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Suggested amendments or corrections will be considered by the Editor.

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 6 December 2010

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise the House that the Speaker is away on official business today. I also advise the House that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is unwell and is unable to deliver the statement on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting today.

Executive Committee Business

Planning Bill: First Stage

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): I beg to introduce the Planning Bill [NIA 7/10], which is a Bill to make provision in relation to planning; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

Construction Contracts (Amendment) Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel to move the Consideration Stage of the Construction Contracts (Amendment) Bill.

Moved. — [The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group the nine clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by the long title.

Clauses 1 to 9 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Construction Contracts (Amendment) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Tourism (Amendment) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Tourism (Amendment) Bill on behalf of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who is unwell today.

Moved. — [The Minister of Culture Arts and Leisure (Mr McCausland).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: As no amendments have been selected, there is no opportunity to discuss the Tourism (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.

Occupational Pension Schemes (Levies) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Attwood): I beg to move

That the Occupational Pension Schemes (Levies) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 be approved.

The purpose of the regulations is to ensure that provisions in relation to the pension protection fund administration levy comply with European Union rules. The pension protection fund operates in Britain and Northern Ireland to protect members of eligible pension schemes. The fund makes compensation payments to members of eligible pension schemes where the sponsoring employer has become insolvent and there are insufficient assets in the scheme to cover pension liabilities. At this time, of all times, such protection will be useful.

The fund is financed through levies on, first, eligible defined benefit schemes; secondly, the residual assets of pension schemes transferred into the pension protection fund; thirdly, investment returns and annual levies made up of a pension protection levy; and, fourthly, an administration levy charged to all qualifying defined benefit occupational pension schemes. A small number of schemes do not have to pay the pension protection levy or the administration levy. Those are defined benefit pension schemes with a full guarantee from a relevant public authority, such as a Department, and, therefore, they do not require the protection of the pension protection fund. The guarantee is a promise given by a public authority to underpin the liabilities of a pension scheme should the scheme wind up in deficit. The precise nature of the guarantee and what it protects varies, but the result is broadly the same. Ultimately, those schemes' liabilities are underpinned by taxpayers.

In some cases, the guarantee covers only part of a scheme, certain members or certain benefits in partially guaranteed schemes. In those cases, schemes have to pay an administration levy only in respect of the part of the scheme that is not covered by the guarantee. Such guarantees apply typically to quasi-public bodies or legacy arrangements following the privatisation of former state bodies. In many circumstances, such pension

scheme guarantees do not present a problem because the sponsoring employers are not commercial entities operating in a competitive market.

This is the essential reason for the regulation. Members may be aware that, in 2009, the European Commission reported on an investigation into whether the guarantee for certain liabilities of the British Telecommunications pension scheme gave rise to incompatible state aid, as defined in the treaty establishing the European Community. The Commission decided that the non-payment of pension protection fund levies by the British Telecommunications pension scheme could not be justified under European Union rules, because it relieved British Telecommunications of charges that its competitors have to pay and was, therefore, incompatible state aid.

The regulations amend existing legislation to ensure that, when a scheme with either a full or partial guarantee does not pay the full administration levy in circumstances in which that would constitute incompatible state aid, the scheme is liable to pay the full levy. Regulations are already in place to implement the Commission's decision in so far as it relates to a similar exemption for the pension protection levy. The protector set of regulations, therefore, completes the action and removes the exemption from the administration levy where it gives rise to incompatible state aid.

The Commission's decision applies only to the British Telecommunications pension scheme. However, the Commission expects the same reasoning to be applied to schemes in comparable legal situations and when the facts are the same.

The technical amendments made by these regulations aim to ensure that the administration levy provisions comply with the EU rules.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Ms Ní Chuilín): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee for Social Development considered the Occupational Pension Schemes (Levies) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 on 15 April and 9 September 2010. As the Minister indicated, the rule has been brought forward in response to a European Commission decision on what was termed illegal state aid for occupational pension

schemes. As we just heard, the rule will require occupational pension schemes with what is known as Crown immunity to be treated like other occupational pension schemes and will require such schemes to pay a levy to the pension protection fund. The Committee values the important role of the pension protection fund and the security that it provides for occupational pension scheme savers. As it was felt that the rule is largely technical, the Committee was happy to recommend that it be confirmed by the Assembly.

Mrs M Bradley: I agree with the rule.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Committee, Mr Hamilton and Ms Ní Chuilín for the positive way in which they have dealt with this technical amendment, which, nonetheless, will provide some further protection for relevant organisations. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Occupational Pension Schemes (Levies) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 be approved.

Pensions Regulator (Contribution Notices) (Sum Specified Following Transfer) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Attwood): I beg to move

That the Pensions Regulator (Contribution Notices) (Sum Specified Following Transfer) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 be approved.

In many ways, these are more substantial regulations. Let us cast our minds back a year and a half to the situation that arose and continues to exist at Visteon, the west Belfast employer. Questions about the Visteon pension fund continue to be examined. In a very real way, that demonstrates what the future relevance of regulations such as these may be.

In that context, the Pensions Regulator operates across Britain and Northern Ireland to protect the benefits of members of work-based pensions. That reduces the risk of situations arising that may result in calls on the pension protection fund. The Pensions (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 provides the Pensions Regulator with tools to protect scheme members' benefits and to protect the pension protection fund from abuse where, for example, employers seek to avoid their obligations to the scheme or to offload them on to the pension protection fund. Avoidance not only increases the risk to the fund but increases the burdens on responsible employers and schemes through higher pension protection levies. The anti-avoidance powers operate within a legal framework, and there are certain tests that the Pensions Regulator must satisfy to justify their use; for example, where it is reasonable to exercise its powers, as well as specific factors that it must consider relevant. Those factors are set out in the legislation.

One of the regulator's anti-avoidance powers is the ability to issue contribution notices to require a company or an individual, normally the sponsoring employer of an occupational pension scheme, to put money into the scheme. The Pensions (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 amended the contribution notice power to close the loophole that prevented the regulator from issuing a notice to any scheme other than the one relating to the one in which the avoidance occurred. That meant that, in effect, an employer could avoid a contribution notice by transferring the members to another scheme.

12.15 pm

The regulations provide the technical details to underpin the change by setting out how the Pensions Regulator must calculate the amount to be specified in a contribution notice where the transfer is to a defined contribution scheme. A defined contribution scheme is one in which the benefits payable are based on the amount of contributions made to it rather than on a member's salary and length of service. The 2005 Order already provides the means for calculating the amount where a transfer is to a defined benefit scheme. The intention of the regulations is to provide a calculation that offers equivalent protection whether the transfer is to a defined contribution scheme or to a defined benefit scheme.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Ms Ní Chuilín): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee for Social Development considered the Pensions Regulator (Contribution Notices) (Sum Specified Following Transfer) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 at its meetings on 15 April and 9 September.

As the Assembly is aware, the Pensions Regulator is a UK-wide body that is tasked with the protection of the benefits of members of work-based pension schemes. The regulator has so-called anti-avoidance powers to help it carry out its role, including the ability to issue contribution notices, which require individuals or companies to put money into occupational pension schemes under certain conditions. Those contribution notices are a vital regulatory tool to minimise the likelihood of occupational pension scheme failure and protect against the abuse of the pension protection fund.

As the Minister said, the new regulations are designed to close a loophole whereby employers could avoid paying a contribution notice by transferring employees from one occupational pension scheme to another. The Committee has previously expressed general support for the occupational pensions regulatory regime and, therefore, welcomes the rule. Consequently, the Committee is happy to recommend that the rule be confirmed by the Assembly.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Committee and its Chairperson, Mr Hamilton, and Deputy Chairperson, Ms Ní Chuilín, for the positive way in which they have dealt with the matter. As Ms Ní Chuilín has

said, contribution notices are a vital regulatory tool that compels companies to act in a more responsible way than they might otherwise do. Consequently, I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pensions Regulator (Contribution Notices) (Sum Specified Following Transfer) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 be approved.

Committee Business

Justice Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice (Lord Morrow): I beg to move

That in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 11 February 2011, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Justice Bill [NIA Bill 1/10].

The Committee Stage of the Justice Bill began on 3 November 2010. Members will be aware that it is a very large Bill with 108 clauses and seven schedules. It makes provision in a wide range of justice areas and aims to provide better services for victims and witnesses; improve public safety and build stronger and safer communities; and improve access to justice through system efficiency and effectiveness.

Mindful that the Justice Bill was introduced relatively late in this mandate, reducing the time available if it is to complete its passage before the Assembly is dissolved, the Committee for Justice agreed to seek written evidence at an early stage of the process to ensure that its scrutiny work could begin as soon as the Bill was referred to the Committee. The Committee wrote to a wide range of key stakeholder organisations to request their views on the Bill, and a public notice was placed in the local newspapers to provide any interested individual or organisation with the opportunity to put forward views.

The Committee agreed a four-week deadline for the receipt of written evidence and has received 66 submissions, many of which provide detailed comment on the Bill. On 18 November, the Committee began to take oral evidence from a range of key stakeholders and the Department of Justice and, to date, has heard from 10 organisations. Further evidence sessions are scheduled up to and including 16 December.

On 25 November, Committee members agreed a motion to seek an extension to the Committee Stage until 11 February 2011 to reflect the importance of what the Justice Bill sets out to achieve and the need for robust and detailed scrutiny of all that it covers. In seeking an extension of the Committee Stage, members believe that the date agreed takes account of the time needed to gather written evidence, take

oral evidence, carry out the clause-by-clause scrutiny and compile and agree the Committee report.

At Second Stage, I informed the House that the Committee for Justice supported the broad principles of the Bill. The Committee intends to undertake its scrutiny responsibility for the Bill in a diligent manner but at the same time is mindful of the need for the Bill to progress through the Assembly. The Committee will endeavour to report to the Assembly on the Bill as soon as possible within the proposed deadline. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 11 February 2011, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Justice Bill [NIA Bill 1/10].

Early Years Children's Strategy

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to three hours for the debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have seven minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the early years (0-6) strategy consultation by the Department of Education and the comments of stakeholders; agrees that there is a clear need for a cross-departmental and holistic approach to early years provision; and calls on the Minister of Education to develop a cross-departmental and holistic early years children's strategy and action plan which will fully integrate provision for the social, care and educational needs of young children from pre-birth to age six.

It is to be noted that the motion has the support of all members of the Committee for Education, which we should welcome as we debate this important issue.

I wish to highlight some important deficiencies in the Department of Education's draft early years (0-6) strategy consultation that were raised directly with the Committee by key early years stakeholders. At the launch of the draft strategy in June, the Minister of Education said:

"The early years in a child's life are the most important in shaping their future, unlocking their potential, identifying issues early enough so that we can intervene and giving them the opportunity to pursue any path in life they choose. These years are also essential in developing children's social, emotional, physical and intellectual abilities."

However, shortly after the launch of the draft strategy, the Committee received a briefing from officials from the Department that raised serious concerns about the document, primarily about its failure to address fully the integration of children's care and education from pre-birth to the age of six. Those sentiments were echoed by a number of key early years stakeholders.

The Committee had waited some six years for the Department to produce the draft strategy and was so disappointed by the Department's briefing on 9 June 2010 that members concluded that the strategy as presented failed to address the key issues or

provide clear proposals for the way forward. The Committee immediately wrote to the Minister, listing nine areas of concern. That included the lack of equity of standards and variability between early years providers, and, for a five-year strategy, there needed to be more emphasis on the pedagogy to be adopted for the early years curriculum. The Committee subsequently received oral briefings from three key stakeholder organisations: the National Association of Head Teachers nursery subcommittee; Children in Northern Ireland and the Early Years Strategic Alliance; and the Early Years organisation.

The serious reservations about the draft strategy that were aired during those briefings and by others in written correspondence led the Committee to agree to host a major event in the Great Hall on 17 November 2010 to provide a platform for stakeholders' views and to hear directly responses from senior departmental officials. Some 160 stakeholder representatives attended that event. Among them were parents, teachers and representatives from statutory and non-statutory preschool providers, including interested voluntary and community and private sector organisations. A good number of them participated in a lively, open and valuable panel discussion and the audience question session on the draft strategy.

During the evening, it was proposed that the Department should extend its public consultation period on the draft strategy beyond 30 November 2010. That proposal received widespread support. Subsequently, on 19 November and, again, on 25 November 2010, I put that request formally to the Minister. To date, the Committee has received no response. Perhaps, when she responds to the motion, the Minister could clarify her position on that matter.

The Committee's difficulties with the draft strategy, which are shared by early years stakeholders, are wide-ranging. The key one that I want to raise and is, therefore, the subject of the motion is that the strategy is supposedly for nought- to six-year-olds, yet it addresses only the educational needs of children aged three years and above, with the exception of a relatively minor mention of the Sure Start programme and the pilot programme for two-year-olds. Those programmes both await evaluation at the time of publication of the draft strategy. That major concern was raised time after time throughout the event, with panellists highlighting

the underprovision for children prior to their preschool education year.

I cannot say that the Minister's officials allayed those fears on the night, as there appeared to be a clear acknowledgement that the Department of Education did not have the remit to implement a true nought-to-six strategy. Officials said that:

"the strategy focuses on the DE educational provision".

They also said that the Department is:

"not designated as the lead Department for early years"

and nor is any other Department; rather, it is a "shared responsibility". That is why the Committee's motion calls on the Minister of Education to develop a cross-departmental and holistic early years strategy and action plan, which will fully integrate provision for the social, care and educational needs of young children from birth to age six.

The Committee asked the three key early years stakeholder organisations, which were represented on the panel at the event, to list their concerns with the DE draft strategy. Those lists were provided to all attendees and are available on the Committee's home page. I will quote from them to ensure that Members fully understand why the Committee's motion is before the House. The Early Years Strategic Alliance, which represents members from across the childcare and women's sectors, referred to the need for:

"integration of early childhood education and care which has proved in other jurisdictions to improve children's outcomes and counteracts child poverty".

It went on to say that:

"DE must pro-actively take forward their role as lead Department for Early Years".

The National Association of Head Teachers' nursery education sector committee, which represents statutory nursery schools and units, said of the draft strategy:

"The age range 0-3 is barely addressed ... This is a missed opportunity to bring real continuity of approach to children's formative years... an opportunity to bring together services for children and families".

It said that:

"NAHT consider this Strategy to be unacceptable and not in the best interests of children and families in N. Ireland."

Finally, the Early Years organisation, which represents 1,200 local early years care and education providers, referred to the need to:

"Commit to the development of an integrated strategy for all children 0-6 but clearly articulate how education and care services for children 0-3 will be enhanced and developed".

It also referred to the need to create a curriculum that links learning and care needs for children aged nought-to-three and over three years, and emphasised holistic learning. Finally, Early Years referred to maintaining an integrated focus on the nought-to-six age group as crucial, given the weight of evidence from neuroscience, economics, health and education.

12.30 pm

All of that represents clear and indisputable evidence of major concerns on the part of early years professional practitioners. The original version of the Department's draft strategy sought to create an integrated early years and childcare system, and the membership of the numerous groups that were originally consulted on the draft strategy includes health professionals who support that view. However, somehow that vision got derailed over the six years that it took to develop the draft strategy.

Another shortcoming in the draft strategy relates to its provision for special educational needs (SEN). The Department's policy proposal 'Every School a Good School: The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion' was launched in August 2009, and the consultation on it closed at the end of January 2010, yet we still await an outcome. Perhaps the Minister could explain to the House the reason for that delay.

In its draft strategy, the Department referred to the financial benefits and the benefits to the child of early identification, yet early years stakeholders considered that the draft early years strategy failed to adequately address the needs of children with special educational needs, and particularly those in the nought-to-four age band. There is a general consensus among stakeholders that there is a reluctance to assess or statement very young children, and, as a result, the additional requirements of children with special educational needs in preschool are not met. There is also a shortage

of adequately trained staff in that area in the voluntary early years sector as a result of the curriculum advisory support service (CASS) being under no obligation to train nursery staff. There are also shortcomings in the training of statutory nursery school staff, and it is widely felt that the absence of specific training for early years staff in SEN is particularly problematic in rural areas.

Although the Department's draft strategy acknowledges that differences, including those in qualifications, funding, admissions policy and staff:child ratios, remain between the statutory and voluntary sectors in preschool education, it fails to indicate how it will reconcile those differences in the future. Those differences need to be addressed in the short term with the necessary consultation with all those who are involved.

The crucial issues in the debate are that there is no cross-departmental holistic approach to the social care and educational needs of children aged nought-to-six and that no single Minister or Department is taking the lead. Indeed, one lady at the Committee's event passionately informed us that she must work with seven different Departments to carry out her role with young children. In proposing the motion, the Committee for Education seeks a joined-up approach at Executive level, with the Department of Education taking the lead. That would give proper provision and the right start to the youngest members of our society. It would also ensure that correct and early intervention is made when problems exist and would truly allow those children to unlock their full potential.

Finally, Members should note that the motion today calls for a strategy that encompasses pre-birth provision, and I am sure that Members with a particular interest in that area will pick that up later in the debate. The evidence paper that accompanied the Department's draft strategy acknowledges that learning starts before a child is born, yet provision for that stage of development is clearly absent in the Department's draft strategy. During their presentation to the Committee's stakeholder event, representatives from the Early Years Strategic Alliance reminded us of research in the field of neuroscience that stresses the importance of the final elements of pregnancy and the first two years of life in the mental development of children.

It is clear that the responsibility for provision for pregnant mothers and newborn babies is outside the remit of the Department of Education.

However, problems can occur and develop at an early stage and may not be detected until a child enters the learning environment at the age of three or four. By that time, the problems can be very difficult to address, and, in some cases, it may be too late.

This motion is important. It is more important that we provide for our children in their crucial and critical early years in a way that integrates their social care and educational needs and gives them the best start in life. Therefore, in the light of those comments, I commend the motion to the House.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion for a number of clear and critical reasons. First, we all recognise that the first five years of a child's life are the most critical. That is the most important time for us to influence, effectively address and reverse the impact of disadvantage and poverty.

International research has shown clearly that if we had only £1 to invest, we would get the highest return by investing in the earliest years of a child's life. Therefore, if we are serious about improving life chances for the most disadvantaged children in society, and if we want to end the intergenerational nature of much poverty and disadvantage and create a fairer and more equal North, investing in early years is critical.

