lack of funds.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank the Members who tabled the motion for raising this important issue. The mental well-being of every mother throughout her pregnancy and after giving birth is important for the mother, her baby and other family members.

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) states that perinatal mental health relates to the time that a woman is pregnant and the first year of a baby's life. It covers a wide range of conditions that can affect women during and after pregnancy. That includes everything from mild anxiety, or baby blues, to severe depression and psychotic conditions. For most mothers, having mild symptoms or feeling low during or after pregnancy does not last very long. However, for some, those symptoms can persist and worsen and can have a significant impact on their daily lives. Some need professional help.

It is estimated that as many as one in 10 women experiences a mental health problem

during pregnancy or in the post-natal period. There are 25,000 births a year in Northern Ireland. That means that 2,500 newly pregnant women may need support during and after pregnancy. Of those, a small number will require access to a psychiatric team. An even smaller number — fewer than 100 a year — will need access to inpatient care.

The element of the Bamford review that dealt with adult mental health services and that was published in 2005 recommended that:

“A regional specialist mental health service should be established for women with mental health problems occurring in the perinatal period. The requirement for inpatient mother and baby facilities should be the subject of a regional needs assessment.”

In 2008, my Department endorsed the NICE guidance on antenatal and post-natal mental health. The guidance identified key areas for action, including: promotion, prediction and detection of mental health issues during pregnancy and the post-natal period; prevention of mental disorders; management and use of medication; effective communication; and specialised services for women with severe perinatal illness. It was recognised that the guidelines would have significant funding implications for services and that some recommendations would not be available immediately.

Following the publication of that NICE guidance, my Department asked the four former health and social services boards to develop an action plan to implement it. That plan was submitted last year. It was comprehensive, and it included recommendations for establishing a specialist team in each trust area, as well as a four- to six-bed mother-and-baby unit. It was estimated that implementing the recommendations would cost around £1.2 million a year, plus an estimated £3 million capital cost to build a regional unit.

After careful consideration, my officials and professional advisers concluded that the proposals and actions had merit. However, given that my resources are stretched to the limit, implementing the recommendations is just not affordable at this time. Although I may not have the necessary funding, I am still committed to improving perinatal mental health services in Northern Ireland. I believe that the best way forward is to adopt a regional stepped approach that builds on existing work and that links with other major policy areas, including

family support, psychological and psychiatric interventions and child health promotion.

I emphasise, therefore, that although we do not have specialist perinatal mental health services in Northern Ireland, a range of services is always in place for women who need help. The child health promotion programme, for example, is provided from pregnancy to all women and their families, irrespective of need or where families live. It guarantees a universal provision of contacts with key health professionals for every family.

Through the programme, staff members such as health visitors play a vital role. They can use their contacts with families to assess the health of children and parents, and they can identify other problems, such as those relating to maternal mental health.

Where problems exist, health visitors provide early support to mothers. That often prevents problems from escalating. The majority of women with established mental health problems will be treated in primary care by GPs or by community mental health teams where appropriate.

I have made substantial investment in those areas over the past few years, in line with the Bamford recommendations. That has resulted in a range of initiatives, including guidance for health professionals on risk assessment in adult mental health services, which is aimed at heightening awareness of the need for timely and appropriate referral; and Beating the Blues, a computerised therapy for mild to moderate depression accessible through GPs. That programme will be rolled out to every GP practice this year. It also supports the additional services for treating depression that the majority of our GPs are delivering.

The Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family project is about better communication and liaison between children's services and adult mental health services. There is also the mild to moderate depression scheme, which encourages health professionals to provide non-drug therapies and employ counsellors to help treat people with mild to moderate depression.

I recognise that more needs to be done, and will continue to promote a regional approach to perinatal mental health services as an important issue. In doing so, my key objective is to develop an integrated care pathway — in other words, to create a system whereby all

health professionals, such as GPs, midwives, obstetricians, psychiatrists, and health visitors, recognise their responsibilities from early pregnancy and in the first year after birth, and take the appropriate action.

A particular aspect of that integration is the effective liaison between psychiatric and maternity services, especially for women who are at risk of a severe perinatal mental health condition. Following further discussions with colleagues on the board and the Public Health Agency, my Department has written to those bodies with proposals to take that forward, including the development of an integrated care pathway, which includes the prediction and detection of perinatal mental health problems. It will also ensure appropriate referral and support, to include liaison arrangements between maternity and psychiatric services.

Additional training programmes will build on the work already being developed to raise awareness of the need for early detection, support and timely referral to psychiatric services where appropriate. That needs to be delivered on a regional basis, focusing on nurses, midwives and health visitors in the first instance, because they are in regular contact with pregnant women and their babies.