The second reason why Sinn Féin supports the motion is based on the issue of the attainment gap between children. It is glaringly obvious that the gap between advantaged and less advantaged children opens up very early in life. Educational underachievement, despite some beliefs, does not happen at age 11, 14 or even 16. It happens at birth or even beforehand. Therefore, addressing the levels of educational underachievement means addressing early years and ensuring that we get this policy and strategy right.

I think that we have the opportunity at this time to get the strategy right, because the consultation period highlighted some of its very positive aspects. It also highlighted concerns, which the Chairperson of the Committee referred to. It is vital that we iron all those out. We need to get the strategy right, because we obviously cannot afford to get it wrong.

The third reason why I support the motion is that I think that the broad vision as set out in the strategy is right and should be supported. I believe that that is the view of many in the sector. The strategy's strapline states that we need to enable every child to develop his or her potential by giving each one the best possible start in life. That is exactly what the focus of an early years strategy should be. With that as our starting point, we need to give that vision a clear shape and focus.

The strategy is about ensuring that, regardless of the area that a child is born in, which parent it has and its family's income, it has the same chance and opportunity as every other child to achieve his or her potential. If a child is born into an uneven playing field and faces difficulties and disadvantage, it is the job of the strategy to have in place the kind of services and support that can address that.

Fourthly, as I said from the start, this is much too important an issue to get wrong. Addressing the huge disadvantages faced by children who are less well off is what matters, and we have the opportunity to seriously address that.

I support the motion, because Sinn Féin is committed to ensuring that we get it right for all our youngest citizens. We are also committed to listening to the views in the voluntary, community and statutory sectors and to working collectively with the other Departments to move forward constructively and with the best effect. If creating the most effective strategy for early years means that we need to have extra time to focus and to get it right, it is important that we give it that time. There has been a request for an extension to the consultation period — perhaps the Minister can address that in her contribution — to ensure that everybody has their voice heard and that nobody feels that they have not been listened to throughout the consultation period.

There are many examples of good practice throughout the sector. I commend the work of the early years organisations, particularly that of Sure Start, which does an excellent job out in the communities by working with families.

We have an excellent opportunity to build and deliver for all the children and young people in our society. The motion is very important, and it is fantastic that it has cross-party support.

Mr B McCrea: This is one of the more important debates that we will have in the Chamber. I share the concern of the Chairman of the Committee that the early years strategy to date has been very disappointing. I was particularly concerned when it came out in discussion — I think that the Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Storey, raised this issue — that the Department of Education considers itself to be looking at only the educational aspects of early years provision, not a holistic approach. Indeed, it is not clear who, if anybody, is the lead in this issue.

I said in the Chamber when we had debates about such matters as the 11-plus or transfer at 11 that those were the wrong debates. The real debate for our society is about what happens in the early years, in the nought-to-six area of a child's development. I was always struck by a statistic that by the age of four, a child can be up to two years behind in its educational attainment. Once children are behind in that, they never make it up.

We had a useful debate at a particularly good event in the Great Hall, because we heard a lot from the stakeholders. This is an opportunity for us to say to them, collectively or otherwise, what information we took on board and what we intend to do.

This is a particularly complex issue, which is one reason why it is good that we have so much time to discuss it. We have had a time extension for individual Members to speak. That is a good thing and something that we ought to do for more debates, because we could then have proper discussions.

I hope that the Minister uses this opportunity to announce an extension to the consultation process. There is no doubt that a fine debate has been engendered, that people are very much engaged with the process and that a lot of good ideas are coming forward. I am sure that the Minister will welcome the input from all the stakeholders. They just need a little bit of reassurance that they will be able to have their say. I am sure that that will be to the benefit of all concerned.

Although my colleagues will talk about other issues — Sir Reg Empey will talk about the downstream consequences, and John McCallister about health inequalities — I want to talk about nursery provision. I say that knowing that my colleague Roy Beggs will argue strongly for the

voluntary sector. We need to do something together and have a joined-up approach.

I hope that people will take this point in the manner in which it is intended, but the most important thing that I have learned is that nursery school is not just about playing with children. At one stage, I felt that there was almost a suggestion that those who work in nursery schools ought to pay us, because they are allowed to work with children. However, the more that you get into the issue, the more you realise that those are highly trained professionals, teachers and others, who are trained to recognise the specific needs of individual children. I was looking at nursery schools in deprived and other areas. When you see those people at work, you understand the focused attention given to children who need help in life and you realise how valuable that work is.

Mr McCallister: Does my colleague agree that nursery staff play a pivotal role in identifying problems and issues early, whether that is a disability or a developmental problem? It is absolutely vital that nursery staff are skilled, trained and updated as often as possible on developments in those issues.

Mr B McCrea: I thank my colleague for the intervention. Obviously, he has a little bit of expertise in these matters. Not only is his wife a nursery teacher, he seems to be getting in on the act himself.

However, he raises a fundamental point that I wanted to discuss, which is that in everything from behavioural problems to speech difficulties, or from people on the autistic spectrum who may be at risk to any other people with complex needs, we need people in the early stages who are trained and able to identify a problem and bring forward the appropriate support and help. That is really what early years provision is about.

When it comes to how that fits in with playgroups or other issues, the inspectorate looked at the quality of provision, and there was excellence in all sectors. However, it is really important that we make sure that our teachers are trained to the highest possible level.

12.45 pm

In Finland, which is often used as an example of good practice, it should be noted that not only are all of the teachers educated to

third-level education, there is also cheap and universal childcare provision. There is a whole issue about how we make sure that people have access, and take up that access, to the provisions put forward. No doubt, people will have mentioned the difficulties about the number of places available, and I am quite sure that Mr Beggs is going to deal with that.

I want to reassure all concerned in the Assembly that the Ulster Unionist Party is totally committed to finding a way of helping very young people. It is disappointing that there is not really a joined-up approach to that. There used to be something called the children's fund. Now, we have junior Ministers and different Departments involved, no doubt all well-intentioned, but the trouble is that the issue requires cross-cutting, universal action. We need to be working together on the process. Do I have an extra minute because of the intervention?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Yes.

Mr B McCrea: It is important that we get a universal approach to the issue. One wonders where our colleagues from the Department of Justice are. People have to realise that it is not just about employment prospects or health prospects; it is also about the fact that those who we do not help early in their careers run the risk of becoming victims of crime or involved in crime. One of the most powerful interventions came from people in the women's aid sector, when they are looking at how to get quality educational provision when a woman is under threat.

In conclusion, I think there ought to be some emphasis on the physiological development of children. This is not just a nice-to-do thing: neurology does actually play its part. We need an evidence base on that.

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

Mr B McCrea: The Ulster Unionist Party will support the motion wholeheartedly.

Mrs M Bradley: I support this very important motion from the Education Committee. Time and again, in the Chamber and elsewhere, we have heard the statement that early intervention is essential to ensure that children get the best possible start in life. Nobel laureate on economic sciences Dr James J Heckman tells us:

"Investments in social policies that intervene in the early years have very high rates of return while social policies that intervene at later ages in the life cycle have low economic returns. A large body of scientific evidence shows a 'persistent pattern of strong effects' derived from early interventions. Significantly, these substantial, long-term benefits are not necessarily limited to intellectual gains, but are most clearly seen by measures of 'social performance' and 'lifetime achievement'. In other words, people who participate in enriched early childhood programs are more likely to complete school and much less likely to require welfare benefits, become teen parents or participate in criminal activities. Rather, they become productive adults."

General research studies suggest that, in comparison to no experience, all forms of preschool experience have a positive impact on attainment in national assessment tests taken at age seven. In addition, preschool attendance has been found to improve school commitment, reducing the risk of disaffection and delinquency during the latter stages of schooling. However, the quality of provision appears to be a crucial determinant on the effects on educational attainment. High quality provision involves small group sizes, high adult:child ratios, a balanced curriculum and trained staff.

Given the current economic climate, investing our limited resources makes good economic sense. Investment in the care and education of young children also makes good sense in boosting educational achievement and closing the gap, especially for vulnerable children and families. We now know from neuroscience that the first 18 months in a child's development are critical. Northern Ireland has an opportunity to build a first-class education system from the bottom up. Investing well in our youngest citizens will build the wealth of the nation.

The nought-to-six strategy is led by the Department of Education but needs cross-departmental and Executive support. The strategy touches on so many of the core objectives of other Departments. It is a rural issue, an employment issue and a cohesion and sharing issue. We know, from our own Northern Ireland-grown research, that we can prevent sectarianism and racism by investing appropriately in young children and those who work with them. It is a justice issue, for appropriate, high-quality early years services prevent crime. It is a health issue, for we know from international research that we can

overcome health inequalities by investing well in young children. I could go on.

The nought-to-six provision touches on all the major issues that we, in this House, are concerned with, but we must pay equal importance to the needs of nought-to-three and three-to-six age groups. We must ensure that all Departments work in an integrated manner so that the care, education and health needs of children are met. We have the opportunity to use existing resources to ensure that the Sure Start model of service delivery is rolled out across Northern Ireland to meet the needs of children. That has already been referred to as a fine programme, and it certainly is.

We know from international research that high-quality early education can be delivered by a range of education and care partners. The Education Committee has welcomed the fact that the Department of Education (DE) has set up a regional implementation group to oversee the implementation phase of the strategy. We hope that that group will create consensus across the various sectoral interests and ensure that there is a focus on meeting holistically the needs of young children. We need to see some early successes and hope that the Department will quickly remove some of the historical anomalies.

We hope that, as the Department moves towards implementation of the strategy, we will see a detailed plan with key targets and milestones. It is critical that, given the potential of the nought-to-six strategy to deliver well for young children and their families, the Executive commit appropriate resources over the lifetime of the next Budget to ensure that the potential of the strategy is realised. I also hope that there will be an extension of the consultation on the strategy.

Mr Lunn: I welcome the motion, particularly as it is a Committee motion with cross-party consensus. This subject concerns us all, and the universal feeling, as expressed by those who have spoken, is that the strategy consultation document — while it is just a consultation — is seriously lacking, not least in defined actions, timescales and costings. We appreciate that the ability of the Department to make a clear statement on the availability of funding to implement the strategy is constrained by the current economic climate. Nevertheless, the Department should seek to cost some of the proposals.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way.

I too welcome the motion from the Education Committee. Given how vital early years provision is for our community, particularly in working-class and hard-to-reach areas, and having recently had a meeting with Shankill Sure Start, does the Member agree that a decision on a Budget as early as possible will give clarity and certainty to people working in that sector? Apart from anything else and leaving aside finance, there is a human aspect to all of this.

Mr Lunn: I obviously agree with that, and I make no further comment. Now I have lost my place.

The Department should also make it clear whether commitments such as the upskilling of the workforce can be funded out of existing budgets, if no additional funding is available and to the possible detriment of existing levels of provision. The strategy also fails to highlight the role of complementary stakeholders in the nought-to-six area. For instance, it makes no reference to the role of health visitors, whose input is so important at that stage of a child's development.

The motion highlights the need for a cross-departmental holistic approach to this provision. The strategy document, as a Department of Education initiative, is lacking in a cross-departmental sense. I hope that the Department will recognise the need, in the terms of the motion and as others have said:

"to develop a cross-departmental and holistic ... action plan which will fully integrate provision for the social, care and educational needs of young children".

Furthermore, the document does not refer to the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) strategy, despite the obvious need for it to align with and reflect that strategy's vision and aims. However, that is, of course, assuming that the CSI strategy can be improved to the point where it is relevant.

The Department has listened to the views of the real experts in the field: the educational practitioners who work with young children and the many and varied bodies that responded to the consultation. As others said, during an open meeting at Stormont a few weeks ago, we heard from teachers, unions and parents about their concerns and fears that the final strategy might not reflect their needs or differ much from

the consultation proposals. I would like the Department to accept that the views expressed that evening were neither criticism for criticism's sake, nor deliberately negative. I hope that the Department and the Minister will take on board and consider the constructive points that were made, and bear in mind the extent of unanimity across the sector on the way forward.

I wish to make a few more specific points. The strategy makes limited reference to the needs of and provision for children with a disability, particularly those whose needs are identified before they go to school. Those children require a multi-agency response to ensure that they reach their full potential. In addition to recognising that group, the strategy should make provision for an effective policy for early intervention and support for children with special educational needs. It is unacceptable that a child in the private or voluntary sector with special educational needs cannot access the same provision as a child in the statutory sector.

There is also insufficient reference to the needs and policy actions required to address the nought-to-three age group. It is vital that the strategy detail how education and care services for children aged nought to three can be enhanced and developed. The document makes numerous references to raising the school age to six and states, in particular, that the strategy is a good place to begin the consideration of the potential implications. However, there is insufficient information on the implications of that change. What, for example, would happen to children aged four and five? How would that change affect the shape of the preschool sector and how would it be resourced? The predefined response document that accompanied the consultation gave no opportunity to comment on that aspect of the strategy. I could make dozens of further points, but most of them are included in the responses that the Department has already received, including my party's.

Finally, I echo Basil McCrea's request: it is still not too late for an extension of the consultation period on this important matter. Mary Bradley also mentioned that, and I hope that the Minister will consider it and respond in due course. We support the motion and are glad that it is before the House today.

Mr Hilditch: I welcome and support the motion, and I concur with many of the comments made by the Members who spoke previously.

We are all aware that early years and nursery education begin long before children reach school age. Ability gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils open up early in the first few years of life. If we do not have a strategy and resources to address that, by the time our children reach primary school age, we might have already set a pattern that allows for disadvantage and poor outcomes, which we are already struggling to address. We do not have the preschool education provision that is needed in Northern Ireland. We need good and affordable childcare that has an educational outcome. Given the rise in the birth rate, there has been an unprecedented shortage of around 1,200 preschool places.

Although this is a holistic debate, I wish to take a quick look at the nursery situation, which I am sure is of concern to most Members. Earlier in the year, several parents contacted me at my constituency office because their children had been unable to secure nursery school placements in their area due to the criteria set at board level. For many families, the criteria are extremely unfair, and it has been suggested that some parents were disadvantaged or penalised because they were not on relevant benefits. In fact, some children in Carrickfergus in my constituency were refused places at preschool or nursery units that there were practically next door to their homes. Their parents were, therefore, told to contact other outlets in Carnlough and Ballycastle, which seems quite ridiculous.

1.00 pm

I understand that the Minister has released £1.3 million for voluntary and private preschool places. That is welcome news. There is no doubt that it will help to meet the shortage — perhaps totally so, in some cases — and to ensure that, where possible, every child will be placed for the forthcoming school year. However, like the National Association of Head Teachers, I am concerned that the funding does not cover the state sector as such and will not include the provision of any new places in nursery schools and units.

It is well known that we need to turn our attention to addressing the literacy and numeracy problems that exist in primary schools throughout Northern Ireland. That matter could be addressed before school, and it is an area that cannot continue to be underfunded. We

recognise that each child develops at his or her own pace. We know that good quality practitioners who are committed to early years are a vital component. We know that there is a need for a curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for the child. We know the crucial role that parents play, and we should be there to give them the support that they need.

Children who attend preschool are benefitted in so many ways. The nursery experience, in particular, benefits social development in all children. Disadvantaged children gain so much more when they are in a mixture of children from different social backgrounds. Children with little or no preschool experience show poorer connectivity and social behavioural outcomes, as other Members indicated, at entry to school and at year one than those who attended preschool.

If high-quality preschool education provision has such a positive effect on children's intellectual and social development, why is every child not entitled to a funded nursery school place? I urge the Minister to provide that basic opportunity for every child. It is totally unacceptable and unfair that children do not get the same funding to help them to start their educational lives. That should form the basis of some parts of the strategy. If we do not provide funded nursery places for all children, we will probably undermine the benefits of taxpayer investments in the latter stages of the formal school system.

We appreciate the success in increasing the supply of preschool education over 11 years, and it is well noted that the uptake has increased from 44% to 90%. However, there are geographical gaps in supply and demand. Parental choice contributes to the amount of places available, and there are some nurseries to which parents simply do not wish to send their children. Indeed, parental choice has led to some popular state nurseries being oversubscribed by as many as 30 places. Therefore, why does the Minister not pour some of the money that was alluded to earlier into accommodating that sector? Those are issues that hinder our children's development, and they need to be addressed.

Every child has the right to develop through educational and social activity and to learn through play in the preschool environment so that they can progress into primary 1. I appeal to the Minister for her and her Department, and other Departments as an interdepartmental

agency, to ensure that every child is well equipped to meet the needs of primary school foundation stage and years one and two by the time that they leave preschool.

I have concerns that the view held by the Minister that a child's formal education should not begin until age six will compound the problems that we have in educational attainment. The reality is that many children will not be able to read or write when they go into P3 and that the gap between children who get parental help and support at home and those who do not will widen rather than narrow. It will also create huge difficulties for P3 teachers who have to work with classes that have children who are advanced in their reading and writing and those who are only starting to learn formally.

It has been found that there are significant differences between preschool settings and their impact on children. Statutory nursery schools and classes had the best outcomes, with good outcomes also identified for playgroups. That is not to say that other types of preschool did not produce benefits; they did, but they did not offer the same long-lasting educational assistance. Those findings were supported by the chief inspector's annual report in Northern Ireland, which found that the highest percentage of good to outstanding practice in early years provision was located in those statutory nursery schools that were inspected.

Almost all Members agree that the most important years of a child's learning experience are in the early years between nought and six. The fact that the Department has failed to produce anything is, therefore, unacceptable for all Members who have called for an emphasis on that strategy for some time.

We have the lowest school starting age in Europe. It has been suggested that many of our children are not ready to enter into the formal reception class and that it causes some children much stress. We have also been advised that, in relation to the compulsory school starting age, an earlier start at preschool has been linked to better intellectual development and improved independence, concentration and sociability for children. Thus, duration of attendance at preschool — the time between entrance to preschool and the start of school — is considered to be one of the most important times in preparing a child for school.

We were to have an early years strategy from the Department, but it has not yet arrived. We were told that it would be presented through the Minister at the end of the year, but we are still waiting for it, which is disappointing, to say the least. The message is simple: the Minister cannot delay the early years strategy. An evaluation of a school curriculum that is going to settle children into school, make them more enthusiastic about the learning process and increase their social development skills is needed immediately.

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

Mr Hilditch: I urge the Minister to develop a cross-departmental and holistic early years strategy and plan as soon as possible, and I look forward to her bringing the proposal before the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Gerry Adams who, I understand, will address the Assembly for the last time.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to speak in support of the motion and to thank the Education Committee for bringing it forward. Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí is an Irish proverb. It means, cherish the young and they will flourish. There is a wealth of reports, studies and information to support the wisdom of that proverb and to prove conclusively the value of early years programmes for children.

As Members have said, the period in a child's life up to the age of six is crucial to his or her personal, social and educational development. Basic social skills, such as learning to co-operate or to take turns, and the development of an emotional vocabulary are also essential to children. Young children need those skills if they are to develop and to function effectively in social settings or in school. Some children have special needs, such as Asperger's Syndrome or autism. They need additional support, and the earlier that those children receive that assistance the better. It is obvious that all children will benefit from early years programmes.

I, therefore, welcome the Department's draft early years strategy. The goal of the draft strategy and the consultation must be to ensure the provision of the best possible services for children and their parents. That will not be achieved by the Department of Education in isolation. In the Shankill area of west Belfast,

for example, nursery schoolteachers have told me that more than half their pupils have special learning needs. That is totally unacceptable, and it is crucial that any strategy must bring together all those providing support for families and children. In west Belfast, integrating services for children and young people is an excellent example of that under the auspices of the task force.

Poverty issues, childcare protection and provision and health provision are matters that extend beyond the remit of the Department of Education, as is acknowledged in the motion. I am advised that 46% of the young children in the Colin area of west Belfast, for example, are not registered with a dentist. The Edenderry Nursery School on the Shankill has advocated a model for co-locating services, which I strongly support. It envisages the co-location of family support workers, speech and language therapists and health visitors with children on school sites. That is essential in tackling the impact of poverty and disadvantage on children.

Some young children from disadvantaged families have very limited vocabularies. I queried that recently with nursery schoolteachers, and, to my surprise, I was told that that was because the telling of nursery rhymes and stories no longer happens in some families. I have also been told of young children who have Coca-Cola in their feeding bottles. Not only is that bad for their general health, but it causes tooth decay, which, apart from the obvious discomfort, affects their ability to speak clearly.

Some months ago, I visited some Sure Start projects. I commend the commitment of the staff and the exceptional work that they carry out on a daily basis in providing help and support for families and children, particularly those who are disadvantaged.

Many committed professionals and voluntary and community workers are active in supporting children, particularly teachers, boards of governors and school staff. I commend all of them and argue, as the motion does, for a joined-up and cohesive approach involving all those sectors and all the appropriate agencies and Departments. I also advocate the concept of special learning zones to break the cycle of educational disadvantage. I commend that to the Minister.

I know that the Minister is determined to construct the best early years strategy possible and that she is mindful of the need for a holistic

approach to achieving that. I wish her well in that work.

With your indulgence, and as this is my last speech in the Assembly in this phase of my life, I extend best wishes to my colleagues here. I thank you and your colleagues, especially the Ceann Comhairle, for the fair, balanced and inclusive way in which the business of the Assembly is conducted. My thanks also go to the staff, from cleaners to admin, ushers, caterers, security and civil servants. Tá mé fíorbhuíoch díbh. I am thankful to all of them.

The Assembly is approaching the end of its first full term, which is a remarkable achievement given the difficulties that have been overcome. The Assembly is about delivering for citizens. The island of Ireland is too small for us to be separated for ever by an artificial border. Most sensible people know that, and the Good Friday Agreement recognises it. Godspeed the day when we will be united. Today's debate is an example of the issues that must be tackled if we are to improve the living conditions of citizens, particularly our children. Good luck to all of you in that important work. I commend the motion. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Jonathan Craig.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Who is staying in Northern Ireland.

Mr Craig: Yes. It is not often that I welcome the departure of someone from the House, but I am rather glad to see the back of him.

I support the motion.

"Early years are vital years in our children's lives. They are unique in terms of children's intellectual, emotional, physical and social development and the formation of children's ability to interact successfully with the world around them, both in early childhood and in later life. They are the springboard for creating confident learners and participative citizens."

Those are not my words. They are the words of the Education Minister in the foreword to the Department of Education's early years strategy. It is good to read something with which I agree. However, the Minister has produced a strategy that is insignificant and misses many of the important points that have been raised, not only by researchers, but by stakeholders who specialise in the subject area. The early years of a child's life are vital and are reflected in

the development of a child and his or her later learning. Social interaction, communication and academic ability all boil down to what children learn in those early years.

It is vital that we get the strategy right, because children, as we are often reminded, are our future and are vital to the future of our country. We got it right when we called it the nought-to-six strategy because it has taken us six years to get to where we are now. That is the only part of the strategy with which I totally agree.

On 24 June 2010, the Chairperson of the Committee for Education wrote to the Minister of Education to highlight a number of concerns. I have highlighted and listed some of them today as they form the foundation of the debate. The absence of good evidence in the strategy, as to the benefits of early years education, has been highlighted by stakeholders. There is an assertion that the lack of school readiness is related only to income groups. That is fascinating.

Last Friday, I had the delight to be at Barbour Nursery School, which takes in one of the most deprived places in Lisburn, the Hillhall estate. Bordering it is one of the more affluent areas in Lisburn — probably in Northern Ireland, if the truth be told — so there is an interesting mix of children in that group. When I investigated how its strategy of teaching and learning improved the lives of children, it was fascinating to find out that it improved the lives of all the children, regardless of the background of their parents. That scheme has, quite frankly, picked up many early difficulties in the lives of those children, whether they come from a more affluent or a more deprived background. It is a strategy that helps those children to develop.

1.15 pm

The strategy ignores the fact that a child may not be ready for school due to, for example, the number of books at home and the access that a child has to educational resources. Again, that is not true solely of those from deprived backgrounds. I have seen examples in my constituency of people from surprisingly middle-class backgrounds having the same difficulties in their childhood. There is also an absence in the strategy of an evidence-based focus on play-based learning and development. It is also lacking in laying out the current legislative provision and an indication of any future legislative proposals. What does the Minister

intend to do to tackle that fast-evolving subject? Does she have any ideas worth discussing?

Other issues include those of the potential change to the school starting age, which has not been addressed, and the absence of any costing to implement the draft strategy. Stakeholders, many of whom work in the field, argue that the strategy is severely lacking in detail. There is also a view that the published strategy does not focus enough on the child. Stakeholders also pointed out that the strategy failed to mention the child poverty strategy that is being drawn up by OFMDFM, yet it talks about a joined-up approach.

Stakeholders have accused the Department of Education of failing to take the lead on the early years issue and of simply drawing up and publishing, for the sake of it, a strategy that is inadequate. I tend to agree with that assertion. The Minister needs to take this strategy back to the Department and to come back to the Committee when she has taken on board and acted on all these issues. A strategy is pointless without direction, support and a workable plan that has the support of all the stakeholders. The Minister talks regularly about consensus. She has certainly failed to win over the people who matter here and to reach a consensus.

Sir Reg Empey: I echo the words of my colleague from Lagan Valley Basil McCrea who said that issues such as this represent the real education debate: the one that we should have been having over past years, instead of the ideological trench warfare with which we have, unfortunately, been left.

I want to concentrate for a moment on the downstream consequences of failure during the early years. Members may not be fully aware of the costs that fall to other Departments because of failure at the nought-to-six stage. All the evidence is that, for children at that stage, and even from nought to three, their development forms the basis of their future success. That, in turn, is linked closely to their social and economic backgrounds. In my view, there is little doubt that it is infinitely more difficult and expensive to try to deliver a service to teach reading, writing, numeracy and ICT to a young adult at 16. We all understand why.

Is it not a national scandal that, after so many years at school, we are still, despite improvements in recent years, turning out thousands of young people without adequate

qualifications in those areas? I simply do not understand how and why it is that we allow our children to go from primary to post-primary schools unable to read or write. No possible successful outcome can be achieved under those circumstances.

Among the other costs, of course, is that DEL has to deal with the essential skills side of things. I know for a fact that tens of millions of pounds are spent every year engaging with organisations to try to deal with such young people. That is because, sadly, many of them fall into a category that we have debated in the House time and time again: NEETs — those not in education, employment or training.

I pay tribute to the many voluntary organisations that take on that difficult work. The subject is specialised and can be extremely difficult. There is a correlation between young people from care backgrounds and dysfunctional families and alcohol and drug abuse and all the other social ills. Those young people inevitably clash with the justice system at that stage, and there are costs to that. Any member of the Justice Committee who has visited Hydebank Wood has seen that young people are there because of mistakes that were made at the beginning of their lives. If we in the Assembly do nothing other than address those issues, we will, I hope, have at least earned our place and justified our existence.

The status quo is not working. Although there have been improvements, and many dedicated professionals are doing what they can, day and daily, the fact remains that a very large percentage of our population, particularly our young people, do not have even basic skills. How are they going to progress through employment? How will they prosper? How are they going to do anything other than remain in a permanent clash with the justice system? That represents waste, not only economic waste, but personal waste and a waste of the social interaction that they could have had. What happens when they become parents? The cycle goes on. The Assembly has to break that cycle, and we must realise that we have to move resources from the latter part of people's development to the beginning of that development. I believe that, over time, that will solve many problems.

Parents have, of course, come to the Education Committee to say that they are not content that their children are being required to attend

school at the age of four. We have heard very eloquent and passionate presentations from parents who said that their children were simply not ready at that age. They also pointed out that people forget about premature births. If we add that into the criteria for the qualifying date of birth for a child going to school, we can see that that can have a significant impact. We will have to look at that issue and at examples from elsewhere and realise that perhaps the parents know best. On the other hand, if a child comes from a dysfunctional background, perhaps schooling will give some focus and formality to that child's life. So, there is a tension between those two positions, and it is a tension that we are going to have to address. I hope that the Minister will draw attention to that in her summing up.

My colleague mentioned the position of the children's fund, which was an Executive programme fund that came about in the first Assembly. No sooner had the Assembly come down than the fund was got rid of. The then Secretary of State, Peter Hain, brought it back and then it was gone again. I know that the two junior Ministers have taken on a specific responsibility for children, and there is, of course, a cross-departmental subcommittee, but we have to admit that our position on early years and on how we deal with children has been consistently inconsistent. Some clarity and certainty has to be brought into the area.

I commend the motion to the House. I believe that the Committee has done the right thing in bringing it forward, and I hope that it will form the basis of a real debate on education and not continue the trench warfare in which we have been engaging in recent years.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

I support the motion. I welcome the tone of the debate. It has been a good and instructive debate on the very important subject of early years and on how we, as an Assembly, and the Executive progress through the issue in the time ahead.

The consultation on the draft strategy that was published by the Department of Education ended at the end of November. The strategy drew many comments and, it has to be said, much criticism. No one can shy away from the fact that we have to get it right. It has taken a long time to get the strategy published, but if it takes longer to implement and requires the

Executive to collectively look at the programme of work, that is what should happen. We should ensure that we get a collective strategy that deals with children aged nought to six. As the Chairperson of the Committee for Education said, the motion alludes to the latter stages of pregnancy and the development of children in the womb.

The education of our children takes place in a number of venues, including in the formal setting of our schools, but it also takes place in our homes and communities. I am fortunate to be the father of a three-year-old and a five-year-old. We, as parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents or in any other position that requires dealing regularly with children of that age, know only too well that they have very inquisitive minds. The most regular question that I get asked about any factor of life is: why? In fact, some of the most sensible conversations that I have after leaving here at the end of the day are in the house with my three-year-old and five-year-old. I never win those arguments.

My wife and I are fortunate to be able to take the time to engage with our children. I am sure that that is the case in most homes. However, unfortunately, there are homes in which it is not happening. In such homes, people, for whatever reason, are not spending time talking and listening to their children and engaging with, and, indeed, playing with them. That is where the most important factor of education has to be. We are told that more than 70% of a young person's educational attainment, whether they are in primary school, nursery or in post-primary school, is as a result of what happens in the home and the community. Therefore, one reason why we have to have a collective strategy is to send the message out loud and clear that, although people send their children to school for formal education, parents, guardians and older siblings have a responsibility to encourage young people to become educated and to grow into the full people that they can be.

I welcome Reg Empey's comments about Hydebanks. The visit to Hydebanks has had a lasting impression on the Justice Committee members who took part. A number of Members talked about the different Departments that are involved and a number of them mentioned the Department of Justice. At Hydebanks, we were brought into a recreational room — I do not want to overemphasise the facilities — where we met five or six young people who were aged

15 or 16. Every one of them had known each other from when they were children through being in the institutions. They had gone through one institution after another. I do not accept that anybody is born bad. People are born into circumstances that are beyond their control. They are born into environments that create disadvantage in their lives that lead them to commit crimes against society. As Sir Reg said, if we do not get this right for children at an early age, we are going to continue to repeat the same mistake.

I think it is today's 'Belfast Telegraph' that has an article about the police questioning four-year-olds, six-year-olds, eight-year-olds, etc. On the radio this morning, somebody made a comment that the police should be charging the parents or guardians of those young people. If we, as elected representatives and as an institution of government, continue to fail to protect, encourage and build our young people, the people who should be charged are those in this gathering: the politicians. If we, as a Government, an Assembly and politicians, continue to fail those people, we are failing more and more generations, and Justice Committees of the future will go to meet 15-year-olds and 16-year-olds who will have been in institutions since they were children. That is why this strategy is important.

1.30 pm

Debate has been ongoing for a considerable period about whether preschool education should take place in a formal setting, such as statutory education in a nursery, and whether a child attending a community or voluntary facility is losing out. I am somewhat disappointed by the tone of that debate, particularly between the two sectors. It is a debate that is required and is necessary, but we need to draw the lines back a bit and to have each sector learn from the other. The statutory and community sectors can teach each other what the advantages are, because the tone of the debate thus far indicates that we are missing the objective.

Let us not retreat into our own corners and come out fighting over the school starting age. Let us think about what is best for the young children involved and have a mature, sensible debate around it. Let us not just say, "In my head, I have a position, and I am going to defend that position". Let us ensure that we have an informed debate, challenge each other

and come out the other side on the side of the argument that is best for the educational well-being of our children.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest as a governor of Glynn Primary School and as a committee member of Horizon Sure Start, which assists children in areas of need in Larne and Carrickfergus.

The early years of a child's life are extremely important for their development and future life prospects. It is vital that, between the ages of nought and six, all children are adequately equipped to develop emotionally, physically and socially to reach their full capability, whether in education or the world of work. We need to do all that we can to help our children to achieve that by helping to create confident, active and positive citizens.

That early investment, as well as being good for individuals, makes economic sense. That has been recognised internationally through the work of Professor James Heckman. Over the past year or so, Steve Aos of Washington State has been in this Building, and Dr Harry Burns, the Chief Medical Officer for Scotland, who identified the importance of early years learning and early education, spoke at an Investing for Health partnership meeting that I attended.

More needs to be done to the strategy to ensure that parents, as well as children, are more significantly included in the early years programme. It is widely accepted and respected that the nought-to-six age bracket is important, but the preschool and pre-nursery years — those very early years — are vital in a child's development.

Up to four years of age, most children's time is spent with their parents and families, and, therefore, most of their learning and many of the habits that they acquire come directly from their parents. It is important that there are positive experiences and positive learning. There is a brief acknowledgement of that in the strategy, but there is also a failure to place suitable importance on that area. The emphasis seems to have been placed on the statutory settings of school and nursery.

Suitable parental support must be built in to the strategy to ensure that parents get adequate support and guidance on good parenting skills. That makes me think of my dad's family of 12 children, and my late grandfather who worked at

the local bleach green for 55 years. They were a stable family with a good work ethic, and value was placed on education. The children were encouraged to work hard and to develop through education, and I would want every child to grow up in such an environment where they can better themselves.

It is widely accepted that good parental nurturing can affect brain development: there is scientific evidence. Hardwiring occurs in the brain in those very early years, and if you wait until a child reaches preschool, it can be too late. Opportunities will have been missed. Aside from international research, we have local early years organisations such as Sure Start, Barnardo's, and Action for Children. They all recognise the significant role of the family and how the early family environment can set the foundations for a child's better life chances. Therefore, there is a need to support parents in order to improve their parenting skills in those early years.

The strategy mentions the fact that some programmes will be extended and expanded. However, it fails to acknowledge the areas in which change is needed and the fact that choices must be made. I refer in particular to a recommendation in a recent PAC report, which identified the need to address problems with some substandard reception classes. To get better outcomes, we have to make improvements on where we spend money.

I found it sad that the Minister's personal political pet issue, the Irish language, is covered more extensively in the strategy than assisting children with speech and language development issues. Recently, on a visit to a Sure Start scheme, I spoke to the parent of a child who had almost become isolated because of speech and language impediments, but who, in a relatively short time, caught up and is now back up to speed and ready for the school environment. I think also of parents who do not have good English, who may be isolated in their community and unable to access fully the Health Service in order to gain benefits for their children. Those are priority areas in which, rather than teaching the Irish language, we should be teaching English and ensuring that people have good speech and language skills. It is inappropriate, therefore, to include Irish language teaching in the debate.

Why are 7% of children not accessing preschool education? Is it because some parents choose to home educate? I suspect that, as was mentioned earlier, it is also to do with the availability of places. In addition, in some disadvantaged communities, there is an issue with why some parents and their children are not engaging with services. Therefore, further research is needed in that area to ensure that those in greatest need receive assistance.

As I am sure Members are aware, the issue of two-year-olds entering a nursery setting must be dealt with straight away. It is dreadful that someone in their immediate preschool year is not given a place, yet we are funding two-year-olds to go into a class with four-year-olds. If you had a playgroup at home, would you expect two-year-old children to play with four-year-olds? It would be ridiculous, unless the group was on such a scale that you could have specialist groups for each age range.

It is vital that we invest money wisely to ensure that everyone in their immediate preschool year gets a place. I think of a family in Carrickfergus who were not offered a place mainly because the husband was working. They lived in a former council house and were working, so they did not qualify to be prioritised because they were not on benefits. To add insult to injury, they were then rejected by another group, only to be offered a place in its private unit.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member comment on whether we should consider the introduction of universal provision and target intervention in certain other areas?

Mr Beggs: It is essential that everyone in their immediate preschool year be afforded a place and that there be no inequality. If the system cannot offer a funded preschool place, I would far rather that funding be offered to that person so that they can go to find support. Why should someone on relatively low earnings, whose child has been excluded because the state cannot find a place, have to pay for private preschool education? A huge inequality exists, and it must be addressed. There is also an issue with how the numbers are carved up.

Although the Department has an influence on nursery school places, playgroups can also provide an excellent service, and that has been recognised by the inspectorate. Indeed, there are many nursery schools that rural

communities cannot avail themselves of due to their location.