An audit of the prevalence of perinatal mental health conditions will include particular regard to the needs of women with severe mental health conditions who require inpatient care, and the associated impact on their families. That audit will inform the way forward in the continued development of appropriate, specialist services if resources become available. As I have said, the implementation of a comprehensive perinatal mental health service would require additional resources that I do not have.

Mental health services have suffered from years of neglect and underfunding. That is why I secured an additional £54 million in the comprehensive spending review period for those services, on top of the annual spend of approximately £200 million. However, that is not enough. As I said at the time of the Budget, it is as good as it gets, but it is not enough. As I explained during Question Time today, we have had a number of limiting factors on the health budget, including swine flu and the cuts proposed by the Executive. There is a gap of £600 million, and I am required to find £700 million in efficiencies. Sinn Féin proposed that I find that money in a

motion tabled last year, and there was support from other parties to ensure that the Department of Health had its share of cuts.

The background is that there is rising demand in the Health Service — 9% this year — against a resource increase of less than 1%. It does not take a mathematician to work out where we are going.

Our level of activity is dictated by the level of available resources. Last year, the budget was increased by £12 million. I attempted to explain all that at a Committee meeting a couple of weeks ago.

5.30 pm

There has been interdepartmental sign-up to the Bamford review, and the action plan has finally been received. A fact that is continually overlooked is that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety does not have sole responsibility for implementing the Bamford review. NICE provides guidance on the specialist area of perinatal mental health, and I have an action plan ready for when I receive the necessary resources to move forward.

In the meantime, we have a comprehensive mental health service. Two new hospitals will open in south Belfast soon: the adolescent unit and the family unit, which will be available to mothers and children. The Bluestone unit at Craigavon Area Hospital, for example, also has the capacity to provide a mother-and-baby unit. I fought successfully to secure investment in mental health, but that investment is now in jeopardy. We are trying to provide a service and to meet an ever-increasing demand on a budget that is being continually constrained.

As I explained to Mrs McGill at Committee, there is enough money in the block grant to provide the requested services. It is a question of whether the Executive and Members of the Assembly are prepared to apportion that block grant in an appropriate manner. Over and over again, I have made the point that health is underfunded and requires more money. If I had the money, I would be delighted to put those services in place.

Similarly, I would be delighted to put in place a new children's hospital, a new maternity hospital at the Royal, and much more besides. Even with the support of Tom Buchanan and some extra money, there is another proposal to increase

services in Omagh. I never thought that I would hear anyone using a debate on an issue such as perinatal psychiatric services to electioneer. However, Tom Buchanan's comments never cease to surprise me.

We are where we are, with a good service that could be improved by adding a specialist service. I ask Members to recognise that the implementation of that specialist service would require extra investment.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It gives me great pleasure to make a winding-up speech on the debate. I thank all Members who took part and supported the motion. I want to give special mention to Research and Library Services for providing an extremely comprehensive research pack. In particular, I thank Dr Janice Thompson, who enabled the Committee to make comparisons with England, Scotland and Wales. It is always useful to make comparisons with our nearest neighbours.

I want to take the opportunity to welcome the Minister to a debate. He will probably want a gold star for finding the time to attend today's debate, but he received a demerit for his non-attendance at last Tuesday's debate on cancer treatment.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have attended every single health debate. Last week, I informed the Speaker's Office that I would not be available on a particular day, and the debate was called for that day. Furthermore, the debate concerned a social security issue, and no Minister was named until the last minute. For such snide remarks to be made in a discussion on an important issue —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Minister, that is not a point of order, but your remarks are now on the record.

Ms S Ramsey: It was not a point of order, but I am glad that the Minister made the point. Between 27 April 2009 and 2 February 2010, the Minister attended 20 of 51 health debates in the Chamber. I welcome him to today's debate, but the lack of ministerial attendance on Tuesdays is an issue.

I also thank the Royal College of Midwives (RCM) for providing the Committee with a

briefing paper in preparation for today's debate. In common with others, the Royal College of Midwives supports the implementation of specialist services for perinatal mental health.

As many Members have said, over the years, research has found that suicide is a leading cause of maternal death. Statistics were cited by most Members who spoke. However, let me read this into the record: 10% to 15% of women suffer post-natal depression. One in six women will experience some sort of mental distress during pregnancy or following childbirth.

The Minister cited recent research. There were over 25,000 deliveries in 2008. The rates of the incidence of perinatal mental health imply that between 2,500 and 4,000 of those new mothers suffered post-natal depression, and around 51 were admitted to hospital due to a relapse into a pre-existing mental health problem.

I did some research before Christmas for a women's community group of which I am a member. On the day that I did that research, the World Health Organization put out a statement to the effect that an impact could be made on the cause of women's illnesses, including death, only for the fact that men are in charge. Coming from the World Health Organization, that is something that we need to take on board. Look at the rates of ovarian and cervical cancer: the World Health Organization says that that is because men are in charge.