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

Mr Beggs: It is vital, therefore, that the Department recognises the role of playgroups and the quality of the service that they provide.

Mr Bell: Research points heavily towards the benefits of front-loading resources into the early years sector. That appears to be the conclusion of the knowledge base, and if we fail to plan for young people in the nought-to-six age group, it is crystal clear that we will, in effect, fail them in later life.

I have seen at first hand, over some 21 years in family and childcare social work, the need to get it right with an early intervention, from a societal and educational point of view. Let us be absolutely clear: many young people fail through no fault of their own, and many live with parents who have a chemical dependency on drugs, alcohol or prescription medication. In my experience, many men failed their young people by leaving mothers to bring up their children with limited financial or emotional support. In many cases, they left children bereft. It is a testimony to many mothers in society who brought up children on their own that they have done it so well in their circumstances.

Young people have benefited from home support and the services provided by schemes such as Sure Start and Bryson House, which have made a difference to their lives. Those of us who worked in intensive support social work teams and dealt with those children in adolescence could see the difference in their lives when services were front-loaded. Many support and education schemes that have long-lasting benefits can be put in place before a child comes to school.

Many of us are fortunate to have been brought up by very good mothers and fathers. We saw the capacity that they seemed to have, almost naturally, to provide excellent parenting. Shortly after my son was born, I was invited to a parenting class in a local Methodist church. I remember thinking that it was going to be interesting to see what that parenting class provided. I have a degree in psychology, and I could quote Piaget's somatosensory period of child development. There was almost a false arrogance on my part. I asked myself: what

could I learn from the class? When we went to the parenting class, we were told some very simple things, such as letting children see parents reading a newspaper, because when children see parents reading, they take on board that reading is important. It is important because Mum, Dad or whoever provides the care is doing it. Issues that I thought were superficial are vital to a child's normal development. We need to make such parenting classes integral, and make sure that they are provided in facilities to which the community has easy access without huge cost.

When I worked beside child and adolescent psychiatrists, I found it difficult to deal with the fact that some young people who had hit their teenage years, at 14 or 15, were addicted to mixtures of vodka and prescription medication. Their health was being torn apart because they were taking medication to improve their heart rate and to raise their blood pressure while using other medication to drive down their heart rate. I asked one of the psychiatrists about the programme that they were following. The psychiatrist explained that, using one case as an example, a person's emotional reactions and how he or she copes with certain situations are, quite literally, hard-wired into that person's system from what he or she observed during the nought-to-six period. In those formative years, children who experienced domestic violence and emotional trauma, or were abused or saw a parent being hurt or injured, missed out. Their brains have not been hard-wired into being able to cope properly emotionally with any given situation within the normal parameters. I emphasise that the difficulty is that, if they miss out on that during the nought-to-six period, it is not a repair job later on; it is about dealing with and managing the chaos. If we miss the essential hard-wiring in those early years, it cannot easily be put back in place, if at all.

1.45 pm

The issue is not solely the Department of Education's responsibility. However, the critical point is that the Department of Education must take the lead and, along with the other Departments, show a serious joined-up approach to children aged nought to six. If we get that right and provide a proper and adequate service during the early years, I doubt that the House will do anything of more value in this Assembly term. Therefore, although I pay tribute to those who have been so successful in providing

services for the nought-to-six age group so far, I conclude with a call for the Department of Education to take a more strategic leadership direction and to lead the debate and co-ordinate the services to ensure that a future generation gets a joined-up response. In many ways, getting it right now will save us many future problems.

Mr McCallister: I start by declaring an interest: my wife is an employed nursery-school teacher, and I suppose that, given that we have a seven-week-old baby, we have a great interest in the nought-to-six strategy.

I hope that the good nature of the debate does not diminish its importance or let the Minister think that we are all agree that the strategy is wonderful and does not need significant changes. Many Members have talked about the various aspects that tie into that, such as Home-Start and Sure Start, and those programmes are absolutely vital to continue the good work. My colleague Michael McGimpsey spoke last week about why he has continued to fund Home-Start. He said:

"That is why I set aside resources from my own budget to provide continuing support to over 40 former children's fund projects that were pursuing activity that contributed to improving outcomes for children and their families in line with the aims and objectives of my Department." — [Official Report, Vol 58, No 4, p237, col 1].

We must focus on the best outcomes for those children. Many Members have mentioned the importance of getting into families early and the hard-wiring of the brain at a very early age. The Committee Chairperson mentioned pre-birth provision, which is about intervening early, helping families before they hit crisis point and looking at health inequalities.

I want to focus primarily on some of the health inequalities that stem from the issues. There are some major ones. I am grateful to my colleague Michael McGimpsey for the way that he has dealt with some of those inequalities from a Public Health Agency perspective. I draw Members' attention to the fact that we can begin with early intervention. That not only improves physical health but can have a huge impact on the mental health agenda. We need not only to consider how to deal with ill health or bad mental health but how to promote flourishing mental health. Mental health problems can start at a very young age, and we can give children coping mechanisms and

coping strategies for later life. We have to get to grips with that issue. We have only to look at the appalling record on suicide and self-harm in different parts of Northern Ireland. If the strategy is done properly and is co-ordinated across government, it could make a difference to that.

There are other health inequalities and differences in parts of Northern Ireland. For example, there can be anything up to a 24-year difference in life expectancy. What are the key factors? We must look at people's socio-economic backgrounds, educational achievement, diet and exercise levels.

As others have said, all that ties in to their life experiences from a very early age. That is why it is so important to get the strategy right and why so many Committee members, including me during my time on the Committee, were so disappointed with the strategy. They felt that it had almost totally ignored the nought-to-three element and focused purely on the three-to-six age group.

Justice has been mentioned, and there is a fine line between someone becoming a victim and a perpetrator. Problems include antisocial behaviour, children running around the streets with seemingly no parental control, stemming from a very young family or no —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Certainly.

Mr Beggs: Is the Member aware of the presentation that Steve Aos gave in this Building? He said that, rather than investing millions of dollars in new prisons, Washington state decided to invest in early years and that that money appears to have been well spent.

Mr McCallister: That is a very useful intervention, and I hope that the Minister will take it on board. Having campaigned so much to get justice devolved here, let us hope that she will engage with the Department of Justice on those issues to see what improvements can be made to the strategy and how we can improve the outcomes for children in the years ahead. Justice has an important role. We can stem back to a younger age group the lessons on family and responsibility, what is seen and goes on in the home and all the aspects to do with teen pregnancies and the rise in STIs. We need to intervene much earlier, much better and much more effectively.

We need to look at some cross-departmental workings, and I agree with other Members who said that there is a need to get this right across the Departments. DARD is involved in providing some of the rural childcare, and OFMDFM is looking at the child poverty strategy and has the lead on the shared future CSI strategy, although whether we think it is any good is a debate for another day.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: My question is at the risk of the Member's making a party political speech, which he did at the weekend. It is easy for us to point the finger at everyone else and to pick out the Departments for which our parties do not have responsibility. Will he accept that the way that Health interacts with Education for practitioners on the ground is less than satisfactory? One Department tries to use one piece of the legislation to opt out from what it is required to do. We often talk in the House about joined-up government and it is really only an attempt to have a go at another party. Let us see it genuinely working on the ground. The Health Department also has to take a responsibility for that.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Member for that intervention. One obvious area of distinct lack of joined-up government that I was coming to in my remarks is the I CAN centre in Ballynahinch, where the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust was providing the speech and language service and the Department of Education and the Minister were seemingly powerless to tell the board to make it work. Even when other options were looked at, including letting the funding for each child follow to the I CAN centre, they seemed to fall apart for the sake of £10,000.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member agree that few things are more important than being able to communicate and that the I CAN centre is one place that helps with that? The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists has an excellent role to play, and we ought to promote that work and to ensure that that is included in the submission.

Mr McCallister: I could not agree more with those two points. We need to get on board with this, co-ordinate this approach and get in early. This should be a flagship policy, and we need to look at going back to the example of the children's fund for how you get resources and make a difference to the outcome for children.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up. I remind Members to please make their remarks through the Chair.

Ms Purvis: I support the Committee's motion, particularly its call for a cross-departmental, holistic approach to early years. Like other Members, I looked forward to the release of the long-awaited early years strategy. I was pleased that the Department of Education allocated a decent length of time for consultation.

As others have pointed out, the importance of early care and intervention to break the cycle of educational underachievement is no more acutely felt than in Protestant working-class areas. As we know, Protestant working-class boys make up the major non-progressing group in the education sector. The impact that that has on the individual, community and society is devastating. That is why I set up a working group to look at educational underachievement among Protestant working-class boys. I encourage all those who have an interest in that area to read the consultation document and to respond in kind. We know how important early years are to tackling that.

As the Department, rightly, recognises in the consultation document, early years programming has a profound effect on children's education and development that extends well beyond their early years. That is particularly true of children from households that struggle with deprivation and poverty. Given the multitude of international research that now supports the long-term value and cost benefits of supporting children and their families from an early age, much of which appeared in the Department's evidence-based paper to support the policy document, I had hoped and expected that the strategy would contain a comprehensive and multidepartmental approach to early years.

Although I am pleased to see in the document a rhetorical commitment to improving outcomes for children by the end of foundation stage, and a commitment to providing parents with a key role in meeting those outcomes, the policy proposals that support the objective are insufficient to achieve that goal, largely because they are solely limited to the current areas of responsibility of the Department of Education. Certainly, that was probably the most disappointing aspect of the Department's recent presentation to the all-party group on children and young people.

The document defines early years as being from birth to the age of six, yet the policy initiatives offered largely cover services that a child can access at a point of contact with the Department of Education, which, as outlined earlier, is extremely rare from the ages of nought to three, with the exception of participation in Sure Start. I know first-hand of the success of Sure Start schemes. Unfortunately, however, that is not evidence-based, as the schemes have yet to be evaluated in Northern Ireland.

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

Outside of those limited initiatives, the document offers little to children aged between nought and three years, such as infant mental well-being and development or interventions for families in the home. Essentially, the draft policy is a decent foundation stage document. However, it is not an early years document.

Furthermore, it is critical that families, particularly those who are most vulnerable, are offered some form of support for early years development in the privacy of their own homes. Parents and families are their children's primary caregivers and first educators. Support is particularly critical for parents of young children. Much could be achieved through co-operation, particularly between the Department of Education and the Health Department. It is worth noting the ongoing implementation of the Family Matters strategy.

Mr B McCrea: I know that the Member has great interest in the area and has set up her own task force. Perhaps, when she mentions the Health Department, she might also suggest the involvement of the Minister of Justice because, obviously, there are long-term implications for his Department.

Ms Purvis: I thank the Member for his intervention. He is absolutely right. All Departments need to work together. When the education system fails and young people do not achieve, it shows up in other Departments' budget lines. It shows up in the Department of Justice, the Health Department, the Department for Employment and Learning, and right across the board.

The policy document also raises questions about the childcare and child support services that are available to children and families from birth. Certainly, the evidence-based paper made compelling arguments in favour of the integration of early years education and

development with childcare provision and policy, yet there is no meaningful discussion of that in the draft policy document.

Although I recognise that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has responsibility for the development of a childcare strategy, I am deeply concerned at the delays in that effort and the fact that there is still no one Department with responsibility for addressing what is a critical social and economic issue. Childcare can provide opportunities to prepare children for learning and support parents through their child's education and development. The case for the integration of childcare and early years education services is well made by international research and experience.

2.00 pm

The issue is also tied to the discussion that the Department of Education is having about raising the school age, which is an issue that my working group has looked at. The argument has its merits, particularly in learning outcomes for boys. However, it cannot be considered in a vacuum, and it should not be advanced without full consideration of the preschool and childcare provisions that will be available to those children before statutory education begins.

Mr Bell: I thank the Member for her extensive quoting of international research, and I support the point that she made about the Protestant working class, which we came from. Indeed, the disadvantage in Protestant working-class boys is becoming even starker.

Will the Member comment on the work undertaken by Peter Shirlow from Queen's University in advancing loyalist communities in north Down and Strangford? In that work, he highlighted the fact that one in five children educated in the maintained sector accesses university, yet only one in 10 of those educated in the controlled sector does the same.

Ms Purvis: I thank the Member for his intervention, and he will be aware that Dr Pete Shirlow is part of the working group that I set up. I am acutely aware of the statistics on Protestant working-class boys, their access to universities, how they leave school with few or no qualifications and the growing number who leave school barely able to read or write. The consultation on my working group's document closes on 13 December, and I would welcome the Member's comments on it.

As the issue is cross-departmental and is tied to areas including childcare provision and the age at which children begin school, I am also deeply concerned that the Department has no clear plans to consult children and young people directly on the proposals.

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

Ms Purvis: I encourage the Minister to ensure that there is full engagement with children and young people, particularly those with disabilities.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé iontach sásta go bhfuil an Tionól ag cur spéise in oideachas sna luathbhlianta. Tá a fhios againn go bhfuil luathbhlianta shaol an pháiste rithábachtach d'fhorbairt agus d'fholláine an pháiste sa todhchaí.

I welcome the interest of the Assembly in early years education. We know that the early years of a child's life are of critical importance to its future development and well-being. We also know that interventions early in life can help to reduce barriers to learning that may otherwise reduce children's long-term chances of success.

The draft early years strategy, which has attracted widespread interest and comment, aims to set out a vision and plan for the development of early years services in the context of the responsibilities of the Department of Education. It seeks to ensure better outcomes for children by setting out a framework to improve the provision and quality of services to the youngest children and their parents and families over the next five years. It is particularly important given that we are a society emerging from conflict and we want to break the intergenerational nature of disadvantage. Therefore, the draft strategy has a clear focus on learning and education from age three onwards. However, in recognition of the vital importance of the early years of a child's life in determining its future well-being, the draft strategy also seeks to make targeted provision before the preschool year a recognised area of our work. That early provision is focused on those who can benefit most from additional support. The Sure Start programme and its associated services operate in designated areas of disadvantage with the aim of providing families with the support necessary to ensure that children are well prepared for the future.

In considering the issue of early years, we must not lose sight of the fact that we are building on a platform of well-established, high-quality services or forget that my Department makes significant investment in early years provision. We know that we have quality early years services in preschool, in education and in our Sure Start programmes on which to build.

Mar shampla, tá a fhios againn go bhfuil caighdeán an-ard le fáil sna seirbhísí luathbhlianta — sa réamhscolaíocht agus sna cláir Tús Cinnte, agus is féidir linn cur leis sin. I dtaca leis an mbliain réamhscoile de, léiríonn tuairiscí ón gCigireacht Oideachais agus Oiliúna go bhfuil an tsármhaitheas le fáil inár gcuid seirbhísí agus go bhfuil caighdeán an tsoláthair réamhscoile ag dul chun feabhais bliain i ndiaidh bliana.

In relation to the preschool year, reports from the Education and Training Inspectorate show that we have much excellence in our services and that the quality of preschool provision is improving year on year, and I welcome that.

There is quality provision in the statutory and the private voluntary sectors. There are people who suggest that statutory nursery provision should be available for all children. There is a view that the current system offers parents greater choice and flexibility as well as a high-quality and cost-effective method of preschool provision. I agree with my colleague John O'Dowd: we need a real and less strident debate on statutory nursery provision.

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

The Minister of Education: No. The current level of funded preschool provision is a result of the implementation of the pre-school education expansion programme. Prior to the introduction of that programme in 1997, only 45% of children received a funded preschool education. That figure has risen to over 94% of children in their immediate preschool year in 2009-2010, and we should welcome that. Obviously, more needs to be done, and we will continue to do it. In 2009-2010, over 21,000 preschool places were offered through the pre-school education expansion programme in both statutory and voluntary nursery settings. In that year, DE invested over £50 million in the preschool year, which is a non-compulsory phase of education but is highly valued by parents.

Sure Start aims to work with parents and children under the age of four to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of the children, particularly those who are disadvantaged, to ensure that they are well prepared for school and later life. Services are provided through a targeted and holistic approach, which brings health, education and parenting support services together in a co-ordinated way. It is estimated that over 34,000 children have access to Sure Start provision. In the current financial year, my Department is investing over £23 million in the Sure Start programme.

Members from all parties in the House made comments, and I will comment on a couple of them. I agree with the Member who made points about Hydebank Wood. I visited Hydebank Wood on a number of occasions before I became Minister, and it was one of the first places that I visited as Minister. I was very disturbed by what I saw in Hydebank Wood and the lack of provision there, and I went public with my concerns. I also visited the juvenile justice centre in Bangor. I agree that we need to deal with early years provision in a co-ordinated manner so that we can avoid difficulties in later life.

I agree with many of the comments that Jonathan Bell made. I also agree with Gerry Adams's comments about Sure Start. I pay tribute to Gerry for the tremendous amount of work that he has done on preschool provision, particularly on the Falls Road, the Shankill Road and in other areas of disadvantage. I have visited projects on the Falls and Shankill roads. I am delighted that he chose such an important subject on which to make his last contribution in the House. I am sure that the House will join me in thanking him for the work that he has done.

I am disappointed that Roy Beggs chose this debate to suggest that children educated through the medium of Irish should not be given fair play. I hope that he did not mean that, because the rest of his contribution was very important.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister acknowledge that what I said was that the Minister seemed to give a higher priority to the Irish language by regularly mentioning the issue than to basic speech and language difficulties or the issues faced by those from other countries who do not have English as their first language? It was the priority that the Minister was giving to that issue that I thought was inappropriate.

The Minister of Education: I reiterate the point: I am disappointed that the Member should single out the Irish-medium sector. That follows a disappointing pattern in the House. We would do well to make sure that we adhere to our statutory duties to all children, including those who learn through the medium of Irish.

I want to make a few points about funding. Dawn Purvis made interesting comments about the foundation stage. I agree with her on that. We have put significant resources into the foundation stage, as well as a new, good and play-based curriculum. For example, we have allocated £22 million to support the particular requirements of the foundation stage of the curriculum. I met trade union leaders last week, and they were unanimous in their comments about how well the foundation stage has embedded.

Since becoming Minister of Education, I have introduced measures aimed at primary education, nursery schools and units. John O'Dowd made the point that 30% of learning is done in schools and 70% in the community and at home. Jonathan Bell also referred to learning in the home. We have to continue to forge those links, because 70% is significant. It is important that we continue with those programmes. We have brought in a significant number of programmes, including reading programmes for families and schools. We want to see our schools open 24/7, not closed at 3.00 pm or 4.00 pm at the end of the school day.

We have also provided classroom assistants for all year 1 and year 2 classes, with specific funding for planning, preparation and assessment times for primary-school teachers. We have primary languages and sports programmes. We have funding initiatives to assist the children of Traveller families, and a targeting on the basis of need programme in relation to the common funding formula. There is incredible need. Mention was made of that in respect of our Protestant working-class children, and I absolutely support that. Equally, we have significant numbers of Catholic working-class children — boys and girls — who need significant support. We need to target on the basis of need in respect of all our children.

As I said, we have a new curriculum. We also brought in transfer 2010. We cannot ignore the impact of the selective system on our education

system. Members rightly cited Finland and other areas that do not operate selective systems.

I was struck by some of Jonathan Bell's points about emotional health and well-being. I absolutely support everything that he said about that. I see people jibing; I do not think that we should do that. There are important issues that we need to deal with about pupils' emotional health and well-being. In fact, I agree about the nought-to-six strategy and those key years.

One programme that I am sure Members will welcome and for which we can have cross-party support is the Women's Aid programme that I have brought in. In the past, Women's Aid did very good work in primary schools, but its representatives went directly into primary schools. The programme that the Department of Education is now funding for Women's Aid uses that organisation's skills to train teachers, because they have a huge role to play.

The primary focus of the early years nought-to-six strategy is on education services, although that, of course, overlaps with the Department of Health and health and social care boards' responsibilities in the case of the youngest children and their parents in Sure Start provision. We have sought to develop a strategy that reflects the drive for cohesion in relevant policies and services affecting early years so that children and parents get the best outcomes possible. The strategy will need to take account of a wide range of policies and strategies in development and in place in the Department of Education and other Departments. The issue of childcare in particular has been raised. OFMDFM has been developing an economic and policy appraisal, and the Executive will consider in due course how that work can best be taken forward.

2.15 pm

During the consultation on the draft strategy and here in the Assembly today, concerns have been expressed that the draft strategy needs to be more broadly based and needs to provide a cross-cutting overview of the Executive's approach to early years provision. It has been suggested that it should cover the social, care and educational needs of all young children from pre-birth to age six and those of their parents and prospective parents. A strategy of that nature would be much wider than the Department of Education's responsibility and would impact on the Departments of a number of my colleagues in the Executive. I have written

to the junior Ministers in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to request a meeting to seek their views in the first instance and to help me decide how I wish to proceed. A decision to progress the cross-departmental strategy and action plan proposed would be a matter for the Executive.

I am aware that, during the consultation, the reference in the draft strategy to the school starting age attracted a good deal of interest. It is a fact that in the North of Ireland we have the lowest school starting age in Europe. In my view, the compulsory school starting age here is too low, when compared with Scandinavian countries such as Finland. It again led the way in the latest OECD PISA survey, with a school starting age of six. Further, I believe that there is merit in considering other, less formal, more flexible approaches to the school starting age, such as that in the South of Ireland, where parents can choose to enter their children into the formal education structures at any time between the ages of four and six. I agree with Dawn Purvis's point on childcare and preschool provision. It is important to have an open and comprehensive discussion on the subject, and I welcome the fact that the strategy has prompted this important debate.

The consultation period on the draft strategy, which opened in June 2010, was scheduled to end on 30 November. I thank all the individuals, organisations and schools who have taken the time to respond or attend one of the events organised by the Department. I am also aware that several organisations convened their own events with parents and members. I thank my colleagues on the Education Committee for their keen interest in the strategy. Indeed, from as far back as when we launched the strategy, my colleague Michelle O'Neill asked me to extend the consultation and said that the Committee would be raising that. I welcome the fact that the Committee has raised it.

The consultation has raised a wide range of issues. There is clearly significant interest among parents, schools and a range of stakeholders on the best way forward for early years provision and services in the coming years. There have been suggestions that that important area needs further consideration and debate and that the consultation period on the draft early years strategy should be extended.

Ba mhaith liom a chinntiú go ndéantar breithniú iomlán ar na saincheistean seo, agus ba mhaith liom a chinntiú go raibh deis ag gach páirtí leasmhar cur leis an díospóireacht agus a dtuairimí a chur in iúl.

I want to ensure that there is a full and frank consideration of the issues. I want all interested parties to know that they have had the opportunity to contribute to the debate and to have their voice heard. That being the case, I can announce that I am extending the consultation period on the draft strategy to 31 January 2011 and that we will consult children as part of that. I do not wish to delay the publication and implementation of an early years strategy any longer than is necessary. However, I want to ensure that the strategy that is taken forward has widespread support and reflects the views and concerns of all interested parties and stakeholders. I can assure everyone that I will consider all views presented and that it is a real consultation.

My primary concern will be to ensure that the children at whom the strategy is targeted receive the best possible services from the Department of Education. I know that we are in negotiations on securing further resources in relation to the overall amount of money in the Budget. If we are to seriously make a difference in the early years, I ask that all parties support the education and, indeed, health budgets for early years. I thank all Members for their contributions.

Seo ár seans le seirbhísí luathbhlianta a mhúnlú do na blianta atá le teacht agus le dífeáil a dhéanamh do shaol gach páiste. Fiú amháin sa timpeallacht dheacair airgeadais seo, ní féidir linn an deis seo le creat láidir d'fhorbairt seirbhísí luathbhlianta a ligean tharainn. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Bradley to conclude and wind the debate on the motion, although I will have to interrupt him just before 2.30 pm for Question Time. *[Interruption.]*

Mr D Bradley: I am grateful for the opportunity to wind up this important debate, if Mr McCarthy gives me the opportunity to do so.

During the Minister's response, I thought she was trying to usurp my position as the person giving the winding-up speech, because she spent more time discussing the individual contributions of Members than she did responding to the points

raised by Committee members and, in particular, to those raised by the Committee Chairperson.

The Committee Chairperson outlined ways in which stakeholders thought that the strategy failed to address the integration of children's care and education from pre-birth to age six. He said that Committee members had concluded that the strategy, as presented, failed to address the key issues or provide a clear way forward. The Minister has not responded to that today, nor has she outlined a clear way forward other than making a general commitment to write to the junior Ministers in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Committee outlined nine areas of concern, and the Minister has not responded to them. The Committee also said that there was a need for more emphasis on the pedagogies to be adopted for the early years curriculum. The Minister has not responded adequately to that point either.

The Committee Chairperson referred to the event that the Committee hosted on 17 November. I was lucky enough to be able to attend that event and was impressed by the large attendance and by the commitment of all stakeholders to the goal of achieving a nought-to-six years strategy that satisfied the needs of all children in that age group. As the Chairperson pointed out, the audience that night was made up of parents, teachers and representatives of statutory and non-statutory providers, including the voluntary, community and private sectors. The general view of the meeting was that the consultation period should be extended. One positive thing that has come out of today's debate has been the willingness of the Minister to extend the consultation period until the end of January. However, I warn the Minister that that does not give her carte blanche. She has already had seven years to develop the strategy, and, now that we get it, we find that it is mostly inadequate and in need of major overhaul and repair. I hope it does not take a further seven years before we have the finished article.

One major concern about the strategy is that it concentrates on years three to six and largely ignores years zero to three. In her response, the Minister has not addressed that issue, but it needs to be addressed adequately in any future version of the strategy. That point has been made time and again by many stakeholders, not only at the event but through evidence given before the Education Committee. Stakeholders expressed their concerns at that event. However,

there was a general feeling that the Minister's officials did not respond adequately to those concerns, and, unfortunately, the Minister has not responded adequately to them today either. Hopefully, between now and the date on which the consultation ends, the Minister will have time to take on board the points made during this debate and will readjust her approach accordingly.

The Chairperson of the Committee mentioned the three major issues that were raised at the consultation event. The first issue was the need for the integration of early childhood education and care, which has been proven to improve children's outcomes and counteract child poverty in other jurisdictions. The second issue was the need to address the nought-to-three age group. That has been a missed opportunity so far. We need to bring a continuity of approach to children's formative years, and this is an opportunity to bring together services for children and families. The third issue, which the Early Years organisation mentioned, was the need to commit to the development of an integrated strategy for all children aged nought to six and to clearly articulate how education and care services for children aged nought to three will be enhanced and developed. The Department of Education should really be the lead Department on that. Those are the challenges that the Minister faces at this stage.

Many Members — around 14 in all — contributed to the debate, which was certainly constructive. One of the constant themes in Members' speeches, including those of Mary Bradley and Roy Beggs, was the need for early intervention. Mr Beggs pointed out that it is better to invest well in early years education so that we do not need to invest in building prisons later on. Mention was also made of the first 18 months of a child's life and of how critical it is to positively influence a child during that period. The neurological evidence suggests that that is a period when children need positive intervention and respond to it more readily than they do when they get older.

Mrs Bradley and Mr Beggs also referred to the work of Professor Heckman and the benefits of investment in early years education and the outcomes that that delivers: better personal relationships for the people who are involved in it, who make better citizens, contribute more positively to the economy and are less likely to engage with the criminal justice system. Those

are all positive outcomes. Early years education also obviously enriches the personal life of the child who benefits from it.

My case is clear: we should ensure that the strategy that we formulate between and across Departments has the best possible effect and impact on children. The point was made that every pound invested in early years education saves £17 later on. Therefore, not only does it enrich individuals and society in the ways that I outlined, but it has a financial benefit.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. You may conclude your winding-up speech after Question Time and the urgent oral questions.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed with questions to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I remind Members that supplementary questions must contain only one inquiry and that Ministers' answers to questions may be no longer than two minutes, unless they indicate at the start of Question Time that they will need additional time for certain questions.

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Northern Ireland Block Grant

1. **Mr Burns** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the discussions they have had with the Prime Minister in relation to the Northern Ireland block grant and the outcome.
(AQO 660/11)

Enterprise Zone

11. **Ms J McCann** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions they have had about the British Government's commitment to create an enterprise zone. (AQO 670/11)

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): The First Minister and I are in close contact with the coalition Government on the details of the Budget 2010 settlement and its repercussions. For that reason, and with your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 1 and 11 together.

As we highlighted publicly on 20 October, our settlement through Barnett breaks the commitments made in the St Andrews Agreement and is much worse than we were led to believe. We do not believe that the settlement is on course to deliver an investment strategy of £18 billion by 2017. The First Minister and I wrote to the Prime Minister on 20 October to ask for an urgent meeting to discuss the details of the spending review, and we are hopeful that a meeting will take place very shortly. As part of that engagement process, the Assembly will be aware that we also met the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, on 20 September, and the Deputy Prime Minister on 10 October.

The coalition Government have stated publicly that they will bring forward a paper regarding tax variations on a potential enterprise zone.

Consideration of corporation tax rates forms part of our strategy to grow the private sector. The First Minister and I also met the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, Mark Hoban, on 24 November, to discuss the banking crisis in the South. We were given assurances that consideration of the potential to lower the corporation tax rate here was still on the table. We pressed the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, on our continuing concerns about the result of the spending review and, in particular, the reduction in capital expenditure at a recent meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee. The Deputy Prime Minister acknowledged that the figures are in dispute and gave an undertaking that the NIO and the Treasury will re-examine them. Meanwhile, we made clear our intention to pursue the matter, if necessary through the dispute mechanism available to us under the memorandum of understanding.

Mr Burns: I thank the deputy First Minister for his reply. With regard to the problem about our block grant and the flexible approach, will the deputy First Minister tell us whether he has made any progress in respect of Northern Ireland becoming an enterprise zone?

The deputy First Minister: Members will know that there has been a lot of debate about that issue in recent months. We have been involved in intensive discussions with representatives of the British Government. We had a number of engagements with Owen Paterson, and, on a number of occasions, in public statements, Mr Paterson referred to it as an item that he was concerned to deliver. We also had a few wobbles in the process when it became clear at an early stage that there seemed to be some difference of opinion between Treasury officials and those in political leadership, namely Owen Paterson and the British Prime Minister. However, as I said, the First Minister and I recently met the Treasury Minister to discuss the banking situation in the South. We raised the issue of how far advanced they were in relation to the paper that we are expecting to receive on the enterprise zone and on the lowering of the corporation tax rate, and I have to say that we were encouraged by his comments. Therefore, it is still a work in progress. At this stage, we are still at the mercy of what comes from London,

and we await the outcome of what, hopefully, will be a positive result for us.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister give assurances that equality considerations are being taken into account in the Budget to ensure that the most deprived and disadvantaged people are protected?

The deputy First Minister: The Executive are absolutely committed to tackling disadvantage in our society and to protecting the most vulnerable people. That is why we are taking the time to get the Budget right.

In the first instance, it is for the Executive to assess the impact of any proposals on equality and good relations. As designated public authorities in their own right, each Department, including our own, is required to ensure that it has due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity across all nine section 75 categories. Once allocations have been made to Departments, the responsibility for assessing the impact of any proposals on equality, good relations and sustainable development resides with those Departments.

The Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) has issued Budget 2010 guidance to Departments on the processes to be followed in assessing equality impacts where spending proposals and saving measures are concerned. In addition, DFP has asked all Departments to submit, along with the details of their spending proposals, a summary of the impact on equality, good relations, poverty, social inclusion and sustainable development. Departments have also been asked to publish a similar summary as part of their savings' delivery plans.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that the block grant and the Budget are so interlinked, will the Minister give a final date or a due date by which the Budget must be resolved and agreed so that this uncertainty does not go on and on?

The deputy First Minister: It is important to note that all the parties that are entitled to positions in government are represented on the Budget review group, and it is very important that the Budget review group continues with the work that it has been engaged in. Officials were charged with providing a number of papers on a number of matters to the Budget review group. I think that we agree that this is not only about the distribution of the funds that have

been and will be sent to us from London; it is about a Budget-plus. It is about examining what other revenue-raising streams exist that will allow us to deal with what will have a serious impact on our Budget, that is, the fact that the coalition Government in London have reneged on the commitments that were made by a previous Administration on the capital building programme, for which we have big plans over the coming years.

Over the past three years, since the establishment of the Assembly and the Executive, we have shown that we are able to spend. Last year, for instance, we were able to spend £1.7 billion on important projects such as roads, the building of new schools and hospitals and recognising the importance of social housing. In fact, the First Minister and I were involved in the opening of two roads the other day. Each of those capital projects was undertaken to meet the needs of the people whom we represent.

Essentially, we are trying to ensure that we get the Budget right. If it takes time to get it right, so be it.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that a harmonised rate of corporation tax across the island would benefit North and South?

The deputy First Minister: I absolutely agree. We all know that we have been hugely disadvantaged by the fact that the level of corporation tax in the North is far higher than that in the South. At the recent economic investment conference in the United States, it was obvious to the First Minister and I that the level of corporation tax would exercise the minds of those who would consider investing in the North. It would be a very important development for us. I absolutely agree; this really is a very small island of about six million people. It does not make sense that we should be competing against each other, and I think that it is of no benefit to either jurisdiction that we should have to. I think that potential investors look to the opportunities on the island, and I believe that we will yield greater benefits and investment opportunities, North and South, by co-operating with each other.

Racial Equality Forum

2. **Ms Lo** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the reconvened Racial Equality Forum. (AQO 661/11)

The deputy First Minister: The first meeting of the reconvened forum took place in November 2009 and included a wide range of attendees from the statutory and the voluntary and community sectors. The meeting agreed that a racial equality panel should be established to take forward the business of the wider forum, with the forum meeting once a year. Nominations for minority ethnic representatives on the panel were received, with those volunteering having to establish their accountability to other forum members. The first meeting of the panel took place on 11 November 2010.

The meeting focused on the panel's terms of reference and future work programme. It was agreed that, as a priority, the panel would consider the future role and shape of a new racial equality strategy to replace the previous 2005-2010 strategy. The second meeting of the panel is scheduled to take place on 17 February 2011. It is intended that that will be followed by a meeting of the racial equality forum to discuss and review progress to date and raise any issues that are of concern to forum members.

The forum also agreed that a thematic subgroup should be established to consider immigration issues in the local context. The subgroup, which is chaired by the Law Centre, has had three meetings to date, with the most recent on 9 September 2010. A presentation on the work of the subgroup to date was made to the panel meeting on 11 November, and a paper containing proposals for a migration impact crisis fund was presented to the panel. We look forward to considering the proposals in the paper in the near future.

Ms Lo: I thank the deputy First Minister for his comprehensive response. I am pleased with the progress with the race forum. One of the remits of the subgroup that he mentioned is the establishment of a crisis fund to help those who have no recourse to public funds. Will the Minister advise us on its progress?

The deputy First Minister: The issue has been much in the public domain recently. We all understand that having no recourse to public funds can affect a range of individuals under immigration status, including A2 to A8 nationals and those who have travelled here under the work permit or points-based system. The difficulties that are caused by having no recourse to public funds cut across different communities in which individuals working here

legally may, through no fault of their own, find themselves destitute and in need of short-term or bridging support. Trigger issues may include domestic violence, for example, where the victim depends on their partner for immigration status; injury or illness and the consequent impacts on family, particularly for those on work permits; bureaucratic loopholes and a lack of information on the part of migrants, as in the case of A8 workers; and the requirements of the workers' registration scheme.

We agree that the issue of migrant workers who fall into difficulties through no fault of theirs deserves careful consideration and swift action. The impact of such cases can be disproportionate to the numbers involved, and it seems realistic that local services should work with those in the voluntary sector to develop pragmatic and compassionate responses to those cases, as quick and early intervention could prevent the escalation of an incident or a family's difficulties. We are glad that the Racial Equality Forum has established a subgroup to look at immigration in general and at this issue in particular. I know that the Member has been very proactive, and I applaud her participation. We are very pleased that the Law Centre has agreed to chair the group.

Mr B McCrea: Will the deputy First Minister tell us how many people are on the panel and whether he considers it to be of manageable size to monitor the Department's racial equality programme effectively?

The deputy First Minister: I do not have the exact number, but I think that there were about 50 people on the forum in the first instance, although many thought that that was too big and too unwieldy. We will get that number for the Member and write to him.

Mr McDevitt: Will the deputy First Minister evidence to the House his office's commitment to that work by telling us exactly what budget has been made available for the work of the forum, the panel and the emergency fund to which Ms Lo referred?