The Bamford report told us a number of things, and specifically that childbirth is a time of great vulnerability. Conall McDevitt mentioned that birth moves the focus to the baby. Sometimes the mother is forgotten about, which can give rise to a situation where a woman can become severely mentally ill.

I commend the Minister and his Department for getting the additional money, which is useful. Claire McGill mentioned the Minister's press release in which he said that he had enough money to deal with the problem. It is also useful to point out that the June 2009 review of health visiting and school nursing takes forward another of Bamford's recommendations, and that is to be welcomed. It is a positive way forward, recognising that early intervention on infant mental health should be pursued as a preventative measure.

Michelle O'Neill, opening the debate, said that perinatal mental health covers the period from

conception to 2 years. We must be careful that we do not add more troubles and issues if we deal with the issue solely from the perspective of infant mental health.

Mental illness is also a factor in maternal morbidity. I know of two women in my constituency who have died in recent years as a result of suicide associated with perinatal mental illness. There is a human aspect to this: we lose not only an individual member of the community, but a new mother. Some child is losing his mammy. A family is losing a wife, a partner, a sister or a daughter. That is the human cost.

We need to look at this issue. I take on board the Minister's point that we need to live in the real world. I know that the Minister has hard decisions to take. In her opening remarks, Michelle O'Neill mentioned the North/South Ministerial Council. There are no services for perinatal mental health across the island of Ireland. At Question Time, the Minister said that he had no difficulty in looking to the North/South dimension if there is a need for it. I suggest that he look at it for this issue.

Alex Easton said that the focus is sometimes on the baby rather than the mother, and that is a valid point. Supporting the motion, Conall McDevitt stressed that there is a lack of joined-up thinking. He went on to say that the SDLP supports the motion. I am glad that he said that, because Dolores Kelly, in the previous debate, criticised motions brought before the Assembly.

That brings me to Sam Gardiner. I do not think that the motion is a wish list, Sam. I do not accept that my party, or any other, should not bring issues to the Assembly. We are here as elected activists, so we are entitled to bring issues to the Assembly, to have them thrashed out and debated, and to try to take them forward.

As to the Budget, I saw that your party leader was in earlier to talk to you —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member please direct all remarks through the Chair, rather than to Members?

Ms S Ramsey: That is not a problem. People are getting very sensitive.

I do not know whether the Member was a member of the Health Committee at the time, but I proposed that the health budget be equality

proofed, and it was pushed through with all-party support. However, the Member needs to talk to his party leader to discover what his position was when the matter went to the Executive.

I return to the briefing from the RCM, which states that there are significant gaps and that there is a need for regional guidance based on the NICE guidance. I do not think that that will cost much money. It also says that there is a need for multi-professional and inter-professional training. I do not think that that will cost a lot of money. It says that the needs of women should be determined in relation to establishing perinatal mental health services and planning future health strategies. I do not think that that will cost a lot of money. We can send out a clear message that we may not get to the endgame this year or next year, but let us start building the foundations so that at least people can see that we are trying to get there. It is not always about money.

We need to treat patients, and treating them early saves money. It is called Investing for Health, which is a strategy to which all Ministers signed up, with the Health Minister taking the lead. Let us see that as investing for health.

Other Members, mainly from the Ulster Unionist Party, mentioned the budget. Claire McGill made a valid point when she highlighted that the Minister had said in his statement that he had secured additional money, and thought that he had the money in his budget to deal with the issue. We need to get it right. The Minister cannot say that there is not enough money to deal with this issue one minute and then release a press statement that says that there is enough.

The Minister went on to say that he supports the 2008 guidelines. I would be grateful for an update on the action plan for the four boards, including outpatient services in trust areas. I also ask the Minister whether he has made any bids to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) through the monitoring rounds to take forward the action plan that came from the trusts. We could then see the impact, because that is what the Committee has been calling for. The Committee has been asking the Minister to tell it what impact the recent DFP statement will have and to let the Committee know how it can help. By saying that he will not do something, the Minister is not giving the Committee the human side of the possible

impact, which is what the Committee should be told.

We can talk about efficiency savings and wastage in the Health Service. However, has the Minister had any recent discussions with his officials about senior staff pay, rather than let the negotiations take place in England? If we want devolution, it is about having all the issues relating to health and other services devolved.

I commend the Members who took part in the debate. It is useful that we discussed the issues. I commend the Department and the Minister for taking forward the strategy concerning children who are two years old and over. However, if we want to get this right, we need to ensure that we go in at an early stage and build the foundations on concrete rather than sand. We must remember that this is a human issue. It affects all of us and all our constituencies. The fact that the issue only affects women does not mean that we should ignore it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that the provision of perinatal psychiatric services is lacking; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that mentally ill mothers and their babies are protected through the establishment of recognised structures for the provision of mental health care in pregnancy.

Adjourned at 5.43 pm.