The deputy First Minister: I think that Members know that a substantial budget has been available for this important work over the course of recent years. The budget recognises that there has been significant progress in improving relationships with historically low levels of violence and tension. We want to ensure that improved relationships in the whole community

continue and we want to address the challenges that face new and host communities. The direct expenditure on good relations and good race relations by our Department between 2006 and 2008 was in the region of £21 million. Additional funding of almost £7.5 million over the period from 2008-2011 has been provided.

Therefore, total investment will be approximately £29 million, which takes into account efficiencies over the period to meet the public service agreement target of a shared and better future for all. Key elements of the investment proposals include a significant increase over the period to promote inclusion and integration at local level.

2.45 pm

Childcare

3. **Mr Spratt** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the provision of affordable childcare will be a priority in the child poverty strategy, given that the lack of affordable provision is currently a barrier to employment.

(AQO 662/11)

The deputy First Minister: A LeasCheann Comhairle, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister Mr Gerry Kelly to answer question No 3.

The junior Minister (Office of the First and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am pleased that we published the child poverty strategy for public consultation today. It contains key strategic priorities, one of which is to support more parents to be in work. Those priorities will be achieved by focusing on key policy areas, including childcare.

The ministerial subcommittee on children and young people, which is chaired by junior Minister Newton and me, has already identified childcare as a priority. It tasked members of the cross-departmental child poverty subgroup to undertake an exercise to consider the issues. A preliminary report was completed in June, and the ministerial subcommittee agreed that a policy and economic appraisal should be carried out on a range of strategic options.

A paper on the appraisal report has been prepared for the Executive. It outlines the key findings, and, when the Executive have had an opportunity to consider that paper, the next phase of the work to develop a childcare strategy will begin. Our intention

is that a lead Department, or Departments, for childcare would be identified and that the childcare strategy would be developed by that Department, or those Departments, in collaboration with the relevant ministerial subcommittee and the child poverty subgroup.

The appraisal report contains a timetable of actions and estimates of the financial implications of such actions, and it is expected that the report will form part of the evidence base underpinning future public consultation.

Mr Spratt: I thank the junior Minister for his answer. Does he agree that the availability of affordable childcare, particularly in deprived areas, might well help unemployed parents get back to work? Would the Department encourage such an approach?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): I agree. Lack of affordable childcare is a clear barrier to employment, particularly for vulnerable groups, including lone parents and others, who are unable to go to work without childcare.

Mrs D Kelly: Of the signature projects in the child poverty strategy, are any designed to implement affordable childcare? What is the budget for those signature projects?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): Clearly, they are connected. In my opening remarks, I said that childcare was part of the anti-poverty strategy, and that is where it will sit. If we sort out the childcare issue, which we hope to do soon — and a paper is to go before the Executive — there must be a budget to make that happen.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister inform the House whether there has been any emphasis, or targets set, in respect of children in the most severe poverty, so that we have a tangible way of measuring whether progress is made?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): The Child Poverty Act 2010 imposes a statutory duty on us to prepare a matching strategy by, I think, March 2011. The strategy was to have eliminated poverty by the year 2020. We introduced a target to eliminate severe child poverty by 2012. The targets are ambitious; nevertheless, we want to achieve them. Therefore, we are moving towards those clear-set targets.

Mr Neeson: Mr Deputy Speaker, I thought that my question for oral answer (AQO 674/11) would have been taken along with this question,

but I am pleased to be called. To what extent will the present economic climate be considered in the development of the strategy?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): It is a very important part of it, and the Executive subcommittee on poverty and social inclusion will consider all of that. There is no way that we can look at this without realising that we are in more difficult circumstances than a couple of years ago. Therefore, the economic climate is at the heart of anything that we do.

St Andrews Agreement: North/South Bodies

4. **Mr Elliott** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the St Andrews Agreement review into North/South implementation bodies and areas of co-operation. (AQO 663/11)

The deputy First Minister: Consultation on all aspects of the St Andrews Agreement review is under way in both jurisdictions. That includes considering the case for additional bodies and areas of co-operation within the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) where mutual benefit would be derived. It is expected that the review group will move rapidly to conclude its work when the process is completed. A report by the review group will be considered at a future NSMC meeting, and, in accordance with statutory requirements, we will provide a report to the Assembly on the outcome of the meeting and on any decisions taken on the St Andrews Agreement review.

Mr Elliott: I thank the deputy First Minister for that response. Just for clarification; I assume that the current implementation bodies are part of the review, and, if so, do the terms of reference allow for the recommendation to bring some of those bodies to an end?

The deputy First Minister: I suppose that that question begs the question of whether the Member would like to see some of those bodies brought to an end. If he were to assent to that, I would find it to be a very surprising statement from the new leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, given that that party was as much involved in the Good Friday negotiations as I was. As we all know, the outcome of those negotiations resulted in the establishment of important power-sharing arrangements in the North and of North/South bodies, which I believe have

worked for the mutual benefit of all the people who live on this island.

As we go forward, we need to recognise that when commitments to agreements are made, whether it is the Good Friday Agreement, the St Andrews Agreement or the Hillsborough Castle Agreement, those agreements have to be implemented. So, I am not really sure where the new leader of the Ulster Unionist Party is coming from with his supplementary question.

Mr Elliott: You are not answering the question.

The deputy First Minister: I think that I am answering the question. The answer is that all the institutions that have been established, including the North/South institutions under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council, will continue for the mutual benefit of all the people who live on this island.

Mr Bell: Does the deputy First Minister agree that those bodies, which are essentially a snapshot of the late 2007-08 period, are now of limited value given the difficult circumstances that the Irish Government now find themselves in?

The deputy First Minister: No, I do not agree with that analysis. I do not think that the Member will be in the least bit surprised by that answer. Obviously, the circumstances in which the present Administration in Dublin find themselves are very difficult, and there is no doubt that the four-year plan that they announced publicly last week, I think, will impact on every aspect of life in the South of Ireland over the next four or five years. However, that is not an argument against the working of institutions that clearly bring huge benefit to all the people who live on the island.

I will pluck out an example: InterTradeIreland has been a roaring success. It has been hugely beneficial to the business communities in the North and in the South, and we have seen increased trade between North and South in recent years, which, obviously, brings new jobs for people north and south of the border.

Whenever I hear people talking about the cost of those institutions, I hear the insinuation that a case should be put forward for their abolition because those people are opposed to them in principle. That is a huge mistake, and that approach is very short-sighted. We must recognise, as Ian Paisley correctly said in the aftermath of the first North/South Ministerial Council meeting

that he and I attended, that we have to bring down all the old barriers and all the old obstacles and remove all of the old hatreds.

Mr Leonard: The Minister has rightly identified InterTradelreland as one of the valuable implementation bodies. Will he further outline the values of those bodies as he sees them?

The deputy First Minister: The North/South implementation bodies and, indeed, Tourism Ireland are taking forward mutually beneficial, practical co-operation.

As I said, InterTradelreland makes a significant contribution to trade and business development, and, indeed, through collaboration on innovation and research. Waterways Ireland plays a key role in the development of our inland waterways, including the Ulster canal, which is an issue that is close to the heart of the former leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, not Sir Reg Empey but David Trimble.

The Loughs Agency's work on the protection, conservation and development of the tourism potential of the Foyle and Carlingford loughs is well recognised. The Special EU Programmes Body is managing and delivering major EU programmes, which make a real difference on the ground to many communities, including those in border areas. Although operating in difficult global conditions, Tourism Ireland continues to work hard to attract overseas visitors. The Food Safety Promotion Board, through its important work, contributes to health and well-being. The North/South Language Body continues to promote the Irish language and greater awareness of Ullans and Ulster-Scots cultural issues.

OFMDFM: Budget

5. **Mr T Clarke** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the potential impact of the Budget cuts on their Department. (AQO 664/11)

The deputy First Minister: When the Finance Minister launched the Budget 2010 process in June 2010, OFMDFM was tasked with identifying savings of £3.8 million, £6.9 million, £10.3 million and £13.8 million. That represents a baseline reduction of 5% in year one, rising to 18% by year four. Those targets were set in advance of the announcement of the spending review on 20 October 2010 and the proposed Budget settlement for the Executive. The impact of any Budget

reductions must be considered in the context of the overall budget outcome for OFMDFM, including any additional allocations secured through the Budget process. Therefore, I am not in a position to comment on the potential impact of any budget cuts for OFMDFM until a draft Budget is presented to the Executive.

Mr T Clarke: Does the deputy First Minister accept that, if a Budget is not agreed sooner rather than later, the impact would, obviously, be worse on his Department?

The deputy First Minister: I am working, as is everyone who is involved in the discussions, to agree a Budget and to do so as quickly as possible. I am not looking for failure; I am looking for success.

Sir Reg Empey: The deputy First Minister acknowledged that his departmental budget has increased by approximately 30% in the current mandate. Does he feel that there has been a similar increase in productivity and performance as a consequence?

The deputy First Minister: I think that the Member knows, probably better than most in these institutions, that the Department is involved in a huge amount of work on behalf of the Executive. In addition to its responsibilities in providing advice, guidance and support to the First Minister and me, as joint Chairpersons of the Executive, and to Ministers and Departments concerning their participation in the institutions of government, it has the following responsibilities: providing secretarial functions to the North/South Ministerial Council; supporting the development and delivery of Ministers' legislative programmes; providing the services of the Statutory Publications Office; developing, overseeing and co-ordinating the delivery of the Programme for Government and the investment strategy; developing the former strategic sites that were gifted to the Executive; setting strategic policy and direction on cross-cutting issues; equality of opportunity; human rights; good relations; tackling poverty and social exclusion; children and young people; victims and survivors; sustainable development; economic policy; civil contingencies; the sponsorship and oversight of the Commission for Victims and Survivors; the Economic Research Institute of the North; the Equality Commission; the Ilex urban regeneration company; the Community Relations Council; the Memorial Fund; the local

secretariat of the Sustainable Development Commission; the Commissioner for Children and Young People; the Strategic Investment Board; supporting Ministers, Departments and others in international relations, including representing the Executive in meetings with the Administrations of the USA and Europe; and providing administrative support to the Planning Appeals Commission and the Water Appeals Commission. I could go on for a very long time. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: No you cannot, because you have only two minutes.

Mr O'Loan: Will the deputy First Minister tell us who is now taking the lead, at ministerial level, on the creation of a Budget? Is it now the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and has the Finance Minister been sidelined?

3.00 pm

The deputy First Minister: I would like to think that we are all working in a spirit of friendship and co-operation. The work of the Budget review group has been important. That body has very seriously set about facing up to the big challenges to ensure that work on growing our economy, which we put front and centre of our Programme for Government, continues; that we protect jobs; that we protect the most disadvantaged in our society; and that we protect front line services. I am working on the basis that all Ministers involved in the Budget review group and other discussions that will take place as a result of the outworkings of that group are working in good faith as I am, and I believe that our chances of success are very good.

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Bipolar Disorder

1. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the treatment and support available for people with a mild form of bipolar disorder and their families. (AQO 675/11)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): There is no

recognised diagnosis of mild bipolar disorder. In 2007, my Department endorsed National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) clinical guidelines on the management of bipolar disorder in adults, children and adolescents in primary and secondary care. People diagnosed with bipolar disorder may receive services in primary care or be referred to generic mental health services for appropriate treatment, which may involve medication, psychotherapy or social support to manage the symptoms of their condition. They may also require inpatient care. Other relevant agencies can also provide assistance with social security benefits, housing needs, training and employment. In addition, specialist voluntary organisations provide a range of useful advice and support services.

Mr Spratt: Does the Minister agree that treatment and support are often only made available when there has been an attempted suicide, violence or alcohol abuse? In many other cases, families are left to deal with the situation on their own. Does he find that acceptable?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Were the situation to be as Mr Spratt outlined, I would not find it acceptable; however, I do not believe that that is an accurate reflection of services on the ground. I have invested in mental health services during the comprehensive spending review period to ensure that we provide better support for those suffering mental ill health. Members are aware that, compared with England, our funding needs are around 25% greater pro rata but our funding is around 25% less pro rata. Nevertheless, we have come forward with the Bamford action plan, which has been endorsed by the entire Executive, and all Departments are working with me to address the issue.

Mr Callaghan: Is the Minister satisfied that service provision for mild bipolar sufferers is consistent across all trust areas?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Equity of treatment across Northern Ireland is an important issue, and it is something that I look to achieve. In pursuit of that, this year has seen the development of the psychological therapies strategy. We have also brought forward our personality disorder service strategy, as well as strategies around cognitive behavioural therapy. We have invested

and looked to take the steps that Bamford has outlined. If the Member has examples of inequity among the five trusts that deliver the services, I would be interested to hear them.

Public Health Agency

3. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the work of the Public Health Agency.
(AQO 677/11)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I established the Public Health Agency in April 2009 to bring together the various disparate elements of health improvement and health protection in one place and to drive forward co-ordinated action addressing health inequalities. It continues to inform and empower individuals and communities in respect of lifestyle challenges such as smoking, obesity and alcohol misuse, and it supports local initiatives in respect of suicide prevention.

Key achievements include successfully responding to the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, achieving the highest H1N1 vaccination uptake rates in the UK and putting in place the bowel cancer screening programme. The agency is also taking forward a joint working programme with local government.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that health and social care must be protected in order that the emphasis on public health in communities can continue?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Of course, I very much agree. Members will be aware of my overarching strategy, because I have outlined it over the past three years: to invest, to be efficient and to engage the Northern Ireland population in respect of their health. The strategy is very much about addressing inequalities and the harmful lifestyle choices that we often make. To that end, I am working on advanced arrangements in that area with 24 local councils. Of course, to ensure that the pro rata funding gap between here and England of somewhere over £600 million does not widen but, in fact narrows, I shall look closely at the Budget settlement, which we hope to see coming forward shortly.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. I am a fan of the Public Health Agency, which does good work not just at official level but, as we have seen, on the

ground. Where will the Investing for Health strategy and the review that we are hopefully due to see sit with the strategy that the Public Health Agency is due to take forward?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The review outcomes are being considered and will come forward for the Committee and Members to consider shortly. The review is very much about the Public Health Agency being the deliverer of the strategy, and I will look to see that it does that. The Member will be aware that, prior to the establishment of the Public Health Agency, there were a number of disparate bodies. We have brought them together. The other thing that I have looked to do, because it is very important, is to work closely with local government. It would have been beneficial if the review of public administration in local government had been further advanced. Nevertheless, we have established arrangements with 24 local councils, which is a major step forward.

Mr Burns: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. What proportion of the agency's budget has been spent on foreign travel?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am not aware of the percentage of the agency's budget that has been spent on foreign travel. The bulk of its spend goes on delivering services required by the people of Northern Ireland. It is a pity that the Member did not give me advance notice of his question, because I would then have been able to give him a comprehensive answer. We have had, for example, a series of fairly inaccurate newspaper stories about an abuse that, in fact, was not an abuse. I am happy to answer comprehensively each question that the Member might have.

Ms Lo: The Minister is probably aware that the voluntary and community sector runs a range of very effective prevention and early intervention projects. Will the Minister assure us that funding for those projects will not be cut disproportionately?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The voluntary and community sector plays a very important part in the delivery of the objectives of the Public Health Agency, as do other bodies such as local government. I can say that we currently fund services in approximately 600 projects across Northern Ireland, and I will look to ensure that that continues. However, I do not know how much

money will be available come 1 April. All I can talk about is the situation up to the end of March. Of course, that creates anxiety and stress in the voluntary and community sector, so the sooner that I get answers to the questions that everybody is asking, the better.

NHS: Managers

4. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many managers who trained and qualified as medical consultants are currently employed in the Health Service and how many earn a consultant's salary in addition to a salary paid for a managerial role.

(AQO 678/11)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Currently, 115 managers who are qualified medical consultants are employed in the Health Service. None of them receives a separate salary for his or her managerial role. As consultants, they are paid under the terms and conditions of their contract, which entitles them to receive an additional allowance based on their managerial responsibilities. Only three of the 115 consultants are employed as full-time managers; the remaining 112 are actively involved in clinical work and deal directly with patients. They spend an agreed proportion of their time on managerial duties and responsibilities.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive answer. In view of the fact that those managers have to be paid a consultancy fee, would it not be advisable to employ others because they could be employed at a cheaper rate?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: To an extent, there is logic to what the Member says. A number of managers are employed purely for a managerial role. Consultants look at issues such as clinical governance, patient safety, education and training and management of the medical workforce. It is much more appropriate that that is done by service leaders. A consultant, therefore, will be employed to perform those tasks — effectively, leading teams. I do not believe that it would be appropriate that anyone other than those consultants would be so employed.

Mr Gardiner: Does the Minister agree that, if we do not meet consultants' salaries, those that

we have in Northern Ireland would leave this country, and the Health Service would be the poorer for it?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is important to make the point that salaries in the Health Service are determined, almost exclusively, by national pay deals that are negotiated in London. It is no different for consultants, doctors, nurses, allied health professionals and staff working in other areas, such as cleaners. Under those national pay deals, a consultant receives a rate for the hours worked in a week that he or she is entitled to and no more. If we tried to break that national pay deal, as has been suggested on a few occasions in the House, and short-change the consultants, we would be breaking a contract, which would not only lead to a contractual dispute but would risk our brightest and best going elsewhere. They can go to the Irish Republic and do better. We would also have to look at terms and conditions.

Ms M Anderson: Has the Minister been involved in trying to influence the negotiations or the additional allowances?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The contract negotiations are conducted nationally and periodically. I am not involved directly in any negotiations. A deal was done with the British Medical Association (BMA), as I recall, some five or six years ago. We have input through established bodies, committees and forums in London, which are attended routinely by my directors, my human resources director in particular, to discuss such issues.

Mr O'Loan: Does the Minister believe that those managerial salaries and, indeed, all managerial salaries across the Health Service should be subject to a pay freeze?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Mr O'Loan will understand that, because those salaries have been set by a national pay deal, any pay freeze would be subject to a national response. When it comes to proposals for pay freezes, we will, of course, play our part as proper members of the United Kingdom. Whatever the rest of the United Kingdom determines, that is the route that we will follow. I am not aware of any proposals for doctors, but I can tell Mr O'Loan that the increments are extremely small.

Domiciliary Care: East Belfast

5. **Lord Browne** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many older people in East Belfast have had their domiciliary care reduced in the last 12 months.
(AQO 679/11)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Both the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust have responsibility for parts of east Belfast.

Both trusts have indicated that no older people in east Belfast have had their domiciliary care reduced in the past 12 months as a result of budget pressures. However, there will routinely be situations in which a review of need will result in a reduced care package or in the ceasing of a short-term care package; for instance, following a period of rehabilitation or as an older person regains independence following a hospital admission or illness.

3.15 pm

Lord Browne: I am sure that the Minister is well aware that east Belfast has one of the highest proportions of older people in Northern Ireland. They are concerned that he will make serious cuts to their home care. Considering that home care does a lot to protect the dignity of older people by allowing them to remain in their own homes, will the Minister assure them that he is fully committed to making that a priority when he reviews the budget?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I agree very much that we should support the older population and treat them with dignity and respect. However, we need to do more than that: we need to keep them out of hospital. They do better at home than in hospitals, nursing homes or residential homes. Therefore, care packages must be in place to give them that support. I will look to do that.

I have increased the budget across the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, and my domiciliary care budget is now almost £200 million. That is a considerable increase. As the Member is aware, the demography is firmly against me at the minute because of the rise in numbers in certain parts of the population. For example, the number of people aged 85 or over in Northern Ireland is projected to increase by 67% in the next 10 years. That

sort of increase in demand will mean that the budget will be stretched and will be insufficient to properly meet needs. That will mean that we end up targeting clients with the highest levels of need. That is unfortunate and is an indictment of the House.

Mr Lyttle: What measures has the Department put in place to monitor the private provision of domiciliary care?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: If the Member means monitoring standards of the private provision of domiciliary care, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority carries out unannounced inspections of premises and facilities that provide private care. We also permit direct payments, and, in the CSR period, I allowed an extra 1,500 direct payments to individuals in the community to allow them to purchase their own domiciliary care directly. However, demand is much greater than can be met through the allocated budget. As I have said repeatedly, the pro-rata gap between us and England is over £60 million. I await the settled Budget with interest to see whether that gap closes. At that stage, I will be able to form judgements on the future of health.

Mrs M Bradley: What consultation, if any, has taken place between the Minister and all the trust areas to improve domiciliary care?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am sure you will be aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, that in May 2008 I introduced regional access criteria for domiciliary care in an effort to get standardisation across Northern Ireland. Those access criteria play a key part in assessing need and delivery of care. The care that we provide is of a good standard. In fact, in a recent survey, 90% of respondents rated their care as either good or very good. I believe that users are best positioned to say whether the care that they get is of value.

Antrim Area Hospital: Accident and Emergency

6. **Mrs O'Neill** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of how the Antrim Area Hospital is coping with the increased workload since the closure of the accident and emergency unit at the Mid-Ulster Hospital.
(AQO 680/11)

10. **Mr T Clarke** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients have been treated at the accident and emergency unit at Antrim Area Hospital since the closure of the accident and emergency units at Mid-Ulster and Whiteabbey hospitals and how this figure compares to the same periods in the previous two years. (AQO 684/11)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: With the House's permission, I will take questions 6 and 10 together.

To support the transfer of services, a number of measures were implemented at Antrim Area Hospital, including the redesigning of the A&E treatment areas to streamline patient flow. That will ensure that patients can be quickly triaged. Moreover, we established a 10-bed clinical decision unit, and an additional 11 inpatient beds were identified on a temporary basis in advance of the building of a permanent extension. Antrim Area Hospital continues to respond effectively to the needs of those who attend A&E.

The proportion of people who were treated within four hours was 66.7%, which represents a significant improvement on performance prior to the service changes. I am advised that 30,844 patients have been treated at Antrim A&E department from June to October 2010. In the same period in 2008 and 2009, 26,987 and 27,610 patients respectively were treated at Antrim A&E.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister said that Antrim A&E responds effectively to the patients who present there, and he said that over 30,000 patients were treated between June and October 2010. Is he aware that 9,930 of those patients waited over four hours to be first seen at A&E, and does he think that that is acceptable? Is the Minister aware of any member of staff or management in the Northern Trust raising concerns about their capacity to be able to deal with the patients who are presenting, because of the exceptional pressure that they are under?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that only one question is to be asked. I know that buy one get one free is now very popular, but, in this House, it is one question for each person.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The consolidation of services at

Antrim A&E has led to a marked improvement in the delivery of service of A&Es, and that delivery of service will be enhanced. I am currently looking at a business case that is with me for investment at Antrim A&E, and, therefore, a business case is coming forward for the new medical ward, which will also support the A&E. Members will be aware that it is not the A&E per se that is important but what is behind the door, outside and out the back that delivers the emergency treatment, whether that is ICU, radiology, pathology, acute surgery or paediatrics. Any slowness or blockage in an A&E is generally as a result of an inability to get the patient out through the back door, and we are working on that. There is a dramatic improvement in what we had before.

Mr T Clarke: Given that we are now entering the winter, is the Minister concerned in any way about the additional pressure that has been put on the hospital after the plan to bring the other hospitals to Antrim Area Hospital?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have a number of concerns across the Health Service in Northern Ireland. In earlier answers, I illustrated some of those, including care for the elderly. I also have concerns about the delivery of A&E, not least our ability to man and provide staffing at the proper levels. The consolidation of Antrim A&E was a pressure because of our inability to man safely A&E departments at Whiteabbey and Mid-Ulster. The future is at Antrim A&E. The numbers have not increased dramatically as a result of the changes, but I need and will look for investment to go forward in Antrim A&E, and I will announce that in due course. I have huge concerns in a number of areas in the Health Service.

Mr Beggs: One method of reducing pressure on Antrim A&E is by encouraging patients to utilise minor injury units and health and care centres where appropriate, neither of which are in Larne or Carrickfergus. Is the Minister bidding for such capital funding in the Budget process?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Yes, I am bidding for health and care centres both in Larne and Carrickfergus. Minor injury units play an important part, and, for example, one of the key management measures that has been put in place in Antrim Area Hospital to allow it to deal with the numbers has been to triage patients coming

in to separate the flows of minor injuries from accident and emergencies. The steps that we have taken for capital at Carrickfergus and Larne would allow us to triage and to stream patients out much earlier to avoid the pressures at Antrim.

Mr Neeson: As the Minister knows, I had very good treatment at Antrim Area Hospital as a patient during the summer. Does he agree that for people who do not have their own transport, public transport facilities to and from the hospital are lacking?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am not familiar with the transport facilities in that area. However, the level of public transport and the ability of people who rely on public transport to reach hospitals is a familiar refrain. The Member will be aware that that is a matter for another Minister. It is not a matter for me. I have made the point in other areas to the Minister for Regional Development, as have the trusts, about the need to ensure that there is proper public transport support for public investments, such as hospitals.

Causeway Hospital: Accident and Emergency

7. **Mr Leonard** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what has been the average number of trolley waits per week in the Causeway Hospital's accident and emergency unit over the last two months and what action is being taken to address this issue.

(AQO 681/11)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has advised me that, on average, the number of delayed admissions to the Causeway Hospital — that is the number of patients who have waited for more than two hours following the decision to admit them — in the period between 1 September 2010 and 1 November 2010 was one per day. The trust monitors the number of patients who present to A&E and decisions that are made to admit, discharge or transfer them. Should demand exceed capacity, a trust escalation process is in place that is based on the regional acute services escalation plan, which was issued in January 2010.

Mr Leonard: I appreciate that the Minister has drawn a line about the decision to admit.

He may be aware that there are increasing worries in that hospital. Will he give the House an assurance that he will continue to be in contact with his Northern Trust colleagues to ensure that everybody is dealt with as quickly as possible and that maximum coverage is given to the people in the care of A&E?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

I am happy to give Mr Leonard that assurance. The Causeway Hospital's A&E department is an important acute service in the network. It is unimaginable that any current services at that hospital would be ceased. The Member can rest his mind on that issue. I know that there are rumours. Certainly, I am sure that the Causeway Hospital's A&E department and, indeed, its other services are crucial to the network.

Mr Dallat: The Minister will be aware that there has been criticism of the hospital, some of it justified and some entirely unjustified. All of it has been demoralising for the hospital's dedicated staff, who want to provide a first-class service. Will the Minister agree to visit the hospital at an early opportunity, to talk directly to staff and to reassure them of his full commitment to ensure that the Causeway Hospital remains a flagship hospital and that doubting Thomases will have no opportunity to talk the hospital down?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

I assure the Member that a visit to the Causeway Hospital is already in my diary. I am not sure of the exact date. I already intend to get back there because, as I said to Mr Leonard, it is an important hospital in the network.

Mental Health Services

8. **Mr Bell** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the potential impact on patients of transferring acute inpatient mental health care services from the Ulster Hospital to Lagan Valley Hospital.

(AQO 682/11)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

The relocation of acute inpatient mental healthcare services from the Ulster Hospital and the Downe Hospital to the Lagan Valley Hospital will enable the South Eastern Trust to develop a centre of excellence, which will deliver the best possible psychiatric inpatient

services that can be sustained into the future. I have yet to see the proposals. I will consider carefully all of the issues that are involved.

Mr Bell: Will the Minister look at the issue for my constituents in Portaferry, who will have to travel in conditions like this for what ultimately will be several hours to visit their loved ones? Given the nature of acute psychiatric care and the need for contact with loved ones, will he factor into his decision-making their view that those services should be retained at the Ulster Hospital?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The issue of transport has been raised with me. I am aware that the trust will address that issue. I will keep it very much in mind when the proposals come to me for my opinion and decision.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister will be aware of the total opposition of people from the Ards Borough Council area and, particularly, the Ards Peninsula to the proposed move.

Is the Minister convinced that, if the move goes ahead, it will be for the right reasons, and that it is not simply intended to fill vacant wards at Lagan Valley Hospital?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Mr McCarthy will be aware that I follow the strategy that was laid down as a result of the Bamford proposals and that I work with an interdepartmental group to address the issue of mental ill health. The proposal by the South Eastern Trust is intended to address the need for psychiatric inpatient beds in Lisburn, and, when it comes to me, I will look at it carefully and bear in mind the views of Mr Bell, Ards Borough Council and others before making a decision. As I understand it, the proposal will provide for 67 acute beds and four psychiatric intensive care unit beds, which will be an important addition to the service.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

3.30 pm

Questions for Urgent Oral Answer

Justice

Prisoner Release: Sean Gerard Cahill

Mr McDevitt: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The next business will be an urgent oral question asked of the Minister of Justice under Standing Order 20A, which was tabled by one of the Minister's party colleagues. Can you confirm that, under paragraph 1 of Standing Order 20A, a question for oral answer can be asked only on a sitting day? Like my colleagues in the Committee for Justice, I received notice of this question on Friday, which was not a sitting day.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you for that point of order, Mr McDevitt. As you rightly suggested, the question was tabled on Friday. However it is being asked today, which is a sitting day. That is quite in order.

Mr McDevitt: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, the House faces a novel situation given that the question has been asked by one of the Minister's party colleagues. If it is appropriate, will you and the Speaker review the appropriateness of that situation? To the minds of many colleagues, the Minister is having the question asked in that way so that he does not have to make a statement and be subject to the proper scrutiny of the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Again, thank you for that further point of order, Mr McDevitt. It is in order for a Member from the same party as a Minister to ask such questions in the House and in other places.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has received notice of an urgent oral question under Standing Order 20A to the Minister of Justice from Dr Stephen Farry. I wish to advise the House that, generally, when dealing with urgent oral questions, only the Member who tabled the question and the Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson of the relevant Committee is called. However, on this occasion, the Speaker has agreed that a representative from each party will be given the opportunity to ask a supplementary question.

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Justice what were the circumstances surrounding the erroneous release of Sean Gerard Cahill from Maghaberry prison.

The Minister of Justice (Mr Ford): I am grateful to my colleague for asking the question so that this matter could come to the Floor of the House. I am also grateful that the Speaker has agreed that a supplementary question should, unusually, be taken from each party to ensure that this is not a cover-up.

I regret to advise the House of the erroneous release of Mr Sean Gerard Cahill from Laganside Court on 24 November, and I share Members' concern that a further erroneous release has occurred. An urgent inquiry is under way to establish the cause of the release and to ensure that measures are put in place to prevent a recurrence of this type of incident.

Mr Cahill appeared in court on 24 November on a charge of aggravated vehicle taking and was sentenced to one month's imprisonment. However, subsequent sentence calculation confirmed that his sentence for that offence had been served while he was on remand. He was erroneously released from custody because subsequent checks carried out while Mr Cahill was detained in the court's custody area failed to show that he should have been returned to custody to appear before Lisburn Magistrate's Court via video link on 30 November 2010 on separate charges of robbery, possession of an offensive weapon and taking a vehicle without the owner's consent.

The error was discovered on 30 November when the Courts and Tribunals Service contacted Maghaberry prison to query why Mr Cahill had not been produced as directed. I was informed of the error by the Prison Service on the afternoon of 30 November and made a public statement later that day as soon as details were confirmed. I immediately demanded that a disciplinary investigation be launched. That investigation is under way and is focusing on establishing whether the incident was a result of human error, a systems error or a combination of both.

An initial interrogation of the IT systems has established an audit trail of some of the events leading up to the erroneous release, which indicates a number of difficulties in relation to cases against Mr Cahill. Sean Gerard Cahill was committed to Maghaberry prison on 1 November

2010. At that point, two remand warrants were lodged. One, which for ease of reference I will call case A, was for him to appear at Laganside Court on 24 November on a charge of aggravated vehicle taking. The other, which for ease of reference I will call case B, was for him to appear by video link before Lisburn Magistrate's Court on 8 November on charges of robbery, possession of an offensive weapon and taking a vehicle without the owner's consent.

The details of case A were confirmed by Maghaberry office staff on the Courts and Tribunals Service information system — ICOS — because error messages had been generated and the case details had not fully loaded. The situation was resolved by technical support staff for case A, but the charge in case B was incorrectly on PRISM — the Prison Service computer system — as a charge sheet production matter, with no associated error message. It remained as such throughout and was not fully updated to take account of video link appearances on 8 November or 16 November.

A charge sheet production matter does not of itself provide any authority to hold an individual in custody. That error has been traced back to 9 February. At that point, the cases listed against a different prisoner wrongly included the record number for case B. The investigation of those issues, as well of other technical errors that may have led to the failure of the charges to load properly on 1 November, is ongoing.

It would not be helpful at this stage to speculate in any further detail on what may have happened. However, early indications are that the circumstances of this case differ significantly from those of prisoners Paliutis and Cummins, who were also erroneously released recently. It also appears that this case almost certainly involves a degree of systems error.

Additional measures have been put in place with immediate effect to further protect against a recurrence of this type of incident, including arrangements to ensure that three levels of pre-discharge checks — the hard copy file, the PRISM live screen and the ICOS system — take place before any prisoner is discharged from prison or from court. In addition, both the Courts and Tribunals Service and the Prison Service are taking forward checks to provide assurances that no other prisoners have been discharged in circumstances similar to those of Mr Cahill.

A dedicated team has been established in the Prison Service to take forward some of that work.

The Police Service continues in its efforts to return prisoner Cahill to custody — I spoke to the district commander earlier today — and the victims of his alleged offences have been informed.

Dr Farry: The Minister takes his accountability duties to the House extremely seriously. I am happy to guarantee the House the opportunity to discuss the matter.

There clearly are different circumstances in this case compared to the previous two erroneous releases, and there is a distinction between operational and strategic matters. How does the Minister feel that this case will inform the review of the Prison Service? Will he also reflect on how important it is to take forward the review, in light not only of this case but of similar cases?

The Minister of Justice: I thank my colleague for his reference to accountability. It is a matter that I take seriously. I resent the barracking that there has been in the Chamber suggesting that we have been seeking to cover up an incident. I placed information about the incident in the public domain within a couple of hours of hearing about it, and I have come to the House on the first available sitting day to talk about it.

There is no doubt that the case appears to have been caused by a systems error, but that does not necessarily indicate a systemic failure of the system. Nonetheless, the House will be aware of a number of ongoing incidents. This case; the previous two erroneous releases; the reported breach of the outer perimeter security by a journalist at Maghaberry prison on Friday evening; the many reports that are outstanding on the operation of the Prison Service; forthcoming reports from the Prisoner Ombudsman on a death in custody; and a report from the chief inspector on Prison Service governance are all issues that give rise to concern and point to the need for fundamental reform of the Prison Service. That is why I set up the Owers review at an early stage and why I am supporting the strategic efficiency and effectiveness programme being run by the Prison Service. It seems clear to me that the Prison Service is an organisation whose previous functioning was defined by the issues of the day, of the day of, perhaps, 20 years ago.

Society has changed, the demands on the justice system have changed, and so the demands on the Prison Service have needed to change. Although I have seen many good examples of work being done in all three establishments when I visited them, it is also clear that the service as a whole has not kept up with the pace of change in society. That is a challenge for me as a Minister. However, that is not an issue just for me or the Department. There is a fundamental need to recognise the significant scale of the challenge to all of us in this House. If I am to make the necessary changes in the Prison Service, I will need the support of the Justice Committee in particular and the Assembly as a whole. I trust that that support will be forthcoming.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice (Lord Morrow):

The Minister said in reply to his party colleague that he takes this matter seriously — obviously not seriously enough to come to this House with an open and frank statement, which is very regrettable and is causing consternation, to say the least.

We have to tell the Minister that we have been here before, and, with the attitude that seems to prevail, I suspect that we will be here again. It was not long ago that you had to come to this House to answer questions following the erroneous release of two other prisoners. On that occasion, you said:

“...it is vital that lessons are learned to identify where there are procedural weaknesses so that the margin for human error can be removed.”

You went on to say:

“I conclude by assuring the House that I take such issues extremely seriously.”

But not seriously enough, in my opinion, to come to the House with a statement. You also said:

“I will be following the progress of the inquiry closely and will ensure that the House is advised of the lessons learned and of changes made to prevent any future occurrence.” — [Official Report, Vol 56, No 1, p37, col 1].

Well, it has happened again, Minister. The report of the inquiry into the two other mistakes was published on 12 November, and you advised the Committee for Justice that the final recommendations include other measures, which I and the general —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Would Lord Morrow please refer all remarks through the Chair and not directly to the Minister of Justice?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice: I thought that I was doing that, but I apologise. I thought that I did intimate to you, but obviously I had not.

So, Minister, what happened? Were the recommendations in the report not implemented in time to prevent this latest mistake? Will the Minister give an assurance today that in fact he is taking all steps, not just some steps, as he seems to be doing, but all steps necessary to ensure that this matter is taken seriously and that he will not be continually embarrassed? Does he have any idea of the impact on those out fighting crime when they see prisoners being erroneously released and three of them walking away in as many months?

The Minister of Justice: I will deal with the first point. I am not sure whether it is being suggested by the Chairperson of my Committee that it is the duty of a Minister to make a formal statement to the House on an operational failure. It seems to me that that is a rather dubious way of applying logic, and I await the signs of other Ministers, perhaps from his party as well, dealing with operational failures by agencies that report to them by way of a full formal statement to the House.

I believed that the fact that we had a question for urgent oral answer tabled today dealt with the issue in a way that got the matter to the Floor of the House without suggesting that an operational issue, as opposed to a policy issue, was a matter for a formal statement. However, we will have to decide whether that is an appropriate way to proceed. I believed that that was an appropriate way, and that is why, as I said at the beginning, I am grateful that the Speaker agreed to allow a question from every party.

Lord Morrow asked for a number of assurances, some of which simply cannot be given. I cannot guarantee that there will not be future failings. I thought that I had outlined in the answer to my colleague's supplementary question the work that is being done recognising the serious nature of the work that needs to be done in the Prison Service.

I can certainly give an assurance that the steps that were taken after the release of prisoners

Paliutis and Cummins would have dealt with the issues in this case. In this case, there appears to have been a failure in the computer system that went beyond the problems that were addressed as a result of those releases. That is why there have been further checks, and we now have a triple check before an individual is released from custody. I certainly have an idea of the impact that that has outside, because I have every idea of the impact that such errors have in the Prison Service and in the Department of Justice. The House can rest assured that those matters are being dealt with at the highest level.

3.45 pm

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I do not want to get involved in the argument about whether it is appropriate for the Minister to come to the House in respect of a matter that he describes as an operational failure. However, it is a matter of considerable public concern, and, under those circumstances, it would be appropriate for the Minister to come to the House uninvited, so to speak.

Although the Minister seems to indicate that there are various reasons for what are described as erroneous releases, the problem appears to have been more systemic than perhaps otherwise suggested. The Minister said that someone had been appointed to review how those erroneous releases happened. Will he clarify from what level in the Department that person will be appointed? Would it not be more appropriate to appoint someone from outside, given the possibility of systemic failure and the problems in the prison system? Will the Minister give us some clarity and confidence that the review is at the appropriate level, given what is obviously the systemic nature of the problems?

The Minister of Justice: I can give Mr Maskey that assurance. There are two aspects to what is being done. One relates to the potential for disciplinary action, and there is therefore a disciplinary investigation being conducted in the Prison Service at governor level. The other relates to the potential systems failures involving the computer system, and it is being conducted by a team that includes senior management in the Prison Service, managers from the court service — because of the interplay between the two services — and outside IT consultants. They are all looking at how that issue is addressed.

Sir Reg Empey: The Minister advises that we should not rush to conclusions, yet, having listened to him, I am struck by the fact that he has already made up his mind about where some of the problem lies. Does he not consider the number of reviews and inquiries into the Prison Service to be a problem in itself, as they undermine morale and cause confusion? Does he not accept the substantial loss of confidence that those incidents have wreaked on the community in relation to the handling of prisoner releases?

The Minister of Justice: The Member seems to suggest that I have been rushing to conclusions in seeking to give the House the best possible information that I can at this stage on what may be the reasons behind the erroneous release. I thought that I had put in enough qualifications to ensure that I would not be accused of rushing to conclusions. I assure the House that there is no rushing to conclusions in how the matter is being addressed.

Sir Reg mentioned the number of reviews that are under way, and there have been a considerable number of reviews of the Prison Service in the past. That is why the Owers review is an overarching one aimed at learning the lessons from those reviews as well as looking, *prima facie*, from the position from which the review team starts off.

There is no doubt that there may be a loss of confidence; the issue is whether the loss of confidence exists because errors are not being addressed or because errors are being highlighted. It is vital that we learn the lessons from what is being done wrong, that we ensure that we address them and, as I said in my opening statement, that we bring the Prison Service to the point at which it deals with the issues of today rather than continuing to be left in the position it was forced to be in some years ago.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his replies. I agree with the Chairperson of the Justice Committee that this matter should have been brought by way of formal statement to the House instead of the Minister trying to limit a statement under the guise of an urgent oral question.

The Minister has come to what might be a premature conclusion that this was a systems failure. If it was, it was a very serious systems failure, which suggests to me —

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

Mr A Maginness: I am coming to my question. What that suggests to me is that there could be other prisoners who have been released unbeknownst to any Member of the House. Therefore, one would want to be reassured by the Minister —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member assured me that he was coming to the question.

Mr A Maginness: I am coming to the question.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is it tomorrow or today?

Mr A Maginness: Today, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will the Minister reassure the House that he will carry out a thorough investigation to determine whether or not other people have been released unbeknownst to the House?

The Minister of Justice: Mr Maginness repeated the point made by Lord Morrow about the issuing of a statement. I repeat to Mr Maginness, in case it has not been understood: I am not aware of a general rule of the House that Ministers are required to make formal statements on operational failures by agencies that report to them. By arranging to come to the House to answer a question and by requesting the Speaker specifically to allow questions from all parts of the House, I have, frankly, given a greater opportunity than many other Ministers have done in similar circumstances.

Mr Maginness eventually asked a question about whether others may or may not have been released. The answer to that is that a thoroughgoing investigation is under way that has so far identified no other erroneous releases, but that work is ongoing.

Dr Farry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will the Deputy Speaker inform the House whether there was a request this morning from the Minister for Social Development about making a statement regarding the operational failure of the computer system that manages cold weather payments? Given the very cold weather that we are experiencing, the population has expressed strong concerns.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, Dr Farry, but you have made your point. That concludes the question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Justice.

Mr A Maginness: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. With reference to your previous observations on the point of order brought by my friend the Member for South Belfast, you indicated that the Speaker had used the unusual method of allowing all parties to ask a supplementary question to this question for urgent oral answer. In those circumstances, it provided the House with a full opportunity to interrogate the Minister. However, had it not been for the good judgement of the Speaker, Members would not have had an opportunity to so interrogate the Minister. Therefore, the original point made about the way in which the question was posed remains to be answered. I ask the Deputy Speaker to look at Hansard to see if there are other matters concerned with the question that should be further examined.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Maginness, it is for the Speaker to make his own decision on the merits of the request put before him by the Minister.

Regional Development

Roads and Footpaths: Gritting

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has received notice of a question for urgent oral answer under Standing Order 20 to the Minister for Regional Development.

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he accepts that he has the lead statutory duty for the gritting of roads and footpaths in Northern Ireland and does he believe adequate procedures are in place to ensure that roads and pavements are kept safe in these severe weather conditions.

The Minister for Regional Development

(Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The clearance of ice and snow from carriageways is carried out by Roads Service under the Roads Order 1993. With regard to footways, during the most recent review of Roads Service's winter service policy, which was introduced by Gregory Campbell in 2001 and fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, it was recognised that the cost of salting footways is prohibitive and the basic logistics of introducing a service that is largely a manual task makes it impractical.

The same review proposed that, in periods of prolonged lying snow, my Department will

seek to enlist the help of other agencies, such as district councils, to assist in clearing busy town centre footways and pedestrian areas. In consultation with NILGA, Roads Service drew up a draft legal agreement to try to facilitate that process. A small number of councils signed up to the agreement in 2003-04 or thereafter, including Belfast City Council and Ballymena Borough Council, and there it sat.

After last year's spell of wintry weather, I asked the chief executive of Roads Service to revisit the issue. Since then, Roads Service has been negotiating with NILGA, and an amended model of agreement has been developed. The main changes to the indemnity offered to councils in the original agreement can now be extended to private sector organisations acting as a council's subcontractor or agent. Regrettably, partnering arrangements for the removal of snow and ice from town centre footways outlined in the new model agreement have not been endorsed by the majority of councils. However, Roads Service will still offer councils the opportunity to sign up to that agreement for the coming winter. I have just met a cross-party delegation from NILGA to reaffirm that offer.

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

With regard to winter service arrangements, I am content that adequate procedures are in place to ensure that roads and pavements are kept safe in these severe weather conditions. Every night from now until the middle of next April, we will have over 300 people on standby to salt main roads, thereby helping drivers to cope with wintry conditions. Salt barns are stocked to maximum capacity at the start of the winter season with around 65,000 tons of salt. Roads Service is also providing approximately 3,500 salt bins and 39,500 grit piles on public roads. More than 34,000 tons of salt have been used to date, with new stocks being brought in regularly. When ice or snow is forecast, 120 gritters can salt the main network, on which 80% of traffic travels, in just over three hours. It is a massive logistical exercise costing around £75,000 each time it takes place.

It is extremely difficult to predict what nature will throw at us. However, we must always be ready for exceptional weather conditions, such as last year's, when we experienced the worst winter in over 40 years but operations continued around the clock on many occasions.

During periods of prolonged snow, all gritters will be fitted with snow ploughs, and Roads Service will spread salt at up to three times the normal rate. However, clearing snow is much more difficult than dealing with frost because of the large volume of frozen material. Roads Service's snow contingency plan means that efforts will be directed at clearing snow from motorways and trunk roads before other main roads and the busiest urban link roads. The operation will continue until all roads are cleared. However, that may take some time, even with all the resources deployed.

In very deep snow, Roads Service will use its 11 snow blowers, the latest of which can shift 1,600 tons of snow an hour. Arrangements are also in place to enlist the help of contractors, including farmers, to clear blocked roads. This season has already seen some extreme wintry weather, and Roads Service has already carried out more than 4,000 gritting runs to ensure that main routes remain trafficable.

Mr McDevitt: Is the Minister aware that, as we speak, the Glenshane Pass is closed, the city of Derry is deadlocked, school buses are unable to reach children to take them home, there is little movement across our region, and some elderly people have been indoors for seven days because they do not believe that it is safe to leave their home? If he believes that adequate procedures are in place to ensure that roads and pavements are kept safe in severe weather conditions, what has he got to say to the thousands of people who are now prisoners in their home because no one is willing to show the leadership necessary to knock together the heads that need knocked together and to do something to ensure that we can reasonably offer the people of this region some sort of quality of life, irrespective of the weather?

The Minister for Regional Development: I will say again that the current winter service policy was discussed, debated and agreed in 2001. I know that Mr McDevitt was not here at that time. However, his party was the lead nationalist party in the Executive then, and it no doubt had the opportunity to block or amend the proposal as it saw fit. Instead, it agreed with it.

That policy did not include the amendment that I made last year to pay particular attention to rural schools that had been forced to close and to give the roads affected added attention from the gritters. It also did not include any

proposition to deal with footways other than to engage with the local councils. That proposition withered on the vine from 2003-04 until earlier this year, when I reactivated it. As I said, I have just finished a productive discussion with the representatives of NILGA, and we intend to continue that discussion until we get some resolution about the footways.

Therefore, the proposition that was accepted by the Executive and by his party, which was the lead nationalist party in the Executive and had a veto to decide otherwise should it have chosen to do so — *[Interruption]*.

I am at a loss as to why someone who claims to have been involved in the Good Friday Agreement has to have the way that it works explained to him. In 2001, the SDLP was the majority party on the nationalist side. If today's Executive are a Sinn Féin/DUP carve up, in 2001, they were an SDLP/UUP carve up. The policy was brought forward, and it was endorsed by the Executive. It was not vetoed or amended by any party, and his party had the power at the time to do that. Therefore, we are operating on that basis.

4.00 pm

I appreciate completely — *[Interruption.]* I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker, but there is some interruption from the people in the corner.

I appreciate completely the difficulties that people are facing. I happened to look outside before I came to the Chamber, and it was very hard to see outside because of the blizzard. I am not sure — *[Interruption.]* I am not sure why that is a source of amusement for the Member, but I am not sure what service could continue to operate in that regard. However, in very difficult conditions, and under the policy that was agreed by the Assembly, Roads Service has been going out and almost acting as an emergency service over the past 10 or 12 days, in the middle of the night, when other people are safely tucked up in their beds, in very treacherous conditions, to provide a service to the public to the best of its ability. It is to be commended for that service. It has managed, by and large, and if Mr McDevitt looks at some reports from the South, from Britain, from Scotland or from Wales, he will see that, in comparison, the services here have managed to keep traffic moving quite well.

I live in a rural area, and I know the difficulties that people in rural areas face, but Roads Service

has managed to keep the traffic moving quite well. Of course, there have been difficulties for vulnerable people who are having problems leaving their homes. There have been difficulties for rural schools and for people who live in isolated rural areas. Nonetheless, that service continues to be provided, and, by and large, understanding the difficulties under which Roads Service is operating, most people accept that it is providing the best service that it possibly can.

I know that it is in his party's nature to criticise everything that happens, but, rather than criticise, perhaps it would be more appropriate for the Member to offer some support for the people who are out there, day and night, providing that service.

Mr Deputy Speaker: At this point, we would normally call the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, Mr Fred Cobain, but he is not in his place. Therefore, that concludes —

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I heard what you said in relation to calling the Chairperson, who is not here. Perhaps the opportunity would go to the Deputy Chairperson. However, it strikes me that there is a gap here. This issue concerns everyone in the Assembly. Every constituency is affected, and it is a tragedy that no provision was made for at least one Member from each party to ask questions, as happened on a previous occasion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As is customary in all these types of questions for urgent oral answer, the Speaker decides on the nature of the question and the response to it. On this occasion, the Speaker decided that the person who tabled the question and the Chairperson of the Committee would have the opportunity to speak. Other Members will have an opportunity to ask questions next week during questions to the Minister for Regional Development or they can put down questions for urgent oral answer in the future. That is the ruling of the Speaker on this occasion.

Lord Morrow: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Would you be prepared to take the issue back to the Speaker, ask him to look at the situation and outline to him what has happened today, because some of us feel that we have been disadvantaged and have not been given an opportunity to speak on this important issue?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will, but I suggest that the Member discusses the matter with the Speaker outside of the Chamber.

The Minister for Regional Development: On a further point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I appreciate the importance of the issue that the Member opposite has raised, but, for the record, I offered to answer questions from any side of the House if people so wished, but the call was with the Speaker.

Committee Business

Early Years Children's Strategy

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the early years (0-6) strategy consultation by the Department of Education and the comments of stakeholders; agrees that there is a clear need for a cross-departmental and holistic approach to early years provision; and calls on the Minister of Education to develop a cross-departmental and holistic early years children's strategy and action plan which will fully integrate provision for the social, care and educational needs of young children from pre-birth to age six. — [The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey).]

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. If my memory serves me right, I was about to address the points that Michelle O'Neill and Mrs Mary Bradley made. They emphasised the role that good quality early childhood care in education plays in boosting educational achievement and in closing the gap, especially for vulnerable children. I think that it was Mr Beggs who told us that that gap can increase by as much as two years by age four. That is further evidence that there is a need for this type of strategy to be in operation from the earliest age possible.

Member after Member emphasised that the early years strategy is a cross-cutting issue and that many Departments are involved in it. However, most Members who spoke agreed that the Department of Education is the lead Department. Several Members regretted the dismantlement of the children's fund, which was a cross-cutting fund set up under a previous mandate. They also mentioned that, as a result, valuable resources were taken away from the children's sector. By implication, I think that there was a call in the debate for a reinstatement of that fund.

Members mentioned various Departments that have as their core objectives issues relating to the strategy. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, for instance, has a role to play in rural development. People in rural areas need access to high quality healthcare, childcare and early years education.

Sir Reg Empey said that the strategy is an employment issue in so far as it impacts on the

qualifications that children end up having. He mentioned the difficulties that some teenagers have with literacy and numeracy, as well as the costs of and, indeed, the difficulty involved in trying to teach those skills to teenagers around the age of 16.

Trevor Lunn mentioned that there was no reference in the strategy to the policy on cohesion, sharing and integration. He felt that that issue needs to be addressed in any future strategy.

Mary Bradley mentioned that research that is being carried out in Northern Ireland shows that it is possible to reduce or, indeed, prevent sectarianism and racism by interventions during the early years.

John O'Dowd highlighted the fact that the early years strategy is a justice issue. He referred to Hydebank, as did Sir Reg Empey, and the Minister reflected on that point. The implication was that if we have an adequate nought-to-six strategy, fewer young people might find themselves in institutions such as Hydebank. Of course, we would like to see the day when such institutions become unnecessary. If we get to the stage where we have an effective, world-class strategy, that day might come to pass.

One of the major criticisms of the strategy was that it needs to deal clearly with Northern Ireland's low school starting age. That was one of the few points that the Minister responded to. She said that she was minded to look on the issue in a positive way and that she might consider a less formal and more flexible approach to the school starting age. I am sure that that is an issue that will be of interest to many people, although I think that the Education Committee would want to learn more of the detail of that particular attitude from the Minister. Perhaps she will supply the Committee with that information in due course.

It is an issue that exercises many people. The public are slightly apprehensive about it because, in many ways, it is a misnomer: we are talking more about the delaying of the beginning of formal education. Children will still be in education, only on a far less formal footing. It would be useful to get clarity on that issue.

One of the issues that the Chairperson mentioned was the need to ensure equity among the various sectors. Issues such as funding, teacher:child ratios, the quality of

buildings, training and qualifications need to be addressed. It is possible that those issues could be addressed without much further delay. They may prove to be early successes for the Minister if she were to address them.

I think that the general consensus from the majority of Members who spoke was that all sectors, including the statutory sector and the voluntary and community sector, make a very positive contribution and that it is important that sectors work together in a positive way for the good of all children. Mary Bradley made the suggestion that the regional implementation group, which was set up to oversee the implementation phase of the strategy —

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

Mr D Bradley: I understood that I had more time left, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You had seven minutes left, as I announced.

Mr D Bradley: OK. In that case, I will conclude.

I hope that the Minister, rather than waiting on a response from the junior Ministers and the Health Minister, will take the issue on board and champion it. She should take the initiative with other Departments and not be passive and wait for a response from others. Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the early years (0-6) strategy consultation by the Department of Education and the comments of stakeholders; agrees that there is a clear need for a cross-departmental and holistic approach to early years provision; and calls on the Minister of Education to develop a cross-departmental and holistic early years children's strategy and action plan which will fully integrate provision for the social, care and educational needs of young children from pre-birth to age six.

Private Members' Business

Single Use Plastic Bags Bill: First Stage

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to introduce the Single Use Plastic Bags Bill [NIA 8/10], which is a Bill to impose a levy on suppliers of single use plastic bags; to provide for the application of levy receipts; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill will be printed and put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

Adjourned at 4.13 pm.



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